

# Rhetoric: How Politicians Manipulate Language and the Media to Shape Public Thought

*Elsbeth Gustavson*

*This essay analyzes how politicians use the art of political rhetoric and framing to alter public opinion and the media's receptiveness to the rhetoric. By analyzing the way politicians have used the terms "global climate change," "tax relief," "the war on terror," "theory," "torture vs. abuse," and the language framing abortion and controversial George W. Bush administration policies, the essay shows how politicians can use the power of words to gain political support from the public. The analysis then turns to the media's failure to act as a middle ground for the public. The essay examines how the media, due to the influence of money, does not offer an unbiased opinion. Finally, the essay explores the media's failure to act as an extra-constitutional "check and balance" to government's power.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Language plays a pivotal role in everyday life, and political life is no different. Rhetoric is simply the effective or specialized use of language. Political rhetoric is one of the numerous ways language is crafted to serve its creators. This essay analyzes the specific ways that the manipulation of language shapes public perception of specific policies and initiatives. The analysis then proceeds to consider the media's power to disperse this rhetoric and ultimately its failure to inform citizens in unbiased ways that challenge political authority.

### POLITICAL RHETORIC IN UNITED STATES

The first lesson any communicator must learn is that people are not blank slates. In 1999, Anthropologist Axel Aubrun and linguist Joe Grady's showed in their research study that the average American's "thinking is shaped by emotionally loaded models of interpersonal relations" (Aubrun and Grady, 1999). The Rockefeller Brothers Fund's interpretation of the study was that "Research on human cognition...shows that deeply held views of the world and assumptions about how the world works guide people's thinking and reasoning in largely unconscious and automatic ways" (U.S. in the World, 2004). In other words, when communicating, people will use personal experiences and biases to conceptualize the communicator's rhetoric. This feature of human cognition makes it very difficult for an individual to clearly communicate an idea to another because they both have different backgrounds and thus assign different connotations. A connotation is "the

associated or secondary meaning of a word or expression; implication" (Random House Dictionary, 1980, p. 285). Different people will understand different words or expressions according to the way their personal experiences construct connotations.

As an elected representative, politicians must master the skill of communication in order to express to their constituents what they believe and to account for their actions. Most politicians therefore understand the consequences of human cognitive thinking and the formulation of connotations. However, instead of attempting to use language that overcomes these human cognitive biases, politicians use language meant to key into these biases and create specific cognitive reactions. Politicians "spin" language to persuade the public to think in a specific way rather than to impartially provide information. For example, Karen Callaghan and Frauke Schnell found that "laboratory subjects will support a policy proposal when it is said to produce 90 percent employment but oppose the same proposal when it results in 10 percent unemployment" (Callaghan and Schnell, 2005). This is the art of political rhetoric: the ability to manipulate the connotations of language without changing its denotation, and thus persuade the public to a specific set of ideas in a political environment.

Shakespeare said, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet" (Shakespeare, 1992). However, there is a lot more to a name than Shakespeare suggests. Consider the difference between the names jungle and rainforest. Both of these names describe the tropical areas of dense vegetation and animal life. However,

jungle conjures images of a chaotic labyrinth where wild animals are bound to attack at any moment. In contrast, rainforest suggests a sublime rain saturated forest with thriving wildlife and beautiful rays of sunshine beaming through the canopy. Or consider the name estate tax versus death tax. Both terms name the tax placed on assets left to heirs in wills, but death tax frames the tax policy in a negative way. Contrary to Shakespeare's writing, there is a good deal in a name because the name itself evokes an emotional response that shapes the way one thinks about the object.

Another more prevalent name for this political rhetoric is "framing." Framing is how politicians use linguistic cues to define the political boundaries within which a policy will be considered. Rochefort and Cobb argued that "if policy making is a struggle over alternative realities, then language is the medium that reflects, advances, and interprets these alternatives" (Rochefort and Cobb, 1995). Though historically speaking, the study of frames is a newer social science, the framing technique has existed in the United States longer even than democracy. For example, the Founding Fathers long debated which frame of representation should be used in the constitution. The "federalist" representative frame that argued for strong centralized government competed with the "anti-federalist" frame that focused on the danger of centralized power (Callaghan and Schnell, 2005). Framing, or political rhetoric, has been used for centuries to structure the way the public thinks about policy and to capture the attention of the citizenry.

