

The Rhetoric of Our Celebrity Demagogue

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As a candidate, the forty-fifth president spoke and behaved unlike his rivals.¹ He discharged a daily deluge of vile speech. His demeanor was vulgar, not presidential, and yet he won. I offer an explanation of why his behavior contributed to his victory. I also describe his only seemingly erratic language, and offer a warning about the rhetorical power of his speech.

During the 2016 campaign for the Republican nomination and then for president, he gave voice to citizens who harbor resentment toward women and people of color who have won a hard-fought place in US society. He articulated nativist fears about a demographically changing population that both stirred up racist sentiments and gave expression to aggrieved citizens who have become less competitive in the global marketplace. He stoked the anxiety of Americans who fear that today's young people will grow up less well off than their parents. To Americans who presume their superiority to the rest of the world, of course he did not speak about globalization. Instead he pointed to immigrants and "crooked" politicians who had gotten "bad deals" in multilateral trade agreements. And he accused President Barack Obama of "losing the war on terrorism," assuring Americans that with him at the helm, they would no longer have to live in fear, because he would "quickly and decisively bomb the hell out of ISIS."

These pledges were not much different from those of other illiberal politicians, but his speeches were. He did not speak in measured terms. He demeaned women, assailed Muslims, launched petty assaults against his rivals, and demonized the press. His global politics were not the standard pieties: he launched attacks on traditional US allies while speaking glowingly about the autocrat of Russia. He epitomized the Ugly American.

From the very start of his campaign, the nation was transfixed by his outrageous, seemingly off-the-cuff statements. He started with a bang, excoriating Mexican immigrants on the day he announced his run for the presidency:

The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems. Thank you. It's true, and these are the best and the finest. When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. (quoted in *Washington Post* 2015)

The vulgarity of his racist discourse was the topic of everyone's daily conversations from the moment he entered the race. He said things that would sink any other candidate. He mocked a disabled journalist and scoffed at the bona fides of a war hero. Each time he riveted our attention with a new barbarity, his political stock rose. No one expected him to win, precisely because his language was raw and puerile, his discourse offensive and simplistic, and he presented himself not as a statesman but as a crass businessman—but win he did.

Celebrity and Spectacle

In this essay, I will not focus on the news media's role in the president's victory except to say that the decline of an autonomous newsroom due to media consolidation has led news organizations to prioritize entertainment values over their Fourth Estate responsibilities (Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2015). Instead I will speak about two things: why the candidate enthralled the voting public, and how his disjointed discourse confounded politicians and pundits, even as his rhetorical skills charmed his constituency.

In a discerning 2016 essay, Mark Danner writes that the man in the White House, the most powerful person in the world today, is, above all other things, a celebrity. He quotes the prophet Daniel, who defines a celebrity as

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a person who is known for his well-knownness. . . . He is the human pseudo-event. He has been fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness. . . . He is made by all of us . . . who like to see him on television. . . . His relation to morality and even to reality is highly ambiguous. (Boorstin 1992, 57–58)²

When the celebrity candidate took his place on the stage for the first Republican debate on August 6, 2016, in Cleveland, over twenty million of the twenty-four million viewers already knew him well from the television role he performed for fourteen years. On *The Apprentice* he played a loutish real estate mogul who ruthlessly judged game show competitors over the course of a television season. That he is a real estate developer in real life is immaterial; his audience had long ago become familiar with him—as a comedic performer. Role-playing is a game in which each participant takes on the role of a fictional character to create stories; the character may be based on a real-life person, but it remains a fiction. So, on the Cleveland stage at the Republican debate, that celebrity simply continued to role-play his customary character. The role-playing game has rules that let him improvise freely, and his choices shaped the direction of the game.

The other nine candidates on that stage were not popular culture celebrities. They were seasoned politicians who may have been known to those who pay attention to US politics, but to the television audience they were nobodies. The viewing electorate judged those nine candidates in terms of the standard expectations it has for the president of the United States: successful experience in elected office, pertinent life experiences, profound expertise and faith in the democratic system, deep knowledge of domestic issues and complex international relations, an attractive demeanor, and intelligent displays of articulate yet accessible policy discussions.

