From War to Justice: A Pragmatic Analysis of Bush's 9/11 Speech and Obama's Bin Laden Speech

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Article Detail:	Abstract
    	This study examines the role of metaphors in two major U.S. presidential speeches: George W. Bush's Address to the Nation on September 11, 2001, and Barack Obama's announcement of Osama bin Laden's death in 2011. Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003), metaphors were categorized into structural, ontological, and orientational types, with attention to their pragmatic functions in crisis communication. The analysis identified 12 metaphors in each speech. Bush relied mainly on structural metaphors of war and defense, framing terrorism as an enemy to be defeated and mobilizing citizens for resilience. Obama, while also invoking war imagery, used more ontological and orientational metaphors, such as justice as an agent and light versus darkness, emphasizing closure, unity, and reassurance. The findings show that metaphor choice reflects broader pragmatic goals: Bush sought mobilization, while Obama stressed resolution, illustrating how metaphors shape national perception and political legitimacy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a means through which political leaders frame reality, construct meaning, and shape public opinion. In times of crisis, the persuasive power of language becomes particularly visible, as leaders attempt to mobilize, reassure, or unite their audiences. Among the linguistic strategies available, metaphor has attracted significant attention in political discourse analysis because of its ability to simplify complex realities and make them accessible to the public. As Charteris-Black (2004) argues, metaphor in political speech functions not only to explain but also to legitimize political action by grounding abstract issues in familiar experiences. Similarly, Musolff (2016) highlights that metaphors in political rhetoric are rarely decorative; they operate as powerful cognitive frames that guide public understanding of events.

The theoretical foundation for this study rests on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory

(CMT), which proposes that metaphor is central to human thought and not merely an ornamental feature of language. They identify three major types of metaphors—structural, orientational, and ontological—through which humans conceptualize abstract phenomena. As Lakoff (1993) explains, metaphors are "pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action", meaning that the metaphors used by political leaders both reflect and shape the way citizens perceive national crises.

This paper applies CMT to analyze two significant U.S. presidential speeches: George W. Bush's Address to the Nation on September 11, 2001, and Barack Obama's announcement of the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011. Both speeches mark pivotal moments in the American "War on Terror," yet they represent two different historical contexts—Bush's speech introducing a new conflict, and Obama's speech announcing its symbolic closure. Bush primarily relied on war metaphors to mobilize a shocked nation and justify military action, while Obama turned to justice metaphors and orientational imagery to offer closure and reassurance. By comparing these speeches pragmatically, this study demonstrates how the choice of metaphor influences the framing of national crises, mobilizes emotions, and legitimizes political responses.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Metaphor is a central tool in political language, as it enables leaders to frame abstract issues in terms that are more concrete and accessible to their audiences. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in their influential work Metaphors We Live By argue that metaphors are not merely stylistic ornaments, but fundamental to human thought and action. They highlight how we often understand abstract concepts, such as time, justice, or freedom, through more familiar domains like money, journeys, or physical space.

This perspective, known as Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), shows that metaphors are deeply embedded in cognition and everyday discourse. In political contexts, metaphors are especially significant because they allow leaders to frame crises, mobilize emotions, and legitimize decisions (Charteris-Black,

2004; Musolff, 2016). For example, framing terrorism as a war turns an abstract threat into a concrete enemy, while framing justice as something that can be "done" or "achieved" makes it tangible and satisfying for the public.

Previous research has shown that U.S. presidents often employ metaphors strategically to serve pragmatic purposes. Lakoff (2001) noted how Bush's "war on terror" framing after 9/11 shaped public opinion and justified military interventions. Conversely, Obama's rhetoric often emphasized unity and justice, which scholars such as Sullivan (2011) interpret as an attempt to provide reassurance and closure.

