Presidential Rhetoric, Military Operations, and National Will

by

Colonel Michael Trey Rawls
United States Air Force



United States Army War College Class of 2015

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by

Colonel Michael Trey Rawls
United States Air Force

Captain James Boswell
Department of National Security and Strategy
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

Abstract

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The post-Cold War era has proven to be fraught with difficulties created when the idealistic goals of Liberal Hegemony clash with complex international realities. Nowhere is this idea more pronounced than in the rhetoric of the modern Presidency.

Presidential rhetoric in the post-Cold War era and its corresponding military operations often present conflicting information and thereby generate unrealistic expectations in the public sphere both at home and abroad. Through an analysis of the rhetoric of modern presidents during times of conflict this paper seeks to better understand the phenomenon and recommend practices to more closely align rhetoric with achievable foreign policy goals.

Presidential Rhetoric, Military Operations, and National Will

The United States has enjoyed an enviable position for more than two and a half decades as the world's lone hegemonic power. At no other time in post-Westphalian history has one nation had more power to create or destroy across the full spectrum of influence: economic, militarily, or otherwise. Following the collapse of a neatly bifurcated world the United States foreign policy establishment began to execute an ambitious grand strategy. Acting on what appeared to be a supercharged opportunity, U.S. Presidents from George H. W. Bush to Barack Obama made conscious decisions to depart from a Cold War Grand Strategy that privileged sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity in pursuit of a more activist grand strategy. The objective of this policy shift was to aggressively promote liberal democracy across the world with the understanding doing so would increase the "number of nations likely to be friendly to the United States." This grand strategy would be accomplished by tapping into what Dr. Barry Posen terms "Liberal Hegemony." Convinced that threats posed by non-state actors, failed states, and extremist ideologies could be thwarted by interventionist risk reduction policies, the United States has expended tremendous means in search of difficult to achieve ends. As articulated in the National Security Strategy of 2002, "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones...menaced less by fleets and armies than catastrophic technologies in the hands of the embittered few." Unfortunately, the realities of ends, ways, and means are often at odds with Liberal Hegemony's idealistic goals. Recent events in Iraq and Afghanistan have illustrated that interventionist risk reduction policies may not achieve the ends toward which they strive. This phenomenon is not new to American politics, but it has been thrust into the foreground following the precipitous collapse of the Soviet Union. America has long struggled to achieve equilibrium in its foreign policy. As Henry Kissinger noted in 1979, "He [Nixon] had striven for a revolution in American foreign policy so that it would overcome the disastrous oscillations between over-commitment and isolation."

The post-Cold War era has proven to be fraught with difficulties created when the idealistic goals of Liberal Hegemony clash with complex international realities. Nowhere is this idea more pronounced than in the rhetoric of the modern presidency. Presidential rhetoric in the post-Cold War era and its corresponding military operations often present conflicting information and thereby generate unrealistic expectations in the public sphere both at home and abroad. Through an analysis of the rhetoric of modern presidents during times of conflict this essay seeks to better understand the phenomenon and recommend practices to more closely align rhetoric with achievable foreign policy goals.

The field of presidential rhetoric is rife with examples of the power of language to shape an audience's reality. Emily Dickinson famously wrote, "I know nothing in the world that has as much power as a word." The power of words resides in their ability to influence our beliefs, as it is beliefs that are the precursors of behavior. The words people use are not neutral artifacts; they do not merely describe reality, they define it.⁵ Classical rhetoric, the art of harnessing the power of words to persuade and influence, has a long and interwoven history with democracy. In fact, it could be said that rhetoric is the fraternal twin of democracy. Although thought to have originated in Syracuse, Sicily in the 5th century BC, when dispossessed landowners argued their grievances before an audience of their countrymen, it was in Ancient Greece that the tie between rhetoric and politics coalesced. Beginning with Aristotle's assertions on its centrality to

