

**Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Osama Bin Laden
And the American People:
The Importance of Cultural Knowledge
In Intercultural Communication**

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Tämä tutkielma käsittelee kulttuurisen tiedon tärkeyttä kulttuurien välisissä kommunikointitilanteissa. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on selvittää miten puhujan tekemät kulttuurisen tiedon vähydestä johtuvat virheet vaikuttavat kommunikointitilanteeseen. Ovatko vaikutukset yksioikoisen negatiivisia ja miten tämä käytännössä ilmenee?

Tutkimus on toteutettu analysoimalla kahta eri puhetilannetta. Ensimmäisessä puhetilanteessa analysoidaan Iranin presidentin Mahmoud Ahmadinejadin Columbian yliopistossa Yhdysvalloissa pitämää puhetta. Tämä puhe ei sanottavasti lämmittänyt Iranin ja Yhdysvaltojen välistä suhdetta. Toisessa puhetilanteessa tarkastellaan terroristijohtaja Osama bin Ladenin videonauhaa, jossa hän otti kantaa Yhdysvaltain ulkopoliittikkaan. Videonauha julkaistiin juuri ennen Yhdysvaltain 2004 presidentinvaaleja ja se nosti terrorismin vastaisen sodan uudestaan esille juuri kun äänestäjät olivat valmistautumassa tärkeään päätökseen.

Tutkimus on käytännössä toteutettu seuraavasti: Ensin valotetaan lyhyesti puhetilanteiden taustaa. Sitten tarkastellaan puhujien tavoitteita ja sitä, kuinka hyvin asetetut tavoitteet saavutettiin. Lopuksi selvitetään seikkaperäisesti kuinka kulttuurinen tieto vaikutti tavoitteiden saavuttamiseen.

Avainsanat: interkulttuurinen, kulttuurintuntemus, Lähi-itä, Yhdysvallat

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1. Introduction

The modern world is defined by the interconnectedness of people, countries, and economies. National borders do not separate peoples in the same way as they used to. The global economy relies on global trade and mass tourism has led many to set foot in countries their parents and grandparents never dreamed of visiting. And technological advancements have even made it possible to communicate with members of another culture without ever leaving the comfort of one's own home.

It seems fair to say then that, unlike in the past, communication between members of different cultures has become far more commonplace than it used to be. Despite the increasing frequency of such communications, different cultures still struggle at times to understand each other's customs and values. The inability or unwillingness to grasp certain things about the other's culture quite often leads to various misunderstandings and miscommunications of various severity. It follows then that cultural knowledge is important in all intercultural communication. The broad question that this paper seeks to answer is how does cultural knowledge – or lack thereof – influence intercultural communication.

More specifically, this paper will look at two case studies. The first case study examines the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's speech at Columbia University in September of 2007. Being that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was at an American¹ university addressing an American audience, this is a rather perfect example of intercultural communication. The second case study in this paper is Osama bin Laden's 2004 "October surprise" videotape. The infamous terrorist leader addressed his videotape specifically to the American people, so it is another perfect example of intercultural communication.

Clearly, the United States and Middle East are culturally – and in a number of other ways – worlds apart. Therefore, these two case studies seem like worthwhile subjects to study, as the relations between people in the United States and people in the Middle East have been rife with tension ever since (and to lesser extent, even before) the 9/11

attacks. One should note here that this paper does not seek to suggest that Osama bin Laden or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad represent the mainstream view in the Mid-East. Neither does this paper pretend that there is necessarily any kind of a uniform culture in the Middle East or even in the United States. Acknowledging these facts should not obscure the fact that the analysis contained in this paper can still yield at least some insights which could then be used to facilitate the process of uncovering answers to the great questions and dilemmas of our time.

At this point, one can offer a word of warning to potential readers. Rather than regurgitate existing knowledge, this paper is weighted towards the creation of new knowledge. In other words, this paper will be light on theory and heavy on analysis. This means that this paper does not feature a thorough compiling together of the reigning theoretical views ascendant in the field. Instead, there is only one chapter devoted to theory and even that is a highly pedestrian summing together of only the most rudimentary principles of intercultural communication. Conversely, the two case studies featured in this paper take up a lion's share of the paper's length and the actual substance and merit of this paper is to be found in the hands-on analysis contained in these two case studies.

On a practical level, both case studies will essentially follow the same format in the sense that the paper will endeavour to uncover answers to three interrelated questions in both case studies: What was the speaker's objective? How well did the speaker accomplish said objective? How did cultural factors influence the speaker's efforts to accomplish said objective? When assessing the objectives of the speakers, this paper will simply look at the nominal objectives as verbalized by the speakers themselves. In the second case study dealing with bin Laden, the paper will also consider an unstated objective, as the timing of the tape's release strongly suggests that such an unstated objective exists.

This paper will operate on the premise that it is the speaker's responsibility to tailor his communication in such a fashion that it conforms to the cultural norms of his audience. In the abstract, one can, of course, debate *ad infinitum* whether the speaker has a responsibility to conform to the cultural norms of his audience or whether the listener has a responsibility to attempt to overlook any possible cultural faux pas that

might be committed by the speaker. In practical terms, however, the onus tends to be on whoever “wants something.” In both of the cases being featured in this paper, that someone would appear to be the speaker, since both speakers express a clear desire to accomplish a specific objective. Thus, the simple reality is that if Ahmadinejad and bin Laden wanted to accomplish their objectives, they had little choice but to try to appeal to Americans in a way that would resonate with them and that would have meant taking cultural issues and norms into consideration.

Accordingly, this paper will examine cultural issues from a point of view that is decidedly American. This paper essentially strives to look at the words of Ahmadinejad and bin Laden through the eyes of the average American. This does not suggest that “America is right” and “Ahmadinejad or bin Laden are wrong” in any kind of an absolute moral sense – or any other sense for that matter. The intent of this paper, furthermore, is not to render any moral judgments upon the views that Ahmadinejad or bin Laden – or the Americans for that matter – might hold.

Rather, this paper only intends to examine what role – if any – cultural knowledge played in these two intercultural communication situations.

2. The Potential Pitfalls of Intercultural Communication

Imagine for a moment that you were the ambassador of the human race who had to address a race of alien creatures of extraterrestrial origin. What would you say? Apart from fuzzy generalities like “We come in peace!”, what could anyone say? The reason why making any kind of a substantive speech to these alien creatures would likely be next-to-impossible is the simple fact that these creatures are, by definition, alien, and thus, no-one knows much of anything about them.

Paul Chilton explains the reason why it is necessary to have at least some modicum of knowledge about your audience: In his view, the meaning of a text is not something that is “contained” in the text. Rather, readers and hearers link their existing knowledge and expectations to the processing of the language input. This process allows readers and hearers to unearth the meaning of a given text. Chilton refers to this existing knowledge possessed by readers and hearers as “context,” but “backstage knowledge” is a preferable term for the purposes of this paper. (154)

The reality is not so much that people hear what they want to hear, but what they do hear has to be placed in some kind of a relationship with their existing backstage knowledge, meaning that the ultimate meaning of what people hear is to some extent defined by this backstage knowledge. And since all human beings are different, their level and depth of backstage knowledge will also be different. Even in the same country, various groups and individuals can possess wildly varying backstage knowledge. Differing life experiences, educational level, political views, and countless other factors influence the level and type of backstage knowledge that any given individual possesses. For instance, “city slickers” and “country bumpkins” are likely to have a different opinion on many issues. This varying level of backstage knowledge explains, among other things, how it is possible that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” as is often claimed.

The reason why backstage knowledge is important in all communication is because communication is often about the exercise or attempted exercise of power. The

speaker wants, expects or hopes that the person or persons that he is talking to will do something. In order to get someone to do something for you, there is usually a certain level of persuasion in play. In order to persuade his audience, a speaker usually has to first “connect” with his audience. Absent this connection, even a skilled speaker courts failure. This means that a speaker who wishes to accomplish some specific objective, simply has to be mindful of the backstage knowledge that his audience has, since understanding the audience’s backstage knowledge enables the speaker to tailor his message in such a way that it compliments the audience’s backstage knowledge, thus facilitating the establishment of the aforementioned “connection.”

The difficulty, of course, is that establishing this connection is easier said than done – especially when a speaker has to address an audience whose customs and values he may not fully, or at all, share or even understand. In other words:

To the extent that rhetorical situations – ones in which persuasion is necessary – are familiar, deciding on the most appropriate strategy does not pose a problem. There are, however, situations in which a speaker may not know how best to proceed because he or she is faced with an unfamiliar rhetorical task, or with an interlocutor whose responses he or she is unable to predict. Such situations include, but are not limited to, the ones that occur in cross-cultural contexts. (Ting-Toomey and Korzenny 143)

The reason why communicating with a member of another culture is potentially more problematic than communicating with a member of the same culture is simple: While there are many factors that influence one’s backstage knowledge, one’s country – or rather – one’s culture of origin is bound to be one of the biggest, if not indeed the biggest, factor.

In order to lend credence to the aforementioned theoretical considerations and in order to find some use for them, one must find a way to apply them to practical, real-world examples. So here is a practical example where the participants consist of four different groups: Americans, Canadians, Iranians, and finally, alien creatures from another planet. Obviously, it stands to reason that Americans can understand other Americans much better than they can understand Canadians (or any of the other groups for that matter). Common sense further dictates that, on average, Americans

and Canadians are likely to understand each other better than Americans and Iranians, as Americans and Canadians are neighbours, speak the same language and are at least somewhat likely to have more similar backstage knowledge than Americans and Iranians. Finally, Americans can surely relate to and understand Iranians better than they can relate to and understand an entirely foreign race of alien creatures not of our Earth.

The bottom line here is that having things in common facilitates communication. And groups that are culturally similar in many respects and share much of the same backstage knowledge – like Americans and Canadians – can avoid many – but notably not all – of the potential pitfalls of intercultural communication.

Because of varying levels of backstage knowledge, different cultures have vertical barriers between them and these barriers render mutual comprehension difficult or hinder it completely (Maletzke 413). The height of these barriers is determined by the similarity or non-similarity of the cognitive structures of the cultures involved (Maletzke 413). As for the nature of culture itself, Jandt helpfully points out that culture is not something that people inherit biologically (150). Rather, it is something that people tend to pick up and absorb as they live their lives, and, as Jandt sees it, “cultural behaviours and values are communicated from one person to another and from one generation to the next” (150).

What this of course means is that culture is not a universal invariant. In fact, it is quite the opposite: it is a localized phenomenon. Every imaginable group or band of people can theoretically possess their own, unique culture. This means that various cultures can be fairly heterogeneous in many respects. This renders intercultural communication potentially problematic, for the ability of individuals or groups of individuals to comprehend one another is in direct relation to their overlapping backstage knowledge (Maletzke 412). The more common ground there is, the more likely it is that the communicators will reach a meeting-of-the-minds (Maletzke 412). By contrast, the lack of common ground means that there is a higher probability of serious misunderstandings and non-comprehension (Maletzke 412).

Peter Ehrenhaus conjures up a similar train of thought:

When two persons of different cultures meet, converse, attempt to learn about each other, or simply try to accomplish some social task, they do so with the expertise acquired within their own cultures. (267)

Accordingly, it may be an exaggeration to say that people are the prisoners of their own backstage knowledge but it is certainly clear that people's backstage knowledge does inform the way they look at the world. It follows then that if a speaker wants to maximize the chances that his audience will understand and accept his message, a speaker should strive to understand his audience's culture. In the words of Maletzke, fully understanding a foreign culture entails the following:

It means comprehension of the foreign manner of seeing, experiencing, judging, an accommodating to the alien cognitive structure, and adopting of a foreign frame of reference. (413)

In short, one has to be able to think like a member of one's audience, and perhaps even conform to the cultural expectations and standards of one's audience. The preceding insight leads us to the practical objectives of this paper. The substance of the paper is to be found in chapters 5 and 7. These two chapters will examine the speeches of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Osama bin Laden and attempt to identify as many instances as possible where the speakers deviate from commonly accepted American cultural norms. The reason why finding these cultural deviations is important is the fact that whenever a speaker deviates from the cultural norms of his intended audience, the speaker's message, and quite possibly the speaker himself, are compromised.

One can now return for a brief moment to the earlier example about alien creatures and what the ambassador of the human race might say to them. Even saying something as innocuous as "We come in peace!" could lead to a great deal of misunderstandings and confusion, as it is entirely plausible that these alien creatures might not understand concepts of "war" and "peace." The worst-case scenario is that the aliens would misunderstand the phrase and instead think that humanity was declaring war on them. The end result could be a situation where the human

ambassador's poorly chosen words might spark off an inter-galactic war which would ultimately lead to the extinction of the entire human race

The stakes in human-to-human interactions are likely to be less high, and intercultural communication is positively straightforward when compared to the (fictional) difficulties inherent in intergalactic communication, but the reality still exists that every time a speaker deviates from the cultural norms of his audience, it is at least somewhat likely to be disadvantageous to the goals of successful intercultural communication. Depending on the nature and scale of any given deviation, the speaker can come across either as rude, ill-informed, outrageous, laughable, racist, or any number of other things. If there are multiple sizable deviations from cultural norms, the speaker can expect to have his credibility be impacted in a highly negative manner.

3. Notes on the Practical Approach Being Employed in This Paper

3.1. What is this paper looking for and why?

The key to understanding this paper's approach can be found in the following definition: As established earlier in the paper, fully understanding a foreign culture is a considerable undertaking:

It means comprehension of the foreign manner of seeing, experiencing, judging, an accommodating to the alien cognitive structure, and adopting of a foreign frame of reference. (Maletzke 413)

This is a rather broad definition. It encompasses not just cultural customs. Rather, it suggests that successful intercultural communication relies upon the communicator embracing the "foreign frame of reference." The "foreign frame of reference" in this case is obviously the "American point-of-view," as perceived by the mythical "average American."

In a nation as large and diverse as the United States the concept of the "average American" can of course be subject to some degree of controversy. Nevertheless, there are doubtlessly some "all-American" values that virtually all mainstream Americans are highly likely to share. As a starting point for establishing some common American cultural norms one can consider the contents of shared national treasures such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Virtually all Americans celebrate the aforementioned documents and they provide a decent starting point. One can also look at the values of mainstream political figures, as politicians are always good barometers of any democratic nation's sentiments.

For the purposes of this paper, here is a helpful rule of thumb: if a mainstream political figure can hold a certain view, it can probably be deemed to be within "American cultural norms." For example: If a politician says that women who cheat

on their husbands should be stoned to death, then that politician will be unlikely to be elected into office. His views, in other words, are outside of the “cultural norm.”

Another example: A politician can be for or against gay marriage, but insisting that gay people should be imprisoned or executed would be more problematic in terms of his electability.

Using the mind-set of the “average American” as a guiding light, this paper will examine Ahmadinejad and bin Laden’s speeches. In the simplest of terms, the paper is looking for things which seem odd, offensive, or culturally out-of-step to “average Americans” – anything that emphasizes, rather than downplays, the “foreignness” of the speaker.

More specifically, this paper shall examine the following things: the handling of culturally sensitive issues, insults directed against America, excessive religious parlance, the dissemination of war propaganda, and the self-defence defence. The common theme in all of the above issues is that the speaker fails to properly take into account the values, beliefs and opinions of his hosts – that is, the speaker fails to adopt the “foreign frame of reference.”

