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# George W. Bush and the Rhetoric of Chief Legislator: The First Term

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## **George W. Bush and the Rhetoric of Chief Legislator: The First Term**

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Near the beginning of a congressional session, the president will present key pieces of his legislative agenda to both Congress and the American public in the State of the Union address (SUA). He will couch his requests in a way that seeks to persuade his audiences he has the legislative solution to a problem he details. Effective political communication between the president and Congress is essential since each play key roles in the legislative process. While Congress comprises the legislative branch, the moniker we attach to one of the multiple jobs with which presidents are charged is that of chief legislator. Within the legislative process, presidents may recommend legislation, but it is up to Congress to act. While the chief legislator's role is limited, the SUA has become a potent tool that the president may utilize in his role as chief legislator. Presidents, as chief legislators, share two goals with regular legislators. They desire to secure reelection, and they want to make public policy. In addition, term limited presidents have a unique goal; they want to secure a positive legacy. In the SUA, chief legislators will claim credit for past successes, make requests for legislative actions, and use symbols all to further these mutually reinforcing goals. We examine how President George W. Bush used the rhetoric of the SUA in his role as chief legislator during his first term to aid him in the advancement of these goals. We find that Bush's use of the policymaking rhetoric changed after 9-11 and became unusual when compared to previous presidents' use of the SUA. He acted less as chief legislator and more as commander-in-chief and chief executive.

## **George W. Bush and the Rhetoric of Chief Legislator: The First Term**

Together, we are changing the tone in the Nation's Capital. And this spirit of respect and cooperation is vital, because, in the end, we will be judged not only by what we say or how we say it, we will be judged by what we're able to accomplish.

-George W. Bush (2001, 351)

George W. Bush's relationship with Congress in his first term was expected to be much less rocky than his predecessor's relationship with Congress. The 2000 election, while divisive in its own right, had returned a Congress controlled by the Republicans, albeit in the Senate the control was tenuous, and would soon be lost.<sup>1</sup> Bush had pledged to be a "uniter, not a divider" and his history as governor of Texas lent some credence to this campaign pledge; he had to work with the Democrats, who controlled one or both chambers of the Texas legislature, during his tenure as governor (Jacobson 2007, Edwards 2007). Pre-9-11 there was some evidence of Bush working with both congressional Democrats and Republicans, such as in negotiations leading to the re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind), but there was also evidence of divisiveness (tax cut of 2001). In the aftermath of 9-11, however, Bush's relationship with Congress would be transformed. The initial congressional unity immediately after the attacks sprang from the rallying nature of the attacks themselves (Mueller 1973), not particular actions of the president. Bush's interactions with Congress became more divisive, as well as dismissive (Edwards 2007; Jacobson 2007; Allen and Eilperin 2002; Ormstein 2003; Stolberg 2003). While it was in his second term that he proclaimed himself to be "the decider" (Bush 2006), his interactions with Congress in the first term signaled the administration's own view that the president was the center of government and that Congress

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<sup>1</sup>Senator Jim Jeffords defection from the Republican Party, to an independent, caucusing with the Democrats, would hand control of the Senate to the Democrats in June 2001.

was secondary (or subordinate), a view that became much more apparent in the second term but was evident even in the first.

All modern presidents are considered to be the chief legislator, and as such, seek to lead Congress. Like all modern presidents, Bush has the advantage of the “bully pulpit.” From this pulpit, he can rhetorically define situations as he sees them (Zarefsky 2004). We examine the way Bush, as chief legislator, used the rhetoric of the State of the Union Address (SUA) in his first term. The SUA is a genre of presidential rhetoric (Campbell and Jamieson 1990), that gives unique insight into the behavior of the chief legislator (Hoffman and Howard 2006). Near the beginning of a congressional session, the president will present key pieces of his legislative agenda to both Congress and the American public in the SUA. He will couch his requests in a way that seeks to persuade his audiences he has the legislative solution to a problem he details. Effective political communication between the president and Congress is essential since each play key roles in the legislative process. Within the legislative process, presidents may recommend legislation, but it is up to Congress to act. While the chief legislator’s role is limited, the SUA has become a potent tool that the president may utilize in his role as chief legislator. How presidents use the standard components of a SUA to further their legislative goals varies by president and within a presidency (Hoffman and Howard 2006).

Presidents, as chief legislators, share two goals with regular legislators. They desire to secure reelection, and they want to make public policy. In addition, term-limited presidents have a unique goal; they want to secure a positive legacy. In the SUA, chief legislators will claim credit for their past successes, make requests for legislative actions, and use symbols, all to further these mutually reinforcing goals. We examine how President George W. Bush used the

rhetoric of the SUA in his role as chief legislator during his first term to aid him in the advancement of these goals. Using content analysis of his first joint address to Congress in 2001 and his three subsequent State of the Union addresses, we analyze how Bush in his first term conveyed policy substance and used symbolism as he carried out the Constitutional requirements of reporting and recommending measures to Congress. One measure that is used in assessing the success or failure of a president's tenure is whether he accomplishes his legislative goals. With our analysis we offer an assessment of George W. Bush as chief legislator, and his rhetorical leadership of Congress. We find that while other presidents have had events that profoundly influenced the way they went about their chief legislator's job, the events of 9-11 changed Bush's policymaking rhetoric in the SUA substantially, making him stand out from his predecessors. He acted less as a chief legislator who was integral to the legislative process and more as a president who was detached from the legislative process. Bush's post- 9-11 SUAs exhibited a rhetorical style that was directed more toward the public rather than to both the public and Congress. In addition, Bush's rhetoric was focused on his role as chief executive and commander-in-chief, two roles in which the president holds significantly more power and ability to act alone, thus lessening the need for cooperation or consultation with Congress.

