Semiotic Analysis of Robert Byrd's Senate Floor Speech on Iraq War Decision

Daniel Loewus-Deitch

Fielding Graduate University

Abstract

On February 12, 2003, Robert Byrd gave a speech on the Senate floor that some have referred to as the "We Stand Passively Mute" speech. Byrd provided these remarks in order to bring attention to the complacency and lack of debate in Congress surrounding the run-up to the Iraq war. The speech was bold, powerful, and poignant, at a time when few elected officials were speaking out against the planned invasion. In this paper, I conduct a semiotic analysis of the codes, metaphors, metonyms, myths, and narratives that Byrd uses to address the Senate.

Semiotic Analysis of Robert Byrd Speech

On February 12, 2003, Robert Byrd gave a speech on the Senate floor that some have referred to as the "We Stand Passively Mute" speech. Byrd provided these remarks in order to bring attention to the complacency and lack of debate in Congress surrounding the run-up to the Iraq war. In this war, Saddam Hussein was eventually ousted, but at tremendous costs to both the American and Iraqi people. While the justifications for this war often changed over the course of the conflict, the original reason that the Bush Administration provided for initiating the invasion was that they believed Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. The weapons of mass destruction argument turned out to be based on faulty intelligence and became the subject of a major cover-up. Therefore, the Administration tried to re-frame the war as necessary for fighting global terrorism. Furthermore, a military engagement that was promised to be a quick and decisive victory eventually lead to a quagmire. The U.S became caught in the middle of a civil war, perpetually fighting insurgents while maintaining an indefinite occupation and rebuilding effort that has lasted now for 8 years. Byrd's 2003 speech was bold, powerful, and poignant, at a time when few elected officials were speaking out against the planned invasion.

In the "We Stand Passively Mute" speech, there are a handful of primary elements that Byrd characterizes and frames within the overall argument. These are the Senate, the impending Iraq War, the Bush Administration, foreign nations, international governance bodies, and the American people. Each of these actors plays a well-defined part in the story that Byrd tells throughout his speech. In this paper, I will conduct a semiotic analysis of the codes, metaphors, metonyms, myths, and narratives that Byrd uses to address each of these primary elements.

Defining the Semiotic Terms Used in this Analysis

Narrative, Story, and Plot

In semiotic terms, a narrative is the telling of a story based on a particular time structure of events that occur in that story. The story, itself, is the overarching sequence of events in a chronicled tale, regardless of the order or manner in which the events are actually presented to the audience. A plot, on the other hand, is the sequence in which a particular narrative reveals the events of this story (Thwaites, Davis, & Mules, 2002). Moreover, the plot is the primary mechanism to inherently communicate causation and goals (Chandler, 1994).

In politics, politicians and their handlers often reconstruct narratives and plots to frame an issue in a particular light. For example, the story of the Iraq War can be told from many varied perspectives. As I will demonstrate, in this Senate floor speech, Byrd tells the story of the Iraq conflict in a very different way than the Bush Administration. He selectively chooses to highlight certain sequences of events, goals, consequences, and causes in order to illustrate how dangerous, unpredictable, and horrible war can be. As I will also discuss, the Bush Administration ultimately changed its own narrative and plot several times throughout the course of the military conflict, in an attempt to garner more political support.

Metonymy and Myth

According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003), both metonyms and metaphors are communication techniques that facilitate understanding. However, metonyms also serve a primary referential function because they involve one thing standing in for another in a logical, systematic sort of way. In political speeches, metonymical relationships are often expressed through specific patterns, or types of relationships, such as the part for the whole, the institution for people responsible, and the place for the institution (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). For example, Byrd frequently uses “Administration” (the institution) to refer to the people who make up that administration, especially George W. Bush himself.

When studying semiotics, it is important to recognize that signs do not easily convey meaning in isolation. Signs require a context to demonstrate how they relate to each other. This context is provided through codes. A code is a reproducible system of signs that inherently allows for logical and cultural interpretation of meaning (Chandler, 1994).

