Rhetoric in the Public Arena

Post Reprint: “Trump’s rhetoric about the election channels a dark episode from our past”

Post Book Review Reprint: “A deep dive into President Trump’s doublespeak and other rhetorical tricks”

Student Activity/Think Like a Reporter: Rhetoric Matters

Editorial Cartoon: Tom Toles: The MESS-iah

Editorial Cartoon: Tom Toles: Final TOLES Cartoon

Post Editorial Reprint: “Election Day promises to be full of misinformation. Here’s how we can all stop spread.”
Rhetoric — Effective, Persuasive or Hollow?

One person says the pickups were escorting the bus loaded with Freedom Riders. Others saw it as intimidation. A governor feels threatened by the shouts of “Lock her up” at a rally held in her state. The U.S. Department of State is said to exert more pressure on China in its rhetoric. Other leaders see it as just rhetoric.

From the 4th Century BCE, men aspired to persuade others following Aristotle’s Rhetoric. His arguments for logos, ethos and pathos have influenced speakers and writers through the centuries as they consider their audience, their arguments and their power of persuasion. And audiences were swayed — or they saw the hollowness of the speaker and the promises. The definition of rhetoric reflects both of these possibilities.

This guide provides opinion pieces: guest commentary, a book review, Tom Toles’ editorial cartoon and a Post editorial. All consider different dimensions of rhetoric. In the Think Like a Reporter activity students are introduced to examples of rhetoric in media and what a reporter must consider when making word choices from interview questions, to quotations and the published product.

In the final analysis, speaker and audience, writer and reader, determine if the rhetoric was effective and persuasive or hollow and just rhetoric.
MADE BY HISTORY

Trump’s rhetoric about the election channels a dark episode from our past

The only coup in American history came after scare-mongering that wouldn’t sound out of place in 2020.

BY DAVID GESSNER

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At first glance, Norman Jennett, a country boy born in 1877 and hailing from the woods along the Black River outside Fayetteville, N.C., might not seem relevant to the pivotal election that is barreling toward us. But the shy Jennett liked to whittle, and that landed him a spot at the local newspaper making woodblock prints and drawing cartoons. His cartoons, in turn, caught the attention of Josephus Daniels, the editor and publisher of North Carolina’s most influential newspaper, the Raleigh News and Observer.

Daniels made no concessions toward journalistic impartiality, and in the fall of 1898, he led a full-throttle attempt to overthrow what he called “Negro rule.” His target was the Fusion Party, a populist alliance of poor White farmers and African Americans that had come to dominate state politics, particularly in eastern North Carolina.

This was especially true in the thriving port city of Wilmington, North Carolina’s most populous metropolis, with more than 20,000 people, the majority of whom were African Americans. The cosmopolitan city featured a growing Black middle class and a vibrant Black newspaper, the Daily Record. Reflecting its demographics, Wilmington had an integrated government with Black officials, as well as many Black policemen and firemen.

Daniels found this intolerable. He huddled up with Furnifold Simmons, the state Democratic Party chairman — at that time the party of White supremacy in North Carolina. Daniels and Simmons knew that if everyone voted their side would lose. That meant ensuring that everyone did not vote, by fearmongering about the calamitous results if the other side won, gerrymandering, spreading misinformation about the rights of citizens to vote and direct intimidation at polling places.

Throughout it all, there was a consistent message: If you don’t vote for us, you won’t be safe. They argued that chaos would reign if African Americans were allowed to vote. The News and Observer was particularly effective in spreading this message. David Zucchino, whose recent book, “Wilmington’s Lie,” tells the story of 1898, writes that “More than a century before fake news attacks targeted social media websites, Daniels’s manipulation of White readers was perhaps the most daring and effective disinformation campaign of the era.”

This campaign wasn’t subtle. It upheld the racist message that the African American threat could lead to a reign of terror. Black rapists, they suggested, were coming after White women. You had better arm yourself and be ready.

Although this racist propaganda was effective, Daniels had another hurdle to
clear to pry apart the budding alliance between Black North Carolinians and less-educated and less-affluent White people. Many of his poor White readers actually could not read.

