

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Ad Hominem Argument In The Bush/Kerry Presidential Debates



“Do you believe that you could do a better job than President Bush in preventing another 9/11 attack on the United States?” [i] This question, directed toward Senator Kerry by moderator Jim Lehrer, opens the 2004 Presidential Debates in the United States. The issue Lehrer raises seems appropriate and unremarkable, since

in the aftermath of 9/11, security had become a dominant concern in American political discourse. The phrasing of the question, however, offers a less obtrusive but perhaps more important measure of the political atmosphere. Lehrer does not focus upon policy or party or ideology but instead asks for a direct comparison between the Senator and his opponent and thus gives priority to the persons who are competing in the debate. Moreover this strong emphasis on the two individuals accurately reflects the tenor of the whole campaign and anticipates the later course of all three debates. These debates center on persons, and in this direct and literal sense, their arguments rest upon *ad hominem* considerations.

This arrangement of priorities reverses the normal expectations in argumentation studies, where the propositions advocated by the arguer represent the focal concern for evaluation, and the persona of the arguer is, at best, a secondary consideration. To consider the debates from an argumentative perspective, therefore, requires an alteration in perspective and a revision or expansion of existing conceptions of the role of character in argument. And so I need to begin by reviewing some of these conceptions in an effort to open space for my purpose, which is to present a realistic analysis of the debates that maintains contact with traditional interests in argumentation scholarship.

1. *Ad hominem, Ethos, and Ethotic Argument*

One traditional conception of argumentation (associated with what is called the “standard treatment”) hardens the distinction between arguer and argument to the point that *ad hominem* appeals are treated categorically as fallacies. From this perspective, rational inquiry requires strict attention to the quality of the argument *qua* argument, and any reference to the person making the argument

constitutes an irrelevant distraction. This position, of course, virtually exiles campaign debates from the domain of rational argument and leads us to view them as exercises in “mere rhetoric,” designed to manipulate opinion with little regard for the substance of the issues and without any relation to normative principles of reasoning. And in fact, the debates are routinely treated in this way by much of the public, by the press, and even by scholars who study them. It is not an accident that the large and diverse scholarly literature on U.S. presidential debates contains very few entries devoted to argumentation.

A more recent approach to ad hominem argument, developed by Douglas Walton (1998, 2000, 2001), Alan Brinton (1985, 1986, 1995), Trudy Govier (1999) and others, offers a more fluid conception of the relationship between arguer and argument than the standard treatment allows. On this view, the character, commitments, and actions of an arguer often are relevant to the assessment of an argument, and hence ad hominem considerations, while they may sometimes be irrelevant, often are legitimate and appropriate resources for rational argumentation. But, while these revisionist positions allow space for assessing the role of persons in arguments, they still maintain a focus on the proposition or stand-point of the advocate rather than on the advocate *per se*. Brinton, for example, explains that ad hominem argument deals with an arguer, a proposition endorsed by the arguer, and the proposition itself, and a “logically healthy” ad hominem draws a conclusion only about the second element in this sequence. That is, the reasoning proceeds from characteristics of the arguer to a judgment about the propriety or legitimacy of that arguer’s advocacy of the proposition (Brinton 1995, p. 214).

David Zarefsky (2003) productively complicates this view of the relationship between person and argument by demonstrating the potential interaction between two species of ad hominem that normally receive separate treatment. Contemporary theorists divide ad hominem arguments into a number of types, the two most prominent of which are the direct or (the misleadingly named) abusive ad hominem and the circumstantial ad hominem. Direct ad hominem raises doubt about an arguer’s position because of some character flaw (e.g. Jones is a pathological liar, and therefore his testimony is unreliable). Circumstantial ad hominem calls attention to an inconsistency between the arguer’s position and the arguer’s actions (e.g. Mayor Jones has given himself a raise, and therefore he ought not to claim that the budget crisis justifies salary cuts for all city workers), or an inconsistency between the arguer’s position and other commitments that

the arguer has made (e.g. Congressman Jones has repeatedly supported the principle of equal rights for all citizens, and so he ought to not support a ban on gay marriage). For the most part, informal logicians have classified arguments as belonging to one or the other of these types and treated them in isolation. Zarefsky, however, uses the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Bush v. Gore* (the case that decided the outcome of the 2000 presidential election) to indicate how the two may be linked together.

