Theatrical Components of the Presidency of George W. Bush

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"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players"
–From William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

The events we view in a daily life often provoke a variety of feelings. These feelings can range from anger, to sorrow, to intrigue, to astonishment, and everywhere in between. These events, however, have one aspect in common in that each is conducted in a *setting*. Settings vary greatly, and each can influence ones interpretation of or relation to the events that occur therein. In relation to the American political system, the setting in which an event takes place can have an enormous effect on how the public perceives that event. A politician will never choose a dimly lit room for a national address because those watching will perceive his message as a reflection of what they see, not what the substance of the message is. Thus, important political speeches are almost always performed under flattering lighting and with carefully chosen background props that support an image of what a politician *should* (in the minds of Americans) look like.

Political scientist Murray Edelman provides theoretical insight about the role setting plays in the messages of politicians. Edelman outlines the effect of political theatre on the psyche of those who witness it by noting that such performances "condense a wide range of individual fears, hopes, and cognitions into a focus on a narrow set of socially reinforced perceptions [that] help resolve…anxiety" (Edelman, 74). Edelman is suggesting that the American public has become accustomed to such political performances and would react negatively if a politician varied from the status quo. This reaction, however, does not necessarily have a positive effect on democracy. In essence, the politician who offers the best performance becomes the politician who is elected or who has their agenda pushed forward. Edelman offers a very pessimistic view of politics by noting that "although we see largely what we think we know exists, what we 'know' is often wrong, and especially so in politics" (Edelman, 17). Edelman's insight is crucial to the analysis of political speeches as theatre because it implies that political speeches may often offer us "knowledge" that simply is not credible.

During perhaps one of the greatest periods in political theatre, President

Written for Dr. Erik Trump's PS 320 Art and Politics Course
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George W. Bush showcased his talents as a performer. The incredible spectrum of both high and low points during his Presidency led to many unforgettable headlines, as well as to several powerful speeches that shaped the way the American public perceived, not only him, but his actions in directing the nation. Although Presidential speeches in the age of political correctness have become nothing short of uniform, there were several subtle elements in the settings of Bush's speeches that aimed to appeal to citizens on a subconscious level and support the messages President Bush was trying to convey. Why do political figures such as George W. Bush create a "setting" for their speeches as if they were actors in a play? The political settings selected by President Bush -- the Oval Office, Ground Zero, as well as an aircraft carrier, to name a few -- supported specific purposes. Usually, this purpose was to show the power and strength of the American leader, but Edelman notes that "public spaces symbolize widely held beliefs that are clear because they reflect psychological needs" (Edelman, 75). Using Edelman's theory, a space like the Oval Office, to some degree, calms the passions of the masses because it is a setting of strength and security. If the country sees their President in his White House office, one can assume that he feels safe being there, leading the public to believe that the country is safe for the time being.

Drawing upon the idea that the Oval Office is a sign of strength and security, President Bush calmly and effectively addressed the nation after the attacks on September 11, 2001 using his Office as the setting to shape his message. The speech, as shown on CNN, opens with President Bush at his desk, hands folded. This simple hand position, to borrow an idea from Aristotle, calms the passions of the individuals, leading the way for reason. It demonstrates that the President is calm, collected, and ready to address his people in a moment of crisis, which is a highly scrutinized characteristic that a President must demonstrate during the campaign process. Also apparent in the picture are two constants in the Oval Office, the Presidential flag to the President's left, and the American flag to the President's right. These flags are a gentle reminder that the President is representing the American people, and also serve to reinforce the importance of the office of Presidency by having its own flag on display. It is important to also note that there is only one recognizable picture of his family in this photo, which is located over his left shoulder. The reason for this is that Bush is trying to portray the leader of the United States and wants to be the focal point of the image. Although President Bush appeared to be calm, cool, and collected while addressing the nation, his true feelings were being concealed because of his need to project a positive image on the American people. Author Bob Woodward reveals Bush's true feelings about the attacks, noting that President Bush lamented to Vice President Dick Cheney "we're going to find out who did this, and we're going to kick their asses" (Woodward, 18). This emotional display is a far removed from the calm image of the President addressing the nation from the Oval Office.