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Send In the Clowns:

A Rhetorical Critique of American Presidential Debates

The pressed suit, the perfect smile, the flawless speech and jovial greetings to supporters are the characteristics of a candidate in search of public office. With smooth and easy grace, the seemingly flawless machine works: works the crowd, works the phones, works the press. The image of the candidate on television talks about what is important to *you*, to *me*, to *us*, promising and reassuring, spinning and positioning. Back at campaign central, the harried campaign manager wonders where to raise the next batch of desperately needed money; the scheduler vainly attempts to arrange the candidate to appear at six events in two hours; and the press secretary endeavors to work out a strategy of damage control when word of the candidate's affair somehow leaks out to the press. Each day moves from crisis to crisis. To the public, and even to the press, things may appear smooth even as problems boil behind the doors of the campaign headquarters and threaten to spill out.

The political campaign is not unlike the American political system that spawned it. As one of the most prosperous nations in the world, the undisputed foreign leader in the post-Cold War world, the United States appears to be the example of the free market and democracy at its best. Yet crisis upon crisis lurks in the background threatening to destroy our routines; except rather than funds, scheduling and personal attacks, there are the threats of economic collapse, social and racial rumblings, and political apathy. Each of these crises threatens the American political system by challenging its legitimacy and effectiveness. There must be something to unite the nation and offer citizens a reason to overlook governmental shortcomings in order to

keep current governmental structures in place. The use of public platforms to gain support for political ideas and policy actions offers a kind of dependability with the possibility of improvement where the status quo falls short. Political scientist Murray Edelman calls such public platforms “political spectacles.”¹ This paper will focus on one specific form of political spectacle: the presidential debate.

Presidential debates are a political spectacle in which candidates serve to mask deficiencies within the American political system by seeking to unite the public behind a national ideology or action. Like clowns who distract the viewing public from their own problems or from mistakes within the circus ring, presidential candidates within a debate setting have the opportunity to re-characterize and distract the public from the deficiencies of the political system. The first section of this paper will examine communication at its worst with Jürgen Habermas and Edelman’s rendition of the nature of capitalism and how it motivates the political spectacle. This section will focus on an examination of the political spectacle including its forms such as the identification of the enemy, policy making, and the concept of leadership. The second section will examine Habermas’ ideal discourse situation as a model of communication at its best. Specifically, it examines the *a priori* conditions of unbiased communication: truth telling, authenticity, rationality and reciprocity. The last section will examine textual evidence from transcripts of various moments in presidential debate history applying the theories of political spectacle and the ideal discourse situation to the presidential debates themselves.

The Political Spectacle

While the free-market, democratic world in which we find ourselves certainly benefits many, there are also problems that result from such a system. One example is that the desire to

¹ Edelman, Murray. *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988. p. 1.

maximize profits does little for the underprivileged of our society. Habermas, in his book *Legitimation Crisis*, breaks down capitalistic societies into three subcultures: the economic, political, and socio-cultural.² The state must maintain the economic stability of the country while sustaining public support for the free market and social systems that elevate the market's exploitations while creating an ideological climate and social consensus to support capitalism and motivate the public to work within this system.³ It is here that the major philosophical issue between Republicans and Democrats is found. The state must simultaneously applaud unfettered non-state action while justifying intrusive state action to pick up the pieces of those left behind by such a system.

One strategy to deal with this crisis is that the state at all times must be perceived as a necessary part of civilized life. This is achieved through the perception of threats that necessitate the presence of the state. Politics demands controversial situations to sustain power and stability. The public must feel "anxious, fearful, and discouraged" about the state of affairs in which they find themselves in order to keep them needful of government action. A continuity of opposition insures stability by fragmenting the population so that no united force may develop to challenge the power structure. Here Edelman makes a distinction between enemies and adversaries: an enemy is inherently evil while the adversary merely employs the tactics of an opponent. These opponents are not necessarily morally evil, but always politically evil such as an opposing political candidate.⁴ The construction of an enemy is necessary for the viability of political coalitions as the enemy serves to give them "wealth, status, or ideological justification."⁵ Thus,

² Habermas, Jürgen. *Legitimation Crisis*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon, 1973. p. 6.

³ Habermas's opinion serves as a plausible hypothesis of what it is about a political system that makes political spectacles so critical. This paper will merely assert and not defend Habermas's political philosophy in order to focus more specifically the rhetorical aspects of political language and presidential debates in particular.

⁴ Edelman, op. cit. p. 67.

