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Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and the Use of Presidential Surrogacy in Foreign Policy Discourse

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Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton: A Case Study in Presidential Surrogacy

In December of 2009, nearing the end of its first year in office, the Obama Administration faced criticism for failing to establish a firm position concerning human rights. President Obama detailed some elements of the administration’s human rights agenda in his Nobel Lecture on December 10, 2009. However, in an address delivered on December 14, 2009, Clinton responded to this criticism in more detail by laying out the administration’s Human Rights Agenda for the 21st Century. Although both scholarly and popular critics agreed that the Nobel Lecture was a noteworthy rhetorical moment in Obama’s first year in office, when coupled with Clinton’s address, analysis reveals the value of investigating the rhetoric of presidential surrogates in concert with presidential discourse.

Methodology and Analysis

According to Trent, Friedenberg, and Denton, Jr., it is common to see surrogate speakers fill in for a candidate when they are unavailable for an event. Surrogate speakers may logically be chosen for a variety of reasons including: the unavailability of the president, the credibility of the surrogate for a given situation, as a way to shield the president from criticism, or a combination of multiple factors. The central argument in this essay—that this case study reveals the importance of investigating the rhetoric of presidential surrogates in conjunction with presidential discourse—is supported by a close analysis of the combined rhetorical tactics of Obama and Clinton, illuminated by dramatistic criticism, value analysis, and mode of argument.

Dramatism

The concept of dramatistic criticism is a method for investigating human symbolic interaction developed by Kenneth Burke. Thomas A. Hollihan and Mary Stuckey use the dramatistic perspective to reveal how “foreign policy dramas” contain different notions and arguments surrounding foreign policy decisions and eras.

Values and Ideologies

Philip Wander argues that rhetorical criticism must recognize the reality of vested interests that lie in texts and worldviews. In Mary E. Stuckey’s analysis of post-Cold War rhetoric, she asserts that “foreign policy rhetoric both reflects and shapes public values.” Stuckey’s mention of this notion reiterates Wander’s contention that keeping ideological assumptions in focus informs any critique of political discourse. When framing foreign policy arguments, rhetors must take into account the existing values of their audience for their ideas to take hold.

Mode of Argument

Richard Weaver asserts that the structure of an argument signifies an ethical orientation of a speaker. He presents arguments by genus, similitude, circumstance, and authority in a hierarchical structure, and attends to the strengths of each. In foreign policy rhetoric, two of the dominant modes of argument that draw parallels to Weaver’s hierarchy are idealism and realism. Throughout American history, rhetors have relied on idealistic and pragmatic arguments to advance their agendas.

Conclusion

In Post Realism, Beer and Hariman called for increased attention towards foreign policy discourse. Even though several scholars answered this call in the last two or three decades, most investigations focused on the American president or other foreign leaders. Although an essential foundation for an analysis of an administration’s foreign policy rhetoric, the president’s discourse is not the only data that merits attention. For foreign policy rhetoric, this essay elucidates both the importance and utility of examining the discourse of Obama and Clinton together, rather than in isolation. Based on this analysis, it is reasonable to contend that Clinton’s “human rights drama” operated within Obama’s “war and peace drama,” rather than competed with it for acceptance, and the two speakers utilized similar tactics in terms of drawing on audience values and utilizing mode of argument to support the cases they presented.