The idea that politicians sit around and deliberate over the precise language to use to convince a nation that their way is the right way sounds at least conspiratorial if not absurd. However, through polls, focus groups, "meta-analysis", media content analysis, and message testing, politicians and consultants do scientifically gauge public reaction to different language (US in the World, 2004). For example pollsters like Frank Luntz conduct many research studies to determine the precise language that would create the wanted public interpretation. According to Steven Poole, Luntz then advised the Republican Party in a 2003 memo that,

"It's time for us to start talking about 'climate change' instead of global warming... 'Climate change' is less frightening than 'global warming.' As one focus-group participant noted, climate change 'sounds like you're going from Pittsburg to Fort Lauderdale'. While global warming has catastrophic connotation attached to it, climate change suggests a more controllable and less emotional challenge" (Poole, 2006).

By changing the language of the discussion for environmental policy, politicians also alter the way Americans think about specific environmental policy. Such political rhetoric is not necessarily a political conspiracy, but a common language practice used everyday by common people.

In the wake of the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, a new political rhetorical era of "terrorism" emerged. In President George W. Bush's first State of the Union Address following the terrorist

attack on the United States, the President used the term "terror" thirty-six times (terror 14 times, terrorist 19 times, bioterrorism twice, and terrorism once)(Bush, 2002). Almost one percent of all the words in the address had the root "terror." With the increased level of fear and anxiety about terrorism in the nation, politicians utilized "terror" as the new catchphrase for political persuasion. In fact, the phrase the "war on terror," as opposed to the "war on terrorism" has an interesting rhetorical function. Before 9/11, "terror" itself was understood as a particular form of violence that a state practiced on its own citizens. However, "terrorism" was defined as a non-state group's violent acts against a state. According to these definitions, "terrorism," is the proper definition of the catastrophe of 9/11. Writer Steven Poole said,

"once you start using "terror" to describe all such actions, it becomes much easier to construct a symbolic link between suicide bombers and countries...US government officials regularly called Saddam Hussein's Iraq a "terror state"; and al-Qaeda's weapon was "terror" as well as "terrorism"...and so going into Iraq was a relevant part of the "war on terror" (Poole, 2006, p.35).

Poole suggested then that the blending of the terms "terror" and "terrorism" rhetorically guided public thought to clearly link the war on Afghan "terrorism" to the war against Saddam Hussein's "terror state."

To consider a different example, the words "tax" and "cut" connote negative experiences for most Americans. "Tax" reminds most citizens of the big check they have to write every April 15<sup>th</sup>, and "cut" evokes painful memories of a stinging paper cut, or other physical pain. Therefore, calling a policy proposal a "tax cut" does not create a positive image for the American public. Republicans found an ingenious rhetorical strategy to frame their proposed tax cuts in a way that would evoke positive and supportive attitudes from the public. They removed the word "cut" and replaced it with the comforting word "relief." Not only does this language change remove the anxiety associated with the phrase "tax cuts," but once "relief" is added to tax, linguist George Lakoff pointed out, tax becomes an affliction. Lakoff said, "the person who takes it away is a hero, and anyone who tries to stop him is a bad guy" (2004). Therefore, by changing the language of tax cut policy to "tax relief," Republicans not only provide a frame that the public is more likely to support, but they also produce a frame that makes them the heroes.

The rhetorical presentation of policies that are controversial and emotionally sensitive should be handled delicately. The issue of abortion is a case in point. Cleverly, people who support legalized abortion rhetorically softened their position by adopting the name "pro-choice." However, the opposition was quick to respond by changing their slogan from "the right to life" to "pro-life." The first rhetorical function of this slogan change is to place anti-abortion supporters in direct opposition to legalized abortion supports. In addition, the change to "pro-life" successfully put abortion in the frame of "life" and not "choice" because life holds a higher

moral priority than choice. In other words, if anti-abortionists are “pro-life,” than pro-choice advocates must be “anti-life.” If the public understands legal abortion policy to be “anti-life,” they are much less likely to support such a policy (Poole, 2006). Another rhetorical achievement of the “pro-life” movement was enacting policy banning “partial-birth abortions.” As linguist George Lakoff explained, though “partial-birth abortion” is a rare and horrific procedure that only occurs in one percent of all abortions “it is the first step to ending all abortion. It puts out there a frame of abortion as a horrendous procedure, when most operations ending pregnancy are nothing like this” (2004). By rhetorically defining abortion policies as “anti-life” and framing all abortion as a horrendous procedure, “pro-life” activists guide public perception of abortion.