⁵ Ibid. p. 69.

for example, Ronald Reagan preached the terrors of an “Evil Empire” of Communism, and George W. Bush used rhetoric such as “evil” and “murderers” to describe those that waged a domestic attack against the United States.⁶

Enemies and adversaries are not always consistent. They change with the need of the political situation. Enemies and adversaries may be found in foreign governments, the poor, the drug war, abortion rights, welfare, and political ideologies. Whether the enemy is threatening or not is beside the point. The problem existed long before the candidate highlighted it and will continue long after she stops talking about it. The purpose of identifying and vilifying the enemy is because it is always a necessary part of insuring the stability of the political system:

Enemies are sometimes substituted for others to keep a cognitive structure credible and vital. As times change and fashions in naming threats change with them, enemies often succeed one another, though new enemies also coexist with the older ones [. . .] In recent decades, third world terrorist have emerged as a new target, overlapping with communists. In the last century, liberals and radicals have defined their enemy as trusts, the FBI, the CIA, and multinational corporations, to name only the more prominent ones. Through American history potential or actual foreign enemies have succeeded one another: England, Mexico, Spain, Germany, Russia, North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua. *Regardless of whether a perception of threat is valid in any instance, enemies who are credible in the current time and situation are necessary components of the political system.* [Emphasis added].⁷

The danger is that focus on the enemy can lead to a loss of perspective and a justification of atrocities in the name of destroying the enemy, as sometimes occurs in war. Terrible punishments have been carried out on people whose religious beliefs have been made enemies of the state. The justifications for violence are often paradoxical and ridiculous especially when such rationalizations are verbalized, like the American military official in Vietnam who said he had to destroy a village in order to save it. Dislocation of enemies is necessary, however, because

⁶ “Bush's Speech at the National Cathedral: September 14, 2001.” The NewsMinute.com website. <http://newsminute.com/cgi-bin/ikonboard.cgi?s=3ba36ebbf2afff:act=ST:f=2:t=26>, Online. Posted September 15, 2001.

someone has to suffer for the threat or actual loss of privileges or perceived rights. Justification for the massive military build up in the 1980s that led to equally massive national budget deficits was found in “the evil empire” and the need to subdue its threat. Foreign enemies are especially useful tactics to divert attention away from problems at home. The movie *Wag the Dog* was an extreme portrayal of this.⁸ When the president was facing a problem at home, he asked his Hollywood buddies to *create* a war to divert attention from his problem. Victims were portrayed, songs were written in support of the war effort, and great speeches were given. Yet the “enemy” was fictitious and a tool used to retain power at home.⁹

Policies that are enacted to solve the proclaimed problems are usually ineffective. Most of them are merely gestures. Edelman identifies policies as reflections and rationales for ideologies that may or may not be firmly grounded. Policy proposals are introduced and celebrated whether or not they actually accomplish anything of note or change a “problem” as it is identified. The problem or issue is used as a symbol, which the proposed policy is designed to solve. Political spectacles are created in order to announce the problems and introduce the policy solutions that are used to “romanticize the grounds for governmental action.”¹⁰ Take for example the Reagan tax cut in the early 1980s: Reagan’s tax cuts were only for the upper middle class and those of the highest tax brackets. The problems of the poor and lower middle class were ignored. Yet the policy gesture of a “tax cut” allowed Reagan to identify an area of government that was working to remove federal government control. The public at large, for various reasons, is willing to accept their leader’s interpretation of their actions. Edelman observes:

The disposition to accept official interpretations of publicized actions about matters remote from daily experience is a major source of legitimation. That

⁷ Ibid. pp. 81-82.

⁸ *Wag the Dog*. Dir. Barry Levinson. New Line Productions, 1998.

⁹ Edelman, op. cit. pp. 75-79.

¹⁰ Edelman, op. cit. p. 23.

disposition is understandable as a response to the pervasive ambiguity of governmental actions. Their motivations, their consequences, and the problems to which they are attached are typically unclear and the focus of controversy. For a public anxious to understand them or only marginally interested, an official cue readily becomes the key influence.¹¹

The public is ultimately responsible for the continuation of such programs because it accepts the news and interpretations of events it is offered. In many cases there is a silent majority of sorts that choose to ignore and not act upon news of public affairs, thus resulting in the often-lamented political apathy and low voter turnout. Low citizen involvement is dangerous to the sustainability of the governmental structure since it requires positive civic actions on the part of the citizenry to be considered legitimate. This is especially true in the United States, a nation that has its very roots in the ideal of representation and the critical nature of civic involvement. As a method of overcoming this lack of interest, events are created to incite the attention of the masses in order to gain broad-based support for policies proposed to change problems cited by political authorities. Presidential debates are a form of these “pseudo-events” or political spectacles. They provide a suitable public platform to incite public interest to take decisive action in getting a candidate elected and enacting her proposed policies. Both electing a candidate and enacting her policies necessitates voter input and involvement.¹²

Another important consideration is the perception of leadership. One of the main guidelines for determining the winners and losers in a presidential debate is the projection of leadership. Rhetorical theorist Diana Carlin outlines two paradigms by which debates are judged: expectations and leadership. Expectation focuses on the three aspects: what each candidate is anticipated to do, what each candidate must accomplish, and who better exceeded her expectations and met her objectives. Pre-debate and post-debate strategy determines the winner

¹¹ Ibid. p. 25.

