

## RELIGION IN US PRESIDENTIAL WAR RHETORIC

In God we trust, with God we fight. Religion in US Presidential War Rhetoric: from

Johnson to Obama

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## Abstract

In times of war, religion features prominently in US presidential rhetoric. It may be used to strengthen courage and hope or to serve as a powerful tool for accepting sacrifices and losses. In this article we examine, firstly, the speeches of five presidents which were given specifically in periods of war: Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, George H. Bush, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Secondly we analyze variations in the volume and type of religious content between these presidents; we use a textual content analysis methodology to study a representative sample of speeches given by the above-mentioned presidents in time of war. We conclude that US presidents try to persuade the audience that the country is going to war to accomplish God's will. Under this light, religious rhetoric appears to have a higher correlation with the enemy being fought than with the personal convictions of each president.

*Keywords:* Religion; politics; rhetoric; US Presidents; war

## In God we trust, with God we fight. Religion in US Presidential War Rhetoric: from Johnson to Obama

Kevin Coe and David Domke (2006) acknowledge that in the 21st century an increasing, albeit not unprecedented, nexus of religion and politics, marks the political climate. However, they add that what has yet to be systematically explored is whether this environment results in meaningful shifts in presidential religious discourse over time. In response to this, in our paper we aim to examine the role of religion in US presidential discourse, specifically in presidential speeches delivered in times of war.

War is an almost ever-present fact in US reality, now and throughout history. To realize the importance of this, we have just to check the list of “hundreds of instances” in which the United States has used its Armed Forces abroad (Salazar Torreon, 2015). Moreover, the fact that the US is the country with the biggest military budget in the world underlines this assessment; President Barack Obama himself said, in January 2012, in a speech to the Pentagon: “We can keep our military strong and our nation secure with a defense budget that continues to be larger than roughly the next 10 countries combined” (Obama, 2012a). To persuade American public opinion of the need to carry the burden of a war is, therefore, one of the main goals of presidential war rhetoric. And for this rhetorical purpose, presidents count on the contribution of the mass media.

Our research took into account the typology established by Kevin Coe and Sarah Chenoweth (2013) in their analysis of the degree of religiosity in the speeches of US presidents from Reagan to Obama, by measuring the number of terms that appear in all speeches classified in four categories: God, Bible, Manifestations and People.

Coe and Chenoweth state that Obama and Bush are the presidents whose discourse is most detached from the organizational hierarchy of Christianity. They assert that Obama

uses more religious terms than Reagan. However, they also observe that Obama uses religious terms in a more pluralistic way within a less religious but more diverse society.

In our article we present, firstly, an argument regarding the presence of religious concepts in presidential rhetoric. Secondly, we examine the wartime speeches of five presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon during the Vietnam War; George H. Bush on the 1991 Gulf War, and George W. Bush and Barack Obama during the War on Terror. Thirdly, we analyze whether the volume of religious content differs among these presidents.

This paper presents a theory to explain how, from the point of view of rhetoric, religious arguments may be used in the presidential presentation of narratives to reinforce or justify the reasons for waging war and making the sacrifices that this implies, thereby legitimizing that burden.

We confirm that the more religion is present in public life, the more it appears in US presidential war rhetoric, and we conclude that during times of war, religion is used to emphasize content and to give hope to the nation, with the argument that God is on its side.

### **The Role of Religion in American Politics**

Quoting Mircea Eliade's work, Paraschivescu defines America as a place in which the sacred is indistinguishable from the profane, and in which, even though religion may disappear, as in Max Weber's and Marcel Gauchet's disenchanted post-religion society of the future, faith and religiosity will endure (Paraschivescu, 2012). In presidential speeches, religiosity certainly endures; and in certain cases it increases, especially in times of adversity, as noted by Habel and Grant: "When times get tough, the public calls out to government and God for help. During seasons of waning existential threat, the public prefers less government and less religion" (Habel and Grant, 2013, p. 295).

Inaugural speeches, political discourses, farewells or simple addresses to the nation in the US have regularly inserted religion between the lines, either explicitly or implicitly: religious references have been a common component of US presidential rhetoric (Bellah, 1975).

The notion that the Americans are an especially chosen people can be found from the earliest times. In the early 17th century, John Rolfe, a settler in Virginia, referred to the colonists as “a peculiar people, marked and chosen by the hand of God” (Bellah, 1975, p. 41). Religion has been present in national affairs but also in foreign ones. Americans have often interpreted events in their nation’s history “as part of a larger, transcendent scheme. These interpretations served both to legitimate the American nation-state and to offer a set of ideals against which American realities could be judged” (Watt, 1987, p. 269). Williams (2013, p. 251) refers to this exceptional status: “part of our foundational mythology is the idea of Americans coming out of a fallen Old World in order to create a new Zion.”