### **The SUA and the Chief Legislator**

SUAs are unique speeches in a president's rhetorical tool box. In these addresses, one typically sees the president acting primarily in his role as chief legislator. The SUA contains what we have termed policymaking rhetoric (Hoffman and Howard 2006). The Constitutional underpinnings of the modern SUA, that the president both report to Congress "from time to time" on the State of the union and that he recommend to them "necessary and expedient" measures

(Article II, sec. 3), are at the root of policymaking rhetoric and make the speech one in which we can glimpse how a particular president approaches leadership of Congress. At the same time, the president is addressing the American public in hopes of convincing them to support him and his policies. Public support may give the president needed leverage with members of Congress and aid him in the fulfillment of his goals. With his policymaking rhetoric, a president will make a case for the policy result he is seeking. To further his case, he brings to bear symbolism and dispenses substantive information to persuade his audiences (both Congress and the public) he holds the solution to the policy dilemma that is highlighted.

### **Goals of the Chief Legislator**

In his role as chief legislator, the president shares some characteristics with regular legislators. Richard Fenno found the goals of legislators to be securing reelection, gaining influence in the chamber, and the desire to make public policy. In addition, some will possess progressive ambition (1973). Chief legislators do not share the goals of chamber influence and progressive ambition. For the chief legislator, chamber influence is built into the role, and the president has achieved the highest elected position in the government. The goals of reelection and making public policy, however, are shared by legislators and the chief legislator alike. Because presidents are term limited, the reelection goal is short term. There is a related goal, unique to chief legislators, that pertains to the securing of a positive legacy. In the first term, reelection and legacy goals are linked. One will primarily be concerned with reelection, but the things one does to aid reelection also impact legacy; a president certainly wants to avoid a legacy as a one-term president. In the second term, with reelection an impossibility, concern shifts to the legacy one will leave behind. Central to the president's role as chief legislator is the making

of public policy. As the opening Bush quote states, “we will be judged by what we are able to accomplish” (Bush 2001, 351). These goals of the chief legislator, reelection, legacy, and making public policy, are mutually reinforcing ones (Hoffman and Howard 2006).

David Mayhew identified three activities in which legislators engage to further their reelection goals; advertising, credit claiming, and position taking (1974). In the sense that Mayhew defines the behavior of advertising (furthering one’s “brand name”) (49), it does not apply to the chief legislator. Credit claiming and position taking, however, are activities in which the chief legislator does engage. For the president, these activities don’t just further reelection goals, but also further the mutually reinforcing legacy goals and his desire to make public policy (Hoffman and Howard 2006).

### **Policymaking Rhetoric of Bush’s SUAs**

The SUA is a speech that particularly aids the chief legislator in the promotion of his goals. He uses the policymaking rhetoric of the SUA to build a case for his policy recommendations. This rhetoric conveys policy substance and uses symbolism as the president attempts to lead Congress and the public to accept the solutions he proposes to policy dilemmas. In his symbolic rhetoric, the president utilizes images, examples, and draws upon the shared history of Americans to inspire his audiences, appealing to their shared values, experiences, and identities. The substantive rhetoric of the SUA is found in the reporting and recommending aspects of the speech. In reporting, the president details the current situation as he sees it. He will also take credit for what has already been accomplished in a particular area. In recommending measures to Congress, the president proposes his solution to a policy dilemma; he takes positions as he requests the action of Congress. With both the symbolic and substantive



rhetoric of the SUA, he seeks to persuade his audiences that his policy recommendations are good ones that should be supported and adopted.

One of the best examples of Bush's policymaking rhetoric, in which he engages in all of these activities, comes from his 2003 SUA where he discusses his AIDS proposal. Bush transitions into the issue by saying, "As our Nation moves troops and builds alliances to make our world safer, we must also remember our calling as a blessed country is to make the world better" (Bush 2003, 112). He calls upon Americans' shared identity and immediately, Bush utilizes religious symbolism. We are not just any country, but a "blessed" country with a calling. He goes on to give his assessment of the situation.

Today, on the continent of Africa, nearly 30 million people have the AIDS virus, including 3 million children under the age 15. There are whole countries in Africa where more than one-third of the adult population carries the infection. More than 4 million require immediate drug treatment. Yet across that continent, only 50,000 AIDS victims— only 50,000—are receiving the medicine they need.

Because the AIDS diagnosis is considered a death sentence, many do not seek treatment. Almost all who do are turned away. A doctor in rural South Africa describes his frustration. He says, "We have no medicines. Many hospitals tell people, 'You've got AIDS. We can't help you. Go home and die.' " In an age of miraculous medicines, no person should have to hear those words.

AIDS can be prevented. Antiretroviral drugs can extend life for many years. And the cost of those drugs has dropped from \$12,000 a year to under \$300 a year, which places a tremendous possibility within our grasp. Ladies and gentlemen, seldom has history offered a greater opportunity to do so much for so many (112).

As Bush gives information, educates, and updates his audience about the state of affairs in Africa, he again uses religious language; the medicines we have are "miraculous." Bush engages in a small bit of credit claiming by stating, "We have confronted and will continue to confront HIV/AIDS in our own country" (112). We should note that this particular example includes a very small reference to credit claiming. As we will note later, Bush was unique in the way he

engaged in credit claiming in his SUAs.

After laying the groundwork, Bush then gets to his request of Congress.