¹² Ibid. pp. 33-35.

in this category and is the sole responsibility of campaign staffers and political commentators in its execution. The projection of leadership, except political spin, is solely the work of the candidate during the debate. Indeed, the image-oriented strategy centers on the construction or decimation of a candidates' leadership. Leadership focuses on how well the candidates, through both verbal and non-verbal means, project their ability to lead the nation. This is predominantly done through the candidate's articulation of his or her vision for the country, setting forth broad national goals, and bringing out levels of personality that instill public trust in the candidate.¹³

One of the paradoxes of leadership is that its central connotation is innovation, yet effective leaders are those who conform in all ways to their followers, leading Edelman to observe that, historically, followers create leaders.¹⁴ Leaders use political spin to extract themselves from unpopular questions by recharacterizing their position, such as George W. Bush shifting the abortion debate to a debate on the value of life, and Bill Clinton turning questions of whether he lied about his draft status to a principled stance of opposition to the Vietnam War. Marxists and post-structuralists both see the idea of leadership as a misconception. Both views regard leaders as creations of the historical and social environment. The Marxist would say that the traditional, structural conditions of a government determine what kind of leadership is acceptable and what leaders are able to accomplish. The post-structuralist would say that leadership, like all things, is a creation of language that is based on the words and gestures spoken by a candidate and not on her actions.¹⁵

The appearance of innovation is important to creating and maintaining leadership. This is done predominantly through phrases and gestures that appeal to a large audience and present the

¹³ Carlin, Diana Prentice. "A Defense of the 'Debate' in Presidential Debates." *Argumentation and Advocacy: the Journal of the American Forensic Association* 15.4 (1989) XXV: 208-213. pp. 211-212.

¹⁴ Edelman, op. cit. p. 38

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 44-45.

leader as the one willing to face the peril: “We will fight in the beaches. We will fight in the streets . . .” And willing to offer a promise of security: “All we have to fear is fear itself.” Here Edelman borrows from Habermas when he says that the focus on technique or practice displaces dialogue about values or theory. As the population of a nation becomes larger, national leaders must garner support from a larger group of people. In order to do this, candidates attempt to become all things to all people, a practice that almost requires double-speak. Ultimately, this spawns inauthenticity among political leaders. Deception becomes a tool of public relations and not an ethical failing to the politician. Noble ends justify questionable means. This double standard allowed President Kennedy to be both a symbol of civil rights and a government official who appointed judges to the courts that would block African-American civil rights in the court system. It also permitted Ronald Reagan to verbally endorse a balanced budget while signing appropriation legislation creating budget deficits that were greater than ever. Over time, this has led to serious public skepticism and ambivalence.¹⁶

Ideal Discourse Situation

Within societies, Habermas distinguishes between the public and private spheres when examining how communication takes place. Within the private sphere, we carry with us all past religious, economic, cultural, and familial experiences that shape our beliefs and make up individual “life-worlds.” It is through this life-world that we perceive what is going on around us and make judgments. These judgments cannot be universalized because each person has different views and experiences. When we attempt to build maxims¹⁷, or ethical universals, in the private sphere, we are blinded by our life-world and ignore other perspectives. In contrast, the public

¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 53-59.

¹⁷ Maxims being ethical universals.

sphere is characterized by space for rational discussion where all can participate freely and equally. The public sphere strives to remove all the biases of the private world and to be fully transparent. In the public sphere, a group of people makes a unanimous decision about universal maximums through the ideal discourse situation. One of the problems that Habermas identifies with what he calls “advanced capitalism” is that the lines between the public and private spheres are blurred:

With the coming of advanced capitalism, the state and social systems became intertwined rather than distinct because private interests began to overlap onto the political domain. The public sphere no longer existed as a place and space for rational discussion and consensus because all members of society no longer could participate equally. Those whose private interests were connected directly with political aims sought to influence how those aims fared in the public sphere, rather than allowing for open discussion about them.¹⁸

To better understand the contrast between the public and private spheres and to set up a model of communication, we will examine the ideal discourse situation. Habermas views communication as a constructive act in developing public norms. It is imperative in his system of ethics that communication is unbiased and clear for an ideal discourse situation to occur, for it is from the ideal discourse situation that public maxims arise, and those maxims can only be constructed when unfettered communication takes place. The members who operate within the ideal discourse situation do not divorce themselves from their life-worlds. Their backgrounds and perspectives inform the positions that they bring to the ideal discourse situation for consideration in the formation of public maxims. Only the maxims produced from the ideal discourse situation are divorced from any life-world of its members. This is insured because certain standards of communication must be in place for the ideal discourse situation to take

¹⁸ Foss, Sonja K., Karen A. Foss and Robert Trapp. *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1985. p. 228

place. Habermas' work in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*¹⁹ provides the following set of standards. The stated purpose of the debates is to communicate to the viewing audience a message from the candidates. For communication to take place there are four *a priori* conditions that must be true. Habermas describes them as truth telling, authenticity, rationality and reciprocity.

