

Dubya, meet Il Duce: Who said 'axis' first?

By Kenneth Janda
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Who coined the term "axis," as in Bush's "axis of evil"?

President Bush has singled out North Korea, Iran and Iraq as "regimes that sponsor terror," threatening "America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction." He warned that "states like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world."

The news media have overflowed with comments about the meaning and appropriateness of that controversial phrase. An Internet search for "axis of evil" this month produced about 40,000 hits.

People recognize "axis" as the shorthand term for the Axis Powers—Germany, Italy and Japan—in World War II. They were the major enemies of a larger group of Allied Powers led by the United States, Britain and Russia.

As others have noted, Bush's

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State of the Union Message linked the 1940s term "axis" with the term "evil" used by Ronald Reagan, who described the former Soviet Union as the "evil empire" in the Great Communicator's speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in Florida on March 8, 1983.

However, few commentators have inquired into the political origin of the term, whose dictionary definition—based in science

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AXIS: Mussolini popularized it in 1936

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and mathematics—refers to "a straight line about which a body or geometric figure rotates."

Had Franklin D. Roosevelt—that other great communicator—coined "Axis Powers" to stand for that unholy alliance of fascist states?

According to Roosevelt's public papers in World Book's American Reference Library, he did use "axis" 157 times in a political sense but never before Nov. 11, 1940.

Furthermore, his usage did not define the term but merely used one that was already "out there."

So credit for introducing the term in popular political discourse must go to Benito Mussolini during the Italian premier's address on Nov. 1, 1936, to a huge crowd assembled outside Il Duomo, Milan's magnificent cathedral.

Reporting on the historic Italo-German Agreement reached Oct. 26, he said: "This Berlin-Rome vertical line is not an obstacle but rather an axis around which can revolve all those European states with a will to collaboration and peace."

The case for Mussolini's claim is supported by reading all 16 articles leading up to his Milan address in The New York Times during October 1936. Reporters referred to an expected "accord," "pact" or "front" between Italy and Germany, but never "axis."

The Times first mentioned "axis" on Nov. 2, 1936, in a front page article commenting on Mussolini's Milan speech.

Although Mussolini introduced and popularized "axis" to describe the fascist front, the right-wing premier of Hungary, Gyula Gombos, deserves credit for its origin.

Years earlier, he spoke of an axis that connected Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany with Hungary.

However, his pet term was not publicly adopted by either Il Duce or Der Fuehrer during Gombos' life.

He died Oct. 6, 1936, as Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano was preparing to visit Germany to negotiate the accord.

The "Axis Powers," as we know them now, were rounded out to include Japan by virtue of the Three-Power Pact signed in Berlin on Sept. 27, 1940, in which "The governments of Germany, Italy and Japan ... have decided to stand by and cooperate with one another ... to establish and maintain a new order of things."

Therefore, what we know historically as the fascist "axis" in World War II was forged through formal pacts between nations.

It is no wonder that Bush's linking of Iraq with Iran (which recently fought a war linked to sectarian Islamic differences) with atheistic North Korea (which stands ideologically and diplomatically separate) in an "axis" is controversial.

It is an arresting rhetorical flourish, but it does not square with history.