

ISSA Proceedings 2014 - Argumentation In Ronald Reagan's Presidential Campaign Commercials

Abstract: This article reflects on the role of argumentation in running a successful presidential campaign. It describes the notions of 'presence' and 'communion' by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, uses them to identify and analyze arguments and argumentation strategies used in Ronald Reagan's campaign commercials and suggests conclusions which can be drawn on the basis of the analysis.

Keywords: Political argumentation, political commercials, presidential campaigns, presidential rhetoric, Ronald Reagan

1. Political argumentation and presidential campaign rhetoric

Political argumentation is about how politicians argue their cases to either win others' acceptance or persuade them to change their thinking, behavior or decision. It helps to specify political goals and identify the means available to achieve these goals. Seen as an essential part of political communication, argumentation creates a political reality and allows structuring, controlling, and manipulating its interpretation. It defines situations, communicates information, and evaluates events. In politics, arguments link politicians with the public. They serve to express their political positions, convey their identifications, and reveal their commitments. As elements of political discourse, arguments function as stimuli for action. Appropriate arguments result in the acceptance of proposed policies, support for specific issues, and obedience to laws while inadequate arguments bring about rejection, objection and disregard. Political argumentation most often includes persuasion – a tool used to influence others and shape their ways of thinking and behavior. Political public speaking seems to be designed to persuade more than inform or argue. It appears to be constructed to mask rather than reveal true meanings, to appeal to emotions rather than reason, to mute and eliminate potential problems rather than raise difficult questions or give rise to substantive and essential discussions. In the United States, this is especially

evident when one listens to presidential campaign rhetoric. American electoral discourse demonstrates that political argumentation serves to convince more than enlighten. Based on carefully planned and presented arguments, be it those which appeal to reason or emotions, it primarily means to influence public cognitions and impressions. While it does not coerce voters to make specific choices, it does involve a deliberate attempt to influence their decisions and actions.

In *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca define argumentation as “the discursive techniques allowing us to induce or to increase the mind’s adherence to the theses presented for its assent” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 4). Perelman believes that a rhetor can gain the adherence of the audience he speaks to if he first creates a presence and then establishes communion with it. He creates a presence when he identifies the audience’s opinions and beliefs and strengthens the aspects of the audience’s views and convictions which further his cause. He establishes communion with the audience when he recognizes and appeals to its shared values and thus predisposes the audience to a desired action. After all, as Perelman states in an article “*The New Rhetoric: A Theory of Practical Reasoning*,” the rhetor’s ultimate goal is to get the audience participate in the action (Perelman, 1970, p. 82). The means to reach the goal is the language. According to Perelman, both presence and communion are closely connected to the rhetor’s choice of rhetorical devices which vary according to factors such as the audience that he addresses, the context within which the language is used, the constraints that determine its effectiveness and the exigencies that define its form and content. To create a presence the rhetor uses both linguistic devices, which bring desired elements into the audience’s consciousness, and argumentative schemes, which persuade the audience to accept the premises the rhetor puts forward and provoke it to act. Perelman lists a number of linguistic tools which stylistically amplify certain elements and two techniques of argumentation: associative, which links separate phenomena together so that the audience can see a unity among them, and dissociative, which separates concepts originally interconnected in order to restructure the audience’s idea about them.

Furthermore, within the associative scheme, he classifies arguments into quasi-logical and real where the former are based in formal reasoning and the latter appeal to reality and establish the real. As for ways which the rhetor uses to enter into communion with the audience, Perelman mentions appeals to values, abstract

or concrete, which dispose the audience to a certain course of action, and rhetorical techniques, literary devices, figures, and oratorical communication which turns the audience's disposition into action.

2. Setting

To gain a fuller understanding of the discursive techniques used by Ronald Reagan in the 1984 presidential elections, the specific circumstances which shaped the form and content of his campaign discourse should be outlined briefly. In 1981 Reagan entered the White House with a conviction that peace was achievable only through strength and that confrontation was the most effective means of controlling Soviet behavior. At the heart of his foreign affairs was the containment of Soviet expansionist inclinations which he thought could be curbed only through a renewed arms race. Nuclear superiority was the means to achieve an effective Communist rollback. Another important aspect of Reagan's foreign policy was an ideological offensive launched against the Soviets. It demonstrated that the United States was the leader of the free world, that American know-how provided solutions to the problems of the underdeveloped nations and that American approach to politics ensured progress and defended democracy. Finally, restoration of American prosperity through low inflation and high growth rates was seen as the means to strengthen America's ability to confront Soviet power.

