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Ronald Reagan and War Rhetoric in the 20th Century

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"Ich bin ein Berliner." A German phrase meaning "I am a Berliner". It was a line delivered by then-President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and later reprised by President Ronald Reagan during his speech at the Berlin Wall in 1987. During the height of the Cold War, the U.S. economy was plagued with staggering inflation and rising interest rates, while the Soviet economy had reached its highest rate of economic growth; roughly 60% of the U.S. economy. Fears of Soviet economic superiority and diplomatic aggression plagued the U.S. government through Jimmy Carter's and Ronald Reagan's respective presidencies. The Cold War would continue to heighten and define President Reagan as a rhetorical orator. In 1987, President Ronald Reagan delivered his remarks on East-West Relations at the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin; a speech infamous for the line, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" The nature of this speech was delivered in a divided Berlin, with West Berlin occupied by the allies (U.S., Great Britain, and France) and East Berlin controlled by the Soviet Union. President Reagan utilized strong stylistic rhetorical devices and flexible audience adaptation to encourage the people of West Berlin to uphold universal principles of freedom. President Reagan addressed the issue of the Berlin Wall and targeted West Germany's collectivist mindset by effectively utilizing performative rhetoric, similitude, and elements of civil religion.

Literature Review

War messages are areas of rhetorical strength for presidents. The genre in particular allows for both a shift in public perception, but also a reorganization of international identity. A president must define their persona and how they portray themselves in the public eye. In war conventions, public perception is typically the mantra of presidential rhetoric practice. During wartime, the depth of a speech depends on whether the audience views the speaker as a credible figure. War rhetoric frequently adopts a binary construction of morality; good versus evil. Whitford and Yates introduce the idea of strategic ambiguity within the realm of policy. They argue that certain aspects of policy tend to be left out to strengthen one side of the argument, over the logical approach to said argument (Whitford and Yates 17). Short-run success in policy execution, while employing strategic ambiguity, is reflective of many policies today. If a policy is introduced for a short period (roughly 3-5 years), policymakers might exempt certain areas of the policy to garner as much public support as possible; leaving the public very little time to examine the policy itself. These assertions tie into each other by first setting the precedent for timeframe and successful execution by exemption of certain areas of the policy.

Similarly, David Zarefsky builds upon the idea of strategic ambiguity propagated by Whitford and Yates to demonstrate how the president, in this case, Reagan, can redefine certain programs by dividing them into subgroups (Zarefsky 617). Effective policy adoption and use thereof is an idea that Zarefsky highlights as a rhetorical method of categorizing a given problem.

In such mediums, William Lewis argues that President Reagan's frequent use of stylistic devices allowed him to make seamless connections between what constitutes American values and universal principles. President Reagan predominantly utilized narrative form to emphasize a sense of morality and truth (Lewis 292). A key element that Lewis argues for is the idea that President Reagan introduces a level of similitude to introduce universal values as synonymous with American values. When a foreign individual hears terms like “freedom” or “liberty,” they should automatically be associated with the United States. Similarly, James Hawdon notes President Reagan’s use of communitarian rhetoric. Communitarian rhetoric revolves around the idea that a person’s identity is directly determined by their community; higher emphasis on the common good, rather than individualism. During the 1980s crack epidemic, President Reagan employed “communitarian” rhetoric to collectivize the nation against drug traffickers and likened them to bombs and missiles fired by enemy nations (Hawdon 428). Hawdon asserts that President Reagan’s emphasis on the collective common good, rather than making a larger appeal to individualism. A concept that Hawdon formally defines as “communitarian rhetoric.”

Alan Dobson highlights President Reagan's appeal to the audience, since Reagan realized most occupants desired only freedom and less on economic or social prosperity. Dobson further establishes use of unitary rhetoric and how the construction of universal principles is not solely based on economic issues, but social and political ones as well (Dobson 535). President Reagan treated the Berlin Wall as a symbol of authoritarianism, tyranny, and control. Romesh Ratnesar points to this symbolism as a pivot point for expansion into European affairs and the insertion of American identity into European culture. He establishes this connection to portray how the Berlin Wall speech fits into this area and how it produced the narrative style observed in

President Reagan's remarks (Ratnesar 35). By making connections to religious appeal, Ratnesar also highlights the use of civil religion to make a religious appeal to an otherwise atheist society. The speech, as a result, was constructed with a strong emphasis on identifying universal principles shared by residents on both sides of the Berlin Wall.