And to meet a severe and urgent crisis abroad, tonight I propose the Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, a work of mercy beyond all current international efforts to help the people of Africa. This comprehensive plan will prevent 7 million new AIDS infections, treat at least 2 million people with life-extending drugs, and provide humane care for millions of people suffering from AIDS and for children orphaned by AIDS. I ask the Congress to commit \$15 billion over the next 5 years, including nearly \$10 billion in new money, to turn the tide against AIDS in the most afflicted nations of Africa and the Caribbean (112).

With this particular example, we see the standard things presidents seek to do in their SUAs.

They paint a picture of the situation they want to address, claim credit for actions already undertaken, present their solution to the problem, and incorporate symbolism. All of these things aid them as they make their case to Congress, hoping to get their legislative requests enacted. Therefore, we see the SUA as a speech that seeks to persuade Congress (both directly, and indirectly through the public) to follow the president's legislative lead.

We analyze how Bush utilized the policymaking rhetoric of the SUA to further his goals as chief legislator. Content analysis of his initial joint address to Congress in 2001 and his three subsequent SUAs in his first term is used.<sup>2</sup> Both Bush's policy substance, as well as his use of symbolism is examined. Furthermore, we can assess how Bush used the SUA vis-à-vis other presidents.

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<sup>2</sup>The 2001 address is not technically an SUA, but an oral address to a joint session of Congress on the goals the administration will be pursuing in the coming congressional session. While these initial speeches that presidents give are generally not titled an SUA (although Eisenhower and Kennedy did title their initial speech an SUA), it serves the same purpose as an SUA. We include this speech as part of our data because it lays out a legislative agenda, is given to the same audiences in the same place, has the same trappings, occurs at the same time an SUA would (near the beginning of a congressional session), and is treated as virtually indistinguishable from an SUA by the public and the media.

## Bush's Symbolic Rhetoric

One way presidents seek to further their goals in the SUA is by using symbolic rhetoric. This type of rhetoric consists of presidents incorporating images, examples, and language which are symbolically important to Americans.<sup>3</sup> Symbolism abounds in SUAs. The speech, setting, and deliverer all hold symbolic import. Moreover, presidents incorporate symbolic language and invoke images to remind Americans of their commonalities and then portray their policy recommendations as being consistent with these things Americans share (Hoffman and Howard 2006, 72-74). By using symbolic rhetoric in this fashion, presidents hope to make their substantive rhetoric meaningful and tangible for their audiences. In particular, there are two ways that Bush incorporated symbolic rhetoric to advance his goals as chief legislator on which we will focus: his use of religious language, and his use of individuals in the SUAs.

*(Table 3 about here)*

*Religious Language.* In their SUAs, presidents use religious language but they incorporate it to varying degrees and for different purposes (Hoffman and Howard 2006). To gauge Bush's use of religious language, we quantify both mentions of the Deity, as well as specific religious references in SUAs.<sup>4</sup> Table 3 shows the results of the content analysis for Bush's first term. Over the four speeches, Bush's combined use of religious content (mentions of

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<sup>3</sup>Barbara Hinckley defines a political symbol as "the communication by political actors to others for a purpose, in which the specific object referred to conveys a larger range of meaning, typically with emotional, moral, or psychological impact. This larger meaning need not be independently or factually true, but will tap ideas people want to believe in as true" (1990, 7).

<sup>4</sup>Bush's mentions of the Deity are: *God, He, His, that greater power Who*. Religious references are: biblical references, *bless, blessed, blessing(s), Church, Crescent, cross, faith-based, faith* (in religious context), *heaven, Islam* (and formulations), *miracle(s), miraculous, prayers, providence, religious, Star of David*.

the Deity plus religious references) increases. Each speech also includes at least one legislative request that had a religious context. Bush had a reelection strategy to activate his base supporters of which religious conservatives were a large part (Edwards 2007). We see that in his election year SUA of 2004, his use of religious language peaked.

*(Table 4 about here)*

Table 4 shows Bush's use of religious language is very similar to Reagan's. Both Reagan and Bush have comparably high levels of religious content, and more importantly, they are the only two presidents who include domestic policy substance in their SUAs with a religious context. Before Reagan, the use of religious language in SUAs was generally confined to fairly standard statements (such as "God bless America") in the introductory or closing remarks of the speech. This practice ended with Reagan and has not been returned to by his successors; it has become standard that religious language is sprinkled throughout SUAs (Hoffman and Howard 2006, 74-77). Only Reagan and Bush, however, have linked religious content to domestic policy requests. Religious conservatives are almost solely a Republican constituency, and both Reagan and Bush sought to use not only language that would appeal to them, but also policy requests to activate them.

Bush is similar to Reagan in another fashion; both couch key aspects of their foreign policy with religious overtones, invoking freedom as a God-given right. Reagan proclaimed:

And tonight, we declare anew to our fellow citizens of the world: Freedom is not the sole prerogative of a chosen few; it is the universal right of all God's children. Look to where peace and prosperity flourish today. It is in the homes that freedom built. Victories against poverty are greatest and peace most secure where people live by laws that ensure free press, free speech, and freedom to worship, vote, and create wealth (Reagan 1985, 134-35).

Similarly, in 2003 Bush ended his SUA by stating:

Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity.

We Americans have faith in ourselves, but not in ourselves alone. We do not know—we do not claim to know all the ways of providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history (Bush 2003, 116).

