

**ASSESSING THE SINCERITY OF POLITICIANS:
THE CASE OF PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH**

P. Suedfeld, P. E. Tetlock, and R. Jhangiani

University of British Columbia, University of California, Berkeley.
University of British Columbia

RESUMEN

La autopresentación y el control de la impresión son cruciales para los individuos que ocupan cargos deseables que dependen completamente de la aprobación de los demás. Los políticos han aprendido que expresar incertidumbre o indecisión, admitir haber cometido un error, hablar abiertamente sobre lo que les gusta y lo que detestan, revelar ciertos hechos o planes, puede llevarles al desastre a ellos y a veces a sus electores. Este artículo es un análisis breve de las actitudes del presidente de Bush hacia sus aliados, antagonistas y enemigos en la guerra contra el terrorismo. En su análisis utilizamos medidas discretas para evaluar la sinceridad de sus declaraciones públicas sobre ellos.

ABSTRACT

Self-presentation, impression management, is crucial for individuals who hold desirable positions that depend entirely on the approval of others. Politicians have learned to their cost that to voice uncertainty or indecision, to admit having made an error, to speak openly about their likes and dislikes, to reveal certain facts or plans, can lead to disaster for themselves and sometimes for their constituents. The current paper is a brief analysis of Pres. Bush's orientation toward his allies, opponents, and enemies in the war against terrorism. This analysis uses unobtrusive measures to assess the sincerity of his public statements about them.

Key words: politicians' speeches, self-presentation, impression management, Bush's orientation

The degree to which politicians' speeches and writings reflect their true opinions, beliefs, intentions, motives, and other psychological characteristics, has for a long time and in many places been a matter of some doubt and controversy. Many ordinary citizens subscribe to the adage that "You can tell when a politician is lying: his mouth is moving." Journalists frequently assert that their job is to try to keep politicians honest, and the public generally accepts that the politician would not be honest unless

someone took on such a monitoring role (of course, the question arises as to who is keeping the journalist honest).

Self-presentation, impression management, is obviously crucial for individuals who hold desirable positions that depend entirely on the approval of others. Politicians have learned to their cost that to voice uncertainty or indecision, to admit having made an error, to speak openly about their likes and dislikes, to reveal certain facts or plans, can lead to disaster for themselves and sometimes for their constituents. The latter are particularly at risk when the politician holds a globally significant office, where discretion may be the better part of valor – recall Ronald Reagan’s “Evil Empire” comment about the Soviet Union, or more recently, George W. Bush’s catchphrase, “the Axis of Evil,” both of which aroused worldwide criticism not only of the president but of the United States. In fact, the ability to dissemble while not seeming to do so may be a hallmark of political success; in one study of Canadian Prime Ministers, those rated by experts to be the three least honest with the public were also among the four rated as the most outstanding (Ballard & Suedfeld, 1988). As the saying goes, “Sincerity is the most important thing; once you have learned to fake that, you’ve got it made.” Machiavelli might have agreed.

The current paper, a condensation and reformulation of a chapter on Pres. Bush’s orientation to his allies, opponents, and enemies in the war against terrorism (Suedfeld, Tetlock, Jhangiani, 2007), uses unobtrusive measures to assess the sincerity of his public statements about them. When he spoke about the Axis of Evil, was he revealing his actual feelings and thoughts about those nations? What about when he spoke about firm allies, such as Great Britain, or those who hesitated, abstained, criticized, or vacillated?

The superficial content of speech is easily manipulated: leaders extol peace while preparing to start a war, promise tax relief while planning tax increases, express concern and sympathy on issues they care nothing about, oppose a policy in public while pursuing it secretly (or vice versa). In such situations, it would be useful to have a truth detector. Fortunately, psychologists may have one at hand. It is called thematic content analysis (TCA; Smith, 1992), and consists of a fairly large –and expandable– number of coding systems for analyzing nonobvious aspects of verbal behavior. TCA coding systems do not rely on analyzing manifest content; they look at underlying characteristics that are less easy to manipulate, at least until the politician becomes familiar with the system.