the democratic process to modern applications, such as Robert Ivie's exploration of justifications for war during the American Revolution and David Zarefsky's insightful analyses of the impact of presidential rhetoric on audience interpretations of national crises, rhetoric has played a pivotal role in political governance. Political effectiveness, a catchphrase for political power, is born of a leader's ability to persuade, a task at the heart of rhetoric. This is particularly true in a democracy where governance is derived of the people, for the people, and by the people. Modern presidents, following a model established by President Woodrow Wilson, frequently appeal directly to the American people in an effort to shape their understanding of crucial events, particularly armed conflicts.⁶ In such cases, presidents will leverage the office to engage the American public, making rhetoric a core strategy for governing.⁷ This technique, it should be noted, involves more than the mere utterances of the president. In fact, presidential speeches, particularly those involving the potential for armed conflict, have evolved into performances incorporating all the elements of visual art into the persuasion equation.8 Take for example the Presidential State of the Union Address, typically delivered in the House Chamber before the backdrop of an enormous American flag to a joint session of Congress, all elements working in concert to reinforce the president's message.9 From this perspective presidential rhetoric takes on elements of what William Riker has called - heresthetic - "the art of structuring the world so you can win." Plainly stated, presidents frequently work to rhetorically shape the way domestic and international audiences interpret pivotal events in order to garner support for the administrations' actions.¹¹ Winning in the world of politics is often a measure of the presidents ability to frame global calamities in a manner that predisposes the audience to the actions of his

choosing. Without this connection the public may be unable to reconcile the cost of American blood, sweat, and treasure with proposed actions.

Much of the president's ability to successfully amass support hinges on the complexity of the event. When presidents are able to plainly and simply articulate policies involving military actions they are more likely to receive public support. Conversely, policy explanations that are overly complex are likely to face greater public skepticism, regardless of policy objectives. 12 Take for instance, the dialogue between President George H. W. Bush and the American public in the days leading up to Operation Desert Storm. The President's rhetoric regarding Saddam's invasion of Kuwait was a simple but effective rationalization that put the onus for military action on Saddam as the instigator. The message was an elegantly simple policy statement, "This aggression will not stand." In contrast, both President George W. Bush and Barack Obama's attempts to define American interests, strategy, and victory related to Islamic extremism and ISIS respectively left pundits and the public alike confused. As American political satirist John Stewart put it, "The Bush administration was incredibly disciplined and focused' in doing the wrong thing, while the Obama administration is doing the right thing, but couldn't be more 'chaotic and confused' about it."13

As these examples illustrate, the ways in which Presidents "craft" an event is crucial. Presidential "crafting" is a rhetorical construct by which politicians mine public opinion data to construct arguments utilizing the "most favorable" and convincing language in support of their policy preference. Jacobs and Shapiro argue that one way presidential "responsiveness" to public opinion manifests itself is by pursuing the strategy of crafted talk to "change the publics opinion in order to offset the potential

political cost of not following the preferences of the average voters."¹⁵ Politicians "track public opinion not to make policy but rather to determine how to craft their public presentations and win public support for the policies they and their supporters follow."¹⁶ In effect, pollsters are not reshaping policies; they are reshaping arguments for policies.¹⁷ In this way the public does have an affect in shaping presidential rhetoric but only in form, not substance.

As Presidents craft rhetoric they should also recognize the need for simple, succinct policy objectives if they are to be internalized by the public. Take as an example the difficulties experienced in implementing post-Cold War interventionist policies. Because of the aforementioned changes in the nature of international politics, i.e. the shift from state to non-state actors as significant threats, the American people struggle to reconcile the cost of such policies. As a result these initiatives required more rhetorically complex justifications while they typically generate significantly less support than simpler policy statements.¹⁸ Data conclusively supports the notion that complex explanations of policy in support of military action do little to justify such actions to the public. This is particularly true when addressing a modern American public that is both increasingly isolationist and as a recent Pew Research report indicates mostly indifferent to foreign policy and inclined to say "they aren't our problems" when queried about the world's numerous trouble spots.¹⁹ This is not to suggest the American public is averse to military action. It is, however, evidence that American's willingness to support the use of military force is influenced by their interpretation of the "reasonableness" of policy goals and the urgency with which a particular threat presents itself to the nation. In cases where these two conditions are not met, for instance the

use of military force to affect internal political change, empirical data shows a distinct lack of support should be expected.²⁰

The ideological and political bifurcation of the Cold War simplified this process. First, the significant ideological polarization between the United States and the Soviet Union made the Soviets easy to demonize. Second, the nature of the Soviet nuclear threat was easy for the public to conceptualize with potentially catastrophic consequences if unleashed. These elements were straightforward and simple to translate into clear, concise presidential rhetoric. As a result, there was a harmony between the rhetoric presidents used to describe the ever present threat, the military force structure and capabilities acquired and deployed to address it, and the public's understanding of and willingness to support containment policies.

