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Two Leaders, Two Wars: A Psychological Analysis of Fear and Anger Content in Political
Rhetoric about Terrorism.

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Abstract

This paper examines fear and anger content in the political rhetoric of former US President George W. Bush and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair during the period 2001-2003. A total of 49 terrorism-related speeches were coded for content that could plausibly elicit fear or anger in listeners. Although anger and fear inductions were present in the vast majority of coded speeches, the percentage of speeches containing emotional content varied widely over time and between speakers with the highest levels present in the lead up to the War in Iraq. The content of Bush's communication was also considered alongside polling data measuring presidential approval and fear of falling victim to a terrorist attack. Results indicate that fear content in political rhetoric was not associated with significant changes in public fear of terrorism. However, the presence of emotional content did coincide with declining presidential approval. This finding is consistent with claims that emotional appeals are selectively deployed at times of declining public support for governments and their counter-terrorism policies (De Castella, McGarty & Musgrove, 2009). However, the lack of relationship between fear content and fear levels also raises questions about the purpose and effectiveness of alleged fear appeals.

Two Leaders, Two Wars: A Psychological Analysis of Emotional Content in Political Rhetoric.

Over the last decade there has been increasing interest in the role of emotion in political communication, campaigns and decision-making. And, in the declared ‘new age’ of terrorism many political leaders have been charged with manipulating public emotions – particularly fear and anger – to distract audiences from other issues (Muller, 2004; Prewitt et al., 2004); mute criticism and dissent (Furedi, 1997; Krebs & Lobasz, 2007); and, to legitimise and promote support for counter-terrorism policies at the expense of civil liberties and human rights (Flyghed, 2005; Marmor-Lavie & Weimann, 2005; Sunstein, 2004). If it is true that political leaders have attempted to use emotional manipulation to garner political support for the War on Terror, then it is important to examine the degree to which this is politically and socially acceptable in democratic societies. On the other hand, if the allegation is not true, then it is important to revise such claims of widespread emotional manipulation (Lupia & Menning, 2009).

While much of the work in this area has focused on discourse analyses, political commentary and debate (Jackson, 2005a, 2005b; Maser, 2004; Padgett & Allen, 2003; Spence, 2005; Stern, 2000) a number of studies have found that emotional priming can have diverse consequences. Among these include an impact on political judgments (Brader, 2005; 2006; Marcus & Mackuen, 1993; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse & Stevens, 2005); causal attributions for terrorism (Small, Lerner & Fischhoff, 2006); risk estimates, support for counter terrorism policies and plans for precautionary measures (Huddy, Feldman, Taber & Lahav, 2010; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small & Fischhoff, 2003; Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Other terrorism-related research has linked the experience of anger and fear with increased authoritarianism (Hastings & Shaffer, 2005), ethnocentrism (Skitka, Bauman & Mullen, 2004); close-mindedness (Huddy, Feldman, Capelos & Provost, 2002); reliance on social stereotypes

(Bodenhausen, Shepard & Kramer, 1994); and support for pre-emptive action towards an out-group (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003; Lake & Rothchild, 1998). And, from the perspective of terror management theory, fear in particular has been found to promote increased nationalism and patriotism, intolerance for dissent, hostility towards those who are different, and a desire for vengeance (Greenberg, Solomon & Pyszczynski, 1997; Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 2004). Experimental research also indicates that through skilful communication it is possible to produce targeted emotional responses in listeners (Dillard & Nabi, 2006; Gross & Ambrosio, 2004; Small, Lerner & Fischhoff, 2006).

It seems plausible for these reasons that political communicators might choose to play on audience fears, but is it possible to prove that emotional manipulation has occurred? Krebs and Jackson (2007) are sceptical, that researchers in the field can overcome the methodological hurdles necessary to demonstrate that this has occurred. Political persuasion, they argue would require knowledge of a speakers' 'real motives' and the ability to distinguish between sincere beliefs and those adopted for strategic purposes. Motives have long been regarded as "the most illusive of psychological data, distorted as they are, frequently beyond recognition, by the interests and emotions of actor and observer alike" (Morgenthau, 1978, p.5). While to the analyst, true motives are unknown and unknowable; the explicit content of political communication is very much accessible.

We sympathise with the position of Krebs and Jackson (2007). We do not have access to details of motivation so we cannot prove that political leaders are engaged in emotional manipulation, but if emotional manipulation is taking place we would expect it to leave discernable traces in political communications. In other words, it is possible to ask whether there is evidence consistent with the emotional manipulation thesis. If, on the one hand, there is no such evidence then the claim of emotional manipulation would appear to be false. On the

other hand, if there *is* evidence then although this does not prove that the manipulation was deliberate, or that it was effective, it would provide a strong platform for further investigations of these questions.

