



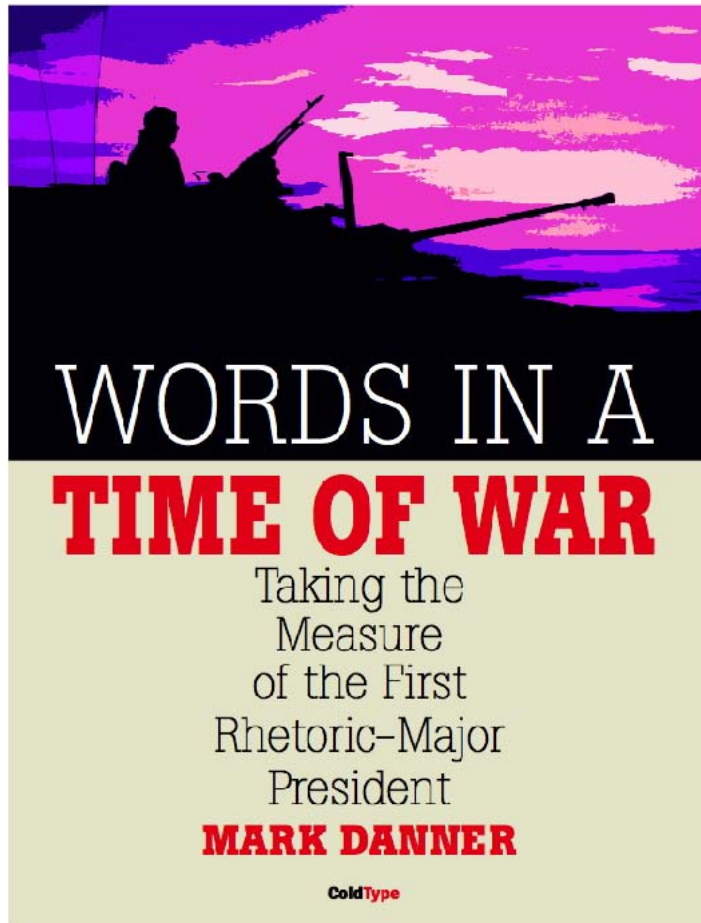
WORDS IN A

**TIME OF WAR**

Taking the  
Measure  
of the First  
Rhetoric-Major  
President

**MARK DANNER**

**ColdType**



**Mark Danner**, who has written about foreign affairs and politics for two decades, is the author of *The Secret Way to War*; *Torture and Truth*; and *The Massacre at El Mozote*, among other books. He is Professor of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley and Henry R. Luce Professor at Bard College. His writing on Iraq and other subjects appear regularly in The New York Review of Books.

His work is archived at [MarkDanner.com](http://MarkDanner.com).

Copyright 2007 Mark Danner

This essay originally appeared on the [TomDispatch.com](http://TomDispatch.com) web site

**ColdType**

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD  
[www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net)

## **INTRODUCTION**

TOM ENGELHARDT

**A** few weeks ago, I offered readers of my web site Tomdispatch, "Close Your Eyes," my fantasy graduation speech for the class of 2007, given from the podium of some university of my mind. Mark Danner, however, recently stood at an actual podium at the University of California, Berkeley, and gave a genuine commencement address to a group of Department of Rhetoric graduates – and what a speech it was on our Age of Rhetoric.

Not long ago, the Bush administration's words outstripped reality every time. Never, after all, has an administration reached for its dictionaries more regularly to redefine reality to its own benefit; and yet, somehow, almost six years after the 9/11 attacks, we find ourselves in a world in which reality, sometimes absurdly, sometimes grimly beyond comprehension, outraces any words the Bush administration may propose for it. Who could, for instance, have imagined an Iraq thrumming with daily car bombs delivered by an organization labeling itself al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia? Yet that is Iraq today. Recently, at his Informed Comment blog the estimable Juan Cole noticed a new leap forward (or backward) in that country. Southern Iraqi rice farmers are evidently reportedly taking Bush-inspired reality yet another horrific (as well as logical) step into a hopeless future. They are beginning to experiment with turning in their rice shoots for a potentially far more valuable crop – poppies. Next thing we know, someone will rename the country "Afghanistan II" and we'll have a second chaotic narco-kingdom on our hands. Even in the Bush administration's wildest dreams, it could never have topped that potential reality.