There has also been much more to America’s national hubris than the belief that the country has a special relationship with God. Other factors – imperialism, cultural superiority and plain old greed – are often at work (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2009, p. 117). God is often portrayed as someone taking care of the American people, especially in times of war and tribulation.

In the United States, “religious symbols, beliefs, and language are deeply embedded in the dominant symbolic repertoire. (...) As a facet of hegemony, therefore, religious discourses provide political elites with an advantage over social movements in mobilizing public support for their claims” (Coy, Maney, Woehrlé, 2008, p. 117). Religion is a “force that has been omnipresent throughout American electoral history, and no political analysis would be complete without some assessment of its importance” (Stedman, 1964, p. 111).

Religious discourse, hence, is an area of contentious politics (Coy, Maney, Woehrle, 2008, p. 141), and religion is often put to work on behalf of the nation and the state's war policies. Also, uncertain times lead to more religion, both individually practiced and politically expressed: "The public has recourse beyond religion when faced with insecurity. The [...] threats to life, liberty, and property should also lead to greater demand for public policy, the bundle of goods provided by the government" (Habel and Grant, 2013, p. 285).

### **The Importance of Rhetoric and the Role of Mass Media**

The speeches addressed to the public through the media are a powerful and effective tool used by the presidency to hold onto power. As Castells asserts (2009, p. 3), "power is based on the control of communication and information, be it the macro-power of the state and media corporations, or the micro-power of organizations of all sorts." To those in power, then, the role of media has become an essential feature in acquiring and retaining the "legitimate dominance" (Weber, 1968, p. 212) or "hegemony" (in Gramsci's definition). Modern presidential rhetoric wouldn't have any effect on public opinion without the contribution of the mass media. In talking about war, it is impossible to understand why people would accept such a burden without being persuaded that it was unavoidably necessary.

The main goal of persuasion is to modify behavior and actions and, if the process of persuasion is well prepared, it will have some guarantee of success. From US presidential campaigns to the lobbying of individual congressmen and senators, the communicator hopes there will be some positive impact (from his or her point of view) on the political behavior of the recipient (McNair, 1995, p. 11). But this effectiveness does not rely only on communication but also on inner presidential dimensions. According to Hess (1996):

a president should be able to provide effective reassurances and exhortations in difficult periods, give a heightened sense of national purposes, and put before the citizenry a vision of a better society. But such abilities are most affected by the people's trust in a president based on his past record, personal conduct, rhetorical skills, factors such as being in office during a 'just' war, and other matters that are not closely correlated with a president's methods of organizing his administration (p. 128).

### **War as a Crusade**

Political leaders deploy religious symbols to legitimize their war policies. Few political issues cut closer to the heart of religious sensibilities – and are, therefore, riper for religious discourse and activism – than a country's decision to wage war or make peace (Coy, Maney, Woehrle, 2008, p. 113-114).

Identity is as well at the core of the issue. Chapp notes (2012, p. 2): “Religious rhetoric gains its unique political command because it is well equipped to resonate with individuals' emotions and identities – two factors that, not coincidentally, are central to political persuasion.”

Religion is seen in the US as an inspirational factor that can unite the nation, or as a controversial element that creates a division between “us” and “them”. Both aspects are fundamental vectors for understanding presidential statements in times of war, where exceptional policies are decided and heroic values are evoked.

Presidents usually assert in their speeches that God is on their side and they assume that they can count on divine Providence when going to war. This is part of the narrative that Campbell and Jamieson (2008) consider inherent to presidential war rhetoric saying, “presidential war rhetoric constitutes the audience as a united community of patriots that is urged to repulse the existing threat with all available resources, assured that, with the help of Providence, right will prevail” (p. 231).

The same assertion can be attributed to Ivie (2005) when stating that, under Bush, the war was depicted almost as a purifying crusade against evil: “Civilization’s Christian soldiers were crusading against the terror of evil, fighting for the greater glory of God, and seeking their own salvation. Thus, a material empire was made holy by casting out the Devil himself” (p. 62). By presenting the war in this way, it becomes a fight against evil that *blesses* the military activity and gives the nation that wages war the argument that it is in a battle with God on its side. This argument may be seen as close to, or related to, fundamentalist positions: religious fundamentalism can be defined as a type of religion that regards its sacred text – for example, the Bible – as a source of truth that is absolute, plain, and unchanging (Conkle, 2000, p. 320).

War as a moral crusade is portrayed by several authors such as Preston (2012, p. 4): “In times of war, religious liberals and conservatives, militants and pacifists, have all called upon God to sanctify their cause, and all have viewed America as God’s chosen land. As a result, US foreign policy has often acquired the tenor of a moral crusade.” Some other scholars study the “just war” concept: “what the just war tradition does [...] is raise the issue of morality and justice in relation to peace” (Chu, 2012, p. 432).