Another emotionally charged debate that supporters and opponents carefully frame is evolution vs. intelligent design. The primary issue in the debate over creationism theory is what children should be taught in public schools. Considering the constitutional separation of church and state in the U.S., supporters of “intelligent design,” are careful to rhetorically frame their “theory” in nonreligious terms. Proponents of intelligent design pretend “ignorance as to the identity of the actual designer, because if it were admitted that they thought it was God, it would be thrown out under the establishment clause of the US constitution” (Poole, 2006). Another interesting rhetorical exercise in the creationism debate is the use of the term “theory.” By placing the creationism debate in the frame of “theory,” the public is led to view the debate as one over divergent scientific explanations of creation. Calling intelligent design a “theory” legitimizes the concept and makes it sound fit for a science class. However, it is not clear that intelligent design offers any scientific description of how the universe was actually designed and its status as a scientific theory is debatable. In this frame, naming evolution a “theory” seems fitting because evolution is an entirely scientific explanation of creation. However, by framing evolution as “just a theory,” proponents of intelligent design attempt to strip evolution of its scientific legitimacy touting that its findings have the status of law (Poole, 2006).

Under criticism from the public over some of its actions, the George W. Bush administration has very carefully framed its reaction statements in order to make controversial policies and practices seem justified, or at least not as controversial. One of these controversial practices is the “torture” of detainees at various detention centers. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice insisted that they were not “torturing” anyone, and instead changed the language to “abuse.” Even though the United Nations Convention Against Torture defined such treatment as torture, the administration rhetorically softened public opinion by substituting the word “abuse” (Poole, 2006).

The administration also rhetorically justified the controversial decision to wage a war in Iraq without support from the United Nations (UN) by saying Bush did not need a “per-

mission slip” to defend America. As writer Richard Reeves (2005) pointed out, this rhetoric “frames the issue of multi-national talks in such a way as to suggest that anyone taking the UN seriously is clearly a schoolchild asking for teacher’s say-so.” Finally, the public questioning of the Bush administration’s use of illegal wiretapping brought about another interesting language adjustment. Instead of calling his program “wiretapping,” Bush renamed his policy the “terrorist surveillance program” (Poole, 2006). Since American citizens do not consider themselves “terrorists,” this name “terrorist surveillance program” removes the feared eyes of the government from the public “us” to the terrorist “them.”

#### THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA

Everyday citizens of America have contact with the media in some way. From traffic reports on the radio, to billboards, to the internet and television, the media is a constant unavoidable influence on American thought. The media has historically been the supplier of information the public needs to form political opinions and make political decisions. In the words of American humorist Will Rogers, “All I know is just what I read in the papers” (Rogers, 2007). In numerous, well-publicized studies social scientists examined public policy preferences via opinion polls in light of media coverage of specific policies. These numerous studies showed “that issues featured in the media become correspondingly important to the public. By contrast, issues receiving little media coverage are unlikely to arouse public concern or to engender political action” (Graber, 1990, p.71). Together these studies demonstrate that the media has the power to set political agenda by setting public preference for policy. This means that, in addition to the public need for an unbiased media to serve as a check on political power, an unbiased media is also needed to produce unbiased information about political issues for public consumption. Basically if politicians controlled the media, they would have greater control over what the public wants from their politicians and when.