Reagan put these foreign policy concepts into action through a massive military spending on new weapons systems, research and development, and improvements in combat readiness and troop mobility, through support and aid to groups fighting against Communism in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, and through an anti-Communist rhetorical crusade. He used his public statement to portray the Soviet Union as evil, labeling it as a "power untamed," a "totalitarian force" (Reagan, 1982), and an "evil empire" (Reagan, March 8, 1983). He presented a negative image of the Soviet system and its means of power, calling Communism a "regime," and a "[tyranny]" and its instruments "subversion," "conflict," "assault," and "violence" (Reagan, 1982). Finally, he described members of the Soviet leadership as people who "reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat" and called their exercise of authority "oppression," "repression," "destruction" (Reagan, 1982), and "aggression" (Reagan, March 23, 1983).

Relying on strident rhetoric and clear-cut policies, Reagan, on the one hand, restored American sense of strength and leadership, but, on the other, evoked the

fear of war. While his rhetoric led many Americans to believe that he managed to defend and protect the nation's interest effectively, it, at the same time, made them feel threatened by the possibility of confrontation with the Soviet Union. Opinion polls carried out at the end of Reagan's first term seemed to indicate that most Americans wished to reorient American-Soviet relations, moving from confrontation to cooperation, from competition to coexistence, from intensification to relaxation of tensions. Reagan's task was to capture the new attitude and articulate it. To win the reelection campaign, he had to reflect voters' attitude and persuade them that he understood their fears and that he identified with their concerns and that it was in their interest to identify with him. Realizing that effective expression of voters' attitude and establishment of a trustful relationship with them were crucial to his reelection, he focussed on identifying the opinions and strengthening the views which he shared with the public and on recognizing and addressing the values which he thought would help him encourage the public to take the desired action. He used rhetoric which conveyed his moral and political judgments and attitudes, with emotional appeals so constructed as to reveal both the values he believed in, the actions he favored and the depth of his commitment to the actions and with logical arguments designed to accomplish his proof of rationality and convince voters to place their trust and confidence in his performance. While the forms with which Reagan chose to convey his emotional appeals and logical arguments were in part determined by his personal characteristics, they were also in part dictated by revised public attitudes to American-Soviet relations. Considering the new political context, Reagan had to ensure voters that in his handling of foreign affairs he would take decisions and actions which would help to reconcile the differences that divided the two powers instead of thriving on them, to soothe tensions rather than intensifying them, to solve problems instead of aggravating them.

3. Analysis

Reagan made at least three points of departure for his campaign argumentation. First, he argued that the Soviet Union was a threat. Second, he maintained that America was strong again. Third, he persuaded that peace was America's highest aspiration. He sought to gain adherence to his statements through quasi-logical arguments, through arguments based on the structure of reality, and through arguments that establish the structure of reality. He argued by sacrifice when he declared that America "will negotiate for [peace], sacrifice for it." He used the association of succession when he recalled that "we stopped complaining together

and started working together” to the effect that “Today, America is strong again.” He relied on the association of coexistence when he stated that “With your help, we’ve renewed our strength and working together, we’ve prepared America for peace,” stressing the link between the people and their actions. Finally, he argued by analogy when he compared the Soviet Union to a bear, the United States to a hunter and the woods to the context of the Cold War.

In his argumentation, Reagan relied on both inductive and deductive reasoning. Used in the argumentation of the assumption that the Soviet Union was a threat, he did not mean to prove definitely that the war with the Soviets was real but intended to merely increase the probability that it was not imagined. Reagan drew on the public’s inability to predict the future and posed an open question about the issue. While, on the one hand, he allowed the possibility of a military conflict to evoke the fear of the threat and use of force, on the other, he stated that there was no evidence that the threat of confrontation was real.