Zarefsky argues that the majority opinion in *Bush v. Gore* inconsistently departs from the justices' prior commitments in four respects, and thus it stands open to circumstantial ad hominem critique. He then adds that the circumstantial inconsistency warrants a direct ad hominem judgment, since a decision so much "at odds with ... prior commitments" raises a legitimate question about the basis for the decision and supports the conclusion that it is based on political preferences rather than legal principle (2003, p. 307). In this case, then, Zarefsky holds that circumstantial considerations provide logical grounds for a charge of direct or abusive ad hominem.

This effort to connect a typology of arguments with the character of arguers nudges the study of ad hominem into territory more familiar to rhetoricians than to informal logicians. The tendency is hardly surprising given Zarefsky's disciplinary affiliation (note the ad hominem here) and his conviction that "personal character is intrinsic to argument" (2003, p. 307). This view, of course, follows from a long-standing rhetorical interest in *ethos* (character) as a mode of proof, and Zarefsky's essay implicitly supports Alan Brinton's cogent but neglected appeal for argumentation scholars to explore the relationship between the study of ad hominem argument and rhetorical ethos (Brinton, 1985, 1986).

In the remainder of this paper, I intend to pursue what Brinton has recommended and Zarefsky has illustrated by studying ad hominem argument and the uses of ethos in the Bush/Kerry debate. Because I am dealing with a political debate where ethos is the central concern, my study changes and expands some of the interests developed in Zarefsky's analysis of a judicial argument. First, instead of focusing upon how character enters into the assessment of a particular case, my attention shifts to consider how reference to cases and other matters bear on perception of the general character of the arguers. Secondly, while Zarefsky assesses the way that character flaws detract from an argument, study of campaign debates requires recognition of constructive as well as negative uses of character arguments. This difference encourages, perhaps even necessitates, a

direct connection between ad hominem and rhetorical argument, and for this reason, a third modification is necessary. While Zarefsky makes only implicit reference to rhetorical ethos, it plays an explicit and central role in my analysis, though I am going to depart from conventional rhetorical usage in one respect. Following Aristotle's use of the term ethos, rhetoricians typically label character arguments as "ethical proof." Unfortunately, the adjective ethical is ambiguous and sometimes confusing or misleading when applied to argumentation. Consequently, I prefer to use the term "ethotic," a neologism devised by Brinton (1986), and my purpose is to consider how "ethotic argument", as it is understood and used by rhetoricians, and ad hominem argument, as understood and used by informal logicians, enter into the 2004 presidential debates.

2. Character and Argument in Bush's Rhetoric

As I noted earlier, Jim Lehrer's opening question in the first debate suggests the central role of character in the contest between the two candidates. Toward the end of that debate, Lehrer raises the matter directly when he asks President Bush whether he believes that there are "underlying character issues ... serious enough to deny Senator Kerry the job as commander in chief of the United States?" (1, p.31). Both Bush's answer and Kerry's follow-up comment reveal much about the status of character in the debates and the strategies used to deal with it.

Bush makes a carefully measured response. After complaining that the question is "loaded", he proceeds to praise Kerry for his "service to our country," for being "a great Dad," for his twenty years of service in the Senate, and he also adds, on a lighter note, that he will not hold it "against him that he went to Yale." But, Bush continues, he is concerned because Kerry "changes positions on the war in Iraq. He changes positions on something as fundamental as what you believe in your core, your heart of hearts, is right in Iraq." Kerry, Bush maintains, sends mixed messages and that makes it impossible to lead, since it confuses our troops, our allies, and the Iraqi citizens. And, as someone "who knows how this world works," Bush can testify that "there must be certainty from the U.S. president" (1, p.31).

Kerry's remarks follow the mood and sequence of Bush's comments. He first expresses appreciation for Bush's kind words on personal matters and returns them with his own praise for the President's family and especially for his wife, a "terrific person" and a "great first lady." Then Kerry pauses. There are differences between them, Kerry notes, but he is not "going to talk about a difference of character," since that is not "my job or may business." On second

thought, however, Kerry thinks he should respond to the President's concluding theme. This has to do with "certainty." Maybe the issue concerns a "character trait," or maybe it doesn't, but Kerry observes that it is possible to "to be certain and be wrong." He worries that Bush fails to acknowledge what "is on the ground," to acknowledge "the realities of North Korea or "stem-cell research," or "global warming." "Certainty," Kerry concludes, "sometimes can get you in trouble" (1, pp. 31-32).