On the other hand, the comedic performer was not judged on these criteria. Because the audience recognized him as a celebrity and allowed him to take his place on that Cleveland stage with the others, it assessed his performance by the one criterion it had always used: how well he held viewers' attention. Throughout the campaign, the audience was entertained—whether delighted or appalled—by daily mortifications of his rivals and other targets of abuse. We all asked: *Have you heard what he said today!?* As Marco Rubio painfully learned when his poll numbers tanked and never recovered after he traded insults with the celebrity at the final GOP presidential debate, the other candidates could not play the celebrity's game.

The celebrity's sustained invulnerability was baffling. Early on, many observers thought his campaign was a publicity stunt. As the first days

became months, pundits and party officials offered one or another reason why the celebrity candidate would soon crash and burn. For example, an economic chasm would soon open up between the billionaire and his base of “struggling wage earners.” A few scholars, such as Kira Hall, Donna M. Goldstein, and Matthew Bruce Ingram (2016), dismissed such contradictions as beside the point. For them, the winner of the 2016 election was successful because he was

in a word, entertaining—not just for the white rural underclass, not just for conservatives, but also for the public at large, even those who strongly oppose his candidacy. Whether understood as pleasing or offensive, [his] ongoing show was compelling. (72)

Kira Hall and her coauthors explain “why we are all vulnerable” (72) to the performance of the celebrity buffoon. They employ neo-Marxist, post-structuralist assertions that late capitalism values style over content and refer to Situationist ideas about the place of spectacle in society. One key function of entertainers is to blur class distinctions. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) argued for the central importance of “festivals of misrule” (197–98), often led by clowns or other ludicrous figures, that merge a community’s high and low classes. Bakhtin located these festivals and performers among the earliest references of Homer, across the breadth of ancient Greek and Roman life, and into the Christian period. Initially they took the form of communal carnivals, where the townsfolk would install a preadolescent boy as their bishop, their “Lord of Misrule,” for the duration of the festival. Carnivals were later reconfigured after the Reformation into sites for entrepreneurial opportunity. The medieval European festival took the form of masquerade balls. Now we call them raves. Mardi Gras, the last feast before the penitence of Lent, has morphed into a commercial jurisdiction of excess. The catchphrase “Whatever happens in Vegas . . .” is now trademarked. In this analysis of late capitalism, the hybridization of politics and festival was to be anticipated.

Hall and colleagues describe the comedic candidate as trading in lowbrow drama, humor, and hostility—Bakhtin’s vulgarity trope—to topple the political class. These authors point out that the Trump Organization can be considered an archetype of the Debord corporation that trades in spectacle. It markets nothing but “hyperbole, casino capitalism, branding, simulacra, nostalgia, mediatization, excess, consumption, and vacuousness” (Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram 2016, 91). The mogul’s “business narrative is everywhere saturated with examples of late-capitalist excess—restaurants that offer all-you-can-eat menus; investments that earn money through

bankruptcy; branding schemes that are several times removed” from the product itself (92). Guy Debord (1994) argued that in late capitalism such profit-driven corporate imagery has entirely supplanted natural human interaction.

In 2017, the *New York Times* reported on a “tweedy” new journal that would attempt to give “intellectual heft . . . to the amorphous ideology known, for lack of a better term, as Trumpism.” At the journal’s launch, its editor quipped, “Our politics, like Barthes’s wrestling, has become a spectacle of excess, which has no sense of time, and no logic of the future.” His quip was said to draw “a chuckle from the crowd” (Schuessler 2017).³

Nervous laughter might be a better description. The topic Barthes discusses, professional wrestling, is risible. However, the presaged degeneration of American politics into spectacle is not funny. Spectacle depoliticizes elections by masking their class relations in its extravagant media staging. Again, style—not content—makes the spectacle entertaining. Just as the medieval European carnival gave its participants a respite from the dreary caste system, our twenty-first-century Lord of Misrule turned the media-saturated presidential campaign into a rollicking festival of disorder. From the partisan to the apolitical, everyone was caught up in the frenzy. As it was in Aristotle’s Athens, the festival is carefree and celebratory as well as mocking and deriding. The 2016 presidential campaign carnival was directed by a buffoon. Finally, with his unexpected win, his supporters confirm Bakhtin’s description of the festival’s conclusion: they experienced a renewed sense of community. In short, our society was captivated by the “electoral allure” of a “Rabelaisian clown” who parlayed his comedic persona and shtick into the White House (Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram 2016, 75, 82).

