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The American People in Crisis: A Content Analysis

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This study examines how images of the American electorate were deployed after the 11 September 2001 terrorism incident and during the Clinton impeachment. Transcripts of congressional proceedings, news coverage, and presidential campaign addresses were analyzed to determine how the phrase the American people *was used during these two crises and in unrelated presidential campaign speeches. The analysis considered the roles, actions, qualities, and circumstances ascribed to the people, as well as the time orientation and the forces aligned against the people. The results show that (1) relative to presidential campaign rhetoric, both crises resulted in greater concentration on the electorate; (2) the crises differed from one another as well, with the impeachment texts featuring a contentious electorate and the 11 September texts identifying the people's psychological strengths and anxieties; and (3) both crises were also affected by exogenous factors—partisanship in the case of impeachment, and the passage of time for the terrorism incident.*

KEY WORDS: political communication, political crisis, content analysis, language behavior

This study asks a series of basic questions: Who are the American people? What do they do? believe? know? Are they unique? How do they function politically? For many social scientists, the answers to these questions are already known. For anthropologists, the American people are an amalgam fashioned from the villages of Europe, the dynasties of Asia, and the tribes of Africa that have produced unique cultural folkways. For historians, the American people are haunted by Old World hegemonies and hence are committed to individualism and modernism for philosophical and practical reasons. For psychologists, the American people are a restless and contentious lot producing a kaleidoscope of attitudes about most social issues.

Although all of these descriptions may be true, they are never true enough for the political psychologist, a person for whom "community" is both an empirical and an imagined entity. The American people can be found in election turnout figures and in gross economic indicators, to be sure, but they are more than that; they are also the meanings of their behaviors. As Lawrence and Bennett (2001) argued, "simple heuristic calculations [of opinion polls] based on media-independent factors" can never tell the whole story (p. 446). Rather, one must also reckon with a nation's meaning-making factories—its educational infrastructure, its mass media and popular culture, its city halls and legislatures—to explain its self-understanding.

This study attempts to do that by operating on these premises: (1) An electorate is not a stable, ontological entity; rather, it is "summoned up" periodically by political actors who define it in order to control it. (2) The American electorate has been an especially contested political site, in part because of its mottled demography but also because of its unique geography, history, and cultural mores. (3) American politics, as a result, rarely reduces to issues of simple expediency—how often? how much?—because the nation has never settled deeper questions: Who are we? Where are we going? What is fundamentally right and wrong? (4) During moments of political turbulence, these crises of meaning can be acute.

This is the fourth in a series of studies assessing such self-understandings (see also Hart & Jarvis, 1999; Hart, Jennings, & Dixson, in press; Hart & Johnson, 1999). All of these studies track the use of collective tokens—words referring to a group (e.g., Latinos), a nation (e.g., Russians), or a cross-national entity (e.g., Europeans). The specific token we chose to track (variations of the phrase *the American people*) allowed us to compare discourse produced by ordinary citizens during discussion groups, by professional politicians when speaking on the campaign trail, and by reporters writing for the mass media.

We expand on these concerns here by asking how constructions of *the American people* change during periods of national crisis. We do so by looking at speeches made in the U.S. House of Representatives after the 11 September 2001 attacks (9/11) and comparing them to remarks made in similar surroundings during the impeachment of President Bill Clinton. By contrasting these times of great stress to more conventional political moments, we try to explain who the American people are—or who they have been invited to become. Our work is informed by several kinds of work in political psychology, ranging from Edelman's (1988) observations about national political spectacles and Lewis' (2001) concerns about how public opinion is constructed, to Entman's (1989) analyses of citizen portrayals by media elites and Monroe's (1996) inquiries into how group commitments are developed and displayed. Our underlying premise is that the way a society defines itself affects how its members reason, how they react to new policy proposals, and how they bond with one another during moments of tribulation.

Background

The question asked in this study—how is an electorate invited to understand itself, and what results from those understandings?—could be asked of any nation. Nonetheless, there is something uniquely American about this question. As Merelman (1989) has argued, Americans have always been "loosely bounded," hence working political coalitions have been difficult to fashion. But they have had no choice but to do so, wrote Scruton (1999), because "no society can survive if it cannot generate the 'we' of affirmation: the assertion of itself as entitled to its land and institutions" (p. 290). It is remarkable that the American people have been able to develop such affirmations despite the demographic, geographic, and historical factors aligned against them. How have they done so?

Public opinion polls have helped. Arguably no nation has spent more time or money on polling than the United States, in part because of its positivistic and mercantile roots but also because public opinion has been highly volatile in a nation so large and diverse. As Bourdieu (1979) observed, public opinion polls constantly reify the nation-state, creating the idea "that a unanimous public opinion exists in order to legitimate a policy and strengthen the relations of force upon which it is based" (p. 125). For these reasons, wrote McGee (1975), " 'the people' are more *process* than *phenomenon*" (p. 242, emphasis in original), an entity brought forth for political purposes that cannot be measured precisely. From this vantage point, a national electorate does not really exist in some sort of primordial state but is brought into being during elections (and during crises), with "issue publics," "demographic sectors," and "media markets" substituting for hardier forms of identity.

The mass media have helped as well. Baym (2000), for example, studied broadcast news coverage following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and found two very different tropes being used. The "Institutional We" referred to the news station itself (as in "*we*'ve received a report that . . ."), whereas the "Representative We" linked the reporter to the nation as a whole. This latter "we," wrote Baym (p. 101), often marginalized right-wing groups, as when one militia member was asked, "Should *we* be afraid of you guys?" But Larson's (1999a, 1999b) work with "person on the street" interviews argues differently. She found that the ordinary folks who testify for the American people on the nightly news suitably resemble the electorate at large (when matched against public opinion data). Cramer's (1999) study of habitués of a corner restaurant found them frequently conceptualizing politics in terms of "us" and "them" despite their vaunted forms of individualism. Although Cramer's work shows that voters constantly seek out (and sometimes assume) a sense of the group, how and why they do so are not yet known.

