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# Threat and Threatening Language: Public Discourse on Iraq

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**Abstract.** This article explores the relationship of language, the construction of threat, and the constructor's response to that which is constructed.

The United States (US) Senate majority leader has been quoted (in Firestone and Sanger, 2002) as stating, "I'm more concerned about getting this done right than getting it done quickly." Here "this" and "it" refer to hearings and debate over the appropriateness of US military intervention against Iraq. The majority leader is suggesting that the US should not be rushed into military action and should have ample time to decide about that action's appropriateness. He is also no doubt sticking up for a presumed Congressional prerogative concerning declaring and funding war and against a presumed Presidential prerogative to engage in de facto war.

However, isn't it the case that getting any this right may also involve getting any it quickly? The two can be conflated through positive association and correlation as easily as they can be through negative association and correlation or can be not conflated at all.

It also has been posited (in Firestone and Sanger, 2002) that the US Senate minority leader does "not favor forcing a quick vote" on military intervention against Iraq. What has not been parsed from such positing is whether a quick vote should be denoted only by the sands of time, by a compatibility with the reality of fast-breaking action and the necessity for fast-breaking proactive or reactive action, by a deference to the US President's conception of and preference for quickness, or combinations of these and other denotations.

The notion of a quick vote for military intervention is also muddled by intimations (in Firestone and Sanger, 2002) that it might be at least a year for inspectors to verify that Iraq was not developing prohibited weapons. Problems here include the reality that verification can rarely be an all-or-none phenomenon and that no longer developing prohibited weapons may bear not at all on the incipient or actual deployment and potential for employment of such weapons.

Moreover, if the threat presented by Iraq's weapons programs alone or in conjunction with Iraqi military and political intent was dire or urgent, one might assume that the US President would already have ordered military intervention with all deliberate speed. In fact, through logic, with all its fallacious possibilities, one might even assume that this already has happened and that a quick vote is desired before the observables of this order are obvious to the discerning viewer. In fact, one might assume that a US President deferring to a less than quick Congressional deliberation when the threat was dire and urgent would be courting impeachment as well as disaster for the country and its allies.

Of course, there are other aspects to the psychological and political conflict on quickness that are orthogonal to viable threat assessment and response. One is the domestic political notion that the discourse on military intervention is but a vehicle to seize the advantage for the Republicans against the Democrats in the Fall 2002 elections, given the presumption that security discourse favors the Republicans and economic discourse the Democrats. Another is an unflattering but extant ad hominem

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argument that, regardless of additional discourse and data, the US President has a made-up mind: i.e., his mind of substance towards security issues is but an artifice as opposed to the real thing. Still another sort of made-up-mind contention may be operative: that the President is resistant to change for any number of reasons regardless of additional discourse and data.

Yet, language may concurrently bear on threat in several ways. That is, threatening language may be about threat, may impart threat to others, and, too often, may carry the seeds of one's own failure and even self-destruction through one's own thoughts. (See Bull, P., & Elliott, J. (1998). Level of threat: A means of assessing interviewer toughness and neutrality. *Journal of Language & Social Psychology*, 17, 220-244; Firestone, D., & Sanger, D.E. (September 6, 2002). Congress now promises to hold weeks of hearings about Iraq. *The New York Times*, pp. A1, A10; Parker, I. (1998). Against postmodernism: Psychology in cultural context. *Theory & Psychology*, 8, 601-627; Roloff, M. E., Paulson, G. D., & Vollbrecht, J. (1998). The interpretation of coercive communication: The effects of mode of influence, powerful speech, and speaker authority. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 9, 139-161.) (Keywords: Iraq, Language.)