Building on this theoretical framework, the present study applies Conceptual Metaphor Theory to a pragmatic comparison of Bush's 9/11 address and Obama's Bin Laden speech. The aim is to explore how each leader employed metaphors differently, and how those choices influenced the way the American public was guided to respond to crisis.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research follows a qualitative approach, examining the use of metaphors in two major U.S. presidential speeches. The analysis draws on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003), which classifies metaphors into three categories: structural, ontological, and orientational. Alongside this framework, a pragmatic perspective is applied to explore how these metaphors function in communication, particularly in shaping persuasion, legitimizing actions, and reinforcing national identity.

The study focuses on two historically significant speeches: George W. Bush's Address to the Nation on September 11, 2001, delivered after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, and Barack Obama's announcement of Osama bin Laden's death on May 2, 2011, broadcast from the White House

IV. TYPES OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS (LAKOFF & JOHNSON, 1980/2003)

Lakoff and Johnson (1980/2003) identify three main types of conceptual metaphors that structure human

thought: structural, ontological, and orientational. These categories illustrate how abstract concepts are made understandable through more concrete domains of experience.

4.1 Structural Metaphors

Structural metaphors occur when **one concept is organized in terms of another**. According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003), this type allows us to map knowledge from a familiar source domain onto a less familiar target domain. Kövecses (2002) explains that the source domain provides a rich structure that guides how we think and talk about the target. For example, *time* is often understood through the metaphor of *motion*:

- *You are wasting my time.*

- *The passing of time is motion.*

- *This gadget will save you hours.*
  Here, time is treated as a **moving or measurable object**, which shows how everyday reasoning depends on metaphorical structuring.

4.2 Ontological Metaphors

Ontological metaphors arise when **abstract experiences are conceptualized as physical objects or substances** (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). This allows us to treat intangible concepts like *time, ideas, or inflation* as if they were discrete entities we can interact with. For instance, *inflation* is conceptualized as a living enemy:

- *Inflation is lowering our standard of living.*

- *Our biggest enemy right now is inflation.*

  By personifying inflation, the metaphor transforms an abstract economic phenomenon into something concrete, recognizable, and threatening.

4.3 Orientational Metaphors

Orientational metaphors do not map one concept onto another but instead organize entire systems of concepts based on **spatial orientation** (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Because human experience is embodied, these metaphors are grounded in how our bodies function in space (Li, 2010). For example:

- *HAPPY IS UP* (*I'm feeling up today.*)

- *SAD IS DOWN* (*His mood sank.*)
  Such metaphors make use of verticality and spatial positioning to structure emotions, linking positive states with upward movement and negative states with downward movement.

V.   RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study investigates the use and pragmatic functions of metaphors in George W. Bush's *Address to the Nation* (2001) and Barack Obama's *Remarks on the Death of Osama bin Laden* (2011), guided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003). It seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What types of conceptual metaphors (structural, ontological, and orientational) are used in Bush's and Obama's speeches?

2. How frequently does each type of metaphor occur in the two speeches?

3. What pragmatic functions do these metaphors serve in shaping persuasion, legitimization, and emotional response?

4. How do the differences in metaphor use between Bush and Obama reflect their distinct communicative goals in crisis contexts?

VI.   ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Obama's Bin Laden Speech (2011) – Metaphor Analysis

A1. "We went to war against al Qaeda to protect our citizens, our friends, and our allies."

Metaphor: War

Type: Structural Metaphor

General Meaning: The U.S. fought militarily against al Qaeda.

Metaphoric Meaning: Terrorism is framed as a war, legitimizing military action and portraying the U.S. as protector.

A2. "I authorized an operation to get Osama bin Laden and bring him to justice."

Metaphor: Justice as Mission

Type: Structural Metaphor

General Meaning: Obama approved a mission to capture or kill bin Laden.

Metaphoric Meaning: Justice is framed as a mission, highlighting leadership and presenting the killing as moral duty rather than revenge.

A3. "The death of bin Laden marks the most significant achievement in our nation's effort to defeat al Qaeda."

Metaphor: Victory / Defeat

Type: Structural Metaphor

General Meaning: Bin Laden's death was a major success.