Recently, De Castella, McGarty and Musgrove (2009) conducted an analysis of the political rhetoric of former Australian Prime Minister John Howard. These authors applied appraisal theory to a content analysis of Howard's speeches on the War on Terror, with a specific focus on fear content. In coding Howard's speeches between 2001 and 2006, they found that fear inducing content was not a constant feature of Howard's rhetoric but it was in fact highly variable and most prevalent at the point where the Australian Government was seeking to bolster support for Australia's looming involvement in the invasion of Iraq.

The current paper uses the appraisal theory-based form of content analysis developed by De Castella et al. (2009) to assess the extent to which fear- and anger-content is present in political rhetoric of other speakers. While appraisal theory has been used previously in research on fear, anger, causal attributions and risk assessment (Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small & Fischhoff, 2003; Small, Lerner & Fischhoff, 2006), it has only recently been used as a basis for content analysis. This study thus aims to extend the methods of De Castella et al. (2009) to the fear and anger content in the political rhetoric of two former Western leaders in the War on Terror: US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. In considering their public speeches, we sought to answer three key questions:

- (Q1) Is there evidence of fear or anger appraisal content in the terrorism-related rhetoric of George W. Bush and Tony Blair? If present,
- (Q2) Which of the two emotions are most common in speeches about terrorism and do the speakers differ in this regard?

(Q3) Is the quantity or form of emotional content similar between speakers and how does it vary over time with respect to the broader political climate in which the speeches are delivered?

Due to the lack of published data in the United Kingdom we ask two further questions about speeches made by former President Bush.

(Q4) Is the presence of fear content associated with fear of terrorism in a population?

And,

(Q5) Is the presence of emotional content in rhetoric about terrorism related to the level of public support for that leader or their policies?

Appraisal Theory

Appraisal theory (Frijda, 1993; Lazarus, 1991a, 1991b, 2001; Scherer, 1993; Smith & Lazarus, 1990, 1993) presents a cognition-emotion model that describes the conditions necessary for eliciting of a wide range of emotions. In the context of terrorism it has been used in psychological research on emotion, political judgments and decision-making (See: Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small & Fischhoff, 2003; Small, Lerner & Fischhoff, 2006).

According to appraisal theory, emotions are elicited not by situations, events or objects themselves but by perceivers' cognitive appraisals of those things (Lazarus, 1991b). Specific combinations of these discrete emotion-eliciting cognitions then produce distinct emotional responses in people. Two key appraisals are necessary for arousing anger and fear: appraisals of (a) motivational/goal relevance – the belief that matters being discussed are personally relevant; and, (b) motivational/goal incongruence – the belief that the issues at hand are potentially unpleasant or harmful (Lazarus, 1991a, b; Smith & Lazarus, 1993).

The elicitation of fear also requires (c) concerns about one's ability to cope with the present threat (uncertain coping). While anger, on the other hand, requires (d) an attribution of

blame — a belief that someone or something is accountable for the harmful or threatening situation. These last two components are termed ‘secondary appraisals’ and play a pivotal role in the appraisal process and ultimately determine whether a harmful situation evokes anger, fear or even guilt (as would be the case if someone believed themselves to be responsible for the morally violating or threatening situation). If audience members believe a situation is personally relevant, harmful or threatening, and is a direct consequence of someone else’s actions, they will most likely experience anger at the responsible party. If, however, they concentrate on their own inability to cope with the present threat then fear is expected as the primary emotional response. These secondary appraisal elements are closely related to Lazarus’ notion of ‘core-relational themes’: a “synthesis of the separate appraisal components into a complex, meaning-centred whole [which] determines the nature of the emotional response” (1991c, p. 64). According to Lazarus’ model, the experience of fear is bound up with a core relational theme of existential threat or danger while anger is tied to the theme of other blame.

Based on Lazarus’s (1991a, b) criteria for anger and fear appraisal, the current project uses a content analytic approach to examine key terrorism speeches presented by George Bush and Tony Blair between September 11, 2001 and May 1, 2003 — the declared end of major combat operations in Iraq. This time-period was selected to capture all terrorism-related speeches delivered in the aftermath of the September 11, as well as speeches delivered in the lead up to, and during two periods of major combat operations: The War on Afghanistan and The War on Iraq.

Method

Texts

For both speakers we sought to obtain a comprehensive sample of all key television and radio addresses to the nation on the topic of terrorism within the date parameters (September

11, 2001 - May 1, 2003). Press conferences, written statements, press releases, media remarks and conference speeches were excluded, as were speeches that were less than 400 words in length. For each speech the percentage of content on the topic of terrorism was calculated by dividing the total number of sentences relating to terrorism, foreign threats and national security by the total number of sentences in each speech. Where less than 50% of a speech's content related to these themes it was also excluded from the analysis.

