

Authority, Household, and Restoration: A Detailed Comparative Analysis of Metaphor and the Strict-Father Moral Frame in Trump's 2017 and 2025 Inaugural Addresses

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Abstract: This paper offers a refined comparative analysis of Donald J. Trump's 2017 and 2025 inaugural addresses using **Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)** (Lakoff & Johnson 1980) and Lakoff's subsequent “**nation-as-family**” moral framing (Lakoff 1996/2002). Building on two prior speech-level readings (the 2017 speech, manually coded earlier in this project; and an independently provided, detailed 2025 analysis), I employed a systematic coding scheme to classify metaphorical expressions into **structural**, **orientational**, and **ontological** types, and map each onto elements of the **Strict Father** moral frame (protection, discipline, moral education, hierarchy, reward/punishment, moral clarity). Quantitatively, the 2017 corpus contained 21 coded metaphorical instances (Structural = 10, Orientational = 6, Ontological = 5), while the 2025 corpus contained 41 instances (Structural = 16, Ontological = 17, Orientational = 8). Qualitatively, both speeches instantiate the Strict Father model but in different paternal phases: **2017 as rescuing/disciplining** (warrior father), **2025 as rebuilding/providing** (builder/guardian father). The paper proposes a small dynamic model of paternal-phase rhetoric, traces implications for persuasion and policy legitimisation, and discusses limits and future directions (computational validation, experimental framing tests).

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Lakoff, Strict Father model, inaugural addresses, political discourse, cognitive linguistics, Trump

1. Introduction

Political inaugurations are performative acts that do more than announce policy; they construct cognitive environments within which citizens reason about moral obligations, hierarchies, and collective identity. This paper investigates how two inaugurations by the same political actor (Trump, 2017 and 2025) use metaphor to instantiate and operationalize the **Strict Father** moral frame. I aim to show (i) how metaphors map onto specific Strict Father principles; (ii) how the same moral frame can be instantiated in distinct rhetorical phases; and (iii) theoretical implications for understanding how populist rhetoric can evolve while retaining its moral core.

2. Literature and theoretical anchors

Key theoretical resources:

- **Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT):** metaphors are conceptual mappings (tenor ← vehicle) that structure thought, not merely decoration (Lakoff & Johnson 1980).
- **Nation-as-family / Moral Politics:** Lakoff (1996/2002) argues that political thought frequently uses family models; the **Strict Father** frame defines conservative moral reasoning via authority, discipline, and moral strength.
- I.A. Richards' distinction **tenor/vehicle** is used operationally for coding individual instances.

I build on empirical work in political metaphor (e.g., politics-as-war, nation-as-body) and on Lakoff's direct claim that family metaphors translate to political moral cognition.

3. Corpus, coding scheme, and method

3.1 Corpus provenance

- **2017 inaugural address** (full text; delivered 20 Jan 2017).
- **2025 inaugural address** (full text; delivered 20 Jan 2025).

3.2 Coding scheme (operational)

Each discrete metaphorical phrase or clause that instantiated a conceptual metaphor was coded as one instance. Overlap allowed but each instance was assigned to its primary CMT type.

- **Structural:** one domain structured in terms of another (e.g., POLITICS IS WAR; NATION IS BUILDING).
- **Orientational:** spatial/axis mappings (GOOD IS UP; FUTURE IS FORWARD).
- **Ontological:** abstracts treated as entities/objects/persons (NATION IS A PERSON; PROBLEMS ARE ENEMIES).

Additionally, each instance was linked to one or more **Strict Father** moral principles:

1. **Protection** (father as protector/guardian)
2. **Discipline / Moral Education** (work as virtue; welfare as dependence)
3. **Hierarchy / Authority** (obedience, loyalty)
4. **Punishment & Reward** (punishment for wrongdoing; reward for virtue)
5. **Private Virtue → Public Policy** (the mapping of family moral logic onto state functions)
6. **Divine Parenting** (appeal to God as ultimate father/legitimiser)

3.3 Quantitative accounting

- 2017: total coded metaphorical instances = **21** (Structural = 10; Orientational = 6; Ontological = 5). Percentages: Structural 47.6%, Orientational 28.6%, Ontological 23.8%.
- 2025: total coded metaphorical instances = **41** (Structural = 16; Ontological = 17; Orientational = 8). Percentages (as supplied): Structural 39.0%, Ontological 41.5%, Orientational 19.5%.

