

Politics, Metaphor, and War: George Bush and the Axis of Evil

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Metaphor: Uses and Limitations

“Fossil poetry”, “the archives of history”, “the tomb of the muses” – that is how the poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson describes language. Just as the crust of the Earth holds the bones of long-dead creatures that continue to spark our imagination, the English language is filled with remains of figurative language that were once “stroke[s] of genius” and “brilliant picture[s]”.¹

Linguists have noticed that as figurative language loses its novelty, it becomes conventionalised and literalised into everyday items of language. Novel pieces of figurative language gradually become what is known as a “dead metaphors”. Emerson captured this concept with his idea of “fossil poetry”: many of the words used in ordinary speech have long ceased to hold any of the metaphorical implications they once had. The word “obligation” comes from an expansion of the Latin *obligare*, meaning literally, a binding, yet almost no one thinks of literal bondage when hearing the word obligation.²

At their simplest, metaphors are comprehending one kind of thing in terms of another. Such a comparison means highlighting the similarities of two objects and minimising their differences. By necessity, metaphors are partial representations, framing concepts in a way that elucidates certain aspects and obscures certain other aspects. Because of their ability to highlight and obscure, metaphors are invaluable in presenting complex matters in a simpler way, framing the concept in more accessible terms. For example, Dr. Jason Moran found that using figurative language helped football players run faster than step-by-step instructions because it helped the athletes gain a more holistic view of the complicated workings of individual bodily mechanics.³

Because of their complex and multifaceted nature, matters of social policy are particularly predisposed to metaphorical framing. However, due to the issue of partial representation, different metaphors may illustrate the same problem in different ways and steer

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet.” In *Essays: Second Series* (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin Company, 1883), 26-33.

² “Obligation.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/obligation>. Accessed 30 Jul. 2024.

³ Tibi Puiu, “Coaches Encourage Football Players to Sprint ‘like a Jet’ to Run Faster. And It Works,” *ZME Science*, March 8, 2024, <https://www.zmescience.com/science/news-science/coaches-encourage-football-players-to-sprint-like-a-jet-to-run-faster-and-it-works/>.

people in favour of a certain solution. Two studies conducted by Paul H. Thibodeau and Lera Boroditsky found that describing crime as a “virus” as opposed to a “beast” impacted participants’ preferred solutions to crime.⁴ Moreover, the participants rarely identified the metaphor as the reason for the solution they selected, instead citing the statistics presented, which were the same in both cases. These studies suggest that rather than being purely stylistic, metaphor can powerfully shape how people reason about social issues, with cognitive linguist George Lakoff pointing to the role of metaphor in creating reality rather than just helping represent it.⁵

However, political metaphor follows a different path. Rather than becoming conventionalised and assimilated into literal language, old political metaphors are recursive. The fossils of figurative language are dredged up and reanimated, constantly revived and altered, drawing on historical associations and blending concepts of the past with those of the present. The example of George Bush’s “axis of evil” will serve as a case study for the linguistic structures and political uses of figurative language. Metaphors such as these are particularly formidable in policy decisions, as they do not just influence potential solutions, but also eliminate all other options from consideration.

George Bush and the “Axis of Evil”

In his 2002 State of the Union Address, George W. Bush referred to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an “Axis of Evil”⁶. Less than half a year after the September 11 attacks, the phrase signalled a new orientation in American foreign policy. Bush’s use of the metaphor solidified an abstract collection of security concerns into a concrete coalition of enemies. None of the terrorists involved in the attacks were citizens of the nations mentioned. Bush’s assertions that Iraq had close ties to terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, were later found to have little factual basis.⁷ Evidence of Iran’s cooperation with al-Qaeda was greatly outweighed by evidence of

⁴ Paul H. Thibodeau and Lera Boroditsky. “Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning,” *PLoS ONE* 6, no. 2 (February 23, 2011): e16782–82, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0016782>.

Paul H. Thibodeau and Lera Boroditsky. “Natural Language Metaphors Covertly Influence Reasoning,” *PLoS ONE* 8, no. 1 (January 2, 2013): e52961–61, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0052961>.

⁵ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 156.

⁶ George W. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” *The American Presidency Project*, January 29, 2002, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/211864>.

⁷ Carroll Doherty and Jocelyn Kiley, “A Look Back at How Fear and False Beliefs Bolstered U.S. Public Support for War in Iraq,” *Pew Research Center*, March 14, 2023 <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/03/14/a-look-back-at-how-fear-and-false-beliefs-bolstered-u-s-public-support-for-war-in-iraq/#:~:text=Neither%20Bush%20nor%20senior%20administration,that%20took%20nearly%203%2C000%20lives.>

deep animosity between the two.⁸ North Korea had no links to 9/11 whatsoever, nor did it share much ideologically and geographically with the other two nations. The devastating Iran-Iraq War, fought under virtually the same leadership as that which existed during the Bush administration, suggested enmity, not cooperation between Iran and Iraq. Nevertheless, Bush's analogy implied an alliance and coordinated goal between the nations.