Danner, New York Review of Books regular and author, most recently, of *The Secret Way to War*, offers a remarkable college-level mini-course on the Bush administration's record of words – and the reality it tried to discipline and punish. He then graduates all of us into a world almost beyond words.

## **WORDS IN A TIME OF WAR**

### TAKING THE MEASURE OF THE FIRST RHETORIC-MAJOR PRESIDENT

[Note: This commencement address was given to graduates of the Department of Rhetoric at Zellerbach Hall, University of California, Berkeley, on May 10, 2007]

**W**HEN my assistant greeted me, a number of weeks ago, with the news that I had been invited to deliver the commencement address to the Department of Rhetoric, I thought it was a bad joke. There is a sense, I'm afraid, that being invited to deliver The Speech to students of Rhetoric is akin to being asked out for a romantic evening by a porn star: Whatever prospect you might have of pleasure is inevitably dampened by performance anxiety – the suspicion that your efforts, however enthusiastic, will inevitably be judged according to stern professional standards. A daunting prospect.

The only course, in both cases, is surely to plunge boldly ahead. And that means, first of all, saluting the family members gathered here, and in particular you, the parents.

Dear parents, I welcome you today to your moment of triumph. For if a higher education is about acquiring the skills and knowledge that allow one to comprehend and thereby get on in the world – and I use "get on in the world" in the very broadest sense – well then, oh esteemed parents, it is your children, not those boringly practical business majors and pre-meds your sanctimonious friends have sired, who have chosen with unerring grace and wisdom the course of study that will best guide them in this very strange polity of ours. For our age, ladies and gentlemen, is truly the Age of Rhetoric.

Now I turn to you, my proper audience, the graduating students of the Department of Rhetoric of 2007, and I salute you most heartily. In making the choice you have, you confirmed that you understand something intrinsic, something indeed.... intimate about this age we live in. Perhaps that should not surprise us. After all, you have spent your entire undergraduate years during time of war – and what a very strange wartime it has been.

## MARK DANNER | WORDS IN A TIME OF WAR

When most of you arrived on this campus, in September 2003, the rhetorical construction known as the War on Terror was already two years old and that very real war to which it gave painful birth, the war in Iraq, was just hitting its half-year mark. Indeed, the Iraq War had already ended once, in that great victory scene on the USS Abraham Lincoln off the coast of San Diego, where the President, clad jauntily in a flight suit, had swaggered across the flight deck and, beneath a banner famously marked "Mission Accomplished," had declared: "Major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed."

Of the great body of rich material encompassed by my theme today – "Words in a Time of War" – surely those words of George W. Bush must stand as among the era's most famous, and most rhetorically unstable. For whatever they may have meant when the President uttered them on that sunny afternoon of May 1, 2003, they mean something quite different today, almost exactly four years later. The President has lost control of those words, as of so much else.

At first glance, the grand spectacle of May 1, 2003 fits handily into the history of the pageantries of power. Indeed, with its banners and ranks of cheering, uniformed extras gathered on the stage of that vast aircraft carrier – a stage, by the way, that had to be turned in a complicated maneuver so that the skyline of San Diego, a few miles off, would not be glimpsed by the television audience – the event and its staging would have been quite familiar to, and no doubt envied by, the late Leni Riefenstahl (who, as filmmaker to the Nazis, had no giant aircraft carriers to play with). Though vast and impressive, the May 1 extravaganza was a propaganda event of a traditional sort, intended to bind the country together in a second precise image of victory – the first being the pulling down of Saddam's statue in Baghdad, also staged – an image that would fit neatly into campaign ads for the 2004 election. The President was the star, the sailors and airmen and their enormous dreadnought props in his extravaganza.