Starting with the obvious, culturally sensitive issues like homosexuality and the Holocaust serve as perfect examples of issues where different cultures can have very different views, and as such, they can be considered as “classic” obstacles to successful intercultural communication. Likewise, there is little need to explain why being hostile or repeatedly insulting the United States is not conducive to a healthy dialogue.

The religious tones invoked by both Ahmadinejad and bin Laden are also potentially damaging to the prospects of successful intercultural communication. The United States is a majority-Christian country with strong Christian roots. By contrast, Ahmadinejad and bin Laden are Muslims. By bringing attention to their religion, the speakers are highlighting their own foreignness rather than downplaying it. One should also remember that both speeches were delivered in a post-9/11 world. It is doubtless that some Americans, rightly or wrongly, perceive a connection between Islam and terrorism. If the audience associates a speaker with terrorism, even

tangentially or tendentiously, it is likely to make it more difficult for the speaker to accomplish his objectives, unless those objectives include antagonising or frightening his audience.

There is a fairly compelling case to be made that bin Laden is using his videotape to disseminate war propaganda. “Propaganda” is a word that has a very negative ring to it. People instantly and instinctively associate it with dishonest and disingenuous lies. If a person engages in propaganda, they are seen as untrustworthy. Being seen as untrustworthy is a problem for any speaker.

Apart from actual propaganda, Osama bin Laden also claims that 9/11 was an act of self-defence. From an American point of view, this is the equivalent of claiming that the sky is not blue or that water is not wet. It is not that bin Laden is “wrong,” but he is failing to assume the American point-of-view. Bin Laden’s interpretation of events is highly inconsistent with the worldview of most Americans and it is thus quite simply something that most Americans can not fathom and will not accept. This decreases rather than increases the odds of successful intercultural communication.

3.2. Some Practical Issues

One thing to be noted is the fact that Ahmadinejad and bin Laden are not the only ones who can be seen to be engaging in intercultural transgressions. It can be argued that the Americans are similarly guilty: The introductory remarks given before President Ahmadinejad’s speech contained quite harsh and impolite attacks directed against the president. Some of the questions that Ahmadinejad had to contend with were also laced with a decidedly challenging tone. On the whole, there was something of a media feeding frenzy surrounding Ahmadinejad’s visit and Ahmadinejad was subjected to some harsh criticism in the media. One can therefore argue that Ahmadinejad was pre-judged unfairly. Thus, one can easily argue that Americans were perhaps partly to blame for the negative tone surrounding the visit.

Nevertheless, due to reasons established earlier, this paper operates on the premise that the onus is on Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Osama bin Laden to conform to

American cultural norms, not the other way around. Strictly speaking then, examining the attitudes and possible intercultural follies of Americans is outside the scope of this paper. One could, if one was so inclined, consider studying the Americans an interesting avenue for follow-up research, though.

A second practical point that deserves to be noted is that the transcripts featured in this paper are English translations. Ahmadinejad used a translator when he spoke to his audience at Columbia and bin Laden's videotape appears to have been translated by the U.S. Government. The contemplations included in this paper are premised on the notion that Ahmadinejad and bin Laden's speeches have not been significantly impacted by the fact that they were translated. This assumption is primarily premised on the notion that both Ahmadinejad's speech at Columbia as well as the contents of bin Laden's videotape were widely reported and it is thus logical to assume that if their statements vis-à-vis those featured in the translations had contained notable irregularities some industrious soul would no doubt have taken note of this, leading to such irregularities being reported in the mainstream media. No such reports have emerged in the mainstream media, leading one to the logical conclusion that the translations objectively and adequately reflect the original message.

This conclusion is given further credence by the fact that Ahmadinejad and bin Laden's speeches seem to largely conform to their previous statements and seem generally in line with other speeches that they have given before. Again, all indications are that both translations appear well-made. As such, all statements contained in the transcripts are considered "as is," i.e. they are judged as though they would have originated from President Ahmadinejad and Osama bin Laden themselves. More information on the transcripts (e.g. the internet addresses from whence they were obtained) can be found at the "works cited" entry at the end of this paper.

4. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at Columbia University: Aims and Outcomes

4.1. The Background of Ahmadinejad's Visit

In September of 2007, the President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, graced the esteemed Columbia University with his presence. One of the professors responsible for inviting Ahmadinejad to Columbia explained the reason for the invite thusly:

First, I think face-to-face exposure to world leaders is in and of itself good education. And second, it was my hope that through listening to and observing the new bogeyman of American politics firsthand, the slide toward war that has been building in certain precincts of our executive branch and the media might be slowed. (Bulliet)

While the reasons behind the invitation may have been noble, Ahmadinejad's visit was nevertheless criticized by much of American society which felt that a man like Ahmadinejad was not a suitable guest speaker. These criticisms were not without foundation for not only did many Americans – including President Bush – regard Iran as part of the Axis of Evil, but President Ahmadinejad himself had repeatedly made public statements regarding Israel and the Holocaust which, from an American point of view, seem unbecoming of a head of state. Ahmadinejad had, among other things, dubbed the Holocaust a “myth” and called for Israel to be “wiped off the map” (Ahmadinejad). Additionally, the timing of Ahmadinejad's visit was such that it occurred during a time period when animosity between America and Iran was high and the threat of war between the two countries was very much present.

According to several leaks from U.S. officials, Iran was acting in collusion with the terrorists in Iraq against the interests of freedom. For instance, an ABC News article published in November of 2006 begins with the following inflammatory paragraph:

U.S. officials say they have found smoking-gun evidence of Iranian support for terrorists in Iraq: brand-new weapons fresh from Iranian factories. According to a

senior defense official, coalition forces have recently seized Iranian-made weapons and munitions that bear manufacturing dates in 2006. (Karl and Clancy)

The United States, for its part, had worked with its allies in an effort to place economic sanctions against Iran. The Americans had also designated the Iranian Revolutionary Guard a “specially designated global terrorist” (Orr). This highly unusual manoeuvre marked the first time that a part of a sovereign nation’s armed forces was considered to be a terrorist organization. Some individuals, like Senator James Webb, have suggested that this resolution amounts to a de-facto authorization for military force against Iran (in Welna).

Further complicating matters was the fact that the President of Iran had dubbed the Holocaust a “myth” (Vick et al.), and even more worrisome was his infamous threat to wipe Israel “off the map” (Fathi). Such inflammatory statements, coupled with the rising suspicions regarding Iran’s nuclear program, had led to a bitter stand-off between the U.S. and Iran. Many thinkers theorized that President Bush would have no choice but to resort to the military option before the end of his presidency.

Overall, one might charitably state that the relations between Iran and the U.S. were under some strain at the time of Ahmadinejad’s visit.

4.2. The Objective of Ahmadinejad’s Visit

In order to determine whether Ahmadinejad’s visit was successful, one must first determine what he sought to accomplish, i.e., what the objective of his visit was. Fortuitously, one student asked Ahmadinejad exactly that, as the following passage from the event’s transcript demonstrates:

QUESTION: Mr. President, I have two questions which I’ll put together.

One is, what did you hope to accomplish by speaking at Columbia today? And the second is, what would you have

said if you were permitted to visit the site of the September 11th tragedy?”

Ahmadinejad’s response is somewhat verbose and his response blends together so that it is not easy to distinguish when he is answering the first question and when the second. Moreover, the president even seems momentarily disoriented as he tries to recall what the second question was. Taken as a whole, however, it seems clear that the purpose of Ahmadinejad’s visit was to address the volatile post-9/11 atmosphere in a constructive fashion by entering into a dialogue regarding “root causes,” for example. The following passage seems particularly telling:

AHMADINEJAD: Don't you think that a lot of problems in the world come from the way you look at issues because of this kind of way of thinking, because of this sort of pessimistic approach toward a lot of people, because of a certain level of selfishness, self-absorption that needs to be put aside so that we can show respect to everyone, to allow an environment for friendship to grow, to allow all nations to talk with one another and move toward peace?

In other words, the visit appears to have been a goodwill mission. In addition to the above generalities Ahmadinejad offers these particulars:

AHMADINEJAD: If the root causes of 9/11 are examined properly -- why it was happened, what caused it, what were the conditions that led to it, who truly was involved, who was really involved -- and put it all together to understand how to prevent the crisis in Iraq, fix the problem in Afghanistan and Iraq combined.

When one combines these earlier remarks with Ahmadinejad’s closing remarks where he calls upon everyone to “move hand in hand to establish peace and future filled with friendship and justice and brotherhood” it seems fairly clear that the objectives of Ahmadinejad’s visit seems to have been to solve the problems in Iraq and

Afghanistan, invigorate friendly dialogue between Iran and the U.S., and to beat back the looming spectre of war.

Now, many powerful voices have suggested that Ahmadinejad's intent was never to enter into an honest and constructive dialogue. For example, Ed Koch, the former Mayor of New York City, claims that the real goal of Ahmadinejad's visit was "not to respond to Bollinger [the President of Columbia University], the Columbia students or Americans seeing him on television. His goal was to talk over their heads to the Islamic world and its terrorists and show how he bearded the Columbia lion in its own den."

In all fairness, it is perfectly reasonable for Ed Koch and other likeminded individuals to suggest that Ahmadinejad might have had ulterior motives. Ahmadinejad is, after all, the President of Iran, which is thought to be part of the Axis of Evil. If one accepts the premise that Iran is part of the Axis of Evil – as many Americans do – then one can logically conclude that Ahmadinejad himself may be evil. As such, his true, unspoken intentions might be thought to be more nefarious. For the purposes of this paper, however, Ahmadinejad must be afforded the benefit of the doubt. It is assumed that his nominal reason for the visit was in fact the true reason for his visit. Furthermore, this paper also assumes that Ahmadinejad legitimately intended to accomplish his stated objective.

4.3. The Response to and Outcome of Ahmadinejad's Visit

Having established the objective of Ahmadinejad's speech, one can now begin to ponder whether or not Ahmadinejad was in fact successful or unsuccessful in accomplishing his objective. One can obviously measure this by looking at America's foreign policy and whether or not any shift occurred there. One can also look at the response that Ahmadinejad elicited from the American people.

It is clear that Ahmadinejad's visit provoked an outcry among large segments of the American public. The news media took issue not only with the perceived shortcomings in Ahmadinejad's speech, but also with the character of Ahmadinejad

himself. “Grinning madman Ahmadinejad squirms at Columbia” screamed the headline of a NY Daily News article published on the 25th of September, 2007 (El-Ghobashy et al.).

Such criticisms extended beyond Ahmadinejad to include the institution of Columbia University. Many felt that a man like Ahmadinejad should not have been invited in the first place. The New York Post featured an article about the visit with the following headline: “Squalid Mistake: Academia’s Ugly Blindness”. The following quotation captures the spirit of the article: “...but that doesn’t make the school’s decision to offer a platform to the head of a violent terrorist state any less abject, squalid or shameless” (Herman).

Similar views were expressed in a number of newspapers. The criticisms routinely extended from Ahmadinejad to Columbia University and its President Lee Bollinger and from there to academics and liberals in general. Finally, extending an invitation to Ahmadinejad invoked the inevitable “Would they invite Hitler?” question from the fever swamps of the blogosphere, highlighting the volatile nature of the debate over Ahmadinejad’s visit.

Military families constitute a segment of the population whose views regarding Ahmadinejad’s visit seem imbued with particular gravity. The United States, after all, is a nation at war and maintaining good morale is absolutely vital to the war effort. However, indications are clear that military families were less than thrilled with the idea of Ahmadinejad’s visit: An article published on Fox News’ internet pages on the 25th of September, 2007, is entitled “U.S. Military Families Insulted By Ahmadinejad Visit.” The article contains a number of informative quotes from military family members. John Ellsworth of Wixom, Mich., whose son, Marine Lance Cpl. Justin Ellsworth, died in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004, asserts in the article the following: “I think American decency should have kept him [Ahmadinejad] from speaking at Columbia. He should never have been given the opportunity.” The article also features Patricia Roberts of Lithonia, Ga., who also lost her son, Army Spc. Jamaal R. Addison, in Iraq. Roberts asks “how can we allow him [Ahmadinejad] to come here, to speak to our children, when he has already said that if we go there, he will kill us” (Wallace).

One probably cannot blame military families for feeling the way they do. The war on terror has often been characterized as a battle between good and evil. If indeed the war on terror is a struggle against the forces of evil, then it seems highly improper to invite the President of a nation that belongs to the Axis of Evil to any American university, let alone one so prestigious as Columbia University.

One possible explanation for such an invitation would be the prospect that Ahmadinejad's visit could somehow avert the likely war between Iran and the U.S. It seems, however, that the likelihood of war between the U.S. and Iran had not significantly lessened as a result of Ahmadinejad's visit. Arguably, it may even have increased. Less than a month after Ahmadinejad's visit, President Bush, speaking about Iran's nuclear program, warned of the impending threat of World War III: "I've told people that if you're interested in avoiding World War III, it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing them (Iran) from having the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon" (Bush). This statement clearly did not indicate any notable lessening of tensions. On the contrary, Bush's statement could be considered an escalation of war rhetoric.

On the whole, whether one looks at the responses of various Americans or actual concrete changes in America's foreign policy (such as the lifting of economic sanctions or even just the softening of rhetoric), Ahmadinejad's visit appears to have yielded little in the way of tangible results. It seems clear then, that according to any reasonable real-world standard, Ahmadinejad failed to accomplish his objectives. To what exactly is this fact attributable to? Specifically, what role, if any, did cultural reasons play in this failure?

5. An Analysis of Ahmadinejad's Speech with Special Emphasis on Cultural Issues

As established earlier, when a speaker deviates from the accepted cultural norms of his audience, he creates a disconnect between himself and his audience. This resulting disconnect makes it harder to sway the opinions of his audience. There are a number of areas present in Ahmadinejad's speech where he departs from the cultural expectations of his American hosts. This clearly makes it more difficult for him to sway and influence the minds of Americans. Ahmadinejad's transgressions against American cultural norms can be roughly divided into the following categories:

1. hostile response to the hostile introduction
2. overt religiosity
3. somewhat overt insults directed against America
4. outrageous views regarding topics such as homosexuality and the Holocaust

5.1. Hostile Response to the Hostile Introduction

Before he was afforded the opportunity to speak, Ahmadinejad received an unusually hostile introduction from Lee Bollinger, the President of Columbia University. What Bollinger said is not important. But what Ahmadinejad said is very important. Ahmadinejad's response to this introduction arguably constitutes his first error. An inescapable fact, one that Ahmadinejad himself must have been acutely aware of, is that Iran is thought by many to be part of the Axis of Evil and Ahmadinejad is the President of Iran. Thus, Ahmadinejad likely was not going to receive a warm and cordial welcome, even in a "neutral" university setting.

Frankly, Ahmadinejad, or at least his handlers, should have anticipated this type of an introduction. Their best bet would probably have been to simply ignore it, thus conveying superior but not smug character. Instead, Ahmadinejad chooses to confront Bollinger and basically calls him a liar: "Many parts of his speech, there were many

insults and claims that were incorrect, regretfully.” By challenging the truthfulness of Bollinger’s introduction, Ahmadinejad immediately casts the situation as confrontational. Even worse, as the next example demonstrates, Ahmadinejad manages to come across as lecturing and condescending, a problem that persists throughout his speech:

AHMADINEJAD: I think the text read by the dear gentleman here, more than addressing me, was an insult to information and the knowledge of the audience here, present here. In a university environment we must allow people to speak their mind, to allow everyone to talk so that the truth is eventually revealed by all.

