

6

Methods for Studying Public Oratory About Terrorism



In Chapter 3, we briefly reviewed the development of rhetoric, some of which centered on the contribution of the ancient Greeks and the schism between the Sophists and, later, Plato and Aristotle, the latter of whom felt that public speaking and rhetoric were less ends unto themselves and more the *sine qua non* of good citizenship. In developing a modern theory of rhetoric, we also referenced neoclassical theory, the contemporary application of Aristotle's ideas about oratory and persuasion. In this chapter, we will examine the relationship between public oratory and the general discourse we have concerning terrorism and how we construct its meaning—or how that meaning is constructed for us. By *public oratory*, I am referring not just to any speeches made on the subject of terrorism but to those speeches for a public audience made by our leaders or those of other countries, decision makers, and individuals in authority (including, by extension, the leaders of those groups we designate as terrorist). Any of these individuals are likely to shape public opinion. Naturally, I could be referring to any senior member of government (e.g., in this country, a president or a secretary of state); a former authority figure (e.g., a former leader

like President Clinton); an expert recognized by the public (e.g., a well-known academic whose advice is relied on by people in government); the leader of a state that practices terror (e.g., the leader of a country that employs terrorism against its own populace); the leader of a dissent terror group (e.g., the leader of al Qaeda); and so on. In the interest of space and economy, however, I will here focus on only two speakers for this analysis: a former president, whose speeches on terrorism should be well-known to the reader at this time, and the most famous (or infamous) leader of a terror group.

In the next chapter, we will look at two speeches given by President George W. Bush in response to terrorism and the events of September 11. As leaders and authority figures, presidents occupy unique positions in American and global politics. A sitting president is the leader of our country but, by the rules of our Constitution, must share political power with the legislative branch of government (the Congress), and both the president and the Congress must have that power checked by the judicial branch of government (hence the old concept of *checks and balances*). Nevertheless, the president enters the game of shared power with considerable resources at his (and someday her) disposal—one of which concerns foreign affairs. It has been our custom throughout the history of our country to allow the president to speak with a single voice for all of us in matters of foreign affairs. It is true that Congress, controlling appropriations (i.e., the money to pay for things), still has influence in foreign matters and that the federal judiciary (and most especially the Supreme Court) will ensure that nothing a president does even in the foreign arena blatantly violates our Constitution; but these facts notwithstanding, foreign affairs are still the president's domain. This authority is bolstered by the fact that the Department of State is folded under the executive branch of government, as well as the fact that the president has the title of commander-in-chief of all the armed forces. In times of foreign conflict—especially involving war or the threat of war—the president's authority is unmatched. Even though our Congress passed a law called the War Powers Act¹ after our conflict in Vietnam, requiring more of a role for the Senate in the making of war, the act was filled with loopholes and is today a post facto measure, for the Senate does not get involved until after the fact and only if the president formally declares war or has committed American troops for combat beyond a certain statutory period.² Smart presidents since that time have been loath to declare war (although in some crises their rhetoric comes awfully close to *sounding* like a declaration of war) and have also been careful about time periods for deployment of troops or what language they would use in describing

the reasons for sending troops in the first place. The result has been that the president acts and speaks for us in a relatively unchecked, single-minded manner. For all these reasons, presidents make ideal subjects for studying the effects of public oratory on matters of public concern—especially a topic such as terrorism, which, when committed on American soil, has the feel of war declared on America. Although in this book I will focus our examination on two of the more rhetorically significant addresses given by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, let me stress that there are many acts of terror against this country and others (both *terror from above* and *terror from below*) that could be evaluated in the context of the public oratory they incite and how it shapes discourse. I have elected to use only these two examples because of time and space constraints. For the sake of understanding how these kinds of oratory engage the discursive process eliciting other kinds of rhetoric, including more oratory, in the next chapter I have also included a speech by Osama bin Laden—given three years after Bush’s second speech in this chapter. Bin Laden’s speech is clearly a response to Bush and, as we shall see, is an attempt to influence the 2004 presidential election.

Before I discuss the three speeches, however, I think it is important to first return to the subject of rhetoric—our rhetorical strand for this aspect of terrorism as a communication process—and address how we evaluate public oratory to discover its rhetorical function.

❖ A METHOD OF RHETORIC FOR PUBLIC ORATORY

Using the notion of neoclassical theory as a springboard, I will suggest the following methodology in this section, first by examining the notion of rhetoric, public speaking, and persuasion as being *audience centered*; then by examining the development of specific *rhetorical appeals* to affect that persuasion; and finally by considering how these appeals translate into actual persuasive messages with the assistance of *rhetorical figures* of speech and with the occasional use of *rhetorical fallacies*. Let’s consider each of these in turn.