Method

In examining subtle cues in Pres. Bush's remarks about other nations, we sampled one TCA coding system from each of three major psychological realms: cognition, emotion, and motivation.

Thematic Content Analysis

It should be noted that there are a large number of coding schemes within the TCA family, with more being developed at any given time. We selected one from each of three major psychological areas, cognition, interpersonal affect, and motivation. The three coding systems used in the study were the following:

a) *Integrative complexity*, a measure of cognitive information processing that assesses perceptions of legitimate disagreements and alternative interpretations, as well as the degree to which these are reconciled. Two components are scored: differentiation, the recognition of several dimensions within or legitimate points of view about, the subject of the discourse; and integration, the recognition of relationships or interactions among the differentiated dimensions or points of view. The level of complexity is scored on a 1 (no differentiation) to 7 (differentiation and high-level integration) scale. Higher scores indicate higher complexity (Baker-Brown, Ballard, Bluck, de Vries, Suedfeld, & Tetlock, 1992).

Table 1. Scoring System for Integrative Complexity

Scoring is on a 1 to 7 scale, as follows.

Score	Description
1	Undifferentiated: One dimension or perspective; inclusion-exclusion
2	Some indication of differentiation, but not clear enough for 3
3	Differentiated: Several dimensions or perspectives recognized
4	Some indication of integration, but not clear enough for 5
5	Integrated: Relationships among differentiated units recognized
6	Some indication of overarching cognitive schema, but not clear enough for 7
7	Hierarchically integrated: Hierarchical integration into overarching cognitive schemata

Integrative complexity can be scored from almost any verbal (oral or written) materials, including those recorded on audio and video tapes. Learning how to score can be either through a training seminar or an on-line course. To qualify as an independent scorer, the trainee must attain an acceptable level of reliability ($r=0.85$ or higher) with expert scorers on a test set of materials. In research, a proportion (usually 20-30%) of scored units is independently scored by another qualified person to ensure that adequate reliability has been maintained. The scoring system is shown in Table 1.

b) Immediacy/Nonimmediacy, an unobtrusive measure of positive or negative emotions toward another person or entity. Scoring is based on connotative rather than literal or denotative meaning, which makes the underlying emotion difficult to conceal. Thus, for example, the question, "Do you like John?" may elicit answers such as "I like him very much" or "I think he is an interesting person." The first answer would be scored as indicating high immediacy or positive psychological closeness; the second separates out one aspect of John (interesting), rather than considering him as a whole individual, introduces an element of uncertainty in the evaluation (I think), and changes the topic of the evaluation from an affective variable (being liked) to a cognitive one (being interesting). It therefore implies nonimmediacy, psychological distance, and negative affect. It is usual to report scores on the basis of *nonimmediacy*: therefore, higher scores reflect greater psychological distance, and more negative emotion (Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968). Table 2 summarizes the scoring categories.

Categories	Ex.: Answers to question, "Do you like John?"
<i>Spatio-Temporal Categories</i>	
Spatial distance	<i>I like that guy.</i>
Temporal distance	<i>I used to like him.</i>
<i>Denotative Specificity</i>	
Part category	<i>He has very good manners.</i>
Class category	<i>Everybody likes him.</i>
Implicit category	<i>John is a good guy.</i>
<i>Agent-Action-Object Categories</i>	
Unilaterality category	<i>I try to spend time with him.</i>
Passivity category	<i>I have to like him, he's a teammate.</i>
Modified category	<i>Sometimes I think I like him.</i>

(c) *Motive imagery*, which makes it possible to identify the relative strengths of three important motives: *Power*, the desire to influence or control another entity while avoiding being controlled oneself; *Affiliation*, the motive to establish close and friendly relations with another entity; and *Achievement*, the striving for excellence, superiority, or victory or to reach an important goal. An integrated scoring system exists for the measurement of all three motives together, which adjusts the score for the length of the passages that are being scored (Winter, 1991). Higher scores show more allusions to that particular motive. Table 3 illustrates some of the scoring criteria.