This was where Jennett, and his gift for caricature, came into play. Every day that fall, the News and Observer featured a new front-page cartoon by the 21-year-old Jennett, and if the paper’s editorials, written by Daniels, could not drive home their crude points to his illiterate nonreaders, the cartoons could.

That fall, a particularly popular cartoon of Jennett’s, which, like most of the others was given its title by Daniels, was called “The Vampire that Hovers Over North Carolina.” It featured a giant winged Black man guarding the ballot box while his elongated arms stretched out and reached for White Southern women. In this cartoon world, African Americans weren’t only portrayed as monsters. They were also portrayed as clowns, thick-lipped big-eyed fools who must be bopped on the head with a club labeled “Honest White Man” (“Get Back! We Will Not Stand it.”) and as a giant foot crushing a poor helpless White person (“A Serious Question — How Long Will this Last?”).

The Jennet-Daniels team also relentlessly mocked Daniel Russell, the Republican governor who rode into power on Fusionist support. Jennett drew Russell as fat and servile, a servant of the Black man. One of these cartoons showed a huge Black hand, heavily crosshatched with hair and with long nails that could prick skin. In that open palm were the fat bulb-eyed governor and his skinny Fusionist lackeys, dancing foolish jigs. “Dance or I Will Crush You,” was the title.

The 1898 campaign was so effective that by the night of the election, the White populace was armed to the teeth, and the majority-Black population was kept from voting in Wilmington. But that was not enough for the usurpers. White goon squads, called Red Shirts, whipped into a frenzy by speeches about Black dominance and threats to White women, guarded polling places and later set fire to the Black-owned newspaper building, making sure that not just lives but also sentences were lost that night.

Intimidation and violence took care of the elected state officials, but there was still the matter of the mayor, police chief and alderman, who were not running for reelection. They abdicated at gunpoint. Then the true violence began: the slaughter of at least 60 Black citizens, shot down in the streets, and the driving of the thousands of survivors from town. Daniels hailed his young cartoonist whose efforts were “vital to the election effort.” After the election, Democratic leaders pooled together their funds and gave young Norman a gift of $63, telling him that he was “one of the powers that brought about the revolution.”

The Wilmington coup, though lost to history for most of the 20th century, is starting to gain new recognition as the only true coup d’état in American history. In the years to follow, new tools were employed to suppress the Black vote, including poll taxes, voter roll purges and continued intimidation at polling places. Zucchino reports that the number of registered Black voters in North Carolina plummeted from 126,000 in 1896 to 6,100 in 1902.

This story is one we need to hear as the 2020 campaign races to a conclusion. It isn’t just that the rhetoric President Trump and his allies are using sounds a lot like that of Josephus Daniels. The Republicans today face a problem similar to the one Daniels faced: Polling indicates that they, too, are outnumbered. The answer? Make it harder to vote. Many of the tactics used are the same ones employed after the 1898 coup, though they have been limited in some cases by courts.

Trump’s overheated rhetoric — warning ominously of rigged elections and stuffed ballot boxes, despite no evidence to support these claims — also risks the sort of violence perpetrated by White men in North Carolina at the prodding of Daniels, with an assist from Jennett. Yesterday’s Red Shirts would not feel out of place at today’s Trump rallies.

The coup is a direct reminder that words matter. Advocacy and fearmongering can precipitate violence, tip the scales in an election and lead very quickly to minority rule. Only action to prevent voter intimidation and preserve the integrity of elections can safeguard against this possibility.
OUTLOOK • REVIEW

A deep dive into President Trump’s doublespeak and other rhetorical tricks

BY TIM WEINER

• Originally Published July 24, 2020

The question of how Donald Trump ever got elected president has stumped some of the nation’s deeper thinkers. Jennifer Mercieca has a compelling answer in “Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump.”

Spoiler alert: Trump is not, in fact, a genius. He’s a sophisticated con man who used the tools of rhetoric to pick the pockets of the American body politic. He double-talked his way to power. He buried his opponents with an avalanche of gibberish. He convinced more than 60 million Americans that the barnyard odor of his bombast was actually the pungent aroma of pure truth.

How did that happen? This book shows us by dissecting his demagogic language with a particularly precise scalpel. In doing so, it deserves a place alongside George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” and Harry G. Frankfurt’s “On Bulls—.” It’s a brilliant dissertation on Trump’s patented brand of balderdash. That makes it one of the most important political books of this perilous summer.