In using the phrase, Bush achieved a goal similar to that of the Tottenham football coaches. By utilising metaphor, the coaches distracted the athletes from focusing too much on the complex workings of individual bodily mechanics. Instead, they approached the problem more holistically and were able to encourage the athletes to use their entire bodies harmoniously. Similarly, Bush's metaphor shifted the focus from smaller independent actors to a broader "axis", making it seem logical to address them as a unified threat rather than to pursue diplomatic negotiations with individual nations. American international relations with individual countries were thus grouped together into one metaphorical schema. Furthermore, the use of the phrase "axis of evil" implicitly created an opposing "axis of good". It both simplified the complex problem space of geopolitical agendas and rivalries into a singular conflict, and intensified it into a metaphysical conflict between "good" and "evil". The metaphor painted the United States and its allies as a force for good, and anything allied with Iran, Iraq, or North Korea as a force for evil. Moreover, it makes the connection of seemingly disparate entities like North Korea and Iran seem more logical: they are all, in some way, opposed to the United States and, therefore, are all "evil".

The phrase "axis" in a similar political context was first used in 1926 by Benito Mussolini, the leader of Italian Fascists. Though Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany had previously disputed, hostility from the Allies later united the two nations. In a speech on November 1, 1936, Mussolini celebrated the alliance and stated: "This Berlin-Rome protocol is not a barrier, it is rather an axis around which all European States animated by a desire for peace may collaborate on troubles".⁹ The idea of a fixed line from Berlin to Rome around which all other European states would revolve represented Mussolini's expansionist aspirations; it represented his and Hitler's vision of fascism as a strong, unifying force, reshaping Europe under their control. In 1940, Japan joined the alliance by signing the Tripartite Pact. In doing so, the former idea of an "axis", a single straight line around which Europe would rotate, was destroyed, yet the Germany-Italy-Japan alliance still became known as the Axis powers. Japan's inclusion

⁸ Bruce Reidel, "The Mysterious Relationship Between Al-Qa`ida and Iran," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 7 (July 2010): 1-3.

⁹ Benito Mussolini, "Text of Mussolini's Milan Speech," *The New York Times*, November 2, 1936, 12, <https://www.nytimes.com/1936/11/02/archives/text-of-mussolinis-milan-speech.html>.

extended the metaphor to East Asia, projecting the perceived influence, power, and expansionist goals across the entire world. Though the three nations had significant political and cultural differences, they were united in their opposition to the Allies and by their far-right, authoritarian ideologies.

As a result, the phrase became metonymic with the three countries and their ideals, with particularly strong associations with German Nazism and Italian Fascism. Bush's use of the metaphor grouped the similarly disparate Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as partaking in the same far-right ideology that they would use to reshape the world and positioning them as enemies of democracy and Western values. The reference to the Axis powers, a grave danger to the entire world during World War II, grounded the perceived menace of the "new Axis" in a historical context. Bush's inclusion of North Korea among the Axis had a similar effect as Japan joining the Axis powers. It extends the "axis" metaphor into Asia, raising the perceived threat by implying a strategic and coordinated effort and heightening the matter into one of global, not domestic, security. By tapping into a narrative familiar to many Americans, Bush made the threat more understandable to the general public and emphasised the gravity and urgency of the situation.

This highlights a marked difference between ordinary metaphors and political metaphors. Rather than a metaphor "dying" — becoming so conventionalised it is comprehended as a literal statement — figurative language is often "revived" and exhibits remarkable flexibility in the context of political ideology. The initial metaphor of a fixed line around which other countries rotate was soon seemingly rendered obsolete by adding a third country, yet the "axis" was used just as frequently to refer to the new tripartite alliance of nations. Leaders build new historical associations with metaphors through conceptual blending, as described by Philip Eubanks and John D. Schaeffer. Following their framework, blending the conceptual domain of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea with the domain of the Axis powers of World War II makes it more likely for us to "imagine the axis of evil combining strength in order to achieve world domination".¹⁰ The phrase blended analysis with a policy direction, the context of the present with the weight and cultural memory. Thus, the flexibility of the "axis of evil" demonstrates how politics can make novel inferences from reconceptualised metaphors and thus make history more rhetorically potent.

Even though the "axis of evil" phrase is most commonly associated with George Bush, the phrase originated from the speechwriter David Frum. Upon reading FDR's Day of Infamy speech, Frum noticed similarities between the Axis powers of WWII and modern "terror states".

¹⁰ Philip Eubanks and John D. Schaeffer. "A Dialogue between Traditional and Cognitive Rhetoric: Readings of Figuration in George W. Bush's 'Axis of Evil' Address." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2004): 53–70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40232411>.