Metaphoric Meaning: Al Qaeda is framed as an enemy in war, and killing bin Laden symbolizes victory.

A4. "We will be relentless in defense of our citizens and our friends and allies."

Metaphor: Defense

Type: Structural Metaphor

General Meaning: The U.S. will continue protecting its people and allies.

Metaphoric Meaning: National security is portrayed as ongoing defense, stressing vigilance and persistence

A5. "The American people did not choose this fight. It came to our shores…"

Metaphor: Fight

Type: Structural Metaphor

General Meaning: The U.S. did not start the conflict; it was attacked.

Metaphoric Meaning: Terrorism is conceptualized as a forced fight, justifying U.S. action as defensive and morally legitimate.

A6. "A bright September day was darkened by the worst attack on the American people in our history."

Metaphor: Light vs. Dark

Type: Orientational Metaphor

General Meaning: A clear day turned tragic because of the attacks.

Metaphoric Meaning: Light = good, dark = bad, dramatizing the contrast between peace and destruction.

A7. "Nearly 3,000 citizens taken from us, leaving a gaping hole in our hearts."

Metaphor: Hole / Emptiness

Type: Orientational Metaphor

General Meaning: The nation lost many lives on 9/11.

Metaphoric Meaning: Loss is expressed as a physical void, personalizing grief and uniting Americans in mourning.

A8. "Bring him to justice."

Metaphor: Justice as Destination

Type: Ontological Metaphor

General Meaning: Bin Laden should be punished lawfully.

Metaphoric Meaning: Justice is framed as a place or entity, making the abstract concept concrete and attainable.

A9. "Justice has been done."

Metaphor: Justice as Agent

Type: Ontological Metaphor

General Meaning: Bin Laden was punished for his crimes.

Metaphoric Meaning: Justice is personified as an actor, giving closure and satisfying public demand for accountability.

A10. "America… one nation, under God, indivisible…"

Metaphor: Nation as Person/Body

Type: Ontological Metaphor

General Meaning: The U.S. is united under shared values.

Metaphoric Meaning: The nation is conceptualized as a single body or person, emphasizing unity.

A11. "We reaffirmed our ties to each other."

Metaphor: Ties / Bonds

Type: Ontological Metaphor

General Meaning: Americans showed solidarity after 9/11.

Metaphoric Meaning: Social unity is described as physical ties, reinforcing connection and togetherness.

A12. "The cause of securing our country is not complete."

Metaphor: Cause as Object/Project

Type: Ontological Metaphor

General Meaning: The work of protecting the U.S. continues.

Metaphoric Meaning: Security is framed as a project to finish, stressing vigilance and ongoing responsibility.

6.2 Bush's 9/11 Speech (2001) – Metaphor Analysis with Purpose

B1. "Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America."

Metaphor: Nation as Building

Type: Structural Metaphor

General Meaning: Attacks can destroy physical structures but not the country itself.

Metaphoric Meaning: America is conceptualized as a building with unshakable foundations, stressing that its core values and democracy remain strong.

B2. "These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve."

Metaphor: Resolve as Steel

Type: Ontological Metaphor

General Meaning: Terrorists destroyed buildings, but they cannot break American determination.

Metaphoric Meaning: The nation's will is personified as steel, symbolizing resilience stronger than physical materials.

B3. "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world."

Metaphor: America as Beacon

Type: Ontological Metaphor

General Meaning: The U.S. was attacked because it symbolizes freedom.

Metaphoric Meaning: America is depicted as a beacon of light, guiding others and justifying why it was targeted.

B4. "A great people has been moved to defend a great nation."

Metaphor: Defense / War

Type: Structural Metaphor

General Meaning: Citizens are called upon to protect the nation.

Metaphoric Meaning: Americans are framed as defenders in a war, mobilizing unity and collective strength.

B5. "Our country is strong."

