



The Shortcomings of Contemporary Political Rhetoric

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Abstract

This article examines some important trends in American political discourse. In tracing the problems present in contemporary debates back to their rhetorical roots, it argues that our political discourse is harried not only by party schisms, but also by inefficient modes of speech and debate..

Keywords: *political rhetoric, speech, debate*



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On May 9, 1781, John Witherspoon published a series of essays under the heading “The Druid” in the *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser*.¹ Having cast off the strictures of their late English hegemon, Americans were in the process of forming a standardized lexicon and grammar. In his essays, Witherspoon exhorted his fellow citizens toward this goal. His worries, like those of many of his contemporaries, focused on the potential for tyranny bound up in laws written in an inchoate language. Speaking in concert were many other voices from around the nation; the citizens of Ablemarle County Virginia had warned just five short years before Witherspoon that “vague and uncertain laws, and more especially constitutions, are the very instruments of slavery.”²

Skipping ahead about 250 years to the nation’s present day, this goal sounds as hackneyed as it is trans-historical. Are our standards of speech and debate today less subjective and divisive than they were in the 18th century? Most recently the right, especially after the rise of the Tea Party in 2009, has been consistently accused of engaging in this kind of harmful vituperation.³ In his January 2011 piece for the *New York Times*, economist Paul Krugman partially blames right wing rhetoric for the recent surge in threats against members of Congress.⁴ The statistics cited by Krugman show an upswing in public ire directed towards some of our politicians, but correlation does not entail causation. Demonstrating that the “rising tide of threats and vandalism”⁵ was caused by the United States’ distinctly hateful national climate, while plausible, is an empirically difficult task. Rather, this essay looks in depth at some of the country’s contemporary political debates and the general quality

of political rhetoric surrounding them. It argues that the dynamics by which political debates proceed today have made no serious progress since the exhortation of John Witherspoon, and thus contribute to protracted political struggles that inhibit serious, fruitful conversation.

One main force, fuelled by two subsidiary forces, is responsible for the vitiation of American political rhetoric: the erosion of the relationship between producers and consumers of political rhetoric. In the weeks leading up to his 2012 State of the Union address, President Obama and others worked tirelessly to prepare for one of the biggest nights of the year. As is tradition for all such addresses, “the best speechwriters are put to the task [and] the biggest policy announcements are saved for it.”⁶ But after the speech had been delivered with much fanfare by the commander-in-chief, public opinion did not budge. If anything, the president had won a marginal victory, moving from 46 percent to 47 percent in his approval rating in the week following the speech.⁷ By no means is this an isolated incident. Based on a Gallup study reviewing data on the State of the Union and its relation to the president’s public approval, pollsters concluded that the speech rarely has any significant effect on public support for the president.⁸

This apparent disconnect is not limited to the State of the Union. In November of 1994, former President Bill Clinton toured the country to drum up national support for his languishing health care bill, among other things. Hitting about 200 cities and towns, it was quite a grand tour for a non-election year. However, the end result was less than ideal for the president. His health care bill failed, and his approval rating also took a hit.⁹ George W. Bush experienced similar difficulties in the wake of his 2004 election. Moving through 60 cities in as many days schilling privatized Social Security, Bush intended to capitalize on the mandate he had just received from the country for four more years in the White House. However, support for this issue kept dropping, and the president was eventually forced to abandon hope for this legislative aspiration.¹⁰ Clearly a deluge of rhetoric is

not the panacea for all forms of sagging public support. Two subsidiary forces fuelling this erosion between those producing and those consuming political rhetoric are what I will call conflation and compartmentalization. Both will be examined in turn.

When powerful ideas like truth, liberty, and fairness are in the arsenal of any politician, it is tempting to invoke them without explaining exactly what is meant. Conflation occurs when two sides use such terminology to refer to vastly different concepts. Nowhere is this more evident than in the debate over the debt ceiling of last summer.

don't get."¹¹ President Obama employs the idea of fairness to redress inordinate advantages given to the rich in the United States tax code. Thus, a more egalitarian tax policy, championed by the whole people, is an important element in the president's notion of fairness.

Speaker of the House John Boehner, President Obama's main rhetorical sparring partner in this debate, took up the podium minutes after the president's speech had concluded. Right off the bat, he distinguished between America and Washington as two economic actors playing by two separate sets of rules. Most



President Obama and Speaker Boehner shake hands after a State of the Union address,

January 25, 2011.

Source: Official White House Photo by Pete Souza

In his speech from the White House on July 25, 2011, President Obama drives home the point that his plan to raise the debt ceiling while introducing modest spending cuts will be a fair shake for all Americans. He claimed that “most Americans, regardless of political party, don't understand how we can ask a senior citizen to pay more for her Medicare, before we ask a corporate jet owner, or the oil companies, to give up tax breaks that other companies

American businesses, he said, “make the hard choices to pay their bills and live within their means.”¹² Fairness, to these Americans, would be a government making similar difficult choices in fiscal policy. Conversely, the ongoing “spending binge”¹³ in Washington is a flagrant breach of these rules of fairness. Boehner's conception of fair and unfair is rooted not so much in tax policy, but in the practices of government set against the rights of the people.

The preceding example is a classic case of rhetorical conflation, as both speakers couch their arguments in terms of fairness. What each speaker withholds however is *to whom* their notions of fairness refer. The breadth of interpretation possible with a term like fairness legitimizes a more cautious usage of the word; it cannot simply refer to the interests of the American people at large, because so many citizens have differing interpretations of fair and unfair. President Obama and Speaker Boehner failed in this debate to specifically define their notions of fairness. Had they done so, the public could have been more aware of the ideological disagreements on both sides of the debate. Ultimately, Americans were left with two sides purportedly pursuing the same goal, but employing mutually exclusive means to get there.