Miller (1994) argued that these rhetorically based communities are rarely unidimensional (especially in the United States); a careful analysis of what is said within them often reveals political fractures (see Beasley, 2001). These cleavages, however, have not prevented American presidents from referring to "the people"

in their annual addresses more and more over time. Lim (2002) found, for example, an almost monotonic rise in the number of such references between 1789 and 2000. But why? Is it because a sense-of-the-whole has actually increased over the years, thus making it easy for politicians to warrant their arguments? Or has there been an actual decline in such feelings (perhaps because of the nation's increased pluralism and democratization), thus forcing presidents to compensate rhetorically? Willard (1996) worried about this latter possibility because "to define a people is to define a nonpeople" (p. 317). In other words, wrote Willard, the political solidarity purchased by identity markers can insulate a polity from others in the world, making them increasingly willing to think and act monolithically.

Hart and Jarvis (1999) found some evidence to support Willard's concerns. When examining small-group transcripts from the 1996 National Issues Convention—an event that brought together some 500 ordinary Americans to discuss the issues of the day—these authors found that use of collective self-references ("we," "our," and "us") increased *sevenfold* when foreign policy (as opposed to domestic matters) was being discussed. Moreover, 61% of the citizens' foreign policy claims contained policy recommendations (e.g., "we should tell Saddam Hussein that . . .") versus only 43% when they discussed economic matters, ostensibly an echo of the United States' longstanding foreign policy rhetoric. Hart and Jarvis also found the discussants to be *nine times* as likely to use active references ("we") as passive references ("us"), also a signal of political confidence. In other words, elite articulations may have sunk deep roots in the United States, the evidence for which can be found in the re-articulations the citizenry itself provides.

Two other studies along these lines are those by Hart and Johnson (1999) and Hart et al. (in press). In the former study, the authors searched a large (digitized) database of political stump speeches and campaign addresses produced during U.S. presidential campaigns from 1948 to 2000. They identified some 900 uses of the expression *the American people*, with the heaviest use occurring in the campaigns of 1968 to 1984, apparently because that was a time when the nation's traditional policies were being sharply debated. Not surprisingly, the American people were almost always described by the candidates in presentistic (versus historical) terms, a finding also echoed in the lay rhetoric analyzed by Hart and Jarvis (1999). However, candidates who described the people optimistically almost always won their races, a finding that flies in the face of the slash-and-burn advice that campaign consultants often provide.

Hart et al. (in press) expanded this database to include mass media reportage as a set of letters to the editor published in 12 small-city U.S. newspapers between 1948 and 2000. These additions permitted comparisons to be made among three different voices—politicians, the press, and the citizenry. For example, the candidates used the phrase *the American people* seven times as often as the letter-writers; this finding implies that elected officials (not the people themselves) best knew how the citizenry felt or, alternatively, that ordinary citizens do not use grand

rhetorical flourishes. The press, however, was the most negative; even when quoting candidates directly, it featured their more pessimistic ruminations.

This study follows up on these researches by treating campaign talk as a normative field against which crisis discourse can be understood. Other points of comparison could have been used (e.g., legislative hearings or political interview shows), but our reasoning was that campaign speeches (1) focus on highly salient topics, (2) are presented to diverse audiences in diverse locales, (3) inevitably attract media attention, and yet (4) share a common setting and format, thereby giving them both ideological representativeness and political importance.

We compare such remarks to those delivered during two very different crises. One such crisis was 9/11, an event that inspired a period of intense national self-examination. The terrorist incidents called into question all the U.S. myths—a nation more generous than all other nations, the supreme military force in the world—and brought up questions the American people had not asked in a very long time: Do we have the resolve to see this through? Can Western technologies overwhelm religious fanaticism? Has the economy been dealt a death blow? Will flying ever be safe again? Is the United States one nation or a micronesia of sub-nations?

These questions are quite different from those raised during the Clinton impeachment, which had all the requisites of a classic political scandal—overweening power, unbridled lust, partisan warfare, and massive press coverage. But it also had something else: a clear empirical record of how people actually felt about Bill Clinton. Public opinion experts Gerhardt (2000), Sonner and Wilcox (1999), and Miller (1999) agreed that (1) most Americans never wanted Clinton removed from office, and (2) they resented the intense partisanship surrounding the scandal. But the nation's political leaders inevitably argued that they knew the people better than the polls did—as, for example, when Rep. Steve Buyer (R-Ind.) argued during the House judiciary hearings that "the American people want their elected officials to honor their oath, defend the Constitution in accordance with the laws of this Nation" (8 November 1998). Arguing far more pragmatically, Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.) declared that "the American people want Congress to act on the real issues that face our country. A Patients' Bill of Rights, school construction, saving Social Security . . ." (31 October 1998).

One can dismiss this as mere rhetoric, but that hardly stops its issuance or causes it to go unheard. In the above quotations, for example, the Republican brushes away the pollsters' numbers as mere reifications, whereas the Democrat reads public opinion more deeply than the available evidence allows. As a result, the combatants become locked in the kind of rhetorical and epistemological struggle that surfaces during moments of turmoil. Table 1 shows that the two crises that ended one century and began another prompted a kind of national introspection (i.e., heavy use of collective tokens), making campaigns seem unreflective in contrast (proportionally less group-regarding). These data prompt several important scholarly questions:

Table 1. Database for Collective Tokens

Source	Total texts	Texts with token *the American people* Number	% of Total
Campaign speeches	2,357	322	13.7
9/11 speeches	449	188	41.8
Impeachment speeches	350	138	39.4

What qualities are attributed to "the American people" across political circumstances? Relative to normal times, how does a national crisis affect such invocations of the collective? Do these invocations differ during an external (military) threat and an internal (partisan) crisis?

