

5-5-2008

## The Strategic Rhetoric of a President: A Narrative Criticism of President George W. Bush's Second Republican Party Nomination Acceptance Speech

Miriam Bundick  
*Liberty University*, [mobundick@liberty.edu](mailto:mobundick@liberty.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/coms\\_stud\\_pres](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/coms_stud_pres)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bundick, Miriam, "The Strategic Rhetoric of a President: A Narrative Criticism of President George W. Bush's Second Republican Party Nomination Acceptance Speech" (2008). *Student Papers and Presentations*. 2.  
[https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/coms\\_stud\\_pres/2](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/coms_stud_pres/2)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Strategic and Personal Communication at Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Papers and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact [scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu](mailto:scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu).

Miriam Bundick

Dr. F. Mullen

Communication Theory 455

5 November 2007

The Strategic Rhetoric of a President: A Narrative Criticism of George W.  
Bush's Second Republican Party Nomination Acceptance Speech

The popular trend of American culture today is no longer a toy or a hairstyle but a more of an attitude, a satirical way of looking at President George W. Bush. Through analyzing George Bush's Republican Party Nomination Acceptance Speech it is not the purpose or aim of this study to add to the cascade of disrespect toward our president, but to explore his unique rhetorical style. The research question asks how Bush's rhetoric in this speech exemplifies his use of specific narratives in order to assimilate with the audience. Fisher's Narrative Paradigm is used to explore these narratives, looking at their narrative coherence and fidelity and showing how satellites within his speech do not relate to the speech but are aimed at the audience's feelings.

The significance of my study is that it is a look at a speech of an influential man in the world, George W. Bush, who has raised a high level of

controversy in the past four years. It is also a study of a speech that was given at the Republican Nomination Convention for the 2004 election which fell between two very important historical events which included the tragedy of 9/11/01 and the War in Iraq. Finally, the study is important because understanding the motives behind the rhetoric of a presidential candidate is an essential skill. If people can become aware of the emotional appeal often given in speeches, then perhaps they will really be able to discern the real intentions and stances of the candidates in future elections.

## Literature Review

Because Fisher's Narrative Paradigm is so broad, it can be applied to many fields and subjects. Researcher Larry Smith uses Fisher's Narrative Paradigm to prove that the National Nominating Convention is an essential stage to the election process. He uses the Narrative Paradigm to show the narratives that were involved in the whole process and more specifically, to show the stories that went on in both parties. He explains that:

These narratives reflect the values around which the parties rally their constituencies and, as a result, provide critical insights regarding the parties' motives for action. That these stories offer reliable, trustworthy guides to action for partisans can be seen through an analysis of those documents in terms of their narrative fidelity.

(Smith, 98)

Brinson and Brown's article: "The Aids risk Narrative in the 1994 CDC Campaign" uses Fisher's Narrative Paradigm to judge the effectiveness of a campaign of public service announcements on the prevention of the spreading of HIV/AIDS. The researcher uses narrative consistency, fidelity, and competing messages to explore public service announcements on the

prevention of HIV/AIDS. The researcher actually proves narrative fidelity but then uses the competing narratives to explain that the public service announcements would actually be ineffective due to the other messages in media that either negate them or make the target audience think that the commercials were referring to someone else. For instance, heterosexuals may not respond to these public service announcements because there is a larger problem with Aids for homosexual men. Another factor that negated narrative fidelity in the public service announcements was that the message, abstinence, is negated by all of the other media and would only reach a small amount of people. The researchers explain, “Most young adults will find these stories unfaithful to their lives and will most likely disregard the CDC narrative.” (Brinson, Brown, 110) Finally, the Researchers explain that through their exploration of narrative fidelity and probability they were able to explain limitations, strengths, and suggestions for the public service announcements on the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

In the article: “*Big Brother* Merging Reality and Fiction: An Application of the Narrative Paradigm”, authors Michael H. Eaves and Michael Savoie explain how the reality TV show *Big Brother* is appropriate as a subject for Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm and proceed to prove its narrative coherence and explain its narrative fidelity through its effect on the

audience. Eaves and Savoie suggest that “The argument made here is not that the paradigm fits perfectly with the narrative elements of the show, but that there is a narrative tension that surfaces in *Big Brother*” (92). The authors also explain that coherence is contained in the show in that the narrative of each episode encourages empathy among its viewers. Eaves and Savoie propose that coherence is also created by convenience of backstage viewing available online because the content is not edited and makes online viewers believe that they are seeing what is really happening in the house. Finally, they conclude that “Reality TV asks the audience to participate in narrative coherence, thereby establishing a bond with the audience” (94). They also explain that they used narrative framing and narrative voyeurism in order to further explain the narrative fidelity of the show. The researchers conclude that “This paper should shed additional light on the application of Fisher's theory to TV viewing behavior. Moreover, the theory's scope and utility should be illuminated as a result of this essay” (Eaves, Savoi, 96).