Truth telling is simply that we never communicate with someone we believe to be lying because we do not trust what she is saying. We are not willing to regard what she says or the information she gives on a particular topic because we doubt her honesty. The integrity of politicians is something that has been called into question and viewed more skeptically since the 1970s Watergate era. In presidential debates themselves the public often has doubts about the candidates' honesty when they dance around questions and when the media brings to light factual errors in claims made by candidates during the debates. A specific example of this was in the 2000 presidential debates when then-Governor George W. Bush danced around the abortion issue. Sometimes the truth blunders are more overt, as when former President Gerald Ford claimed in 1976 that the Soviet Union did not dominate Eastern Europe. Authenticity can also be described as sincerity. Claims of emotion and expressions of pathos are not effective when the subject of communication, or audience, doubts the sincerity of the speaker making it impossible for effective communication to take place. Politicians in particular are fond of the personal example – Nixon talking about his dog, Carter describing his discussion of the nuclear threat with his daughter Amy, Reagan painting incredible word pictures that described his vision of America. Clinton made every word he spoke breathe out empathy and understanding. All of this is wasted, however, when the public begins to doubt the genuineness of these expressions of

¹⁹ Habermas, Jürgen. "Discourse Ethics." *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Translated by C. Lenhardt and S. Nicholsen. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990.

emotion. As will be demonstrated later, Vice-President Al Gore was particularly fond of the personal example during the 2000 presidential debates.

Rationality is necessary for communication for more obvious reasons. The people that we communicate with must have reflective capability. They cannot act only on impulse, but must have reasons for holding their positions. To communicate with another person, we must have reasoned beliefs if the other person is to understand our perspective. Without this type of communication, the other will be unable to view our perspective reciprocally. This can be seen in the 2000 presidential debates when Gore used emotional pleas when arguing for increased funds for medical prescriptions. Such appeals to the life-world of the audience is not based on reason and only affects a small part of the audience that shares the life-world that includes exorbitant medicine prescriptions not covered by Medicare. All others that are affected by the emotional appeal do not agree with his proposed policy based on reason; they only agree due to the coercive effects of Gore's rhetoric.

Once you understand the reasons behind someone's perspective, reciprocity requires that you give equal value to those reasons and "walk a mile" in the other person's perspective. It is when we role-play within the other's life-world that we come to fully value that person's experiences and perspective. Only when we do this can the people within the ideal discourse situation reach a limited objectivity²⁰ in creating public maxims. A general problem between the two political parties is that they frame the other's position within their own rhetoric and never from the perspective of the other party. For example, Democrats will say that Republicans want to benefit the rich when Republicans only want to reduce the size of government by cutting

²⁰ Habermas would not claim that the maxims developed out of the ideal discourse situation were truly objective. Rather, he conceived of a scenario in which subjective people came together to develop a norm that was inter-subjective in nature. Objectivity assumes a God-like view absent all biases that no system involving humans could

taxes. Or Republicans will accuse Democrats of being for big government when Democrats only want to relieve the suffering of the disadvantaged. At least as they describe each other publicly, neither party views the positions of the other party in terms of the primary concern of the other party; nor do they acknowledge how that concern shapes the positions of the other party. A more specific example of this would be George W. Bush and Al Gore in the third presidential debate in 2000 on the issue of affirmative action. Both talked past each other in their conceptions of affirmative action and mischaracterized the others perspective. This will be more closely examined in the following section.

American Presidential Debates: A Textual Examination

To compare the traditional ideal of a debate to what really occurs during a televised presidential debate reveals the illusion of what presidential debates *are* and how they are presented to the public. To call it a “debate” is a mischaracterization of the event. The viewing public expects a winner to emerge and to learn firsthand from the candidates their stances on the issues. Jamieson and Birdsell discuss how broadcast debates have all the trappings of traditional debates in the form of an audience, opposing candidates, ability to rebut, time limits and established rules; yet they promote “sloganeering” rather than substance and in other ways prove not to be traditional debates. Candidates use debate events to show the public they have knowledge of policy areas.²¹ This was especially critical for George W. Bush in the 2000 elections. The debates allowed him to dispel doubts about his knowledge of policy topics to a certain extent.

ever achieve. The ideal discourse situation at least operated in a framework that attempted to remove its members from their biases producing results of limited objectivity.

²¹ Jamieson, Kathleen Hall and David S. Birdsell. *Presidential Debates: The Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

Presidential debates have often been valued for their supposedly “raw” glimpses of the candidates who stand unfiltered and un-scripted before a camera recording their every move for an hour or more. They are characterized as a “reality television” look at the candidates under pressure, exposed and naked to questions being hurled at them. Yet the debates themselves are not as they appear. Candidates spend days preparing before the debates, arranging rhetorical strategies, slogans, facts and examples. Those that study debate rhetoric have broken the strategies down in scholarly works in order to evaluate the effectiveness of debate performances.