George Bush's speeches were retrieved from the White House website (www.whitehouse.gov/president). Speeches were obtained from three separate archives: 1. Renewal in Iraq, 2. National Security, and 3. Homeland Security. From these archives, a total of 30 national and radio addresses to the nation were identified that met the search criteria. Speeches by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair were retrieved from the "statements" and "speeches" archives of Number10.gov.uk (The official site of the Prime Minister's Office). The site's news section provides links to all speeches presented by Tony Blair, archived by year. While Blair delivered very few nationally televised addresses on the topic of terrorism, his public statements and parliamentary speeches were of a comparable length and focus and were frequently televised. For this reason, these speeches were also included in the search criteria. From these archives, a total of nineteen speeches were found on the topic of terrorism within the date parameters. The complete sample of 49 speeches contained a total of 7,758 statements, each of which were coded for the presence of anger- and fear-appraisal elements. It is important to emphasise therefore that each data point is based on a large number of observations.

Content Coding

Each speech was independently coded by the first author for all six appraisal components necessary to meet the criteria for anger or fear appraisal. These included sentences

containing statements that expressed: (a) core-relational themes of threat or danger; (b) core relational themes of other blame; (c) motivational relevance; (d) motivational incongruence; (e) low or uncertain ability to cope with the present threat; and, (f) attributions of blame or accountability to a specific 'other'. Some sentences contained more than one appraisal element so the proportions obtained for the different components are not independent of each other.

A three page sample of content was then coded independently by two additional coders who were unaware of the questions we were addressing to establish inter-coder reliability. Each coder examined 50 statements, selected from a random cross-section of the sampled speeches. Coders were required to indicate which (if any) appraisal components were present by ticking the appropriate combination of boxes. All six appraisal categories were provided with a seventh option: no content. A correct answer was recorded when coders ticked the same boxes as the researcher and when they left the same boxes unchecked. In total, the 50 statements provided a score out of 50 for each of the seven categories.

Content was first coded for core relational themes of 'danger or threat', which were defined as statements about terrorism-related risks and dangers. They included comments about the consequences terrorist actions could have for the listeners' safety, security and freedoms. For example: "The world understands that whilst, of course, there are dangers in acting, the dangers of inaction are far, far greater. The threats of further such outrages, the threat to our economies, the threat to the stability of the world." (Blair, October 7, 2001), and "No nation can be neutral in this conflict, because no civilized nation can be secure in a world threatened by terror" (Bush, November 6, 2001). For this category, 95% of the utterances coded as threatening by the researcher were also identified as threatening by the supplementary coders. This indicates high overall inter-rater reliability for this construct.

Core-relational themes of 'other blame' were defined as general stereotypical statements

about the ‘evil other’, the ‘war on terror’; and the ‘fight against evil’. They included statements like: “The terrorists are traitors to their own faith... we have seen their kind before. They are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century.” (Bush, September 20, 2001), and “Osama bin Laden’s philosophy... is an assault on our hearts and minds. It represents extremism, cruelty, intolerance of different cultures and lifestyles...” (Blair, April 7, 2002). Inter-rater reliability for this construct was also high with 93% of the utterances coded consistently across the three coders.

For the purposes of coding, motivational relevance was defined as any statements, which promoted thinking about how the situation specifically affected the listener, was bad for them, or placed them in danger. It included statements about the suffering, responsibilities, and dangers facing one’s country, Western nations, or even the world at large: “We’re in a fight for the freedom and for the security of the American people. We’re in a fight for the values of a civilization” (Bush, January 23, 2002); and “whoever committed these acts of terrorism will have murdered at least a hundred British citizens, maybe many more. Murder of British people in New York is no different in nature from their murder in the heart of Britain itself” (Blair, September 14, 2001). For this category 88% of the statements coded as motivationally relevant by the researcher were identified as such by the two supplementary coders.

Motivationally incongruent statements were defined as claims about the importance of the situation and its harmful, evil or dangerous nature. Appraisal of motivational incongruence included statements of remorse, hatred or disgust at terrorists or terrorist attacks, concerns for the future, and possible risks that the audience may face. For example: “Those who celebrate the murder of innocent men, women, and children have no religion, have no conscience, and have no mercy” (Bush, November 8 2001) and “If we do not deal with the threat from this international outlaw and his barbaric regime, it may not erupt and engulf us this month or next;

perhaps not even this year or the next. But it will at some point.” (Blair, September 10, 2002). Inter-rater reliability was once again high with 91% of statements coded by the researcher also identified by the two independent coders.

The two secondary appraisal components (uncertain coping and other accountability) served as the primary means for identifying specific fear and anger evoking content. Content was coded for uncertain coping when statements suggested to listeners that they were in danger, at risk of terrorist attack and/or may be unable to protect themselves against such risks. As such it required that all other appraisal elements were present. For example: “The danger to our country is grave and it is growing... The attacks of September the 11th showed our country that vast oceans no longer protect us from danger” (Bush, September 28, 2002); “We know that if not stopped, the terrorists will do it again, this time possibly in Britain” (Blair, October 8, 2001). For this category, 92% of statements coded for ‘uncertain coping’ by the researcher were also identified by the supplementary coders.