Table 3. Sample Scoring Criteria for Motive Imagery

Power (see Winter, 1992)

- Actions that express power (impact, control, or influence over others)
- Actions that arouse strong positive or negative emotions in others
- Concern for reputation or position

Affiliation (see Heyns, Veroff, & Atkinson, 1992)

- Concern over positive affective relationship with another person
- Desire to be liked, accepted, or forgiven
- Liking another person
- Negative affect over disruption of a personal relationship
- Friendly, nurturant or companionate activities

Achievement (see McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1992).

- Competition with a standard of excellence
- Unique accomplishment
- Long-term involvement

The scoring of both integrative complexity and motive imagery began as methods used in face-to-face experimental research, with dimensions measured respectively by the Paragraph Completion Test (Schroder, Driver & Streufert, 1967) and a version of the TAT cards (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953). Both measures have been adapted to be used with archival materials, with the use of detailed scoring protocols and rules for ascertaining coder reliability (Baker-Brown et al., 1992; Winter, 1991), and both have been widely used in archival studies. In the current study, trained coders reached a reliability level of at least $r=0.85$ for both sets of variables. Nonimmediacy, whose scoring procedures were also originally designed for use in a dyadic situation, has only been used once in archival research (Ramirez & Suedfeld, 1988), and only one qualified scorer was available; thus, intercoder reliability could not be calculated.

The Objects of Discourse

In the chapter mentioned previously, we classified the regimes that were the objects of Bush's speeches into six categories. However, for the purposes of this paper, three major groups suffice. These are: Enemies, countries that were hostile to US policy and also have sociopolitical and economic ideologies profoundly inimical to those of America (e.g., Iran, North Korea, Saddam Hussein's Iraq); Friends, which supported the Bush administration's wars to liberate Iraq from the rule of Saddam Hussein, and also shared basic values with the US (e.g., Great Britain, Australia; Spain and Italy before their last elections); and Ambivalents, which either gave some support to the war but had irreconcilable basic values (e.g., Pakistan) or were generally compatible with American ideas of democracy, human rights, free enterprise, and so on, but stood aloof from or opposed the war (e.g., France and Germany before their last elections). It is this last category that in the original analysis was further subdivided into a number of alternatives.

Both Enemies and Friends can be considered to be in cognitively consonant or balanced relationships with the Bush administration—that is, they were either consistently opposed to or consistently in favor of both its specific policies and its foundational values. Ambivalent nations represented cognitive dissonance, in that their positions on the war and on general values were inconsistent with what the President could have expected (Festinger, 1957). In the rest of the paper, we will refer to these as Consonant Relationship and Dissonant Relationship nations, respectively.

Database

The TCA data reported below are based on the scoring of paragraphs or equivalent units drawn randomly from speeches and press conferences by Pres. Bush between 15 February and 17 March 2003, while the US was seeking UN support for a military intervention in Iraq. Previous research had found that TCA scores do not differ significantly between official statements that are definitely the personal product of a particular policy-maker and those prepared partly or completely by aides or speechwriters; since the use of a specific word or phrase is not important in TCA scoring, the role of speechwriters was judged not to pose a significant problem.

Results

Integrative Complexity

Bush's integrative complexity when referring to Consonant Relationship and Dissonant Relationship nations is shown in Table 4. The difference is significant, both statistically [$t(53) = 1.81, p = .04$ one-tailed] and in real-world terms. Within the Consonant category, there was no significant difference ($M=1.69$ for Enemies, 1.20 for Friends).

Table 4. TCA Results, Descriptive Statistics *

<i>Integrative Complexity</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Consonant Relationship Nations	1.51	0.90
Dissonant Relationship Nations	2.00	0.78
<i>Nonimmediacy</i>		
Consonant Relationship Nations		
Enemies	1.35	0.46
Friends	0.68	0.42
Dissonant Relationship Nations		
Ambivalents	1.14	0.44

* For inferential statistics, see text

Nonimmediacy

The mean nonimmediacy scores by category are shown in Table 4. Analysis of variance showed a highly significant main effect for category, $F(2,55) = 10.82, p < .0001$.