Unfortunately, this political control of media is partially a reality; the unbiased media is a myth. Christopher Dickey concluded in a web essays that the media “long ago concluded having access to power is more important than speaking truth to it” (Dickey, 2005). To a certain extent, close proximity to political power makes sound business sense to the media. If a reporter is in the good graces of powerful politicians, she/he is more likely to have access to interviews with that politician, and interviews sell. Also, there are numerous cases where news reporters became so close to the political power, they were paid to act as a mouthpiece for the politicians’ rhetoric. Politicians have the power to sway public opinion with rhetoric, and the media has the power to set the agenda. When the media source neglects its democratic responsibility to challenge power, the news becomes nothing but a loudspeaker for political rhetoric.

One example of the media simply disseminating politician’s rhetoric is the case of Armstrong Williams, a conserva-

tive commentator, talk-show host and newspaper columnist for the *Washington Times*, the *Detroit Free Press* and other publications. After Williams' extensive positive reporting on the benefits of the Bush administration's education policy No Child Left Behind (NCLB), he was,

"unmasked as the front man for a scheme in which \$240,000 of taxpayers' money was quietly siphoned to him through the Department of Education and a private P.R. firm so that he would 'regularly comment' upon the Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind policy in various media venues during an election year" (Rich, 2005, P. 5).

Williams was literally being paid by policy makers of NCLB to publicly spread the good news about NCLB. Williams told reporters from the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Nation* that "he ha[d] 'no doubt' that there are 'others' like him being paid for purveying administration propaganda and that 'this happens all the time'" (Rich, 2005, P. 20).

Sadly, Armstrong Williams was right. Reporter Douglas Bandow resigned from *Copley News Service* in December of 2005 "after he admitted writing as many as two dozen op-eds for which he was paid \$1,000 to \$2,000 each by embattled Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff" (Javers, 2006, P. 35). William Greider of *The Nation* magazine observed,

"Information is shaped (and tainted) by the proximity of leading news-gatherers to the royal court and by their great distance from people and ordinary experience. People do find ways to inform themselves, as best they can when the regular 'news' is not reliable" (Greider, 2005).

There are at least three additional known cases where federal agencies televised "fake news reports" during the Bush administration. As reported by *The New York Times*,

"The Department of Health and Human Services, the Census Bureau and the Office of National Drug Control Policy have all sent out news 'reports' in which, to take one example, fake newsmen purport to be 'reporting' why the administration's Medicare prescription-drug policy is the best thing to come our way since the Salk vaccine" (Rich, 2005).

All of these incidents were found to be violations of federal law that "prohibits 'covert propaganda' purchased with taxpayers' money" (Rich, 2005). The question the American public needs to be asking is "How can our media provide us unbiased information when politicians are paying them with our tax money?" The answer is that the media cannot. Instead members of the media are being paid to act only as loudspeakers for the political rhetoric intentionally framed to alter the public's political opinions.

The system of checks and balances in the United States democracy is constitutionally delineated by the separation of power into three distinct branches of government: the executive, legislative, and judicial. Implicit in the Constitution is the function of the media as a secondary check on government. Similar to the constitutional autonomy assured to the United States Supreme Court, the American media is also

assured autonomy by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution which states that "Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." As previously discussed, political rhetoric has attempted to mold public thought even before the constitution was written. The 'free press' is important in ensuring that politician's rhetoric is challenged. True free investigative journalism was meant to keep politicians in line by keeping a public eye on their actions and decisions. The unbiased media needs to be the objective opinion the public relies on to engender an informed democracy.

## CONCLUSION

It is too common in our day to merely dismiss what politicians actually say as... 'spin,' to assume that it is meaningless waffle, and to close our ears. On the contrary, if [political rhetoric] is interrogated rather than accepted uncritically and spread by compliant media, it cannot help but betray what its users really mean. (Poole, 2006, p.36)

Politicians are great communicators; they have mastered the art of rhetoric, framing, and therefore the manipulation of public opinion. *The Nation* reported, "Democracy...begins not at election time but in human conversation" (Greider, 2005). The media may often act as a loudspeaker for the rhetoric of politicians, deafening the American public to the discourse of policymaking. The government still has a very intimate impact on the citizen's everyday life and cannot be ignored. A citizen's responsibility to the democratic process does not begin or end at the polls. The public must compel the media to question the rhetoric politicians tout, and seek the meaning behind the words.

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