Statements promoting other accountability were defined as remarks that attributed blame and responsibility for incongruent, harmful or threatening events. For example: “Iraq's weapons of mass destruction are controlled by a murderous tyrant who has already used chemical weapons to kill thousands of people” (Bush, September 28, 2002); and, “The regime of Saddam is detestable. Brutal, repressive, political opponents routinely tortured and executed” (Blair, April 7 2002). Inter-coder reliability for this item was also high with 94% of utterances coded for attributions of blame also identified by the two independent coders.

Results

The percentage of each speech containing fear and anger content was calculated by dividing the number of statements meeting the criteria for fear or anger appraisal by the total number of sentences in each speech. Statements consistent with fear or anger appraisal required

the presence of (a) a core-relational theme of threat or blame; (b) sentiments that were motivationally relevant and (c) motivational incongruent for the listener as well as one of two secondary appraisal elements. For fear, statements needed imply an inability to cope with potential dangers or risks (uncertain coping) while for anger statements required attributions of blame (other accountability). Because anger and fear appraisal typically require that all the primary appraisal elements are present, these secondary components were the primary means for distinguishing between the two kinds of emotion-eliciting content. When a statement contained all primary appraisal elements in conjunction with claims of (d) low or uncertain ability to cope with the present threat, it was coded as fear content. Anger-consistent statements on the other hand, contained all primary appraisal elements and (e) attributions of blame or accountability to a specific 'other'. Because some statements contained both secondary appraisal elements the obtained proportions are not independent of each other. The proportions of fear and anger-consistent speech content was then graphed over the time period (Figure 1).

Differences between Speakers

While both speakers displayed similar patterns over time, there were key differences between them: First, fear-consistent appraisals were generally more pervasive within Bush's rhetoric and in some cases accounted for almost 40% of the speech content. Fear content was much lower in Blair's political speeches and rarely exceeded 15-20% of coded material. Secondly, of the two emotions, Blair's speeches more frequently contained anger content, which exceeded the total amount of fear-content in each of the 19 coded speeches. Bush's speeches, on the other hand, were more frequently dominated by fear-consistent appraisals, which were identified as the primary emotion coded in exactly half of his 30 speeches. The third and final difference between the two speakers relates to the relationship between fear and anger content in the two sets of communications. While proportions of fear and anger appraisal

content varied across Bush's communications, the two emotions show a more consistent relationship in speeches made by Tony Blair. This finding may reflect 'thematic' changes occurring in Bush's speeches as compared to more general increases and decreases in overall emotional content within Blair's political speeches.

Patterns of fear and anger content over time

For both Bush and Blair, speech content containing fear appraisals elements were relatively low throughout 2001 and early 2002. However, on the 10th and 14th of September 2002, the initial major spikes emerge in both speakers' first national speeches on the topic of Saddam and the threats posed by weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The ensuing pre-Iraq war period was then characterised by significantly higher levels of fear content present in on average 26% (Bush) and 11% (Blair) of the coded speech material. Anger appraisal was also high throughout this period averaging 17% and 20% for the two speakers. The overall presence of appraisal content also fluctuates markedly over these months as Bush and Blair make their demands of Saddam and these demands are repeatedly 'defied and mocked' by 'the dictator' (Bush, Radio Address, February 8, 2003). The strong presence of fear content at this time is especially noteworthy given the almost complete absence of such content in the lead up to the War in Afghanistan and throughout both periods of major combat operations.

The construction of confidence intervals for the proportions of anger and fear content in the sampled speeches provides a straightforward way to draw statistical inferences from these data. Confidence intervals are informative for proportions close to .5 and with large sample sizes (see e.g., Smithson, 2003). Placing 95% confidence intervals around the mean proportion of fear appraisals for speeches in the pre-Iraq War period (September 10th, 2001 – March 20th, 2003) yielded a range of .20 to .31 for Bush and .04 and .17 for Blair. The mean proportions for each of the other time periods fall outside the range of plausible values on these measures

indicating that there were significantly higher levels of fear appraisal in Bush and Blair's speeches in the lead up to the War on Iraq than during any of the other time periods. For anger appraisals, a 95% confidence interval for the same time period produced a mean range of .12 to .22 for Bush and .16 to .24 for Blair with means for the pre-Afghanistan war period and major combat operations in Iraq falling within the range of plausible values.