There are many critiques of Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, though it is used by many to analyze text, visual artifacts, speeches, television shows, or even rhetoric between specific people. The main criticisms of Fisher's paradigm seem to be that if used as Fisher suggests, it is not available for

public use, that it is too broad, that narrative fidelity is subjective, and that it does not answer many questions that a critic needs answered.

In “Clarifying the Narrative Paradigm”, Fisher himself, further explains the narrative paradigm stating that it is “The foundation on which a complete rhetoric needs to be built.” He explains further that “This structure would provide ‘a comprehensive explanation of the creation, composition, adaptation, presentation, and reception of symbolic messages.’” (Fisher, 56)

In Warnick’s opinion, Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm doesn’t even have narrative probability itself! Her reasoning is that “The presence of contradictory claims and equivocal statements in Fisher’s initial presentation of the paradigm are likely to cause difficulties for those who seek to apply it to the critical assessment of texts.” (172)

Others praise Fisher’s paradigm and seek to prove its relevance. In Jennifer Wood’s article: “Living by Parental Narratives: A Narrative Criticism of Marian Write Edelman’s *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours*” she uses Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm to explore the narrative of parents to their children by analyzing Marian Write Edelman’s book, *A Letter to My Children and Yours*. She explores Edelman’s work proving the narrative fidelity and probability through Edelman’s use of a motherly tone throughout the book that fosters a trust

between the reader and the author that is also built upon by the author's bibliography and her dedication to children's rights. Through this exploration, Woods concludes that Fisher's Narrative Paradigm theory is correct because "By passing on their family legacies through parental narratives, children are able to develop their narrative rationality—probability and fidelity" (116). She explains that this rings true because "Parents serve not only as authors of their lives, but also as co-authors of the lives of each of their children." (117)

## Methodology

Walter R. Fisher's narrative paradigm was employed as a rhetorical research tool because President Bush's speech is full of stories. Specifically, I used Fisher's narrative paradigm as a tool for a rhetorical analysis adapting Sonja Foss' version of Fisher's paradigm. Fisher's narrative paradigm explains that within life there is a series of stories and that anything with a beginning, middle, end, and characters constitutes as a narrative. In order to understand how these narratives affect us, narrative rationality is then explored concerning the narrative coherence and the narrative fidelity of a story. (Baldwin, et al. 96-97)

Foss' adaptation explains that when using Fisher's narrative paradigm, one may ask:

How the construction of a narrative directs the interpretation of a situation, what a narrative reveals about an individual's identity, what a narrative suggests about the values of a culture, or an assessment of the narrative.

(Foss, 341)

In this study, we explored the stories within Bush's speech and determined whether or not they had narrative coherence as well as narrative fidelity and suggested how those stories revealed the intentions of the speaker.

## Analysis and Findings

President Bush is certainly an influential and controversial image in our world today. George W. Bush's approval ratings for August 2007 were down to 28% (American Research Group, 1). It doesn't take much research to realize that President George W. Bush is a very controversial topic of conversations worldwide. Because of the controversy surrounding President G.W. Bush; his Republican Party Nomination Acceptance speech an important artifact to study.

Bush's Second Republican Party Nomination Acceptance Speech, which I will later refer to as Bush's second acceptance speech was given at the Republican National convention in New York City in September of 2004. There was a large crowd at the speech which was held in Madison Square Garden and it lasted about one hour. The historical context of this speech is important for its content and effect. This speech lies in between two prominent events: the tragedy of 9/11/01 and the War in Iraq.

Fisher's Narrative Paradigm is used as a tool to delve into Bush's narrative, and specifically, stories within his narrative, in order to see how the stories are used in the speech by determining coherence and fidelity.

