Chapter Six

Framing Analysis: Evaluating Presidential Statements

Presidential Rhetoric on Terrorism

The debate over appropriate ways to cope with terrorism varies in intensity as spectacular incidents explode and recede from popular memory, declared Rubin (1990, pp. xi–xii) in a prophetic remark befitting the situation the United States has faced since the Clinton administration took office in January 1993. Leaders must decide among a repertoire of policy responses taking into account both effective tactics and overall foreign policy interests. To compound the problem, measuring counterterrorism effectiveness is not easy—failure, though it may be rare, is starkly evident whenever violent attacks occur; rates of success, noted by the frequency of foiled terrorist plots, may be significant but unknown to the general public due to intelligence sensitivities. Logically, a trajectory of counterterrorism policies over time should lead to increased effectiveness as a product of decision makers’ learning curve and as better security mechanisms are implemented. A pattern of decreased effectiveness might emerge however, if a copycat process is expanding (more and more individuals and groups applying terrorist tactics in many, often vulnerable, environments in order to achieve their goals), and the sheer volume of attack attempts grows exponentially. In another scenario, when enhancing security factors (improved safety levels) intertwine with inhibiting security factors (terrorism diffusion) it may seem that changes in counterterrorism effectiveness are negligible. As a result, to determine whether a counterterrorism strategy works means measuring the complexities of effectiveness with precision instruments. But such measurement does not really capture whether the public actually feels safer. Feeling secure is also important. What presidents say help set the stage. A terrorist attack creates a national crisis; crises bring about emotional outpourings—people react with shock, fear, anger, and sorrow—that may significantly affect the relationship between a leader and a follower. At such times, state Pillai and Meindl (1998),
followers want to see their leader as more powerful and identify more with their leader as a coping mechanism.

United States’ policy on terrorism “is simultaneously a set of actual practices—wars, covert operations, agencies and institutions—and an accompanying series of assumptions, beliefs, justifications and narratives—it is an entire language or discourse. At the most basic level, the practice of counter-terrorism is predicated on and determined by the language of counter-terrorism. The language of counter-terrorism incorporates a series of assumptions, beliefs and knowledge about the nature of terrorism and terrorists. These beliefs then determine what kinds of counter-terrorism practices are reasonable or unreasonable, appropriate or inappropriate,” states Jackson (2005, pp. 8–9). The language of politics is deliberately structured to shape public perceptions of the world through the strategic employment of certain words and sentences. Words and deeds are inextricably linked—they mutually reinforce each other and together constitute social and political reality, thus, understanding the language of counterterrorism is essential. Among the most important “texts” to be analyzed for this purpose, Jackson (p. 17) identifies the written speech or spoken speech by high government officials as key for it sets out parameters of official thinking, forms the basis of policy and action, and provides an overall narrative for public understanding of the issue.

Such “verbal strategy,” as Franck and Weisband (1972) call it, constitutes an important part of the complexity of influence signals in world politics. Rhetoric is more than mere ornamentation. The concept of verbal strategy proposes the planned, deliberate use of principles, concepts, and enunciated norms as a conscious component in communication and persuasion. It requires the same careful planning as other aspects of strategy for the achievement of national goals; hence, before a verbal strategy option is chosen, its effects should be estimated. The verbal behavior of a state is seldom random; it is, therefore, part of national strategy to produce certain predictable and desired effects. All verbal strategy in the context of systemic hostility is planned with a conscious awareness of the implications of words as signals of intentionality. As Franck and Weisband (pp. 118–119) argue, the importance of communications implies that verbal policies are “indeed policies and tantamount to acts insofar as they affect an opponent’s understanding of a nation’s attitude and reactions… [A] verbal strategy is as important as military strategy.” Ultimately, through its verbal strategy, a state outlines the parameters of future interaction with the adversary.

Presidents frame the terrorist image and problem to the U.S. public and to the world. The meaning of terrorism is socially constructed. As