These research questions are basic and our answers will not be definitive. This is a descriptive study, not a probative one. Although we speculate about the impact of the practices we analyze, we make no empirical tests of those effects. Rather, we describe how American politicians framed the electorate in both normal and turbulent times and then speculate about the effect of these framings on citizens' self-understandings.

Method

Both the 9/11 texts and those relating to impeachment were collected by searching for the phrase *the American people* (our collective token) on the House of Representatives portion of the www.congress.gov Web site. For the terrorist incident, House remarks delivered between 11 September and 11 November 2001 were gathered, thereby allowing us to track both immediate and delayed reactions to the calamity. That search produced 188 eligible texts (from a corpus of 449 sets of remarks) containing 280 eligible tokens. For the impeachment situation, speeches given by House members on 18 and 19 December 1998 (i.e., during that chamber's formal debate) and on 14–16 January 1999 (i.e., during the Senate trial) were searched, producing 138 eligible texts (from a population of 350 sets of formal remarks) containing 310 collective tokens. In all cases, the texts selected consisted of complete speech acts (an introduction, a body, and a conclusion). Interruptive comments made from the floor were excluded, as were ceremonial remarks. Republicans and Democrats were represented in equal proportions.

The campaign speeches were drawn from formal and informal, mediated and unmediated, and local and national addresses delivered by major-party presidential candidates between 1948 and 2000 (see Hart, 2000). These criteria produced 2,357 speeches, 14% of which (n = 322) contained the requisite phrase, resulting in an additional 953 tokens for study. Naturally, presidential campaign speeches are not an exact match for formal House remarks, but they did have the practical advantage of being both available and searchable, as well as the conceptual advantage of

having been delivered across many years in many contexts, thus providing a broad background against which the crisis speeches could be viewed.

Two additional sets of texts were also gathered. To track how the presidential candidates' remarks were translated by the press, we assembled a collection of print news stories (n = 7,310) from which we extracted 1,484 candidate quotations containing the phrase *the American people*. The news coverage came from such sources as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Los Angeles Times*, as well as AP and UPI wire stories. For 9/11, 138 House quotations containing the desired phrase were extracted from these same print sources as well as from a number of regional newspapers (to capture the kind of coverage House members try to garner).[1] No analogous press coverage was generated for the impeachment period because the House debate's 2-day news window in December 1998 was so limited.

All uses of the phrase *the American people* were identified by a Keyword-in-Context program that also reported the 20 words preceding and following the targeted phrase, thereby providing needed contextual information for coding. (Our content unit therefore consisted of 41 words.) Several other collective tokens could have become the focus of this study, but we rejected them for either practical or theoretical reasons: *we/us* (too informal), *voters* (too restrictive), *citizens* (too arcane), *the electorate* (too abstract), and *people* (too indefinite).

The content analytic categories used were identical to those used in previous studies and were inspired by previous work on political time (Pocock, 1971; Skowronek, 1993), coalition formation (Dahl, 1971), moral development (Kohlberg, 1981), social contractarianism (Rousseau, 1997), and civic republicanism (Dagger, 1997; Oldfield, 1990). Admittedly, we took conceptual liberties when extrapolating from these studies, but the result was a practical, simple, and reliable coding system.[2]

1. *The People's Time*: Is the token's focus contemporary, historical, or projected? Does the speaker make all-inclusive and trans-temporal statements?

2. *The People's Situation*: Generally speaking, what forces now confront the American people? Is the overall situation facing the nation dire, hopeful, or neutral (non-directive)?

[1] These sources included New York's *Newsday*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Boston Herald*, the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, the *Houston Chronicle*, *USA Today*, the *St. Louis Dispatch*, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the *Omaha World-Herald*, the *Tampa Tribune*, the *St. Petersburg Times*, the *Hartford Courant*, the (Durham) *Herald-Sun*, and the (Minneapolis) *Star Tribune.*

[2] The categories were uncomplicated, they had proven stable in previous research, and the 41-word coding unit left little room for interpretation. For these reasons, we typically used individual coders (after an appropriate training period) and periodically ran post hoc reliability checks to ensure fidelity to the coding system. These post hoc checks for the People's Time through People's Opponents categories ranged from .82 to .97. For further details about the content analytic system, including textual examples of the codings, see Hart and Johnson (1999).

3. *The People's Role*: What stated or implied task is projected onto the American people? Are they active in the affairs of the nation, interested onlookers, or simply living their day-to-day lives?

   (a) Agent of the state (a voter, a taxpayer, a local volunteer, a citizen)
   (b) Private individual (a worker, a family member, a consumer)
   (c) Observer (an interested audience member)

4. *The People's Actions*: Judging by the verbs immediately adjacent to the targeted phrase, what are the American people doing? Are they reflective, acting in behalf of their friends and neighbors, unleashing their creative and productive energies, etc.?

   (a) Communal (e.g., care, get along, unite, sacrifice, help, give)
   (b) Productive (e.g., achieve, move, turn, develop, improve)
   (c) Competitive (e.g., prevail, fight, rally, engage, cast out)
   (d) Cognitive (e.g., hear, think, appreciate, expect, decide)
   (e) Axiological (e.g., trust, pray, believe, worship)

5. *The People's Qualities*: On the basis of the adjectives and adverbs used to describe the American people, what are their strengths and weaknesses? Are the people distinguished by how they think or act, or by what is in their hearts?