Public Speaking and Persuasion as Audience-Centered Rhetoric

Although it would seem that any discussion of this subject (especially one employing a modern application of Aristotle’s ideas) should begin with an examination of appeals in the speech message proper, I feel that this puts the cart before the horse. In truth, effective public

speaking and persuasion recognizes that its rhetoric must be created for and targeted to a specific audience (or audiences). Before we can talk about the persuasive message itself, therefore, we have to begin our discussion by understanding what and who the audience is, because considerations of audience drive the creation of effective persuasive messages in the first place. Out of necessity, we must begin our discussion of methodology with a comment about the significance of audience and how it is analyzed by the speaker/rhetor before the creation of the message. By understanding how and why speechwriters and speakers (not always the same person) make assumptions about audience, we can begin the process of deconstructing a public speech to understand how it works its influence on the intended audience. How does the creator of the speech message make assumptions about his or her audience?

The first question that must be asked is “*Who is the specific audience for this speech?*”³ On occasion, there will be only one audience, but in truth, for most public speeches such as the kind given by a president, there will be multiple audiences. These may include (but are not limited to) members of the president’s own party or those of the opposition party; they may include all the members of the armed forces—the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and so on, members of the White House and the executive branch, or members of the Congress; they may include foreign governments of countries who are our allies, those who are neutral to the interests of the United States, or even our supposed enemies; and they may also include any and/or all the residents of those countries on whose support the leadership of their governments depends. Audiences may include important captains of industry in our business sectors or important bankers and investment officials who need to be comforted or reassured by the president’s words. They may include the leaders of state governments or state and local law enforcement personnel, whose cooperation the president may require for an initiative. Audiences may also include lobbyists and the leaders of special-interest groups who regularly contribute money and resources to campaigns for politicians who support their positions while campaigning vigorously against those who oppose them. Most fundamentally, audiences may obviously include the American people—regardless of party affiliation—whose interests the president is supposed to represent and serve and on whose good graces a reelection bid may hang.

Understanding more about who the audience is can be facilitated by asking questions about *audience demographics*⁴ (e.g., age, race, ethnicity, cultural background, religion, education, and political orientation);

*size of the audience*⁵ (how many people will be in the audience); *when the speech will be seen by the audience*⁶ (both for those in attendance and for those who may be watching on television, listening on radio, or doing either on the Internet); *how much time will be allotted for the speech*⁷ (i.e., for how long one can speak to the audience); and *where the speech will take place*⁸ (i.e., questions about forum, which are most relevant for a live audience but can also play a role when the event is witnessed on television and the location creates a sense of background scenery/context for the speech).

Next, the creator of the speech may inquire, *“Is there any possibility for common ground between the speaker/rhetor and the audience?”*⁹ In practice, this means considering whether there is anything in the background or situation of the audience that may also be found in the background or situation of the speaker. For example, if the president was addressing a group of concerned parents about the problems of teenage drinking, he might make a reference to the challenges he has faced as a parent concerned with alcohol use by his own teenage daughters. Doing so suggests that a common ground or bond exists between the speaker and the audience; he understands their concerns or situation because these are his concerns or his situation too.

Another audience-centered question the creator of the speech may ask is *“Has the audience heard the speech message before?”*¹⁰ This is also known as “prior exposure to the message,” and it deals with whether the audience has already been exposed to the speech message and has formed some kind of opinion or position in response. Has the audience heard this before? If so, what was the reaction? Was it what the speaker wanted? If it was a negative reaction, why did this happen? Surprisingly, some speakers are foolish about repeating speech messages that have proven unpopular or ineffective with audience members in the past. Sometimes, speakers do this because they are dogmatic and stubborn about their own positions; other times, they do this because they failed to consider the audience and prior exposure. In either event, it is a general rule of crafting speeches for specific audiences that what has worked in the past rhetorically will work again in the future, assuming that conditions and circumstances for the audience have not changed. For example, the senior George Bush, former president of the United States, decided to emphasize a traditional message in his speeches for election in the campaign of 1988. These included references to themes that his predecessor, President Reagan, had evoked in the previous campaigns of 1980 and 1984, such as the need for a strong defense, decreasing the tax burden, diminishing the role of the federal government in the private life of a citizen (or a business!), and