The Celebrity’s Language and Rhetoric

The celebrity president has repeatedly averred that wealth is indisputable proof of personal quality. As a billionaire, he must be the acme of all things human. Consider his humanity on display, for example, when he spoke about his political rivals:

It is the level of stupidity that is incredible. I’m telling you, I used to use the word *incompetent*. Now I just call them *stupid*. I went to an Ivy League school. I’m very highly educated. I know words, I have the best words. I have the best, but there is no better word than *stupid*. Right? There is none, there is none. There’s no, there’s no, there’s no word like that. (quoted in Marquis 2016)

His promises to his fan base were not original. He guaranteed that he would solve the nation's problems of terrorism, health care, and immigration, with unrivaled intuition, understanding, and intellect. His ability to make us laugh was never lost on journalists:

After bashing America's political leadership as "very, very stupid people," [the candidate] talked about how America is losing across the globe. But hope is on the way, [he] said: "It will change. We will have so much winning if I get elected that you may get bored with winning. Believe me." After the audience responded with cheers, [he] added: "I agree. You'll never get bored with winning. You'll never get bored!" [The candidate] is known for being an entertaining political figure, but is it possible that he could be an inspiring one, too? (Green and Becker 2015)

While the news writers wrote ironically, many distressed white citizens wanted to hear the candidate's message. Much will be written about the nationalist turn of twenty-first-century global politics. In the US context, the celebrity president's fan base longed for a mythical America.⁴ They accepted his word that he would resurrect a country they had never experienced, a *retrotopia* of failed and putative national potentials (Bauman 2017), by eliminating all threats from runaway corporations, wild-eyed terrorists, insolent minorities, strident women, and unwashed foreigners who should never have posed a challenge, by their estimation.⁵

As weeks turned into months and the ovation did not stop, journalists stopped asking why, and instead asked how he sustained his popularity. To the college-educated, his speeches seemed to be an "incoherent verbal miasma" (Waldman 2016), so they asked language professionals what was special about his oratory. A few mentioned his shortcomings. Linguist Geoffrey Pullum said the president was able to speak only using main clauses without subordinate clauses. Pullum went on to say the president is "a man with scattered thoughts, a short span of attention, and a lack of intellectual discipline and analytic skills . . . [His is] the disordered language of a person with a concentration problem" (Golshan 2017a).

However, Pullum and other language professionals also noted that his speech was highly persuasive. For example, cognitive linguist George Lakoff (2016b) called the celebrity's speech "spasmodic" but not "word salad." At the podium, the celebrity rarely read from a prepared text. Linguist Mark Liberman noted that in oral discourse the scattershot of false starts and parentheticals of the candidate do not confuse supportive listeners, since he cues them with hand gestures, prosodic modulation, and shifts in his

posture (Golshan 2017a). These listeners automatically factor out those cued irregularities and understand a substantial amount of his speech. Listeners who generously accept the celebrity's framing of ideas also fill in his unfinished statements. Among friends, this kind of language generates empathy and projects a sense of intimacy. Sentence fragments are common and natural in colloquial speech, as are the spoken discourse markers that guide listeners: "First off, I believe our families matter." "Honestly, she should be locked up." "That is business, *by the way*." "You know, *frankly*, I think the best person in her campaign is the mainstream media." Several linguists noted that the celebrity changes topics more frequently than normal, but everyone uses such discourse markers.

There are many other linguistic tools that he uses to great effect, but these techniques are better understood as part of the domain of rhetoric. One important tool is deixis, the use of words or phrases (such as *those* in *those people*, or *me*, or *here*) that depend on context for their meaning. He regularly spoke indirectly, projecting innuendos, as when he urged his supporters to monitor polling places, saying, "Go down to certain areas . . . Make sure other people don't come in and vote five times." His fans understood his vague references to "other people" in "certain areas." The journalist Katy Waldman (2016) called it "tribal signaling."