A myth is a particular type of code that is often leveraged in political discourse. Political myths use metonymy to simplify complicated situations, such as foreign affairs, into simple, emotionally powerful concepts (Thwaites, et. al, 2002). These concepts are often intimately connected to pervasive cultural beliefs and attitudes, as well as national, patriotic traditions, thus making them seem natural and objectively true (Chandler, 1994). As I will illustrate, Byrd frequently leverages myths in his narrative as a way to persuasively create understanding and meaning surrounding concepts such as war, the Bush Administration, international relations, national tradition, and the interests of the American people.

Connotation and Denotation

A denotation is the currently dominant meaning of a sign. It is the most obvious or literal way that people understand that sign. A denotation belongs to a greater superset of connotations, which include all of the possible meanings (i.e. interpretations) that can be extended or derived from the sign (Danesi, 2007). In a political discourse, a lot of complex issues are often addressed, involving such things as economics, foreign affairs, social policies, and governmental ideologies. This leaves a lot of room for interpretation and targeted framing of issues. The construction of a narrative, including the strategic use of myths, metaphors, metonyms, and other codes, all enable the author to encourage particular connotations of signs amongst audiences. These connotations can influence others, sometimes at a deeply emotional level, and help the speaker win support for his or her position. In this paper, I will show how Byrd structures his narrative to connote the

impending Iraq War as chaotic, uncontrollable, destructive, illegal, immoral, and dangerous to both America's global reputation and the security of its citizens.

The Senate

The central message of Byrd's entire speech is that his fellow senators are standing by submissively silent and unwilling to debate, while the Administration initiates this irresponsible and illegal war. By using the words "ominously" and "dreadfully," their silence is subtly associated to conspiracy, indifference, and perhaps even evil. Of course, the chamber is not literally silent, but the image of a morbid, oppressive silence is portrayed to characterize the lack of debate over the war. He paints those that are silent as not only complacent but also malicious since they are allowing such a war, and consequently death and destruction, to take place under their watch.

Active Complacence

Perhaps the most intriguing part of Senator Byrd's speech is when he states, "We stand passively mute in the United States Senate, paralyzed by our own uncertainty, seemingly stunned by the sheer turmoil of events." Using the word "stand" infers an active choice, but "passively mute" once again implies complacence, weakness, and an unwillingness to speak up. Furthermore, the contradiction between the phrases "stand" and "passively mute" creates an effective oppositional tension, while reinforcing Byrd's central theme that the senators should take a bold stand and loudly speak out against the war. He suggests that their continued silence is offering implied consent for the "horrors of war." In the latter half of the statement, Byrd softens his blame on his fellow senators a bit, recognizing the possibility that the other members of Congress may be in shock over the sudden escalation and rapid, traumatic sequence of events. This shock has presumably left them disabled or "paralyzed" by "uncertainty," and thus unable

to govern effectively. By later stating that they are "sleepwalking through history," Byrd reinforces his argument that the Senate is asleep at the wheel. They have become ineffective at playing a checks and balances role, leaving the executive branch to do as they please in regards to Iraq.

The Iraq War

The prospect of an unprecedented, pre-emptive war, initiated by the United States, is the most salient and central subject of this argument. Byrd deliberately selects paradigmatic, or associative, structures for war that emphasize the most negative and disturbing connotations possible. The myth of war for Byrd is very different than the myth of war for Bush's administration. In fact they are essentially in binary opposition to each other, especially in regards to Iraq. Thus, to better understand Byrd's intentions and motivations for his speech, it is important to first understand the narratives and myths that the Bush Administration used to sell the Iraq War to Congress and the American people.

Bush's Frame: War is a Proactive, Brave, and Noble Struggle

For Bush, the myth of war is that it is a brave, noble fight against terrorism and evil, where we are the good guys and they are the bad guys. Being militarily pre-emptive is equated with being proactive, and it was often rhetorically stated that we must fight the terrorists over there so that we aren't later forced to fight them over here, on our soil. Therefore, taking the war to them was framed as a way of keeping the war from coming to us.

