



Charisma under crisis: Presidential leadership, rhetoric, and media responses before and after the September 11th terrorist attacks

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Abstract

Scholars since Weber have suggested that times of crisis may create an increased opportunity for charismatic leadership to emerge. We examine the rhetorical content of President George W. Bush's public speeches before and after the terrorist attacks of September 11th to determine if the context of crisis affected the President's communications with the American people. We also examined how the media's portrayal of President Bush may have changed after the crisis. Results suggest that the President's rhetorical language became more charismatic after the crisis of 9/11. In addition, the media's portrayal of Bush reflected a similar increase in charismatic rhetoric, suggesting an increased receptivity to a more charismatically based leadership relationship after the crisis. © 2004 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and Flight 93 have been widely perceived as one of the greatest crises in American history. The events of 9/11 surpassed even the attack on Pearl Harbor in the sheer number of lives lost, and represented not an attack on the

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American military but on the American public. A report released by the Gallup Organization concluded, “the American psyche was jolted on September 11th, in a way seldom seen before” (Gillespie, 2001, p. 1). This evidence clearly suggests that in the eyes of the public, the terrorist attacks of September 2001 constituted a significant event that shattered American illusions of safety and invulnerability.

Scholars have long studied crisis and crisis management, and the effects of crisis on the leadership relationship (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991; Hunt, Boal, & Dodge, 1999; Lord & Maher, 1991; Pillai, 1996; Pillai & Meindl, 1998; Stewart, 1967, 1976). Using previous theory as a guide, we hoped to understand how the events of 9/11 affected the relationship between the President and the American people. Viewing political leadership as a link or connection between the President and the American citizenry, we sought to uncover how the post-9/11 context impacted the nature and strength of this relationship. Previous theoretical and empirical work suggests that the occurrence of a crisis may significantly affect the relationship between a leader and his or her followers (House et al., 1991; Hunt et al., 1999; Pillai, 1996; Pillai & Meindl, 1998). The plethora of emotions felt in the aftermath of a crisis, including shock, confusion, fear, anger, sorrow, and anxiety, can have a potentially devastating effect on individual self-concepts as well as collective national identity. Times of crisis thus enhance the likelihood that followers will want to invest increased faith in leaders, see leaders as more powerful, and identify more with their leaders as a coping mechanism (Madsen & Snow, 1991).

Pearson and Clair (1998) define a crisis as “a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly” (p. 59). Many Americans perceived the events of 9/11 as an attack not only on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center but also as an attack on their fundamental values and beliefs. The President himself reflected this perspective in his “Enduring Freedom” speech, in which he noted that in the incipient war, “we defend not only our precious freedoms, but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear.” These comments are indicative of the collective response to the attacks as an assault on the American “way of life,” suggesting that the events of 9/11 threatened the very ideology that America represents to many. As President Bush commented on the day of the assaults: “Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack.”

We explore how leadership theory might inform our understanding of the President’s response to the crisis of 9/11, as well as the collective response of the American people. The tremendous unease and uncertainty brought about by the terrorist attacks presented an opportunity for the President to act in stronger, more decisive, and potentially more meaningful ways (Lord & Maher, 1991; Stewart, 1967, 1976; Yukl, 2002). In addition, these same feelings of uncertainty likely fostered a greater appreciation for the type of “strong” leadership often associated with charismatic, transformational leaders.

Following Bandura’s (2001) notion of proxy control, accepting a leader’s interpretation of events and believing in his or her ability to deal with followers’ problems relieve followers of the psychological stress and loss of control created in the aftermath of a crisis. Thus, the emergence of more charismatically based forms of leadership can be viewed as a collective coping mechanism, even a palliative (Meindl, 1993), as followers seek to symbolically and emotionally “restore their own sense of coping ability by linking themselves to a dominant and seemingly effective leader” (Madsen & Snow, 1991, p. 15). Beyer (1999b) notes that perceptions of strong needs in followers, such as a shared perception of a crisis, may drive them to “socially construct and project qualities on a person to satisfy that need” (p. 581).

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