return of greater political power to states and localities. It made sense for Bush, a former vice president under a popular president (Reagan), to repeat these same ideas in his speech messages in 1988. Of course, by 1992, conditions and circumstances had changed. How? The Soviet Union had broken up, and the Berlin Wall had crumbled. The concept of a political enemy in the Soviet communists was a strong rationale in much of the rhetoric used to advocate a stronger defense and more military spending. But, by 1992, that rationale wasn't effective for most voters because the old enemy no longer existed. In its place were new defense concerns, but President Bush's rhetoric never really effectively defined these in a way that resonated with voters. At the same time, he was accused—even by members of his own party—of going back on a pledge to never raise taxes. And of course, in that election year, the economy was still in recession, and many people felt vulnerable, while others suffered hardship from the downturn of events. Taken with that set of changed conditions and circumstances for the targeted audience of his reelection speeches in 1992, it is not hard to understand why Bush failed to connect with voters. Though it is true that messages that are effective can be repeated, it is also true that those messages should not be repeated if conditions and circumstances have changed the audience's disposition about the message. What worked for the senior Bush in 1988 was exactly what proved to be his undoing in 1992.

A final audience-centered question the creator of the speech message may wish to consider is "*What is the disposition of the audience to the speech message or to the speaker on a personal level?*"¹¹ Here, we would look to see if there was any evidence of audience disposition to be discovered from the other aspects of audience analysis we have discussed so far. How will the audience feel about the message the speaker is presenting? What is its disposition toward the speaker on a personal basis? In contemporary practice, we think of broad classifications to describe audience orientation to the message or speaker. These include classifying all or part of an audience as *hostile* to the message or speaker (meaning that audience members cannot be persuaded because they are so opposed to what is being said or to the speaker personally); *sympathetic* (meaning that they are, in effect, already persuaded because of their support, love, adoration, etc., for the message or speaker from previous experience); or *neutral* (meaning that no firm disposition exists toward speaker or message—the audience is yet to be persuaded). Though it is possible in theory for an entire audience to be classified as one or the other of these, more commonly—especially for public speeches delivered by presidents—elements of all three classifications may be found in the audience. Or to put this in a different way,

it is more likely that for most presidential addresses, there will be multiple audiences, which are divided along the lines of hostility, sympathy, or neutrality. Knowing this ahead of time helps the creator of the message know what message is intended for what audience; likewise, it helps us understand, when we deconstruct a speech, why certain message choices were made.

Public Speaking, Oratory, and Rhetorical Appeals

Now that we have considered the audience, the next part of our methodology for public oratory is to consider the message itself. Here, we may reach back to Chapter 2 and our discussion of Aristotle and entertain three concepts he introduced in developing a theory of rhetoric. These concepts are still in use today by neoclassical theorists. They are the concepts of a persuasive speech message, classified as *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Of course, their effectiveness will depend on the audience; we are not all affected by *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in the same ways.

In contemporary application, *ethos* refers to credibility—and specifically to the credibility of the speaker or rhetor, the messenger. When we say that a speech message is imbued with a strong sense of *ethos*, we are suggesting that the speaker, himself or herself, has a strong sense of credibility with the given audience. Of course, credibility can take many forms. For example, an individual may be credible because he or she is an *authority figure* (a person of power and responsibility), like a political leader or the leader of an organization or movement. Or a person may be credible because he or she is an *expert* on the subject addressed, like a scientist or a researcher. Or an individual may be deemed credible because he or she has *experience* with the subject being discussed—like Christopher Reeve, who, though not a medical expert on the subject of broken spines and paralysis, could still speak effectively because of his own experience. Perhaps, an individual may be found credible because he or she is trustworthy and honest, such as someone in whom you really trust and believe. (Can you think of any people like this? How about a close friend or family member?) If an individual possesses some amount of *ethos*, we may say that he or she will be effective with the audience, not necessarily because the speech message content itself is effective and persuasive but more because the speaker as an individual is credible. A powerful leader like the president will often have the *ethos* of credibility that comes from authority, but since the Watergate era, that has not always guaranteed that audiences would automatically believe anything a president had to say. Different presidents since that time have affected different forms of

rhetorical ethos. For example, President Carter, though not perceived as an effective leader by the end of his administration, was nevertheless perceived to be an intelligent man and a very honest one, a perception confirmed in 2002, when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In contrast, President Reagan, Carter's successor, was a highly popular and likable leader, with an ethos that touched even his political opponents. Though many Democrats may have opposed Reagan's policies, most would still admit that they liked him on a personal level. The American people were no different; though many disagreed with Reagan's position on issues such as abortion or separation of church and state, they still liked him on a personal level and could be persuaded to vote for him. President Clinton, like President Reagan, was also an immensely popular leader—even to the point where his public support remained unflinchingly solid in the face of impeachment over whether he had perjured himself in an investigation over an alleged affair with Monica Lewinsky. Clinton's ethos, however, was different from Reagan's. How would we describe this ethos? Although both men shared enormous charisma, Clinton was often perceived as credible for his intelligence and command of detail, while Reagan—the so-called Teflon president—was more like a general or corporate CEO. Acting above the level of detail for which Clinton was known, President Reagan was seen as an authority figure who could see the big picture and make the larger decision.