Unfortunately, the break up of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991 brought with it a muddiness in American foreign policy, which, when combined with a shift toward activism in U.S. grand strategy, increasingly complicated the process.²¹ This change was precipitated by the validation of Wilsonian ideas and highlighted by the failure of Marxism. The new grand strategy argues that the United States can only truly be safe in a world that is populated with like-minded nation states. This idea is not new; in fact, it can be seen woven throughout the writings and correspondence of America's founders. For instance, as Thomas Paine famously stated in *Common Sense*, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, has not happened since the days of Noah until now." It is also, at least in part, a byproduct of spending fifty years planning for war only to be suddenly confronted with victory without ever having fired a shot.

Chasing perfect safety, however, under the guise of support for democratic principles and liberal ideology is an arduous and unwieldy recipe for disaster.²² The danger emanates from a hubris that in the aftermath of Cold War victory the United States may actually posses sufficient power to impose its ideas about both international order and domestic governance on would-be democracies.²³ While the goal of a harmonious world populated by nations founded on democratic ideas and liberal ideologies is a noble end that undoubtedly would benefit U.S. interests, the implementation of such policies has proven to be problematic. This is particularly true when it involves justifying use of force to the American people. Since the end of the Cold War, presidents have struggled to convince both public and press that their fears, honor, and interests are tied to America's ability to prevent emergence of any near term or future global competitor. To the extent military intervention is required to put down the threat of such competitors a connection must be made. In order to overcome this obstacle recent administrations have resorted to increasingly broad rhetoric that defines every third world dictator, international criminal, and rouge state menace as an existential threat to the United States and its interests. The rhetoric in such a script often results in mixed messages and a collection of missives that conflate "total war" rhetoric with "limited war" intentions. One resulting danger of such rhetoric is that it generates confusion in the public that is easily misperceived by our adversaries as a lack of national will. Countless enemies of the United States including Farrah Aideed, Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, and Osama Bin Laden, have attributed this conflict between rhetoric and action to a "lack of will" in the American people and identified it as the Achilles heel of the United States. Furthermore, this perceived

caustic mix of words without deeds has the potential to embolden other international bad actors to challenge the United States, whom they view as a nation of soft, risk-adverse cowards hiding behind technology and talk. In short, such actors may consider the United States a paper tiger, willing to talk the talk but not walk the walk.

Unfortunately, recent attempts to justify military action, particularly in the case of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, have not resonated well with either domestic or international audiences. In order for American citizens to support military action a case must be made that there is inherently more danger in inaction than there is cost related to action, preemptive or otherwise. This critical link hinges on presidential rhetoric that bridges the gap between foreign threats and the fear, honor and interests of the American people. Absent this connection the American public will be slow to support military action and the expenditures it incurs. Presidential adventurism, and the application of military force that often accompanies it, has proven difficult to justify particularly when it deviates from the traditional pillars of national security and international order: sovereignty, territorial integrity and secutity.

Rhetoric plays a significant role in rationalizing armed conflict to the public. In such occasions leaders often use rhetorical devices such as metaphors as warrants for actions. Through rhetoric, leaders can literalize metaphors to bring a nation to arms.²⁴ This was true in America's War of Independence where political leaders characterized Great Britain as "a beast of prey, common criminal, ruthless murderer, haughty pirate, and crazed tyrant whose appetite for commercial monopoly was insatiable."²⁵ It was similarly true in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania where the President declared freedom itself under attack and that "the

greatest hope of all time – now depends on us."²⁶ The danger in these powerful rhetorical constructs arises when they lead to strategies that are "costly, wasteful and counterproductive" and "make enemies almost as quickly as it dispatches them."²⁷ As Thucydides noted, public support is a necessary precondition for democracies to engage in sustained military operations.²⁸ The remainder of this essay will explore the idea by examining the rhetoric of several presidents to illustrate the complications that arise when presidential rhetoric is misaligned with military actions, particularly its effects on national will and international relations.