5.2. Overt Religiosity

One major, reoccurring “problem” that comes to the forefront is the overt religiosity that imbues Ahmadinejad’s entire speech. Ahmadinejad does not merely make passing references to God but in fact spends an inordinate amount of time quoting religious verses and contemplating other spiritual matters, as he does here:

AHMADINEJAD: Human being is just an example of the creation that is a combination of a material and the spirit. And another important point is the relationship of science and purity of spirit, life, behavior and ethics of the human being. In the teachings of the divine prophets, one reality shall always be attached to science; the reality of purity of spirit and good behavior. Knowledge and wisdom is pure and clear reality.

There is nothing inherently wrong with religious or philosophical musings, but this kind of religious tone creates a strange disconnect with the rest of the speech, especially when Ahmadinejad so very clearly makes an effort to impress his audience by emphasizing his academic credentials:

AHMADINEJAD: Right now, as president of Iran, I still continue teaching graduate and Ph.D.-level courses on a weekly basis. My students are working with me in scientific fields. I believe that I am an academic, myself.

The problem is that Ahmadinejad tries to have it both ways by coming across as both a man of science and a man of faith. This seems to be a somewhat illogical position. In the abstract one can argue that belief in God is premised on the very notion of faith while science will accept nothing on faith alone, but rather regards evidence as paramount in importance. Admittedly, in real life things are not always as black and white. There are no doubt many scientists who believe in God despite the fact that they can not prove his existence. Nevertheless, in logical terms, the contradiction still stands. At minimum, it seems safe to say that the immediate audience, consisting primarily of scientists and other likeminded individuals, will be at least somewhat unlikely to be pious.

Ahmadinejad, perhaps sensing this inherent contradiction, makes repeated efforts to bridge the gap between science and faith by verbalizing sentiments like “Science is the light, and scientists must be pure and pious”. President Ahmadinejad also states the following:

AHMADINEJAD: All researchers and scholars are loved by God. So I hope there will be a day where these scholars and scientists will rule the world and God himself will arrive with Moses and Christ and Mohammed to rule the world and to take us toward justice.

These statements certainly fit into what Ahmadinejad is saying, but one cannot help but wonder how much of his audience subscribes to this view. In any case, the larger point is that this sort of excessively religious speechifying seems decidedly out of place considering the venue. Columbia University is not a church or some other kind of a holy place; it is a learning institution dedicated to the pursuit of hard facts and knowledge. This means that injecting an excessive amount of religion into the proceedings constitutes a deviation from the cultural norm, as perceived by the

Americans. After all, one does not expect to hear a sermon at a university any more than one expects to hear a lecture on nuclear physics at a church. It is even conceivably that the scientists present at Columbia on the day of Ahmadinejad's speech might have been insulted by this invasion of religion and faith into their territory.

Even if one were to consider Ahmadinejad's level of religiosity appropriate, Ahmadinejad would still have a problem on his hands since he is not merely introducing religion into the mix, he is introducing the "wrong" religion. A passing reference to "God" or even "Allah" would be unlikely to catch anyone's attention. Unfortunately, Ahmadinejad chooses to be a bit more specific:

AHMADINEJAD: Oh, God, hasten the arrival of Imam al-Mahdi and grant him good health and victory and make us his followers and those to attest to his rightfulness.

For better or for worse, The United States is majority-Christian. It seems fairly safe to say then that the average American has probably never heard about "Imam al-Mahdi." So what does Ahmadinejad hope to gain by bringing him up? Invoking "Imam al-Mahdi" may not be detrimental to Ahmadinejad but it does not appear to be helpful either. Invoking Imam al-Mahdi certainly emphasizes rather than de-emphasizes Ahmadinejad's foreignness to his American hosts.

Additionally, Ahmadinejad's heavy use of religious tones feels not only quite inappropriate considering the venue, but somewhat inexplicable in its goals as well. To whose benefit are all these religious utterances intended to? The obvious answer would be those Americans who believe in God, but a closer examination reveals the absurdity of that conclusion. One must not lose sight of the fact that the United States is a nation at war. This war is often characterized as a struggle between good and evil. This obviously places Mahmoud Ahmadinejad into an uncomfortable position since he is the President of Iran, which is thought by many to be part of the Axis of Evil. Logically, God, in his infinite wisdom, is extremely unlikely to be neutral in any conflict that involves good and evil. As a matter of fact, shortly after 9/11, President Bush, while discussing the war on terror, explicitly stated that "freedom and fear,

justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them” (Address).

Considering all of this, why would Ahmadinejad draw attention to the fact that he is perceived by Americans to be evil by constantly referencing God? Every time he does so, he is reminding God-fearing Americans of the fact that Ahmadinejad himself is thought to be one of the “bad guys.” He is, after all, the President of Iran, which is part of the Axis of Evil. The end result is that those Americans who believe in God and the devil, heaven and hell, are likely to reject Ahmadinejad outright simply by the virtue of him being the President of a nation that is thought to belong to the Axis of Evil.

By contrast, those Americans who are perhaps most receptive to Ahmadinejad’s message, or at least willing to hear him out, are those who do not believe in God or good and evil in absolute terms. People like this are also likely to reject the black & white dichotomy of the war on terror. These Americans are mostly from the left side of the American political spectrum. Coincidentally, these Americans are also not terribly keen on the notion of injecting God and religion into politics. This is something that Bush did on occasion and it always seemed to infuriate the liberals.

So why would Ahmadinejad dwell on issues of faith since that will – in terms of those Americans who do believe in God – accomplish little apart from reminding them that Ahmadinejad himself is thought to be evil, and in terms of those who do not believe in God, accomplish little apart from annoying , or even infuriating, them? If he intended to curry favour with those Americans who dislike the Bush administration and its strict notions of good and evil, it might have been a better idea to dispense of all the religious references, especially considering that the venue was one that valued knowledge and science rather than one’s devotion to God.

In the end, Ahmadinejad’s religious verbiage adds little to the speech while drawing unnecessary attention to the issue of good and evil. It is difficult to see what Ahmadinejad hoped to accomplish with the inclusion of this religious parlance. In the way of an explanation, one might speculate that Ahmadinejad is unaware of the fact

that Iran is often thought to be a member of the Axis of Evil, though how that could be possible is hard to grasp.

5.3. Insults Directed Against America

It may have been bad form for Columbia University to first invite Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and then insult him, but Ahmadinejad more than returned the favour by repeatedly slamming America and its foreign policy. The following passages are virtually nothing more than one insult heaped on top of another:

AHMADINEJAD: First, the wrongdoers reveal only a part of the reality, which is to their own benefit, and conceal the rest. As we have witnessed with respect to the scholars of the divine religions in the past, too, unfortunately, today, we see that certain researchers and scientists are still hiding the truth from the people.

Second, science, scientists, and scholars are misused for personal, group, or party interests. So, in today's world, bullying powers are misusing many scholars and scientists in different fields with the purpose of stripping nations of their wealth.

Ahmadinejad is basically accusing the Bush administration, without naming names of course, of cherry picking intelligence to justify an unjust war. Ahmadinejad continues with more insults:

AHMADINEJAD: And they use all opportunities only for their own benefit.

For example, they deceive people by using scientific methods and tools. They, in fact, wish to justify their own wrongdoings, though. By creating nonexistent enemies, for

example, and an insecure atmosphere, they try to control all in the name of combating insecurity and terrorism.

They even violate individual and social freedoms in their own nations under that pretext. They do not respect the privacy of their own people. They tap telephone calls and try to control their people. They create an insecure psychological atmosphere in order to justify their warmongering acts in different parts of the world.

If America faced only “non-existent” enemies, then 9/11 never would have occurred. The fact that it did occur would seem to indicate that contrary to what Ahmadinejad claims, America’s enemies are not only existent but dangerous as well. In this context, accusing America of warmongering seems like a rather impolite thing to do. The accusations of warmongering, taken together with the earlier accusations of distorting intelligence, constitute fairly inflammatory remarks. There is some logic to this. The Bush administration was not well liked by the left wing of Democratic Party. Ahmadinejad’s allegations are exactly the sort of thing that could very easily gain traction with anti-Bush liberals. “Stripping nations of their wealth” might not have the same pithiness as “war for oil,” but the implication is clearly the same. Ahmadinejad is practically using liberal talking points.

While some academics and liberals might be receptive to this type of reasoning, the presence of television cameras and reporters meant that Ahmadinejad’s words would be relayed to all of America, not just those individuals who were physically present at Columbia on the day of his visit. An argument that works on academics and liberals is less likely to work on Republicans for the simple reason that Republicans tend to be more supportive of the war effort. It seems safe to say that Republicans, or most mainstream Americans for that matter, are likely not going to be impressed by a speech that is an implicit, and at times even an explicit, attack against their president, their country and their values. Likewise, one might reasonably speculate that even though most Democrats are not fond of the Bush administration, most of them are still unlikely to side with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over their own democratically elected President.

In another part of the speech Ahmadinejad makes this argument:

AHMADINEJAD: Another point of sorrow: Some big powers create a monopoly over science and prevent other nations in achieving scientific development as well.

This, too, is one of the surprises of our time. Some big powers do not want to see the progress of other societies and nations. They turn to thousands of reasons, make allegations, place economic sanctions to prevent other nations from developing and advancing, all resulting from their distance from human values and the teachings of the divine prophets.

Ahmadinejad is clearly talking about the economic sanctions that the U.S. and the rest of the free world have placed against Iran. He has every right to address the issue, but for him to claim that the reasons for the sanctions include “their distance from human values and the teachings of the divine prophets” is bound to be an affront to his hosts, and, arguably, to common sense.

Americans are very proud of their extensive freedoms and their commitment to the defence of human values. Therefore, from an objective point of view, as well as from an American point of view, the distance that America has from human values is certainly much less than the distance that Iran has from them. And the “distance from the teachings of the divine prophets” is typical of the kind of religious mush that saturates Ahmadinejad’s speech. The meaning of the passage, assuming there is one, is without a doubt going to be lost on the vast majority of Americans.

It is difficult to see how Ahmadinejad expects Americans to accede to this type of argument, as in-your-face offensive as it is. Again, Ahmadinejad is forgetting who he is (President of Iran, which is part of the Axis of Evil) and who he is talking to (all of America, which is the world’s most ardent advocate of freedom). His patronizing tone might carry the day at some other venue, but this time he is addressing an American audience. It seems a foregone conclusion that this audience is not going to respond

well to vaguely disguised insults coming from a man like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – after all, nobody enjoys being insulted.

Towards the end of his speech, while discussing the various ways through which Iran and the U.S. might resolve their points of conflict, Ahmadinejad openly and specifically accuses the U.S. of a number of misdeeds:

AHMADINEJAD: I think that if the U.S. administration, if the U.S. government puts aside some of its old behaviors, it can actually be a good friend for the Iranian people, for the Iranian nation.

For 28 years, they've consistently threatened us, insulted us, prevented our scientific development, every day, under one pretext or another.

The above quote illustrates Ahmadinejad's folly very clearly and succinctly. There is nothing wrong or forbidden about expressing valid criticisms. But when elder statesmen criticize other nations' foreign policy, custom usually dictates that such criticisms are conveyed in a subtle, even understated manner. President Ahmadinejad is, after all, a diplomat and diplomats are supposed to behave diplomatically. By contrast, Ahmadinejad does not mince words. According to him, America has engaged in a number of malicious acts "every day" for 28 years. He also claims that America's actions are motivated by "pretexts," as opposed to genuine concerns. One might perhaps grant Ahmadinejad some credit for at least openly and honestly expressing his views on the topic of America's foreign policy, but even if all of his criticisms were valid and well-founded, he would likely have been better served by a more diplomatic approach.

As it is, Ahmadinejad's speech seems largely at cross-purposes with his stated objective of fostering a friendly dialogue between Iran and the United States. Ahmadinejad ends his speech by asking "Almighty God to assist all of us to move hand in hand to establish peace and future filled with friendship and justice and brotherhood." If indeed Ahmadinejad genuinely believes this, then it is doubly unfortunate that such sentiments were not better expressed throughout the speech.

5.4. Outrageous Views Regarding Sensitive Topics

In order for a speaker to be convincing, he first needs to be credible. If someone is judged to be lacking in character or somehow confused about the most basic of facts, people are unlikely to give him much credence. This is a problem for Ahmadinejad for he repeatedly says things which greatly detract from his credibility. This phenomenon is most visible during the question & answer segment when Ahmadinejad has to contend with a number of challenging questions.

The issue of women's rights is addressed in the following manner:

QUESTION: Mr. President, another student asks -- Iranian women are now denied basic human rights and your government has imposed draconian punishments, including execution on Iranian citizens who are homosexuals. Why are you doing those things?

AHMADINEJAD: Freedoms in Iran are genuine, true freedoms. Iranian people are free. Women in Iran enjoy the highest levels of freedom.

Ahmadinejad rejects the premise of the question and makes that very clear. While the question was undeniably combative, and, as such, a certain level of umbrage on Ahmadinejad's part can perhaps be considered understandable, the fact still remains that Ahmadinejad signed up for this of his own volition and he should have anticipated tough questions. For him to reject the premise of this question so completely by stating that "women in Iran enjoy the highest levels of freedom" does not establish a very good tone for the rest of the answer. The big problem for Ahmadinejad is that by rejecting the premise of the question, he is refusing to accept and acknowledge facts, as they are commonly perceived by the American people.

Ahmadinejad continues his answer by bringing up more specific examples of female participation in various walks of life in Iran:

AHMADINEJAD: We have two deputy -- two vice presidents that are female, at the highest levels of specialty, specialized fields. In our parliament and our government and our universities, they're present. In our biotechnological fields, our technological fields, there are hundreds of women scientists that are active -- in the political realm as well.

It's not -- it's wrong for some governments, when they disagree with another government, to, sort of, try to spread lies that distort the full truth.

Our nation is free. It has the highest level of participation in elections, in Iran. Eighty percent, ninety percent of the people turn out for votes during the elections, half of which, over half of which are women. So how can we say that women are not free? Is that the entire truth?

Perhaps the most notable aspect of Ahmadinejad's reply to this question is that while he decries the notion of spreading lies that distort the full truth, he is, in essence at least, guilty of doing the very same thing by claiming that "women in Iran enjoy the highest levels of freedom." How many American women (or men for that matter) are going to believe this?

The examples that Ahmadinejad brings up regarding women's contribution to Iranian politics only proves that the situation in Iran is not as bad as it is in some other countries. Even allowing for the fact that the "full" or "entire" truth is bound to be a subjective thing, women in many countries, like in the United States for example, clearly enjoy a higher level of freedom. Arguably, the mere fact that this type of a question can be posed is indicative of the lack of freedoms that Iranian women enjoy.

To make matters worse, Ahmadinejad employs this same tactic of distortion not just in this one answer, but throughout his entire speech. As seen earlier, he systematically misrepresents facts when discussing American foreign policy. This phenomenon is so prevalent in his speech that it gives rise to the notion that it is present by design. There

seems to be a concerted effort on his part to “muddy the waters” by providing evasive answers that are at best misleading and at worst dishonest.

This inevitably exposes Ahmadinejad to charges of hypocrisy for he exhorts the importance of truth while simultaneously obfuscating it repeatedly during his speech. Ahmadinejad’s tendency to prevaricate did not go unnoticed, as evidenced by the very telling remarks made by the moderator, Lee Bollinger, at the conclusion of the event:

MODERATOR: I'm sorry that President Ahmadinejad's schedule makes it necessary for him to leave before he's been able to answer many of the questions that we have, or even answer some of the ones that we posed to him.

