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APERTURE

Francesca Ditifeci

# American Values

After September 11

Mediascape Edizioni

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1999

*Aperture*

1

Quaderni della Scuola Fiorentina di Comunicazione  
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Francesca Ditifeci

**American  
Values**  
*and Communicative Linguistic Strategies*

**After September 11**

Mediascape Edizioni

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## AVVERTENZA

I contenuti di questo saggio sono stati presentati da Francesca Ditifeci in occasione delle XIV Giornate Fiorentine della Comunicazione, *After September 11. Media, Narratives, Conflicts and Interculturality*, Firenze, 19-20 giugno 2002.

Interventi degli altri relatori delle XIV Giornate Fiorentine della Comunicazione si possono leggere nel libro, a cura di Giovanni Bechelloni e Anna Lucia Natale, *Narrazioni Mediali dopo l'11 settembre. Dialoghi e conflitti interculturali*, Mediascape edizioni, Roma - Firenze 2002.

My paper focuses on the language used by George W. Bush in his speech<sup>1</sup> to the Congress on September 20, 2001<sup>2</sup> and has the aim to comment upon the communicative linguistic tools used in the text to support, reassure, encourage and spur on the American people in such a tragic moment.

## 1. Union

### 1.1 Domestic Union

The leading Idea on which the whole speech is constructed is expressed by the keyword/keyconcept UNION and its related lexical chain, which together form a circular structure, a *Ringskomposition* in being the opening and closing matter in the text.

Union was “the” keyword of America before September 11; Union is and ought to be “the” keyword of America after September 11. Furthermore, Union is the keyword of the American Dream, Union is the American historical keyword par excellence<sup>3</sup>. The United States’ strength is embodied by the Union itself opposed to Disunion which would mean vulnerability and, as an inevitable consequence of it, menace to freedom.

It is noteworthy that, although the plural form is

tolerated, the United States is a singular noun. And this is semantically relevant because there are many States, but only one nation, only one people, only one country. As a matter of fact, as a significant tool used to emphasize its Union and Indissolubility, in this text we always read: "The United States is..., The United States respects..., The United States makes..., The United States is grateful...". Indeed, the everlasting force of the Union is skilfully depicted through its embedment in a temporal perspective.

Actually, the President's speech begins with the concept of the UNION intertwined with the concept of TIME and its connected temporal references:

*"...in the normal course of events", presidents come to this chamber to report on the state of the union. Tonight, no such report is needed; it has already been delivered by the American people.*

*My fellow citizens, for the last nine days, the entire world has seen for itself the state of union, and it is strong.*

*These were the true strengths of our economy before September 11<sup>th</sup>, and they are our strengths today.*

*Tonight I thank my fellow Americans for what you have already done and for what you will do. And ladies and gentlemen of the Congress, I thank you, their representatives, for what you*

*have already done and for what we will do together.*

*Tonight, we face new and sudden national challenges. We will come together to improve air safety, to dramatically expand the number of air marshals on domestic flights, and take new measures to prevent hijacking. We will come together to promote stability and keep our airlines flying, with direct assistance during this emergency.*

*After all that has just passed - all the lives taken, and all the possibilities and hopes that died with them - it is natural to wonder if America's future is one of fear. Some speak of an age of terror.*

*Americans have known the casualties of war - but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning.*

*Americans have known surprise attacks - but never before on thousands of civilians.*

*All of this was brought upon us in a single day - and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack.*

*From this day forward any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime".*

In the above reported quotations, temporal references seem to produce a revolutionary effect - in the normal

course of events vs the present situation-, marked by the PRESENT which becomes a watershed, dividing past on the one side and future on the other: before and after September 11, and the UNION embodies "the" everlasting Value thank to which PAST (before September 11, you have already done (2), PAST/PRESENT (for the last nine days ... has seen, after all that has just passed, never before, single day, different world), PRESENT (tonight, today, is), PRESENT/FUTURE (new and sudden, from this day forward) and FUTURE (you will do, we will do together, we will come together (2), America's future) remain unaltered.

Un/fortunately, September 11, 2001 has become a historical turning point, from which the juxtaposed temporal references derive: BEFORE and AFTER September 11. Consequently, this crucial date best represents the concept of 'shared knowledge' on which the President insists to provoke a positive constructive reaction in his fellow citizens:

"Tonight ...Our grief has turned to anger and anger to *resolution*".

Starting from the very first lines throughout all the document until the very end, the issue of UNION is developed at all linguistic levels, lexical, grammatical, syntactic and semantic.

