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Rhetorical Theory with Anne Aronson
Article Review: The God Strategy -
The Rise of Religious Politics in America
by David Domke and Kevin Coe
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Summary

In the journal article, "The God Strategy - The Rise of Religious Politics in America", David Domke and Kevin Coe examine the frequency of the inclusion of religious rhetoric in presidential speeches from 1933 (inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt) to 2007. The findings show a marked jump in presidential religious rhetoric beginning in 1981, which continues today.

Domke and Coe quantified the religious rhetoric into two categories: God-talk and Faith-talk. God-talk included names referencing God like Christ, Creator, the Almighty, and Providence. Faith-talk included words associated with religion like angel, confession, evil, faith, miracle, mission, pray, proverb, sacred, sin, and worship.

The authors did not try to measure the sincerity of the Presidents, and they allowed for the possibility that the Presidents used the language because they believed in it. However, Domke and Coe point out that modern political strategists encourage the use of religious rhetoric to create identification. Doug Wead, who headed George H.W. Bush's campaign, was quoted as advising political leaders to "signal early, signal often" religious viewpoints" (Domke, and Coe). They also found that, among religious Americans, it was more important to religious conservatives (evangelicals) that the President connect with them through the use of common symbols. G.W. Bush was rewarded for connecting with this group in the 2000 election, and he secured nearly eighty percent of the white evangelical vote that year (Domke, and Coe). In the following

election, James Dobson publicly encouraged Christians to vote for G.W. Bush, and Jerry Falwell said, "For conservative people of faith, voting for principle this year means voting for the re-election of George W. Bush. The alternative, in my mind, is simply unthinkable." (Domke, and Coe).

Domke and Coe studied over 350 speeches, nearly all of which are available for review at <http://www.americanpresidency.org>. They claim to have read each speech manually (versus scanning them electronically). However, I believe they also scanned them electronically. The study started with Roosevelt because this timeframe corresponded to the emergence of TV and radio, allowing the speeches of American Presidents to be more influential on the public.

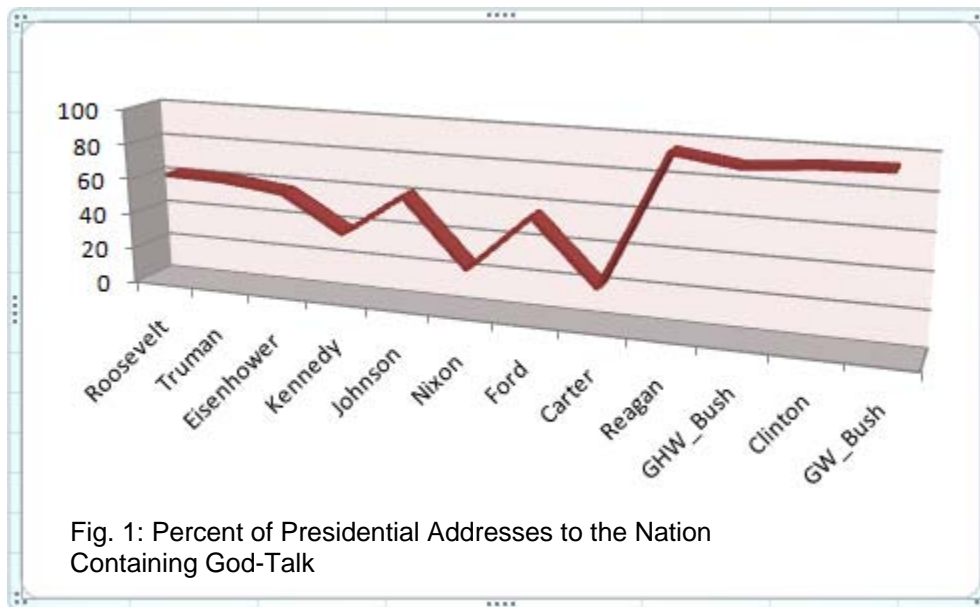


Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of presidential White House speeches that included God-talk (referencing the name of God or synonym). The figure shows that once the level rose in 1981, the percentage remained high.

In Figure 2, God-talk is examined for all presidential speeches (versus only State-of-the-Union addresses). Again, the trend shows a marked increase from 1981 that is sustained until current.