In a well known passage of the *Rhetoric* (1378a5-19), Aristotle identifies three sources for arguments based on character - good moral character (*arete*), goodwill (*eunoia*), and good judgment (*phronesis*). Bush and Kerry both studiously avoid making charges that directly address either of the first two considerations, and they speak about character only after explicitly dismissing concerns about moral integrity and enacting a display of mutual goodwill. They locate their difference not in relation to rectitude or intentions but to the somewhat less morally charged issue of judgment. On that matter, the debaters present symmetrically opposed positions: Bush represents Kerry as wavering, inconsistent, and thus unable to lead effectively. Kerry represents Bush as inflexible, insensitive to changing facts and circumstances, and thus prone to exercise bad judgment. These two ethotic arguments surface repeatedly in the debates and form the most consistent argumentative thread running through them.

As it is fully developed, Bush's ethotic argument coordinates both constructive and negative aspects - a positive image of the President set against a contrasting, negative assessment of Kerry's character. The constructive side of this argument appears in Bush's response to the first question directed toward him. Bush side-steps its specific wording, which asks whether Kerry's election might increase the chances of a terrorist attack, and predicts that he will win the election because "the American people know that I know how to lead." He declares that he has made some tough decisions, and while some disagree with him, the people "know where I stand" and "what I believe." Moreover, he has demonstrated that the way to protect the nation and defeat "the ideology of hate" is "to never waver, to be strong, to use every asset at our disposal, is to stay on the offensive, and at the same time spread liberty." And he is confident that if "we remain strong and resolute, we will defeat this enemy" (1, pp. 3-4).

An interesting variation on this theme occurs in the second debate. When one of

the “town-hall” participants asks about the ill-will that Bush’s Iraq policy has generated in other parts of the world, the President replies by emphasizing his determination to stand firm on principle even in the face of criticism. He knows that that “taking Saddam Hussein out was unpopular.” Nevertheless, he made a decision that he thought “was in the right interests of our security.” Likewise, in making decisions about Israel and about the International Criminal Court in The Hague, he acted on his convictions even though they led him to choices that “people in Europe didn’t like.” And so,” Bush sums up, “what I’m telling you is that sometimes in this world you make unpopular decisions because you think they’re right” (2, p. 10).

The theme of principled consistency returns again in Bush’s concluding remarks in the final debate: “I’m optimistic that we’ll win the war on terror, but I understand it requires firm resolve and clear purpose. We must never waver in the face of the enemy” (3, p. 40). Thus, the President ends the debates where he began – asserting his unwavering commitment to principle and stressing the importance of a steady, resolute Presidential character.

This construction of Bush’s ethos conforms to his already long-established image and to certain aspects of his performance as a debater. However else he is perceived, Bush is not generally regarded as a clever orator or a cunning politician. His language is not ornate or elegant. He does not express complex ideas, make fine-grained distinctions between concepts, or generate elaborate chains of argument. Instead, Bush appears plain-spoken, colloquial, apparently uncomplicated, and even somewhat inarticulate. These are not characteristics that American audiences associate with a master of devious politics – a “Slick Willie” or a “Tricky Dick,” and so Bush’s professions of simple, straight-forward openness and guileless consistency seem to fit his persona.

The negative side of Bush’s argument constructs Kerry as a foil to the President – as irresolute, temporizing, and inconsistent. The contrast is so direct and is repeated so often that it also appears simple and straight-forward, but when examined carefully, a rather sophisticated argumentative pattern emerges. Much like Zarefsky’s critique of Bush v Gore, Bush’s ad hominem reasoning displays sensitivity to the relationship between apparent circumstantial inconsistencies and flaws of character. In Bush’s argument the connection applies not to a judgment about a particular case but to a general assessment of character, and so, consistent with the demands of campaign rhetoric, the focal concern is the

representation of character rather than the evaluation of an argument. Nevertheless, as I hope to show, the principle of inference remains the same, and its recognition casts some light on how Bush argues.