These strategies take predominantly two forms within the debates themselves, as noted by Miami University Professor of Communication Robert Friedenber: issue-oriented and image-oriented. Issue-oriented strategies can be directed three different ways. First, candidates can target the audience specifically. They do this by crafting their opening and closing statements to the issues that matter to the audience and by forcing questions posed during the debate to fit the message they want to present. Second, candidates can develop an overall theme that they carry throughout the entirety of the debate. Again, they put across their issue message through their opening and closing statements and by crafting their responses to this end. Thirdly, candidates seek to avoid losing the debate. A candidate uses questions to promote himself, avoids being pinned down on issues, and falls back on stock responses to avoid rhetorical traps.²²

With image-oriented strategies candidates choose to focus on the persona they present in the debate. They do this by projecting either a positive image or a negative image. Candidates use debates to project a positive image by presenting themselves as vigorous active leaders, fostering identification with national issues, supporting their party’s philosophy, and by personifying themselves. Candidates project a negative image by attacking their opponents. They

²² Friedenber, Robert V. “Patterns and Trends in National Political Debates 1960-1988.” *Rhetorical Studies of National Presidential Debates*. 2nd ed. Ed. Robert V. Friedenber. New York: Praeger, 1994. 235-259. pp. 198-201.

do this specifically by attacking their leadership style, associations, and personification.²³ Both strategies bolster an ideological climate and social consensus needed to legitimize the American political system though means that destroy the inter-subjective nature of the ideal discourse situation. This will become more evident as we examine examples of rhetorical strategies in the debates.

We will first examine issue-oriented strategies. Before candidates can convince the viewing public to vote for them (and presumably their policy proposals), they must first create in the minds of the audience a need for the solution (Edelman's "romanticizing the grounds"). The invention of problems can be seen most clearly in presidential debates through candidates' use of personal narratives to embody a problem that demands a solution. Vice-President Al Gore used this technique most recently in the 2000 presidential debates. He backed up a call for his Medicare plan with an emotional appeal describing those he claimed would benefit from his policy of reform:

Under my plan I will put Medicare in an ironclad lockbox and prevent the money from being used for anything other than Medicare [. . .] There is a man here tonight named George McKinney from Milwaukee. He's 70 years old, has high blood pressure, his wife has heart trouble. They have an income of \$25,000 a year. They can't pay for their prescription drugs. They're some of the ones that go to Canada regularly in order to get their prescription drugs. Under my plan, half of their costs would be paid right away. Under Governor Bush's plan, they would get not one penny for four to five years and then they would be forced to go into an HMO or to an insurance company and ask them for coverage, but there would be no limit on the premiums or the deductibles or any of the terms and conditions.²⁴

In his policy defense, not only does Gore give an impassioned story to lay the groundwork to justify his proposal, but he also draws a clear distinction between Bush and himself. He offers himself as friend to the unfortunate Mr. McKinney, while painting Bush as a man who would

²³ Ibid. pp. 202-206.

²⁴ "The First 2000 Gore-Bush Presidential Debate: October 3, 2000." *Debate Transcripts: 2000 Debates*. The Commission on Presidential Debates website. <http://www.debates.org/pages/trans2000a.html>, Online.

knowingly let the man be at the mercy of his profit-interested HMO. Here we see the invention of a problem as well as Gore implicitly defining Bush as the enemy. Also, Gore runs into problems meeting the standards of authenticity and rationality as prerequisites for communication. With his example, Gore is solely appealing to the life-worlds of the viewing audience, disregarding the reasons behind why such a policy should be in place. It is difficult to question his sincerity, yet it is hard to imagine that Gore would talk about Mr. McKinney and his tragic situation if it did not advance his policy position.

Another approach to the issue-oriented strategy is for candidates to use vaguely worded yet powerful thematic slogans, always making sure to tie these themes into the responses they make to questions asked during the debate. It does not really matter whether their response has anything to do with the question that has been asked. Perhaps one of the best illustrations of this tactic was used by then-Governor Bill Clinton during the 1992 presidential debates. Clinton's entire campaign was centered on three main tenets. All of his responses and statements during the campaign came back to one of these messages. George Stephanopoulos, who was the deputy campaign manager for communications of the Clinton-Gore 1992 presidential campaign, described this strategy in his book *All Too Human*:

[T]he most useful item in the War Room was a low-tech template – a hand-lettered white board that James [Carville] stuck on a pillar in the middle of the room. It said:

Change vs. More of the Same

The economy, stupid

Don't forget health care

I thought of it as a campaign haiku – an entire election manifesto condensed to nineteen syllables. James drilled it into our heads, and every speech, every event, every attack, and every response had to reflect one of these three commandments: New unemployment numbers are released? Put out a statement – it's the economy, stupid. Bush repeats the ludicrous charge that as a student Clinton was a KGB tool in Moscow? Closer call, but see line 1 and go with it: The president is at it again, giving us more of the same old negative politics. A new controversy over the National Endowment for the Arts? Tempting, but let it go. We can

protect the NEA later, from the White House, but talking about it won't help us get there. In our world, the only mortal sin was to be "off message."²⁵

This strategy is mirrored clearly in Clinton's responses in the 1992 debates. Apart from his opening and closing statements in which he referenced and developed his "campaign haiku," Clinton at times could weave all three messages in a single response:

LEHRER [Moderator]: Governor Clinton, how do you respond to [. . .] President [George H. W. Bush] on the [. . .] question of experience? He says that is what distinguishes him from the other two of you.