A second form of rhetorical appeal identified for us by Aristotle is what he called *pathos* or the appeal of emotion. Here, we are describing speech rhetoric that persuades and affects an audience because it appeals to them on an emotional level. Not surprisingly, much of the rhetoric used by presidents in their speeches to different audiences employs pathos-centered appeals. For example, President Clinton, speaking in the aftermath of the violent tragedy at Columbine High School, made reference to the deaths of so many young people to make a larger point about the need for gun control. Though the President's point may have been logically connected to the gun control argument, the first way it hit many in the nation was emotionally because the memory of so many young victims was present in our consciousness.

Likewise, when the senior President Bush chose to make flag burning a political issue for the campaign in 1988, he employed rhetoric suggesting that support for the physical symbol of the flag was in some way a litmus test for an individual's patriotism to this country. Anyone who dared to support flag burning was unpatriotic and un-American. Ironically, a year later, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that burning the flag was symbolic, political expression protected by the First

Amendment.¹² It would not have been difficult for the senior Bush to have explained his argument in logical terms,¹³ but he instead made this a mostly emotional argument, involving the aforementioned patriotism.

A third form of rhetorical appeal identified for us by Aristotle is *logos*—the appeal of logic or reasoning. In contemporary terms, we are describing rhetoric that succeeds with an audience because the message is rational and logical. There are many different ways to use *logos* appeals, but the kind with which you may be most familiar involves the use of *deductive reasoning*. This form of reasoning operates from the assumption that if certain statements—called argumentative premises—are true, then a certain conclusion must follow. If you have already enjoyed a class in critical thinking, you will undoubtedly have been exposed to this kind of argument before—usually in the form of what is called a *syllogism*. With a syllogism, there are two premises, the major premise and the minor premise, that must be true if a certain argumentative conclusion is to follow. For example, you may recall this syllogism from a class in critical thinking:

Major premise: All men are mortal.

Minor premise: Socrates is a man.

Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.

Note that when this kind of appeal is used in oratory, the speaker seldom (if ever) uses language to suggest that something is a “major premise” or a “minor premise.” More often, we find these premises embedded in the text of the speaker’s arguments as we deconstruct them.

Presidents, when trying to make a case to a certain audience, will sometimes use *logos*-based appeals with deductive reasoning in their speeches. More often, however, the use of these appeals must be kept relatively simple because the audience(s) for the president will be diverse and not always capable of understanding a complex argument in the same way. In such situations (which are common for speakers/rhetors addressing large audiences), simple is better!

For example, it was, ironically, former President Richard Nixon—someone who had the ethos of a fighter and a staunch anticommunist—who later argued that negotiation with Communist China would not be possible without first improving relations with that country. His symbolic visit to China (the first by an American president since the communist revolution there) was the culmination of an argument he had already made to the Congress and to the country. The premises for

this were relatively simple. Peaceful coexistence (and containment) of China required negotiation between our countries. Negotiation between the two countries, in turn, required normal relations. Therefore, it followed that peaceful coexistence with China would flow from normalizing relations. The more complex realities of using our improved relations with China to help drive a dividing wedge in the damaged relationship between China and the Soviet Union made for more complexity than Nixon wanted to convey.

If a president is to be effective, his or her decision to employ one or more of these appeals is ultimately driven by the assumptions made regarding the audiences to be addressed. As indicated before, not every appeal works with every audience member in the same way—if at all. Accordingly, it is rarely the case that a president's rhetoric reflects only *one* of these kinds of appeals. More commonly, there will be a blend of two or, perhaps, all three of the appeals, depending on the audience analysis that has already been conducted. Later in this chapter, I will discuss how these appeals are used in rhetoric about terrorism; for the moment, what would you assume would be the most common form of appeal to employ when discussing terrorism before an American audience?

Public Speaking, Oratory, and Rhetorical Figures

Understanding whether the speech message is ethos, pathos, or logos oriented for the specific audience(s) is an important step in deconstructing the public oratory of individuals like our political leaders—especially on topics such as terrorism. The next step is to examine how these messages are actually worded to create the desired rhetorical effect. To appreciate this, we will here consider how *rhetorical figures of speech and argument* are used. Rhetorical figures are the actual techniques for wording specific kinds of claims and arguments, and although there are literally hundreds of these, I will (for the sake of space considerations) focus on those that are most relevant to our discussion about terrorism. These include accumulation, anaphora, antithesis, catalog, personification, and prolepsis.