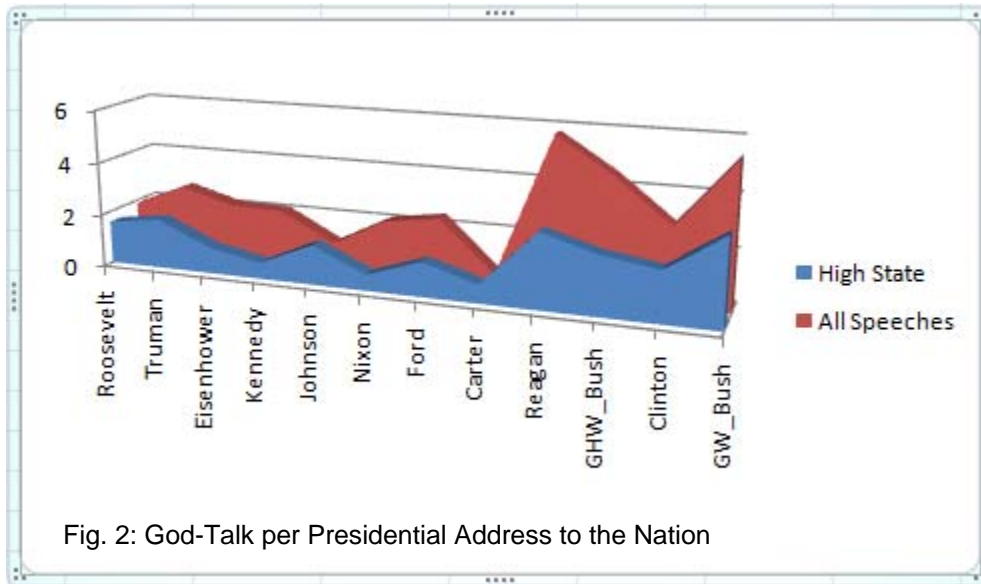


Fig. 2: God-Talk per Presidential Address to the Nation

Faith-talk also substantially increased in 1981 (see Fig.3). This increase caused Domke and Coe to refer to the four Presidents from 1981 through 2007 as "the Founding Fathers of today's religious politics" (Domke, and Coe).