The celebrity is not eloquent, but he is highly skilled at scoring political points with his audience. Rhetorician Jennifer Mercieca (2015) noted early on that his "brilliant" use of rhetoric "partially" explains his "persistent appeal." Rhetoric is the use of language to persuade, patterns of expression that have demonstrable capacity to bring an audience around to the speaker's views. By design, in various ways, the celebrity president draws our fleeting attention away from the important issue at hand and then, without having presented an argument, urges his listeners to accept his viewpoint. He uses this sleight-of-tongue in all of his public communication:

[He] appeals to voters' fears by depicting a nation in crisis, while positioning himself as the nation's hero—the only one who can conquer our foes, secure our borders and "Make America Great Again." His lack of specificity about *how* he would accomplish these goals is less relevant than his self-assured, convincing rhetoric. He urges his audiences to "trust him," promises he is "really smart" and flexes his prophetic muscles (like when he claims to have predicted the 9/11 attacks). [His] self-congratulating rhetoric makes him appear to be the epitome of hubris . . . However, [he] is so consistent in his hubris that it appears authentic: his greatness is America's greatness. (Mercieca 2015, emphasis in original)

As a celebrity candidate, he disparaged the policy positions of his opponents not with evidence or logic, but by calling them “dummies,” “weak,” or “boring.” This rhetorical move is the *ad hominem* argument. In a debate tourney, you would lose points for doing this, but this is American politics. He drew rude thumbnail portraits such as “low-energy Jeb,” “little Marco,” “lyin’ Ted,” “Pocahontas,” “crazy Bernie,” and of course “crooked Hillary.” The news media willingly reiterated his childish insults. He made frequent unwarranted associations that at times took our breath away. Once, after vowing to “knock the hell out of ISIS,” he blamed the terrorist organization on a former president—but not George W. Bush, who started the Iraq war:

ISIS is honoring President Obama . . . He is the founder of ISIS. He is the founder of ISIS, okay? He’s the founder. He founded ISIS. And I would say the cofounder would be crooked Hillary Clinton. (quoted in Pager 2016)

Even when he became the frontrunner, he did not hold back. His sexism was on full display when he mocked a fellow candidate’s looks:

Look at that face. . . . Would anyone vote for that? . . . Can you imagine that, the face of our next, next president? . . . I mean, she’s a woman, and I’m not s’posedta say bad things, but really, folks, come on. Are we serious? (quoted in Lawler 2015)

Journalist David Lawler concluded, “Despite, or perhaps because of, the continually simmering controversies surrounding his campaign, [he] has only consolidated his lead in the polls.” In the end, trading barbs reduced the presidential debates to juvenile insult sessions, which only served the celebrity’s purposes (Chotiner 2016). Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram (2016) discuss the candidate’s comedic performance at length as he caricatured others, including physical lampooning from the podium, to underscore the case that he was the Rabelaisian clown during the campaign.

Another of the celebrity candidate’s rhetorical moves is the *ad populum* argument, which is an appeal to the crowd, the claim that something must be true because many people believe it. This could be seen whenever he says “the polls show . . .,” “we’re winning everywhere,” or makes any reference to his fan base as representing the whole nation. This move at times can be accompanied by another rhetorical move called *reification*, in which one creates a false category by label alone. Thus, with two opposing labels, “the people” versus “Washington,” or simply “us” versus “them,” he built a campaign that exploited the polarization of the country. Moreover, he assured his fan base—one-third of the nation—that its traditional

view of the nation was ascendant, while ignoring the other two-thirds. At first this was seen as a tactic to win the Republican nomination. Once he became the GOP candidate, pundits waited in vain for his “pivot” to the political center. As a result, national commentators were aghast at his inaugural speech:

For too long, a small group in our nation’s capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost . . . Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth. . . . The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. . . . And while they celebrated in our nation’s capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land. . . . Today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, DC, and giving it back to you, the people.

When he combined this *ad populum* move with reification, he created another rhetorical move: the (false) *axiomatic statement*. As president, he characterized the citizens of the United States as “you, the people”—but implied that only his supporters were “the people.”

Another type of axiomatic claim that the candidate frequently made was the simple-minded solution to real-world problems. To describe this, Lakoff (2016c) contrasts direct versus systemic causation. Some social problems can be addressed by direct action, such as removing one mosquito from the bedroom to end the threat of a welt in the morning. However, if the social problem is malaria, although one might claim that it can be solved by eliminating one or every mosquito from the face of the earth, such a direct-cause objective would prove dauntingly complex if not impossible to execute, and is thus the wrong approach to the problem. Even so, the celebrity candidate boasted that he could solve the nation’s problems directly: a “beautiful wall” will keep out immigrants, a 35 percent tariff on foreign goods will save domestic jobs, and a seven-nation immigration ban will end domestic terrorism.