“The only [thing] consistent about my opponent’s position,” Bush says in the middle of the first debate, “is that he’s inconsistent” (1, p. 19). The theme is a leitmotif running through Bush’s rhetoric in the debates, and it is applied to most of the issues that he addresses. Its earliest and most prominent manifestation, however, refers to Kerry’s position on Iraq. On that matter, Bush produces a list of circumstantial ad hominem claims: Kerry voted to authorize the use of force, but he now says that it is the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. Kerry said that Saddam Hussein was a grave threat, but he now thinks that it was mistake to remove Saddam Hussein from power. Kerry complains that U.S. troops were not adequately equipped, but he voted against the 87 billion dollar appropriation to support the military effort. In fact, Kerry isn’t even consistent in talking about his vote, since he has said that he voted for the appropriation bill before he voted against it.

These circumstantial inconsistencies, Bush implies, are not random or accidental. They represent a basic weakness of judgment and a defect in character. Instead of displaying resolute commitment to principle, Kerry alters his attitudes to suit political convenience. “As his politics change,” Bush asserts, “his positions change” 1, p. 18). More specifically, on the issue of Iraq, Bush claims that his opponent’s stance on the war reflects his interests as a candidate: “You know, for a while he was a strong supporter of getting rid of Saddam Hussein. He saw the wisdom – until the Democratic primary came along and Howard Dean, the anti-war candidate, began to gain on him, and he changed positions. I don’t see how you can lead this country in time of war, in a time of uncertainty, if you change your mind because of politics” (2, pp.2-3). The inference, then, is clear. Kerry’s inconsistencies on policy indicate a serious character flaw – an irresolute tendency to abandon core principles and a corresponding vulnerability to political pressure.

Echoing his original theme about presidential character, Bush repeatedly and emphatically stresses that Kerry’s flaws are incompatible with leadership from the White House. Kerry does not and cannot act as a commander in chief should in time of war. He sends disparaging and mixed messages. Someone who says “wrong war, wrong time, wrong place” cannot function effectively as the leader of

the war effort. Someone who keeps changing position confuses and demoralizes the troops, fails to secure help from allies, and undermines efforts to win the support of Iraqi citizens. In short, Kerry is unable to exercise leadership as a wartime president because, unlike Bush, he does not demonstrate the kind of character and judgment needed to do the job.

When the components of this ethotic argument are arranged as I have just summarized them, the argument takes shape as a complex and carefully considered effort to encompass the crucial issue of character. The reasoning, placed in a logical order, follows this sequence of propositions:

- (1) In time of war, a president must demonstrate steady, consistent judgment and adhere to core principles without regard for political popularity.
- (2) George Bush has demonstrated this kind of judgment.
- (3) Therefore, George Bush has shown that he can lead.
- (4) But, John Kerry inconsistently shifts his positions on the war.
- (5) These inconsistencies result from his willingness to sacrifice core principles for political expediency.
- (6) Therefore, his behavior reveals a character flaw that renders Kerry unable to meet a necessary requirement for presidential leadership.
- (7) Therefore Kerry cannot lead the country effectively in the war in Iraq or the war against terrorism.

The argument has notable weaknesses, especially in regard to support for premises, but its basic structure seems reasonably solid. The premises are coherently related to one another and offer relevant grounds for conclusions about the character of the candidates. The argument fulfills its comparative purpose by including both constructive and negative phases, and the progression of the negative phase conforms to Zarefsky's prescription for a well behaved ad hominem, since attacks based on circumstantial inconsistencies support a direct (or "abusive") judgment about character.

This fully developed ethotic argument is the best example of Bush's sensitivity to the character issue and his tendency to rely upon ad hominem tactics. But his use of ad hominem appears in other forms throughout the text of the debates, and it is an almost defining characteristic of Bush's rhetoric that he rarely defends himself without including an attack against his opponent. Moreover, unlike the extended example we have just considered, these other ad hominem arguments are often logically weak or transparently fallacious.

This pattern is well illustrated in an exchange concerning the status of the coalition in Iraq. The argument opens when Kerry criticizes the President for failing to build an adequate international coalition prior to the invasion; in fact, Kerry asserts, the United States went in with only two allies, Australia and Britain. In response, Bush corrects Kerry by noting that Poland was also involved, and he adds that there are now 30 nations “standing side by side with our American troops.” Then, comes a shift to the attack mode: Bush “honors the sacrifices” of our allies, and he doesn’t appreciate “it when [a] candidate for president denigrates the contributions of these brave soldiers. You cannot lead if you do not honor the contributions of those who are with us” (1, p. 15). The ad hominem here is not cogent. It blatantly distorts what Kerry said and uses an emotionally charged expression of indignation to distract from the issue at hand.