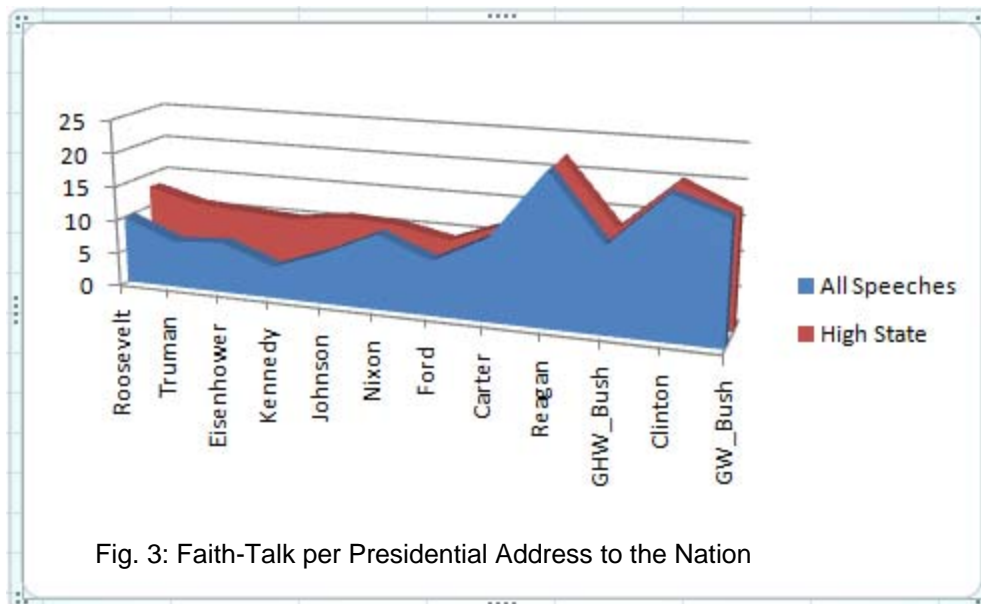
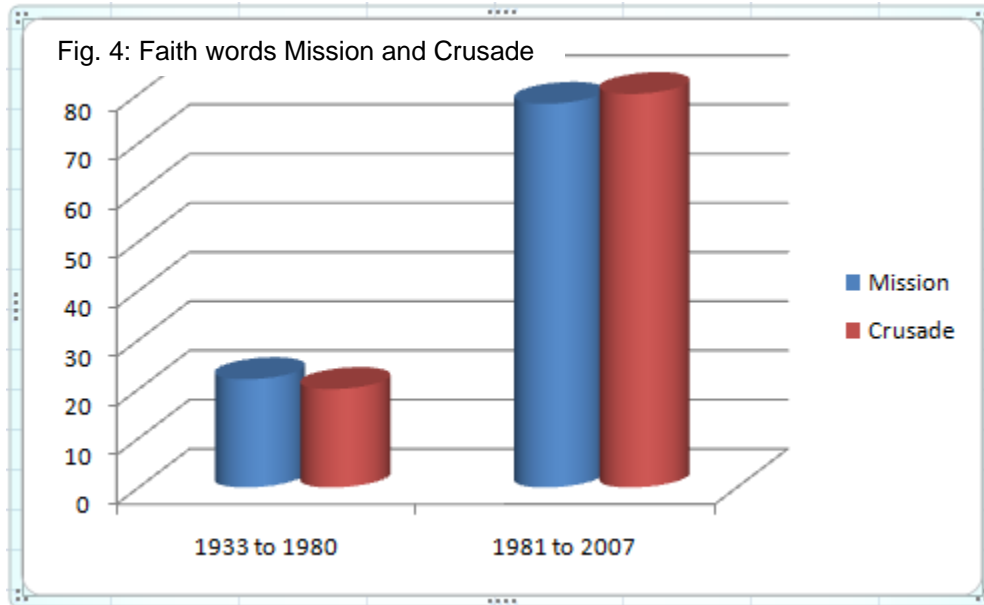
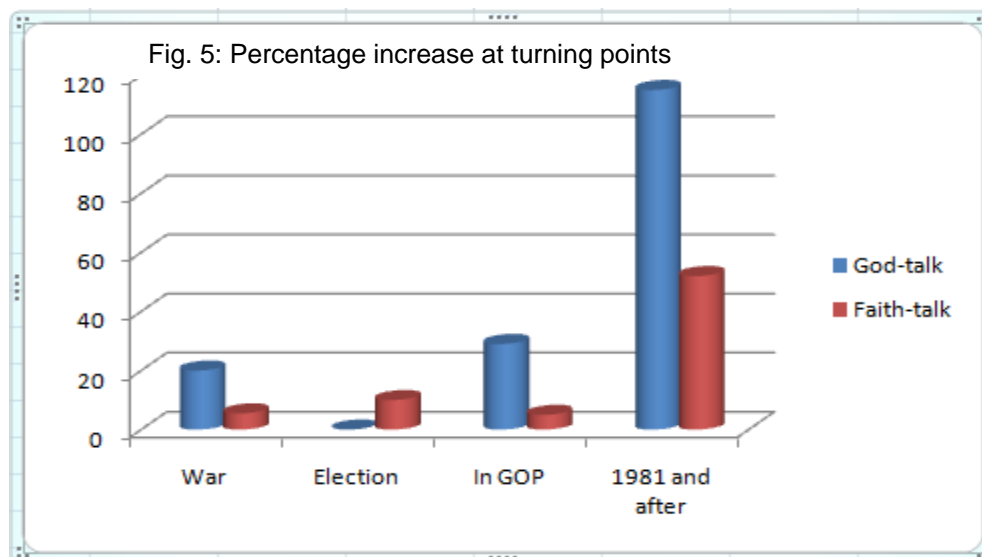


Fig. 3: Faith-Talk per Presidential Address to the Nation

The authors discovered that particular religious symbols were used to shape views of pressing issues facing the nation. Specifically, they noticed that the handling of critical matters was often referenced with the religious words “mission” or “crusade.” Domke and Coe tracked the frequency of the use of these terms over the twelve-President timeframe. The results are shown in figure 4.



The authors also found that Presidents were more likely to use both Faith-talk and God-talk during a time of crisis. However, it was hypothesized that the increase could also be due to other factors such as more Republican Presidents or election rhetoric. Figure 5 shows the percentage increase in God-talk and Faith-talk for four different events: war or crisis, elections, GOP in office and post-1981 timeframe.



Assessment

The clear statistics are the strength of the article. They show a dramatic increase in religious rhetoric by US Presidents since 1981. The explanation for the increase is brief and could be expanded further- along with political implications and the effect on foreign affairs and domestic policy.