The first of these, *accumulation*, refers to a situation in which two or more clauses are used in succession within a speech, saying essentially the same thing. This is often done for emphasis and/or clarity. For example, during the 1960 presidential election, questions were raised about the fact that the presidential candidate John F. Kennedy was a Catholic, with some charging that his election would be dangerous for the United States because his first allegiance on different issues might

be to whatever the Vatican's positions were. Answering this charge with an eloquent speech,¹⁴ Kennedy used accumulation when he said,

I am wholly opposed to the state being used by any religious group, Catholic or Protestant, to compel, prohibit, or persecute the free exercise of any other religion. And that goes for any persecution at any time, by anyone, in any country.¹⁵

Here, the words *religious groups* and *Catholics and Protestants* are saying essentially the same thing. The same is true for *compel, prohibit, or persecute*, and *at any time, by anyone, or in any country*.

An additional example from an ally of the United States can be seen in this passage from former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's speech, only a month after her political party's (The Conservatives) conference had been bombed at the Grand Hotel in Brighton by the IRA. Thatcher said, "The terrorist is obsessed with power, but knows he cannot get it by democratic means. Reasoned debate means nothing to him. He despises it. He scorns the arts of persuasion. Democratic institutions he holds in contempt."¹⁶ Each successive statement here echoes and reiterates Thatcher's claim that IRA terrorists reject democracy and reasoned discourse.

In contrast, another figure called *anaphora* deals with the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or lines. Like accumulation, this is often done for emphasis and clarity—as well as for a sense of rhetorical style. For example, Lyndon Baines Johnson, who was sworn into office as president with the assassination of President Kennedy, addressed a joint session of Congress shortly thereafter,¹⁷ in which he said,

All I have I would have given gladly not to be standing here today. The greatest leader of our time has been struck down by the foulest deed of our time. Today, John Fitzgerald Kennedy lives on in the immortal words and works that he left behind. *He lives on* in the minds and memories of mankind. *He lives on* in the hearts of his countrymen [italics added to show anaphora].

The repetition of the words *he lives on* allows Johnson to emphasize Kennedy's memory and creates a sense of style for the pathos-oriented speech to multiple audiences.

A third rhetorical figure, called *antithesis*, deals with clauses in a speech set in opposition to one another, usually to distinguish between choices, concepts, and ideas. For example, in his first inaugural

address,¹⁸ President Richard Nixon closed his speech with antithesis, encouraging his audience to remember that “our destiny offers *not the cup of despair, but the chalice of opportunity*” [italics added to show antithesis]. Here, Nixon sets the *cup of despair* in opposition to the *chalice of opportunity*, leaving his large audience with a clear choice (after all, who would opt for despair over opportunity?) in this speech mixed with pathos and logos, along with the ethos of the presidency as an authority source.

In a similar way, consider the example of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) leader Yasser Arafat, who spoke to the United Nations General Assembly in 1974, declaring, “Today I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter’s gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand. I repeat: do not let the olive branch fall from my hand.”¹⁹ Here the olive branch was set in opposition to a gun, and the choice Arafat wants his audience to make is not even implied—it is directed with the last words.

A fourth example of a figure for our review is *catalog*, in which a speaker/rhetor offers a list of things, ideas, or arguments. Often, this is done in conjunction with a logos appeal to suggest evidence or support for a claim the speaker is making. Beyond making the message appear logical, this figure may also strengthen a speaker’s/rhetor’s ethos as an expert and a trustworthy source, by making the speaker appear as if he or she has considered all the possibilities. Political leaders often make use of this device. For example, former President Gerald Ford, in a speech²⁰ to a joint session of Congress, explained his vision for a new energy policy to cure the nation’s energy problems.

America’s future depends heavily on oil, gas, coal, electricity, and other resources called energy. Make no mistake, we have an energy problem. The primary solution has to be at home . . . I have ordered today the *reorganization of our national energy effort* and the *creation of a national energy board*. It will be charged with developing a *single national energy program*. . . . *New legislation* will be sought after your recess to require use of *cleaner coal processes* and *nuclear fuel in new electric plants*, and the *quick conversion of existing oil plants*. . . . I will use the *Defense Production Act* to *allocate scarce materials for energy development*. . . . I will *meet with top management of the automobile industry* to assure. . . . a *firm program aimed at achieving a forty percent increase in gas mileage* within a 4-year deadline [italics added to illustrate catalog].²¹

Here, Ford lists aspects of his energy effort and program. The sum total of this list of initiatives is designed to rhetorically suggest that

Ford is actively trying to lead by comprehensively dealing with a complicated problem.