4. Results — mapping metaphors to Strict Father components

Below I first summarise the core Strict Father components, then show how each is instantiated in both speeches, with representative quotations, CMT type, tenor/vehicle, and interpretive claim.

4.1 Protection / Guardian role

Strict Father principle: leader as protector of the family; state defends boundaries.

- **2017** (structural / ontological): “*We will protect our borders from the ravages of other countries.*”
 - Tenor: national borders/security. Vehicle: physical defence/fortress.
 - Interpretation: External threats are moralised; protection legitimises coercive policy (border control, militarised rhetoric).
- **2025** (structural / ontological): “*As commander in chief, I have no higher responsibility than to defend our country from threats and invasions.*” (military frame extended to domestic issues)
 - Tenor: presidency as guardian. Vehicle: military command.
 - Interpretation: Protection rhetoric persists but expands to justify domestic enforcement; protection is linked to paternal duty.

Comparative claim: Both speeches legitimise coercive capacity as paternal duty; 2017 frames urgency and rescue, 2025 frames sustained guarding and institutionalised protection.

4.2 Discipline and Moral Education (Work ethics)

Strict Father principle: children must learn self-reliance; work is moral training.

- **2017** (ontological / structural): “*We will get our people off of welfare and back to work.*”
 - Tenor: social policy/welfare. Vehicle: physical movement from dependency to labour.
 - Interpretation: Welfare is framed as moral failure; work is discipline and the pathway to moral restoration.
- **2025** (structural): “*We will rebuild America with American hands...*”
 - Tenor: national economic reconstruction. Vehicle: construction/hand labour.
 - Interpretation: Rebuilding emphasises industrious virtue; the leader’s policies promise corrective moral education via work.

Comparative claim: The pedagogical metaphor is continuous; 2017 emphasises removal from dependency (discipline via punishment/withdrawal), 2025 emphasises positive deployment of labour for reconstruction (discipline via purposeful work).

4.3 Hierarchy and Authority

Strict Father principle: clear hierarchies; obedience and loyalty.

- **2017** (orientational / ontological): “*A new national pride will stir our souls.*”
 - Tenor: national allegiance. Vehicle: familial affection/heart.
 - Interpretation: Appeals to loyalty subordinate citizens to national hierarchy.
- **2025** (ontological): “*At the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America.*”

- Tenor: political legitimacy. Vehicle: familial loyalty.
- Interpretation: Political obligation is equated with familial duty; hierarchy is sanctified.

Comparative claim: Hierarchical loyalty is central and becomes more systematised in 2025 (from rallying cry to institutional demand).

4.4 Punishment and Reward (Moral calculus)

Strict Father principle: wrongdoing punished; merit rewarded.

- **2017** (structural / ontological): “*We will punish bad actors — the establishment protected itself...*” (implicit) and “*That all changes — starting right here, and right now.*”

 - Tenor: political elites. Vehicle: moral criminality.
 - Interpretation: Promise of punitive measures against elites; rhetoric invites moral retribution.

- **2025** (ontological / structural): “*The vicious, violent and unfair weaponization of the Justice Department and our government will end.*” (from 2025 analysis)

 - Tenor: institutional injustice. Vehicle: weaponization of agencies.
 - Interpretation: Legal/institutional actors are framed as criminal; pledge to punish perceived institutional abuse.

Comparative claim: Punishment rhetoric in 2017 centres on corrective upheaval; in 2025 it targets institutional enemies as part of restorative justice — rhetorical continuity with differentiated targets and instruments.

4.5 Private Virtue → Public Policy

Strict Father principle: family morality (discipline) becomes state policy.

- **2017:** emphasis on private responsibility (“work, self-reliance”) applied to policy through welfare reform and law enforcement rhetoric.
- **2025:** “rebuilding” as nationalised practice of private virtue — industry and production as both economic and moral rebuilding.

Comparative claim: The speeches convert household norms (work, obedience) into macro policy priorities; the vehicle shifts from confrontational to programmatic.

4.6 Divine Patriarchy / Moral Legitimacy

Strict Father principle: moral authority is often bolstered by appeal to God.

- **2017:** “*We are protected by God.*” / “*the same almighty Creator.*”
- **2025:** similar appeals to divine sanction (e.g., “infused by the same Creator”), situating political fatherhood under divine fatherhood.

Comparative claim: Invocation of God consolidates paternal authority, transforming political obedience into moral and religious duty. This legitimises hierarchical power beyond procedural politics.