Domke and Coe wrote this journal article early in 2007 in preparation for a book with a similar title, "The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America," which was just published a few months ago by Oxford University Press (240 pages). I assume that the causes and implications of God-talk and Faith-talk are expanded in the book. I was unable to locate it prior to writing this (the book is in route to the library as I am writing).

The God-talk and Faith-talk not only create rhetorical symbolic identification, but, increasingly, doctrinal identification. I felt the authors failed to identify words that carry a much greater doctrinal denotation than others. Some doctrinally-loaded words were mentioned, but the implications were not pursued to the length they could have been.

For example, they recorded Clinton as saying, "That's what I want to talk with you about tonight. I call it the New Covenant" (Domke, and Coe). While "New Covenant" can be used as a theological phrase that crosses denominations, in my opinion, its use is more prevalent in evangelical circles. If it is true, as Domke and Coe point out, that evangelicals are more affected by God-talk and Faith-talk, it makes sense to target rhetoric specific to these groups for the purpose of building ethos.

I am more concerned that we watch for presidential religious rhetoric that identifies with evangelical doctrines of prophecy and science, as it could affect foreign relations and educational policies. For example, Tim LaHaye, author of the Left Behind novels, has been very influential in Republican politics since 1981. His novels, which have made him millions in evangelical circles, all deal with prophecy, the rapture and military battles of the end times. He has a well articulated plan for US involvement in the Middle East that comes directly from his beliefs about biblical prophecy.

Sam Harris wrote:

Contemporary examples of governmental piety are everywhere to be seen. Many prominent Republicans belong to the Council for National Policy, a secretive Christian pressure group founded by the fundamentalist Tim LaHaye (coauthor of the apocalyptic "Left Behind" series of novels). This organization meets quarterly to discuss who knows what. George W. Bush gave a closed-door speech to the council in 1999, after which the Christian Right endorsed his candidacy. (Harris 155).

G.W. Bush continues to refuse the release of the contents of the speech to the public.

Reagan is said to have been heavily influenced by doctrines of evangelical prophecy. Sam Harris wrote:

It has been widely reported, for instance, that Ronald Reagan perceived the paroxysms in the Middle East through the lens of biblical prophecy. He went so far as to include men like Jerry Falwell and Hal Lindsey in his national security briefings." (Harris 153).

Harris attributes this knowledge to the following:

"At a 1971 dinner, Reagan told California legislator James Mills that 'everything is in place for the battle of Armageddon and the Second Coming of Christ.' The President has permitted Jerry Falwell to attend National Security Council briefings and author and Armageddon-advocate Hal Lindsey to give a talk on nuclear war with Russia to top Pentagon strategists." Cited in E. Johnson, "Grace Halsell's Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War," *Journal of Historical Review* 7, no. 4 (Winter 1986). (Harris 266).

The encroachment of evangelical, doctrinal religious rhetoric was perfectly illustrated by Mike Huckabee during his presidential campaign speech before a large Republican audience on January 14, 2008. Huckabee wanted his audience to know his intentions regarding gay marriage and abortion. He said:

I have opponents in this race who do not want to change the Constitution, but I believe it's a lot easier to change the Constitution than it would be to change the Word of the Living God, and that's what we need to do- is to amend the Constitution so its in God's standards rather than try to change God's standards so it lines up with some contemporary view of how we

treat each other and how we treat the family.

(www.youtube.com/watch?v=D08Dq_iNMRk).

The use of God-talk and Faith-talk is an obvious way to connect with a target audience. All of the great teachers of rhetoric from Aristotle and Quintillian to Burke have acknowledged this need. However, when the rhetor uses strong words that connect with the most radical of his or her target audience, others are immediately disenfranchised.

If Domke and Coe's study is repeated, they should have three categories: God-talk, Faith-talk and Doctrinal-talk. As the interpretation of Mike Huckabee's speech points out, the inclusion of doctrine often means the removal of established rights. For example, On August 27, 1987, a reporter, Robert Sherman, asked George H.W. Bush, "What will you do to win the votes of the Americans who are atheists?" Bush replied, "I don't know that atheists should be regarded as citizens, nor should they be regarded as patriotic. This is one nation under God." (Sherman). Obviously, the first amendment and Freedom of Religion would disagree. This is the danger of identifying too closely with a segment of your audience, even if the segment represents a majority position in the population. It goes beyond creating ethos and creates division. Ironically, God-talk and Faith-talk, when taken too far, violate a cherished division: Church and State.

Primary Sources

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