Emotional Content and Public Attitudes

To explore whether variations in content are related to politically relevant measures of public opinion, we focused of necessity on the United States and on fear content. Only isolated opinion polls on fear of terrorism were conducted in the United Kingdom over the period in question and there are no equivalent measures of public anger in either country so these are not considered further. However in the United States, a series of CNN/USA Today/Gallup Polls monitored public concerns about terrorism by asking subjects: "How worried are you that you or someone in your family will become a victim of terrorism? Answers were reported on a 5-point scale with options including: Very worried; somewhat worried, not too worried, not at all worried or no opinion. A USA Today/Gallup Poll also provides presidential approval ratings over the same dates. Respondents were asked, "do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president.

The Aftermath of 9/11

In the weeks and months following the September 2001 terrorist attacks, Bush's approval rating leapt from approximately 51% to an unprecedented 88-90% as early as September 13th (*PollingReport.com*, 2004; *USA Today/Gallup Poll*, 2001). Polling also indicated that Americans were indeed frightened at this time. According to the CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll, 40% of those surveyed believed that further acts of terrorism were a very likely possibility in the next few weeks, 45% considered them somewhat likely and only

13% thought such attacks were unlikely (*CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll*, October 2001). Despite these concerns, the vast majority of those surveyed (84%) believed the U.S. government was doing a good job reducing the threat of terrorism (*Princeton Survey Research Associates*, 15-21 October 2001), and 92% approved of the way Bush was “handling the U.S. campaign against terrorism” (*ABC News/Washington Post Poll*, October 2001).

The Lead-up to the ‘War on Terror’

A series of public opinion polls from *PollingReport.com* indicate that Bush’s approval ratings remained high throughout late 2001 rarely falling below 85%. However, by mid-March 2002, support for Bush had declined to less than 80% and this decline continued steadily throughout the year. On the 10th of September Bush delivered his first speech on the threats posed by Saddam and weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. At the same time, polling data indicated that his approval ratings had dropped to approximately 65% (*PollingReport.com*, September, 2002). Bush’s approval rating declined further to 61% by October 2, 2002 and remained in the low 60s until early March 2003 (*PollingReport.com*; *Gallup.com*). Approval of Bush’s “handling of the U.S. campaign against terrorism” also declined from 92% in October 2001, to 74% by October 2002 (*ABC News/Washington Post Poll*, October 2002). By February, approval of the Bush’s handling of ‘terrorist threats’ had declined further to 67% (*Princeton Survey Research Associates*, February 2003). At this time, only 31% supported immediate military involvement – down from approximately 65% two months earlier (*CBS News/New York Times Poll*, 24 January 2003)

The American public also appeared less fearful of terrorism than they had been 12 months earlier. Terrorist attacks on American soil were no longer considered an imminent threat facing Americans. Now only 12% of those surveyed (in contrast to 40% a year earlier)

believed a terrorist attack was a very likely possibility in the next few weeks, 44% thought it was somewhat likely and 41% considered it unlikely (*Gallop Poll*, 13-16 September 2002).

Combat Operations in Iraq

On March 22nd 2003 – a mere two days after the invasion – support for US-president Bush was up by almost 15 points to 71% (*Gallup.com*, 22 March 2003) and 75% approval (*CBS News Poll*, March 2003). The high levels of support for Bush only began to decline after the declared end in early May (*Gallup.com*). Approval for U.S. involvement in Iraq also reached record highs after the invasion, fluctuating between 68 and 72% throughout this period (*Gallup.com*, March – May, 2003). Although levels of public concern about terrorism remained constant throughout this period, American citizens did appear increasingly worried about the likelihood of an attack with 21% believing “further acts of terrorism in the United States over the next several weeks were very likely”, 52% believing them “somewhat likely” and only 6% who considering them “not at all likely” (*Gallup Poll*, 22-23 March, 2003).

Fear Content and Public Anxiety

The results from polling data over the period in question suggest that the relationship between public fear of terrorism and fear content in political rhetoric is weak at best. This finding casts doubt on claims that fear rhetoric has induced sustained fear of terrorism among listeners. Interestingly, the major spikes in public concerns about terrorism occur in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the death of a kidnapped US reporter (February, 21, 2002). These surges in public fear about terrorist may indicate that terror acts have greater power than terror rhetoric for inducing public uncertainty and fear. When examining personal concerns about terrorism, Nacos, Bloch-Elkon and Shapiro (2007) observed similar effects with public anxiety rising after major terror alerts and events such as the bombings of London’s

transit system in 2005. A spike in fear levels also appeared here shortly after the death of three U.S. aid workers killed in Yemen (December, 30th, 2002) and coincides with a presentation to the U.N by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The close proximity of Powell's speech to the latter rise in public fear of terrorism points to the role that may be played by other political spokespeople in the War on Terrorism. Research suggests that some speakers are more important than others when conveying messages of threat. Terror warnings from President Bush for example, have been found to have greater impact on public threat perception than similar warning from Department of Homeland Security officials and other media sources (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon & Shapiro, 2007). However, the speeches of other members of the administration such as Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President, Dick Cheney may warrant investigation in future research.