Controlling and Evolving the Narrative of the Iraq War

The Iraq war, specifically, was justified to ensure that Saddam could not mature his alleged Weapons of Mass Destruction program to the point where he could target allies, such as Israel, in the region. However, the underlying connotation, used emotionally to ignite fear and

obtain approval, was that such potential weaponry was a direct danger and threat to the American people. Furthermore, the Administration tried to equate Saddam with the terrorists who plotted the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center attacks.

Eventually, the Administration lost control of these first two narratives in the media, thanks to constant reports of faulty intelligence. At this point, the narrative of the war was re-organized as a liberation of the Iraqi people; the connotation being that Saddam, an illegitimate dictator, was a source of tyranny, and his undemocratic rule imposed a loss of freedom on the citizens of Iraq. Using metonymy, the Bush Administration equated America, freedom and democracy. A big part of Bush's national identity myth was not only that America is a place of freedom and democracy but also that it is an enforcer and protector of such virtues around the world. Within this frame, America, a single country, is portrayed as the overarching, guiding source of freedom and democracy for all of human civilization. In terms of a plot, Saddam is first introduced as an oppressive dictator who is terrorizing his people. Therefore, we, as the heroes of freedom and democracy, must respond by entering Iraq and removing Saddam from power in order to liberate the common citizens from this despotism. Of course, a plot does not need to reveal the whole story to the audience. Rather, it can strategically and selectively highlight particular motivations, events, and consequences.

War as a Surgical Procedure and a Technological Showcase

In Bush's plot of how the war in Iraq would play out, we would swiftly and decisively hit Iraq with "shock and awe," and we would use "precision-guided smart bombs" to ensure that only the enemy, the bad guy terrorists, are killed, thus liberating the helpless, good people of Iraq. This plot establishes a myth about our military and technology that we are entirely in control of Iraq's fate. Saddam and his forces will hardly be able to resist and fight back because

they are really more spectators in this conflict. Almost like a fireworks show, they become a passive audience, forced to watch as we mesmerize the world with our shocking and awe-inspiring barrage of technological weapons.

At the same time, this sheer volume of force is mitigated and balanced by technology that is "smart" and "precise." These highly destructive bombs become personified, endowed with brains and a human sense of morality that can help them seek out and kill just the bad guys while leaving the innocent civilians unharmed. Here, Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) metonymical pattern, object used for user, is also leveraged, as the "smart bombs" referentially represent the noble aspirations of the people who produce these bombs, as well as the military personnel who launch them. This personification and metonymy enhances our good guy image by making us look judicial in our attacks. In a metaphorical sense, we are cautiously invading the body of Iraq to cut out the cancer so that the good parts can continue to live. The "shock and awe" and "smart and precise" metaphors also work together to sanitize the Iraq War and establish a widespread myth that such an operation could be extremely accurate, highly controlled or contained, and finished very quickly.

Byrd's Frame: War is a Chaotic, Destructive, Horrible Human Experience

In his very first utterance, "To contemplate war is to think about the most horrible of human experiences," Robert Byrd looks to tear down the hegemonic myth that the Bush Administration had pumped through the mainstream media in the run-up to the Iraq war. In its place, he immediately constructs a new myth. In Byrd's narrative, war only leads to "horrors" and "death and destruction." Bush's quick, precise, and painless myth of war is replaced with one that associates military conflict with complete uncertainty and lack of control over the situation. The metaphor Byrd uses at the end of his speech, "picking a wild card," connotes this

idea of war as chaotic and uncontrollable. Towards the beginning of the speech, he also uses the word "conflagration." This is a very powerful word choice because it has a duel meaning, as well as an inherent, coded, paradigmatic structure in its definition. Conflagration can mean a conflict or war but, according to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, its primary definition is a large, uncontrolled, disastrous fire that threatens human life. The use of such a word instantly colors war in direct, binary opposition to the way that Bush frames it in his narrative. If a war is a conflagration, it is broadly destructive, it cannot be controlled or contained, its duration is unpredictable, and it can certainly lead to loss of innocent lives.

