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# The “Axis of Evil” and Iran



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## [September 11, 2001 Speech](#) [1:21 mins.]



“Good evening. Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts. The victims were in airplanes, or in their offices; secretaries, businessmen and women, military and federal workers; moms and dads, friends and neighbors. Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror.

The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing, have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger. These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed; our country is strong.

A great people has been moved to defend a great nation. Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.”

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## The State of the Union Address



29 January 2002

“States like these [North Korea, Iran, and Iraq] and their terrorist allies, constitute an **axis of evil**, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.”

## The Rhetoric of the “Axis of Evil”



1. Bush used “evil” five times, three times referring to enemies.
2. Was this an echo of Reagan’s “Evil Empire” rhetoric?
3. Bush as a “born-again” Christian with a dualist view of life  
A struggle between Good and Evil | Us and Them

## The Metaphor: The Axis Powers



1. A term first used by Benito Mussolini when he spoke of a Rome-Berlin axis in reference to the treaty of friendship signed between Italy and Nazi Germany in October 1936.
2. Major Axis Powers: Germany, Italy, Japan  
Lesser Axis Powers: Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia

## The Metaphor: Analysis



The term, “Axis,” evokes:

1. World War II and the enemies of the allies.
2. Comparisons with Hitler and visions of “appeasement.”
3. An alliance of countries sharing responsibility for their actions.
4. A shift of focus from bin Laden to “terrorist states” who might possess weapons of mass destruction.

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## The Metaphor: Analysis (continued)



State of the Union Address  
29 January 2002

“Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people’s hope for freedom.”

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## The Metaphor: Analysis (continued)



Although this phrase may have been the invention of the President’s speechwriters, it contains metonymic concepts that are grounded in experience.

Like metaphors, metonyms “structure not just our language but also our thoughts, attitudes, and actions” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 39).

## The Metaphor: Analysis (continued)



1. Metaphor is the first step in the construction of new understandings of the world.
2. Such restructuring often begins with a vague idea, such as an “axis,” that has long been neglected.
3. In this respect, the “Axis of Evil” is a kind of cognitive breakthrough--an attempt to restructure the international system like it was in the 1930’s.
4. The Axis Powers are evil, and something must be done about them.



# The “Axis of Evil” and Iran



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## Interviews Conducted in Iran by Heradstveit



Sample: 18 members of the “oppositional” elite in Iran, including politicians, civil servants, academics, journalists

In-depth Interviews lasting up to 90 minutes with open-ended questions were conducted in April 2002

## Why Was Iran Accorded Membership In the “Axis of Evil,” in spite of...



1. President Khatami’s idea of a “dialogue of civilizations.”
2. Secretary of State Albright’s apology for 1953 and US support of the Shah.
3. Iranian collaboration with the West over Afghanistan.

# The “Axis of Evil” and Iran

<b>Table 1 The USA’s Motives for Including Iran in “the Axis of Evil”</b> (N is the number of statements)	
<i>Avowed American aims</i>	
Al-Qaida	3
Removal of WMDs	6
Democratization	5
<i>Geopolitics</i>	
Domestic motives	8
Hegemony	13
Israeli interests	13
<i>Psychology</i>	
Ingrained hatred	4
Need for an enemy image	5
Irrationality	11
	N = 68

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## Geopolitics: Interview Comments



1. *“The USA wants to play the role of savior of the world. ‘In God we trust’ is on the American dollar.”*
2. *“This is primarily about the USA’s security interests.”*
3. *“Iran’s important strategic role make the country of great interest to the USA.”*

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## Psychology: Interview Comments



1. *“The USA has a need for an enemy image. They have always conjured up enemy images.”*
2. *“The USA is trying to find an identity that can unite the nation politically and culturally. The phrase is connected with this identity crisis.”*
3. *“The phrase was not founded on strategic rationality and seems poorly thought through.”*

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## A War Against Iran?



1. Respondents were uncertain about the intentions of the USA.
2. They seemed to be more worried than they were willing to admit.
3. Some thought Iran would give in quickly, but others thought that the consequences of a confrontation would be serious.
4. Interview Comments [next slide]

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## A War Against Iran?: Interview Comments



1. *“The expressions he uses—good and evil—do not suggest that he is thinking of imminent military action.”*
2. *“The phrase strengthens Muslim hatred of the USA.”*
3. *“The USA desires agreement with Iran. If they are not reconciled, the USA will claim its has free hands to attack.”*

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## The “Axis of Evil” and Iranian Politics



1. Only two respondents dismissed the “Axis of Evil” rhetoric as having few consequences for Iranian politics.
2. The “Axis of Evil” led to fear among both the reformers and the conservatives.
3. The reformers became profoundly alienated and met the conservatives half way.

## The “Axis of Evil” and Iranian Politics

**Table 2: What Effect Has “the Axis of Evil” Rhetoric Had on Iranian Politics and the Iranian Factions?**

(N is the number of statements)

No effect in Iran	2
Strengthened the overseas exiles	1
Strengthened the reformers	2
National unity	4
Killed off dialogue with the USA	11
A godsend to the conservatives and ultras	16

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## “A Stab in the Back”



1. *“When Bush used the term ‘Axis of Evil,’ it was as if he hit the moderate forces in Iran with a hammer.”*
2. *“The phrase came straight after the collaboration between the USA and Iran in Afghanistan. The sense of betrayal was strong.”*
3. *“The ‘Axis of Evil’ is a slap in the face of all those who trusted the USA.”*

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## Discussion



1. Metaphors are tied to cultural contexts: what can be effective in one culture may not convey meaning in another.
2. For example, no Iranian respondents reacted to the term, “Axis.”
3. The term, “Evil,” carries even stronger negative connotations in Iran than the USA and Europe.

## Policy Implications



1. The “Axis of Evil” metaphor implies that all American enemies are not only evil, but they are also united.
2. If a war is fought against Iran, it will be a battle against “the cowardly terrorists of the Axis of Evil.”

## Policy Implications (continued)



3. “Axis of Evil” has a very different meaning in West as compared to Iran. The Iranians picked up on “evil,” but not “Axis.”
4. When Western leaders engage in speech practices with an audience like Iran, they need to understand their own rhetorical practices...And how their audience will respond to them.