“Political language,” wrote Orwell, “is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” As Trump batters our country with his lies, which pummel us like the pellets of a ceaseless freak hailstorm, the falsehoods fly so fast and thick that we barely have a chance to examine them. How do they work? Why do they work?

Mercieca is an academic, yet her book is mercifully free of scholarly cant. It’s lively, clear, concise and remarkably good-humored, given its ill-tempered subject. She has done her homework and then some, poor soul: “I’ve watched and rewatched every Trump rally,” she writes. “I’ve read Trump’s books. I’ve watched all of his interviews and read his tweets. I’ve read as many articles as I could about what Trump was doing and why in traditional and nontraditional media. I’ve read white nationalists, conspiracy theorists, and the manosphere — all Trump’s people — which helped me make sense out of Trump’s more perplexing appeals.”

She explains Trump’s demagoguery — no easy matter — by analyzing it through the classic principles of rhetoric. This could be tedious in the wrong hands, but she makes it exhilarating, methodically revealing the insidious crowd-controlling methods of an autocrat.

Ad populum — appealing to the wisdom of the crowd — is Trump’s “many people are saying” strategy for framing his lies. He has tried to convince the nation “that the corrupt establishment used political correctness to hide its agenda, but that he, speaking for the wise crowd, saw through the corruption and the politically correct doublespeak,” Mercieca writes.

“Hey,” Trump told a rally in Birmingham, Ala., in November 2015, “I watched when the World Trade Center came tumbling down. And I watched in Jersey City, New Jersey, where thousands and thousands of people were cheering.” Trump never saw anything of the sort. When challenged, he first attacked the press, then doubled down before another crowd: “I received hundreds of phone calls...
over the couple of days since I said it from people saying, ‘Mr. Trump, you’re right. You’re right. We saw it. We live in New Jersey; we saw it.’"

Trump is a master of ad baculum — threats of force or intimidation. Debating Hillary Clinton, he brought out the big stick, as Mercieca reminds us: “If I win, I am going to instruct my attorney general to get a special prosecutor to look into your situation.” When Clinton responded that “it’s just awfully good that someone with the temperament of Donald Trump is not in charge of the law in our country,” he interrupted her to sneer, “Because you would be in jail!” Someday we will look back on the videos of Trump leading crowds in chants of “Lock her up!” and wonder how we fell so far.

Trump also used the trope of paralipsis to pave his path to power. That’s the forked-tongued-devil trick: “I’m not saying; I’m just saying.” It’s how Trump puts out falsehoods thinly veiled in implausible deniability: Oh, I was joking. I was being sarcastic. I never said it. On the day he secured the Republican nomination in May 2016, he called into “Fox and Friends” with a scalding libel of his vanquished opponent, Sen. Ted Cruz, linking his father to the JFK assassination: “You know, his father was with Lee Harvey Oswald,” Trump said. “Nobody talks about it. . . . What was he doing with Lee Harvey Oswald?”

A damnable lie, defended by drivel: “I’m not saying that he conspired; I’m just saying that it was all over the place. . . . I didn’t believe it, but I did say, ‘Let people read it’” — as they did in the National Enquirer. And then he blamed the whole thing on you-know-who: “The press takes that, and they say, ‘Donald Trump and his conspiracy theories; he went out and said his father was with Lee Harvey Oswald, and he assassinated the president.’ What did I do? I know nothing about his father. I know nothing about Lee Harvey Oswald.”

Mercieca defines Trump’s use of ad hominem personal attacks and his “America First” jingoism, along with the aforementioned rhetorical devices, as part of a larger tactic, in which he draws his audience into a black hole of conspiracy theories. You know it when you hear it from Trump: “believe me,” “this is so true,” “can you believe it?” “there’s a lot going on” “you never hear this” and the ever-popular “nobody even knows about it.”

“Because Trump was wise to the conspiracy, he positioned himself as a credible truth teller,” she writes. “Conspirators would never reveal their plot, which was why Trump was the one and only credible source of information. ‘You don’t read about this, right? They don’t tell you about this. They don’t want to tell you about this,’ Trump said knowingly.”