When Byrd says, "This is no simple attempt to defang a villain," after calling the anticipated Iraq War a "conflagration," he is implying that we are not neutralizing a threat to protect innocent people. Rather, we are capriciously creating a new, volatile threat that could potentially be even harder to contain and runs the high risk of harming the very people we are claiming to protect. At the end of his speech, Byrd emphasizes this point in a less-than-subtle manner by twice stating the fact that Iraq's population is over 50% children (with the implicit assumption that children under the age of 15 are innocent and should be protected). He also describes a U.S. military attack as an "infliction of death and destruction on the population of the nation of Iraq." Such repetition is an effective technique used in arguments to emphasize the importance of the point being made. Once again, this paradigmatic structure of signs surrounding the war is in stark contrast to the ones used by Bush and his administration.

War as a Security Risk and Threat to All Americans

To be clear, Byrd is not just presenting war as exclusively harmful and destructive to the Iraqi people, but also that it will be harmful and destructive to us as American citizens. He repeatedly connects the word "horrors," an extremely visceral, alarming word, with war

whenever he speaks of it. Twice, he explicitly refers to the horrors that *American troops* will face, including "unimagined chemical and biological warfare." What's even more interesting, however, is how careful Byrd is to maintain a close-linked association between military personnel and citizens. The word "civilian" is often used to create a distinct separation between the role and identity of Americans who are in the military and Americans who are not. In this speech, Byrd avoids this establishment of distance, emphasizing, "Family members are being called to active military duty." Later he says, "On what is possibly only days before we send thousands of our own citizens to face unimagined horrors." It is not much of a stretch to assume that such emphasis on common family and citizenship ties are deliberate to ensure that all Americans, including his fellow members on the Senate floor, feel the proximity to the "horrors" of this impending war.

In a similar vein, in order to bring a distant, remote war and its consequences closer to home, in the minds of American citizens, Byrd juxtaposes Bush's link between the Iraq War and terrorism. He reverses the causality in Bush's argument by exclaiming, "On the eve of what could be a vicious terrorist attack in retaliation for our attack on Iraq." While Bush claims we are fighting the terrorists over there so that we don't have to fight them on our own soil, Byrd's alternative myth of war inverts the effect of the catalyst, while still inciting the exact same fear emotions related to physical security: initiating a war in Iraq will, in fact, leave us vulnerable and at greater risk for retaliatory terrorist attacks on our soil.

The Iraq War as an Illegal Act of Terrorism

Byrd is not content just changing the white washed and euphemistic overtones that the Bush Administration has attributed to war in general. Rather, he pushes further to specifically redefine the Iraq War by emphasizing the role that we play in it as the aggressors. Not only does

Byrd suggest that a war in Iraq would encourage more terrorist attacks against us, rather than prevent them, he introduces the metaphor that the Iraq War is actually an act of terrorism conducted by our own country. In reference to the war, he states:

> It appears to be in contravention of international law and the UN Charter. And it is being tested at a time of world-wide terrorism, making many countries around the globe wonder if they will soon be on our -- or some other nation's -- hit list.

Bush framed the Iraq invasion as a proactive, decisive operation that was a necessary response to an imminent terrorist threat. By establishing the illegality and illegitimacy of the Iraq War, and then immediately following with the phrase "world-wide terrorism," Byrd transposes Bush's frame, thus defining the American invasion as a crude, unjustified terrorist attack. He later reinforces this definition of the Iraq War, exclaiming, "I truly must question the judgment of any President who can say that a massive unprovoked military attack on a nation which is over 50% children is 'in the highest moral traditions of our country'." Within one sentence, he calls the war "unprovoked," questioning the morality of the action, and insinuates that this is really an attack on a nation predominantly made up of children.