Both Reagan's and Bush's foreign policy rhetoric reflected an "us v. them" world view. America was good because it cherished, protected, and advanced God-given freedoms; those who denied freedom were evil. For Reagan, it was important that communism was also, as he would sometimes characterize it, a godless monolith (Reagan 1982a, 1982b, 1983b). Certainly, he was famous for labeling the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire" (1983a). While Reagan never explicitly used these formulations in a SUA, Bush often did, even coining the term "axis of evil" in his 2002 SUA (135). In his three first-term SUAs after 9-11, Bush made reference to "evil" ten times. Bush framed the fight against terrorism, and by extension Iraq, by formulating it as a battle of good against evil, which aided him in forestalling opposition and debate (Smith 2005).

Unlike Reagan's rhetoric that conveyed a sense of struggle that pitted religion v. non-religion in his discussion of bringing freedom and democracy to communist nations abroad, Bush's rhetoric regarding America's pursuit of freedom and democracy in the world connotes pitting one religious tradition (Judeo-Christian) against another (Islam). Emphatically, Bush takes great pains to communicate that the war on terror is not a war with Islam (Bush 2002). It is, however, a war with Islamic extremists who use terrorism; it is about "good v. evil." Even though both presidents cast their foreign policy in a way that emphasized a black-and-white world view, there is a qualitative difference that should be recognized. Terrorism is a tactic, not

an ideology. Reagan relied on a religious conception of democracy and pitted it against what he viewed as an evil, atheistic ideology. Bush relied on a religious conception of democracy, but pitted it against a tactic used by one religion's extremists. While Bush's use of a black-and-white frame of reference makes it easy to explain to his audiences, it is not so easy a problem to solve. Ideologies can be defeated, but tactics cannot be. Bush's rhetoric, while it aided him in promoting the war on terror, may in the end present him with insurmountable problems toward its conclusions.

*Use of Individuals.* Ronald Reagan seemed to make more numerous inclusions of religious language throughout the SUA acceptable, even expected, as all presidents since have followed him in this practice. Reagan was also the first president to begin incorporating key individuals into SUAs, many of whom would be seated in the House gallery and introduced by the president during the speech. Presidents since Reagan have followed him in this practice, using individuals for symbolic purposes. Each president, however, adapts this practice and uses individuals in slightly different ways (Hoffman and Howard 2006, 78-81).

Bush initially used individuals to help him advance two key legislative requests in his 2001 speech. Particularly, he tied individuals he introduced to his tax cuts and his faith-based initiatives. A couple from Pennsylvania was introduced as "representing many American families." To promote his policy, Bush proceeded to explain how his tax cut recommendations would benefit the couple and all of the families they represented (Bush 2001, 355). Bush also used the introduction of the Democratic mayor of Philadelphia to promote his faith-based initiatives (353). After 9-11, however, Bush's use of individuals in SUAs changed. Everyone introduced in 2002 had a connection to the war on terror and were recognized in the course of

claiming credit (for successes in Afghanistan), or for exemplary behavior (thwarting terrorism). Again, the unusual nature of the 2003 SUA stands out as Bush introduced no individuals. In 2004, Bush only introduces two individuals, Adnan Pachachi, president of the Iraqi governing council, and 10 year-old Ashley Pearson. Both were introduced in connection to the war in Iraq and as symbols of why it should be supported. After 9-11, Bush utilized individuals to advertise the success of his foreign policy actions to combat terrorism and justify them; none are tied to domestic policy initiatives.

By using religious language and key individuals (and sometimes both at the same time) in his SUAs, Bush appealed to Congress and the public to see things in the same manner and follow him. Like Reagan, but unlike other presidents, Bush's religious language was pointed and policy-related to appeal to a specific audience rather than a general audience. Further, while he initially incorporated key individuals to aid him in the promotion of his legislative requests, this changed after 9-11. He no longer used individuals to sell domestic policies, but largely used them to justify actions that had already occurred.

### **Bush's Substantive Rhetoric**

Substantive rhetoric in the SUA is comprised of the two activities in which Mayhew identified regular legislators engaging: credit claiming and position taking. Whereas for the legislator, these two activities aid their reelection goals, for the chief legislator, credit claiming and position taking aid the mutually reinforcing goals of reelection, legacy, and making public policy.

*Credit Claiming.* When the chief legislator engages in claiming credit, it aids his reelection/ legacy goals because it enables the president to draw attention to the accomplishments

he wishes to highlight. Mayhew defines credit claiming as “acting so as to generate a belief in a relevant political actor (or actors) that one is personally responsible for causing the government, or some unit thereof, to do something the actor (or actors) consider desirable” (Mayhew 1974, 53). The SUA is certainly a forum for claiming credit; this is a key aspect of the speech.

Furthermore, credit claiming can aid presidents in their goal of making public policy. Success can breed success and claiming credit for an accomplishment often will help the president set the stage for legislative requests.

For example, in his 2002 SUA, Bush touts recently completed education reform.

Good jobs begin with good schools, and here we’ve made a fine start. Republicans and Democrats worked together to achieve historic education reform so that no child is left behind. I was proud to work with members of both parties: Chairman John Boehner and Congressman George Miller; Senator Judd Gregg. And I was so proud of our work, I even had nice things to say about my friend Ted Kennedy. [Laughter] I know the folks at the Crawford coffee shop couldn’t believe I’d say such a thing—[laughter]—but our work on this bill shows what is possible if we set aside posturing and focus on results (Bush 2002, 136).

Bush then moves on to his specific legislative requests in the area of education for the coming session.

There is more to do. We need to prepare our children to read and succeed in school with improved Head Start and early childhood development programs. We must upgrade our teacher colleges and teacher training and launch a major recruiting drive with a great goal for America, a quality teacher in every classroom (136-37).