   (a) Moral (e.g., loyal, good, dishonorable, unpatriotic)
   (b) Intellectual (e.g., wise, moderate, disillusioned, naïve)
   (c) Psychological (e.g., strong, passionate, intimidated, dispirited)

6. *The People's Opponents*: What persons, groups, or agencies advertently or inadvertently thwart the will of the people? Are these forces endemic to government itself, or are they external activists vying for a share of the political spoils?

   (a) None designated
   (b) Professional activists (foreign governments, political parties, pressure groups, campaign specialists)
   (c) Governmental officials (federal government, specific politicians, politicians in general)

In addition to the six primary variables, a seventh (dummy) variable was also used. *Scope* was constructed by recording one integer whenever any of the six main variables received a nonzero code, thereby creating a measure of descriptive richness. The resulting metric ranged from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 6, with a mean of 4.15 and a standard deviation of 1.08. To better calibrate how reactions to 9/11 may have changed over time, we created a composite variable (*Cycle*) that divided responses to the terrorism into three equal, but arbitrary, time periods: (1) *Reaction*: 11 September to 2 October; (2) *Recovery*: 3 to 23 October; (3) *Resolve*: 24 October to 13 November.

Table 2 shows how collective tokens were used across the three political scenes. It presents an especially important fact: During both international and domestic crises, citizens are framed as statutorily responsible for the nation. This contrasts rather sharply to campaigns, where politicians appeal to voters' quotidian needs (as private persons) or cast them as observers. So, for example, when campaigning in 2000, George W. Bush declared he would "return about one-fourth of the surplus to the American people who earned it, paid it and deserve part of it back" (campaign speech, Green Bay, Wisconsin, 28 July 2000), but that appeal would have seemed inappropriate during a time of turmoil. Scruton (1999) wrote that such moments require the "metropolitan power" needed to turn individual citizens into a functioning collective (p. 290).

A unique aspect of the 9/11 speeches was their emphasis on the people's Communal responsibilities (27.4% for 9/11 vs. 7.2% for campaigns and 2.2% for impeachment) and a diminution of the Cognitive (62.7% during impeachment, 51.5% during campaigns, but only 37.2% for 9/11). Clearly, an attack on cultural essentials—a capitalist monument in New York City, an icon of defense in Washington, D.C.—required that people look inside for strength, which they did in candle-lighting ceremonies throughout the nation. These patriotic displays made

Table 2. Politicians' Use of Collective Tokens Across Scene

Rhetorical features		Political scene		
		Campaign	9/11	Impeachment
People's Time	Past	17.6%	7.9%	14.4%
	Present	60.4%	71.6%	65.9%
	Future	16.8%	3.6%	2.6%
	Across time	5.2%	16.9%	17.0%
People's Situation	Advantageous	36.2%	17.9%	2.4%
	Adverse	32.5%	37.7%	59.5%
	Neutral	31.3%	44.3%	38.2%
People's Role	State agent	64.9%	90.7%	97.1%
	Private person	13.2%	2.5%	1.3%
	Observer	21.9%	6.8%	1.6%
People's Actions	Communal	7.2%	27.4%	2.2%
	Productive	22.5%	11.0%	2.7%
	Competitive	8.6%	15.2%	25.3%
	Cognitive	51.5%	37.2%	62.7%
	Axiological	10.2%	9.1%	7.1%
People's Qualities	Moral	33.1%	38.9%	38.3%
	Intellectual	33.7%	36.3%	55.1%
	Psychological	33.1%	24.8%	6.6%
People's Opponents	None designated	45.0%	47.5%	20.2%
	Professional activists	41.1%	43.6%	27.7%
	Government officials	13.9%	8.9%	52.1%

some progressives worry that militarism or ethnocentrism would erupt, but such worries did not stop the rhetoric in Washington after 9/11:

> One of the beautiful things about this period in American history is we have gone beyond our State flags, beyond our corporate banners, beyond where we work, where we were elected, where we are from, and the tragedy of September 11 for this moment in American history has forced all of us to seek security in that which makes us one, the ideals that we believe in fundamentally as Americans. We have turned to our national flag. We have turned to our national government, and even our President is experiencing unparalleled approval ratings because the American people are rallying behind the concept that we can defend ourselves as a Nation from these attacks. (Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., D-Ill., 11 October 2001)

As we see in Table 2, House members were four times as likely to focus on the emotional strengths of the citizenry (see People's Qualities) after 9/11 as during impeachment; they were less pessimistic as well, describing the People's Situation as both more advantaged (17.9% vs. 2.4%) and less adverse (37.7% vs. 59.5%) than during impeachment. These data rehearse the classic therapeutic encounter, where the client articulates his or her (1) felt anxieties and (2) inner strengths so that (3) self-authorized healing can result: "Evil stole the lives and safety of our citizens [but] it can never steal our resolve, our ideals, and our love of freedom" (Rep. Jack Kingston, R-Ga., 11 September 2001). In the House, there was frank acknowledgment that "the goal of the terrorist [is] to instill fear in the American people" (Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., 14 September 2001) and that routing out the terrorists was "going to take sacrifices and, unfortunately, it is going to cost lives" (Rep. Tom DeLay, R-Texas, 5 October 2001). But there was also talk of the "tough fiber of the New Yorkers" (Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., 14 September 2001) and hymns to the resilience and solidarity of the American people. And there were hymns of a more traditional sort: "Be encouraged; do not be terrified. Be strong and courageous, for now, as always, throughout our history, the Lord, your God, will be with you wherever you go" (Rep. Mike Pence, R-Ind., 11 September 2001).