On September 20th, 2001 President George W. Bush delivered an address before a joint session of Congress that established a narrative which has dominated U.S. foreign policy for the past 15 years. In that speech, President Bush not only declared war on "every terrorist group of global reach" he also vowed to pursue Islamic extremist until every such group had been "found, stopped, and defeated." He also issued a binary ultimatum to nations around the world; either support us or support the terrorists. The President then issued a proclamation declaring that the United States was fighting on the side of God, defending all that is right and just in the world, and by contrast, those who did not stand with the U.S. were choosing to side with "evil." This was not a feeling unique to the President. As Richard Cherwitz and Kenneth Zagacki argue, in the emotionally charged aftermath of catastrophic events the trend toward binary choices is not uncommon, particularly where one side is undisputedly the aggressor. Unfortunately this dichromatic narrative is overly simplistic because it fails to explore additional alternatives. For instance, President Bush's line of demarcation

left no room for states that did not necessarily support terrorism but also did not support what they perceived as American invaders on Muslim lands.

The Bush administration's nomenclature in the emotionally charged aftermath of the September 11th attacks ran headlong into what Michael Howard describes as, "a very natural but terrible and irrevocable error....one that administration leaders have been trying to put right ever since."32 Labeling the impending conflict a "war on terrorism" and declaring the United States "at war" legitimized the criminals who perpetrated the horrific acts on the United States by granting them a status and significance they sought but did not deserve. Although the terrorist's attacks had many of the attributes of war; attacks were made, property was destroyed, lives were lost, they lacked other crucial qualities that differentiate war from other violent actions: the attacks were not conducted by an invading army, the weapons used were not military in nature, and no nation declared war on the United States nor was it declared by the United States.³³ Thus the "Global War on Terror," as it came to be know, was in large part a rhetorical creation: "a forever war launched against evil itself." The enemy was not merely nineteen young Muslim men with box cutters at the helm of sophisticated transcontinental airliners, the enemy the President declared was "heir to all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century....follow[ing] in the path of Fascism, and Nazism, and Totalitarianism" and a foe such as this, one capable of humiliating the United States in such a violent way in our own back yard led to a rhetorical war to "rid the world of evil."35 Following the events of September 11 few people, Americans or otherwise, questioned whether or not the United States was really at war. It was not until much later that it became clear the "War on Terror" was primarily a rhetorical

construct. Unfortunately however, "truly significant outcomes of presidential rhetoric may pass unnoticed until long after the fact," 36 and the reality of the past fifteen years is that rhetorical war begot real war. 37

The simplified language that inspire Americans to support Presidential policies against terrorists and their regimes also has the potential to provide justification for taking any and all actions necessary to pursue them. Because the terminology used is characterized by broad appeals to basic values and strong promises of retaliation it can put the country on a rhetorical trajectory that leads to actions that are contrary to international law and the morals and values Americans hold most dear. The more a population demonizes an enemy the less likely it is to show restraint in pursuing and defeating that enemy.³⁸ A final concern surrounding this type of prophetic rhetoric is that it fails to account for the fact that it had a clearly antagonistic effect on Muslim nations around the world including many of the very Muslims nations the President was soliciting to joining the U.S. in its fight against Islamic extremists.³⁹

To declare that a nation is at war creates a type of psychosis amongst the populous that may in reality be completely counterproductive to the objective being sought.⁴⁰ In the case of the Bush administration the nation's frustration following the 9/11 attacks was justifiably and clearly in search of spectacular vengeance. The quest for immediate military action, when coupled with promises of decisive results, drove a timeline for action and the use of military force that no longer became the last resort, it became the only resort. The ontological qualities of the conflict quickly limited the response options available to the United States and its allies, and played directly into the terrorists' hands by granting them a level of significance, some might say an