Besides the repetition of the lexeme itself, the idea of being and remaining united is strongly expressed by the

pronominal system, used "to distribute responsibility and create solidarity" (Vasta, 2001, p. 25)<sup>5</sup>. The anaphoric WE comprises I/the President + YOU a people/the people of America, in the role of ACTORS, and is alternatively used with some epanalepsis such "we have seen/we will not forget", "we are a country" where the fusion I/the President + You/the People is skilfully expressed by the combination 'We'/the President + 'the People'/plural and 'a country'/singular with a plural, collective value. But, because a union presupposes a leader, WE is often alternated with I/the President = the leader/guide/mentor<sup>6</sup>, the person who is present in these dramatic circumstances to support his "loving and giving people", his "fellow citizens", his "fellow Americans", who become YOU, who become active, responsible participants: "YOU did more than sing. YOU ACTED". President Bush is well aware that in this very moment the most insidious danger is depression, scepticism and, inevitably, apathy. So, his duty is the one of inciting, urging his People to re/action. And in pursuing it, the President's words are acts, illocutionary acts<sup>7</sup>:

"I thank ..."

"I'm so honored ..."

" ... I will carry this ...".

But very often the President's speech force goes beyond an illocutionary act achieving a perlocutionary effect: he achieves the effect of convincing, persuading and

detering<sup>s</sup> his people, i.e. through the impressively repeated usage of the verb 'to ask', which begins with the question:

"Americans are *asking*: What is expected of us?"

and continues with the epanaleptic "I ask ...":

"*I ask you* to live your lives, and hug your children. I know many citizens have fears tonight, and I ask you to be calm and resolute, even in the face of a continuing threat.

*I ask you* to uphold the values of America, and remember why so many have come here. We are in a fight for our principles, and our first responsibility is to live by them. No one should be singled out for unfair treatment or unkind words because of their ethnic background or religious faith.

*I ask you* to continue to support the victims of this tragedy with your contributions. Those who want to give can go to a central source of information, [libertyunites.org](http://libertyunites.org), to find the names of groups providing direct help in New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

The thousands of FBI agents who are now at work in this investigation may need your cooperation, and *I ask you* to give it.

*I ask* for your patience, with the delays and inconveniences that may accompany tighter security; and for your patience in what will be a long struggle.

*I ask* your continued participation and confidence in the American economy. Terrorists attacked a symbol of American prosperity. They did not touch its source. America is successful because of the hard work, and creativity, and enterprise of our people. These were the true strengths of our economy before September 11<sup>th</sup>, and they are our strengths today".

Resuming my analysis from the lexical perspective, UNION is expressed through the evocation of many symbols:

"the unfurling of flags"

"the lighting of candles"

"the giving of blood"

"the saying of prayers"

where flags represent the human national value, candles the light, blood the human sacrifice, the offer of life for the beloved country, and prayers witness the faith in God. Furthermore, within the main lexical chain, single self-contained lexical chains are realized within single paragraphs through nouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs, prepositions. For instance, in:

*"All of America (1) was touched on the evening of the tragedy to see Republicans and Democrats (2) joined together (3) on the steps of this Capitol (4) singing 'God bless America' (5)"*

the image of the Union is embodied in the lexical chain expressed by elements (1), (2), (3), (4), and (5), where (1) gives a general idea of the united country, (2) represents political Unity, (3) reinforces (2), (4) refers to the Congress, to the body of the legislative power, and (5) is the national hymn, which of course contains a specific religious connotation.

What a magisterial lesson for Italy is contained in "Republicans and Democrats joined together"! On the evening of the tragedy America was joined together, notwithstanding political divisions, whereas Italy, which is politically always 'at war', is, if possible, even more separated when tragic events occur<sup>9</sup>.

### 1.2 International Union

From a national dimension, the speech moves on with a thank to the 'whole' world "for its outpouring of support" and once more through the epanalepsis "...will not/will never forget", the due and everlasting memory both of the dead and of the United States' friends is reaffirmed and emphasized:

*"America will never forget the sounds of our*

National Anthem playing at Buckingham Palace, on the streets of Paris, and at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate.

*We will not forget* South Korean children gathering to pray outside our embassy in Seoul, or the prayers of sympathy offered at a mosque in Cairo.

*We will not forget* moments of silence and days of mourning in Australia and Africa and Latin America.

*Nor will we forget* the citizens of 80 other nations who died with our own: dozens of Pakistanis; more than 130 Israelis; more than 250 citizens of India; men and women from El Salvador, Iran, Mexico and Japan; and hundreds of British citizens.

America has no truer friend than Great Britain. Once again, we are joined together in a great cause - so honored the British Prime Minister has crossed an ocean to show his unity of purpose with America.

Thank you for coming, friend".