The longer a president is in office, the more his accomplishments accumulate. We would expect credit claiming to take up very little, if any, space in a president’s initial joint address. He has only been in office for a matter of weeks and little has likely been accomplished for which he could take credit. As credit claiming helps a chief legislator fulfill reelection goals, we would



expect the amount of credit claiming to increase as he gets closer to a reelection campaign, and peak in the year the president seeks reelection.

To gauge if our expectations about credit claiming hold, we identified sentences in which Bush claimed credit for outcomes. These outcomes were not limited to solely legislative ones since the goal of credit claiming is to demonstrate that one is successful; presidential successes will encompass legislative accomplishments, as well as executive and foreign policy actions that might be touted. We then computed the percentage of the total speech devoted to credit claiming.

*(Table 1 about here)*

As shown in the second column of Table 1, our expectations for Bush's first term SUAs partially hold. There is no credit claiming in his initial joint address, and the amount of credit claiming he engages in does peak in his reelection year SUA. However, the 2003 SUA is unusual in that it contains a comparatively low level of credit claiming. This is especially interesting since Bush has extraordinarily high levels of credit claiming in his 2002 and 2004 SUAs.

*(Table 2 about here)*

If one compares Bush's levels of credit claiming in his first-term SUAs with previous research that charts credit claiming back to 1965 (Hoffman and Howard 2006), one sees that the level of credit claiming in the 2004 speech, where almost 30% of the total speech is devoted to the activity of credit claiming, is only surpassed by one speech, Ford's 1977 lame-duck SUA given just days before Jimmy Carter would be sworn in as president (Table 2). Third place for the level of credit claiming goes to LBJ's lame-duck address given in 1969, just days before

Richard Nixon would be sworn into office. In both these instances, the outgoing president is leaving office under less than ideal circumstances (Johnson withdrew from the 1968 race after being seriously challenged for his party's nomination and Ford was defeated in the 1976 election). Both are particularly attune to what their legacy will be, and they need to devote less attention in these SUAs to policy recommendations, therefore more attention can be given to touting their accomplishments.

The second highest level of credit claiming is achieved by George W. Bush and his 2004 SUA. This SUA has levels of credit claiming that previous research indicated typically occurred in lame-duck SUAs (Hoffman and Howard 2006, 117-118). It is an election-year SUA and presidents obviously have a desire to advertise their accomplishments going into the election year. However, presidents are usually more restrained in this activity. From 1965-2002, the median level of credit claiming for election-year SUAs was 13.2 percent of the speech. Election-year SUAs do, however, have slightly higher levels of credit claiming than SUAs as a whole (10.7 percent), but nothing like the almost 30% of the speech Bush devotes to this activity.

The fourth highest level of credit claiming is also claimed by Bush in his 2002 SUA. Given in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, this speech is classified as a rally-round-the-flag crisis SUA, a type which tends to have higher levels of credit claiming than SUAs as a whole (Hoffman and Howard 2006, 120). Nevertheless, Bush's use of credit claiming in this SUA well surpasses the other examples of this type of SUA.

As mentioned before, the nature of the 2003 SUA is unusual, especially with regard to credit claiming. The reason why Bush has such low levels in this particular speech is to be found in the other activities that take place in that speech. In the 2003 SUA, Bush devotes an

extraordinary amount of attention to making the case that something has to be done about Iraq. The space devoted to this activity reduces the amount of space that can be devoted to credit claiming, as well as position taking.

Finally, Bush's credit claiming is unusual in another sense. To a degree not seen in most other SUAs, Bush's credit claiming is often detached from policy recommendations, that is, he uses this activity less to set up his specific legislative requests, and more to set the overall tone of the speech. His credit claiming is more likely to stand alone rather than be linked to specific requests for future action. For example, in 2004, Bush recounts progress made in Iraq.

Yet we are making progress against [killers and terrorists in Iraq]. The once-all powerful ruler of Iraq was found in a hole and now sits in a prison cell. Of the top 55 officials of the former regime, we have captured or killed 45. Our forces are on the offensive, leading over 1,600 patrols a day and conducting an average of 180 raids a week. We are dealing with these thugs in Iraq just as surely as we dealt with Saddam Hussein's evil regime (95-96).

This update of the situation in Iraq is not linked to any kind of legislative request, but simply occurs near the beginning of the speech when Bush is recounting the current state of affairs.

*Position Taking.* When a president recommends Congressional action on policy, he is engaging in position taking. This activity corresponds with his Constitutional power to recommend "necessary and expedient" measures to Congress, is directly related to his desire to make public policy, and also furthers reelection/legacy goals. Whereas legislators will often only engage in position taking near the end of the legislative process through roll call votes (Mayhew 1974, 61), the chief legislator (who cannot cast a roll call vote) will often play a vital role at the beginning and middle of the legislative process through his position taking. For the chief legislator, taking positions is done to influence the congressional agenda and affect the substance

of public policy.

By looking at both the quantity and nature of legislative requests in SUAs, one can assess how a president approached his rhetorical leadership of Congress. In order to gauge Bush's position taking activity, we coded all instances of legislative requests in the four, first-term speeches. To be included, legislative requests had to be substantive requests, not vague rhetoric about a policy area.<sup>5</sup> Requests of a non-legislative nature are not coded. All legislative requests, whether major or minor, were included.<sup>6</sup>

The third column of Table 1 indicates the number of requests made by Bush in his first term SUAs. Previous research found that the quantity of legislative requests presidents made of Congress varied, often dramatically, from president to president depending on how they approached their role as chief legislator. In addition, the environment in which the SUA took place could substantially affect the quantity of requests within a presidency (Hoffman and Howard 2006, 113). The quantity of Bush's requests (median 31.5) is not unusual; in fact, for

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<sup>5</sup>For example, presidents will often introduce broad goals at the outset of their speech. Bush states in his initial joint address "Excellent schools, quality health care, a secure retirement, a cleaner environment, a stronger defense: These are all important needs, and we fund them" (2001, 352). Besides being introductory, this statement is too vague to count as a request for congressional action. Later in his remarks, Bush specifically states, "Reading is the foundation for all learning. So during the next five years, we triple spending, adding \$5 billion to help every child in America learn to read" (352). This counts as a request for congressional action. Legislative requests can be both for positive action (do x), or for negative action (don't do x).