If this is insufficient to raise concerns, the celebrity also employed and employs the *ad baculum* argument, another appeal to a primitive emotion. Here the speaker attempts to persuade by (veiled) threat, as he did to Fox News host Megyn Kelly at the first Republican debate: “I’ve been very nice to you, although I could probably maybe not be.” As a real estate magnate, he had a reputation of threatening litigation to get his way. Nothing changed during the campaign.

Consider his second debate with Hillary Clinton. A video had surfaced in the days leading up to this debate in which the celebrity candidate was

heard bragging about groping women. He defensively stated that his peccadillos do not compare to those of Clinton's husband: "Bill Clinton, far worse . . . Mine are words, and his was action . . . Bill Clinton was abusive to women." He then threatened Clinton: "If I win, I'm going to instruct the attorney general to get a special prosecutor to look into your situation because there's never been so many lies, so much deception." When Clinton later said that it was "awfully good" that someone like the celebrity candidate was not leading the nation, he countered: "Because you'd be in jail." Here his threat demonstrated that he is unaware of or indifferent to the rules of American democracy. Despots threaten their political rivals and critics with jail; elected officials in the United States do not.

The celebrity candidate never made a claim just once; on the campaign trail he reiterated any given assertion many times over days and weeks. *Repetition* is among the most effective rhetorical device for changing people's minds, because over time repetition makes even the most troublesome proclamations sound less crazy. When the candidate continually referred to "crooked Hillary" or "radical Muslim terrorism," he strengthened the association through repetition.

The celebrity also makes use of *paralipsis*, in which he frames a claim in such a way that it is hard to hold him to account. This works well with his disjointed discourse, since he can mention a policy position briefly while omitting the difficult policy points. Or he states that the details of the issue at hand are too obvious to mention. Or he says he will emphasize the subject but ultimately avoids discussing it beyond brief mention. On the campaign trail, he was in control, claiming that all the other candidates

are weak and they're just weak—I think that they are weak generally if you want to know the truth. But I don't want to say that because I don't want to. . . . I don't want to have any controversies, no controversies, is that okay? So I refuse to say that they are weak generally, okay? (quoted in Mercieca 2015)

As in the quote above, his paralipses were often brazen: he first demeans his rivals, then denies wanting to do so, and ends by restating his insult.

His use of paralipsis extends to assertions that he fails to confirm with facts. In some settings, he told journalists that he would supply evidence later, when none was forthcoming. Todd Gitlin, the renowned historian and sociologist of journalism, pointed out that at times US journalists helped the celebrity candidate evade hard questions when they employed "slipshod" interviewing techniques. If the candidate got a follow-up question

after making an unsubstantiated claim, he regularly offered noncommittal sound bites and incoherent rejoinders until the journalist said, “Let’s move on.” The candidate simply had to wait out the interviewer, as he did at a televised town-hall appearance in South Carolina:

I said the [Iraq] war is a disaster because you’re going to destabilize the Middle East. I said it long before 2003. . . . I’m the only one that said don’t go in and I said it in 2003, I said it in 2004. . . . There’s headlines and magazines. Don’t go into the war.

The MSNBC moderator, Joe Scarborough, followed up: “So where did you say this?” The candidate did not answer: “I said it all over the place. It’s written all over the place, Joe—2003, 2004 headlines and articles.” Scarborough let him slide: “Okay” (MSNBC 2016).

Todd Gitlin (2016) provides a number of cases and speculates that the journalists may have been pressured to go easy on the candidate. These interviewers might have been “on a tight leash—maybe because their bosses are blinded by ratings.” As evidence, Gitlin points to an early 2016 statement by a network executive. When discussing the celebrity’s campaign, CBS president Leslie Moonves quipped, “It may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS.” Gitlin countered that Moonves’s

admission was both refreshing and revolting in its candor. . . . It poses most acutely a question that goes to the soul . . . of journalism. Is the mission to elicit facts and evaluate claims, or to dash off . . . in the ratings chase?⁶

It must be said that when journalists controlled the interview, they revealed a little man behind the bluster. In March 2016, MSNBC’s Chris Matthews asked, “Do you believe in punishment for abortion?” The journalist had to prod seven times, while parrying two tries by the candidate to turn the tables and ask the questions. In the end the journalist won out. The candidate finally admitted, “I don’t know. That I don’t know. That I don’t know.” Matthews pressed further, until the candidate said women who have illegal abortions should be punished (Kertscher 2016).