Post hoc multiple comparisons indicated that the score for Friends was significantly lower than for the other two categories (Tukey's test mean $p < .05$), which did not differ significantly from each other. The reader is reminded that higher scores on this measure indicate more negative emotion toward the object.

Motive Imagery

The statistical analysis of *Power* imagery revealed a significant main effect, $F(2,51) = 7.58, p = .001$. Pairwise comparisons (Tukey's test) indicated that there was significantly less Power imagery in references to Friends ($p < .05$) than either of the other two groups (Enemies and Ambivalents); the latter did not differ significantly from each other.

There was a significant main effect in *Affiliation* imagery, $F(2, 51) = 22.37, p < .001$. Because the assumption of homogeneity of variances was violated, the data were also assessed using Welch's test. The statistical outcome was still supported, $F''(2, 28.54 \text{ corrected}) = 11.11, p < .001$.

As in the case of Power, Tukey tests show that Friends are significantly different ($p < .05$) from both other groups (Enemies and Ambivalents), but that the Enemies and Ambivalents categories are not significantly different from each other.

The differences among the mean *Achievement* imagery scores of the three categories did not reach statistical significance, $F(2, 51) = 2.63, p = .08$.

Discussion

It appears that Pres. Bush's cognitive, emotional, and motivational orientations toward governments with different reactions to his administration's plans for Iraq show a high level of internal consistency. Two major theories related to integrative complexity, the value conflict hypothesis (Tetlock, 1986; Tetlock, Peterson, & Lerner, 1996) and the cognitive manager model (Suedfeld, 1992), both predict that dissonant situations whose resolution is important will elicit higher levels of complexity from the decision-maker. Given Bush's repeated attempts to obtain support for the deposition of Saddam Hussein, he clearly considered this an important matter; his attempts to persuade Ambivalents to join his coalition (or at least to

vote for it in the UN), the heightened level of complexity was predictable. Interestingly, complexity was the only one of our measures where the sharp difference was between Consonant- and Dissonant-relationship nations. On the other measures, the major distinction was between Friends and others.

Nonimmediacy scoring showed that subtle indicators in the President's comments confirmed his positive regard for governments and leaders who ranged themselves alongside as Friends, contrasting with high negative emotion toward Enemies. Although Ambivalents attracted less negative emotion than Enemies, the scores were not significantly different; this pattern confirmed Bush's earlier statements that those who were not allies in the war against terrorism could be considered enemies.

The motive imagery scores were again very consistent. High Power imagery toward both Enemies and Ambivalents confirmed Bush's desire to influence the behavior of these two groups of leaders and countries; there was no need to influence Friends, who were already on his side with regard to Saddam Hussein as well as sharing America's basic values and political structure. Conversely, high Affiliation scores in references to Friends reflected his wish to maintain close personal relationships with them (confirming the nonimmediacy scores). As in the case of nonimmediacy, the lack of a significant difference in Affiliation motivation toward Enemies and Ambivalents showed that Bush's willingness to exert an effort to persuade Ambivalents to join in his plan (high integrative complexity, high Power motivation) was coupled with negative emotion and little desire to become personally close.

To return to our original question, what may we conclude from these data concerning President Bush's sincerity? Our conclusion is that the complete consistency among cognitive, emotional, and motivational indices, all measured using an unobtrusive methodology that is high in ecological validity and relies on subtle, nonobvious markers, shows him to have been very honest in his remarks. Perhaps he was even more honest than might have been optimal: expressing more positive regard and desire to affiliate toward Ambivalent leaders might perhaps have softened the opposition of some of them.

At the present time, we are initiating similar analyses of Bush's references before and after regime changes in some of the Ambivalent nations. These have been balanced in direction: some (e.g., Germany, France, Canada) have moved closer to the Bush Doctrine, although not to the point of sending troops to Iraq, while others have distanced themselves (Italy, Spain, Great Britain, and after the upcoming election, possibly Australia).