He presented two sides of the issue, trying not to support one side over the other or to reconcile the two positions, to let voters decide which option they favored. Reagan involved the public into his consideration intentionally. He knew that the audience was more likely to accept his conclusion if they arrived at it together. And to that end he created the impression that he did not impose any opinion on it, that he respected its freedom, that he invited it to make its own choice and let it make the decision. By contrast, he relied on deductive reasoning to convince that America was strong again. He maintained that the United States was strong again because it was respected again. He argued that four years of hard work in the area of foreign relations, frequent diplomatic visits, difficult talks and negotiations with foreign governments, noticeably improved America’s global position. He strengthened his deductive reasoning with a sequence of shots, contrasting groups of people protesting against US policies and burning the American flag with crowds of people and foreign government representatives of Japan, China, France, Italy and Britain welcoming and hosting official US delegations. Reagan used contrast to emphasize that there had been a change in the perceptions about and the attitude towards the United States among foreign nations and point out that his diplomacy caused that perception and attitude change.

Just as he wanted to construct his argumentation according to reason, Reagan liked also to appeal to emotions. He evoked the feeling of mission when he said

that “we can work toward a lasting peace for our children, and their children to come,” the feeling of hope when he envisioned that “America’s best days, and democracy’s best days, lie ahead” as well as the feelings of fear and terror when he recalled that “we’ve faced two world wars, a war in Korea, and then Vietnam” and when he speculated about another war with the Soviets. He reasoned that arguments evoking the feelings of patriotism and the fear of war were universal enough to attract the attention of the majority of voters. He meant positive feelings to make his listeners feel proud if they decided to support him, and negative feelings to make them feel ashamed and guilty if they chose to do otherwise. Reagan used very simple and general appeals over complex and specific ones to reach the widest audience possible.

The fact that he used only three objects of agreement seemed to have served the same purpose. Reagan directed how public perceived and conceived his lines of argument through assumptions, truths, and promises. He assumed when he stated that “many countries thought America had seen its day. But we knew better” to enhance the value of the fact that America had regained its strategic advantage and to stress that it did so under his presidency. He expressed a self-evident opinion when he said that “while governments sometimes disagree, all their people want peace” to convey his realistic understanding of foreign policies and of the differences between people’s desires and governments’ difficulties in addressing them. He pledged not to “surrender for [peace] – now or ever” to justify his potential controversial and debatable moves and actions taken to ensure peace worldwide.

Regan amplified his argumentation with stylistic techniques of imagery and repetition. He persuaded the public that the Soviet Union was a threat in a series of shots presenting a grizzly bear – the Soviet threat – lumbering through the woods, standing face to face with a hunter – the United States – and retreating. He strengthened his message with an expression of doubt if the threat was real or imagined and with a rhetorical question asking viewers if it was not “smart to be as strong as the bear? If there [was] a bear?” Regan maintained presence with the audience by repeating the view that “it takes a strong America to build a peace that lasts,” by reiterating the belief that “working together” helped to make America strong again and by restating the conviction that “America is prepared for peace.” He increased adherence to his statements through images as well. He conveyed the notion of a strong America by comparing the United States to a

South Russian Ovcharka, a large and robust sheepdog, and by showing shots of him and major world leaders meeting together. He communicated to the public that renewed America's power was the result of a collaborative effort using shots of a space shuttle launch and of a satellite in orbit. He convinced viewers that America was ready for peace with a shot of a smiling child on a porch with the US flag flying beside him. Reagan heightened the persuasive effect, arguing through soothing and calm narrative of advertising executive Hal Riney and his soft and avuncular voice and through suspenseful music and heartbeat sound effect.

He also strengthened his argumentation with techniques designed to establish communion with the audience. He adhered to at least two self-evident abstract values of peace and strength, which best reflected the motifs, needs and interests he wanted to address. He drew on the value of peace when he maintained that it was "the highest aspiration of the American people" and when he declared that "A president's most important job is to secure peace - not just now, but for the lifetimes of our children" to convey that he shared the public's ambitions and to assure it that he had strong will and determination to fulfill them. Once Reagan centered the public's attention around the value of peace, he enhanced his sense of communion with the audience with the value of strength. Making the statement that "it takes a strong America to build a peace that lasts," he expressed his strong belief in the notion of peace through strength, implying that his policy of a military build-up was an indispensable component of peace. Aware that the concept of peace through strength failed to win full public approval in the first four years of his presidency, Reagan deliberately gave voters the chance to choose between peace and war to use their support for peace - the public's choice was fairly predictable - into their support for peace through strength. Aware that he was unlikely to win wider support for the cause of peace through strength rather than for peace alone, Reagan structured his message around three points: first in which he talked about the virtues of peace, second in which he mentioned the military means necessary to achieve it, and third in which he listed the benefits of peace achieved through strength thus increasing his chances for reaching the goal of his argumentation.