While I have provided examples of single rhetorical moves, in practice the candidate, like all speakers, blended multiple rhetorical moves as he spoke. According to Jennifer Mercieca (2015), his “Statement on Preventing Muslim Immigration” exemplifies this strategy.⁷ Here were interwoven various of the aforementioned rhetorical moves such as the *ad populum* argument “it is obvious”; repetition, “hatred”; plus two axiomatic claims,

US exceptionalism and Muslim hatred for America. As if an explanation for twenty-first-century Middle Eastern terrorism could be found in the majority opinion of US citizens, the statement asserted,

Without looking at the various polling data, it is obvious to anybody the hatred is beyond comprehension. Where this hatred comes from and why we will have to determine. Until we are able to determine and understand this problem and the dangerous threat it poses, our country cannot be the victims of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in Jihad, and have no sense of reason or respect for human life. If I win the election for President, we are going to Make America Great Again.

One cannot discuss the celebrity candidate's discourse without referring to his *lies*. They run from little white ones to pants-on-fire whoppers. Cataloging them has spawned a small industry that will ultimately require a reference library. He often uses spectacular lies to divert attention from urgent issues. Lakoff (2016b) discusses some of the more common diverting expressions the celebrity employs to bury a patent misstatement. For example, when he says "Believe me . . ." he automatically signals to others that he has made a justifiable claim, and those in his audience who are predisposed are even more prone to accept his statement. Similarly, when he says "Some people say . . ." or "I have heard many times . . .," he invokes the views of unknowable numbers of others.

The vast issue of the candidate's (and now president's) lying is beyond the scope of this essay. I have merely pointed to the range of his rhetorical moves. His rhetoric is exceedingly effective, but only among sympathetic listeners. The 53 percent of the electorate who did not vote for him were not moved.

The Demagogue's Propaganda

Donald Trump is a demagogue. A great number of political and historical commentators have stated as much. Frederic Rich (2016) succinctly lists the actions that justify this assertion: the demagogue obliterated the normal rules of political conduct; he exploits the prejudices and false beliefs of his fans, inflaming their passions rather than offering reasoned discussion of the issues; he is wholly intolerant of criticism—to the point of seeking to silence the press;⁸ he is not above inciting violence; and he is uninterested in, if not hostile to, the US Constitution and the nation's laws. Historian Shawn Parry-Giles (2002) defined propaganda as "strategically devised messages that are disseminated to masses of people by an institution for the

purpose of generating action benefiting its source” (xxvi). On the first full day of his presidency, the demagogue said he was in “a running war with the media” (White House 2017). Now he marshals the White House’s communication apparatus to disseminate his propaganda—a terrifying prospect for people across the ideological spectrum. Since he can easily distract us from important issues at hand, we must be vigilant (Stanley 2015).

Up to this point I have discussed only the demagogue’s interaction with mainstream news media. But he also famously tweets directly to his base. In the recent past, the mainstream media covered a speech that a candidate gave to a local crowd, then reported their own version of the event to national audiences. However, when the celebrity candidate tweeted to his millions of Twitter followers, he bypassed the networks. There is a precedent: in 2010 Egyptians routed their tyrant, even though President Hosni Mubarak shut down Egyptian state television. Egyptians simply turned off their televisions and tweeted to one another directly. In the same way, the candidate’s tweets ended the network news monopoly. His Twitter stream became a second, alternative public sphere (McKelvey, DiGrazia, and Rojas 2014). Given two separate public spheres, the war against the demagogue’s propaganda will likely take place on two fronts.

Finally, Lakoff (2017) notes that the president uses a four-step demagogic dance in both public spheres. First of all, if possible, he *preempts* the framing of an issue for the public. Being the first to frame an issue gives him an advantage, because the public has difficulty considering later alternative framings. If he can’t be first, he is repetitively insistent on his framing. For example, he repeatedly calls American journalists “dishonest” “sleaze” who purvey “fake news.” Two, he releases *trial balloons*, outrageous statements intended to gauge the public’s reaction. Trial balloons prepare the public for something coming down the road, and they inure people to later dramatic action. Recall the bombshell Associated Press report that 100,000 National Guard troops would be deployed to round up unauthorized immigrants (Burke 2017). Three, he masterfully *diverts* the public from an important issue or revelation by pointing our noses at some sensational and inconsequential tidbit. Recall his two-day ruckus with the cast of the stage play *Hamilton* when he repeatedly demanded their apology for a non-insult. This dustup occurred on the same evening that a ranking House Republican and former chair of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform called for the appointment of a special prosecutor to probe the president’s ties to Russia.