He pointed out that Japan was extremely reckless to attack the United States, and that this recklessness is what made “the Axis such a menace to world peace”.¹¹ Frum thought that Saddam Hussein’s wars against Iran and Kuwait were similarly reckless and thus posed a comparable threat to world peace. The ideological differences did not weaken the comparison. Frum wrote that Iran, Iraq, al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah, despite quarrelling among themselves, “all resented power of the West and Israel, and they all despised the humane values of democracy”.¹² This instead strengthened the metaphor, as the three Axis powers also lacked ideological cohesion and notable coordination but were united in their opposition of the Allies and their far-right ideology. Frum references Mussolini’s metaphor of the axis as a fixed gravitational line of nations that others revolve around, the implication being that other countries will fall into the “orbit” of the new Axis powers and adopt a similarly authoritarian, far-right ideology.

In doing so, Frum and Bush overlaid historical fact with imagined possibility, blending what we know of the Axis powers with what may come of the new axis of evil. Eubanks and Schaeffer state that the “axis of evil” brings with itself a vision of a dystopian future.¹³ As a result, the imagined solution to a dystopian future is one drawn from recollections of a shared cultural past. The explicit comparison of the problem creates an implicit comparison of the solution: Bush activated the logic of intervention, emphasising a need for an opposing alliance of defenders of democracy — that is to say, an “axis of good” — and military action headed by the United States, as was the case in WWII. In using the metaphor, Bush polarised the conflict. He signified that there is only one gravitational axis the world can turn around, forcing other nations to pick a side. He then further amplified this message by stating that the “price of indifference would be catastrophic”¹⁴, painting Western opponents of military actions as indifferent “appeasers”, contemporary Stanley Baldwins and Neville Chamberlains. “The axis of evil” not only grouped three countries together, but also gave a new ordering principle to global international relations, restructuring it through the eyes of the 1930s and 40s.

The “axis of evil” metaphor highlights the same information about metaphorical frames as the Thibodeau and Boroditsky study. Metaphorical frames highlight certain aspects of a problem. In Bush’s case, the phrase “axis of evil” emphasised three nations’ dangerous far-right nature. However, in highlighting certain aspects, metaphors also exclude and obfuscate other

¹¹ David Frum, *The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush, An Inside Account*, (Waterville, Me.: Thorndike Press, 2003), 335

¹² Frum, *The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush, An Inside Account*, 337.

¹³ Eubanks and Schaeffer, “A Dialogue between Traditional and Cognitive Rhetoric,” 66.

¹⁴ Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union.”

aspects, such as the lack of cooperation between Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. Furthermore, in the words of Heradstveit and Bonham, “metaphor sanctions actions and helps to build goals.”¹⁵ In the example of crime, framing it as a “beast” instead of a “virus” impacted participants’ preferred solutions.¹⁶ As can be seen from Bush’s example, “dead” metaphors in framing are potent in politics. Though the idea of “axis” in terms of a fixed gravitational line is more or less obsolete, the metaphor remains flexible because of its historical associations. More importantly, these ingrained associations create continuities that not only give prevalence to certain solutions over others but actually narrow the path to a single correct solution, making all other proposals seem illogical and shutting down the debate. The revival of old metaphors is more present in the political realm than any other, and through making analogies between the immediate and the historical, the solution to the historical is illuminated as the most viable solution in the present.

From a cognitive perspective, metaphors are represented in the mind through conceptual mapping, where one concept is mapped and understood in terms of another. By mapping Iran, Iraq, and North Korea onto the historical template of the Axis powers, Bush’s use of the phrase scaffolded a reality where the ensuing Iraq War and deposition of Saddam Hussein was the only logical solution.

The “axis of evil” metaphor exemplifies how figurative language can be used in politics to both clarify and obscure facets of political issues. By blending historical context with contemporary issues, metaphors simplify complex geopolitical dynamics into easily digestible narratives. The phrase itself has seen continued contemporary usage: in October 2023, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described an axis of evil involving Hamas and Iran in an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*,¹⁷ and in July 2024, British Army General Sir Patrick Sanders said that Russia, China and Iran were the “new axis powers” in an interview with *The Times*.¹⁸

Just like the fossils of long-extinct creatures, dead metaphors can spark our imagination, structuring a mess of bones into a skeleton, communicating complicated information in an efficient frame. However, these fossils in the context of politics carry echoes of the past that risk narrowing the scope of potential solutions and steering discourse toward dangerous

¹⁵ Heradstveit and Bonham, “What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran,” 422

¹⁶ Thibodeau and Boroditsky. “Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning,” e16782–82.

¹⁷ Benjamin Netanyahu, “The Battle of Civilization,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 30, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-battle-of-civilization-in-gaza-israel-hamas-3236b023>.

¹⁸ Tom Newton Dunn, “Rearm Now or Face Threat of Global Conflict, Ex-Army Chief Warns,” *The Times*, July 8, 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/re-arm-now-or-face-threat-of-global-conflict-ex-army-chief-war-ns-58tfn2sdd>.

oversimplifications. The enduring legacy of the “axis of evil” illustrates the role of metaphor in politics. But more than that, it emphasises the need for vigilance in our interpretations of language, as these “dead” metaphors can fossilise our thinking. By unearthing their implications, we can access a much deeper stratum of understanding regarding global affairs.

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