Clearly, the paradigmatic choices in these highlighted passages connote the Iraq War as more of a crime and an act of evil. This fundamentally changes the overarching myth of the war, while also unraveling the neatly packaged plot that the Bush Administration sold: our military bravely enters Iraq as saviors and liberators, takes down Saddam, the embodiment of evil, and thus simultaneously protects both innocent Americans and the Iraqi people.

War as Self-Defense Rather than Preemptive Action

Before we move on from the concept of war and the way it is portrayed in this speech, we must discuss the speech's syntagmatic rule structure that Byrd constructs as an alternative to

preemptive action in Iraq. Just like words are organized by grammar rules to form a sentence, or rules of a board game exist to determine the method and sequence of how pieces are moved around the board, war can be looked at as a narrative syntagm made up of various diplomatic and military actions or events that require preconditions and must occur in a particular order (Thwaites, et. al, 2002). Byrd uses the longstanding traditions of U.S. foreign policy and international law as the basis for these rules, establishing that war can only be initiated in self-defense, in response to an imminent attack:

> The doctrine of preemption -- the idea that the United States or any other nation can legitimately attack a nation that is not imminently threatening but may be threatening in the future -- is a radical new twist on the traditional idea of self-defense.

He also states, "War must always be a last resort, not a first choice," adding, "This war is not necessary at this time." These statements reinforce the idea that war is governed by rules of tradition and legality in our country and Bush was illegally and inappropriately challenging this tradition with a "revolutionary doctrine applied in an extraordinary way at an unfortunate time."

Byrd makes an interesting concessionary choice in this speech. Despite his general negative portrayal of war, asserting that it only leads to "horrors" and "death and destruction," he finds it necessary, in his argument, to distinguish the Iraq war from the Afghanistan war. Presumably, he does this in order to strengthen the narrative syntagm that he has developed about war being strictly for self-defense. In doing this, he is accepting the argument that the Afghanistan war was legitimate because the United States was acting in self-defense, after being attacked by terrorists on September 11, 2001. Of course, this also requires accepting the frame that a nation state is responsible for terrorist actions that occur if the government knowingly allows such terrorists to reside within their country. To be clear, Byrd is quite judicial with his

words. He never gives a full-hearted endorsement of the Afghani conflict. In fact, he states, "The war in Afghanistan has cost us $37 billion so far, yet there is evidence that terrorism may already be starting to regain its hold in that region." He also emphasizes they have "not learned that after winning the war one must always secure the peace?" To Byrd, winning a war is irrelevant if peace and stability are not achieved afterwards. However, by stating, "The dark dens of terrorism may yet again flourish in that remote and devastated land," he is subtly acknowledging that the war was at least temporarily successful in suppressing and disrupting terrorist activity. He also chooses to accept the Administration's myth, true or not, that the Afghanistan conflict was indeed a "war against terrorism," even while acknowledging that Bin Laden, the alleged mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks, still has not been found or captured.

The Bush Administration

Generalizing the Personalized Myths of George W. Bush to the Administration

In making his argument, Byrd clearly casts the Bush Administration as the antagonist or villain in this call to war. Byrd is quick to frame the Administration in a negative light by highlighting its failures, both domestically and internationally, all while tying these failures to unfavorable personal characteristics. Such associations help firmly establish the Bush team's direct responsibility for our current problems rather than allowing them to be attributed to unavoidable, situational variables. It is also interesting to note the *institution for people responsible* metonymical concept that Byrd repeatedly uses (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Bush is never once referred to by name in the speech. Rather, he is only indirectly referenced through the word "Administration." However, using phrases such as "crude insensitivities," "reckless," "arrogant," and "callous disregard," personalizes and narrows the ad hominem attack, playing off of myths or stereotypes about President Bush, at the time, amongst his political opposition and

within popular culture.