In a similar spirit, Bush uses circumstantial ad hominem arguments that are based on weak or equivocal evidence about Kerry’s actions: Thus, Bush maintains that Kerry is not credible about Medicare, because in his twenty-year tenure, the Senator has done nothing to improve it, and while Kerry says he supports progressive environmental policy and medical liability reform, he has failed even to show up and vote on key legislation dealing with those issues. Bush also deploys a number of somewhat better grounded but still dubious ad hominem attacks based on Kerry’s voting record: Kerry declares that we need better intelligence, but in 1993 he voted to cut the intelligence budget by more than seven billion dollars; he claims to oppose partial birth abortions, but he voted against a bill that banned them; and he talks about balancing the budget, but he has voted to increase taxes ninety-eight times and to break the budget cap more than two hundred times.

In respect to the last of these issues, fiscal responsibility, Bush not only attacks Kerry through a circumstantial ad hominem but also by labeling him as a liberal. Kerry is not a credible fiscal conservative, Bush explains, because he is liberal; in fact, the *National Journal* named Kerry “the most liberal in the United States Senate,” and this was not “because he hasn’t shown up to many meetings. They named him because of his votes” (2, p. 22, p.23). Coupled with references to his voting record, Kerry’s status a ‘liberal’ might have some logical bearing on an assessment of his claims about fiscal policy. But Bush also uses this ploy in instances where the “L-word” functions as an entirely irrelevant effort to poison the well. For example, in the third debate, Kerry criticizes Bush because he did

not provide twenty-eight billion dollars of the funding he had promised for the No Child Left Behind program. Bush replies: "Only a liberal senator from Massachusetts would say that a forty-nine percent increase in funding for education was not enough" (3, p.28). And in the second debate, Bush offers this dismissive assessment of Kerry's stance on health care: "He said he's going to have a novel health care plan. You know what it is? The federal government is going to run it. It's the largest increase in federal government health care ever. And it fits with his philosophy. That's why I told you about the award he won from the National Journal. That's what liberals do. They create government-sponsored health care." This passage seems remarkable to me and not just because it is such a blatant effort to distract from meaningful debate about an important issue. It also implicitly undermines Bush's repeated charges about Kerry's inconsistency. If the only thing consistent about Kerry is his inconsistency, how could Kerry have earned the title of most liberal member of the Senate? Wouldn't that require a consistently liberal record? And if Kerry was not consistent, how could Bush understand so clearly what "fits with his philosophy" and know with such assurance that the philosophy reveals the true motive behind the policy?

Bush makes significant use of one other type of ad hominem argument, the *tu quoque*. Against the charge that he made errors and misled the public in making the case for war against Saddam Hussein, Bush repeatedly argues that Kerry (and others) had access to the same information and came to the same conclusion that he did. Bush frequently combines this "you too" response with the circumstantial arguments that he uses to attack Kerry's consistency. Thus, in the first debate, just at the point that the issue of the President's credibility becomes explicit, Bush defends himself in these words:

He said I misled on Iraq. I don't think he was misleading when he called Iraq a grave threat in the fall of 2002.

I don't think he was misleading when he said that it was right to disarm Iraq in the Spring of 2003. ...

The intelligence I looked at was the same intelligence my opponent looked at, the very same intelligence. And when I stood up there and spoke to Congress, I was speaking off the same intelligence he looked at to make his decisions to support the authorization of force (1, pp. 18-19).

Later in that debate, Bush makes the point in somewhat different terms: "You know, we looked at the same intelligence and came to the same conclusion: that Saddam Hussein was a grave threat. And I don't hold it against him that he said grave threat. I'm not going to go around the country saying he didn't tell the truth, when he looked at the same intelligence I did" (1, p.37).