“Demagogue for President” has one flaw, though it’s part of its design: It’s about Trump’s campaign and not his time in the White House. The pursuit of power differs from its possession. And the one way in which Trump has grown in office is in the ferocity of his falsehoods.

But the book succeeds on its own terms, as a handbook for recognizing the real dangers of his dangerous nonsense. Mercieca concludes by calling Trump “a new kind of demagogue. He is a demagogue of the spectacle — part entertainer, part authoritarian.” He has used his rhetoric as a weapon to take advantage of the deep divisions in American democracy, conning the electorate into believing that he alone could heal them. He won by convincing just enough people that there are no facts and there is no truth.

This book can serve as a vaccine against a virus that threatens the survival of our democracy. Lord knows we need it.

Demagogue for President
The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump
By Jennifer Mercieca
Texas A&M
338 pp. $28

Tim Weiner is the author of “The Folly and the Glory: America, Russia, and Political Warfare, 1945-2020.”
The highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public.

Journalists should deny favored treatment to advertisers, donors or any other special interests, and resist internal and external pressure to influence coverage.

Provide updated and more complete information as appropriate.
Think Like a Reporter | continued

Journalists face decisions about word choice when forming their questions, when writing their articles and columns, and quoting their sources. Photojournalists must gather accurate information for captions in addition to capturing great images. In some cases, the rhetoric they encounter forces them to make ethical decisions.

Consider the following situations when words and rhetoric matter.

IDENTIFIERS: Accuracy includes spelling of names, indication of positions and titles. What identifiers and labels should reporters use for the people they cover?
A. Public officials, company and school leaders
B. Members of groups, clubs and teams
C. People of varied races, religions and ethnicity

WORD CHOICE and FAIRNESS: No story is fair if it includes essentially irrelevant information at the expense of significant facts.
A. When covering political figures and school officials, how do reporters deal with comments that are profane, biased or misleading?
B. What if the promises being made in speeches by a public figure or official is “just rhetoric”? The organization, budgets and policies will not allow the promise to ever materialize. Should the promise be published? Does the reporter have a responsibility to put the promise within context?

LIBEL: To be libelous, a statement must injure reputation (“defame”) or otherwise cause actual injury. A reporter can incur liability for slander (the oral equivalent of libel) by spreading allegations to third persons during interviews. Checking the accuracy of allegations or rumors is part of a reporter’s job. It calls for care in framing questions.

If a reporter discovers that a community leader is making false claims in meetings and speeches, what should she do? How does she achieve accuracy, balance and clarity in her reporting?
A. Does she quote the community leader’s claims in an article?
B. Is it a reporter’s job to judge the rhetoric of the interviewee?
C. If a reporter accurately quotes the community leader can she be sued for libel? What if the other sources she quotes to balance the article express their belief that the claims are false?
**Tom Toles | The MESS-iah**

Editorials and editorial cartoons are commentary on the current conditions, issues and decisions made (or not made). They may remain cogent when read months later or they may have lost their vitality because of later actions, decisions and conditions. They do provide a perspective on that time.

August 23, 2019

1. Tom Toles uses symbols, details and labels.
   A. Who is the figure in the foreground of the visual commentary?
   B. Why is this figure dressed as he is?
   C. What does the background of the cartoon indicate?

2. Each “mess” is labeled and given a representative symbol. Select three of the seven to state the “mess,” explain its symbol and why it might be considered a mess.

3. Tom Toles enjoys word play in his editorial cartoons. Explain how the title of this cartoon has several levels of meaning. Include in your response Toles’ use of point size and punctuation.

4. Toles’ alter ego resides in the lower right corner at the drawing board.
   A. In what way does his comment continue the word play?
   B. What do you think the “message” is?

5. Summarize Toles’ point of view.
   A. Given this was a 2019 commentary, what “mess” would you add to the image to reflect today’s concerns?
   B. Is there one or more “mess” that you would delete? Explain your answer.
Tom Toles | Final TOLES Cartoon

As Tom Toles tells us today, he has decided to retire. After a half-century of brilliant cartooning, including 18 years at The Post, he is entitled, but we will miss him greatly, as we know will many of you. While we search for a replacement, we will offer a cartoon every day chosen from a roster of the best cartoonists in the country. You also may continue to enjoy the work of our other staff cartoonist, Ann Telnaes.