equality, they did not earn and did not deserve. Terrorism is a crime and terrorists are criminals. The goal of terrorism, as Menachem Begin, the late Israeli Prime Minister remarked is the destruction of the prestige of Imperial States; terror is about dirtying the face of power.⁴¹ Its weapons are not suicide vests, improvised explosive devices or roque airliners; terrorism's weapon in fear. The British learned this lesson all too well in their dealings with similar "wars" in Palestine, Ireland, Cyprus and Malaya. In each case they were careful never to label these crises "wars," instead they were deemed "emergencies." These emergencies, as Howard describes, provided "police and intelligence services with exceptional powers....reinforced where necessary by the armed forces, but they continued to operate within a peacetime framework of civilian authority. This promotes the qualities needed in a serious campaign against terrorists secrecy, intelligence, political sagacity, quiet ruthlessness, covert actions that remain covert, and above all infinite patience."42 Unfortunately, in the aftermath of September 11 the Bush administration's urgent calls for action eliminated these options. In such cases, as Howard notes, "all alternatives are forgotten or overridden in a media-stoked frenzy for immediate results, and nagging complaints if they do not get them."43

The Bush administration's promotion of the terrorists from criminals to enemies also inhibited any sense of nuance in dealing with the perpetrators. Few states will support those labeled international criminals, and international public support, by a sizable majority, tend to side with justice when such criminals turn murderous. At the same time it is also important to remember that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. This distinction was unfortunately lost in the rhetoric that led up to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Because terrorists lack state sponsorship they

necessarily require the support of a people. Thus, terrorists can be eliminated only when public opinion, both national and international, supports a government's characterization of them as criminals rather than heroes in a David verse Goliath confrontation. A strong characterization of terrorists as criminals undermines the moral certainty of their cause, as the British discovered in both Palestine and Ireland. Should terrorists provoke governments to use overt military force against them they have achieved legitimization and in many ways already won. Either they escape to the bewilderment and frustration of the opposing force and its people or they are defeated and championed as martyrs.⁴⁴ A democratic government's power is derived from its ability to garner public support for its policies. Therefore, when democratic states rhetorically legitimize terrorists in an effort to justify overt military action they are allowing the terrorists to exploit one of the defining qualities of a democracy.

One can see this principle at work in President Obama's rhetoric surrounding the Syrian civil war and the rising Islamic State (IS). In addressing the nation on Syria's use of chemical weapons and later the ongoing Islamic State (IS) crisis the Obama administration has delivered a confusing combination of tough talk and vague policy, coupled with minimal action. As it became increasingly clear that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had and continued to use chemical weapons in the country's civil war President Obama chose a particularly evocative phrase saying proof of such activities would cross a "red line" and "change my calculus" regarding American military intervention. Despite the President's definitive rhetoric his administration's polocies remained vague and ambiguous. Although it appeared that the President had delivered an ultimatum to the Assad regime once that "red line" was crossed Assad faced no

consequences. This is partly because the President's "red line" was poorly defined, as was the impact on his calculus. The danger, as articulated by Barry Pavel, a former defense policy adviser to President Obama, is "about the broader damage to U.S. credibility if we make a statement and then come back with lawyerly language to get around it."46 In this case there has been a great discrepancy between President Obama's rhetoric on the matter and America's military commitment in the fight against Islamic extremists in Syria, Iraq, and Africa. In the same 10 September 2014 speech the President outlined his strategy for dealing with ISIS, where he stated, ""I have made it clear that we will hunt down terrorists who threaten our country, wherever they are," yet he followed this definitive statement with a vague assertion that he would "not involve American combat troops fighting on foreign soil."47 The President's rhetoric regarding ISIS appears confusing because the administrations policy is confusing. While the administration's rhetoric was full of strident promises to "degrade and destroy" the extremist group, its policy appeared to be to more akin to "managing" the crisis. The President appeared to be striking a middle ground between keeping combat troops out of the Middle East while trying to play an active role in combating the spread of ISIS in the region and beyond. Unfortunately, once the President began a rhetorical trajectory promising an aggressive response anything but the complete eradication of ISIS and the Assad regime would appear to be lack of resolve on the part of the United States. This seeming dichotomy of purpose, aggressive talk vs. passive action, served only to confuse the public both at home and abroad. As detailed in a recent Gallup Poll, and for the first time in his presidency, 53% of American's polled believe President Obama is not respected abroad. Even more striking is the fact that this number has increased by twenty five percent in the last twelve months.⁴⁸