Another commonly used rhetorical figure is known as *personification*, the assigning of human characteristics to impersonal, nonhuman things. This is often used to create a positive or negative association with something by imbuing it with characteristics the audience may more easily understand. Regular product advertising and marketing campaigns often resort to this. For example, an ad at a service station selling gasoline with additives supposedly able to clean engine parts proclaimed, “Your car’s parts are *happier* when they’re *cleaner*” [italics added to show personification]. Of course, engine parts do not feel emotions any more than they have awareness of being dirty or clean, but wording it this way suggests that car parts have feelings like people, rhetorically suggesting that as consumers we should respect their wishes and spring for the more expensive gasoline! Likewise, politicians often employ personification in their speech making. For example, former President Jimmy Carter, while addressing the nation in his 1980 State of the Union speech, employed personification as he described the conflict with the hostage situation in Iran: “In response to the abhorrent situation in Iran, our nation has never been so *aroused* and unified greatly in peacetime. Our position is clear. The United States will not *yield* to blackmail” [italics again added to illustrate personification].²² Can a “nation” be “aroused”? Can it “yield”? Or are these things that people do? How might it have changed Carter’s speech if he substituted the word *people* for *nation*?

A final rhetorical figure we might consider is called *prolepsis*, which refers to anticipatory refutation. In this situation, the speaker/rhetor anticipates a criticism or counterargument to the one he or she presents and actually voices the response to it before the opposition can respond. If you have ever watched a student debate in a classroom or perhaps a debate between politicians in an election, you will have observed this in practice as one debater argues something to the effect of “In his next speech, my opponent will likely suggest this is not true. But let me tell you why he will be wrong.” In this case, the entire reference is prolepsis because the debater anticipates the criticism and immediately counters it. This is often done to get the response out ahead of the counterargument and perhaps to discourage the opposition from even suggesting it.

Politicians will often use this in their speech making as well. For example, former President Reagan, two years into his first administration,²³ once explained his budgeting priorities and answered criticism (before it was made in response to his speech!) that he was unwilling

to help the poor and less fortunate in American society. An exasperated Reagan observed,

In the discussion of Federal spending, the time has come to put the sob-sister attempts to portray our desire to get government spending under control as a hard hearted attack on the people of America. In the first place, even with the economies that we've proposed, spending for entitlements—benefits paid directly to individuals—will actually increase by one third over the next five years. . . . Only here in this city of Oz would a budget this big and generous be characterized as a miserly attack on the poor. *Now where do some of these attacks originate? They're coming from the very people whose past policies, all done in the name of compassion, brought us the current recession* [italics added to show prolepsis].

Reagan was perfectly aware that his discussion of government spending would be criticized by Democrats in the Congress, and, anticipating their arguments, he addressed them directly, voicing the criticism and then supplying the response. Using prolepsis will not completely eliminate the opposition or criticism a speaker/rhetor faces, but it can be a very effective way of dulling the impact of such arguments in advance of their use.

Public Speaking, Oratory, and Rhetorical Fallacies

On occasion, speakers/rhetors may want to create the appearance of being rational and reasonable in their rhetoric but will employ tactics that are really anything but logical. When this occurs, rhetorical fallacies are in play. How do they work?

Fallacies are argumentative tactics that operate outside the presence of logic or reasoning. Sometimes explained as logical inconsistencies, these tactics will often be undetectable unless the audience member knows what to look for and demands more logic from the rhetoric. Again, if you have had a class in critical thinking, you will have been exposed to this before. You may be aware that there are literally hundreds of different types of fallacies used by speakers. It is not my intention to restate them all here. Rather, I will address a small list of the more common ones in use by political leaders, like the president, so that we may add them to our grouping of tools for deconstructing public oratory about terrorism. These fallacies are example reasoning, scare tactics, *post hoc ergo propter hoc* arguments, *reductio ad absurdum* claims, and *ad hominem* attacks.

The fallacy of *example reasoning* is the absence of deductive reasoning. Here, a speaker/rhetor purports to be logical in evidencing his or her conclusion by using evidence from some form of example. This becomes fallacious (and thus illogical), however, if it is clear that a single example or a limited set of examples has been used, rendering the approach inductive. For example, if the president says that the evidence for a new solution to resolve homelessness can be found in the example of an approach taken by a single city in America but it turns out that this city has a unique population, not typical of the rest of the country, and the approach has been in operation for only a month, we might say that this argument was a fallacy because of example reasoning. Quite simply, the example would not support the conclusion the president advocated.