First, Bush's second nomination speech is a valid narrative. As Baldwin et al. explain in Communication Theories for Everyday Life, "The narrative or 'story,' for Fisher (1987) is broadly understood as any communicative account that has a beginning, middle, end, and characters" (96). By using this definition we can see that the nomination speech qualifies as a narrative in two ways: first, the overall speech starts off with Bush establishing who he is and what he believes. Bush then explains different campaigns and issues that he is for or against, and finally, he ends with a forecast into the future. Some of the main characters of the speech overall include himself, the terrorism, and John Kerry, his opponent. Bush establishes himself as some type of hero or rescuer, crediting himself for what has been accomplished and what will be accomplished. He does this by always using the word "I", for instance, he says "I believe we have a moral responsibility to honor America's seniors—so *I* brought Republicans and Democrats together to strengthen Medicare" (1). Additionally, terrorism, which is treated as a character in this speech stands for evil in the speech with its arch nemesis, democracy or freedom. Bush says to the military and their families: "Because of your service and sacrifice, we are defeating the terrorists where they live and plan, and you're making America safer" (6). This segment suggests the terrorists are the purpose of the war. Finally,

Kerry is a character to whom Bush applies laughable characteristics. He mocks Kerry and treats him like he is a juvenile. One instance of this can be seen where Bush quotes Kerry on voting for funding for troops. Bush tells the crowd that Kerry says “I actually did vote for the 87 billion dollars [for troops] before I voted against it” (6).

We can see that this speech is valid as a narrative, but in this paper, the stories within the speech will be analyzed. We will be looking at three different minor stories that are told within the overall speech. Sonja Foss calls them “satellites” or “minor plot events” (337). The first story is in the beginning of the speech. It looks at the tragedy of 9/11, telling how the tragedy came and heroes were made. He also tells of “Americans in uniform storming mountain strongholds, and charging through sandstorms, and liberating millions, with acts of valor” (1). First we must ask if this story has narrative coherence. It does have all of the elements of a story, for example: the bad characters, the terrorists, invaded and the good characters, the heroes, were courageous. However, its coherence to the rest of the speech is not as strong.

The speech is a platform for Bush’s presidential campaign and includes his main issues and standpoints. A story about the tragic events of 9/11 is not necessary to accomplish its purpose of giving Bush’s stand on

political issues. Secondly, we must look at the narrative fidelity. Fidelity, explained by Contemporary Theories for Everyday Life defines it as “The process of evaluating the truthfulness of the story” (Baldwin, et al. 97). We know the events of the story to be historically accurate, although the specific instances of “storming of mountain strongholds” cannot be proven (Bush, 1). This language, however, does strike the audience emotionally. In the speech text we can see that the audience gains coherence with the story as applause breaks out after Bush tells his brief narrative of heroism. As we see that the audience accepts the characters of the story as real characters, we can also observe how this story is used to form coherence between Bush and the audience especially considering that this story forms the opening of the speech.

The second story that will be analyzed falls in the middle of the speech and also concerns the tragedy of 9/11. Bush explains his experience at the World Trade Center site; he tells the audience that he encountered the workers there, and that “A fellow grabbed me by the arm and he said, ‘Do not let me down.’ Since that day, I wake up every morning thinking about how to better protect our country” (Bush, 4). This story does sound like something that is possible, although the coherence within the context of the speech is questionable. This is not a proposition for a new law or even a

promise for lower taxes, but it is an emotional appeal. The narrative fidelity of this story is also questionable in that it does not converge with reality that the President of the United States wakes up every morning thinking those exact thoughts, or that that specific instance was the trigger for higher national security. Again, this narrative is aimed at the feelings of the audience. It gives a visual of a caring and personal president who understands his people.

The third and final story that will be analyzed in this paper is a story in which Bush explains the relationship that he has and has had with the public. He says "In the last four years, you and I have come to know each other. Even when we don't agree, at least you know what I believe and where I stand" (7). The emotional appeal is seen by his use of the word "I" for himself, and "You" for the audience. The story he is creating is that there is a direct and personal relationship between him and everyone listening. This further suggests that this break from coherence of the overall purpose and content of the speech is used to create that connection between Bush and the audience. His narrative has limited fidelity because it does not ring true that everyone in the audience personally knows the president of the United States, as the narrative suggests. It can be argued, however, that the president can have a relationship with the public in a vague and impersonal

manner. Due to the applause afterwards, we can see that the audience believes there is fidelity and that they somehow share a common bond with the president.