CLINTON: I believe experience counts, but it's not everything. Values, judgment, and the record that I have amassed in my state also should count for something. I've worked hard to create good jobs and to educate people. My state now ranks first in the country in job growth this year, fourth in income growth, fourth in reduction of poverty, third in overall economic performance, according to a major news magazine. That's because we believe in investing in education and in jobs. And we have to change in this country. You know, my wife, Hillary, gave me a book about a year ago in which the author defined insanity as just doing the same old thing over and over again and expecting a different result. We have got to have the courage to change. Experience is important, yes. I've gotten a lot of good experience in dealing with ordinary people over the last year and month. I've touched more people's lives and seen more heartbreak and hope, more pain and more promise, than anybody else who's run for president this year. I think the American people deserve better than they're getting. We have gone from first to thirteenth in the world in the last twelve years, since Mr. Bush and Mr. Reagan have been in. *Personal income has dropped while people have worked harder.* In the last four years, there have been twice as many bankruptcies as new jobs created. *We need a new approach. The same old experience is not relevant.* We're living in a new world after the Cold War, and what works in this new world is not trickle down, not government for the benefit of the privileged few, not tax and spend, but a commitment to invest in American jobs and American education, *controlling American health care costs*, and bringing the American people together. That is what works. And you can have the right kind of experience and the wrong kind of experience. Mine is rooted in the real lives of real people, and it will bring real results if we have the courage to change [emphasis added].²⁶

Clinton took a general question on experience, spinning it to focus on his message: "Personal income has dropped while people have worked harder." (*The economy, stupid*); "We need a new approach. The same old experience is not relevant." (*Change vs. More of the Same*);

²⁵ Stephanopoulos, George. *All Too Human*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1999. pp. 88-89.

“ . . . controlling American health care costs . . .” (*Don't forget health care*).²⁷ Each point of Clinton's campaign message was a description of problems that the American public faced in 1992. The genius of it was its simplicity, and its implicit acknowledgement of fears that the American public faced, namely an economic downturn that threatened their security and well-being. Clinton was able to tap into and identify with these implicit fears and came to embody a leader whose concern rested with the citizens and the domestic economic issues that alarmed them. He appealed to the life-world of those viewers who were or who knew people who had been affected by the stock market drop. Clinton's focus was not on the reasons his policies would be better than Bush's, just that change was good. He speaks of change in a noble way by using such phrases as “the courage to change” that appeal to vague character traits and not to the reasons behind the type of change and why it would be good.

A final aspect of the issue-oriented debate strategy is not to lose an issue. For almost every candidate going into the presidential debates, there are certain issues to avoid at all costs. For Clinton, there were image issues regarding his character and questions as to whether he avoided the draft. For Reagan, there were questions regarding his age and how that affected his ability for perform the role of the president. For George H. W. Bush, there were the issues of what he knew about illegal actions in the Iran-Contra affair and when. To illustrate how a candidate evades a dangerous policy issue, let us look at then-Governor George W. Bush in the 2000 presidential debates.

Abortion, since the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision in 1973, has been an issue that has determined voter affiliation more than any other issue. For many voters, where a candidate falls on the issue of abortion is the primary deciding factor in whether or not to support a

²⁶ “The First Clinton-Bush-Perot Presidential Debate, October 11, 1992.” *Debate Transcripts: 1992 Debates*. The Commission on Presidential Debates website. <http://www.debates.org/pages/trans92a1.html>, Online.

candidate. A Republican candidate must seek to hold the far right wing of the party while appealing to moderates who may be economically conservative but socially liberal. For George W. Bush, it was an issue he sought to avoid like the plague. This can be seen in his vague answer to a question regarding the abortion pill RU-486 that had recently been approved by the Federal Drug Administration:

MODERATOR: [. . .] Governor Bush. If elected president, would you try to overturn the FDA's approval last week of the abortion pill RU-486?

BUSH: I don't think a president can do that. I was disappointed in the ruling because I think abortions ought to be more rare in America, and I'm worried that that pill will create more abortions and cause more people to have abortions. This is a very important topic and it's a very sensitive topic, because a lot of good people disagree on the issue. I think what the next president ought to do is to promote a culture of life in America. Life of the elderly and life of those women all across the country. Life of the unborn. As a matter of fact, I think a noble goal for this country is that every child, born or unborn, needs to be protected by law and welcomed to life. I know we need to change a lot of minds before we get there in America. What I do believe is that we can find good, common ground on issues of parental consent or parental notification. I know we need to ban partial birth abortions. This is a place where my opponent and I have strong disagreement. I believe banning partial birth abortions would be a positive step to reducing the number of abortions in America. It is an issue that will require a new attitude. We've been battling over abortion for a long period of time. Surely this nation can come together to promote the value of life. Surely we can fight off these laws that will encourage doctors to – to allow doctors to take the lives of our seniors. Surely we can work together to create a cultural life so some of these youngsters who feel like they can take a neighbor's life with a gun will understand that that's not the way America is meant to be. Surely we can find common ground to reduce the number of abortions in America. As to the drug itself, I mentioned I was disappointed. I hope the FDA took its time to make sure that American women will be safe who use this drug.²⁸