4. Outcome

Reagan surely achieved the aim of his polemic winning an unprecedented landslide victory. He carried 49 of the 50 states, becoming only the second presidential candidate to do so after Richard Nixon's victory in the 1972

presidential election, and won 525 out of 538 electoral votes, which is the highest total ever received by a presidential candidate. Running a campaign which was the inverse of the 1980 race, he called for relaxation of tensions and for peaceful solutions of problems. Reagan restrained from his former anti-Soviet rhetoric but he also stayed relatively vague about his foreign policy plans. The absence of a clear foreign policy vision may indicate that he did not mean to change his tough anti-Soviet approach. The change in attitude articulated in the campaign spots might have been merely a change in tactics only. Reagan might have used new campaign techniques to relax public vigilance and win their mandate for another term in which he would continue developing his hard line anti-Soviet policies. Vague foreign policy vision may also suggest that he did not really have a precise plan of action. He knew that his second term diplomacy had to be different than the first but he did not really have a plan in place. Realizing that voters' concerns based on his inclinations shaped in the first administration about his rigid anti-Soviet posture which could increase the danger of war, expand armaments and develop nuclear arsenal could not be ignored, he chose to construct vague statements to create the impression that he had in fact addressed the subject matter.

It can also be suggested that the lack of clearly articulated foreign policy platform meant that Reagan indeed had a vision of what American-Soviet relations would look like in his second term but did not reveal it for fear of losing his strategic advantage. He did not want to be involved into a discussion about his give-and-take attitude and chose to run a campaign based on public trust in the results of his foreign policy making. One final suggestion is that the absence of a coherent policy and a unifying vision of American foreign affairs resulted from Reagan's unsuccessful four years on the international scene.

Aware that the controversies surrounding the massive military build-up of US weapons and troops, the escalation of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the US intervention in Lebanon, the invasion of Grenada, and the deteriorating US relations with Libya hurt his rating in the polls, Reagan might have run a campaign strategy based on vague foreign policy plans to avoid a public discussion about his diplomatic failures. He knew that it was politically damaging to defend one's position, especially if one were the incumbent president, therefore he might have decided not to respond to the opposition's accusations in order not to undermine his chances for victory.

5. Conclusion

Reagan's achievements in foreign affairs in the next four years of his presidency indicate that he well calculated the risks of his campaign strategies and well suited his campaign discourse techniques to the circumstances. Avoiding assertive anti-Soviet rhetoric and a precise foreign policy plan Reagan made "space" for himself to adequately react to the new developments in American-Soviet relations initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, the first Soviet leader who actively sought political and economic reform in the Soviet Union and who seriously wanted to discuss a possible peace with the United States and was ready to make concessions necessary to achieve the goal. The fact that in his campaign Reagan neither kept his anti-Soviet approach nor presented a specific foreign policy proposal allowed his administration to observe Soviet actions and react responsibly to them. Drawing on the image of a negotiator and peacemaker that Reagan was trying to create through his campaign discourse, the president could shift from anti-Soviet policies, cutting armaments, reducing nuclear weapons and developing more cordial relations with the opponent, without being accused of yielding ground to or a point to the Soviets. Moreover, he was communicating to his detractors that he was not a reckless, unpredictable and unaccountable warmonger, but an idealist devoted to the American ideal of peace, as well as a pacifist who proved that conflicts could be solved in a nonviolent way. While during the campaign Reagan could not have predicted that the Soviets would reorient their policies during his presidency, it should be noted that taken completely by surprise he reacted to them quickly and appropriately, fostering prospects for global peace and for the end of the Cold War.

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