When studying the use of religion in presidential rhetoric by comparing the Vietnam War, the 1991 Gulf War and War on Terror, reference must be made to Fukuyama and Huntington. Fukuyama (1992) established a new paradigm in which ideological struggle as a driving force of history was no longer relevant; the fight between Communism and Capitalism had ended, and the latter had won. Not long after this approach, Huntington (1996) stated that, once Communism was over, the wars of the future would be between civilizations.

### **From Vietnam to War on Terror**



Lyndon B. Johnson's war rhetoric had the aim of persuading Americans of the need to fight in Vietnam. At that moment in time, the struggle was against Communism, a system in which religiosity was absent. So, the *atheism* of the enemy could be presented as a reason to fight it. Richard M. Nixon, on the other hand, needed to persuade people to find a way to end the war "honorably", and his need to portray the enemy as evil or godless was less evident. The fact that, under Nixon, Americans were fed up with war and wanted to end it, may have influenced Nixon's rhetoric and its religious content - or lack thereof.

Two decades later, in 1991, George Herbert Bush did not have any great need to justify the war to liberate Kuwait: in that case, Iraq was seen as a country guilty of a clear violation of international law, so the US-led international coalition to liberate Kuwait had the support of several countries, many Arab countries among them. The Cold War had just ended, and Bush was talking about "a new world order", characterized then by the fact that the USSR (which had not yet disappeared) and the USA were fighting side by side, this time against a common enemy.

At the beginning of the 21st century, in the context of the War on Terror, we find a scenario similar to that of Vietnam: at the beginning, right after 9/11, the American people felt deeply hurt and were easily persuaded of the need to strike back because of the attack they undergone. Nevertheless, due to his determination to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime, George W. Bush needed to present Iraq as *evil*, brutal and merciless. Barack Obama, on the other hand, having seen the lack of satisfying results and the people's rejection of war, wanted to persuade Americans of the need to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan and Iraq.

### **Research questions**

The first of our objectives is to analyze whether, in the 21st century, presidential war rhetoric maintains the argument that, in going to war, the US is fighting against evil (Ivie,

2005). Thus, the main hypothesis of this paper is that, in their speeches, US presidents are trying to persuade the audiences they are ordering the country to go to war to carry out God's will, to fight against the Other as the representation of evil. It can be understood, therefore, that God is presented as belonging to a nation, or that a nation (the US, in this case) is God's chosen people on Earth, an idea that finds its roots in Puritan mythology and its parallel in the rhetoric to justify the very existence of Israel, as seen in the work of several authors mentioned above (Bellah, 1975; Williams, 2013; Campbell and Jamieson, 2008 and Preston, 2012).

Our second hypothesis is that the presence of religious references has increased over time in public presidential speeches in reference to war. Our aim is to confirm that the major presence of religious connotations already noted in US presidential public discourse (as said in Coe and Chenoweth, 2013) is also intrinsic to presidential speeches related to war.

A third, related hypothesis is that there are fewer religious references in presidential war rhetoric during the Vietnam period than in the War on Terror period. That would mean that the fight against terrorism has caused an increase in religious references in presidential rhetoric. The fact that in Vietnam the enemy was *communism* (often presented more as an ideological or political threat, i.e. without any religious connotation, than as a godless system with moral or ethical implications) while in Iraq or Afghanistan the enemy was Islamic terrorism may be significant.

Focusing on the War on Terror, we put forward the hypothesis that the references to religiosity were much more frequent under Bush than under Obama. Some scholars have studied this phenomenon and have presented it as evidence of the ascendancy of "religious conservatives" (Coe and Domke, 2006), also known as "the Christian right", with such outstanding figures as Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell, who started to gain momentum in

American public opinion in the 80's. In our study, however, we compare Bush's and Obama's presidential war speeches, and we seek to measure whether there is more religious content in Bush's war rhetoric than in Obama's.

At this point, we analyze whether Obama shows more plurality than other presidents. Our hypothesis is that Obama is more aware than previous presidents that he lives in a more secular but at the same time more plural society, as Coe and Chenoweth assert (2013).

We also seek to analyze to what extent the nature of the war conditions or fosters a particular type of rhetoric in speeches or, paradoxically, whether this is, in fact, an insignificant factor because the personal profile and convictions of each American President are more important.

### **Methodology**

Our study is based on content analysis. We combine quantitative and qualitative methods with the aim of analyzing the presence or absence of religious “dominant symbolic repertoire” (Coy, Maney, Woehrle, 2008, p. 117) in American presidential war rhetoric. Thus, the subject of analysis is the presidential rhetoric, and the specific material analyzed is a sample of speeches delivered by US presidents in wartime. We have selected the last two major wars that the US has fought in recent years, the Vietnam War and the War on Terror, as well as the 1991 Gulf War. The five presidents whose war rhetoric has been analyzed are Lyndon B. Johnson (six speeches), Richard M. Nixon (seven), George H. Bush (eight), George W. Bush (eight) and Barack Obama (twelve). Their speeches are our empirical evidence, and therefore we have examined closely 41 speeches that represent different time periods and presidential styles.