As Arnold (1977) noted, there has always been a waltz between the pragmatic and the transcendent in American life, between the high-minded and the hard-headed. Ultimately, wrote Arnold, the United States is distinguished by its ability to blend these elements or, at least, to require that they take turns. Too much of the technocratic, wrote Dworkin (1977), creates a society incapable of finding a center that holds; too much philosophizing, wrote Hofstader (1989), spawns a glut of mass movements that substitute passion for reason. Because choosing between these options has been hard for Americans, they have typically chosen both, placing their faith in the Lord even while agreeing with Calvin Coolidge that "the chief business of the American people is business."

Figures 1 and 2 show the rather remarkable shifts along these lines between 11 September and 11 November 2001. In Figure 1, the early Communal and Axiological emphases drop off as the House gets back to the business of national defense. The technocratic kicks in and the psychological recedes or, better, the psychological is asked to serve instrumental functions. Figure 2 shows that these behavioral interpellations are attended by characterological ones as well. The shifts happened rather quickly (our time frame here is only 12 weeks), but they unmistakably changed the tenor of the discussions, as when Rep. Gene Green (D-Texas) deconstructed the emotionality of the early period:

> The so-called stimulus package that we have on the floor today is being presented wrapped in red, white and blue, but it is a charade. It is a Trojan horse for every special interest package that has come around for the last 10 years. The American people are not and will not be fooled. This so-called stimulus package is a wish list of every special interest tax rebate and tax cut that will not stimulate our economy and does nothing to help us from the September 11 tragedy. The wrapping of special interest legislation in our patriotic feelings is wrong, and it is not in the spirit of our bipartisan war effort. (24 October 2001)

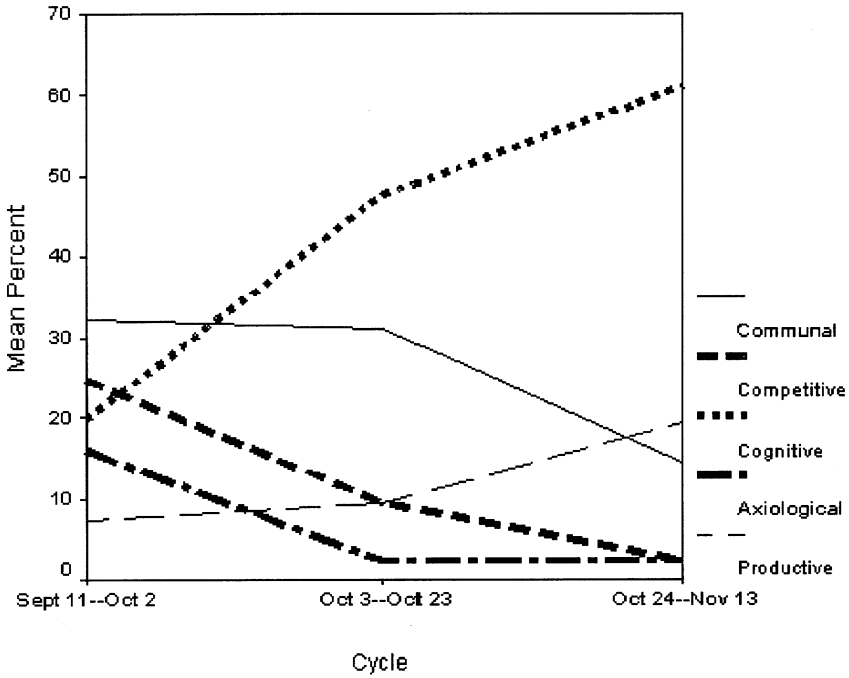

Figure 1. Descriptions of people's actions across cycle.

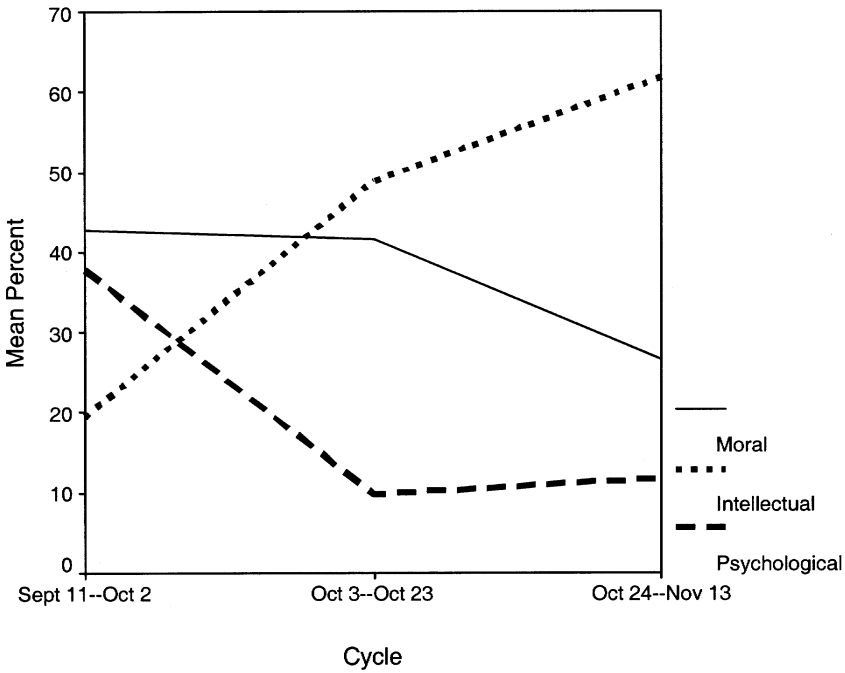

Figure 2. Descriptions of people's qualities across cycle.