<sup>6</sup>We do not distinguish major and minor legislative requests because we are interested in the totality of the requests the president communicates in the SUA. We should note that this will differ from Light's computations of presidential requests for legislation in the SUA (see Light 1999, 42). Light's calculation of presidential agendas involved items that were both mentioned in an SUA and cleared as being in accordance with the president's program through the Office of Management and Budget (9). Furthermore, our measure of legislative requests includes the president requesting action on legislation that may not be of his own initiative, that may already be in the congressional pipeline, and that he believes might benefit from presidential attention.

the 1965-2004 period it is the median number of requests (Table 5). Once again, however, the 2003 SUA stands out as containing considerably fewer requests. As noted before regarding credit claiming, this particular speech is unusual. The space in the speech devoted to the president making his case for an invasion of Iraq edged out the space available for other activities, such as credit claiming and position taking.

The nature of Bush's legislative requests are often repetitive. Requests not accomplished in the previous Congress, things such as making tax cuts permanent, Social Security reform, his faith-based initiatives, and restricting "frivolous" lawsuits, show up in multiple SUAs. His requests generally are short; he expends less space explaining and developing his legislative requests than is typical in most other presidents' SUAs. While SUAs always include some measure of "laundry list" requests, Bush tends to resort to this tactic frequently. For example, in 2003 Bush asks Congress to pass his Clear Skies and Healthy Forests proposals (Bush 2003, 111). He engages in very little explanation of these programs, relying mostly on the positive connotations of these descriptive titles to sell the policies. He expends little space trying to sell these proposals, and as Edwards notes - they were strategically framed (2007, 36). Echoing his use of "evil," who could be against clear skies and healthy forests? Bush is very descriptive, however, in the 2003 SUA when it comes to discussing Iraq. In the latter half of the SUA, Bush does use his rhetoric to paint a picture of the Hussein regime. Bush invokes Hussein's name 20 times and devotes 12 lengthy paragraphs to detailing his crimes, often quite graphically. Bush states, "International human rights groups have cataloged other methods used in the torture chambers of Iraq: electric shock, burning with hot irons, dripping acid on the skin, mutilation with electric drills, cutting out tongues, and rape" (Bush 2003, 115-16). This treatise on Iraq,

however, in the 2003 SUA is not linked to a legislative request; Congress had already authorized the president's use of military force several months previous. It was, however, aimed at persuading public and world opinion that imminent action was justified.

By looking at the number and nature of legislative requests we see that Bush was not unique in the sheer quantity of the things he asked of Congress. Furthermore, he did not exhibit the rhetorical salesmanship of Clinton in his SUAs (Hoffman and Howard 2005), expending less space and energy linking extensive explanation to proposals. Was he, however, successful in his attempts to lead Congress and the public in accepting his legislative requests?

*Success of Legislative Requests.* We examine the legislative requests made in SUAs to determine whether the president's policymaking rhetoric was successful in the congressional session in which the president gave his address. Was Bush successful in fulfilling his goal of making public policy? More specifically, did he get his request, some version of what he wanted, or was his request completely unsuccessful? Whether or not presidents are successful in their attempts to make public policy is particularly tied to how we view the effectiveness of presidents. In gauging the success of the president's legislative requests, we start anew with every SUA and congressional session and the actions and inactions that follow in that session.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>This time frame is justified for two reasons. First, SUAs are annual events. While policy proposals may take more than one congressional session, or even more than one Congress to be enacted, we are interested in the speech as political communication - what he says in the speech and to what extent he gets his requests fulfilled. Presidents will often repeat requests from one SUA to the next, indicating previously unsuccessful items were continuing priorities. Sometimes, requests that were not successful in the previous session are absent in the next SUA, indicating waning priority on the part of the president. Second, presidential requests of Congress in the SUA often relate to the federal budget, the submission of which is due shortly after the typical SUA. The budget process begins at the beginning of the congressional session with the submission of the president's budget and is to be completed within the session.

The level of success is determined by using the relevant year of the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports*, and/or appropriation acts.

The last four columns of Table 1 show the results of our analysis. Bush's most successful year was his first year in office where he was able to get some measure of success on almost 55 percent of his SUA requests. After his first year in office, however, Bush never again gets more than 50 percent of his requests fulfilled in the first term. In his third year, he is unsuccessful with 70 percent of his legislative requests. Furthermore, as time goes by, Bush increasingly gets substantially fewer of his full requests fulfilled, getting less than 10 percent in his reelection year.<sup>8</sup>

*(Table 5 about here)*

Previous research on the success of legislative requests in SUAs found that the median success rate (full and partial) for presidents from 1965-2002 was about 43 percent (Hoffman and Howard 2006). As Table 5 shows, Bush's success rate is slightly below the median for presidents since 1965. Given the environment in which he governed, it is perhaps surprising that Bush is least successful with his legislative requests in the years *after* 9-11 than he is before 9-11.<sup>9</sup> For more than half of his most successful year, Bush is confronting divided government; for all of his second year, the next most successful, he faces the condition of divided government.