Metaphor: Nation as Living Being

Type: Ontological Metaphor

General Meaning: The U.S. remains firm despite the attacks.

Metaphoric Meaning: The nation is portrayed as a living body with strength, calming fears and projecting resilience.

B6. "Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature."

Metaphor: Evil as Entity

Type: Ontological Metaphor

General Meaning: Terrorism represents the worst of humanity.

Metaphoric Meaning: Evil is personified as a visible being, framing terrorism as a moral force that must be confronted.

B7. "We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."

Metaphor: Hunting / Pursuit

Type: Structural Metaphor

General Meaning: Both terrorists and their supporters will be held accountable.

Metaphoric Meaning: War is conceptualized as hunting down enemies, showing a broadened and uncompromising stance.

B8. "America and our friends and allies… stand together to win the war against terrorism."

Metaphor: War

Type: Structural Metaphor

General Meaning: The U.S. and allies will unite to fight terrorism.

Metaphoric Meaning: Terrorism is framed as a war to be won, reinforcing solidarity and U.S. leadership.

B9. "America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time."

Metaphor: Enemies in Battle

Type: Structural Metaphor

General Meaning: The U.S. has defeated threats in the past and will again.

Metaphoric Meaning: Terrorists are cast as enemies in a historical war, linking current struggle to past victories.

B10. "This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace."

Metaphor: Resolve as Substance

Type: Ontological Metaphor

General Meaning: All Americans are united after the attacks.

Metaphoric Meaning: Resolve is treated as a shared physical substance, highlighting unity and shared determination.

B11. "Yet, we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world."

Metaphor: Defense of Territory

Type: Structural Metaphor

General Meaning: The U.S. will protect its values.

Metaphoric Meaning: Freedom is depicted as territory to be defended, legitimizing U.S. action as safeguarding universal principles.

B12. "Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations… but they cannot touch the foundation of America." (repeated theme)

Metaphor: Nation as Building

Type: Structural Metaphor

General Meaning: Physical structures may collapse, but the nation's values remain.

Metaphoric Meaning: America is conceptualized as a building with strong foundations, reinforcing the message of enduring resilience.

VII. RESULTS

The analysis identified 12 metaphors in Bush's 9/11 speech and 12 in Obama's Bin Laden speech. To present these findings clearly, the following table summarizes the metaphors, their types, and their pragmatic purposes.

Table: Summary of Metaphors in Bush and Obama's Speeches

Metaphor Analysis Results

NO.	President	Code	Metaphor	Type	Purpose
1	Bush	B1	Nation as Building	Structural	Resilience of national foundations
2	Bush	B2	Resolve as Steel	Ontological	Strength of willpower
3	Bush	B3	America as Beacon	Ontological	Symbol of freedom
4	Bush	B4	Defense / War	Structural	Mobilize defenders
5	Bush	B5	Nation as Living Being	Ontological	Project strength
6	Bush	B6	Evil as Entity	Ontological	Frame terrorism as evil
7	Bush	B7	Hunting / Pursuit	Structural	Accountability and pursuit

8	Bush	B8	War	Structural	Global war leadership
9	Bush	B9	Enemies in Battle	Structural	Link to past victories
10	Bush	B10	Resolve as Substance	Ontological	Unity and shared resolve
11	Bush	B11	Defence of Territory	Structural	Defence of universal values
12	Bush	B12	Nation as Building	Structural	Reinforce resilience
13	Obama	A1	War	Structural	Legitimize military action
14	Obama	A2	Justice as Mission	Structural	Leadership & moral duty
15	Obama	A3	Victory / Defeat	Structural	Show success and progress
16	Obama	A4	Defence	Structural	Reassure protection
17	Obama	A5	Fight	Structural	Justify defensive action
18	Obama	A6	Light vs. Dark	Orientational	Highlight trauma of 9/11
19	Obama	A7	Hole / Emptiness	Orientational	Personalize grief
20	Obama	A8	Justice as Destination	Ontological	Make justice concrete
21	Obama	A9	Justice as Agent	Ontological	Provide closure
22	Obama	A10	Nation as Person/Body	Ontological	Stress unity
23	Obama	A11	Ties / Bonds	Ontological	Reinforce solidarity
24	Obama	A12	Cause as Project	Ontological	Stress ongoing vigilance

The table shows that Bush relied mainly on structural metaphors such as war, enemies, defense, and ontological metaphors like resolve as steel and America as a beacon. His framing presented terrorism as a war to be fought, aiming to mobilize citizens, emphasize resilience, and justify military action.