Green's remarks also illustrate the partisan differences found in the 9/11 texts. Although no grand statistical argument can be made on the basis of Table 3, the overall trend seems clear: The Democrats were more businesslike, the Republicans preachier (see Axiological/Moral vs. Intellectual data). Curiously, this is the *inverse* of the pattern found in the impeachment debates, where the Republicans adopted a more factual, legalistic style. Why the difference? Here is one possibility: The pragmatic and transcendent are available to all politicians regardless of party, with deployment being best predicted by the peculiar circumstances faced. After 9/11, that is, the Republicans may have felt a need to tonally align themselves with a chief executive from their own party. The Democrats clearly took the opposite tack, perhaps to ensure that the emotions of the moment did not overwhelm policy discussions. A more general possibility is that an attack mode encourages a legalistic style, whereas defense encourages a moralistic style. In any case, these two styles are probably *not* the properties of a single political party.

Table 4 shows that not all political remarks become sound bites. Relative to 9/11, at least, the media offered presentistic quotations featuring a logical and competitive electorate, whereas House members preferred to discuss historic truths and community trust (see People's Actions). News norms help to explain these differences: The press sees itself as the nation's watchdog, not its pastor. Thus, 74.1% of the press quotations were judged neutral, versus 44.3% for House

Table 3. Selected Party Comparisons: 9/11 Speeches

	People's Actions		People's Qualities		People's Time	
Party	Communal	Axiological	Intellectual	Moral + psychological	Present	Past + across time
Democrats	31.2%	5.4%	45.6%	54.4%	78.1%	19.3%
Republicans	22.5%	14.1%	23.9%	76.2%	63.4%	31.7%

Table 4. House Speeches Versus Press Quotations: 9/11

	People's Actions				People's Time	
Source	Communal	Axiological	Cognitive	Competitive	Present	Past + across time
House	27.4%	9.1%	37.2%	15.2%	71.6%	24.8%
Press	6.0%	3.0%	59.7%	23.9%	92.2%	5.2%

members (who constantly contrasted the nation's perils to the people's strengths). So, for example, while Rep. Bill Young (R-Fla.) could speak floridly right after the terrorist attack ("the world will know that our people and we as their representatives in Congress are more united behind our President as he leads this great Nation under God than most Americans alive today have ever witnessed," 14 September 2001), the media selected his most pedestrian remarks for reportage: "If we don't act swiftly, we are going to let down the American people. . . . They want action and they want it now" (*Boston Globe*, 14 September 2001, p. A22). In the media's hands, that is, the Rational Actor is alive and well.

Raised on a diet of political supremacy and technocratic invincibility, the American people were shaken to the core by 9/11. Shortly thereafter, a number of bromides caught the national ear: "America has lost its innocence forever," "this is the first war of the twenty-first century," "the U.S. just joined the world of nations." At some point, history may prove these claims true. But 9/11 has already shown something more heartening: the functionality of a longstanding communal discourse. Admittedly, that discourse is shot through with contradictions and impossible overstatements. That contradictions and overstatements can prove sustaining to a people is a curious fact—an American fact.

The Impeachment Debate

Perhaps the most famous presidential quotation in recent memory is this: "But I want to say one thing to *the American people*. I want you to listen to me. I'm going to say this again: I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie, not a single time—never. These allegations are false. And I need to go back to work for *the American people*" (remarks at the After-School Program Event, Washington, D.C., 26 January 1998). Heretofore, most commentators have focused on the essence of President Bill Clinton's

statement and ignored its form. But note that he bracketed his remarks with collective tokens. In his first usage Clinton lied (by most people's standards), but his second usage saved him. That is, the American people (the real ones, not the rhetorical ones) genuinely liked this president's work. Indeed, two remarkable things happened during the Lewinsky scandal: Over time, people became increasingly convinced of the president's guilt, but they also grew increasingly disinclined to remove him from office (Sonner & Wilcox, 1999).

Although Posner (1999) was probably right that the American people never had monolithic feelings about the Lewinsky affair, that did not prevent monolithic rhetorics from developing. As we saw in Table 1, House members spent much of their time during the scandal intuiting public opinion, but Figure 3 comes closer to the actual texture of their remarks. Not only did the House members use a great many tokens, but they also used them athletically, providing layered and rich descriptions of the American people. The impeachment statements were broader in Scope than the 9/11 remarks, with the campaign rhetoric being positively anemic in contrast [$F(2, 1540) = 370.26$, $p < .001$]. In other words, at the very moment when House members were more divided than ever in recent memory, they described an electorate that was unified and had a sense of direction. Republicans