Another kind of fallacy commonly used by our leaders is the *scare tactic*. Here, the speaker/rhetor typically overstates or exaggerates a claim for the purpose of trying to scare the audience into submission to his or her message. When your parents swore that they personally knew of someone who had lost an arm that had been waved out of a car window in traffic, they were using this kind of fallacy. It is highly unlikely that they knew of any such individual; their purpose was to scare you into believing that you should keep your hands in the car when they were driving! A president will often resort to the scare tactic fallacy when trying to urgently make a case for something (such as congressional support and funding for a financial bailout to investment companies in 2008) by suggesting dire consequences if he or she does not get what he or she wants. This is commonly detected when the language and word choice used by the president suggest exaggeration, with the effect of scaring the audience. President Clinton, who made a habit of having his way with the Republican-controlled Congress, often employed this fallacy in successive State of the Union addresses, as well as in Rose Garden press conferences, when arguing against Republican plans to cut his initiatives to “invest in the American future” by paying down the deficit. Clinton would often paint a future doomsday scenario in which generations of Americans would suffer horribly.

The fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, although a mouthful to say out loud, is not as complicated as the name implies. Translated, it means, “after the fact, therefore because of the fact.” This is a fallacy dealing with the appearance of logical causation. Here, the speaker/rhetor argues that because one result occurred in time *after* the presence of another factor, the factor must have caused the result. For example,

you may recall that in any television murder mystery—such as *Matlock*—an innocent man (soon to be Matlock’s client) would often be the “last person to have seen the deceased alive.” As such, it was often assumed (fallaciously, of course) that because the murder occurred after the defendant had seen the victim, the defendant must have committed the murder! Programs such as this revolved around being able to show that this kind of causal argument would not stand up to reason.

Presidents sometimes use post hoc reasoning in their rhetoric, especially when in the midst of trying to assign blame for something. For example, President Reagan, in his first inaugural address, argued that the economic harm facing the nation as he took office (which included rampant inflation and high unemployment) was the direct result of too much reliance on the government for solutions. In Reagan’s words “In the present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” The President’s argument, a centerpiece of his populist conservatism in the election, was that the failing economy he inherited in 1980 came about after Jimmy Carter’s expanded role for the federal government from 1976 (especially with respect to taxation and regulation of energy importation and consumption) and that because the problems came after the federal buildup, they must have been caused by the buildup. The President’s argument, however, presented a classic post hoc fallacy. The economic problems facing the country in 1980 were the result of myriad problems; some of them may have been traced to inadequate government policies, but they also included normal cycles of contraction in the economy; decades of poor—or nonexistent—planning at the federal, state, and local level for conservation; no investment in alternate energy forms; and a flailing foreign relations agenda that stretched back through numerous administrations.

The fallacy of *reductio ad absurdum* can be seen in arguments in which a claim is extended through to an extreme position, quite literally *reduced to the absurd*. These kinds of claims are common—especially in marketing and advertising rhetoric. How often are we told, for example, that failure to use certain products may lead to dire and/or embarrassing consequences? One television spot for a product to control the effects of diarrhea argues for its effectiveness but then suggests that failure to use it may subject an individual suffering from diarrhea to the worst of consequences. In the advertising spot, a father who failed to use this particular product is being buried in the sand during a day at the beach when he becomes afflicted. At the last instant, in a moment that is funny but patently absurd, he is suddenly struck with the diarrhea but unable to move because he is buried up to his neck!

Presidents and other political leaders will, on occasion, rely on this kind of fallacy in their rhetoric as well. In a famous address critical of television news media, former Vice President Spiro Agnew once complained that there was too much liberal bias in television news (not always true, even when Agnew was in office); that television news exerted too much influence (somewhat accurate—television news was and is extremely influential, as we shall explore in Chapters 8 and 9); and that decisions about what to show in the news were always based on telling a story that showcased “controversy” (again, a fair claim for television news, even today). But he then further opined that the only reason there were so many demonstrations in the streets in protest against the country’s involvement in Vietnam was because television news cameras were present. Agnew asked, “How many marches and demonstrations would we have if the marchers did not know that the ever faithful TV cameras would be there to record their antics for the next news show?” Agnew’s conclusion presented a typical *reductio fallacy*. He began by making reasonable claims (at least in part) but gradually spun the argument until it reached a more absurd conclusion—that the only reason for people to demonstrate en masse against the war in Vietnam was that they thought they might get on television. His claim, of course, ignored the possibility that the large public demonstrations against the war were due to a sizable number of Americans having serious doubts about what the United States was doing or accomplishing in Southeast Asia.

The fallacy of *ad hominem* attacks occurs when a speaker/rhetor resorts to name-calling to advance a claim. We call this approach fallacious because the speaker is suggesting that a course of action be followed or avoided, not for any rational reason but simply because an individual or institution associated with the message is a “nasty you-know-what.” In many ways, this is more common in the heat of campaigns, when the mudslinging between political camps has increased and the number of days left before the election is limited. The temptation to engage in this fallacy is overwhelming.