These presidents gave many war speeches during their mandates, especially during the Vietnam War and the War on Terror; the 1991 Gulf War was shorter and less traumatic

in terms of cost and lives, and therefore, there were fewer presidential speeches related to it. To randomly select a sample of the war speeches of these presidents would not have been significant or worthwhile. We have, therefore, made a qualitative selection of speeches following these criteria:

- When the president specifically states his position or strategy regarding a war.
- When a specific decision is announced that changes the course of the war.
- Speeches delivered for historical reasons at important moments in the conflict (e.g. Bin Laden's death)
- When it is delivered to a military audience and has the war and the armed forces as its main topic.

Even though those speeches are addressed to different audiences, all of them have the same target: American (and world) public opinion, given the fact that most of them were not only broadcast live but transmitted to the audience via the media in the form of news articles, reports, radio or TV sound bites, opinion articles or editorial commentaries in different media outlets.

The texts are sourced online from the Public Papers of the Presidents page hosted by the website The American Presidency Project (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>).

The subject-matter of the analysis, therefore, consists of 41 presidential public speeches on war that have a total of 106,238 words. In analyzing the presidential speeches, we have undertaken an in-depth content analysis of the selected texts, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods for this purpose.

First, we searched for the presence of a range of words with unquestionable religious meaning (God, Bible, Faith...). In the second stage, we used a more inductive process and carried out an in-depth reading of the texts. Given that since the foundation of the US, the presidents' discourse on the legitimation of war has been based on the defense of freedom

and liberty (Ivie, 1974, p. 341; 1980, p. 281) and the quest for justice and democracy (Ivie, 2005, p. 61), we also checked for the presence of those words, as other scholars have done when analyzing the presence of religion in presidential discourse (Coe and Domke, 2006, p. 316).

Therefore, the words we sought are the following: belief; Bible; bless; comfort; Creator; Koran; eternity; evil; faith; free/freedom; liberty; glory; God; heaven; hell; holy; hope; Islam; Muslim; just/justice; mercy; pray; religion; sacred; sacrifice; salvation; sin; soul; spirit. We have observed their frequency in each speech and have compared the data collected. This analysis was not computer-driven, but rather carried out by the in-depth reading of the authors; therefore, all the words counted have the religious meaning intended (which means that, for example, common words such as comfort, faith or hope, when counted, have the religious meaning that we intended to observe).

Finally, in the third stage, we analyzed in-depth the arguments of the 41 selected speeches, focusing on their religious content and their use of religious concepts or references.

Our analysis relies, therefore, on a careful, interpretive reading of the texts; that is, more on qualitative than quantitative observation. Through the content analysis technique, based mostly in an in-depth interpretative analysis of religious words, expressions, arguments, references and symbols, we gathered data to answer our research questions.

## **Findings and discussion**

### **Quantitative Findings**

The presence of religious words is much more significant in the speeches on the War on Terror than those on the Vietnam War. George W. Bush and Obama together use 515 religious words, whereas Johnson and Nixon use 138; George H. Bush, 106. In absolute figures, George W. Bush is the president who uses the greatest number of religious words

(277), followed by Obama (238), George H. Bush (106), Nixon (71) and Johnson (67). But what is really significant are the relative figures: on average, George W. Bush heads the ranking with 12.9‰, followed by Obama (6.9‰), George H. Bush (6.3‰), Johnson (5.07‰) and Nixon (3.5‰) (see Table 1).

The word “freedom” is the most frequently used by all five presidents, a fact that confirms that in US presidential rhetoric, war is justified in the defense of freedom, as has been previously observed (Ivie, 1974, 1980). It is worth noticing that George W. Bush alone uses this word 114 times. If this word were not counted, the difference between George W. Bush and Obama would not be so great: the figures would be 7.6‰ for Bush and 5.7‰ for Obama.

The word “sacrifice” is used much more frequently by Obama and George W. Bush (33 and 17 times, respectively) than by Johnson and Nixon (five each), and by George H. Bush (just twice). The fact that in the War on Terror rhetoric this word is used much more than in Vietnam rhetoric – despite the lower number of American casualties – gives an indication of the epideictic connotations of the former, as noted by Bostdorff (2011).

The use of the word “God” is worthy of note: it is pronounced by Obama 24 times; by George W. Bush, 19; George H. Bush, 9; Johnson, 6; and Nixon just once. In the case of Obama, this is mainly because he closes all 12 speeches analysed except for two (in Oslo in December 2009 and in the Pentagon in January 2012), saying “God bless you and God bless the United States of America”.