Analysis

With a heavy appeal to collectivist identity, President Ronald Reagan heavily draws upon performative rhetoric throughout the speech to emphasize the nature of the division splitting West and East Berlin. Performative rhetoric is the ability to physically demonstrate that the president is making some form of moral contribution (Stuckey 373). Visiting Berlin itself acted as a medium of performance for President Reagan. If the speech was delivered in the Oval Office, rather than the Brandenburg Gate, the rhetorical magnitude might've not been felt by those in Berlin. At face value, President Reagan capitalizes on the idea of collectivism to demonstrate his ability to define a moral good and establish some level of compromise. He demonstrates this principle when he declares, "the West must resist Soviet expansion. So we must maintain defenses of unassailable strength. Yet we seek peace; so must strive to reduce arms on both sides." In this section, President Reagan instituted performative rhetoric to condemn the aggressive methods of the Soviet Union, while juxtaposing such aggression with U.S. peace and compromise. A key area of rhetorical appeal that he institutes is humanization, rather than demonization. President Reagan places a heavy emphasis on counteracting the idea of communism; however, he never condemns the people of the Soviet Union themselves. He establishes the opposite by stating, "Let us work to bring the Eastern and Western parts of the city closer together, so that all the inhabitants of all Berlin can enjoy the benefits….."

Although President Reagan understood the benefit of establishing compromise, he made a heavy appeal towards peace by strength. Performative rhetoric works as a double-edged sword that can either help or hurt the president. In President Reagan's case, the Cold War was not a conflict of weapons, but of dollar bills (Alexeev et al. 27). President Reagan carefully chose to establish a common ground between the two conflicting ideologies before confronting Soviet aggression. He painted the U.S. as the victim and the Soviet Union as the perpetrator. Communitarian appeal, by linking one's identity to that of the community, is heavily instituted within this specific area of the speech. West Germany, if called to collective action, will not blindly support an individual or policy if they believe that it will not succeed. By targeting a common enemy or "folk devil," President Reagan succeeded in individualizing a social issue and reorienting the blame of all human suffering on Soviet Russia (Hawdon 426). This particular idea is demonstrated when President Reagan states, "...you Berliners have, in freedom, rebuilt a city that once again ranks as one of the greatest on earth. The Soviets may have had other plans." In this case, President Reagan draws a comparison between the intentions of Berliners opposed to the Soviet Union. He draws a line between those who are innocent and those who possess ill intentions to protagonize Berliners and antagonize the USSR. In this statement, notice that President Reagan does not make a distinction between the Berliners. He does not state whether they are west or east Berliners. He unites them under the guise of fighting the common evil of communism. President Reagan insinuating the "grave new threat" of Soviet Russia inadvertently appealed to the collectivist solidarity of communitarian rhetoric. When under the impression of some threat, a collectivist society assumes an opportunistic position and emphasizes group pride and individual collection toward counteracting or eliminating that threat. President Reagan's

heavy appeal to collective identity and communitarian appeal would ultimately cause both sides of Berlin to apply more pressure toward removal of the wall, which would occur one year after the speech.

The Berlin Wall speech marked an important expression of President Reagan's appeal to rebuilding Americanism and American values following the 1970s. Throughout various sections of the speech, President Reagan heavily incorporates a sense of hope, while simultaneously highlighting the dangers of Soviet imperialism. To accomplish this, he utilizes rhetorical similitude by drawing similarities between the authoritative government of the USSR and the western idea of "big government"; an idea President Reagan heavily campaigned against (Pach 80). He capitalized on this distinction by asserting, "The totalitarian world produces backwardness because it does such violence to the spirit, thwarting the human impulse to create, to enjoy, to worship." In this instance, President Reagan furthered his own interests of small government, while simultaneously targeting his appeal to a more foreign audience. Metaphorical narrative structure allowed President Reagan to paint a picture of what a liberated Berlin would look like. In a sense, it's easier for an affected audience to understand the basis of a speaker's idea, when expressed in a manner applicable to their own daily lives (Lewis 292). In this time period, those in West and East Berlin could witness the various atrocities committed on the Soviet side and how much totalitarian ideologies could bleed into other parts of the world. In a sense, President Reagan utilizes "the table" as a metaphorical cornerstone of his narrative. The "table" refers to joint-diplomatic discussion held by the allies following World War II. Most notably, President Reagan instituted a protagonist viewpoint into his narrative approach. He paints the people of West Berlin as the protagonist or as the heroes. In fact, President Reagan

instituted a heavy use of both first and second-person point of view to identify himself with the crowd and create a deeper level of trust and intimacy with the citizens. The primary motive behind this rhetorical choice is to ensure that “Americanism” evolves as an ideology. When President Reagan presents the ideals of liberty and democracy, he always points back to the U.S. as an example of this system. In a sense, what he did was make the words “liberty” and “democracy” synonymous with the United States. As the speech progresses, President Reagan capitalizes on this rhetorical appeal to ensure that eastern nations view the U.S. as a beacon of freedom and a liberator of their oppression.