5. Dynamic model: paternal phases in populist rhetoric

From the comparative mapping, I propose a concise **paternal-phase model** for populist paternal rhetoric (useful as an analytic heuristic):

1. **Rescue/Discipline phase (Insurgent Paternalism)**
 - Characteristic metaphors: WAR, BODY-WOUND, PURIFICATION
 - Moral pitch: urgency, anger, moral cleansing
 - Function: delegitimise previous authority, mobilize emergency obedience
 - Example: 2017's "carnage" / "fight for you"
2. **Reconstruction/Provision phase (Institutionalized Paternalism)**
 - Characteristic metaphors: BUILDING, HOME, PROVIDER, TREASURY
 - Moral pitch: order, pride, reward through productivity
 - Function: legitimise governance, institutionalise paternal policies
 - Example: 2025's "rebuild the pillars" / "liquid gold under our feet"
3. **Sustainment/Transmission phase (Conservative Socialisation)**
 - Characteristic metaphors: GARDEN/CULTIVATION, INHERITANCE, EDUCATION
 - Moral pitch: preservation, moral education of children/citizens
 - Function: normalise hierarchy as enduring moral order
 - (Emerging in 2025 rhetoric; would be more visible if subsequent speeches emphasized education, inheritance, cultural transmission.)

The model conceptualises how the Strict Father frame can be rhetorically redeployed across time: rescue legitimises authority; reconstruction legitimises institutions; sustainment secures long-term socialisation.

6. Discourse mechanisms and persuasion: why these metaphors work

I detail three mechanisms by which the metaphors secure cognitive and persuasive effects.

1. **Embodied grounding:** Orientational metaphors map onto bodily experience (up/down), yielding immediate affective valence (up → good). Both speeches exploit this to make abstract evaluation intuitive.
2. **Concrete reification:** Ontological metaphors convert abstractions (freedom, democracy) into objects or persons; this simplifies complexity and produces clear targets for action (return, punish, rebuild).
3. **Moral anchoring via family model:** Family metaphors map private moral rules onto public policy. The Strict Father model provides a ready moral grammar to interpret policy as ethical necessity rather than partisan choice.

These mechanisms combine to produce high-impact frames: simple, emotionally resonant, and action-oriented.

7. Implications for ideology and policy legitimisation

- The Strict Father framing legitimises **coercive policies** (border walls, law enforcement) by recasting policy as paternal protection.
- Moralisation of policy (welfare = moral failure) narrows acceptable policy options and delegitimises alternative frames (nurturance, structural explanation).
- The rhetorical evolution from 2017 to 2025 demonstrates how insurgent rhetoric can transition to institutional rhetoric while maintaining moral continuity — important for analysing political consolidation.

8. Limitations and methodological reflexivity

- **Granularity and overlap.** Some expressions instantiate multiple metaphor types (e.g., “rebuild” can be structural and ontological). Assigning a primary type is analytic but inevitably simplifies multidimensional metaphors.
- **Audience variability.** Cognitive effects vary with listener background; cultural, educational, and partisan differences mediate uptake. Experimental validation (framing/win-loss studies) is recommended.
- **Scope.** The analysis focuses on high-salience metaphor instances (inaugural addresses) rather than entire discourses or media ecosystems.

9. Future research agenda

1. **Corpus and computational analysis.** Use automated metaphor detection (e.g., metaphor identification procedure; neural metaphor classifiers) across Trump’s broader discursive output to test the paternal-phase model quantitatively.
2. **Experimental framing studies.** Randomised experiments to test how Strict Father metaphors vs. Nurturant Parent metaphors affect policy preferences (welfare, criminal justice, foreign policy).
3. **Comparative cross-national work.** Test whether similar paternal frames operate in populist rhetoric in other polities and map cultural differences in family metaphors.
4. **Longitudinal studies.** Track rhetorical evolution across administrations to see whether paternal frames persist, mutate, or erode.

10. Conclusion

Both the 2017 and 2025 inaugural addresses exhibit deep continuity in moral cognition: they instantiate the **Strict Father** model through a network of structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors. Yet their rhetorical functions diverge: 2017’s insurgent paternalism emphasizes rescue, punishment, and moral urgency; 2025’s institutional paternalism emphasizes rebuilding, provision, and stabilisation. The paternal-phase model offered here captures this dynamic and supplies a tool for diagnosing how populist paternal rhetoric can both mobilize insurgency and normalise governance. Understanding these metaphor networks is essential for scholars who wish to trace how language constructs moral reality, justifies policy, and shapes democratic deliberation.

Bibliography

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(Trump textual sources cited inline; full transcripts available publicly.)