This argument, coming from a halting and apparently artless speaker, demonstrates a remarkable bit of verbal legerdemain. Somehow Bush manages to put himself on the same footing as Kerry; the Senator who voted to authorize force has the same responsibility for the decision to go to war as the President who made the case for war. It is true, I suppose, that both "looked at" the same intelligence. But it was the President, not John Kerry or anyone else in the Senate, who gathered, organized, and presented the intelligence. To say that they are equally culpable for mistakes is to argue that the reader who believes errors contained in a document is as responsible for them as the author of the document.

3. Character and Argument in Kerry's Rhetoric

In response to Bush's central ethotic argument and his scatter of specific ad hominem attacks, Kerry seems to be forced into a defensive position. He has no retort to the matter or manner of Bush's convoluted tu quoque argument, and his only response to the well poisoned by the "L word" is to say that labels are unimportant. At times, he does make sharp responses to Bush's allegations: Against the charge he has done nothing in the Senate to improve Medicare, Kerry cites specific legislation he has sponsored. On the issue of partial birth abortions, he explains that he opposes them in principle but could not vote in favor of a specific bill that precluded exceptions where the life of the mother was threatened. To counter Bush's ad hominem reference to his voting record on fiscal policy, Kerry devises a rather clever tu quoque in the form of a simile: "Being lectured by the President on fiscal responsibility is a little like Tony Soprano talking to me about law and order" (1, p. 9). But these responses are isolated and are far less notable than Kerry's defensive remarks about the charge of inconsistent.

On occasion, Kerry considers how Bush's tactics might connect with a general assessment of his conduct and character. In the town-hall debate, when asked about the perception that he is "wishy-washy," Kerry says: "The President didn't find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, so he's really turned his campaign into a weapon of mass deception" (2, p. 2). In the third debate, he notes that Bush

shifts ground by turning a question about jobs into a speech about education, and he suggests that his opponent's incorrect account of his record on Medicare fits into a pattern of misleading rhetoric. These strands, however, are never gathered together into a coherent counter-position, and whenever Kerry comes to the verge of a systematic offensive, he drops back into a defensive posture. This tendency displays itself clearly in the following passage:

Now, the president wishes that I had changed my mind. He wants you to believe that because he can't come here and tell you he's created new jobs for America... .

He can't come here and tell you he's created health care for Americans... .

He can't come here and tell you that he's left no child behind because he he didn't fund no child left behind. **RARE ZIN????**

So what does he do? He's trying to attack me. He wants you to believe that I can't be president. And he's trying to make you believe it because he wants you to think I change my mind.

Well, let me tell you straight up: I've never changed my mind about Iraq (2, pp. 2-3).

The direction of thought Kerry's thought here moves from criticism of his opponent and his motives to self-justification. But consider the impact of a change in order and emphasis so that Kerry begins with positive affirmation of his character and ends with an attack on Bush. And think also about the impact of this alternative arrangement carried out on a larger scale, where the basic point about Bush's motives was repeated frequently and connected to a broad range of issues. By coordinating his responses in that fashion, Kerry might have found some ground for stabilizing his own image and systematically reversing Bush's ad hominem attacks. Against Bush's charge that Kerry's "rhetoric doesn't match his record," Kerry might well have argued that Bush's rhetoric doesn't match his record or the image he seeks to project. The President, from this perspective, emerges as a wolf in sheep's clothing - an extraordinarily skillful politician who disguises partisan motives and opportunistic tactics under the veneer of plain speech and folksy mannerisms.

Kerry, however, fails to order and coordinate his arguments in any fashion that

allows him to pivot out of a defensive posture. This problem is especially acute, since unlike Bush, Kerry does not construct a balanced ethotic argument, where an affirmative self-image contrasts with negative critique of the opponent. He does make a few widely separated references to his career in public office and his military record, but these remarks are too isolated and far too infrequent to generate a positive ethos, and for the most part, Kerry's identity in the debates is negative – he is not George Bush. And even though President's record makes him appear an easy target for a negative campaign, Bush's rhetorical skill is sufficient to manufacture a self-image that can open space for a positive comparison with his opponent and serve as a platform for launching ad hominem attacks. Given the range and density of these attacks, Kerry hardly was able to sustain a coherent position while holding to a defensive position.

Kerry fashions two main lines of ethotic argument against Bush. The first is the direct ad hominem attack that accuses him of exercising bad judgment. The second involves charges of misleading the public and breaking promises. Some aspects of this second argument make direct claims about the inaccuracy of Bush's public statements, but for the most part, Kerry uses a kind of circumstantial ad hominem: Bush's actions are not consistent with his commitments – he misleads by failing to do what he promises.

