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Wojtek Mackiewicz Wolfe. *Winning the War of Words: Selling the War on Terror from Afghanistan to Iraq.* New York: Praeger, 2008. xiv + 137 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-34967-6.

Reviewed by Steve Casey

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Commissioned by Janet G. Valentine (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College - Dept of Mil Hist)

Bush's Rhetorical War on Terror

George W. Bush leaves office on a profound low. His bold foreign-policy vision to win the war on terror partly by transforming the Middle East remains starkly unfulfilled. His approval ratings are at an all-time low, dragged down by his ongoing war in Iraq and the economic crisis. And as these foreign and domestic problems have escalated, he was a silent witness in a pivotal election that saw his own legacy decisively rejected as his party went down to a momentous defeat.

Yet for scholars, at least, Bushâs presidency has proved something of a boon, if only because its sheer controversy has provided fresh subjects to analyze. Thus, while foreign-policy analysts have probed the causes and consequences of the Bush doctrine, historians–besotted for so long by social movements or the cultural turn–are, perhaps, starting to discover a renewed value in studying decision-making elites. To them all, in the wake of Bush, the presidency clearly matters.

In this book, Wojtek Mackiewicz Wolfe demonstrates one of the ways that the Bush presidency is also important to political scientists. Under a bold title, *Winning the War of Words*, Wolfe displays the fruits of his research into almost 1500 of Bushâs first-term speeches, which he uses to explore how Bush marketed the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Such an extremely significant subject, based on such prodigious research, deserves a wide audience. But Wolfe is clearly aiming, first and foremost, at his colleagues within the political science academy.

Wolfeâs principal goal is to demonstrate the utility of analyzing framing effects and threat rhetoric. One of his chief targets is the work done by Christopher Gelpi and Peter Feaver, suggesting that American public opinion will support a war, even if casualties mount, as long as it sees a reasonable benefit associated with victory. By this logic, effective presidential rhetoric needs to emphasize future gains. But, as Wolfe convincingly demonstrates, Bushâs speeches between 2001 and 2004 invariably stressed loss, not gain. During the fall of 2002, in particular, Bush worked hard to convince the public that a war with Iraq was vital because of Iraqâs growing strength and its development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). In Bushâs sales pitch, America had to gamble to avoid the future losses associated with this growing threat.

Such arguments clearly have a wider interest. For the general reader, Wolfe is particularly fascinating when exploring how Bush directed WMD and threat themes to specialist audiences before 9/11, thereby laying the âgroundworkâ for what happened after that pivotal date; when detailing the timing of speeches and use of specific themes; and when showing how Bush tried to equate economic security with the war on terror. Yet, despite the obvious importance of, and interest in, this subject, Wolfeâs prose is too heavily laden with political science terminology. Too often, his arguments are difficult to discern amidst the detailed discussions of utility or prospect

theory, thematic or evaluative framing.

More substantively, Wolfeâs political science framework also defines the issues narrowly, thereby gliding over the enormous complexity associated with any effort to sell war. Wolfeâs focus is on the president and public opinion. To his credit, he recognizes many of the limitations presented by such a focus. On occasion, he discusses the role of the media in framing, amplifying or obscuring issues. At another point, he raises the need to explore the publicity efforts of all the senior members of the administration, rather than just the president. And finally, he also recognizes that the role of speechwriters is important and that the speechwriting team does not remain static. In fact, in an interesting twist, at one point Peter Feaver, whose political science work is one of the targets of this book, actually joined Bushâs staff, and was thus in a position to persuade the president to adopt a more gains-oriented message, a development that threatened to undermine a central plank of Wolfeâs argument!

Yet, for all his recognition of complexity, ultimately Wolfeâs methodology does not enable him to adequately factor in the messy nature of–and especially the sheer noise surrounding–any effort to sell war. Two examples stand out. First, Wolfe emphasizes that Bushâs efforts to sell a preventive war in Iraq peaked in October 2002, almost six months before the actual invasion. But he fails to explore one of the central reasons for this timing: the impending mid-term elections, which played a major role in establishing the domestic context for war in the coming months. Second, Wolfe swiftly dismisses the need to expand the research scope to other leading officials âbecause behind-the-scenes disagreements within an administration rarely translate into public rhetoricâ (p. 99). If only! In earlier wars, presidents were sometimes so hampered by conflicting signals emanating from their own administration that, in one instance, a leading historian has argued that the official message was drowned out in a âcacophony of discordant notes.â[1] Of course, these conflicting signals often take the form of leaks, rather than outright insubordination. But such activity further highlights the need to increase, rather than confine, the research scope.

In dealing with current political issues, political scientists also face the problem of a time lag. While their manuscripts are peer reviewed and edited, the issues they tackle can start to change. Clearly Bush did âwinâ his âwar of wordsâ in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. This was hardly surprising. As John Zaller has pointed out, crisis periods are one of those relatively rare occasions when it is easier for the White House to set the agenda partly because âcitizen attentiveness to politics peaksâ and partly because âelites are more likely to forge a united position,â with both Congress and the media falling in line behind the administrationâs diagnosis of events.[2]

Perhaps Bush also won the war of words in 2004, the end point covered here, for the simple reason that he won reelection. But even by this point in time, his victory was beginning to seem pyrrhic. Wolfe clearly states that his research agenda âis not about the validity of the presidentâs arguments but about his choice of rhetorical toolsâ (p. 76). But by this stage, domestic critics were starting to question the veracity of earlier arguments. And the presidentâs need to respond to such barbs undoubtedly influenced the content of his speeches.

It would be interesting to see how Wolfeâs analysis can be applied to both these and more recent events, especially the claims for the âsuccessâ of the âsurge.â With a new president poised to take charge–one who has centered his campaign on the rejection of everything Bush stands for–it also remains to be seen whether Bushâs emphasis on loss rather than gain will be jettisoned as swiftly as the new administration hopes to discard other aspects of a presidency now so widely viewed as a failure.

Notes

[1]. Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938-1939* (London: Mandarin, 1989), 258; Steven Casey, âWhite House Publicity Operations during the Korean War, June 1950-June 1951,â *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35 (2005): 694-96, 709-10.

[2]. John Zaller, âElite Leadership of Mass Opinion: New Evidence from the Gulf War,â in W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz, eds., *Taken By Storm: The Media, Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 187-88.

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