The lack of relationship between fear content and public fear of terrorism also suggests that heightened levels of public fear may be somewhat difficult to maintain. Recent research by Back, Küfner and Egloff (2010) investigated the emotional content of pager text messages in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. They found that while many people experienced heightened anxiety at the time of the attacks, they recovered quickly with anxiety returning to baseline level shortly after each event. Anger on the other hand, increased steadily after the attacks as information was provided by the news media and other sources. Interestingly, the expression of anger peaked immediately after Bush's public address to the nation and again later in the evening with additional media coverage. While polling on levels of public anger and outrage is lacking, this recent study indicates that anger appeals in political rhetoric may show a somewhat more direct and sustained relationship with public anger in response to terrorism.

Fear Content and Approval Ratings

While there appears to be little association between public fear levels and fear content in Bush's rhetoric, fear content was associated with periods of declining support for the administration and their counter terrorism policies – most clearly seen in the lead-up to the War on Iraq. Similar research examining the quantity and source of statements about terrorist threats over the time period in question indicates that despite a general pattern of decline in public approval, brief spikes in concerns about terrorism and support for President Bush occur roughly in tandem with increased terror warning and news reports citing Bush on the terrorist threat (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon & Shapiro, 2007). The authors suggest that official alerts and public statements emphasizing the risks of terrorism served to boost public approval of the President's handling of the terrorist threat as well as his overall approval in general. These findings are consistent with arguments made by Jackson (2005b) and others (Altheide, 2003; Pyszczynski, 2004; Robin, 2004; Sunstein, 2004; Rothe & Muzzatti, 2004), that fear appeals in political rhetoric are intended to promote support for controversial political policy at times of declining support for political leaders and their campaigns.

Discussion

The results from the content analysis demonstrate that fear and anger content is indeed present in the majority of George Bush and Tony Blair's sampled speeches. However, the amount of this emotional content varies substantially, between speakers and over time. In both Bush and Blair's rhetoric, anger and fear appraisal content is at its highest in the pre-Iraq-war period with a near complete absence of fear content before this time. Both periods of major combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq are also characterised by comparatively lower levels of anger and fear appraisal content – accounting for less than 10% of coded material. Interestingly, these patterns largely replicate the occurrence of fear content identified in the rhetoric of former Australian Prime Minister, John Howard (De Castella et al., 2009). In

Howard's speeches the largest spike in fear content was in early February 2003 — Howard's initial statements justifying Australia's pending involvement in the War on Iraq.

While these findings suggest a general trend in emotional content throughout the 'War on Terror', it is important to acknowledge that the content of Bush, Blair and Howard's speeches are not independent of each other. This is in part true because they were talking about the same events, but even if different people with different motives were to craft these speeches, they remain public communications that are immediately available to other speakers. The content and styling of a speech by one leader may thus be echoed in the speech of another.

Bush, Blair, Howard and their speechwriters undoubtedly possessed varied reasons for their choice of rhetoric in framing the War on Terrorism and terrorist threats. Without access to internal communications we cannot claim to know the 'true motives' guiding these decisions. It is dangerous to underplay risks at politically turbulent times and it would have been surprising if national leaders had not genuinely experienced and expressed some degree of anger and fear in the face of impending war with Iraq. However, one must also assume that political leaders are deliberative actors who select their words carefully and strategically in pursuit of a broader political agenda. Research based in part on internal memos and other sources indicate in April 2002, George Bush and Tony Blair had agreed that there needed "to be a political plan in place to convince public and world opinion that war was necessary" (Pfiffner, 2007, p. 215). The presence then of a correlated pattern of fear content in the rhetoric of all three political leaders is consistent with such a plan but is not proof of its existence.

If, as some critics claim, politicians have been engaged in a campaign of "fear mongering" (Altheide, 2003; Jackson, 2005; Lawrence, 2006), the results of the current study indicate this campaign has not taken place in a consistent fashion since September 11, 2001. Instead it appears that fear content only really began to feature prominently in the 'War on

Terror’ rhetoric prior to the invasion of Iraq. Krebs and Lobasz (2007) explain that in the immediate aftermath of the attacks of 9/11 the president’s own rhetoric was ‘notably restrained’. Instead these first speeches were typically motivational and patriotic appeals to unity and strength: “Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve” (Bush, Address to the Nation, September 11, 2001).

The fact that explicit fear and anger content emerged later in this rhetoric is noteworthy for two main reasons. First, the absence of fear and anger appraisal content at other times demonstrates that anger and fear content were not permanent, inevitable aspects of political rhetoric — even when discussing the provocative and frightening topic of terrorism. Terrorism is an emotive topic that arouses numerous negative connotations particularly in the aftermath of September 11. However, it is possible to discuss these issues in a way that seems less likely to induce an angry or fearful response from listeners. Secondly, the consistent patterns across different speakers also seems to rule out the possibility that emotion inducing content merely reflected one leader’s rhetorical style or choice of speechwriter. Instead, fear and anger content arose in a correlated fashion between speakers during the lead up to the invasion of Iraq suggesting a systematic basis to variations — possibly as a means of generating public support for military involvement at times of declining support for government policy (H2).