However ambitiously conceived, these were all very traditional techniques, familiar to any fan of Riefenstahl's famous film spectacular of the 1934 Nuremberg rally, *Triumph of the Will*. As trained rhetoricians, however, you may well have noticed something different here, a slightly familiar flavor just beneath the surface. If ever there was a need for a "disciplined grasp" of the "symbolic and institutional dimensions of discourse" – as your Rhetoric Department's website puts it – surely it is now. For we have today an administration that not only is radical – unprecedentedly so – in its attitudes toward rhetoric and reality, toward words and things, but is willing, to our great benefit, to state this attitude clearly.

I give you my favorite quotation from the Bush administration, put forward by the proverbial "unnamed Administration official" and published in the New York Times Magazine by the fine journalist Ron Suskind in October 2004. Here, in Suskind's recounting, is what that "unnamed Administration official" told him:

## **MARK DANNER | WORDS IN A TIME OF WAR**

"The aide said that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors.... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.'"

I must admit to you that I love that quotation; indeed, with your permission, I would like hereby to nominate it for inscription over the door of the Rhetoric Department, akin to Dante's welcome above the gates of Hell, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here."

Both admonitions have an admirable bluntness. These words from "Bush's Brain" – for the unnamed official speaking to Suskind seems to have been none other than the selfsame architect of the aircraft-carrier moment, Karl Rove, who bears that pungent nickname – these words sketch out with breathtaking frankness a radical view in which power frankly determines reality, and rhetoric, the science of flounces and folderols, follows meekly and subserviently in its train. Those in the "reality-based community" – those such as we – are figures a mite pathetic, for we have failed to realize the singular new principle of the new age: Power has made reality its bitch.

Given such sweeping claims for power, it is hard to expect much respect for truth; or perhaps it should be "truth" – in quotation marks – for, when you can alter reality at will, why pay much attention to the idea of fidelity in describing it? What faith, after all, is owed to the bitch that is wholly in your power, a creature of your own creation?

Of course I should not say "those such as we" here, for you, dear graduates of the Rhetoric Department of 2007, you are somewhere else altogether. This is, after all, old hat to you; the line of thinking you imbibe with your daily study, for it is present in striking fashion in Foucault and many other intellectual titans of these last decades – though even they might have been nonplussed to find it so crisply expressed by a finely tailored man sitting in the White House. Though we in the "reality-based community" may just now be discovering it, you have known for years the presiding truth of our age, which is that the object has become subject and we have a fanatical follower of Foucault in the Oval Office. Graduates, let me say it plainly and incontrovertibly: George W. Bush is the first Rhetoric-Major President.

### **THE DIRTIED FACE OF POWER**

I overstate perhaps, but only for a bit of – I hope – permitted rhetorical pleasure. Let us gaze a moment at the signposts of the history of the present age. In January 2001, the Rhetoric Major President came to power after a savage and unprecedented electoral battle that was

## **MARK DANNER | WORDS IN A TIME OF WAR**

decided not by the ballots of American voters – for of these he had 540,000 fewer than his Democrat rival – but by the votes of Supreme Court Justices, where Republicans prevailed 5 to 4, making George W. Bush the first president in more than a century to come to the White House with fewer votes than those of his opponent.

In this singular condition, and with a Senate precisely divided between parties, President Bush proceeded to behave as if he had won an overwhelming electoral victory, demanding tax cuts greater and more regressive than those he had outlined in the campaign. And despite what would seem to have been debilitating political weakness, the President shortly achieved this first success in “creating his own reality.” To act as if he had overwhelming political power would mean he had overwhelming political power.

This, however, was only the overture of the vast symphonic work to come, a work heralded by the huge, clanging, echoing cacophony of 9/11. We are so embedded in its age that it is easy to forget the stark, overwhelming shock of it: Nineteen young men with box cutters seized enormous transcontinental airliners and brought those towers down. In an age in which we have become accustomed to two, three, four, five suicide attacks in a single day – often these multiple attacks from Baghdad don’t even make the front pages of our papers – it is easy to forget the blunt, scathing shock of it, the impossible image of the second airliner disappearing into the great office tower, almost weirdly absorbed by it, and emerging, transformed into a great yellow and red blossom of flame, on the other side; and then, half an hour later, the astonishing flowering collapse of the hundred-story structure, transforming itself, in a dozen seconds, from mighty tower to great plume of heaven-reaching white smoke.