The word “evil” is never used in Vietnam War speeches; whereas in the Gulf War, it is used twice by George H. Bush, and in the War on Terror it is used 13 times by Bush and 4 by Obama.

We can conclude that Nixon has the fewest religious references in his presidential war rhetoric: less than four (just 3.5) of every thousand words have religious connotations.

Not far above him, Johnson also has a low level of usage: 5.07 for each thousand words.

Next comes George H. Bush, with an average of 6.29 religious terms per thousand words, very close to Obama, with 6.9, and far above the rest, George W. Bush scores 12.9%, which is almost four times that of Nixon.

[Table 1 about here]

## **Qualitative findings**

### **Vietnam War**

**Lyndon B. Johnson.** President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963 –1969) speaks from personal conviction, but he does not emphasize this fact. In his speeches, religion appears as a natural element: America is a religious country and he acknowledges this with references to prayer, God and sacrifice. He does it in a natural way: this is the way that society expresses beliefs in the public arena.

In fact, there are few religious words or references in Johnson’s speeches. As we will see in the speeches of all the presidents analyzed, “freedom” is the most frequent word, confirming that the pursuit of freedom is America’s main goal when going to war. Thus, Johnson says in his Johns Hopkins University speech, on April 7, 1965, that, after having fought in Europe, the US is in Vietnam because of “its continued responsibility for the defense of freedom” (Johnson, 1965).

The presence of religious references in Johnson’s rhetoric increases with the worsening of the war and the increasing US involvement and subsequent losses. In his second war speech, on August 5, 1964, when asking Congress to approve “all necessary action” in Vietnam (Johnson, 1964), there are almost no religious references and he emphasizes peace and freedom. Over time the religious content increases: for example, in his Johns Hopkins University speech, he uses the words “bless”, “hope” and “sacrifice”, and he presents two biblical references in the same text: “We must say in southeast Asia -

as we did in Europe - in the words of the Bible: ‘Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further’” (Johnson, 1965), which is a quotation from Job 38:11. At the end of this address, he says: “I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live” (Johnson, 1965). The president is quoting the Bible again: Deuteronomy 30:19.

Also worth noting is that the references to “God” are introduced in Johnson’s speeches only after his San Antonio speech (Johnson, 1967): “Of those 85,000 wounded, we thank God that 79,000 of the 85,000 have been returned, or will return to duty shortly”; and on March 31, 1968: “I asked then for your help and God’s, that we might continue America on its course.” Only in the two last speeches analyzed, and not before, he closes with the words “God bless you all.”

**Richard M. Nixon.** Richard M. Nixon’s war rhetoric can be described as austere, sober, moderate, not religious and with rare spiritual or biblical references. President Nixon (1969 – 1974), in the speeches analyzed during a period of war, is not a man delivering inspiring speeches based on religion to his people. He doesn’t use the formula “God Bless you” at the end of his speeches as other Presidents do, especially Bush and Obama. He does not seem to want to mix God with politics. He rarely refers to religion and only when addressing the “spiritual needs” of his people.

Thus, the presence of religious references in Nixon’s war rhetoric is not very significant. As with the other presidents, freedom is again the main goal of the war, but Nixon very often says that his objective in dealing with the war is to achieve an “honorable peace”, an expression that characterized his mandate.

The Vietnam war was seen as being against an impious, ungodly or sinful Communist regime in the context of the Cold War. There is no evidence, in Johnson’s or Nixon’s war rhetoric – especially that of the latter – of the use of religious references to



reinforce their discourse. We start to see signs much later, as, for example, in the case of Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), when, in the speech in which he defined the USSR as an “evil empire”, he said: “There is sin and evil in the world, and we’re enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might.” And he added, when referring to the Soviet people: “Let us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in that totalitarian darkness; pray they will discover the joy of knowing God” (Reagan, 1983). Such clear assertions are not present in either Johnson’s or Nixon’s war speeches. Later on, the number of George H. Bush’s religious references in his war speeches increases, but not as much as those seen in the War on Terror rhetoric.

### **Gulf War (1991)**

The main story in the war rhetoric of George Herbert Bush (1989-1993) is that Iraq has broken international law and it must withdraw from Kuwait. His rhetoric is very pragmatic and justifies the war efforts by saying that US is defending freedom, stability and international law. The religious references in his speeches are few, and what is noticeable is that he shares, with his son, the frequent invitation to pray for the military: “I ask that, in the churches around the country, prayers be said for those who are committed to protect and defend America's interests” says Bush (1990a) when announcing the deployment of US forces in Saudi Arabia just one week after the invasion of Kuwait. Or “tonight, as our forces fight, they and their families are in our prayers” (Bush, G. H., 1991a); “tonight (...) I ask only that all of you stop what you are doing and say a prayer for all the coalition forces” (Bush, G. H., 1991c), and finally “may God bless our valiant military forces and their families, and let us all remember them in our prayers” (Bush, G. H., 1991d). We infer from this that, in an armed conflict that was clearly not religiously motivated, but rather perceived as a defensive action on behalf of Kuwait, the references to religion are only present when asking the nation to pray for the safety of the troops; so, the

main aim would be to praise the US military and to show the appreciation of American people, another example of epideictic rhetoric.