The idea of wholeness does not simply include the worldwide spatial setting, which is naturally well underlined by the long list of countries from East to West, from North to South, gathering together to express their support, but it also comprises their multi-cultural, multi-social, multi-religious societies, which do belong to them.

From a historical perspective, the U.S. has often strategically relied on the whole world as witness and supporter. For instance, in two primary American documents, *The Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of taking up Arms* (1775) and *The Declaration of Independence* (1776) we find expressions such as "It is universally confessed ...", "Before God and the world ...", "We exhibit to mankind ...", "To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world", which clearly reaffirm American request for universal support and consent.

But, the present situation asks not merely for a consent, it goes far beyond: it wants to warn the whole world, to make it well aware of the incumbent menace in order to provoke an immediate international reaction. The individual/common inalienable rights have been heavily attacked and are still under attack not only against the United States, but also against the whole civil/ized world:

"... All of this was brought upon us in a single day, and night fell on a *different world*, a world where freedom itself is under attack".

*"This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom"*.

The anaphoric contrast "This is not/this is" and the anxious repetition of the lexeme 'fight' reinforce the reality that not only America, but every nation, every country, every single individual, who believes in freedom, is in serious danger and is personally called to take active part in this fight. All those who believe in the inviolability of the inalienable rights are invited and ought to participate in this fight, notwithstanding any possible religious, social, racial and cultural difference.

## 2. Contrastive Rhetoric

Once the solid union between America and the whole civil/ized world has been established, the aim of the speech is to focus on the common enemy. In order to achieve this purpose, a contrastive rhetoric strategy is applied. It is mainly constructed on the bipolar options: American citizens/citizens of the Whole World *vs* terrorists. These two polarities are conveyed in the lexicogrammar through the use of:

- personal pronouns 'we' *vs* 'they';
- possessive adjectives 'our' *vs* 'their';
- lexical density with 'positive connotations *vs* negative connotations';
- 'positive *vs* negative evaluation markers'.

For instance, in the following excerpt:

"They hate what *they* see right here in this

chamber: a *democratically elected* government. Their leaders are *self-appointed*. *They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.*"

- the repeated 'they/their' are opposed to the repeated 'our',
- a '*democratically elected* government' is placed in opposition to '*self-appointed* leaders';
- the strongly negatively-connoted verb 'hate' is in contrast with the almost universally-recognized positive inalienable rights, all the several freedoms.

Moreover, in the extract below:

*"They want to overthrow existing governments in many Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. They want to drive Israel out of the Middle East. They want to drive Christians and Jews out of vast regions of Asia and Africa. These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life. With every atrocity, they hope that America grows fearful, retreating from the world and forsaking our friends. They stand against us, because we stand in their way".*

We find not only the repeated antonymy 'they/we-their/us', but also the epanalepsis 'they want to' which reinforces the terrorists' strong will to utterly destroy not simply the Western civilization but all civilizations which differ from theirs. The resolute action of disruption is expressed through a powerful lexical chain, densely built upon, based on a theme/rheme structure where, once more all the linguistic levels, lexical, grammatical, syntactic and semantic, are exploited.

It is a comprehensive action; as a matter of fact, it comprises the political - Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, Israel, America - religious - Muslim, Christians and Jews - and social spheres - against us, in their way.

Their unique "goal is to remake the world" in order to "impose their radical beliefs on people everywhere". They constitute a menace for humankind, who is now called to defend their values, their good values against the evil attacks of terrorists.

Indeed, two completely incompatible blocs are opposed through a widely distributed use of contrasting pairs, expressing Good *vs* Evil:

on a peaceful morning	<i>vs</i>	an act of war
civilians	<i>vs</i>	terrorists
lovers of freedoms	<i>vs</i>	enemies of freedoms
democracy	<i>vs</i>	tyranny
free choice	<i>vs</i>	imposition
different religious faiths	<i>vs</i>	Islamic extremism
good	<i>vs</i>	evil

construction	vs	destruction
peace	vs	terror
defence	vs	attack
security	vs	menace

Consequently, the President seems to underline the absolute necessity that Good prevail over Evil and this asks for an urgent and immediate re/action.

### 3. Re/action

Firstly, an institutional, public and whole commitment is promised and guaranteed by the President himself, as the one in whom the executive power is vested, and by the Congress, as the body in which the legislative power is vested:

*"We will direct every resource at our command - every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war – to the destruction and to the defeat of the global terror network".*

The idea of the Union between the two powers is significantly expressed by the personal pronoun 'we' and

the possessive adjective 'our' and the "comprehensive" effort by the anaphoric 'every'.

