Words in a time of war

A sobering reality check on the Iraq war for an administration that once said it could create reality.

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This is an edited version of a recent commencement address at UC Berkeley.

BEING INVITED to deliver a commencement address to the Department of Rhetoric is akin to being asked out for a romantic evening by a porn star. Whatever prospect you might have of pleasure is invariably dampened by performance anxiety — the suspicion that your efforts, however enthusiastic, will inevitably be judged according to stern professional standards. A daunting prospect.

Yet I agreed to do so today because 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 today we are living under a presidential administration that not only is radical — unprecedentedly so — in its attitudes toward rhetoric and reality, toward words and things, but is also willing, to our great benefit, to state this attitude clearly.

Here is my favorite quotation about the Bush administration, a description of a conversation with the proverbial "unnamed administration official" by the fine journalist Ron Suskind in October 2004:

"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 and many other intellectual titans of these last decades — though even they 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.

It must admit to you that I love that quotation. The unnamed official, widely believed to be Karl Rove, sketches out with breathtaking frankness a radical view in which power frankly determines reality, and in which rhetoric — the science of flounces and folderols — follows meekly and subserviently in its train. Those in the "reality-based community" 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?

But this is all old hat to you, graduates of the Rhetoric Department of 2007, 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.

In January 2001, the rhetoric-major president came to power after a savage and unprecedented electoral battle that was 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. 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.

Then came 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 in Iraq, it is easy to forget the blunt, scathing shock of it. The real weapon that day was not box cutters, or even airliners, but the television set, which reproduced and conveyed that astonishing picture, creating both a recruiting poster for jihad and an image of humiliation to "dirty the face of imperial power."

Our nation's leaders — men and women worshipful of the idea of power and its ability to remake reality itself — needed to restore the nation's prestige, to wipe clean our 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 vanished Arab capital.

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 multimillion-dollar anachronisms with so-called IEDs, improvised explosive devices, worth a few hundred bucks apiece. This is called asymmetrical warfare — the strategy of provocation — and one should note here with some astonishment how successful it has been these last half a dozen years.

In the post-Cold War world, after all, as one neoconservative theorist explained shortly after 9/11, the United States was enjoying a rare "unipolar moment." It deployed the greatest military and economic power the world has ever seen. It was the assumption of this so-called preponderance that lay behind the philosophy of power enunciated by Rove 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." In such a world, courts — indeed, law itself — must not be allowed to limit the power of the most powerful state. The most powerful state, after all, makes reality.

Now, here's an astonishing fact: Fewer than half a dozen years into this "unipolar 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, and all designed to use the power of the most powerful against it. 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.

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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.

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.

Critical to this was the administration's peculiar ideas about the relationship of power 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, untrammeled 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.
If the last half a dozen years have done anything, they have put such grand ideas to a stern empirical test. The experiment unfolds daily in the bloody streets of Baghdad. How can I convey to you the reality of that place at this time? Perhaps by this account from a young Iraqi woman of her trip to recover the body of her nephew, who had been killed in a downtown explosion:

"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 cellphone 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…. But now it had become a slaughterhouse, only instead of cattle, all around were human bodies…."

"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."

These words come from those who find themselves as far as they can possibly be from the idea that, when they act, they "create their own reality." The voice comes not from "history's actors" but its objects — and we must ponder who exactly its subjects are.

Graduates, you have chosen a path that will let you look beyond the rhetoric that you have studied and into the heart of reality. 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, and that bold choice may 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.

The full text of the speech can be found at [tomdispatch.com](http://tomdispatch.com).