

'TRUTH' IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE  
A THEORETICAL CRITIQUE AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF THE 'WAR ON TERROR' ERA

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In American political discourse, the traditional notion of 'truth' as the matching of knowledge with objectively verifiable facts about the world largely dominates public ideologies as social actors in the political arena vie to uncover the 'truth' and wield it over opponents (e.g., *Did pre-war Iraq possess WMD?*, *Did Osama bin Laden have links to Saddam Hussein?*, *Did they collaborate in 9/11?*). Yet 'truth' in these debates is not so much discovered as enacted. This paper examines the performative acts that bring 'truth' into circulation. My data come from speeches and interviews of the Bush administration and opposing voices, such as those involved in the 2004 election and more recent events such as the funeral of Coretta Scott King. Specifically, I attempt to illustrate how intertextuality (Bakhtin 1981) contributes to the construction of 'truth' through references to previously accepted understandings, and acts as a tool of subversion in the challenging of truth claims-e.g., through the quoting of past statements in light of new evidence. I argue that while political actors view 'truth' as an objective reality to be discovered, analysts are best served by viewing 'truth' as "a process, which requires action to be realized" (Duranti 1993:236; cf. James 1963[1910]:89, Foucault 1980:131, Rosaldo 1982:227). The enactment of 'truth' associated with the 'war on terror' discourse, therefore, is implicitly built out of prior assumptions used by political actors variously positioned in the diagram of power to produce, circulate and subvert political claims qua 'truth.'

***References***

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