### War on Terror

**George W. Bush.** George W. Bush (2001-2009) is, by far, the president with the greatest number of religious references in his speeches. We see this in the proportion of religious words he uses (12.9%), but also in the religious references and the use of religious arguments or quotations.

His presidency was marked by the 9/11 terrorist attacks and their aftermath, which involved two wars against “Terror”, in Afghanistan and Iraq. In his speeches, his main argument is that God is on the US side and that war is waged in the fight for freedom and the fight against evil. In fact, in his 2002 SOTU speech he coined the expression *axis of evil* with reference to North Korea, Iran and, notably, Iraq, a country that was invaded in March 2003: “States like these and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world” (Bush, 2002). He had used similar expressions to justify the war in Afghanistan when announcing US engagement, in October 7th 2001: “... we will make it more difficult for the terror network to train new recruits and coordinate their evil plans” (Bush, 2001). The best example of how Bush depicts the war as a fight against evil in the name of God is, again, in the 2002 SOTU speech, when he uses the words “evil” and “God” in the same paragraph: “We’ve come to know truths that we will never question: Evil is real, and it must be opposed. Beyond all differences of race or creed, we are one country, mourning together and facing danger together. [...] Many have discovered again that even in tragedy – especially in tragedy – God is near” (Bush, 2002). He doesn’t say explicitly, “God is on our side”, but by linking God and evil, Bush frames his argument. It is also noteworthy that Bush says that evil must be opposed “beyond all differences of race or *creed*”. Belief in good and evil and the Manicheist view of reality are

frequently features of strongly Christian American conservatives. Indeed, Bush proved to be more supportive of the Christian Right's Agenda than any president before him (Marley, 2007, p. 267).

As noted several times, freedom is the main goal of the war in US presidential rhetoric, but on some occasions Bush explicitly states that, in fighting for freedom, the US is defending God's will, as he asserts on August 31, 2006, in front of the American Legion (whose motto is "For God and country"): "We believe that freedom is a gift from an Almighty God, beyond any power on Earth to take away" (Bush, 2006a).

In his speeches Bush extends this fight for freedom to freedom of religion, as in the 2002 SOTU speech: "America will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law; limits on the power of the state; respect for women; private property; free speech; equal justice; and religious tolerance" (Bush, 2002).

Bush also shows, and expresses, a deep respect for Islam, and asserts on several occasions that the US is not fighting against Islam but against those who have a "twisted", "biased" or "perverted" view of that religion.

On several occasions Bush presents the American people as devout, stating explicitly that they pray to God asking him to help them achieve their objectives, as we saw in his father's rhetoric. Thus, on March 19, 2003, when announcing the war on Iraq, he says to Americans, "I know that the families of our military are praying that all those who serve will return safely and soon. Millions of Americans are praying with you for the safety of your loved ones and for the protection of the innocent" (Bush, 2003a).

In his storytelling, Bush's narrative presents heaven as a *place* where those fallen in combat for freedom will go because they have earned it, after their "sacrifice" on Earth. In George W. Bush's rhetoric, the word "sacrifice" is very often related to the burden of the war: when announcing the invasion of Afghanistan he says that "sacrifices are being made

by members of our Armed Forces who now defend us so far from home. [...] We ask them to leave their loved ones, to travel great distances, to risk injury, even to be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice of their lives” (Bush, 2001).

Finally, we must note that, in the speeches analyzed, we found only one explicit quotation from the Bible: when welcoming those who came back from Iraq on May 1st, Bush praises those who didn’t return, saying: “Their final act on this Earth was to fight a great evil and bring liberty to others”, and then he says that the “message” of those who are combating *evil* is that “you are defending your country and protecting the innocent from harm. And wherever you go, you carry a message of hope, a message that is ancient and ever new. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘To the captives, ‘come out,’ and to those in darkness, ‘be free’””, in what is a reference to the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, verse 49:9.

**Barack Obama.** In his war speeches, President Barack Obama (2009 – ) stresses the fact that the war is being waged in the quest for justice. For both Bush and Obama, the justification for war is freedom but in Obama’s rhetoric the goal of justice or “a just world” is also prominent.