The United States enjoys tremendous freedom of choice when it comes to international engagement⁴⁹. For the U.S., argues Waltz in his book *The Origins of* Alliances, it is "internal political pressures and national ambitions", not necessity, that dictates the when and where of American foreign policy decisions⁵⁰. Regardless of whether driven by necessity or choice American presidential rhetoric since the end of the Cold War has justified interventionist policies directed at terrorists, their networks, and rogue regimes as vital in order to thwart the "existential" threat they pose. There is an implicit contract presidents make with the public when they assume their role as Commander-in-Chief, that role is to protect the lives and interests of American citizens by making clear to those intent on harming this nation that doing so will be met with dire consequences. It also suggests that presidents must articulate both the nature of offense, should one occur, and requisite response. In return, this contract asks the American people to support efforts of the nation's armed forces as they carry out the business of the national command authority. The fulfillment of this contract validates the presidents' mandate for action and acts as a demonstration of will to the rest of the world. This contract is revealed through the rhetoric of the Presidents' administration in form of key speeches, comments, appearances, and national security documents. For Presidential rhetoric to manifest action it must consummate this contract with the American people by making a clear connection between a call to arms and the interests of the nation. Thucydides proposed this idea more than 3000 years ago, suggesting leaders must consider the citizens of a nation as they are, not as they ought to be,

propelled by basic motives that they rationally pursue in the form of fear, honor, and interest. When the president wishes to harness the power of these motives in support of political objectives through military operations there should be a consideration of the form, function, and implications of his statements. Because of its ability to influence an audience's perception and shape expectations rhetoric becomes one of the most powerful tools at a presidents' disposal. As Ivie argues, national will is greatly impacted by the American people's perception of the issue at hand.⁵¹ When presidential rhetoric fails to create a reality that demonstrates how Thucydides' three motives, fear, honor, and interest, are legitimately threatened there will be a distinct lack of support for the action.

Of these three motives it is reasonable to say interest looms largest. When the nation is unable to draw a line between its fears, as was easily done during the Cold War and following the attacks of September 11, or their honor as occurred following the attack on Pearl Harbor, all that is left is interest. Unfortunately, as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated, when Americans see the dire consequences of military actions but lack a consideration of how such actions serve the nation's interest support quickly wanes, perhaps even turning negative. Such considerations can extend beyond the physical losses incurred by military actions to other factors such as financial support. For instance, during the recent actions in Iraq many Americans weighed the financial contributions needed to improve schools and infrastructure in Iraq against domestic needs in those same areas. This misalignment of interest between the threat presidential rhetoric describes, and what the public perceives, creates a discrepancy in the public sphere that can be misinterpreted as a lack of national will. In

reality however it is more akin to a simple recognition by the public that the cost benefit ratio does not lead to a favorable outcome.

As this essay demonstrates the often-overlooked realization in contemporary American politics is that there must be a balance between presidential rhetoric and military action. Unfortunately, as the examples analyzed here demonstrate, when that calculus is unclear the consequences can be calamitous. As Nikolas Gvosdev posed, "The current generation of [Washington] policymakers has developed the tendency toward taking symbolic gestures while avoiding stronger commitments of the nation's energy and resources to back up its grandiose and far-reaching rhetoric." For the United States to maintain its position of global leadership the nation's leaders, beginning with the President, must endeavor to align rhetorical means and military ends in a comparable manner. A careful consideration of such a calculus empowers administrations to consider more nuanced approaches to international diplomacy. This allows the president to make room for states that, for instance, do not support America's enemies but also do not necessarily support America's actions in a given theater. Such an approach is rooted in American liberalism and encourages states to be nonthreatening to the United States and our interests without forcing them into an either/or situation that limits diplomatic opportunities. As the Old Testament Proverb warns, "The tongue has the power of life and death" and as such, the rhetoric of the most powerful leader of the most powerful nation on the planet should be wielded with great care. To be sure, words matter, and none more so than those emanating from the White House.

Endnotes

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