Reframing the Protector Role of the Federal Government

Right near the beginning of the speech, Byrd asserts that the Administration must be judged on its record, which he calls "dismal." There appears to be a common theme throughout this "dismal" record narrative: *protection*. On the domestic side, they are charged with not providing adequate funding for fire and police protection within local communities. They are characterized as not looking after the best interests of seniors or other vulnerable demographics by ignoring healthcare reform and understaffing "essential services." They are also accused of failing to fund Homeland Security, while leaving our borders vulnerable as well. The economy is a common focus for Byrd. Once again, he paints the Bush Administration as incompetent when it comes to protecting our country's wealth and stability, trading surpluses for large deficits, impeding economic growth, and putting states "in dire financial condition." Meanwhile, on the foreign front, Byrd emphasizes the fact that Bin Laden has not been found.

All of this negative focus on the Administration's record and its inability to protect the American people is designed to discredit the current decision to go to war in Iraq. If the Administration is unable to even protect us within our own borders, then how can they be trusted to make the right determinations in protecting us outside of our borders? Keeping the emphasis on domestic policy also helps to create a new myth that government's primary job is to provide protection within our country by making sure that citizens are well-cared for and the economy is strong. This shifts the definition and frame of protection from a foreign, military-centric view to a more friendly interpretation for Democrats, who traditionally tend to believe in empowering and protecting the American people through civilian forces and the provision of localized social services.

The Administration as an Extreme, Unstable Leadership that Ignores American Tradition

Byrd makes a great effort in this speech to draw the distinction between "traditional" and "radical" or "revolutionary." In Byrd's narrative, these terms are treated as being in binary opposition to each other; the connotation being that "traditional" is constructive and safe, while "radical" is destabilizing and reckless. He talks about the Administration's "doctrine of preemption" and how it challenges the "traditional idea of self defense" in an illegal and inappropriate manner. He also describes how the Bush team has "split traditional alliances" and caused others around the world to question whether the United States can still legitimately maintain its traditional reputation as a "well-intentioned peacekeeper." Moreover, this consistent focus on the Administration's habit of breaking long-standing traditions appears designed to make them appear dangerous, extreme, unstable, and unpredictable. When this crafted representation of the Administration is paired with a frame of the impending Iraq War as a terrorist action, the inherent codes become clear. After all, terrorists are often portrayed with the same adjectives that Byrd uses to describe the Bush Administration. Without directly saying it, Byrd has essentially constructed a metaphor of the Administration as terrorists.

America

America, in Byrd's speech, plays an interesting role. On one side, he maintains the idealized, patriotic self-image of this country that many citizens subscribe to here domestically. He describes America as a great nation, "the greatest superpower on the plant," in fact. Going back to tradition, Byrd emphasizes that this country has high moral traditions and "good and trusting" citizens. Part of this high moral tradition myth, for Byrd, is a specific conception of self-defense: we should never attack a nation unless it is a direct, imminent threat.

Despite this generalized, high rhetoric, he acknowledges that America is currently in quite

a precarious state. “Fuel prices are rising,” and the “economy is stumbling” as surpluses have been replaced with large deficits. Using metonymy and personification, Byrd reflects sentiments of many individual citizens by proclaiming, “The mood of the nation is grim.” The country is also described as being trapped in a corner and standing “at the brink of battle.” Of course, Byrd ties all of these examples of the precarious state that America is in to the “inadequate” and “reckless” leadership of President Bush’s administration.

In the domain of international opinion, the senator from West Virginia also paints a very different picture of America that greatly contradicts the idealized, “traditional” self-image that this nation has, or as Byrd implies, once had before the Bush Administration took power. In this globalized realm, America is characterized, under its current leadership, as a bully that is suspicious, not trustworthy, and destabilizing. With Bush’s “revolutionary” and “extraordinary” doctrine of preemption, America is also connoted as an invader, occupier, oil pirate, and even potential terrorist in the eyes of other nations. At the same time, Byrd believes that the United States can still attain “the cooperation and friendship of our time-honored allies” because of its “awesome military machine,” while also winning over new friends with its wealth.