The attack on Bush's judgment concentrates on Iraq, and Kerry strings together a long list of charges that get spread through the debates: Kerry argues that the President made "a colossal error of judgment" when he diverted attention from Afghanistan and Osama Bin Laden, the "center of the war on terror" and decided to go after Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Bush made a "huge, catastrophic mistake" when he failed to build a global coalition. The President "rushed to war without a plan for peace" and has left the U.S. without a viable exit strategy. He has misjudged and mismanaged the situation, failing to bring in enough troops to do the job, to equip the troops adequately, to seal the Iraqi borders, and to safeguard ammunition dumps and nuclear facilities. He has refused to listen to advice from military advisors, terrorism experts, the State Department, and U.N. officials, and he has given priority to a tax cut for the wealthy over adequate funding for homeland security.

The second major line of ad hominem argument is more difficult to summarize, largely because its elements are somewhat jumbled. The unifying point is that Bush has exhibited bad faith by making misleading statements or by making promises that he did not keep. The misleading statements refer mainly to Iraq,

and Kerry ticks them off rather quickly: Bush erroneously claimed that the Iraqis were seeking to obtain nuclear materials, that they possessed weapons of mass destructions, and that the war could “be won on the cheap.” Somewhat better developed are the charges that Bush has not made good on his promises. Many of these concern domestic issues: Bush promised in the 2000 campaign to work as a unifier and encourage bipartisan cooperation, but he has presided over the most bitterly partisan government in recent memory; the President said he would allow importation of drugs from Canada, but he now has blocked it; he has funded the No Child Left Behind Bill at twenty-eight billion dollars below the level that he had promised; and he has not made good his commitment to reform immigration policy. Other charges, however, involve the war in Iraq and circle back to Kerry’s criticism of the President’s judgment. Thus, Kerry complains that Bush broke his word when he failed to create a genuine international coalition, or to go to war as a last resort, or to plan carefully, or to devise an exit strategy.

While Kerry’s points about bad judgment and bad faith might have interacted productively, he tends to dissipate their force by mixing and confusing them. This problem surfaces early in the first debate when Kerry is asked to specify his claims about Bush’s misjudgments, and he replies: “First of all, he [Bush] made the misjudgment of saying to America that he was going to build a true alliance, that he would exhaust the remedies of the United Nations and go through inspections. ... He also promised America that he would go to war as a last resort” (1, p. 5). These remarks are not truly responsive to the question, since the “misjudgments” he enumerates are all examples of broken promises, and they indicate a problem in sorting and arranging the components of a key argument. This confusion, and it occurs routinely in Kerry’s remarks, makes it difficult to discern the logical coherence of his position. His two main points seem to bleed into one another without maintaining distinctive shape, pattern, or relationship.

Perfectly disciplined logical order is probably impossible and almost certainly not desirable in a campaign debate. But basic principles of direction and coordination of argument surely must have some relevance. At least, this conclusion seems warranted when we consider the comparison between Bush and Kerry. Bush generates a widely scattered and often fallacious set of ad hominem arguments, but he also develops a well focused and plausibly constructed ethotic argument that centers his attacks and gives them the appearance of coherence. Kerry, however, not only violates the “Zarefsky” rule by failing to link circumstantial ad

hominem arguments to direct character attacks, but he does not develop a clear sequence of arguments nor any basic argumentative structure capable of framing or centering his specific allegations. The result is that his attacks manifest themselves as a shotgun attack against the President, a desultory list of complaints, and as a consequence, Kerry's argumentation sustains its identity only in relation to its target. Little wonder, then, that Kerry, both in the debates and in the campaign, was unable to construct a positive image or mount a sustained, coherent riposte that would have allowed him to get out from under Bush's ad hominem attacks on his consistency and judgment.

NOTE

[i] All references to the debates are taken from the transcripts found at the website for the Commission on Presidential Debates, <http://www.debates.org>. In the text of the paper, I cite references by indicating the number of the debate in the sequence of three (i.e. 1 for the first debate, 2 for the second debate, and 3 for the last debate) and then citing the page number based on the printer friendly version of the print-out. The quotation cited here is on the second page of the first debate, and hence the citation is: 1, p.2.

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