A good example of Ahmadinejad’s evasiveness is the way he responds to a question about homosexuals. If Ahmadinejad’s take on women’s rights decreased his credibility, his response to a question about homosexuals all but destroys it. Ahmadinejad insists repeatedly – with a straight face no less – that there quite simply are no homosexuals at all in Iran.

AHMADINEJAD: In Iran, we don't have homosexuals, like in your country. We don't have that in our country. In Iran, we do not have this phenomenon. I don't know who's told you that we have it.

The audience responds, somewhat tellingly, with a mixture of laughter and boos. Ahmadinejad’s claim is of course somewhat ludicrous and its impact on his credibility should not be underestimated. Ahmadinejad’s answer could be a clumsy attempt to deflect attention away from the way that homosexuals are treated in Iran, or it could be that Ahmadinejad genuinely believes that there are no homosexuals in Iran. Neither possibility is particularly appealing and the end result is the same in both cases: loss of credibility.

One further area where Ahmadinejad struggles is the issue of the Holocaust. In response to a question inquiring why Ahmadinejad supports more research into the

Holocaust given the well-documented nature of it, Ahmadinejad invokes the academic principle of never-ending research:

AHMADINEJAD: Thank you very much for your question. I am an academic, and you are as well.

Can you argue that researching a phenomenon is finished, forever done? Can we close the books for good on a historical event?

There are different perspectives that come to light after every research is done. Why should we stop research at all? Why should we stop the progress of science and knowledge?

So far, so good. But next Ahmadinejad attempts to turn the tables by claiming that those who oppose further research into the Holocaust are in fact the ones who ought to be ashamed of themselves. By referencing past developments in the world of physics, he makes a fairly compelling point:

AHMADINEJAD: You shouldn't ask me why I'm asking questions. You should ask yourselves why you think that that's questionable? Why do you want to stop the progress of science and research?

Do you ever take what's known as absolute in physics? We had principles in mathematics that were granted to be absolute in mathematics for over 800 years. But new science has gotten rid of those absolutisms, come forward other different logics of looking at mathematics and sort of turned the way we look at it as a science altogether after 800 years.

So, we must allow researchers, scholars, they investigate into everything, every phenomenon -- God, universe,

human beings, history and civilization. Why should we stop that?

One the whole, one might actually give points to Ahmadinejad for a technically adept answer. He essentially sidesteps the question by exalting the virtues of continued research – one of the better arguments for further research into the Holocaust. Apart from repeating himself and possibly appearing a bit evasive, there is nothing fundamentally wrong in the way Ahmadinejad phrases his response. The problem for Ahmadinejad is that there really is no good answer to a question like this. When one vigorously demands more research into a subject that virtually everyone else considers settled science, it tends to make you look silly or in denial. The simple reality is that questioning the Holocaust is decidedly non-pc and it tends to automatically render one a bigot in the eyes of others.

Before Ahmadinejad began his speech, Lee Bollinger, clearly anticipating that the issue of the Holocaust would come up during the speech, addressed the following introductory remarks to Ahmadinejad:

In a December 2005 state television broadcast, you described the Holocaust as a "fabricated" "legend." One year later, you held a two-day conference of Holocaust deniers.

For the illiterate and ignorant, this is dangerous propaganda. When you come to a place like this, this makes you, quite simply, ridiculous. You are either brazenly provocative or astonishingly uneducated.

You should know that Columbia is a world center of Jewish studies and now, in partnership with the YIVO Institute, of Holocaust studies. Since the 1930s, we've provided an intellectual home for countless Holocaust refugees and survivors and their children and grandchildren. The truth is that the Holocaust is the most documented event in human history. Because of this, and

for many other reasons, your absurd comments about the "debate" over the Holocaust both defy historical truth and make all of us who continue to fear humanity's capacity for evil shudder at this closure of memory, which is always virtue's first line of defense.

Will you cease this outrage? (Bollinger)

These sentiments seem to sum up the audiences feelings on the issue quite well. Even Bollinger, who clearly is not disturbed easily since he considers inviting Ahmadinejad to speak at Columbia University perfectly acceptable, considers Ahmadinejad's views on the Holocaust an "outrage." He describes Ahmadinejad as "ridiculous" and suggests that he might be "astonishingly uneducated," which must be especially offensive to Ahmadinejad for he is a self-proclaimed academic. Finally, Bollinger even dismisses Ahmadinejad's views on the Holocaust as "dangerous propaganda."

In any event, all of this adds up to form a picture that is not flattering: Ahmadinejad comes across either as a hypocrite, or alternatively, as something of a buffoon, a caricature of himself. Either way, his credibility, in doubt to begin with, is further diminished to the point of non-existence.

6. Osama Bin Laden's 2004 "October Surprise" Video: Aims and Outcomes

6.1. The Background of the Videotape

On September 11th, 2001, Al-Qaeda terrorists attacked America and killed roughly 3,000 people. This sparked off a global war on terror which led American forces first to Afghanistan and then to Iraq. After a string of initial victories, the American war machine began to sputter as the terrorists seized the initiative. The political developments mirrored the developments in the war. After a period of unity, the American political consensus broke down and the Commander-In-Chief was subjected to moderate and at times even heavy criticism.

The issue of who could best prosecute the war on terror was one of the big items to be decided in the U.S. presidential elections, which was to be held on the second of November, 2004. As that fateful day neared, the incumbent President, George W. Bush, was holding onto a narrow but steady lead over his challenger, John Kerry (Realclear). On the 29th of October a videotape surfaced where the head of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, spoke at length about 9/11, the war and the way forward.

The timing of the video's release was such that the videotape quickly became a classic example of an "October surprise" which might well impact the election.

6.2. The Objective of the Videotape

6.2.1 The Stated Objective

The central question with regard to the release of the videotape is naturally what, if anything, was bin Laden attempting to accomplish. Fortunately, bin Laden clearly and succinctly states his reasons for releasing the videotape:

People of America this talk of mine is for you and concerns the ideal way to prevent another Manhattan and deals with the war and its causes and results.

It would appear that bin Laden wanted Americans to alter their foreign policy to such an extent that bin Laden and likeminded individuals would no longer feel any need to launch further attacks like 9/11. Another significant and interesting point here is the notion that bin Laden is not addressing his followers or the world at large, but rather, the videotape is clearly intended specifically for the American people. Bin Laden also expresses a desire to discuss the causes of the war. In other words, it seems that bin Laden wishes to answer to oft-repeated question: Why do they hate us so much?

6.2.2 The Unstated Objective

This paper will later demonstrate that some have opined that bin Laden also had a hidden, unstated motive in releasing his videotape: he wanted to influence the outcome of the election. This theory is somewhat controversial and absent an admission from bin Laden himself, it is difficult to see how one could prove this theory. Nevertheless, the following ruminations are designed to illustrate that there are a number of facts which lend credence to this theory.

First, it should be stated that bin Laden refrains from endorsing either candidate. This, however, did not stop an avalanche of speculation from unfolding. Accomplished journalist David Brooks of the New York Times brought up the point that most Americans trust Bush over Kerry when it comes to combating terrorism – suggesting that the tape would work in Bush’s favour. Conversely, a CBS News article featured Joseph Nye, a political scientist at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, who spelled out the opposing logic:

I think it helps Kerry slightly, in the sense that it dramatizes one of these issues, which is that Bush has not accomplished what he set out to accomplish in terms of catching bin Laden. (in Murphy and Kuhn)

After the election was over, legendary newsman Geraldo Rivera reported that John Kerry himself believed that the bin Laden tape had cost him the presidency (in Exclusive).

While there is some uncertainty as to which candidate bin Laden was rooting for, the timing of the tape's release strongly suggests that bin Laden wanted to influence the election in one way or another. Tommy Thompson, the former Governor of Wisconsin and experienced politician, points out the obvious by saying that "Usama bin Laden would not give out a video report 72 hours before the election unless he wanted to influence it" (in Nauert and Moss). Before one proceeds any further, one should first note a few facts about bin Laden: he is almost certainly an exceptionally intelligent man whose diabolical activities appear to be methodical and calculated. He is, after all, a terrorist mastermind, the leader of an international terrorist organisation, and a figure of almost mythical proportions. It goes without saying that an unintelligent man likely would not have been able to carry out attacks like 9/11, nor would an unintelligent man have been able to elude capture for so many years.

This paper argues that bin Laden was attempting to damage Bush's chances of winning without being too obvious about it. The reason why bin Laden refrains from openly endorsing Kerry is the fact that he correctly calculates that such an overt endorsement would likely backfire as the American voters would simply instinctively do the opposite of what bin Laden wanted.

The arguments supporting the hypothesis that bin Laden wanted Kerry to win are as follows:

Firstly, the release of the tape would remind Americans of the events of 9/11. The single most important job of a president, any president, is to insure the safety of the citizenry. Bush clearly failed in this regard and roughly 3,000 Americans paid the price. To insure that the voters received the message loud and clear, bin Laden reminded Americans that while their fellow Americans were dying, President Bush was reading children's stories to school kids. While Bush's leadership after the fact proved to be strong, his behaviour on 9/11 was hardly his finest hour. Reminding the

electorate of the success of the 9/11 attacks and Bush's relative feebleness obviously works to Kerry's benefit.

Secondly, bin Laden must have known that the release of the tape would refocus attention to the fact that Bush had failed to capture or kill bin Laden, who is America's biggest enemy. Again, this failure being spotlighted in the waning days of the campaign could not have been helpful to President Bush.

Thirdly, while bin Laden stops short of endorsing Kerry, he clearly "un-endorses" Bush in no uncertain terms. He accuses the President not just of bad judgment but of criminal misdeeds and refers to him derisively as the "liar in the White House."

Fourthly, the terrorists have an established pattern of influencing the results of democratic elections. The timing of the Madrid train bombings in Spain (the bombs went off only three days before the election) strongly suggests that the attacks were almost certainly designed not only to cause carnage but also to thwart, or at least alter, the will of the voters. In the run-up to the elections, the right-wing party of José María Aznar was ahead in the polls (Pro-U.S.). The terrorist attacks which occurred mere days before the election changed the political calculus as leftwing politicians surged into an impressive come-from-behind victory. One could easily offer some caveats by arguing that it wasn't the train bombings per se that altered the results, but rather how skilfully the political parties responded to those train bombings. This is a valid point to consider, but the fact nevertheless remains that had there been no terrorist bombings, the election results would likely have looked very different. The terrorists' method of influencing the outcome of the elections in this Spanish example (detonation of bombs) is obviously different than in the United States (release of a videotape), but the desire to hijack the democratic process and alter the course of the elections appears to be the same in both cases.

Finally, perhaps the most compelling argument in favour of the "Osama supports Kerry" contention is the fact that as Election Day neared, Bush was continuously leading in the polls (Realclear). While his lead was not big, it was steady. Therefore, if bin Laden wanted Bush to prevail, he could simply have done nothing at all.

One might pose the obvious question: Why would bin Laden want Kerry to win over Bush? The equally obvious answer would likely be that bin Laden may have perceived Bush to be a more formidable opponent than Kerry and thus wanted Kerry to win.

There is no question that George W. Bush prosecuted the war on terror with vigour. The initial war in Afghanistan demolished Al-Qaeda's training camps and eliminated its safe haven by toppling the Taliban government. Some reports have also suggested that bin Laden himself was wounded at Tora Bora and only barely escaped with his life. A large number of the men under his command were not as fortunate. In short, Al-Qaeda was on the run.

The war in Iraq and the consequent bloodshed there arguably transformed the war from a battle between the United States and one terrorist organisation into a battle of duelling ideologies where Americans likely perceive themselves in agitating on behalf of free elections and democratic reforms while Al-Qaeda's arguments consist of beheadings and somewhat aimless bombings that are often directed against civilians.

However, while Bush's leadership in the war led to many victories like the fall of the Taliban and the ouster of Saddam Hussein, many of Kerry's supporters felt that in his desire to smite the terrorists Bush had gone too far by allegedly authorizing the torture of terrorists and in other ways depriving them of their human rights. Had Kerry been elected, he might have scaled back some of these anti-terror policies which might have given Al-Qaeda members some breathing room as well as a sense that America's resolve was weakening.

Furthermore, bin Laden might believe that Kerry would generally be weaker on defense, as Democrats are, rightly or wrongly, usually perceived as pursuing less muscular foreign policies than their Republican counterparts. In fact, in an interview for an article in *The New York Times* Kerry himself suggested that "We have to get back to the place we were, where terrorists are not the focus of our lives, but they're a nuisance" (in Bai). Comparing the war on terror to the decidedly more metaphorical "war on poverty," Kerry continues:

As a former law-enforcement person, I know we're never going to end prostitution. We're never going to end illegal gambling. But we're going to reduce it, organized crime, to a level where it isn't on the rise. It isn't threatening people's lives every day, and fundamentally, it's something that you continue to fight, but it's not threatening the fabric of your life. (in Bai)

This suggests that Kerry would perhaps have pursued a foreign policy that would have harkened back to the kind of foreign policy that was pursued by Bill Clinton where terrorism is regarded primarily as a law enforcement problem to be fought with lawyers and subpoenas.

Bin Laden may also have been influenced by any number of other considerations: Bin Laden may have assumed that Kerry would spend more money on domestic American concerns like health care and less on defence as is sometimes thought to be the case with liberal Democrats. Kerry earned, after all, the somewhat dubious distinction of being the “most liberal member of the Senate in 2003” from the politically neutral magazine *The National Journal* (How). It is also plausible that bin Laden was operating from a position of weakness and wanted to enter into negotiations and deemed, rightly or wrongly, that Kerry would be more inclined to negotiate with terrorists.

One further possibility is the notion that bin Laden had no preference between Bush and Kerry. Instead, bin Laden may have simply wanted the symbolic victory of thwarting, or at the very least influencing, the American electoral process much like the terrorists thwarted, or at least influenced, the Spanish electoral process. It is not counter-intuitive to suggest that bin Laden likely learned from the Spanish example that one can alter the outcome of elections with appropriately timed acts of terror. And if one can alter the outcome of elections, one can alter policy. This is exactly what occurred in Spain. After a new leftwing government took over, Spain decided to pull out its troops from Iraq. It is entirely conceivable that bin Laden was attempting to replicate this very feat.

6.3. The Response to and Outcome of the Videotape

As in the previous case study, having established bin Laden's objectives, one can now look at the American response to the videotape in an effort to determine whether or not bin Laden accomplished his objectives. What one most expects to see – had bin Laden been successful – is some kind of a substantive and concrete change in America's foreign policy: A formal apology, perhaps, or a withdrawal of American forces from Iraq and/or Afghanistan. Failing that, bin Laden may have hoped for some kind of a denunciation or a decisive break with Israel, or at least a speech from the American president acknowledging the legitimacy of bin Laden's grievances.

The absence of any major foreign policy shifts suggests that bin Laden's gambit bore no fruit. What about the unstated objective? Kerry obviously lost to Bush, so the unstated objective was not accomplished. Going beyond the obvious, things get a little murkier. After the election's dust had settled, Bush's supporters mostly claimed that the tape helped Kerry, while Kerry's supporters argued the exact opposite (Nauert and Moss).