The image remains, will always remain, with us; for truly the weapon that day was not box cutters in the hands of nineteen young men, nor airliners at their command. The weapon that day was the television set. It was the television set that made the image possible, and inextinguishable. If terror is first of all a way of talking – the propaganda of the deed, indeed – then that day the television was the indispensable conveyer of the conversation: the recruitment poster for fundamentalism, the only symbolic arena in which America’s weakness and vulnerability could be dramatized on an adequate scale. Terror – as Menachem Begin, the late Israeli prime minister and the successful terrorist who drove the British from Mandate Palestine, remarked in his memoirs – terror is about destroying the prestige of the imperial regime; terror is about “dirtying the face of power.”

President Bush and his lieutenants surely realized this and it is in that knowledge, I believe, that we can find the beginning of the answer to one of the more intriguing puzzles of these last few years: What exactly lay at the root of the almost fanatical determination of administration officials to attack and occupy Iraq? It was, obviously, the classic “over-determined” decision, a tangle of fear, in the form of those infamous weapons of mass destruc-

## **MARK DANNER | WORDS IN A TIME OF WAR**

tion; of imperial ambition, in the form of the neoconservative project to "remake the Middle East"; and of realpolitik, in the form of the "vital interest" of securing the industrial world's oil supplies.

In the beginning, though, was the felt need on the part of our nation's leaders, men and women so worshipful of the idea of power and its ability to remake reality itself, to restore the nation's prestige, to wipe clean that dirtied face. Henry Kissinger, a confidant of the President, when asked by Bush's speechwriter why he had supported the Iraq War, responded: "Because Afghanistan was not enough." The radical Islamists, he said, want to humiliate us. "And we need to humiliate them." In other words, the presiding image of The War on Terror – the burning towers collapsing on the television screen – had to be supplanted by another, the image of American tanks rumbling proudly through a vanquished Arab capital. It is no accident that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, at the first "war cabinet" meeting at Camp David the Saturday after the 9/11 attacks, fretted over the "lack of targets" in Afghanistan and wondered whether we "shouldn't do Iraq first." He wanted to see those advancing tanks marching across our television screens, and soon.

In the end, of course, the enemy preferred not to fight with tanks, though they were perfectly happy to have us do so, the better to destroy these multi-million dollar anachronisms with so-called IEDs, improvised explosive devices, worth a few hundred bucks apiece. This is called asymmetrical warfare and one should note here with some astonishment how successful it has been these last half dozen years. In the post-Cold War world, after all, as one neo-conservative theorist explained shortly after 9/11, the United States was enjoying a rare "uni-polar moment." It deployed the greatest military and economic power the world has ever seen. It spent more on its weapons, its Army, Navy, and Air Force, than the rest of the world combined.

It was the assumption of this so-called preponderance that lay behind the philosophy of power enunciated by Bush's Brain and that led to an attitude toward international law and alliances that is, in my view, quite unprecedented in American history. That radical attitude is brilliantly encapsulated in a single sentence drawn from the National Security Strategy of the United States of 2003: "Our strength as a nation-state will continue to be challenged by those who employ a strategy of the weak using international fora, judicial processes and terrorism." Let me repeat that little troika of "weapons of the weak": international fora (meaning the United Nations and like institutions), judicial processes (meaning courts, domestic and international), and.... terrorism. This strange gathering, put forward by the government of the United States, stems from the idea that power is, in fact, everything. In such a world, courts – indeed, law itself – can only limit the power of the most powerful state. Wielding preponderant power, what need has it for law? The latter must be, by definition, a weapon of the weak. The most powerful state, after all, makes reality.



### **ASYMMETRIC WARFARE AND DUMB LUCK**

Now, here's an astonishing fact: Fewer than half a dozen years into this "uni-polar moment," the greatest military power in the history of the world stands on the brink of defeat in Iraq. Its vastly expensive and all-powerful military has been humbled by a congeries of secret organizations fighting mainly by means of suicide vests, car bombs and improvised explosive devices – all of them cheap, simple, and effective, indeed so effective that these techniques now comprise a kind of ready-made insurgency kit freely available on the Internet and spreading in popularity around the world, most obviously to Afghanistan, that land of few targets.