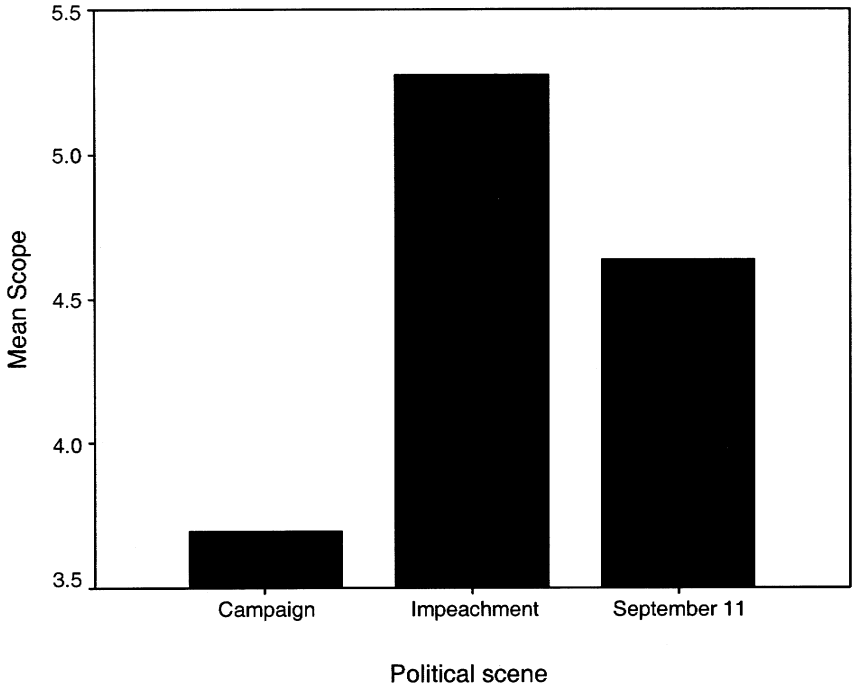

Figure 3. Descriptive breadth of speeches by scene.

and Democrats, of course, disagreed about the source of that unity and the nature of that direction.

Indeed, one of the most distinctive aspects of the impeachment rhetoric was its hortatoriness. As we see in Table 2, both the impeachment debates and the 9/11 texts focused on trans-historical rights and responsibilities (see People's Time). The political campaigners, in contrast, expended much more effort imagining a brighter future. Perhaps because crisis so often obscures the future, people are naturally thrown back on their essential beliefs and commitments. It therefore must have been difficult for voters to think about sexual transgressions in the Oval Office when listening to the House's elevated rhetoric, with Republicans declaring, "We are saying that the American people who have, as the gentleman from Illinois so eloquently put it this morning, believed, fought and sacrificed this past 227 years for the rule of law" (Rep. Merrill Cook, R-Utah, 18 December 1998), and with Democrats being equally fundamentalistic: "In their fervor to punish this President they [the Republicans] will violate a sacred covenant with the American People: this government is still the people's government" (Rep. Ron Kind, D-Wis., 18 December 1998).

Also contributing to the rich tenor of the debate was its focus on the people's enemies. Table 2 reports that almost 80% of the impeachment tokens were juxtaposed to some predatory force (see People's Opponents). Strangely, the 9/11 rhetoric was less antagonistic, perhaps because evil did not have to be *imagined* on that occasion. But because the impeachment process was political to the core—which is to say, because it dealt with values rather than imploded buildings—the debaters gave themselves free rein. For Republicans, Bill Clinton was the obvious bête noir: "Instead of following the law, respecting the American people's values and honoring his office, [Clinton] chose to lie, cover up and evade the truth. His actions have made a mockery of the people who fought for this country, the Constitution and the laws we live under" (Rep. Sam Johnson, R-Texas, 18 December 1998). The Democrats, not surprisingly, made the Republican caucus the hobgoblin of the people: "Today they seek to substitute, in my opinion, their judgment for the will of the American people and remove their nemesis from the position to which the American people, over their objection, elected him" (Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-Md., 18 December 1998).

It is ironic that the People's Situation was deemed graver during impeachment than during 9/11 (see Table 2).[3] Again, this finding dramatizes the Republicans' challenge: They somehow had to get people's eyes off their 401(k)s and onto the "rights and responsibilities of citizenship." As Jacobson (1999) observed, it was hard to accomplish such tasks when the "misery index" was at an all-time low. But

[3] In part, this finding may result from the fact that *both* Republicans and the Democrats had reason to be glum, the former because of Clinton's indiscretions and the latter because the Presidency was, in their language, being undermined "for partisan purposes." In any event, the absolute magnitude of negativity was greater during impeachment than during 9/11, perhaps an indication that genuine tragedies and politically manufactured tragedies have different emotional registers.

because the House members were a contentious lot, with fewer than 10% of them being moderates (Binder & Mann, 1998), they rose to the challenge. However, the main reason for the impeachment's negativity may have been the personal animus felt toward Bill Clinton. As Quirk (2000) noted, Clinton's dazzling strengths and weaknesses virtually assured that the debates would be contentious.

But this is not to say they were uncontrolled. There were comparatively few dramatic indulgences, with speakers usually asking that their cases be judged on their merits. To accomplish that, they cast the electorate as eminently logical (see People's Qualities in Table 2): "The American People have heard the allegations against the President, and they overwhelmingly oppose impeaching him" (Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., 18 December 1998). The data on People's Actions in Table 2 also describe a people who ostensibly wanted unambiguous answers to the questions at hand.

Republicans emphasized the people's Cognitive skills (79.7% vs. 57.9% for the Democrats) because they did not want the proceedings to seem a witch hunt. The Democrats were more combative, invoking the Competitive aspects of the American people twice as often as the Republicans. Launching into the fray on one occasion, Rep. Anna Eshoo (D-Calif.) declared "a day of infamy in the House of Representatives," when the majority party, "through searing, brutal partisanship, disallowed the right of each Member, and this Member, to express their own conscience" (18 December 1998). "It is a day," continued Eshoo, "when the overwhelming voices of the American people are turned away." This same approach saw the Democrats framing the People's Opponents not as governmental actors (the Republicans' favorite strategy—71% vs. 39.3% for the Democrats), but as political operatives (i.e., political parties and the lobbies: 44.6% for the Democrats vs. 8.6% for the Republicans).