In conclusion, Bush's second Republican Party Nomination Acceptance Speech is a narrative according to Fisher's narrative paradigm with characters, a beginning, middle, and an end. The stories that were analyzed are called "satellites" by Foss. ( 337) These satellites are somewhat nonessential to the speech purpose and content, itself but, as shown through using the Fisher's paradigm, they are used by President Bush to connect with his audience.

## Recommendations for Future Research

In this study, the use of Fisher's narrative paradigm as a rhetorical analysis tool was both instrumental and hindering. Because it is such a broad theory of criticism, keeping a focus within the study was difficult and did not allow for in-depth research of the speech. Further, the study was limited by time constraints as well as physical constraints. If more time was allotted a comparison of Bush's speeches with an identification of certain narrative themes that Bush uses to emotionally connect with the audience would aid the study. Additionally, a wonderful asset to this paper would be an interview with members of the crowd that heard him speak and to evaluate their response as to whether or not they felt an emotional connection with the President after listening to his narratives. Additionally one could study a focus group of listeners to evaluate their feelings about the narratives of the speech.

A recommendation for further research would be to explore the same speech and premise with either a different theory or with a mix of theories. Researching this topic again with both the Fisher's paradigm and Bormann's Fantasy theme would be both effective and interesting.

## Conclusions

After looking at George W. Bush's second Republican Party Nomination Acceptance speech, I conclude that the many arbitrary narratives that President Bush includes in his speech serve the purpose of connecting him with his audience and usually have both narrative coherence and fidelity with his audience members. In other words, the stories that Bush tells within his nomination acceptance speech connect him with the audience. Fisher's narrative paradigm is entirely too broad for a rhetorical analysis and needs to be further defined with a certain purpose or aim. The paradigm worked well enough, but if it were used with other rhetorical criticism tools, the study could have been more developed.

## References

- American Research Group, Inc. "Disapproval of the Way George W. Bush is Handling His Job as President Drops from July" The National Economy. 22, August 2007. 15 Sept. 2007
- Baldwin, John R., Stephen D. Perry, Mary Anne Moffitt. Communication Theories for Everyday Life. Boston: Alan and Bacon, 2004.
- Brinson, Susan L., Mary Helen Brown. "The Aids Risk Narrative in the 1994 CDC Campaign" Journal of Health Communication 2 (1997):101-112. Academic Search Premier EBSCOhost. A. Pierre Guillermin Library, Lynchburg, Virginia. ProQuest. 3 Nov. 2007
- Eaves, Micheal H., Micheal Savoie. "*Big Brother*: Merging Reality and Fiction: An Application of the Narrative Paradigm" Texas Speech Communication Journal 29 (2005): 91-97. Academic Search Premier EBSCOhost. A. Pierre Guillermin Library, Lynchburg, Virginia. ProQuest. 3 Nov. 2007
- Fisher, Walter R. "Clarifying the Narrative Paradigm" Communication Monographs 56 (1989): 55-58. Academic Search Premier EBSCOhost. A. Pierre Guillermin Library, Lynchburg, Virginia. ProQuest. 3 Nov. 2007.
- Foss, Sonja K. ed. Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Long Grove:Waveland Press, Inc. 2004.
- Pres. Bush, George W. "Acceptance Speech to the Republican National Convention" Republican National Convention, 2 September, 2004. [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).
- Smith, Larry David. "A Narrative Analysis of the Party Platforms: The Democrats and Republicans of 1984" Communication Quarterly 37.2 (1989): 91-99. Academic Search Premier EBSCOhost. A. Pierre Guillermin Library, Lynchburg, Virginia. ProQuest. 3 Nov. 2007

- Warnick, Barbara. "The Narrative Paradigm: Another Story" Quarterly Journal of Speech 73 (1987):172-182. Academic Search Premier EBSCOhost. A. Pierre Guillermin Library, Lynchburg, Virginia. ProQuest. 3 Nov. 2007
- Wood, Jennifer F. "Living by Parental Narratives: A Narrative Criticism of Marian Wright Edelman's *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours*" Texas Speech Communication Journal 29.2 (2005):106-117. Academic Search Premier EBSCOhost. A. Pierre Guillermin Library, Lynchburg, Virginia. ProQuest. 3 Nov. 2007