International Relations

Byrd mostly discusses the nation’s foreign allies and international governance institutions in terms of their relationship with America, and more specifically, with the Bush Administration. The Senator repeatedly uses a metaphor of physical structure to describe the tenuous state of diplomacy between the United States and its allies. In one part, he states, “There are huge cracks emerging in our time-honored alliances.” He continues, by asserting, “Alarming rhetoric from U.S. leaders is fracturing the once solid alliance against global terrorism which existed after September 11.” Words such as “cracks”, “fracturing,” and “solid” in these statements reinforce

the construction metaphor. At the same time, Byrd recognizes that these foreign nations have necessary dependencies on America, in terms of economics and security. As already stated, he even unabashedly claims that there are new allies the United States can "attract with our wealth."

Senator Byrd discusses how other nations feel they are treated by the United States. He describes how their interests and opinions are callously disregarded. He also says they are offended by being labeled as "evil" and "irrelevant," while their heads of state are referred to as "pygmies." He seems to be carefully limiting this criticism to the Bush Administration, but he also makes it clear that other nations feel disrespected and offended by America as a whole, and that this is damaging international relations at a further level.

Based on the Administration's behavior, Byrd characterizes the international views of America as progressively deteriorating. Other countries increasingly see the United States as a destabilizing force that is unpredictable and makes them constantly feel uncertain. They question America's intentions and wonder if and when America may turn on them. Beyond the sentiments of individual countries, Byrd also constructs a narrative of the Bush Administration "fracturing" alliances with "outrageous pronouncements" and "senselessly bellicose language," while also "crippling" the United Nations and NATO. He emphasizes that the U.S. actions are illegal, and it has openly chosen to disobey U.N. laws and regulations, thus delegitimizing this international governance institution. Overall, Byrd insists that the Bush Administration has fundamentally damaged America's reputation and image across the globe.

The American People

The American people are characterized as passive victims of the Bush Administration in Byrd's myth. According to the senator, the Administration's actions are putting Americans at greater risk of retaliatory terrorist attacks. They are also subjected to rising gas prices and a

worsening economy. Meanwhile, they must face the potential loss of essential social services and reduced police or fire protection in their local communities. Byrd emphasizes that the Administration has left American citizens in the dark with vague warnings of imminent terrorist attacks, but no real guidance. Many are being called into active military duty with "no idea of the duration of their stay or what horrors they may face." With all of these unpleasant experiences, Byrd uses both metaphor and metonymy when he talks about the "grim" mood of the nation. He speaks of the collective citizenry as if they were a single human entity, with one common set of emotions. This is a prime example of the commonly used metaphor: society is a person or society is a body. From a metonymic standpoint, Byrd uses "the nation," a political entity to refer to the people of that nation (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Conclusion

Robert Byrd's Senate floor speech, in February 2003, was designed to be a wake-up call to his fellow senators. He criticized them for remaining silent at a time when real leadership was required to prevent a determined White House Administration from dragging the country into what he considered an illegal military invasion. He strongly felt that this war would ultimately come back to hurt America, both at home and abroad. In hindsight, it appears he was right.

In his speech, Byrd explicitly presents an alternative, opposing narrative for the Iraq conflict. In this narrative, the Bush Administration plays the role of the villain, acting belligerently to endanger American citizens and soldiers, while also immensely damaging relations with international allies. Even today, this remains a compelling speech with a rich paradigmatic structure and an intriguing set of metaphors.

References

Byrd, R. C. (2003, February). *We Stand Passively Mute*. Speech presented on the United States Senate floor, Washington, D.C.

Chandler, D. (1994). *Semiotics for beginners*. Retrieved from http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/semiotic.html

Danesi, M. (2007). *The quest for meaning: A guide to semiotic theory and practice*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors we live by* (2nd ed.). London: The University of Chicago Press.

Thwaites, T., Davis, L., & Mules, W. (2002). *Introducing cultural and media studies: A semiotic approach*. New York, NY: Palgrave.