Obama frequently repeats that the goal of the US efforts is “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaida in Pakistan and Afghanistan and to prevent their return to either country in the future” and adds: “that is a cause that could not be more just” (Obama, 2009a). He finishes his first war speech by stressing, at the very end, the principle of justice that inspires and has inspired the US throughout history: “the United States of America stands for peace and security, justice and opportunity. That is who we are, and that is what history calls on us to do once more” (Obama, 2009a). As with Bush, for Obama we see reflected in those words the messianic character of war. It is also significant that Obama presents these values as essential values of the American character, to which he refers when

announcing the death of Osama bin Laden on May 1, 2011: “Let us remember that we can do these things not just because of wealth or power, but because of who we are: one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all” (Obama, 2011b). The same argument for the quest for justice is given when justifying the US intervention in Libya, in March 2011: this time, the goal is “to see that the principles of justice and human dignity are upheld by all” (Obama, 2011a).

Obama places particular emphasis on the goal of justice in his speech in Oslo, when accepting the Nobel peace prize, in which he refers to “just wars” and makes a plea against holy wars or wars based on religion, arguing that “these extremists are not the first to kill in the name of God; the cruelties of the Crusades are amply recorded. But they remind us that no holy war can ever be a just war. For if you truly believe that you are carrying out divine will, then there is no need for restraint” (Obama, 2009d).

Here we see a slight difference between him and his predecessor: Bush says that God is on our side whilst Obama denounces fighting in the name of God. Even so, it could be said that his very frequent references to God and religion (many more than in Johnson’s or Nixon’s speeches) could be understood as a means of *blessing* the war and giving it a moral justification, as asserted by Ivie (2005). It is also remarkable that, in the earlier part of the speech which we cited, Obama reiterates one of the principles of Christian thought, when he says that there is “one rule that lies at the heart of every major religion: we do unto others as we would have them do unto us”, a reference to Luke 6:31 in the New Testament. Again, these references to religion give a messianic character to the war, a pattern that was very characteristic of George W. Bush’s war rhetoric. It is also highly significant that in Obama’s speeches the word “sacrifice” appears many times when referring to American soldiers who have lost their lives on the battlefield. He says that, for those fighting in Afghanistan, “the sacrifices have been enormous. Nearly 700 Americans

have lost their lives. [...] They and their families embody the example of selfless sacrifice” (Obama, 2009a).

America goes to war in defense of all kinds of freedom, included the freedom of religion, and this is the main argument throughout US history. Obama stresses this, recalling 9/11 when announcing bin Laden’s death: “On that day, no matter where we came from, what God we prayed to, or what race or ethnicity we were, we were united as one American family” (Obama, 2011b).

To recapitulate, it can be said that the use of religious references in presidential speeches given in times of war has increased from the Vietnam era to that of the War on Terror. Thus, we find that Obama and his predecessor, George W. Bush, are the presidents who more often have recourse to religion in their speeches, despite living in a much more secularised time. Some authors go beyond political interpretations when explaining the fight against terror, which is a very different enemy than the one fought five decades ago: the terrorism we are fighting is a seductive idea, not a military target, asserts Stern (2003). And the terrorism in Obama’s period is not only a response to political grievances, as was common in the 1960s and 1970s, and which might, in principle, be remediable. It is a response to the “God-shaped hole” in modern culture. (Stern, 2003).

### **Conclusions**

The idea that, in going to war, the US is fighting against evil, appears in two different forms: evil seen as a political enemy in South-East Asia and evil seen as fundamentalist Muslims in the War on Terror. Religious references are only used in the latter case. US presidents try to persuade the audience that the country is going to war to accomplish God’s will, especially in George W. Bush’s speeches. This argument features only moderately in George H. Bush’s and Obama’s speeches and is almost absent (in the speeches of Johnson) or completely absent (in Nixon’s).

Religious rhetoric appears to have a higher correlation with the type of enemy being fought than with the personal convictions of each president. Communist Vietnam was depicted as a godless, atheist regime, but the Vietnam War did not, at that time, have only religious connotations; however, society was indeed more religious at that time than at the beginning of the 21st century but had a very different attitude to war policies.

The War on Terror, on the other hand, was not religious but contained religious elements at a time when society was far more secularized. The War on Terror has a religious element that is present in the narrative, and there is a strong link between presidential rhetoric and religious references. In the Vietnam War rhetoric, religious elements were present to reinforce the moral discourse or to give strength to the country, but the war was not a “holy” one. In the context of the Cold War conflict, war had clear political and geostrategic purposes, not merely *moral* ones, even though US society was more religious at that time.

Therefore, religion was a stronger presence in the political context in America under Johnson and Nixon than under Bush and Obama but, paradoxically, there is less reference to religion in their war speeches. Johnson and Nixon make use of, but do not abuse, religious references in their speeches in times of war. Religion is called upon as a source of inspiration and compassion rather than as weapon or a cause.