An overview of polling trends in the United States throughout this period are consistent with claims that emotional appeals are employed with the purpose of promoting support for political leaders and their counter-terrorism policies (Flyghed, 2005; Marmor-Lavie & Weimann, 2005; Sunstein, 2004). When Bush and Blair’s popularity was high, fear content was virtually non-existent in political rhetoric. There was a marked absence of this content despite the terrifying nature of events in the aftermath of 9/11 and during periods of major combat

operations. Even in speeches advocating anti-terrorism policy (such as prior to the passage of the Patriot Act, October 26th 2001), there was very little speech content meeting the criteria for fear or anger appraisal when compared to similar speeches at later times. If indeed, fear and anger-appeals were being used to generate support for *controversial* political policy, as claimed by Jackson (2005a, b) and others (Altheide, 2003; Furedi, 1997; Pyszczynski, 2004; Robin, 2004; Sunstein, 2004; Rothe & Muzzatti, 2004), the already high levels of emotional arousal and political support may have rendered such appeals unnecessary at this time. Consistent with the ‘rally around the flag effect’ (Krebs & Lobasz, 2007), Bush enjoyed a substantial surge in public support in the aftermath of 9/11. Personal satisfaction rating and support for the ‘War on Terror’ were at record highs and fear of terrorism was already a prominent concern especially among American citizens. Meyer (2009) argues that it was with this boost in public support following the September 11 attacks, that the Bush administration “seized the moment to press its preferred policies globally” (2009, p.20). Even if this is true, it appears that emotional content was not yet a predominant feature of Bush public rhetoric.

While fear content was largely absent in Bush’s early speeches about terrorism, there is evidence to suggest that public fear of terrorism may have been playing an important role in support for Bush, Blair and the War on Terror. Experimental research by Landau et al. (2004) found that when thoughts of vulnerability, death and terrorism were made salient, audiences showed increased support for George W. Bush and the administration’s counter-terrorism policies. In the aftermath of 9/11, concerns about the threat of terrorism were highest but in the ensuing years a relatively high percentage of people continued to be ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ worried they and their loved ones would be personally affected by a terrorist attack. An analysis of national polling and the administration’s official public statements also reveals that the Presidents’ approval ratings did benefit from media coverage of their terror alerts and threat

assessments (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon & Shapiro, 2007). These findings may help explain the greater support for the War on Terror at times when public fear of terrorism was high.

Recent research by Huddy, Feldman, Taber & Lahav (2010) indicate that ‘personal’ and ‘national’ threat perception may also lead to varied responses in citizens. The polling question used in the current study – “How worried are you that you or someone in your family will become a victim of terrorism?” – represents a measure of perceived personal threat. Using the same polling question, Huddy et al. (2010) recently found that concerns of personal threat were indeed associated with greater support for George W. Bush as well as his domestic and international counter terrorism policies. The same threat perceptions however, did not translate into heightened concern about the national economy as seen with measures of ‘national threat’ – concerns about the likelihood of future attacks on American soil (Huddy, Feldman, Capelos & Provost, 2002). In examining the relationship between fear content and public fear of terrorism, the current study has incorporated public polling as a measure of ‘personal threat’. ‘National threat’ perceptions however and concerns about the broader risks and implications of terrorist attacks may show a different pattern of relationship with emotion inducing content in political rhetoric. Future research should thus seek to incorporate a wider variety of measures in assessing threat perception and emotional responses in listeners.

While support for Bush and Blair was high in the aftermath of 9/11, it changed dramatically in the lead-up to the War on Iraq. Prior to the invasion, a review of polling trends indicates that support for George Bush had dropped significantly and the American public were decisively less concerned about the risk of terrorism. Our content analysis of speeches at this time revealed a significantly greater frequency of fear- and anger-appraisal content particularly in speeches justifying military involvement in Iraq. Together, these finding indicate that fear content only began to feature prominently in Bush’s rhetoric prior to the invasion of Iraq. This

pattern of results is consistent with research by De Castella et al., (2009) and indicates that fear and anger content may have been selectively employed to promote public support for military engagement at times of heightened political uncertainty, conflict, and declining support for the government and its policies. We are at pains to point out however, that the presence of fear or anger content in political rhetoric prior to the War on Iraq does not demonstrate that these speakers were intending to produce these effects. Our objective has been only to assess the plausibility of such claims by evaluating whether these speeches contain content that could reasonably be expected to lead to specific emotional reactions in listeners.