On the flip side, compartmentalization occurs when both sides couch their arguments in patently distinct language, each side refusing to acknowledge the linguistic perspective of the other. Although both arguments may seem compelling in a vacuum, this is only because they do not admit potentially detracting facts and/or perspectives—namely, those used by the other side. The recent debate on contraception is a good example of this trend. Although there were many figures advocating for each side, the rhetoric used by Senator Orrin Hatch on the right and third-year Georgetown law student Sandra Fluke on the left demonstrates this compartmentalization.

Senator Orrin Hatch took the floor in the U.S. Senate on February 9, 2012 to inveigh against the White House's recently announced federal mandate on religious institutions to provide contraception and other preventative services to their employees. Addressing the encroachment on religious liberties he felt this federal mandate represented, Senator Hatch accused the Obama administration of ignoring American citizens' First Amendment rights. By requiring religious employers to provide this kind of health care to their employees, the federal government was forcing these institutions to their most contravene cherished beliefs and principles. In fact, Senator Hatch made no less than 30 references to the notion of constitutionally-

guaranteed religious liberties in his 15-minute speech.¹⁴ However, he included no mention of the suffering undergone by females who are deprived of certain forms of health care coverage.

On the other hand, Sandra Fluke testified in front of the House Democratic Steering and Policy Committee on February 23rd. She mentioned religion twice, near the end of her opening statement. She was reluctant to touch the issue of religious liberty, never using that precise phrase as Senator Hatch had done so profusely. Her argument focused on the principle that religious institutions should stand up to their creeds of caring for their faithful, thus providing the kinds of health care that women need. Most of Fluke's opening testimony was filled with statistics and anecdotes about the adverse effects of incomplete health care coverage. "When I look around my campus," she said, "I see the faces of the women affected by this lack of contraceptive coverage."¹⁵ Describing these women as going through financially burdensome and emotional struggles, Ms. Fluke eschewed addressing what Senator Hatch deemed to be the liberties of various religiously affiliated institutions around the country. By choosing to put her argument almost exclusively in terms of the suffering endured by her fellow classmates and women around the country who were not receiving adequate medical coverage, Fluke effectively ignored the issues of religious liberty broached by Senator Hatch.

Both sides of the contraception mandate debate seem to exist in exclusive realities, each refusing to incorporate the other's facts into their arguments. Were they to do so, this debate could have proceeded along more bipartisan lines, and audiences could see precisely where people like Senator Hatch and Ms. Fluke disagree. Instead, Americans are left with two compartmentalized, incongruous sides to the same story.

In an article published in the *American Thinker* on January 12, 2011 titled "We Need More Political Rhetoric, Not Less," columnist Geoffrey P. Hunt criticizes liberal figures like Hillary Rodham Clinton and Paul Krugman for creating an environment

hostile to the free speech of conservatives. Defending a more free-market approach to political rhetoric, Hunt maintains that “most ideas, even if clumsily expressed or devoid of merit, whether asserted gently or forcefully, deferentially or in your face, form the nutrient-rich red blood cells of our great nation’s discourse.”¹⁶ While I agree with Mr. Hunt that an environment less restrictive of speech is generally preferable, it is only a precondition to productive intellectual discourse. The issue at play in the debt ceiling debate, the contraception debate, and countless other debates today between Democrats and Republicans is a problem of quality, not quantity. Quality in political discourse occurs only when each side comes out from behind the abatis of party and identifies their arguments as representing politically charged, dissimilar perspectives. Only then can policy debates move toward bipartisan solutions instead of rhetorically handicapped squabbles. As citizens of a democracy, we are entitled to such standards of speech and debate.

Author

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Notes

¹ John Witherspoon, “The Druid,” *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser* 5 (1781): pg. unlisted.

² Citizens of Ablemarle County, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd et al. (Ablemarle: Ablemarle County Instructions, 1776), 6: 286-287.

³ By no means are members of the right the sole guilty party, as will soon be made clear.

⁴ Paul Krugman, “Climate of Hate,” *New York Times Online Edition*, January 9, 2011, Internet (accessed January 27, 2012).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ezra Klein, “The Unpersuaded,” *New Yorker*, March 19, 2012, 34.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jeffrey M. Jones, “President’s Support Usually Unaffected by State of Union,” Gallup Politics, January 26, 2010, Internet (accessed January 27, 2012).

⁹ Klein, “The Unpersuaded,” 34.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ YouTube, “President Obama Debt Crisis Address (July 25, 2011),” uploaded by DefinitelyAbsolute on July 25, 2011, Internet (accessed January 27, 2012).

¹² YouTube, “John Boehner’s republican response on debt crisis,” uploaded by CBSNewsOnline on July 25, 2011, Internet (accessed January 27, 2012).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ YouTube, “Sen. Hatch Slams the White House’s Attack on Religious Freedom,” uploaded by SenatorOrrinHatch on February 9, 2012, Internet (accessed March 30, 2012).

¹⁵ YouTube, “Sandra Fluke Opening Statement (C-SPAN),” uploaded by CSPAN on February 23, 2012, Internet (accessed March 30, 2012).

¹⁶ Geoffrey P. Hunt, “We Need More Political Rhetoric, Not Less,” *American Thinker*, January 12, 2011, Internet (accessed January 27, 2012).