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<sup>8</sup>As has been noted elsewhere, the Bush Administration, however, has mastered the art of claiming complete victory out of partial ones (Edwards 2007).

<sup>9</sup>While 9-11 occurred in the midst of Bush's initial year, it substantially changed the agenda and while Bush got partial legislative victories on, for example, the USA PATRIOT act, this was not something even remotely related to any of his requests in his initial joint address. It is important to recognize the change in agenda that occurred, which makes his success level on his requests from before 9-11 even more surprising.

When control of the Senate reverts to the Republicans after the 2002 election and government is no longer divided, he obtains his worst success rates of his first term. There are some clues as to why this might be the case in the chief legislator's own rhetoric.

### **The 9-11 Effect**

As Bush himself noted in his 2002 SUA, 9-11 changed the Bush Administration.

The last time I spoke here [September 20, 2001], I expressed the hope that life would return to normal. In some ways, it has. In others, it never will. Those of us who have lived through these challenging times have been changed by them. We've come to know truths that we will never question: evil is real, and it must be opposed (138).

Before 9-11, Bush's rhetoric in his initial joint address stressed his desire to be a "uniter."

Bush's actions initially reflected his desire to work with all members of Congress (Lacey 2001), as he hosted bipartisan groups of members at the White House, sought to get the ESEA reauthorized to include his No Child Left Behind goals, and get his faith-based initiatives passed (Carr 2001). But quickly this bipartisan strategy was deemed a loser (Harris and Balz 2001) and partisanship began to rule the day (Ornstein 2003). Bush showed a tendency to be a "divider." Then came 9-11 and after the initial unity sparked by the crisis, the divider came to the fore. In addition, Bush the "decider" emerged, as he began to show a dismissive, inflexible attitude toward Congress in his SUA rhetoric.

Bush, in the quote above from the first SUA after the tragedy, speaks of being changed by the events of 9-11. Truly, he and his entire administration would seem altered by the terrorist attacks. Furthermore, a certain inflexibility became evident in Bush's rhetoric and actions, which



one might attribute to realizing these “truths that we will never question” that Bush mentions.<sup>10</sup>

“Evil,” a term Bush would often repeat, became key in the way Bush would portray the post 9-11 world and is indicative of the black-and-white nature, or starkness that is his world view. Compromise, in such a world, means abandoning one’s principles; one cannot negotiate with evil.

In SUAs after 9-11, changes in Bush’s policymaking rhetoric is evident. He paid little attention to skillfully using policymaking rhetoric to actually sell his legislative requests. While his first initial joint address was not unusual in terms of the patterns of SUAs that have been observed over time (Hoffman and Howard 2006), his subsequent addresses were unusual. We see him no longer use individuals as symbols to help him advance his specific legislative requests of Congress. The use of religious language in the SUA steadily increases, and also ranks as the most numerous usage by a president since 1965. His credit claiming pattern became unusual; it was extraordinarily high in two SUAs, and was more often used generically, rather than being tied to specific legislative requests. This use of credit claiming seems to go with Bush’s rhetorical style after 9-11, rather than being influenced by the type of SUA (Hoffman and Howard 2006, 114-131). Credit claiming was frequently used to justify actions that had been taken by the president in his chief executive or commander-in-chief roles, rather than Bush taking credit for legislative accomplishments. Bush’s use of position taking is normal, but he

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<sup>10</sup>While this may have been Bush’s modus operandi from the very start, it emerges very prominently after the attacks. As Jacobson notes, “The Bush administration’s strategy for achieving legislative victories on its agenda also promised to be divisive. Bush’s idea of legislative leadership, by his own and others’ descriptions, is to stake out a firm position right at his own ideal point (‘the moment I negotiate with myself, I lose,’ he puts it), defend it against all objections, pursue it with focus and tenacity, and compromise only at the last minute and to the smallest extent possible to gain the victory” (2007, 71).

does not fully utilize the capabilities of the policymaking rhetoric of the SUA to really sell his legislative proposals, although he utilizes it better when discussing foreign policy. This rhetoric, however, is aimed more at securing public support than being aimed directly at Congress.<sup>11</sup> Finally, we get a picture of Bush through his rhetoric that is very rigid. Besides the dichotomous way he portrays things, Bush also exudes a very dismissive attitude toward Congress. An example of this can be seen in the way he advocates his faith-based initiatives. In his initial joint address, Bush asks for three aspects; making federal money easily available to faith-based social services, creating tax incentives for private charitable donations, and establishing a Compassion Capital Fund. He is only partially successful with one of these requests (the latter). However, Bush would accomplish his goal of making federal grants more easily available by circumventing Congress with an executive order. In each of his next three SUAs, Bush returns to legislative requests on his faith-based initiatives, even asking them to “codify into law [my Executive Order], so people of faith can know that the law will never discriminate against them again” (Bush 2004, 101). Congress does not comply, however. After 9-11 we get a picture of a president who takes his roles of commander-in-chief and chief executive much more seriously than he does his role as chief legislator. This is particularly unusual, because the SUA has been, at least since 1965, a place where the president is primarily on view as chief legislator.

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<sup>11</sup>This is consistent with Edwards assessment of Bush’s governing by campaigning where he extensively “goes public.” Edwards states, “Traditionally, presidents attempted to build coalitions in Congress through bargaining. The core strategy was to providing benefits for both sides, allowing many to share in a coalition’s success and to declare victory. Going public is fundamentally different. The core strategy is to *defeat the opposition*, creating winners and losers in a zero-sum game. In going public, the president tries to intimidate opponents by increasing the political costs of opposition rather than attracting them with benefits” (2007, 286-87).