Going strictly on the basis of polls, however, it would seem that the spread between Bush and Kerry remained steady in the waning days of the campaign. Bush held on to a narrow lead and on Election Day he secured a narrow victory. The truth is that bin Laden's videotape does not really appear to have significantly swayed things at all, one way or another. In other words, if bin Laden wanted Kerry to prevail, he failed. But even if bin Laden had wanted Bush to prevail, he still would have essentially failed, for – even though Bush won – bin Laden failed to move the needle. One way or another, it seems fair to say that, in terms of the election, bin Laden ultimately became more of a footnote rather than the deciding factor.

7. An Analysis of Bin Laden's Videotape with Special Emphasis on Cultural Issues

As before with Ahmadinejad, there are a number of passages present in bin Laden's speech which – to an American audience – would likely come across as false, odd, outrageous or perhaps even deeply offensive. This in turn would undermine bin Laden's credibility and decrease his chances of swaying the minds of Americans. As before, bin Laden's cultural transgressions can be roughly divided into five separate categories:

1. the self-defence defence
2. overt religiosity
3. misrepresentations and insults directed against America
4. war propaganda
5. liberal talking points

7.1. The Self-defence Defence

Bin Laden makes it exceedingly clear that he regards the events of 9/11 as a form of self-defence. First he enumerates a list of grievances and then states that "...the events of September 11th came as a reply to those great wrongs." The heart of bin Laden's explanation for 9/11 is fairly simple, possibly even simplistic. It was retribution for all the wrongs suffered during the invasion of Lebanon when America "permitted" Israel to invade. The line between revenge and self-defence is not always clear, and one can thus argue that bin Laden was essentially acting in self-defence.

At one point bin Laden even seems to suggest that his actions were motivated by a desire to deter the Americans from engaging in future invasions where "women and children" might be killed. This would, of course, be pre-emptive self-defence. Bin Laden also briefly references other events like the sanctions against Iraq and the general nastiness of the Israeli-Palestinian limbo, but for the most part he dwells on

the invasion of Lebanon. A good question to ask here would be why were Americans so unaware of the supposed reasons for 9/11? Perhaps the most obvious explanation is that Americans are stupid and ill-informed. However, it is clear that this explanation is not correct: America, whatever its faults may be, is not a backwards nation.

Americans have virtually limitless access to information. They have countless television and radio stations that offer news. Internet access is also common. There is little in the way of state censorship. Furthermore, Americans are not ill-informed simpletons who are unaware of the events of the world. On the contrary, America is the home for many prestigious and world-famous teaching institutions like Harvard and Yale. Americans in general enjoy a relatively high degree of education, at least in comparison to many other nations where people struggle to learn how to read or write.

An alternative explanation for the obliviousness of Americans could be to suggest that Americans are cold-hearted and mean people who do not care about the misfortunate peoples of the world. This, too, would seem to be incorrect. The United States, after all, gives more foreign aid than any other country in the world and provides significant funding for the United Nations. Specifically, noted polemicist Ann Coulter says that “Americans make up about 5 percent of the world's population and give about 35 percent of the aid.” And still, when the 9/11 attacks unfolded, a commonly heard question among many, if not most, Americans was: “Why do they hate us so much?” Even after blame was assigned and the perpetrator became clear, Americans, by and large, remained oblivious as to why they had been targeted. This obliviousness is illustrative of how poor bin Laden’s justification really is – at least in terms of emotional resonance with an American audience.

If Americans were, for the most part at least, completely or mostly unaware of the events that bin Laden cites as motivation and justification for the 9/11 attacks, then does that not indicate that these events could not possibly have been as significant and noteworthy as bin Laden makes them out to be? The intent here is not to downplay the very real suffering of those in Palestine and Lebanon, but simply to illustrate the relative insignificance of these events that bin Laden claims justify the 9/11 attacks. The mere fact that Americans have to ask the question: “Why do they hate us so much?” is very telling, for it is clear evidence that Americans obviously did not

regard themselves as having done anything that might conceivably have warranted something like the 9/11 attacks.

Even if one subscribes to the notion that revenge is justified, there is good reason for Americans to believe that events in Lebanon simply do not rise to such a level that they would ever justify something on the scale of 9/11. The truth is that there is nothing terribly significant or unusual about the invasion of Lebanon and the accompanying bloodshed – not when considered in the context of world history and how bloody and violent it has been. The history of the world is rife with stories like the invasion of Lebanon. Nations quarrel and the citizens pay the price. Only the names and places change. It is unfortunate to be sure, but it is also something that the world has seen time and time again.

9/11 on the other hand is something different. It is the single-most destructive terrorist attack in the history of America – and perhaps the world, as well. It is regarded, in America at least, as a day that forever changed the world as evidenced by the popularity of the phrase “9/11 changed everything” (Henninger). Specifically, “politics in America, the law, the conduct of war, the West and Islam, U.S. allies past and present--all changed” (Henninger). It seems safe to say that 9/11 is an event like the assassination of JFK or the moon landing – something that every American will remember for the rest of their days.

It is perhaps understandable that Americans would have such a potent reaction to 9/11, for, at the time, even non-Americans regarded the events of 9/11 as exceedingly newsworthy. One can of course criticise Americans for “overreacting” to the deaths of “only” three thousand people. Nevertheless, this is the approach that Americans have adopted. After the events of 9/11, Americans have divided the history of the world into two parts: the pre-9/11 era and the post-9/11 era. However much non-Americans like bin Laden might object to this “overhyping” of 9/11, it does not change the fact that Americans regard 9/11 as an event of profound and life-altering significance.

What all of this means is that the two events that bin Laden cites – the invasion of Lebanon and 9/11 – have a huge discrepancy in the size and scale of the events: one event so relatively insignificant while the other is completely unprecedented and life-

changing. After all, bin Laden is basically arguing cause and effect: the invasion of Lebanon being something that directly and inexorably led to the 9/11 attacks much like the bombing of Pearl Harbor led to the bombing of Hiroshima or the massacre at Waco led to the Oklahoma bombing. However, there is something missing in bin Laden's equation and that something is proportionality. A tit is supposed to be followed by a tat. It seems likely that on some level bin Laden himself recognizes that proportionality is completely missing from his chain of logic, for he attempts some verbal sleight-of-hand by talking about "towers" in Lebanon and "towers" in America:

And as I looked at those demolished towers in Lebanon, it entered my mind that we should punish the oppressor in kind and that we should destroy towers in America in order that they taste some of what we tasted and so that they be deterred from killing our women and children.

Citing deterrence is a nice touch but the larger reality is that not all towers are equal. The World Trade Center's towers were not just any old towers. They were a modern marvel of engineering, rising halfway to heaven. The World Trade Center may not have been one of the Seven Wonders of the World but it was a major landmark visible from miles away and people from all corners of the world travelled great distances at considerable expense to behold the World Trade Center with their own eyes. It is thus perhaps understandable that Americans would regard their towers as being a bit more significant than Lebanon's towers.

In the end, no verbal trickery can erase the underlying truth: Bin Laden claims that the invasion of Lebanon was an event of such magnitude that it justified the premeditated and cold-blooded murder of 3,000 innocent lives, but the event he cites as justification is something that most Americans were only vaguely aware of and they perceived little or no connection between that event and 9/11, as evidenced by the question "Why do they hate us so much?" Bin Laden himself notes that even years after 9/11 the American people continued to be unaware of the fact that there was supposed to be a link between the invasion of Lebanon and the events of 9/11:

No one except a dumb thief plays with the security of others and then makes himself believe he will be secure

whereas thinking people when disaster strikes make it their priority to look for its causes in order to prevent it happening again. But I am amazed at you even though we are in the 4th year after the events of Sept. 11th. Bush is still engaged in distortion, deception and hiding from you the real causes. And thus the reasons are still there for a repeat of what occurred.

Bin Laden ascribes this lack of knowledge to be the fault of President Bush for misleading the American people. But the reality is that no president can mislead that profoundly in a free society where citizens have virtually unlimited access to uncensored news from countless sources. It would appear then that the American people simply have a different take on things than bin Laden does. Bin Laden can claim to be acting in self-defence as many times as he wants, but most Americans simply did not and do not consider themselves to be the aggressors.

Another factor that adds to bin Laden's inability to sell the self-defense proposition is the fact that towards the end of the videotape he makes the following remarks, which are clearly inflammatory and one-sided to the point of being anti-Semitic:

And the same goes for your allies in Palestine. They terrorize the women and children and kill and capture the men as they lie sleeping with their families on the mattresses that you may recall that for every action, there is a reaction.

If the only crime of Palestinian men was to sleep with their families on mattresses then the behaviour of the Israelis truly would be little short of barbarians. But the truth of course is that Palestinian men (and women and sometimes even children) have a rather unfortunate proclivity toward engaging in some terrorizing of their own. bin Laden does not even gloss over this complex issue. Instead, he reduces the intensely difficult and mind-bogglingly complex Israeli-Palestinian issue to two sentences.

In doing so, bin Laden exposes himself to the risk of being perceived as a one-sided extremist who refuses to assess and evaluate the complex Israeli-Palestinian issue honestly, logically and unemotionally. It is not a huge logical jump for American audiences to conclude that bin Laden might easily engage in similar oversimplification and one-sidedness in assessing America's actions in the world.

This logical jump becomes especially easy for Americans to make when one considers the fact that a great many folks from the Middle-East have a tendency to conflate the actions of America and Israel as if though these were not two separate nations. Iranian political figures occasionally even refer to America and Israel colloquially as the “Great Satan” and the “Little Satan,” presumably to highlight the supposed similarity in their foreign policies.

While these two sentences regarding Israel and Palestine appear in the videotape almost as throwaway lines which were conjured up as an afterthought, their significance and impact ought not to be underestimated. Building up one’s credibility can be a time-consuming process but destroying one’s credibility can be accomplished in remarkably few words. Going over these two sentences, one can not help but wonder how many Americans regard bin Laden’s description of the Israeli-Palestinian situation as a fair, honest and accurate assessment of things. It seems highly unlikely that any impartial observer of any nationality would describe the situation in the same manner as bin Laden does. And Americans are, if anything, probably somewhat more sympathetic to Israel than most peoples of the world. If bin Laden wanted to address this issue he should have done so in a more fair and balanced manner. As it is, bin Laden would likely have been better served simply by removing these two sentences from his videotape.

7.2. Overt Religiosity

An old adage holds that “even the devil can quote the Bible to fit his own needs.” Bin Laden may not be the devil, but most Americans could be forgiven for thinking that he probably lives in the same neighbourhood as the devil. All levity aside, the fact is that, for all intents and purposes, Osama bin Laden is a real-life bogeyman. He is the kind of Machiavellian character who is often compared to Adolph Hitler and other such rogues from the pages of history. Reports have emerged that even bin Laden’s own son, Omar, regards his father as “evil” (in Meek).

When a man who is responsible for the cold-blooded and premeditated murder of countless of their fellow citizens talks at length about God, Americans are likely to

take notice. They may easily consider this kind of behaviour not only odd, but in bad taste as well. Some may even regard it as perverse and twisted and more than just a bit hypocritical. Even bin Laden's fellow Muslims might take offence at the repeated references to Allah. In the wake of such declarations, moderate Muslims may feel compelled to publicly declare that while they share bin Laden's religion, they do not share his propensity for terror. Making such declarations can be uncomfortable and embarrassing, and there is little guarantee that non-Muslims will heed your words.

Some Americans, rightly or wrongly, perceive a connection between Islam and terrorism. When a terrorist mastermind such as bin Laden repeatedly references Allah, this gives ammunition to those who argue that all Muslims are terrorists or at least sympathetic to terrorism. This may lead non-Muslims to discriminate against Muslims. After all, no employer wants to hire a potential suicide bomber. A more benign form of discrimination might be people's honest fear of Muslims, which might manifest itself in people's desire to avoid being caught in the airplane or subway car with a Muslim. In extreme cases there may even be acts of violence when patriotic American citizens seeking to strike a blow for freedom end up assaulting moderate Muslims who are mistaken as terrorists.

All of this occurs despite the fact that moderate Muslims may not support bin Laden's *jihad* against America. It is not inconceivable that moderate Muslims may regard bin Laden and his al-Qaeda compatriots as the ones to blame for many of the hardships that they endure in their daily life. And irrespective of all other considerations, moderate Muslims may simply be offended at the way in which bin Laden repeatedly references Allah.

On the whole, the fundamental problem for bin Laden in invoking religion in this context is the same as it was for Ahmadinejad: Firstly, Islam is a minority religion in the United States which means that by bringing Islam into the conversation bin Laden is emphasizing rather than de-emphasizing his foreignness. Secondly, it brings to the forefront issues of good and evil, right and wrong. This is not beneficial to someone who is a murderer and an evil person or is at least perceived by Americans to be a murderer and an evil person.

7.3. Misrepresentations and Insults Directed Against America

One recurring feature of bin Laden's videotape is his propensity to engage in continued and systematic misrepresentations that quite often have only the barest hint of truth behind them. The sheer volume of misrepresentations and outright lies is bound to take a toll on the speaker's credibility even if the individual expressing these views was a well-regarded intellectual. What is doubly harmful is the fact that many of these half-baked assertions concern central elements of American society and can thus be considered to be highly inflammatory and offensive to patriotic Americans.

7.3.1. "Installing of Sons"

America is the world's oldest democracy and its citizens often take great pride in casting their votes. And rightfully so, for the continuous attention that federal authorities devote to issues of voter fraud and voter suppression stand as evidence of America's enduring commitment to fair and open elections where every vote is counted – only once. All of this is not to say that the American voting system is perfect or flawless. The 2000 Florida debacle alone testifies that it is not. Nevertheless, Americans fancy themselves such experts on the issue of elections that they take it upon themselves to advise other nations on how to best carry out free elections.

Despite the aforementioned facts, bin Laden does not shy away from repeatedly attacking many "sacred" elements of American society and government. One of his more notable claims is that "Bush [the elder] sanctioned the installing of sons as state governors." George W. Bush was the Governor of Texas and Jeb Bush was the Governor of Florida. Other than that, there is little truth in bin Laden's claim. Clearly, the president does not install anyone as a governor. Rather, governors are elected in free elections. It is possible but highly unlikely that bin Laden would simply be mistaken as to the process of how governors become governors. The more likely interpretation is that bin Laden is insinuating foul play and electoral fraud. Later examples from bin Laden make clear that this is exactly what he alleges.

Unfortunately for him, there is woefully little evidence to substantiate his claims of electoral fraud.

Allegations of electoral fraud are very serious. One simply can not go around making these kinds of inflammatory claims unless one has some compelling evidence to back up one's allegations. Bin Laden is very quick to allege all manner of wrong-doing but when it comes to substantiating his claims in the form of actual evidence, he consistently comes up short. As a matter of fact, he does not even attempt to back up his allegations with proof. This leaves him vulnerable to charges of conspiracy mongering.

7.3.2. Accusations of Electoral Fraud and Comparisons to Militaristic Regimes or Monarchies

In one of his less controversial moments, bin Laden raises the spectre of electoral fraud: "...and didn't forget to import expertise in election fraud from the region's presidents to Florida to be made use of in moments of difficulty." This is clearly a reference to the 2000 presidential elections which came down to the state of Florida. It was ultimately decided that Bush won the state by 537 votes but the narrow margin of victory and protracted vote counting and legal wrangling lead some people to speculate that foul play might be afoot. The rumours surrounding the legitimacy of the election were such that some of the leading newspapers in the United States got together and decided to carry out a joint investigation to determine who exactly the rightful victor in their view was. The investigation determined that under most vote-counting scenarios Bush would have prevailed over Gore (Media).