Obama, while still using structural metaphors (war, fight, defense), drew more on ontological (justice as agent, nation as body) and orientational metaphors (light vs. dark, hole in our hearts). His rhetoric framed bin Laden's death as justice achieved, highlighting closure, unity, and moral legitimacy.

To make the comparison clearer, the following pie chart illustrates the distribution of metaphor types in both speeches.

Comparison of Metaphor Types in Bush (2001) and Obama (2011) Speeches
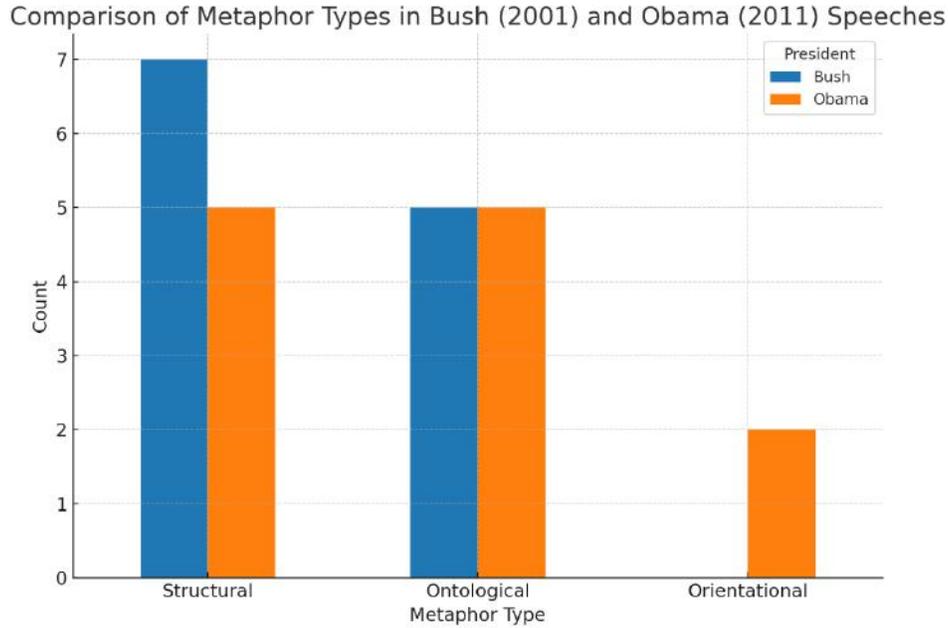
The chart confirms that Bush depended heavily on structural metaphors, while Obama's metaphors were more evenly distributed across all three types, with orientational metaphors adding emotional resonance absent in Bush's speech.

Overall, the comparison suggests that Bush's metaphors were pragmatic tools of mobilization, urging confrontation and resilience, while Obama's metaphors were tools of closure, offering reassurance and symbolic resolution. This illustrates how metaphor choice in crisis rhetoric reflects not only historical context but also the president's pragmatic goals in shaping national perception.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the central role of metaphors in U.S. presidential crisis speeches. Bush's 9/11 address relied mainly on war metaphors, framing terrorism as an enemy to be fought and mobilizing the nation for resilience and confrontation. Obama's Bin Laden speech, while still invoking war imagery, emphasized justice and closure, offering unity and reassurance. The comparison shows that metaphor use reflects each president's pragmatic goals, shaping public perception and legitimizing national responses in times of crisis.

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