The primary component of President Reagan’s rhetorical approach to the Berlin Wall speech is his effective integration of the “civil religion” or appeal to American foundational ideals. By definition, the civil religion is the “unifying effect that is said to exert on a diverse American public, pointing to the “collection of beliefs, values, rites, ceremonies, and symbols which…provide [Americans] with an overarching sense of unity” (Schonhardt-Bailey 485). In the speech, President Reagan utilizes the civil religion to not only convey forms of American values, but also those shared worldwide. Universal principles of liberty, democracy, freedom, and autonomy are boundless concepts that are not limited to only certain countries. This principle is something President Reagan instituted to appeal not only to “Americanism”', but to the aforementioned areas of universal beliefs. It is important to note that natural rights and universal principles are bestowed to all people at birth, but can be compromised by the individual's environment. Civil religion plays heavily on the idea that all people are born with some sense of freedom. These freedoms include freedom of navigation, belief, and individuality. In Soviet Russia, these principles were widely ignored. Under communism, the belief of any religion or

navigation outside Soviet barriers was widely banned. Those who lived in East Berlin, although they might hold personal beliefs surrounding spirituality or God, were not allowed to exercise them. By instituting the civil religion, President Reagan appealed greatly to those who couldn't openly express their beliefs, while simultaneously targeting the widespread "anti-christina" rhetoric propagated by the Soviets (Dobson 535). In the USSR, central belief revolves around prioritizing government goals and establishing a sense of common good. To combat this, President Reagan recognized the importance of self-identity to counteract this pillar of Soviet civil religion.

Toward the latter half of the speech, he institutes a notable use of religious rhetoric. President Reagan, being a conservative individual, appealed to foundational Christian values when he stated, "Yet even today when the sun strikes that sphere--that sphere that towers over all Berlin--the light makes the sign of the cross." Christianity is one of the most popular beliefs in the world and President Reagan ensured to include it in his speech to give it a degree of spiritual applicability. In the USSR, Christianity and other popular religions are completely banned. Civil religion in the USSR deifies government and places emphasis on government benefit, rather than individual gain. The cross, in this case, is being used as a symbol of hope and a beacon of peace. It serves as the antithesis of USSR civil religion by deifying Jesus and placing him at the center of individual benefit, rather than government. In this instance, President Reagan is dismissing atheist communists all together, by insinuating that even with their best efforts, the cross of Christ will prevail over them. Since communism bans religious beliefs, President Reagan integrates the idea that even in the spiritual realm, the forces of the West will always prevail. President Reagan is again instituting his use of similitude with the civil religion to use biblical

allusions to portray his argument for tearing down the Berlin Wall. Figuratively, the Berlin Wall represented a symbol of bondage, pain, and suppression. Tearing down the Berlin Wall was a symbol of freedom from these areas. In the bible, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ represented freedom from the bondage, pain, and suffering of sin. By drawing a stark comparison between the biblical interpretation and American interpretation of freedom, President Reagan is able to establish a deeper connection between the universal principles of human freedom and the spiritual prevalence of such principles in the context of both West and East Berlin. As a whole, President Reagan asserts foundational values under the civil religion, while appealing to larger audiences through religious rhetoric, to convey his idea of unity and hope.

Conclusion

President Ronald Reagan addressed the issue of the Berlin Wall and targeted West Germany's collectivist mindset by effectively utilizing performative rhetoric, similitude, and elements of civil religion. He integrated performative rhetoric by emphasizing a level of compromise and peace, along with actually visiting Berlin to deliver his message. President Reagan understood that prioritizing peace and humanizing the Soviet people redirects blame from the people to the ideology. Comparatively, Reagan strategically implemented rhetorical similitude by tying the oppression of those in East Berlin to those who propagate "big government" in the West. Being the U.S. president, it's quite clear that President Regan would continue to uphold universal values of freedom, while expanding American strength and influence. He ties together all the points of the speech by appealing to the civil religion through the upholding of universal principles of liberty and freedom. President Reagan capitalizes on the universal hope of peace and integrates religious appeal to reinforce his idea of tranquility. The

Berlin Wall speech signaled the end of the Cold War, subsequently followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The rhetorical appeal utilized by President Regan at the Berlin Wall holds a strong testament to the nature of war rhetoric and how such crises can mold international influence and identity.

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