Even though it is more typically found in campaigns, this fallacy is often also employed by presidents during their administrations. For example, President Reagan, in a speech now famously remembered for increasing the stakes in the Cold War, once referred to the Soviet Union as the “evil empire.” In a similar fashion, President Bush Sr. once referred to the government in Iraq as “Nazi.” Both claims were fallacious arguments, designed to create public support for U.S. foreign policy against the U.S.S.R. and Iraq. Reagan’s argument was fallacious because calling a country an “evil empire,” without explaining what

constituted evil, amounted to simplistic name-calling. Likewise, Saddam Hussein's regime may have been repressive and was most assuredly a dangerous dictatorship, but to claim that it was the same as a fascist regime promoting racial purity and world domination was a real stretch. Bush chose the word because Nazism was and is unpopular, and he wanted to make that association in the minds of Americans to ensure public support for the Gulf War.

❖ SUMMARY

Public oratory about terrorism is one of the additional rhetorical strands that envelop the discursive process as we negotiate the meaning of terrorism or a terrorist act. This can include both the public oratory for large audiences by a political leader (like a president or a prime minister) and that from the leader of a group or country we have labeled as terrorist (such as a dictator or the leader of a dissent group). In this chapter, we have examined some methods for using a neoclassical approach to deconstructing the meaning of this oratory, including those for audience analysis, rhetorical appeals, rhetorical figures, and fallacies. In the next chapter, we will apply these methods to two speeches on terrorism by former President George W. Bush, as well as one by Osama bin Laden.

❖ NOTES

1. War Powers Act of 1973, Public Law 93-148.
2. Section 5(b) of the War Powers Act requires that the president report on military activities to the Congress and adds, "Within sixty calendar days after a report is submitted or required to be submitted . . . the President shall terminate use of U.S. Armed Forces unless the Congress (1) has declared war or has enacted specific authorization for such use of U.S. Armed Forces, (2) has extended by law such sixty day period, (3) is physically unable to meet as a result of an armed attack on the United States."
3. For a complete and thorough description of the audience analysis in public speaking and persuasion, see Joseph S. Tuman and Douglas M. Fraleigh, *The St. Martin's Guide to Public Speaking* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002) at pp. 89–115.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 97–102.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 92–93.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 93–94.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 93–94.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 95–96.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 102–103.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 104–105.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 105–107.
12. See *Texas v. Johnson*, 109 S. Ct. 2533 (1989).
13. For example, in *ibid.*, Chief Justice William Rehnquist, writing a dissenting opinion, offered a historical perspective on the use and meaning of the flag to defend the legality of laws preventing its destruction by burning.
14. This speech was made at a campaign appearance before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association in September 1960. The address, titled “Religion in Government,” gave Kennedy a chance to put the issue of his religious faith behind him for good. For a text of this speech, see Joseph S. Tuman, *Political Communication in American Campaigns* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008) at pp. 257–260.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 259.
16. This is from a speech by Margaret Thatcher at the Lord Mayor’s Banquet, November 12, 1984. The text of this speech can be found at www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=105786 (accessed May 25, 2009).
17. The speech, titled “Let Us Continue,” was delivered on November 27, 1963, only five days after Kennedy’s death. It was as much a speech to the nation and the world as it was an address to the Congress, and it provided everyone a real glimpse of Johnson in an entirely new role and in a new light in a time of genuine crisis. For a text of this speech, see Theodore Windt, *Presidential Rhetoric*, 5th ed. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, 1994) at pp. 53–55.
18. This speech was delivered January 20, 1969. For text, see *ibid.*, pp. 123–127.
19. From Yasser Arafat’s speech to the United Nations, November 13, 1974. For a full text of the speech, see *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Beirut, vol. IV, no. 2, Winter 1975, pp. 181–192.
20. This speech, titled “Win!”, was delivered to a special joint session of the Congress on October 8, 1974, as inflation rates climbed out of control and as many, with serious doubts about the pardoning of Richard Nixon, began to question Ford’s ability to lead the nation. For text, see Windt, *Presidential Rhetoric*, *op. cit.*, pp. 242–249.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
22. This 1980 State of the Union address by President Carter is often recalled as the speech that announced the “Carter Doctrine” for American foreign policy. *Ibid.*, p. 297; the full text of the speech is on pp. 296–302.
23. This address, titled “The Conservative Cause,” was made to the Conservative Political Action Committee (an obviously sympathetic audience for Reagan) on February 26, 1982. *Ibid.*, p. 339; the full text of the speech is on pp. 335–342.