No amount of investigating can undo the fact that the 2000 presidential election was closely fought to the very end and close elections can easily engender a feeling among the losers that the winning side must have prevailed by illicit means. Add in the fact that Gore actually won the popular vote and that the ultimate judgment was rendered by the Supreme Court in a divided party-line vote and the accusations that Bush "stole" the election become understandable, if nothing else.

It follows then that bin Laden's accusation that the 2000 election was "stolen" is not by itself unorthodox or outrageous. It is a controversial claim, to be sure, but it is a view which a number of Americans have at least contemplated at one time or another. The problem for bin Laden is that he takes his logic too far. He contends not only that Bush stole this one election but that there exists no substantive difference between the American system and various Middle-Eastern regimes:

...we haven't found it difficult to deal with the Bush administration in light of the resemblance it bears to the regimes in our countries half of which are ruled by the military and the other half of which are ruled by the sons of kings and presidents. Our experience with them in lengthy and both types are replete with those who are characterized by pride, arrogance, greed and a misappropriation of wealth.

The truth is that all politicians, including American ones, probably are characterized by pride, arrogance, greed and a misappropriation of wealth. Some might even contend that that is a requirement for the job. But drawing comparisons between the democratically elected leadership of America and Middle-Eastern regimes seems awfully disingenuous or simply flat-out ill-informed. Even if bin Laden was right about the 2000 election, one shady election does not a police state make.

America's leaders are chosen by democratic elections and, accordingly, represent the will of the people. A common utterance holds that the American government is "of the people, by the people, for the people." The mistake that bin Laden makes is that he transitions from Bush-bashing, which most Americans likely consider justified or at least understandable, to America-bashing, which most Americans likely consider neither justified nor understandable.

When bin Laden assaults such central elements of American society, it is as if though he is assaulting the American way of life itself. The undeniable reality is that the unyielding commitment to the integrity of the electoral system is deeply ingrained into the American psyche. The democratic principles of "one man, one vote" and "of the people, by the people, for the people" are imbued with such gravity and depth of meaning that they are almost synonymous with America. At the very least, there can

be no America if these things are stripped away or exposed as lies or half-truths. Take away these elements and you take away the very qualities that make America that “shining city upon a hill” that Americans feel stands as an example to the oppressed peoples of the world.

What bin Laden’s philippic ultimately represents then is nothing short of a full-fledged assault on American society and the American way of life. If even half of what bin Laden alleges were true, America would indeed be a blighted place to live in. Is it any wonder then that the American people – profoundly patriotic and deeply in love with their country – would not only reject bin Laden’s contentious contentions but also resent the individual putting forth these allegations. It suffices to say that these kinds of reactions are not conducive to bin Laden winning over doubtful Americans with the power of his words and the compelling tenor of his arguments.

7.3.3. Outrageous Criticisms of the Patriot Act

In addition to broad and generalized claims of similarity between the Bush administration and various seedy Middle-Eastern regimes bin Laden also singles out the Patriot Act for specific criticism: “So he took dictatorship and suppression of freedoms to his son and they named it the Patriot Act under the pretense of fighting terrorism.” Here bin Laden once again demonstrates that he does in fact follow the discussion that unfolds in America’s domestic politics. The problem is that, by and large, the most intense criticisms against the Patriot Act have originated from the relatively fringe voices of the extreme left. The ultimate truth is that while a great many public figures have expressed concern regarding certain elements of the Patriot Act, even its detractors likely realize that the legislation is necessary.

And that undeniable necessity helps to explain why the Patriot Act passed with bipartisan support. Furthermore, there exists no powerful mainstream political figures who aggressively agitate on behalf of its repeal, nor is there much in the way of powerful and sustained grassroots opposition to the Patriot Act. In short, the Patriot Act is an imperfect but very necessary tool in the war on terror, and the American people intuitively recognize this.

Had bin Laden argued that the legislation was imperfect in some way, he likely would have found that many Americans tentatively agreed with him, but instead he argues that the stated reason for enacting the Patriot Act – combating terrorism – is but a mirage and that the true purpose of the Patriot Act is to suppress the freedoms of the American people. In other words, bin Laden can be seen to be engaging in fevered conspiracy mongering rather than rational thinking. While Americans appreciate a good conspiracy theory as much, if not more, than most nationalities, bin Laden’s assertions regarding the true nature of the Patriot Act may be a bridge too far for most Americans.

7.3.4. Treading on the Victims of 9/11

Towards the end of the videotape, bin Laden speaks of the victims of 9/11 and claims to be able to divine some meaning in their gestures:

Finally, it behooves you to reflect on the last wills and testaments of the thousands who left you on the 11th as they gestured in despair. They are important testaments which should be studied and researched. Among the most important of what I read in them was some prose in their gestures before the collapse where they say "How mistaken we were to have allowed the White House to implement its aggressive foreign policies against the weak without supervision." It is as if they were telling you, "The people of America hold to account those who have caused us to be killed and happy is he who learns from others mistakes.

These words could be construed to be very hurtful not only by the families and loved ones of those who perished on 9/11 but also by the nation at large. 9/11, after all, is one of those events, like JFK’s assassination or the moon landing, which is shared by the entire nation or perhaps even by the entire world. American terminology regards 9/11 as “the day that forever changed everything.” In short, 9/11 is a wound on the soul of America and virtually every single American feels very strongly about it.

Ground Zero is sacred ground and bin Laden would have been well served had he regarded the victims of 9/11 to be similarly sacrosanct. Instead, bin Laden cavalierly ascribes meaning to the desperate gestures of his victims, and in doing so it is as if though he is dancing on the graves of those who perished on that dark day. This is unlikely to endear him to his audience. Rather, it brings in full relief the fact that not only is bin Laden responsible for the deaths of every man, woman and child that died on 9/11, he does not even appear to be the least bit penitent or remorseful about their deaths. It is the verbal equivalent of a slap in the face, and no-one appreciates that.

7.4. War Propaganda

Bin Laden's characterization of the war's progress is perhaps his biggest misrepresentation and it merits a section of its own. When bin Laden discusses the results of the war, he makes it sound like absolute everything has unfolded according to his plans: "As for its results, they have been by the Grace of Allah, positive and enormous and have by all standards exceeded all expectations." It is difficult to square that characterization with the facts on the ground. While the war has certainly not been easy for Americans – in fact, the war has been something of a mixed bag in the sense that both warring parties have suffered both victories and setbacks – it is nevertheless undeniable that America has scored some real victories.

The lack of new attacks after 9/11 speaks volumes as does the fall of the tyrannical regimes in Afghanistan and in Iraq. The democratic elections in Afghanistan and in Iraq produced historic moments and positive public relations. Along the way, many feared figures like Saddam Hussein and his offspring have been defeated while Al-Qaeda's increasingly bloodier tactics, like the recorded beheadings of innocent civilians, have turned off many moderates and in some ways discredited the cause of *jihad*. While America has faced and continues to face many setbacks, the sheer number of disrupted terrorist plots as well as the number of captured and killed terrorists shows that America's actions in the war have produced tangible results.

Less visible but no less noteworthy is the fact that the institutional methods used to deter terrorism have undergone a massive change after 9/11: the Patriot Act,

warrantless wiretaps, renditioning and enhanced interrogation enabled more vigorous intelligence gathering while the opening of Guantanamo Bay signalled a more aggressive and more determined America. Given that all of these changes – some of them quite radical – were designed to improve security, it is logical to conclude that America was safer at the time of the election than during the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

This is not to say that the terrorists have not scored some victories of their own: Osama bin Laden and many of his confidantes remain alive and well, plotting further attacks. The terrorists have also fought American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan to a virtual standstill not to mention the fact that they have been able to carry out a number of devastating terror attacks against numerous targets in numerous countries. And yet, bin Laden's arguably greatest feat might perhaps be the hijacking of Spain's electoral system which enabled bin Laden to alter the foreign policy of Spain and affect a drawdown of Spanish forces from Iraq.

Nevertheless, all of these accomplishments could, in a sense, be regarded as "small potatoes." While these are victories, they are ultimately small, possibly even pyrrhic, victories. Spain pulling out of Iraq may be unfortunate, but it does not directly and immediately jeopardize America's national security. Bin Laden eluding capture may be frustrating but it does not directly and immediately threaten the continued existence of the American Republic. Even the number of American fatalities in the war, heartbreakingly high though it may be, pales in comparison to some of the past wars that the United States has fought. America lost 50,000 people in WW1, 300,000 people in WW2, and 30,000 people in Korea.

The big point in all of this is that, on the whole, Al-Qaeda's limited success does not justify bin Laden's overtly one-sided view of the war's progress. Bin Laden's characterisation of the war's progress is either mistaken or he is being intentionally deceptive. Perhaps sensing the necessity to remain at least somewhat grounded, bin Laden plays his ace card:

As for the size of the economic deficit, it has reached record, astronomical numbers estimated to total more than

a trillion dollars. And even more dangerous and bitter for America is that the Mujahedin recently forced Bush to resort to emergency funds to continue the fight in Afghanistan and Iraq which is evidence of the success of the bleed-until-bankruptcy plan with Allah's permission.

There is no denying that America's financial status at the end of 2004 was not as healthy as it could have been. There is also no denying that excess deficits and excess debt can bring even the strongest of nations to its knees. Further complicating matters is the fact that deficits and debts can be sustained up to a certain point but nobody really knows where the point of no return lies. It follows then that when it comes to backing up his characterization of the war's results, the financial difficulty the United States is experiencing is perhaps the only real card that bin Laden has to play which likely explains the vigour with which he plays it with. Unfortunately for bin Laden, the "success of the bleed-until-bankruptcy plan" is a mirage. America's deficit has been a product of a great many things including but not limited to the sizable Bush tax cuts, the recession early on during Bush's term, ridiculous and wasteful pork barrel spending, exploding spending in general and exploding entitlement costs especially in the areas of health-care and social security.

In short, the war is only partially responsible for the deficit. When bin Laden talks about the deficit, he makes it sound like the war is the only reason for it. In doing so, bin Laden is basically claiming credit for things that he has had relatively little influence with. As Figure 1 illustrates, the deficit ultimately has relatively little to do with the expenses of the war effort. Of course, the videotape was released just before the 2004 elections, so neither Americans nor bin Laden would have any idea how the deficit would look like in future years. The purpose of this image is to simply demonstrate that war spending has had only a limited impact on America's deficit. Bin Laden is thus either misinformed as to how the deficit came into being or is intentionally misleading the American people.

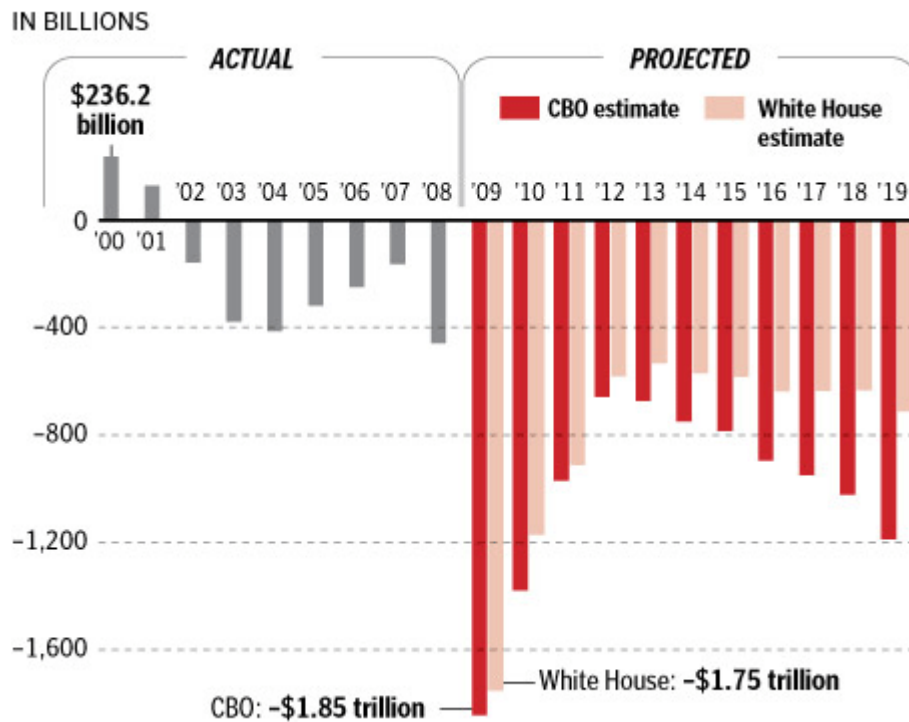


Figure 1: Actual & Projected Deficits. Image Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/graphic/2009/03/21/GR2009032100104.html>

The notion that bin Laden is misinformed as to how the deficit came into being is certainly possible but it seems somewhat unlikely. Once again, it does one well to remember that bin Laden is bound to be an exceptionally intelligent man. He was not only able to mastermind an act of war that penetrated all of America’s defences and claimed the lives of thousands of people but he has also been able to avoid detection and capture by the world’s only remaining superpower, a feat that is most impressive, especially when one considers that the United States almost certainly has devoted huge resources to finding bin Laden. Given the man’s obvious intelligence, it seems likely then that he understands that the war is only a contributing factor rather than a driving factor behind the deficit. This, however, does not stop him from intentionally misrepresenting the nature of the deficit to his American listeners.

Even if one ignores the “bleed-until-bankruptcy” charade, bin Laden’s characterization of the war’s results comes across as highly one-sided and dishonest. Rather than acknowledge the reality of this particular war, bin Laden engages in what amounts to dishonest propaganda, which inevitably undermines his credibility in the most direct fashion. After all, if bin Laden is perceived to be disingenuous in

portraying the results of the war, it stands to reason that he might also very well be perceived to be disingenuous in discussing the causes of the war. At a certain point an exaggeration or a mischaracterisation becomes an outright lie. When that point is reached, the credibility of the individual making such a grievous and blatant misrepresentation suffers precipitously. Bin Laden may have crossed that threshold with his talk of the war's results. In doing so, he runs the risk of ceasing to be perceived as an honest arbiter, if indeed he ever was perceived as one, and, instead, being perceived as just a mouthpiece for the cause of *jihad*.

7.5. Liberal Talking Points

During his speech, bin Laden makes a number of arguments which bear a striking resemblance to liberal talking points. Specifically, bin Laden repeatedly accuses the Bush administration of placing corporate interests above all else. For example:

The policy of the White House that demands the opening of war fronts to keep busy their various corporations -- whether they be working in the field of arms or oil or reconstruction -- has helped al Qaeda to achieve these enormous results.

Bin Laden has a point: Names like Halliburton and Blackwater are not popular in all American households. Even before the financial meltdown at the end of Bush's presidency, these feelings of distrust extended to the captains of industry that run oil companies and insurance companies as well as to the "masters of the universe" that rule Wall Street. But while many Americans may at least occasionally feel uneasy about imposing, too-big-to-fail companies, most Americans still tend to be mostly supportive of the core ideas and principles of free enterprise. Some even feel that this support is so deeply ingrained into the American psyche that it isn't even a result of rational thinking but rather that "Americans instinctively favor free markets" (Easton).

Everyone remembers that Charles Lindbergh became the first man to fly non-stop across the Atlantic. But one should also bear in mind that his heroic endeavour was motivated, at least in part, by the 25,000 dollar prize money. The unvarnished truth is

that the genesis for many of mankind's greatest accomplishments has been the simple desire to make a profit. And rightly so, for there is nothing inherently wrong or contemptible about the legitimate carrying out of entrepreneurial actions, provided that said actions are legal. One might even contend that the intrepid spirit that has driven American entrepreneurs to strike gold in Iraq is the same spirit that brought the Mayflower to America's shores or put Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the surface of the moon.