As I stand here, one of our two major political parties advocates the withdrawal – gradual, or otherwise – of American combat forces from Iraq and many in the other party are feeling the increasing urge to go along. As for the Bush administration's broader War on Terror, as the State Department detailed recently in its annual report on the subject, the number of terrorist attacks worldwide has never been higher, nor more effective. True, al-Qaeda has not attacked again within the United States. They do not need to. They are alive and flourishing. Indeed, it might even be said that they are winning. For their goal, despite the rhetoric of the Bush administration, was not simply to kill Americans but, by challenging the United States in this spectacular fashion, to recruit great numbers to their cause and to move their insurgency into the heart of the Middle East. And all these things they have done.

How could such a thing have happened? In their choice of enemy, one might say that the terrorists of al-Qaeda had a great deal of dumb luck, for they attacked a country run by an administration that had a radical conception of the potency of power. At the heart of the principle of asymmetric warfare – al-Qaeda's kind of warfare – is the notion of using your opponents' power against him. How does a small group of insurgents without an army, or even heavy weapons, defeat the greatest conventional military force the world has ever known? How do you defeat such an army if you don't have an army? Well, you borrow your enemy's. And this is precisely what al-Qaeda did. Using the classic strategy of provocation, the group tried to tempt the superpower into its adopted homeland. The original strategy behind the 9/11 attacks – apart from humbling the superpower and creating the greatest recruiting poster the world had ever seen – was to lure the United States into a ground war in Afghanistan, where the one remaining superpower (like the Soviet Union before it) was to be trapped, stranded, and destroyed. It was to prepare for this war that Osama bin Laden arranged for the assassination, two days before 9/11 – via bombs secreted in the video cameras of two terrorists posing as reporters – of the Afghan Northern Alliance leader, Ahmed Shah Massoud, who would have been the United States' most powerful ally.

Well aware of the Soviets' Afghanistan debacle – after all, the U.S. had supplied most of the weapons that defeated the Soviets there – the Bush administration tried to avoid a quag-

## **MARK DANNER | WORDS IN A TIME OF WAR**

mire by sending plenty of air support, lots of cash, and, most important, very few troops, relying instead on its Afghan allies. But if bin Laden was disappointed in this, he would soon have a far more valuable gift: the invasion of Iraq, a country that, unlike Afghanistan, was at the heart of the Middle East and central to Arab concerns, and, what's more, a nation that sat squarely on the critical Sunni-Shia divide, a potential ignition switch for al-Qaeda's great dream of a regional civil war. It is on that precipice that we find ourselves teetering today.

Critical to this strange and unlikely history were the administration's peculiar ideas about power and its relation to reality – and beneath that a familiar imperial attitude, if put forward in a strikingly crude and harsh form: "We're an empire now and when we act we create our own reality." Power, untrammelled by law or custom; power, unlimited by the so-called weapons of the weak, be they international institutions, courts, or terrorism – power can remake reality. It is no accident that one of Karl Rove's heroes is President William McKinley, who stood at the apex of America's first imperial moment, and led the country into a glorious colonial adventure in the Philippines that was also meant to be the military equivalent of a stroll in the park and that, in the event, led to several years of bloody insurgency – an insurgency, it bears noticing, that was only finally put down with the help of the extensive use of torture, most notably water-boarding, which has made its reappearance in the imperial battles of our own times.

If we are an empire now, as Mr. Rove says, perhaps we should add, as he might not, that we are also a democracy, and therein, Rhetoric graduates of 2007, lies the rub. A democratic empire, as even the Athenians discovered, is an odd beast, like one of those mythological creatures born equally of lion and bird, or man and horse. If one longs to invade Iraq to restore the empire's prestige, one must convince the democracy's people of the necessity of such a step. Herein lies the pathos of the famous weapons-of-mass-destruction issue, which has become a kind of synecdoche for the entire lying mess of the past few years. The center stage of our public life is now dominated by a simple melodrama: Bush wanted to invade Iraq; Bush told Americans that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction; Iraq did not have such weapons. Therefore Bush lied, and the war was born of lies and deception.