The lack of relationship between emotion inducing content and general fear of terrorism was a surprising finding and may indicate that widespread fear of terrorism is somewhat difficult to maintain. However, it is important to recognize that fear and anger content in political rhetoric may not be aimed solely at eliciting public emotional reactions. Krebs and Lobasz (2007) suggest that through a process of ‘rhetorical cohesion’, counter-arguments can be framed in ways, which circumscribe political debate and silence political opponents. They argue that by establishing the ‘War on Terror’ as the organizing discourse for foreign policy, and by framing Saddam Hussein as an evil terrorist threat, the administration undermined political opposition. In this way, even if emotionally charged language did not arouse a response in listeners it may serve to ‘rhetorically coerce’ opponents, media and other actors thus narrowing the space for sustainable political debate.

Polling trends based on isolated measures of ‘concerns’ about future attacks should also be interpreted with caution due to the lack of data over the time period in question. Disentangling the antecedents and consequences of personal and national threat, fear and anxiety is an important area for future research (Huddy, Feldman, Capelos & Provost, 2002; Huddy, Feldman, Taber & Lahav, 2010). The extent to which fear- and anger- content in

political rhetoric actually invokes these emotional responses in citizens is also an area ripe for investigation. The results of the current study suggest that fear and anger content was selectively and variably present in the terrorism-related speeches of two key Western leaders and was correlated with changes in public attitudes and political support. The fact that fear and anger content is almost absent at some times and pervasively present at others also demonstrates that this form communication is neither constant nor inevitable. Alerting the public to the threats posed by terrorism may be important for establishing the legitimacy of foreign policy decisions however, discussion of these issues is not implicitly tied up with fear and anger content. Terrorism is an emotive topic, and responses to it may be massive, vigorous and violent, but terror threats can, and were, at times, talked about by these two political leaders in ways that seemed less likely to induce angry or fearful reactions from their listeners.

We do not yet know to what extent other political leaders have used similar forms of communication, but the present findings are consistent with recent research in an Australian context (De Castella et al., 2009). While further research is clearly needed, appraisal theory-based content analysis appears to offer a plausible basis for investigating emotional content in public communications and may prove a valuable methodology for future inquiry. Further research in this area may also benefit from a complementary discourse or textual analysis of fear- or anger speech content and a more thorough examination of the political and domestic circumstance and media coverage surrounding the delivery of key speeches. A combined qualitative analysis would in this way help contextualize coded content and allow for more meaningful comparisons between the rhetorical styles of different speakers. An examination of later speeches by Bush and Blair (and their successors) would also provide more insight into the ways in which their rhetoric may have changed in the ensuing years.

Despite growing interest in the field of emotion and political communication (Brader, 2005, 2006; Huddy et al., 2002, 2010; Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Lupia & Menning, 2009; Marcus & Mackuen, 1993; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse & Stevens, 2005), many questions remain unanswered. However, the results of the current study highlight the utility of psychological theory and methods for addressing live political issues and informing debates that are likely to be intensely partisan. The results provide some support but also some refutation of the allegations made by political commentators that the War on Terror has been pursued by the leaders of the United States and the United Kingdom as a sustained fear campaign since 2001. The true picture appears to be that while emotional content is present, the frequency and substance of that content has varied substantially over time with fear content emerging primarily in speeches at times of declining public support.

Thus the methods we have presented here help to establish standards for assessing rhetoric by political leaders on crucial matters of public policy, but the methods also establish standards for assessing the claims of critics of those leaders. In this respect, the suggestion that Bush and Blair were engaged in wholesale emotional manipulation in the early stages of the war in Afghanistan is not supported by these data. The very same claim is plausible (but not proven) for the period leading up to the invasion of Iraq. Importantly, the same methods could be deployed prospectively as a resource where similar allegations of emotional manipulation by political leader are made about other issues such as border security and crime rates.

In conclusion our results begin to shed light on the role of anger and fear content in political rhetoric. While it is plausible to claim that the American people became more fearful of terrorism following terrorist events (albeit for a short time, Back, Küfner & Egloff, 2010), it is difficult to demonstrate that terrorism-related speeches also induced fear. Fear content may have helped to legitimise foreign policy positions or narrow avenues for debate about counter

terrorism policy. There is, however, little evidence that speeches loaded with fear content themselves increased perceptions of personal vulnerability in a widespread or sustained fashion. It is even possible that fear rhetoric used by leaders such as President Bush may have undermined popular support in the lead up to the War on Iraq – a possibility that merits much closer investigation. In any case, it appears efforts by leaders to frighten the people of their own nation during a conflict are dubious for ethical, moral and (presumably) military reasons. Our research suggests that the putative political dividends of such attempts may also need careful assessment.

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Figure 1. Proportion of Fear and Anger Appraisal Content in Bush and Blair's Political Speeches about Terrorism.