

GUEST COMMENTARY | A TEXAN'S VIEW

What rhetoric teaches us about politics

BY RICHARD CHERWITZ

Since its inception in ancient Greece, the academic discipline of rhetoric — not to be confused with the knack of sophistry or what often is labeled “mere rhetoric” — has focused on the art of symbolic influence and persuasion.

Perhaps unlike other fields of study, rhetoric is the bridge between theory and practice. That is why as a scholar of communication it has become enormously important for me to write op-eds linking theories of rhetoric to the world of prudential conduct.

Rhetoric might help us understand how Americans speak to each other about political issues since 2016, if not before. In addition, a rhetorical perspective might provide insights into the consequences of President Donald J. Trump’s discourse.

Both of these realizations offer us a way to stand back from partisan, frequently polarized beliefs, and recognize the impact of our communication — hopefully revealing a productive path forward.

Allow me to offer some examples of what rhetoric teaches us, utilizing my work as a rhetorician — some of which is highlighted in prior commentaries in newspapers across the country.

First, rhetorical analysis allows us to appreciate how those with whom we disagree nevertheless can be effective communicators.

In a February 7, 2019, essay in “Citizen Critics,” I delineated eight observations about the President’s second State of the Union address. Rather than expressing a partisan view, I spotlighted some of Trump’s most effective rhetorical appeals — including his reference to the dangers of socialism.

Second, rhetorical analysis



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provides clues about whether a politician is guilty of wrongdoing. In an August 4, 2017 Houston Chronicle op-ed, I employed the classical rhetorical theory of stasis, first developed by the Romans and now the foundation of our country’s legal system of argument, to suggest that President Donald Trump shows all the signs of someone who is guilty of wrongdoing.

Third, rhetorical analysis exposes how speakers’ unstated messages often result in inferred messages, some of which embolden audience members to act. In a December 10, 2018, Des Moines Register op-ed, I used Aristotle’s concept of an enthymeme — a rhetorical syllogism — to illustrate how the eulogies of George H. W. Bush violated the norms of eulogizing by providing a case of what I labeled “shadow rhetoric.” As a result, these speeches became an implicit, but obvious, critique of Trump.

In a previous opinion column published by numerous news outlets including this publication and the Houston Chronicle, I uncovered the rhetorical linkage between President Trump’s language and hateful acts of violence. I suggested that those who believe Trump isn’t at least partially accountable fail to be aware of the capacity of rhetoric to empower and embolden despicable people to come out of the shadows — making it safe for them to act on their prejudice and anger.

Fourth, rhetorical analysis documents the strategic importance of message timing. In a March 19, 2019 commentary in The Hill, I argued that President Trump’s pre-emptive response to the Mueller report may have given him a rhetorical advantage over the Democrats in the House of Representatives, making their sweeping demand for documents and witnesses seem like “presidential harassment.”

Fifth, rhetorical analysis affords an opportunity to transcend political polarization. In

a September 13, 2018 Houston Chronicle op-ed, I drew upon research pertaining to cognitive dissonance and persuasion to explain potential methods for Americans to find common ground, thus moving beyond political differences and rendering compromise possible.

Sixth, rhetorical analysis reveals how what is omitted in a message is as significant as what is included. As I commented in the March 29, 2019 issue of the Washington Spectator, by leaving out the length of the Mueller report and using so few words to summarize it, attorney general Bill Barr actually may have placed additional attention on possible presidential wrongdoing.

Seventh, rhetorical analysis provides a test of academic theories. In the January 2019 issue of Communication Currents, I contended that Trump’s rhetoric provides an empirical test of the social construction of reality hypothesis — a theory scholars have been debating for decades but only in philosophical terms.

Eighth, rhetorical analysis teaches political candidates about how best to defuse charges of misbehavior. In a forthcoming piece in USA Today analyzing Joe Biden’s mishandling of allegations about touching women, I claim that the Vice President’s attempt at humor backfired.

The rhetorical lesson for him and all politicians is: Don’t let a 24 hour story turn into one that keeps on giving; every time you try to clean up a prior response guarantees additional media scrutiny.

These are just a few illustrations of what rhetoric, a discipline dating back to Antiquity, can teach us about our current political communication. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, perhaps we had it all along.

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