Although the Republicans were businesslike during the House proceedings, things changed in the Senate trial. There, House managers used almost twice as many collective tokens (a mean of 3.7 vs. a mean of 2.0 during the House debates), perhaps a signal that they and not the senators hailed from "the people's House." This difference in magnitude is attended by textural differences. When all House speakers are compared to those who took the case to the Senate (Table 5), the latter were considerably more homiletic—less fact-based and more transcendent in tone (see People's Actions and People's Qualities). A number of factors may explain why this was so: (1) Increased media coverage could have prompted a dramatic approach; (2) the impeachment facts were well known by then, leaving only interpretations to be made and implications drawn; or (3) as Kazee (2000) suggested, the remoteness of winning in the Senate may have caused the managers to throw caution to the winds. Whatever the reason, their speeches in the Senate trial were often pure Americana:

> People of all nationalities, faiths, creeds, and values have come to our shores, shed their allegiances to their old countries and achieved their

Table 5. Selected Chamber Comparisons During Impeachment: Republicans Only

	People's Actions		People's Qualities		People's Time	
Chamber	Cognitive	Axiological	Intellectual	Moral	Present	Past + across time
House	79.7%	3.1%	54.7%	38.7%	64.1%	32.0%
Senate	43.5%	52.2%	38.1%	61.9%	37.9%	58.6%

> dreams to become Americans. . . . They fled countries where the rulers ruled at the expense of the people, to America, where the leaders are expected to govern for the benefit of the people. And, throughout the years, America's leaders have tried to earn the trust of the American people, not by their words, but by their actions. (Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., 14 January 1999)

Given the evidence amassed against Bill Clinton, it is something of a small miracle that he escaped with his presidency intact. A strong economy, a satisfied electorate, and political malaise may explain his good fortune. But the rhetoric of *the American people* adds to that explanation. During impeachment, it seemed, everyone knew what the people wanted (see Zaller, 2001). The Democrats sensed that voters wanted to live in the present, that they resented an overweening Republican party, and that they were pragmatic to the core. The Republicans knew that voters were proud of their history, wanted decency in the White House, and felt that facts should guide decision-making. The American people themselves probably believed all these things, and that is the problem: On most public matters, most of the time, Americans differ with one another. But even as they do, the promise of unanimity serves as a siren call for them.

Conclusions

Almost all nations go to great lengths to enshrine their historic documents, the grandest articulations of their people's most basic beliefs and values. Collective tokens, on the other hand, are rarely preserved. Ordinary folks use them unthinkingly ("*we've* got to do something about this pollution problem") and elites use them strategically ("*voters* simply demand the adoption of House Bill 211"). When doing so, both are caught up in a discourse they do not fully understand but with which they feel strangely comfortable.

And these discourses can be complicated. We have seen here that all political crises invite a kind of national self-examination, but that these examinations differ depending on the exigency at hand. The impeachment proceedings, for example, were a study in political delicacy, with Republicans envisioning a rational electorate that could come to only one conclusion, and with Democrats warning that same electorate not to make grand decisions for petty reasons. But 9/11 was another matter entirely. After the attacks, the People were again summoned forth, but this

time they were asked to marshal their inner resources by reaching out to one another. Eventually, members of Congress moved past the emotional to the practical, reminding the American people that their ultimate strength lay in their pragmatism. When doing all of these things, the nation's leaders used a very old discourse for very new reasons.

Many, of course, find political rhetoric to be banal and hence insignificant. But our argument here is that its significance lies in its banality, in its sameness, even in its meretriciousness. People only use rhetoric, after all, because they have no other choice. If Americans really were good—all the time, to everyone—they would not need to label themselves thusly. If they knew what was ultimately right, they could announce those truths once and be done with it. But the American people are too limited and too diverse to know such things for sure. So they and their leaders make pious declarations, hoping, auto-reflexively, that the sound of their own voices will tell them what to do.

But what happens when a people cannot find a rhetoric that fits? What happens to a country like Afghanistan that knows itself (recently at least) largely by negation? Afghanistan knows it is not Western or Christian or Arab or Russian, and that can be clarifying. But it also knows it is not Pushtoon or Uzbek or Tajik alone, and that can be confusing. A nation that cannot find a rhetoric, alas, often cannot find a nation.

We need to know when political language signals what its users have actually experienced and when it reflects their imagined worlds. Both kinds of data are relevant to the political psychologist, and both play a role in practical politics. Understanding what an electorate actually knows is a prerequisite for any sort of rational planning. But knowing what they want and desire, what frightens and heartens them, is needed for enlightened governance. Great leaders articulate the real and the imagined with equal conviction.

As we have seen here, language deployed during crises can be especially telling. Both the 9/11 and impeachment discourses differed from normal electioneering, thereby shedding light on fundamental (if unsettled) aspects of American political experience. And yet the two cases differed from one another as well. That should not be surprising because, on the American plan, collective identity is never whole. In the impeachment case, for example, we found Republicans using a rhetoric that flew in the face of measurable public opinion, and in the aftermath of 9/11 we heard the American people praised for being good and generous just hours after 19 hijackers had declared them neither.

There is much to learn about such matters. How long, for example, can a rhetoric survive when it is undermined by empirical circumstances? Is there an inevitable point of intersection between idealized and actual public opinion, or can both fill the same political space forever? How quickly must a rhetoric of identity adapt to demographic and other changes or to newly formed political coalitions? Do the collective tokens used by ordinary citizens dovetail with those of their leaders, or is there an inevitable disconnect between lay and elite discourse? And

we need to ask such questions cross-nationally. Do some nations use collective tokens more self-consciously and uniformly than others? Can such symbols be treated as an unobtrusive measure of a nation's relative political maturity and/or internal harmony? What peculiar blend of ethnic or religious or cultural traditions best predicts how a nation will speak of itself? And are a society's political fractures inevitably found in its public discourse?

This essay is not the last word on any of these matters, and it is entirely possible that the American case is unique. For many reasons, then, we must develop new and better ways of understanding political language, of learning how a people can reveal all and conceal all simultaneously. Such revelations are inevitably important. Such concealments are inevitably intriguing. We need to understand both.

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