Our conclusions about Bush's sincerity lead us to predict that changes in his comments will be consonant with the direction of these regime changes.

The scoring of other major leaders will be the next step. It will be interesting to see whether experts' opinions and/or public image about the honesty or dishonesty of certain leaders are confirmed by the use of thematic content analysis.

References

- Baker-Brown, G., Ballard, E.J., Bluck, S., de Vries, B., Suedfeld, P., & Tetlock, P.E. (1992). The conceptual/integrative complexity scoring manual. In C.P. Smith (Ed.), *Personality and motivation: Handbook of thematic content analysis* (pp. 401-418). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ballard, E.J. & Suedfeld, P. (1988). Performance ratings of Canadian Prime Ministers: Individual and situational factors. *Political Psychology, 9*, 291-302.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Heyns, R.W., Veroff, J., & Atkinson, J.W. (1992). A scoring manual for the affiliation motive. C.P. Smith (Ed.), *Personality and motivation: Handbook of thematic content analysis* (pp. 211-223). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McClelland, D. C., Atkinson, J. W., Clark, R. A., & Lowell, E. L. (1953). *The achievement motive*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- McClelland, D.C., Atkinson, J. W., Clark, R. A., & Lowell, E. L. (1992). Scoring for the achievement motive. In C.P. Smith (Ed.), *Personality and motivation: Handbook of thematic content analysis* (pp. 153-178). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ramirez, C.E. & Suedfeld, P. (1988). Nonimmediacy scoring of archival materials: The relationship between Fidel Castro and "Che" Guevara. *Political Psychology, 9*, 155-164.
- Schroder, H.M., Driver, M.J., & Streufert, S. (1967). *Human information processing*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- Smith, C.P. (Ed.) (1992), *Personality and motivation: Handbook of thematic content analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Suedfeld, P. (1992). Cognitive managers and their critics. *Political Psychology, 13*, 435-453.
- Suedfeld, P., Tetlock, P.E., & Jhangiani, R. (2007). The Bush Doctrine and the psychology of alliances. In S.A. Renshon & P. Suedfeld (Eds.), *Understanding the Bush Doctrine: Psychology and strategy in the age of terrorism* (pp. 105-126). New York: Routledge.
- Tetlock, P.E. (1986). A value pluralism model of ideological reasoning. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50*, 819-827.

- Tetlock, P. E., Peterson, R. & Lerner, J. (1996). Revising the value pluralism model: Incorporating social content and context postulates. In C. Seligman, J. Olson, & M. Zanna (Eds.), *Ontario symposium on social and personality psychology: Values*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Wiener, M., & Mehrabian, A. (1968). *Language within language: Immediacy, a channel in verbal communication*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Winter, D. (1991). Measuring personality at a distance: Development of an integrated system for scoring motives in verbal running text. In A.J. Stewart, J.M. Healy, Jr., & D.J. Ozer (Eds.), *Perspectives in personality: Approaches to understanding lives* (pp. 59-89). London: Kingsly.
- Winter, D. (1992). A revised scoring system for the power motive. In C.P. Smith (Ed.), *Personality and motivation: Handbook of thematic content analysis* (pp. 311-324). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Peter Suedfeld, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Psychology at the University of British Columbia. Currently, Suedfeld's political psychology research looks mainly at leaders of political organizations during times of crisis or other critical decision-making points. Other work examines the public opinions of leaders who have experienced either extreme popularity or criticism, or both at different times. psuedfeld@psych.ubc.ca

Philip E. Tetlock, Professor in the Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, 94720-1900. Tetlock's research has covered a broad area of social and political psychology, including international relations and leadership at the national and international level. He is currently studying markers of organizational climate for employees of different demographic categories. tetlock@haas.berkeley.edu

Rajiv Jhangiani, teaches introductory, social, and personality psychology at Kwantlen University College and is pursuing his PhD under the supervision of Peter Suedfeld. His research projects concern topics ranging from terrorism and natural disasters to strategic alliances and political leadership.

Address: Peter Suedfeld. UBC Department of Psychology. 2136 West Mall. Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z4. Canada