The point is that in America free enterprise is closely interwoven into the history and very character of America. Given these historical facts, Americans could easily be seen to conclude that the always bold, sometimes reckless, pursuit of profit and glory is arguably the great engine of human innovation. For Osama bin Laden to insult that spirit can perhaps be construed to be an attack against the American spirit itself. America, after all, is a capitalist society and those entrepreneurs who are attempting to secure some financial profit from the sands of Iraq are arguably only pursuing their sliver of the American Dream and the happiness that realizing that dream suggests. And the pursuit of happiness is, of course, a right which is guaranteed to all Americans in the Declaration of Independence.

Bin Laden also repeatedly argues that the war in Iraq is motivated not by national security concerns but by more craven, financial motives:

The darkness of the black gold blurred his vision and insight and he gave priority to private interests over the public interest of America...And Bush's hands are stained with the blood of all of those killed from both sides all for the sake of oil and keeping their private companies in business.

“War for oil” is certainly an argument that many radical and not-so-radical leftwing activists have made but nobody seems to have offered any concrete evidence to back up that assertion. Perhaps tellingly, most mainstream politicians have studiously avoided the “war for oil” claim as they likely concluded that it would appear too outlandish and conspiracy-minded to the average American. It deserves to be noted that a large number of Americans drive automobiles and they must of course gas up their cars. If Iraq truly had been a “war for oil” then these Americans might logically

expect gas prices to be down. On the contrary, there has been no real drop in the price of gasoline, certainly nothing on the scale that would begin to recoup the dollar value that American tax payers have poured into Iraq. If anything, the average American probably thinks that the price of gasoline is too high as opposed to being too low. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, Americans are thus likely to intuitively reject the notion that Iraq was a “war for oil.”

The lack of evidence is a problem for bin Laden. The arguments that bin Laden makes are, after all, fairly inflammatory and even offensive. As such, one might expect that bin Laden would produce some tangible proof to back up his assertions. However, no real proof is being offered to substantiate any of these claims. They are allegations and by the time bin Laden’s speech ends, they remain unsubstantiated. The bottom line here is that making radical allegations and then offering little to no evidence to corroborate said allegations is not a good way to build credibility.

8. Condensed Versions of Ahmadinejad and Bin Laden’s Speeches: “The Message” and Why it Failed to Resonate

8.1. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

When one does a little parsing with Ahmadinejad’s speech, one gets to its fundamental core elements. The simplified chain of logic that Ahmadinejad is employing in his speech is essentially this:

1. Science is light and scientists are loved by God.
2. Unfortunately, bullying powers misuse science for their own nefarious and expansionist purposes.
3. The reason for this is the fact that said bullying powers are distant from human values and the teachings of the divine prophets.

How many Americans are really going to be swayed by this type of reasoning? The answer would appear to be: not many. In terms of altering American foreign policy, Ahmadinejad’s speech was a failure. As established earlier in chapter 4.3., there was no significant change in American foreign policy with regard to Iran after the speech. Since the United States is a democracy, its foreign policy is ultimately decided by its people. This would clearly seem to indicate that Ahmadinejad’s reasoning failed to win over a large enough of a segment of the American public to significantly impact the nation’s foreign policy.

The aforementioned problems in the speech are needlessly compounded by the fact that when Ahmadinejad makes good, valid points that most Americans would ordinarily agree with, he does so in a way that is either needlessly combative, as with the issue of the Holocaust, or so “school-marmy,” so overt that it is as though Ahmadinejad is explaining to his American hosts what free speech and human rights mean as opposed to the other way around. The situation is really quite absurd: the President of Iran is lecturing Americans about how “we must allow people to speak

their mind, to allow everyone to talk so that the truth is eventually revealed by all.” Considering the state of free speech in Iran, Ahmadinejad cannot help but come across as a hypocrite or a buffoon.

Obviously, it must be quite grating for Americans to listen to a man like Ahmadinejad lament the lack of freedoms or human values in certain unnamed nations. While one cannot fully appreciate the magnitude of such insults unless one is an American, even a non-American can logically deduce that such insults and innuendos do little to endear Ahmadinejad to his American hosts. It is self-evident that Americans, being that they are citizens of a nation that champions itself as a veritable vanguard of liberty, would reject the idea of a Middle-Eastern leader explaining to them what freedom and liberty really and truly entail.

In short, Ahmadinejad’s speech was ineffective because it was littered with a large number of unconvincing assertions, offensive innuendos and cultural faux pas. Going beyond these technical reasons, it is worth pondering why exactly Ahmadinejad’s speech was so severely off the mark. Why did the speech contain so many “problems?”

There are likely two possibilities:

1. The speech was a stump speech
2. The speech was specifically tailored for an American audience

Obviously, Ahmadinejad’s usual audiences do not consist of Americans. It could be that the speech that Ahmadinejad delivered at Columbia was simply a variation of the speeches he gives at other venues in front of other, friendlier and more “receptive” audiences. According to this view, his speech at Columbia would essentially be a stump speech and nothing more.

Alternatively, his speech was specifically written for this one event and specifically tailored for an American audience. This possibility appears entire plausible. There are certainly elements in his speech which almost appear to be lifted from Democratic talking points such as the following statement: “We need to address the root causes of

terrorism and eradicate those root causes.” The problem in the speech is that even though it at times closely traces the arguments expressed by many prominent Democrats, there are still too many moments when the speech deviates too heavily from American cultural and societal norms and expectations.

Perhaps Ahmadinejad should have gone even further to make sure his speech imitated the speeches of Democrats in even greater detail. Above all else, Ahmadinejad would have been well served had he disposed of his outrageous remarks concerning the Holocaust and homosexuals. The Holocaust is usually thought to be so well documented that questioning its existence inevitably invokes ridicule if not charges of anti-Semitism. Likewise, his comments as to the non-existence of homosexuals in Iran made him appear either delusional, homophobic or cynically evasive. Either way, his credibility suffered greatly.

In the end, whether the speech was a stump speech or something that was specifically written for the purposes of this one event is of little consequence. The only thing that holds any real significance is the fact that the speech, and by extension, Ahmadinejad himself, failed to accomplish their objectives.

8.2. Osama Bin Laden

When one does a little parsing with bin Laden’s speech, one gets to its fundamental core elements. The simplified chain of logic that bin Laden is employing in his speech is essentially this:

1. 9/11 was an act of self-defence.
2. The Bush administration has distorted the afore-mentioned truth.
3. The Bush administration bears a resemblance to various Mid-East regimes.
4. Bush’s wars are motivated primarily by oil and profit.
5. The war is going splendidly for Al-Qaeda and America is almost bankrupt.

Apart from the self-defence defence, bin Laden's speech is basically a compiling together of all the things that he perceives to be wrong with America. The fundamental problem in bin Laden's speech is that you don't win over someone by calling them names. That is essentially what bin Laden is doing. The speech is also decidedly one-sided: never once does bin Laden acknowledge any wrongdoing on his own part, nor does he credit America for having done anything right, ever.

No-one wants to be called an aggressor or an oppressor, but Americans might find these accusations especially hurtful for they have some claim to being the exact opposite. On the whole, it is doubtless undeniable that most Americans perceive America to have been a positive force in the world: They were the "good guys" in both world wars. They were also the "good guys" in the cold war which is sometimes regarded as the unofficial third world war. And even when Americans are not liberating oppressed nations, they shell out more foreign aid than any other nation in the world while using their global status as a superpower to agitate on behalf of human rights and democratic reforms in all corners of the world. All of this is not to say that Americans consider themselves or their own government to be infallible. Most Americans no doubt realize that they make mistakes just like everyone else and sometimes national security concerns or other considerations overwhelm their more idealistic ambitions.

It is of course possible that reality does not always conform to the American perception of reality but the point still stands: Subjectively – and perhaps even objectively – Americans have a solid basis for considering themselves to be good people and this makes bin Laden's accusations ring hollow. Americans intuitively and reflexively recognize that bin Laden is either lying or he is taking his mischaracterizations to such heights that he might as well be lying. The world view that bin Laden pushes is simply not one that many Americans would agree with. These multiple attacks against America are ultimately attacks against Americans. And no-one wants to be lectured to, especially not by a mass murderer. Rather than intimidate and demoralize Americans, bin Laden may simply have stiffened their resolve.

Even when bin Laden's verbal arguments connect, as they did when he criticized Bush's lack of leadership on 9/11, they fail to make any lasting damage. While Americans recognize that Bush's leadership on 9/11, such as it was, was perhaps lacking in some respects, they likely also recognize that the president is ultimately just an ordinary man. Bush was not the only one who appeared lost on 9/11. All of America felt the same sense of utter shock and disbelief. For Americans to judge Bush harshly would be to judge themselves harshly.

In addition to the substantive issues, the stylistic devices that bin Laden employs fall short of the target as well. Virtually everything that bin Laden says is dressed up in terms which do not resonate with the American people. A good example of this is when bin Laden attempts to use a folk saying to characterize the behaviour of President Bush: "He fits the saying "Like the naughty she-goat who used her hoof to dig up a knife from under the earth. "" This may very well be an apt saying in the Middle East but it does not translate terribly well to an American audience. If bin Laden was serious about reaching Americans on an emotional level, he could have and should have used words that would have facilitated that. The self-defence defence alone would look quite a bit more appealing had bin Laden attempted to draw some parallels to Pearl Harbor and the consequent atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the massacre at Waco and the resulting bloodbath at Oklahoma City. If one wants to make the argument that 9/11 was self-defence, why not use examples that will resonate with Americans and illustrate the fact that these are difficult choices and that shades of grey are inevitable?

On the whole, if Americans disagree with the substantive arguments that bin Laden makes, find many of these arguments to be dishonest in nature, are further offended by particular facets of these arguments, and, in general, find the whole speech to be somewhat foreign-sounding and culturally out-of-step with what they would expect, then it is difficult to see how bin Laden expected his speech to compel the Americans to undertake some rather massive changes in America's foreign policy.

9. Closing Thoughts

It's probably true that Ahmadinejad and bin Laden's speeches were doomed to failure from the beginning. Both men hold reputations that precede them and both men have made past public statements that likely predisposed so many Americans against them that it ultimately made little difference what they said in their big speeches.

Between Ahmadinejad and bin Laden, Ahmadinejad is clearly the lesser of two evils. He is the President of Iran and a fixture at international conferences. As such, he holds at least a modest degree of legitimacy. This is not to say that Ahmadinejad is not a controversial figure, but unlike bin Laden, he is not an outright murderer. It stands to reason that the views that Americans hold regarding Ahmadinejad are bound to be significantly less hostile than the views they hold regarding bin Laden. And yet, despite Ahmadinejad's bone fides as a distinguished statesman, he still had to endure a firestorm of criticism directed against him (and Columbia University) long before he ever opened his mouth at Columbia. If Ahmadinejad – who is significantly less controversial than bin Laden – receives heavy criticism even before people find out what he has to say, then it seems fair to say that both Ahmadinejad and especially bin Laden faced rather daunting odds in terms of attempting to sway the opinions of the American people.

As such, it may very well be that cultural reasons did not play a significant factor in the ultimate success or failure of Ahmadinejad and bin Laden's speeches. Certainly claiming that these two speakers failed to accomplish their stated objectives strictly due to cultural reasons seems like an exaggeration, but it also appears clear that their relative lack of cultural knowledge, or their desire to simply ignore such considerations as cultural "niceties," did play a role in the proceedings, and it does not appear to have been a positive one. What little hope Ahmadinejad and bin Laden had of getting through to their American audiences seems to have evaporated as they stumbled from one cultural faux pas to another.

The one caveat that one might offer in all of this is the fact that many, perhaps even most, intercultural communication situations feature two parties that both want something. This means that intercultural communication is often interactive in nature and can thus be considered a two-way street. The setting in the two case studies being featured in this paper is decidedly more one-sided and more adversarial. Both Ahmadinejad and bin Laden lay out specific objectives and then attempt to influence the Americans in such a way that those objectives are accomplished. This means that on a practical level the burden of accomplishing those objectives is entirely on the shoulders of the speaker. This justifies the approach being utilized in this paper – namely, that he who “wants something” is the one who is responsible for the success or failure of any given communication situation, be that situation intercultural or intracultural in nature. However, the fact still remains that the analysis contained in this paper only looks at one side of the aisle and can thus perhaps be considered lacking in some respects.

Back in the real world, the inevitable end result is that nothing much changed as a result of Ahmadinejad and bin Laden’s speeches. All the lofty goals that Ahmadinejad envisioned in his speech remain unfulfilled and the ideological gulf separating Iran and the U.S. appears as insurmountable as ever. Bin Laden seems to have fared no better. Bush’s second term saw no substantive shifts in the war – certainly nothing on the scale expected by bin Laden. Quite the contrary, the war on terror continued apace and bin Laden himself remained a hunted fugitive.

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Suomenkielinen lyhennelmä

Tämä tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tutkia kulttuurisen tietouden merkitystä interkulttuurisissa kommunikaatiotilanteissa. Tätä varten on valittu kaksi kulttuurien väliseen kommunikaatioon liittyvää puhetilannetta. Ensimmäinen näistä on Iranin presidentin Mahmoud Ahmadinejadin puhe Columbian yliopistossa amerikkalaiselle yleisölle. Toinen analysoitava puhetilanne on terroristijohtaja Osama bin Ladenin puhe, joka tuli julkisuuteen juuri ennen Yhdysvaltain 2004 presidentinvaaleja. Bin Laden osoitti puheensa nimenomaan amerikkalaisille.

Tutkimuksen pyrkimyksenä on analysoida Ahmadinejadin ja bin Ladenin puheita siten, että kiinnitetään erityistä huomiota kulttuurisiin seikkoihin ja siihen kuinka nämä seikat vaikuttavat puhujan pyrkimykseen saavuttaa aikaan jokin tietty tarkoitus. Käytännössä tämä tarkoittaa sitä, että Ahmadinejadin ja bin Ladenin puheita tutkitaan amerikkalaisesta näkökulmasta. Pyrkimyksenä ei ole arvottaa kenenkään näkemyksiä, vaan kyse on käytännön seikkojen sanelemasta valinnasta.

Käytännön tasolla tutkimus noudattaa selvää ja johdonmukaista linjaa: kummankin puhujan kohdalla selvitetään mikä puhujan tarkoituksena on ollut. Tämä tavoite on mahdollisuuksien mukaan puhujan itsensä verbalisoima. Bin Ladenin puheen kohdalla keskitytään nominaalisen tavoitteen lisäksi myös toiseen tavoitteeseen, koska puheen konteksti viittaa vahvasti siihen mahdollisuuteen, että tällainen ”salainen” tavoite on olemassa. Sen jälkeen kun tavoite on selvitetty, otetaan selville kuinka hyvin puhuja onnistui asettamansa tavoitteen saavuttamisessa. Tarkemmassa analyysi-osiossa katsotaan minkälaisia kömmähdyksiä puhujien puheista löytyy ja kuinka kulttuurisesti sävyttyneitä nämä virheet ovat. Tutkielman loppupuolelta löytyy myös osio, jossa kummankin puhujan keskeinen sanoma on tiivistetty ”luurankomaiseen” muotoon asioiden havainnollistamiseksi.