Bush acknowledges that there is no current consensus for action in America on this issue and that he does not believe the president has the authority to overturn FDA decisions. He focuses on how he thinks abortions should be rare, a common sentiment of both pro-life and pro-choice groups. Bush then talks vaguely about the importance of promoting a “culture of life”

²⁷ Ibid. Online & Stephanopoulos, *op. cit.* p. 89.

²⁸ “The First 2000 Gore-Bush Presidential Debate: October 3, 2000.” *op. cit.* Online.

and attempts to frame the issue as one that would in effect protect seniors against involuntary euthanasia and stop rampant crime. Bush attempted to shape his own political reality by re-framing the abortion issue into one that was more politically palatable for the voting public. The only stand he takes on the issue of abortion is by saying that partial birth abortions should be outlawed, which is a much more politically sustainable position and takes only the tiniest of steps toward the “culture of life” concept that Bush spoke of in his response. The obvious way that Bush was dodging the question hurt his credibility when it came to the truth-telling condition of communication. Not coming out emphatically on one side or the other of the issue further served to plant doubts in the minds of both liberal and conservative voters.

Another example of Bush debating not to lose was on the issue of affirmative action in the third 2000 presidential debate. Affirmative action has been a touchy issue for both parties, though Republicans have a harder time maintaining their political base while trying to reach out to African-American voters on this issue. When questioned on his position on affirmative action, Bush attempted to reframe the debate, while Gore attempted to characterize Bush’s stance in the worst possible light:

MEMBER OF AUDIENCE: Hi. How will your administration address diversity, inclusiveness, and what role will affirmative action play in your overall plan?

BUSH: I've had a record of bringing people from all walks of life into my administration, and my administration is better off for it in Texas. I'm going to find people that want to serve their country. But I want a diverse administration [. . .] I've worked hard in the State of Texas to make sure our institutions reflect the state with good, smart policy. Policy that rejects quotas. I don't like quotas. Quotas tend to pit one group of people against another. Quotas are bad for America. It's not the way America is all about. But policies that give people a helping hand so they can help themselves. For example, in our State of Texas I worked with the legislature, both Republicans and Democrats, to pass a law that said if you come in the top 10% of your high school class, you're automatically admitted to one of our higher institutions of learning, college. And as a result, our universities are now more diverse [. . .] I labeled it affirmative access [. . .] So to answer your question, I support, I guess the way to put it, is affirmative access.

MODERATOR: Vice President Gore?

GORE: I believe in this goal and effort with all my heart. I believe that our future as a nation depends upon whether or not we can break down these barriers that have been used to pit group against group, and bring our people together. How do you do it? Well, you establish respect for differences. You don't ignore differences [. . .] Once you have that understanding and mutual respect, then we can transcend the differences and embrace the highest common denominator of the American spirit. I don't know what affirmative access means. I do know what affirmative action means. I know the governor is against it, and I know that I'm for it [. . .] Now, I just believe that what we have to do is enforce the civil rights laws. I'm against quotas. This is, with all due respect, Governor, that's a red herring. Affirmative action isn't quotas. I'm against quotas, they're illegal. They're against the American way. Affirmative action means that you take extra steps to acknowledge the history of discrimination and injustice and prejudice and bring all people into the American dream because it helps everybody, not just those who are directly benefiting.

MODERATOR: Governor, what is your – are you opposed to affirmative action?

BUSH: If affirmative action means quotas, I'm against it. If affirmative action means what I just described what I'm for, then I'm for it. You heard what I was for. The vice president keeps saying I'm against things. You heard what I was for, and that's what I support.²⁹

Bush started out by focusing how he was against quotas – most likely in order to dispel fears of conservative voters who might think he was for what they perceived affirmative action to be. After offering a defense of policies that result in greater racial diversity, he re-labeled his position “affirmative access.” Gore focused on the importance of recognizing racial differences and acknowledging past discrimination, implying so strongly that Bush was against affirmative action that the moderator asked Bush the follow up question: “Are you opposed to affirmative action?” The problem that the candidates had was that had different perceptions of the issue. Ultimately, they ended up speaking past each other because they were unwilling to view the debate from each other’s vantage point. Bush favored affirmative action if that meant seeking to have racial diversity, while Gore viewed affirmative action as a necessary reminder of America’s past history of discrimination. Once you work through the rhetoric, they appear to have agreed with each other. Yet their goal in the debate was not to find common ground or truly consider the

other person's argument from their perspective, but to point out why each of them was the better candidate when it came to choosing a President. Thus, communication breaks down for both participants and observers when reciprocity is not applied.