I hesitate to use that most overused of rhetorical terms – irony – to describe the emergence of this narrative at the center of our national life, but nonetheless, and with apologies: It is ironic. The fact is that officials of the Bush administration did believe there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, though they vastly exaggerated the evidence they had to prove it and, even more, the threat that those weapons might have posed, had they been there. In doing this, the officials believed themselves to be "framing a guilty man"; that is, like cops planting a bit of evidence in the murderer's car, they believed their underlying case was true; they just needed to dramatize it a bit to make it clear and convincing to the public. What matter, once the tanks were rumbling through Baghdad and the war was won?

## **MARK DANNER | WORDS IN A TIME OF WAR**

Weapons would be found, surely; and if only a few were found, who would care? By then, the United States military would have created a new reality.

I have often had a daydream about this. I see a solitary Army private – a cook perhaps, or a quartermaster – breaking the padlock on some forgotten warehouse on an Iraqi military base, poking about and finding a few hundred, even a few thousand, old artillery shells, leaking chemicals. These shells – forgotten, unusable – might have dated from the time of the first Gulf War, when Iraq unquestionably possessed chemical munitions. (Indeed, in the 1980s, the United States had supplied targeting intelligence that helped the Iraqis use them effectively against the Iranians.) And though now they had been forgotten, leaking, unusable, still they would indeed be weapons of mass destruction – to use the misleading and absurd construction that has headlined our age – and my solitary cook or quartermaster would be a hero, for he would have, all unwittingly, “proved” the case.

My daydream could easily have come to pass. Why not? It is nigh unto miraculous that the Iraqi regime, even with the help of the United Nations, managed so thoroughly to destroy or remove its once existing stockpile. And if my private had found those leaky old shells what would have been changed thereby? Yes, the administration could have pointed to them in triumph and trumpeted the proven character of Saddam’s threat. So much less embarrassing than the “weapons of mass destruction program related activities” that the administration still doggedly asserts were “discovered.” But, in fact, the underlying calculus would have remained: that, in the months leading up to the war, the administration relentlessly exaggerated the threat Saddam posed to the United States and relentlessly understated the risk the United States would run in invading and occupying Iraq. And it would have remained true and incontestable that – as the quaintly fact-bound British Foreign Secretary put it eight months before the war, in a secret British cabinet meeting made famous by the so-called Downing Street Memo – “the case [for attacking Iraq] was thin. Saddam was not threatening his neighbors and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran.”

Which is to say, the weapons were a rhetorical prop and, satisfying as it has been to see the administration beaten about the head with that prop, we forget this underlying fact at our peril. The issue was never whether the weapons were there or not; indeed, had the weapons really been the issue, why could the administration not let the UN inspectors take the time to find them (as, of course, they never would have)? The administration needed, wanted, had to have, the Iraq war. The weapons were but a symbol, the necessary *casus belli*, what Hitchcock called the Maguffin – that glowing mysterious object in the suitcase in Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*: that is, a satisfyingly concrete object on which to fasten a rhetorical or narrative end, in this case a war to restore American prestige, project its power, remake the Middle East.

The famous weapons were chosen to play this leading role for “bureaucratic reasons,” as

## **MARK DANNER | WORDS IN A TIME OF WAR**

Paul Wolfowitz, then Deputy Secretary of Defense and until quite recently the unhappy president of the World Bank, once remarked to a lucky journalist. Had a handful of those weapons been found, the underlying truth would have remained: Saddam posed nowhere remotely near the threat to the United States that would have justified running the enormous metaphysical risk that a war of choice with Iraq posed. Of course, when you are focused on magical phrases like "preponderant power" and "the uni-polar moment," matters like numbers of troops at your disposal – and the simple fact that the United States had too few to sustain a long-term occupation of a country the size of Iraq – must seem mundane indeed.