Four, the demagogue *deflects* criticism by attacking the messenger. On the first day of his presidency he spoke out against the “lying press.”⁹ Four weeks after his inauguration, in a speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference, he referred to the *New York Times*, *NBC News*, *ABC*, *CBS*, and *CNN* as fake news producers, saying,

We are fighting the fake news. It's fake, phony, fake. . . . They have a professional obligation as members of the press to report honestly. But as you saw throughout the entire campaign, and even now, the fake news doesn't tell the truth. (quoted in Golshan 2017b)

The demagogue may choose to remain ignorant of history, but everyone else should know that his refrain, “The lying media are the enemy of the people,” was used in the last century to justify persecution, violence, the end of democracy, and genocide.¹⁰

The forty-fifth president is unlike other politicians. As a popular culture celebrity, in our political theater he plays by different rules. His celebrity and his Twitter base shield him from both his political rivals and the Fourth Estate. He effectively employs rhetoric to undercut US democratic norms and values while exploiting his base's support to advance his interests and those of his billionaire clique. He now commands a vast communication apparatus. One cannot expect that his celebrity armor will wear thin, or that he will change. The demagogue should not be treated like other politicians. His lies and hypocrisies must be called out. A vigorous and free press must be preserved to uncover and report on his actions and those of his enablers. All Americans must demand transparency from, and hold to account, the regime that supports him.

Notes

1. In this article I refer to the forty-fifth president by name only once, in my ultimate assessment. At present his name oversaturates the public sphere, so its rare absence may allow readers to focus on his carnivalesque behavior and rhetorical excesses, rather than on his celebrity.

2. Writing originally in 1961, Boorstin critiqued the United States of the 1950s with its presidential press conferences and other staged political events. He would have considered all the candidates on the Cleveland stage to be “celebrities” participating in a “pseudo-event.” The irony is that as the mediatization of

politics progressed, seasoned political performers, namely politicians, eventually were bested by a pop culture celebrity. Americans became so accustomed to the day-to-day media deceptions of political office that they acceded to an unintended parody of a presidential campaign.

3. Editor Julius Krein was referring to Roland Barthes's 1957 essay "The World of Wrestling."

4. Lakoff (1996) used the term "strict father moral order" for the traditional justification of the status-quo power hierarchy. An older name for this ordering is the "great chain of being." It is an appeal to the natural order of things: God over humankind; humankind over nature; male over female; the strong/rich/healthy over the weak/poor/infirm; boss over worker; Christian over heathen; heteronormative over other gender expressions; the West over other cultures and societies; and the United States over other countries. This concept is used to explain why destitute people are to blame for their circumstances and why the wealthy owe nothing to the less fortunate (Lakoff 2016a).

5. Poor and middle-class white fans grew up in a society that overtly privileged them over other people. However, after 1990 they could no longer publically express their bigotry. When the celebrity expressed their sentiments "with force . . . and no shame," he restored their sense of moral superiority and self-respect (Lakoff 2016a).

6. Comedian Bill Maher underscored Gitlin's point with figures on the revenue that news divisions bring to their conglomerates: "CBS News is 3 percent of CBS' revenue; CNN, 4 percent of Time Warner's. ABC and NBC News are only 1-and-a-half percent of Disney and Comcast. Guys, take one for the team. It's not that much" (Kreps 2017).

7. "Donald J. Trump Statement on Preventing Muslim Immigration" (press release, December 7, 2015) appeared on the Trump/Pence website until May 2017, when it disappeared amid legal setbacks to the administration's travel ban.

8. The president's chief political strategist, Stephen Bannon, stated, "The media should be embarrassed and humiliated and keep its mouth shut and just listen for a while. . . . I want you to quote this" (Grynbaum 2017).

9. The term is *Lügenpresse* in German. Hitler's propagandists used it to refer to disloyal journalists.

10. When the Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels used the phrase "enemy of the people," he meant the Jews. Lenin applied it to the critics of Bolshevik ideology, and Stalin to anyone who contested his rule.

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