Käytännön seikoista pitää mainita vielä yksi: Ahmadinejadin ja bin Ladenin puheet eivät alun perin olleet englanninkielisiä, vaan tässä tutkielmassa esiintyvät lainaukset ovat puheiden englanninkielisistä käännöksistä. Tämä tutkielma lähtee kuitenkin liikkeelle ajatuksesta, jonka mukaan puhujien sanoma ei ole mainittavasti kärsinyt

käännösprosessin aikana. Tämä asenne on perusteltua, koska Ahmadinejadin ja bin Ladenin puheet olivat median tarkassa syynissä ja saivat osakseen myös maailmanlaajuista huomiota. Jos käännöksissä olisi ollut jotain isompaa ongelmaa, olisi tästä hyvin suurella todennäköisyydellä raportoitu jossain maailman kolkassa.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Syyskuussa 2007 Iranin presidentti Mahmoud Ahmadinejad luennoi Columbian yliopistossa. Ahmadinejad ei selittänyt puheensa tarkoitusta aivan suorasanaisesti, vaan hän puhui yleisellä tasolla paljon siitä kuinka eri maiden pitäisi kunnioittaa toisiaan, jotta pystyisimme yhteistyöhön ja saisimme näin mahdollisuuden liikkua kohtia rauhallisempaa ja turvallisempaa maailmaa. Rivien välistä lukemalla voitaneekin sanoa, että Ahmadinejadin tarkoituksena oli lämmitellä Yhdysvaltain ja Iranin suhteita ja vähentää maiden välisen sotilaallisen konfliktin uhkaa.

Puhe ei kuitenkaan saanut aikaan toivottua vaikutusta ja on selvää, että kulttuuriset tekijät olivat osatekijöinä tähän. Puheen analyysistä käykin ilmi, että Ahmadinejad teki lukuisia virheitä, jotka liittyvät hänen puutteellisiin tietoihinsa amerikkalaisesta kulttuurista ja näkemyksistä.

Heti puheensa alussa presidentti Ahmadinejad käyttäytyy hyvin epädiplomaattisesti hyökkäämällä kovasanaisesti hänet esitellyttä yliopiston johtajaa Lee Bollingeria vastaan. On sanomattakin selvää, että Bollingerin tapa esitellä presidentti Ahmadinejad oli hyvin tyly, mutta Ahmadinejadin olisi pitänyt osata odottaa tätä. Iran on nimittäin maa, jonka amerikkalaiset mieltävät osaksi pahuuden akselia, joten on selvää, että tällaisen maan presidentti tulee saamaan tätä näkemystä heijastelevan esittelyn. Koska Ahmadinejadilla ei ollut keinoja vaikuttaa Bollingerin negatiivisiin sanoihin, olisi hänen todennäköisesti kannattanut vain hyväksyä ne ja siirtyä suoraan eteenpäin. Kiistämällä Bollingerin esittelyn todenmukaisuuden Ahmadinejad luo heti alusta lähtien puhetilanteelle hyvin negatiivisen sävyn, joka tekee puheensa tavoitteiden saavuttamisen vaikeammaksi.

Puheen edetessä hän täydentää viestiään kietomalla mukaan ylenpalttisen määrän uskonnollista vivahdetta. Puheesta muodostuu välillä suorastaan koominen

kokonaisuus kun Ahmadinejad ensin peräänkuuluttaa tieteen tärkeyttä ja heti perään julistaa itsensä perinpohjaiseksi tiedemieheksi. Samaan hengenvetoon hän kuitenkin nostaa esiin ajatukset Jumalasta ja uskonnollisuuden tärkeydestä, mikä on selvästi askel pois päin puhtaasti faktapohjaisesta tieteellisestä ajattelusta.

Jos amerikkalaiset kokevat, presidentti Bush mukaan lukien, että Iran on osa pahuuden akselia, niin on hyvin todennäköistä, että heidän mielikuvansa Iranin presidentistä ovat myös negatiivisesti värittyneitä. Itse asiassa on täysin mahdollista, että amerikkalaiset saattavat kokea Ahmadinejadin olevan paha, koska hän on pahuuden akseliin kuuluvan maan presidentti. Pahuuden akseli on tietenkin jossain määrin kiistanalainen määritelmä, mutta keskeistä ei olekaan asioiden todellinen laita, vaan se, että amerikkalaiset kokevat asioiden olevan näin. Käytännössä tämä tarkoittaa tietenkin sitä, että pahuuden ruumiillistumaksi mielletyn henkilön ei kannattaisi puhua Jumalasta, koska tämä vain muistuttaa kuulijoita puhujan itsensä statuksesta pahuuden ruumiillistumana.

Presidentti Ahmadinejad hyökkää lukuisia kertoja Yhdysvaltain ulkopoliittikkaa vastaan erittäin jyrkin sanoin. Hän muun muassa väittää suorasti tai epäsuorasti, että Yhdysvallat pyrkii luomaan kuvitteellisia vihollisia, on liian sotaisia, käy sotaa maallisen mammonan toivossa ja käyttää tiedettä sekä taloudellisia pakotteita epämoraalisiin tarkoituksiin. Nämä lukuisat kritismit voidaankin mieltää hyökkäyksiksi koko Yhdysvaltain luonteenlaatua vastaan. Onkin selvää, että tällaiset toistuvat ja kovasanaiset Amerikkaa ja amerikkalaisia kohtaan osoitetut loukkaukset saavat aikaan hyvin negatiivisen reaktion amerikkalaisten keskuudessa.

Ahmadinejadin puheessa esiin nousivat myös hänen asenteensa ja ajatuksensa homoseksuaalisuudesta, naisten asemasta Iranissa sekä holokaustista. Kaikkia näitä aiheita voidaan pitää poliittisesti arkaluonteisina ja onkin selvää, että Ahmadinejadin näkemykset eivät sopineet yhteen amerikkalaisen valtavirran kanssa.

Osama bin Laden

Osama bin Ladenin videonauha julkaistiin juuri ennen Yhdysvaltain presidentinvaaleja vuoden 2004 lopulla. Videonauhasta tuli nopeasti kiistakapula

Bushin ja Kerryn välisessä kädenväännössä. Videonauhalla bin Laden puhui terrorismin vastaisesta sodasta, sen syistä ja sen tulevista käännteistä. Huomionarvoista on se, että videonauha oli nimenomaan amerikkalaisille osoitettu. Bin Ladenin selityksen mukaan hänen tavoitteenaan oli keskustella sodan syistä ja seuraamuksista. Hän myös halusi selvittää ”parhaan” tavan estää uusia syyskuun 11. kaltaisia terrori-iskuja. Käytännössä bin Ladenin tarkoituksena lienee ollut Yhdysvaltain ulkopolitiikan muuttaminen siinä määrin, että hänen organisaationsa ei enää kokisi tarvetta syyskuun 11. kaltaisiin terrori-iskuihin. Videonauhan julkaisupäivämäärä sekä eräät muut seikat viittaavat myös vahvasti siihen mahdollisuuteen, että bin Ladenilla on saattanut olla myös ”salainen” tavoite. Tämän teorian mukaan bin Laden halusi John Kerryn pääsevän presidentiksi Bushin tilalle.

Bin Ladenin puhetta analysoimalla saadaan selville, että sen ongelmakohdat kulttuurisesta näkökulmasta katsottuna ovat itsepuolustukseen vetoaminen, liiallinen uskonnollisuus, Amerikan vastaiset loukkaukset, sotapropaganda ja vasemmistolta lainatut ajatukset. Samoin kuten Ahmadinejadin kohdalla, on vaikea väittää, että bin Ladenin ajatukset olisivat absoluuttisen vääriä. On kuitenkin selvää, että hänen ajatuksensa ovat monelta kohdin niin erilaisia amerikkalaisten ajatusmaailman kanssa, että näiden ajatusten verbalisointi vaikeuttaa puheelle asetettujen tavoitteiden tavoittamista.

Bin Ladenin selitys syyskuun 11. terrori-iskuille on hyvin yksiselitteinen: kyse oli itsepuolustuksesta. Pääoikeutuksena bin Laden mainitsee Yhdysvaltain toimet Libanonin maihinnousun yhteydessä. Lyhyemmin hän mainitsee myös Irakin vastaiset pakotteet ja Israelin ja Palestiinan väliset ongelmat. Bin Laden myös viittaa lyhyesti siihen, että motiivina olisi ollut halu estää Yhdysvaltoja osallistumasta uusiin sotatoimiin tulevaisuudessa – eli kyseessä olisi siis ennaltaehkäisevä itsepuolustus.

Jos amerikkalaiset näkisivät tämän asian kuten bin Laden, he todennäköisesti ymmärtäisivät paremmin minkä takia iskut toteutettiin tai ainakin sen kuka iskuista oli todennäköisimmin vastuussa. He saattaisivat jopa kokea sympatiaa iskun tekijöitä ja suunnittelijoita kohtaan. Terrori-iskujen välittömissä jälkimainingeissa amerikkalaiset olivat kuitenkin hyvin epätietoisia iskujen tekijöistä ja motiiveista. Itse asiassa

amerikkalaiset olivat täysin sokissa eivätkä kyenneet uskomaan, että joku haluaisi vahingoittaa heitä tällä tavalla.

Senkin jälkeen kun iskujen tekijät saatiin selville, amerikkalaiset eivät vielääkään kyenneet ymmärtämään iskujen motiivia. Useiden amerikkalaisten suusta pääsi kommentti ”Miksi he vihaavat meitä niin paljon?” Täysi kyvyttömyys ymmärtää iskujen motiivia on selvä osoitus siitä, että amerikkalaiset kokevat terrori-iskujen taustalla olevat tapahtumat ja syyt täysin eri tavalla kuin bin Laden. Ajatus, jonka mukaan syyskuun 11. päivän terrori-iskut olisivat olleet jotenkin Amerikan itsensä oma vika ei yksinkertaisesti ole ajatusmalli, johon amerikkalaiset voivat yhtyä.

Ahmadinejadin tavoin myös bin Laden sisällyttää puheeseensa reippaan annoksen uskonnollisuutta. Tämä on ongelma, koska amerikkalaiset mieltävät Bin Ladenin maailmanlaajuisen terroristiorganisaation johtajaksi ja murhamieheksi. Syyskuun terrori-iskut. Osama bin Laden. Terrorismi. Islam. Kaikki nämä asiat kietoutuvat yhteen amerikkalaisten mielissä, koska bin Laden nimenomaan kietoo ne yhteen puheessaan. On vaikea nähdä mitä hyötyä tästä on bin Ladenille. Sen sijaan että bin Laden yhdistäisi itsensä islamiin ja muslimeihin (ja heihin mahdollisesti yhdistettäviin positiivisiin ajatuksiin ja arvoihin), on paljon todennäköisempää, että hän yhdistää islamin ja muslimit omaan negatiivisuuteensa. Eli bin Ladenin puheen uskonnollinen vivahte tekee islamin ja muslimit negatiivisemmaksi, se ei tee bin Ladenia itseään positiivisemmaksi.

Bin Laden kritisoi Bushin hallintoa lukemattomista vääryyksistä. Bin Ladenin ongelma on se, että Bushin hallinto on demokraattisesti valittu ja se heijastaa Amerikan kansan tahtoa ja arvoja. Bin Ladenin jatkuvat hyökkäykset presidentin toimia vastaan laajenevat kun hän liittää vasemmiston ajatukset omiin syytöksiinsä: Bush varasti vuoden 2000 vaalit. Irakissa soditaan öljyn takia. Bushin sodat ovat tekosyy amerikkalaisten yritysten rikastuttamiseksi. Bin Ladenin lukuisat syytökset muodostavat lopulta täysimittaisen hyökkäyksen Amerikkaa, sen kansalaisia sekä amerikkalaisia arvoja vastaan. On selvää, että amerikkalaiset tuskin allekirjoittavat tällaista ajattelutapaa.

Bin Ladenia voidaan syyttää myös muusta kuin pelkästä itsestään selvästä kulttuuristen normien rikkomisesta. Voidaan nimittäin argumentoida, että bin Laden käyttää videonauhaansa sotapropagandan levittämiseen. Bin Laden maalaillee esiin kuvan, jonka mukaan amerikkalaisten joukot ovat taistelukentän joka rintamalla joutuneet tappiolle. Sotaan liittyen bin Laden nostaa esiin Amerikan taloudelliset ongelmat ja erityisesti talousvajeen. Bin Ladenin esiin nostamat kysymykset ovat relevantteja ja hänen argumenteillaan on osittaista totuus pohjaa, mutta kokonaisuutena hänen kuvaamansa tilanne ei suoraan vastaa todellisuutta. Bin Laden kuvaa moniselitteisen ja jatkuvassa muutoksessa olevan sotatilanteen mustavalkoisena ja yksioikoisena.

Yhteenveto

Sekä bin Laden että Ahmadinejad ovat henkilöitä, joiden maine on negatiivisesti sävyttynyt – varsinkin amerikkalaisten keskuudessa. Kummatkin puhujat olivat myös antaneet julkisia lausuntoja, jotka todennäköisesti saivat monet amerikkalaiset suhtautumaan heihin hyvin kriittisesti. Onkin selvää, että heillä molemmilla oli edessään varsin vaikea puhetilanne ja yleisö oli jo valmiiksi skeptinen. Niinpä on täysin mahdollista, että kulttuurisen tietouden puuttuminen ei ollut ratkaisevassa osassa puhujien tavoitteiden saavuttamisen suhteen. Ainakin voidaan sanoa, että se ei ollut ainoa ratkaiseva tekijä. On kuitenkin selvää, että kulttuurisen tietouden puuttuminen näkyi puheissa ja tämän seuraukset olivat hyvin suurella todennäköisyydellä negatiivisia (puheiden nominaalisten tarkoitusten saavuttamisen suhteen).

Realistisesti voidaan sanoa, että jos Ahmadinejadilla ja bin Ladenilla oli jotain toivoa tavoitteidensa saavuttamiseksi, heidän olisi täytynyt onnistua puheissaan lähes täydellisesti. Puheiden lähtökohdat olivat niin vaikeat ja nominaalisten tavoitteiden saavuttamisen mahdollisuudet niin pienet, että puhujilla ei yksinkertaisesti ollut varaa edes pieniin virheisiin. Se pieni mahdollisuus, joka puhujilla oli, katosi heidän lukuisten kulttuuristen kömmähdystensä myötä.

Lopputuloksena kummankin puhujan kohdalla oli se, että puhujat eivät onnistuneet saavuttamaan yleviä tavoitteitaan. Ahmadinejadin puheessaan esiin nostamat ylevät

tavoitteet ovat jääneet saavuttamatta ja Iranin ja Yhdysvaltain väliset suhteet eivät mainittavasti lämmenneet puheen seurauksena. Bin Ladenin puheen seuraamukset olivat yhtä marginaalisia. Yhdysvaltain tekemät suunnanmuutokset terrorismin vastaisessa sodassa olivat enemmänkin rajallisten resurssien sanelemia ja luonteeltaan taktisia, eivät filosofisia tai ideologisia. Terrorismin vastaisen sodan kantava ajatus ei muuttunut miksikään bin Ladenin videonauhan johdosta, vaan sota jatkui entisellään ja bin Laden itse säilyi vihattuna hahmona amerikkalaisten keskuudessa.

¹ Whenever the words “America” or “Americans” appear in this paper, they refer to the nation of the United States and the citizens thereof. No offence is intended to any non-U.S. citizens who might consider themselves “Americans” and no authoritative moral judgements should be inferred.