Image-oriented strategies are similarly effective for the purposes of legitimacy. As was stated previously, image-oriented strategies seek to present the candidate as an active leader, identifying with national issues and major party philosophy. Edelman comments that the candidate can become the signifier of the ideology and values that he promotes: "People involved in politics are symbols to other observers: they stand for ideologies, values, or moral stances and they become role models, benchmarks, or symbols of threat and evil."³⁰ Symbols are only effective if they touch the experiences of their audience. Every effective advertisement touches the target audience by identifying with a desire or need people have, such as the need for acceptance, fame, food, beauty, and love. Similarly, effective political figures identify themselves with the needs and experiences of the citizenry and thus become signifiers of ideologies, values and/or actions that permit them to garner a following.

When Ronald Reagan ran for the presidency in 1980, America was in the middle of one of its worst crises since the Great Depression. Watergate and the Pentagon Papers that indicted the United States entry into the Vietnam conflict had undercut the credibility of the government, leaving the public cynical and apathetic. The economic crisis with the oil embargo, unprecedented levels of stagflation, and with the capture of United States citizens from the U.S. Embassy in Iran had created further public dissatisfaction. During the 1980 campaign and throughout his presidency, Reagan was consistently condemning the evils of communism and spinning a bright picture of an America that every citizen could be proud of, portraying it as an

²⁹ "The Third 2000 Gore-Bush Presidential Debate: October 11, 2000." *Debate Transcripts: 2000 Debates*. The Commission on Presidential Debates website. <http://www.debates.org/pages/trans2000c.html>, Online.

ideal to meet as well as a dream realized. The presidential debates of 1980 and 1984 offered a perfect platform with which to expose the awesome greatness of a nation that capitalism made possible and provided a socio-cultural basis for upholding such a nation. An example from Reagan's first presidential debate in 1980 shows this:

I've always believed that this land was placed here between the two great oceans by some divine plan. That it was placed here to be found by a special kind of people – people who had a special love for freedom and who had the courage to uproot themselves and leave hearth and homeland, and came to what, in the beginning, was the most undeveloped wilderness possible. We came from 100 different corners of the earth. We spoke a multitude of tongues [. . .] we built a new breed of human called an American – a proud, an independent, and a most compassionate individual, for the most part [. . .] The living Americans today have fought harder, paid a higher price for freedom, and done more to advance the dignity of man than any people who ever lived on this earth. For 200 years, we've lived in the future, believing that tomorrow would be better than today, and today would be better than yesterday. I still believe that. I'm not running for the Presidency because I believe that I can solve the problems we've discussed tonight. I believe the people of this country can, and together, we can begin the world over again. We can meet our destiny – and that destiny to build a land here that will be, for all mankind, a shining city on a hill.³¹

Reagan sought to return a sense of pride to the American public by talking about the adversity the citizens of the past had come through and thereby quell unrest that would likely spill over if left unchecked. He used phrases like “divine plan” and “meet our destiny” to describe the idealism that founded the United States and that could still be found within its citizenry, a people who were “a new breed of human called an American – a proud, an independent, and a most compassionate individual.”³² Indeed, Reagan himself came to embody the ideals that he articulated about America. Here again is an example of a presidential candidate appealing to the experience of his audience in order to connect, and not appealing to reason. The vast majority of

³⁰ Edelman, op. cit. p. 2.

³¹ “The Anderson-Reagan Presidential Debate: September 21, 1980.” *Debate Transcripts: 1980 Debates*. The Commission on Presidential Debates website. <http://www.debates.org/pages/trans80a.html>, Online.

³² Ibid. Online.

the audience had the family heritage aspect of their life-world touched that night because most Americans can trace their genealogical lines back to when their ancestors first came to America.

Finally, negative image strategies are rarely employed during a presidential debate, as most candidates like to distance themselves from negative campaign tactics they employ in television advertisements, bumper stickers and billboards. That way they can maintain an image of personal integrity in the midst of a campaign of mud slinging. It is important for candidates to keep the image of positive leadership that they have spent so much effort building for themselves, while members of their campaigns have the job of tearing down the image of the other candidate. During a debate, a candidate may at most make allusions to these attacks.

Conclusion

Language is a deceptively powerful tool. Even though rhetorical scholarship dates back to the time of Socrates and Plato, theorists today are still attempting to come to a fuller understanding of rhetoric's far reaching ability to move the hearts of men and women. This paper has examined only one aspect of presidential campaigns, let alone an entire political system. The coercive capabilities of rhetoric can be seen throughout the various aspects of the political playing field: in campaign commercials, in congressional speeches, in presidential signing ceremonies, and so forth. While this paper has presented merely anecdotal evidence, the reader should have a new perspective in viewing the American political system and presidential debates especially. The temporal and partial success of political struggles must be emphasized in a nation that looks to governmental institutions to provide for its needs. Government is never something we should view euphorically, as the healer of all wounds and source of all happiness. To do so would always disappoint and never allow us as a people to reach our full potential.