## Conclusion

One problem with the policymaking rhetoric of the SUA is that it is one-sided. It is not deliberative. It may spark deliberation, but it is not deliberative in-and-of-itself. Bush in particular framed things in such a way as to encourage simple acceptance of his proposals. One should note that ALL modern presidents have sought to do this. The extent to which Bush does this, however, is unusual because he seemed to take as a foregone conclusion that simply asking Congress for things would entail their acceptance in the halls of Congress; he exhibits little recognition of the need to rhetorically work for their passage. However, we also see that Bush's success rates with his legislative requests of Congress were relatively low, especially given the circumstances under which Bush governed. We conclude that Bush was not very skilled at using the full potential of the SUAs' policymaking rhetoric in his first term.

Bush's SUAs seem to be aimed more at the public after 9-11 than at Congress and while this is one important audience in the SUA, it is not the only audience. From an examination of Bush's first-term SUAs, it seems evident that after 9-11, Bush saw his job as president to be primarily about being commander-in-chief and chief executive. He acts less as a chief legislator in his SUAs and this is very unusual in the modern presidency. As Skowronek noted in his conjecture that Bush was an "orthodox innovator," presidents of this type want to "maximize control upfront" (2005, 826). Of the three roles of the president primarily on view in Bush's SUAs (commander-in-chief, chief executive, and chief legislator), a president has the least control when it comes to his dealings with Congress. Bush seeing himself more as commander-in-chief and chief executive, rather than as chief legislator helps explain his unusual pattern of credit claiming, and also might help explain his relative lack of success. From an analysis of his

policymaking rhetoric, his heart did not seem to be in pushing for his legislative requests with Congress.

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**Table 1: Credit Claiming and Position Taking in G. W. Bush's First-Term State of the Union Addresses**

| Year | Credit Claiming Number<br>(% of speech) of requests |    | Percent of Requests |                         |                               |                   |
|------|---|----|---------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
|      |   |    | Fully<br>Successful | Partially<br>Successful | Fully/partially<br>Successful | Not<br>Successful |
| 2001 | 0.0   | 33 | 30.3                | 24.2                    | 54.5                          | 45.5              |
| 2002 | 20.0  | 30 | 36.7                | 6.7                     | 43.3                          | 56.7              |
| 2003 | 9.4   | 20 | 15.0                | 15.0                    | 30.0                          | 70.0              |
| 2004 | 29.6  | 34 | 8.8                 | 29.4                    | 38.2                          | 61.8              |



**Table 2: Bush's Credit Claiming in Historical Perspective: Top Five Levels of Credit Claiming in SUAs, 1965-2004**

| Year | President  | % of SUA Devoted to Credit Claiming | Type of SUA               |
|------|------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1977 | Ford       | 32.7                                | Lame-Duck                 |
| 2004 | Bush, G.W. | 29.6                                | Election-Year             |
| 1969 | Johnson    | 21.3                                | Lame-Duck                 |
| 2002 | Bush, G.W. | 20.0                                | Crisis (rally-round-flag) |
| 1974 | Nixon      | 20.0                                | Crisis (rally-round-pres) |

Source: 1965-2002, Hoffman and Howard 2006; 2003-2004 calculated by authors

**Table 3: Religious Content of G.W. Bush's First-Term State of the Union Addresses**

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| Year | Mentions<br>of Deity | Religious<br>References | Policy with<br>Religious Content |
|------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 2001 | 1                    | 8                       | 2                                |
| 2002 | 2                    | 9                       | 1                                |
| 2003 | 5                    | 9                       | 2                                |
| 2004 | 5                    | 11                      | 2                                |

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**Table 4: Religious Content of State of the Union Addresses, 1965-2004**

| President           | Number of Addresses | Mentions of Deity (total) | Religious References (total) | Total Religious Content (Per SUA) | Policy Substance with Religious Context (total) |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Johnson (1965-69)   | 5*                  | 4                         | 13                           | 3.4                               | 0   |
| Nixon               | 4                   | 2                         | 4                            | 1.5                               | 0   |
| Ford                | 3*                  | 4                         | 12                           | 5.3                               | 0   |
| Carter              | 3                   | 0                         | 4                            | 1.3                               | 0   |
| Reagan              | 8                   | 36                        | 62                           | 12.3                              | 14  |
| G.H.W. Bush         | 4                   | 13                        | 11                           | 6.0                               | 0   |
| Clinton             | 8                   | 20                        | 42                           | 7.8                               | 0   |
| G.W. Bush (2001-04) | 4                   | 13                        | 37                           | 12.5                              | 7   |

\*includes lame-duck SUA

Source: 1965-2002, Hoffman and Howard 2006, Table 3.4;2003-2004, updates by authors.

**Table 5: Summary of Presidential Requests for Congressional Action in State of the Union Addresses, 1965-2004**

|                      | Median Number<br>Requests per SUA | Median Percent of Requests per SUA |                   |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|
|                      |                                   | Fully/partially<br>Successful      | Not<br>Successful |
| Johnson (1965-68)    | 36.0                              | 57.5                               | 42.5              |
| Nixon                | 18.0                              | 37.7                               | 62.4              |
| Ford                 | 31.5                              | 28.5                               | 71.5              |
| Carter               | 18.0                              | 50.0                               | 50.0              |
| Reagan               | 21.0                              | 44.9                               | 55.2              |
| Bush, G. H. W.       | 33.5                              | 38.8                               | 61.2              |
| Clinton              | 50.5                              | 49.6                               | 50.5              |
| Bush, G.W. (2001-04) | 31.5                              | 40.8                               | 59.3              |
| Overall              | 31.5                              | 42.9                               | 57.3              |