Referring to the Vietnam War, Johnson uses a more natural rhetoric, sociologically Christian and based on duty. He makes biblical references to the Old Testament and introduces “God bless you all” at the end of his speeches although he does not refer to his personal beliefs in his narrative. Johnson talks from his personal beliefs and convictions, but they only feature moderately rather than prominently in his discourse. Nixon, on the other hand, uses religious rhetoric more lightly, more “moderately”, less passionately and does not exploit it in any way. Nixon’s speeches are less religious than other presidents’

and more rationally conceived. In wartime, Nixon provides an example of sober speeches which are more linked to peace and the freedom of the nation as something inherent to the US ethos and not presented as a divine destiny.

Regarding the War on Terror, religion is most strongly featured in Bush's rhetoric. In his speeches, Bush is the most belligerently and intentionally religious, involving himself personally in the speech. In his justification for war, Bush divides the world into good and evil based on religious criteria and not political blocks, as his predecessors did. Obama, however, provides a religious discourse that is present in a clear and noticeable way. Our findings demonstrate that, in spite of not calling the war "religious", he suggests that war has religious components to be taken into account. His rhetoric is vivid and both implicitly and explicitly religious. The 9/11 attacks changed the worldwide paradigm irreversibly. Of those analyzed, Obama is the president that has lived in the most secularized time, and he explicitly evokes America as a place in which religious freedom is not only a given right but also an unquestionable reality.

Religion is used in war rhetoric as a means of emphasizing content, in order to suggest ideas rooted in the past that give strength and unite the nation, and give hope for the future. Religion is seen in the speeches as "our" religion and not "theirs". Thus, when used in war rhetoric, religion is yet another element that reinforces US identity, this being one of the main purposes of presidential rhetoric.

This study is limited to the speeches and their rhetoric and religious elements, not the reception of them in the broader public. In our research, we have focused specifically on describing the use of religion by US presidents in their wartime speeches when trying to justify the need to go to combat. To summarize our discussion regarding the key hypothesis of this research, we can assert that, when presidential war rhetoric is used to justify war, the religious element is both a form of reinforcement and an argument used to



support presidential decisions: in the Vietnam era, with less frequency even though the social context was more religious and the North-Vietnamese regime was atheistic; in the War on Terror, with a greater presence of religious elements even though society at this time is more secularized. Transcending time, we find that, for all presidents, one of the main arguments is that God is on “our” side: He helps us to fight, because we fight evil.

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**Table 1. Presence of religious words in US presidential war speeches**

	Lyndon B. Johnson		Richard M. Nixon		George H. Bush		George W. Bush		Barack Obama	
	Times	0/00	Times	0/00	Times	0/00	Times	0/00	Times	0/00
<b>Belief / ve</b>	0	0	0	0	1	0.05	4	0.18	11	0.31
<b>Bible</b>	1	0.07	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Bless</b>	3	0.22	1	0.04	15	0.89	15	0.7	20	0.58
<b>Comfort</b>	0	0	0	0	2	0.11	3	0.14	1	0.02
<b>Creator</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.02
<b>Koran</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Eternity</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.02
<b>Evil</b>	0	0	0	0	2	0.11	13	0.61	4	0.11
<b>Faith</b>	2	0.15	4	0.19	0	0	5	0.23	13	0.37
<b>Freedom</b>	33	2.49	31	1.52	31	1.84	114	15.32	41	1.18
<b>Liberty</b>	1	0.07	0	0	5	0.29	26	1.21	7	0.20
<b>Glory</b>	0	0	1	0.04	1	0.05	0	0	1	0.02
<b>God</b>	6	0.45	1	0.04	9	0.53	19	0.89	24	0.69
<b>Heaven</b>	0	0	2	0.09	0	0	1	0.05	0	0
<b>Hell</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Holy</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Hope</b>	8	0.60	13	0.64	17	1.00	15	0.7	20	0.58
<b>Islam</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0.37	7	0.20
<b>Muslim</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.05	6	0.17
<b>Just / Justice</b>	1	0.07	7	0.34	6	0.35	19	0.89	27	0.78
<b>Mercy</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.05	2	0.05
<b>Pray</b>	5	0.37	1	0.04	7	0.41	9	0.42	4	0.11
<b>Religion</b>	2	0.15	1	0.04	1	0.05	4	0.19	10	0.29
<b>Sacred</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.05
<b>Sacrifice</b>	5	0.37	5	0.24	2	0.11	17	0.79	33	0.95
<b>Salvation</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Sin</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Soul</b>	0	0	0	0	2	0.11	0	0	1	0.02
<b>Spirit</b>	0	0	4	0.19	5	0.29	3	0.14	2	0.05
<b>Speeches</b>	6		7		8		8		12	
<b>Religious Words</b>	67	5.07	71	3.5	106	6.29	277	12.9	238	6.9
<b>Total Words</b>	13.204		20.248		16.846		21.423		34.481	106.202