### **IMPERIAL WORDS AND THE REALITY-BASED UNIVERSE**

I must apologize to you, Rhetoric Class of 2007. Ineluctably, uncontrollably, I find myself slipping back into the dull and unimaginative language of the reality-based community. It must grate a bit on your ears. After all, we live in a world in which the presumption that we were misled into war, that the Bush officials knew there were no weapons and touted them anyway, has supplanted the glowing, magical image of the weapons themselves. It is a presumption of great use to those regretful souls who once backed the war so fervently, not least a number of Democratic politicians we all could name, as well as many of my friends in the so-called liberal punditocracy who now need a suitable excuse for their own rashness, gullibility, and stupidity. For this, Bush's mendacity seems perfectly sized and ready to hand.

There is, however, full enough of that mendacity, without artificially adding to the stockpile. Indeed, all around us we've been hearing these last many months the sound of ice breaking, as the accumulated frozen scandals of this administration slowly crack open to reveal their queasy secrets. And yet the problem, of course, is that they are not secrets at all: One of the most painful principles of our age is that scandals are doomed to be revealed – and to remain stinking there before us, unexcised, unpunished, unfinished.

If this Age of Rhetoric has a tragic symbol, then surely this is it: the frozen scandal, doomed to be revealed, and revealed, and revealed, in a never-ending torture familiar to the rock-bound Prometheus and his poor half-eaten liver. A full three years ago, the photographs from Abu Ghraib were broadcast by CBS on *Sixty Minutes II* and published by Seymour Hersh in *The New Yorker*; nearly as far back I wrote a book entitled *Torture and Truth*, made up largely of Bush administration documents that detailed the decision to use "extreme interrogation techniques" or – in the First President of Rhetoric's phrase – "an alternative set of procedures" on prisoners in the War on Terror.

He used this phrase last September in a White House speech kicking off the 2006 midterm election campaign, at a time when accusing the Democrats of evidencing a continued softness on terror – and a lamentable unwillingness to show the needed harshness in "interrogating terrorists" – seemed a winning electoral strategy. And indeed Democrats seemed

## **MARK DANNER | WORDS IN A TIME OF WAR**

fully to agree, for they warily elected not to filibuster the Military Commissions Act of last October, which arguably made many of these "alternative sets of procedures" explicitly legal. And Democrats did win both houses of Congress, a victory perhaps owed in part to their refusal to block Bush's interrogation law. Who can say? What we can say is that if torture today remains a "scandal," a "crisis," it is a crisis in that same peculiar way that crime or AIDS or global warming are crises: that is, they are all things we have learned to live with.

Perhaps the commencement address to the Department of Rhetoric at the University of California at Berkeley is not the worst of places to call for a halt to this spinning merry-go-round. I know it will brand me forever a member of the reality-based community if I suggest that the one invaluable service the new Democratic Congress can provide all Americans is a clear accounting of how we came to find ourselves in this present time of war: an authorized version, as it were, which is, I know, the most pathetically retrograde of ideas.

This would require that people like Mr. Wolfowitz, Mr. Rumsfeld, and many others be called before a select, bipartisan committee of Congress to tell us what, in their view, really happened. I squirm with embarrassment putting forward such a pathetically unsophisticated notion, but failing at least the minimally authorized version that Congress could provide, we will find ourselves forever striving – by chasing down byways like the revelation of the identity of Valerie Plame, or the question of whether or not George Tenet bolstered his slam dunk exclamation in the Oval Office with an accompanying Michael Jordan-like leap – to understand how precisely decisions were made between September 11, 2001 and the invasion of Iraq eighteen months later.

Don't worry, though, Rhetoric graduates: such a proposal has about it the dusty feel of past decades; it is as "reality-based" as can be and we are unlikely to see it in our time. What we are likely to see is the ongoing collapse of our first Rhetoric-Major President, who, with fewer than one American in three now willing to say they approve of the job he is doing, is seeing his power ebb by the day. Tempting as it is, I will urge you not to draw too many overarching conclusions from his fate. He has had, after all, a very long run – and I say this with the wonder that perhaps can only come from having covered both the 2000 and 2004 election campaigns, from Florida, and the Iraq War.