At the same time, an individual and private commitment is also necessary, every single American is now called to play their personal role; certainly, the most dangerous menaces are want of re/action, fear and apathy:

*"I ask you to live your life and hug your children. I know many citizens have fears tonight, and I ask you to be calm and resolute, even in the face of a continuing threat. I ask you to uphold the values of America and remember why so many have come here".*

Indeed, the *conditio sine qua* non that ordinary life ought to continue and fear should not prevail is communicated by the nouns 'life', 'children', by the verbs 'to live' and 'hug' and by the adjectives 'calm' and 'resolute' and also reaffirmed by the recurrent epanalepsis 'I ask you', which seems to hint at the President's dual role of "Actor/Spectator", who expects to see a re/action.

The American people can and must be proud of their "hard work", "creativity" and "enterprise". Individual work and challenge have always been the American strengths before September 11, they still are at present and ought always to be in the future:

*"America is successful because of the hard work and creativity and enterprise of our people. These*

*were the true strengths of our economy before September 11<sup>th</sup>, and they are our strengths today”.*

Naturally, nobody will ever forget the public and private tragedy, perpetual memory is comprised into the values of America, but in a constru/a/ctive/ manner: as a consequence of “freedom and fear [being] at war”, “We” the American People are well aware that:

*“The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depends on us.  
Our nation, this generation, will lift the dark threat of violence from our people and our time.  
We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage.  
We will not falter, we will not fail”.*

But as human beings, we must accept our limits: human capability, human effort, human strength to re/action are undoubtably limited. However, in the struggle between “freedom and fear”, “justice and cruelty”, “God is not neutral between them”.

As a matter of fact, at the top of all, it is God himself, the Great and Wise Maker of all, who urges to Life, Liberty and Union.

Beside the text-long lexical chain and *Ringskomposition* based on the human idea of Union, the speech uses another text-long lexical chain and *Ringskomposition*

based on the idea of God and the human religious need of Him. Mourning for the dead finds its consolation in prayers, tragedy is supported by faith, human burden is lightened by God’s assistance.

Using the ascendant climax People-God, the human-superhuman, limited-unlimited, perfectible-perfect relationship is reasserted. Although the President reaffirms that the American people are united, as human, rational creatures, he and his people also invoke God to grant them wisdom and to give them assistance in order to be able to re/act wisely:

*“In all that lies before us, may God grant us wisdom, and may He watch over the United States of America...”.*

## NOTES

- <sup>1)</sup> My analysis is mainly a written-to-be-spoken text analysis, which excludes any possible references to intonation, stress, gesture, eye-movements and planned applause-getting pauses. For these features see the remarkable studies of Atkinsons (1984) and Brodine (1986).
- <sup>2)</sup> The complete text can be found at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>
- <sup>3)</sup> Certainly, in an intra/intertextual dimension, extensive cross-references can easily be recognized between this speech and such fundamental documents as *Penn's Plan of Union (1697)*, *The Albany Plan of Union (1754)*, *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms (1775)*, *Resolution for Independence (1776)*, *Declaration of Independence (1776)*, *Hamilton's Plan of Union (1787)*, and all *The Federalist Papers (1787-8)* n. 2-5 in particular.
- <sup>4)</sup> This commonly used metaphor stresses the opposition between the regular flow of time and the present urgent situation.
- <sup>5)</sup> See also Rossini Favretti (1980), Wilson (1990), Miller (1993), Silver (1996).
- <sup>6)</sup> This is a typical feature of political discourse. One of the best examples is represented by *Publius and his Leadership* in the *Federalist Papers*, see Mariani Sacerdoti (1997), pp.1-38.
- <sup>7)</sup> The performance of these acts consists in saying something as opposed to the performance of simply locutionary acts whose "role" is that of saying something, Austin (1962), pp. 99-100.
- <sup>8)</sup> See Austin (1962), p. 109.
- <sup>9)</sup> I could not agree more with Giuliano Ferrara, who, in his article //

*segreto degli Americani*, in «Panorama» n. 2, 2002, affirms that Italy too had its September 11 with Moro's tragedy, but, while America reacted with union, Italy reacted with division. And I add that, unfortunately, Moro's tragedy is not an isolated example, several more can easily be counted. See also Bechelloni (2003).

<sup>100</sup> The address to God is a recurrent feature in all the American documents, from the very first colonial ones.

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Attraverso un'analisi testuale del discorso presentato da George W. Bush al Congresso il 20 settembre 2001, il saggio ha lo scopo di individuare le strategie comunicative utilizzate dal Presidente al fine di supportare e incoraggiare il popolo americano in un momento tanto tragico, facendo appello ai suoi valori più profondi.

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