— Fred Hiatt, editorial page editor

October 30, 2020
KEEP CALM and cast your ballot — oh, and think before you tweet. This is the message voters must have in mind as the country greets this Election Day, which promises to be full of anxiety-inducing misinformation before, during and after votes are counted.

Researchers have spent the past few months trying to understand the provenance of the lies sweeping our online and offline worlds. Local officials are reportedly overwhelmed by the falsehoods circulating in their communities: on the right, phony claims that critical infrastructure is owned by liberal financier George Soros; on the left, phony claims that the conservative Kochs have their hands all over everything; across the spectrum, unfounded fears about mail-in ballots being shredded or dumped en masse.

These tall tales often grow out of tiny truths, according to a study by the Election Integrity Partnership. A local newspaper may report on a molehill of an irregularity, which hyperpartisan outfits then transform into a mountain by stripping it of context or embellishing it with phantom partisan intent. That’s how the Detroit News’s “400-plus Michigan overseas ballots list wrong running mate for Trump” turned into Breitbart’s “Democrat Michigan Secretary of State Misprints Trump Ticket on Ballots for Troops.”

The president has played no small role in this delegitimization effort. He eggs on his side to produce propaganda and then distributes it to supporters far and wide. The right-wing website Gateway Pundit seized on a report about a batch of mail discovered in a ditch in Greenville, Wis., to allege a left-wing plot to steal the election; soon at the second debate President Trump was regaling viewers with the same fantasy, except he had swapped out the ditch for a river. The Post wrote last week about the virtual megaphone that amplifies the president’s every ludicrous claim: a combination of sincere supporters and automated accounts.

The distortion of the public conversation is especially pernicious now, not least because things are bound to go wrong in a national election of a country of more than 300 million. The power may go out in one jurisdiction; poll workers may show up late in another. Some ballots do get mixed up, and there is real concern over mail delays resulting in many arriving late in swing states. Interpreting these events in their appropriate context is difficult enough without bad actors putting them through funhouse mirrors for political gain.

Election Day promises to be full of misinformation. Here’s how we can all stop spread.
The bright spot: Those overwhelmed local officials can act swiftly to correct the record, and so can trustworthy news sources such as the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel — whose rebuttal to the ditch incident became the most retweeted story in the discussion. Platforms have the power to debunk by putting the facts front and center.

All of us have power, too. Resist narratives that treat uncertainty as a sign of illegitimacy. Refrain from reposting what you’re unsure you can trust. Help the people around you avoid becoming unwitting links in a chain of bad information.

No single platform or paper or person has been responsible for the plague of misinformation ahead of the election, which means no single entity can protect our democracy in the days to come. We all have a role to play.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

1. Editorials state their positions directly. What is The Post’s editorial board’s point of view?

2. In the second paragraph, the editorial writer attempts to be balanced. Identify where this is happening.

3. The end of the second paragraph’s last sentence provides examples and serves as a transition to the next paragraph.
   A. Did you hear of concerns about mail-in ballots? If yes, what was the concern?
   B. What idea is developed in the third paragraph?

4. On whom does the fourth paragraph focus?
   A. What words provide a negative view of President Trump’s actions?
   B. What is the “virtual megaphone” to which the editorial refers?

5. The fifth paragraph could be considered a concession. What does the editorial concede?

6. Summarize what The Post considers the “bright spot” in the midst of the “anxiety-inducing misinformation”?

7. In the next to last paragraph The Post directly addresses those reading the editorial.
   A. What are the three suggestions?
   B. Do you see a way for you to accomplish one of these suggestions?
   C. Would you want to follow any of the suggestions? Explain your response.
   D. How might these be considered solutions to a problem that has been presented?

8. What is a “plague”? Is the image and metaphor of a “plague of misinformation” a successful device to emphasize the amount of misinformation circulating? Explain your response.

9. Has the editorial presented the problem that exists in understandable terms?

10. Has the editorial provided solutions so that readers have an idea of how they can “protect our democracy in the days to come”? Do you have another solution to suggest?