I last visited that war in December, when Baghdad was cold and grey and I spent a good deal of time drawing black X's through the sources listed in my address book, finding them, one after another, either departed or dead. Baghdad seemed a sad and empty place, with even its customary traffic jams gone, and the periodic, resonating explosions attracting barely glances from those few Iraqis to be found on the streets.

How, in these "words in a time of war," can I convey to you the reality of that place at this time? Let me read to you a bit of an account from a young Iraqi woman of how that war has touched her and her family, drawn from a newsroom blog. The words may be terrible and

## MARK DANNER | WORDS IN A TIME OF WAR

hard to bear, but – for those of you who have made such a determined effort to learn to read and understand – this is the most reality I could find to tell you. This is what lies behind the headlines and the news reports and it is as it is.

"We were asked to send the next of kin to whom the remains of my nephew, killed on Monday in a horrific explosion downtown, can be handed over...

"So we went, his mum, his other aunt and I...

"When we got there, we were given his remains. And remains they were. From the waist down was all they could give us. 'We identified him by the cell phone in his pants' pocket. If you want the rest, you will just have to look for yourselves. We don't know what he looks like.'

"...We were led away, and before long a foul stench clogged my nose and I retched. With no more warning we came to a clearing that was probably an inside garden at one time; all round it were patios and rooms with large-pane windows to catch the evening breeze Baghdad is renowned for. But now it had become a slaughterhouse, only instead of cattle, all around were human bodies. On this side; complete bodies; on that side halves; and everywhere body parts.

"We were asked what we were looking for; 'upper half' replied my companion, for I was rendered speechless. 'Over there.' We looked for our boy's broken body between tens of other boys' remains; with our bare hands sifting them and turning them.

"Millennia later we found him, took both parts home, and began the mourning ceremony."

The foregoing were words from an Iraqi family, who find themselves as far as they can possibly be from the idea that, when they act, they create their own reality – that they are, as Bush's Brain put it, "history's actors." The voices you heard come from history's objects and we must ponder who the subjects are, who exactly is acting upon them.

The car bomb that so changed their lives was not set by Americans; indeed, young Americans even now are dying to prevent such things. I have known a few of these young Americans. Perhaps you have as well, perhaps they are in the circles of your family or of your friends. I remember one of them, a young lieutenant, a beautiful young man with a puffy, sleepy face, looking at me when I asked whether or not he was scared when he went out on patrol – this was October 2003, as the insurgency was exploding. I remember him smiling a moment and then saying with evident pity for a reporter's lack of understanding. "This is war. We shoot, they shoot. We shoot, they shoot. Some days they shoot better than we do." He was patient in his answer, smiling sleepily in his young beauty, and I could tell he regarded me as from another world, a man who could never understand the world in which he lived.

## **MARK DANNER | WORDS IN A TIME OF WAR**

Three days after our interview, an explosion near Fallujah killed him.

Contingency, accidents, the metaphysical ironies that seem to stitch history together like a lopsided quilt – all these have no place in the imperial vision. A perception of one's self as "history's actor" leaves no place for them. But they exist and it is invariably others, closer to the ground, who see them, know them, and suffer their consequences.

You have chosen a path that will let you look beyond the rhetoric that you have studied and into the heart of those consequences. Of all people you have chosen to learn how to see the gaps and the loose stitches and the remnant threads. Ours is a grim age, this Age of Rhetoric, still infused with the remnant perfume of imperial dreams. You have made your study in a propitious time, oh graduates, and that bold choice may well bring you pain, for you have devoted yourselves to seeing what it is that stands before you. If clear sight were not so painful, many more would elect to have it. Today, you do not conclude but begin: today you commence. My blessings upon you, and my gratitude to you for training yourself to see. Reality, it seems, has caught up with you.



# READ MORE POLITICAL ESSAYS AT COLDTYPE.NET

Download political essays by many of the best and brightest commentators from around the world, plus books, booklets, essays, newspapers and magazines – all in pdf format – all free of charge, at [www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net)

(Click on this link to enter web site)



**ColdType**

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD