



PRESIDENTIAL CRISIS RHETORIC AND THE PRESS IN THE POST-COLD WAR WORLD

Jim A. Kuypers



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To

*Andrew Arthur King, my mentor
(ars est celare artem)*

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Series Foreword

Those of us from the discipline of communication studies have long believed that communication is prior to all other fields of inquiry. In several other forums I have argued that the essence of politics is “talk” or human interaction.¹ Such interaction may be formal or informal, verbal or nonverbal, public or private, but it is always persuasive, forcing us consciously or subconsciously to interpret, to evaluate, and to act. Communication is the vehicle for human action.

From this perspective, it is not surprising that Aristotle recognized the natural kinship of politics and communication in his *Politics* and *Rhetoric*. In the former, he establishes that humans are “political beings [who] alone of the animals [are] furnished with the faculty of language.”² And in the latter, he begins his systematic analysis of discourse by proclaiming that “rhetorical study, in its strict sense, is concerned with the modes of persuasion.”³ Thus, it was recognized over 2,300 years ago that politics and communication go hand in hand because they are essential parts of human nature.

Back in 1981, Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders proclaimed that political communication was an emerging field.⁴ Although its origin, as noted, dates back centuries, a “self-consciously cross-disciplinary” focus began in the late 1950s. Thousands of books and articles later, colleges and universities offer a variety of graduate and undergraduate coursework in the area in such diverse departments as communication, mass communication, journalism, political science, and sociology.⁵ In Nimmo and Sanders’s early assessment, the “key areas of inquiry” included rhetorical analysis, propaganda analysis, attitude change studies, voting studies, government and the news media, functional and systems analyses, technological changes, media technologies, campaign tech-

niques, and research techniques.⁶ In a survey of the state of the field in 1983, the same authors and Lynda Lee Kaid found additional, more specific areas of concern such as the presidency, political polls, public opinion, debates, and advertising, to name a few.⁷ Since the first study, they also noted a shift away from the rather strict behavioral approach

A decade later, Dan Nimmo and David Swanson argued that "political communication has developed some identity as a more or less distinct domain of scholarly work."⁸ The scope and concerns of the area have further expanded to include critical theories and cultural studies. While there is no precise definition, method, or disciplinary home of the area of inquiry, its primary domain is the role, processes, and effects of communication within the context of politics broadly defined.

In 1985, the editors of *Political Communication Yearbook: 1984*, noted that "more things are happening in the study, teaching, and practice of political communication than can be captured within the space limitations of the relatively few publications available."⁹ In addition, they argued that the backgrounds of "those involved in the field [are] so varied and pluralist in outlook and approach, . . . it [is] a mistake to adhere slavishly to any set format in shaping the content."¹⁰ And more recently, Swanson and Nimmo called for "ways of overcoming the unhappy consequences of fragmentation within a framework that respects, encourages, and benefits from diverse scholarly commitments, agendas, and approaches."¹¹

In agreement with these assessments of the area and with gentle encouragement, Praeger established the "Praeger Series in Political Communication." The series is open to all qualitative and quantitative methodologies as well as contemporary and historical studies. The key to characterizing the studies in the series is the focus on communication variables or activities within a political context or dimension. As of this writing, nearly forty volumes have been published, and there are numerous impressive works forthcoming. Scholars from the disciplines of communication, history, political science, and sociology have participated in the series.

I am, without shame or modesty, a fan of the series. The joy of serving as its editor is in participating in the dialogue of the field of political communication and in reading the contributors' works. I invite you to join me.

Robert E. Denton, Jr.

NOTES

1. See Robert E. Denton, Jr., *The Symbolic Dimensions of the American Presidency* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1982); Robert E. Denton, Jr., and Gary Woodward, *Political Communication in America* (New York: Praeger, 1985, 2nd ed., 1990); Robert E. Denton, Jr., and Dan F. Hahn, *Presidential Communication* (New York: Praeger, 1986); and Robert E. Denton, Jr., *The Primetime Presidency of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Praeger, 1988).
2. Aristotle, *The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 5.
3. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. Rhys Roberts (New York: The Modern Library, 1954), p. 22.
4. Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders, "Introduction: The Emergence of Political Communication as a Field," in *Handbook of Political Communication*, eds. Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1981), pp. 11-36.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-27.
7. Keith Sanders, Lynda Lee Kaid, and Dan Nimmo, eds., *Political Communication Yearbook: 1984* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1985), pp. 283-308.
8. Dan Nimmo and David Swanson, "The Field of Political Communication: Beyond the Voter Persuasion Paradigm" in *New Directions in Political Communication*, eds. David Swanson and Dan Nimmo (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1990), p. 8.
9. Sanders, Kaid, and Nimmo, *Political Communication Yearbook*, p. xiv.
10. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.
11. Nimmo and Swanson, "Field of Political Communication," p. 11.

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Acknowledgments

The most troublesome aspect of writing an acknowledgment is the irksome sensation that a particular contribution might be overlooked, thus slighting someone who has meaningfully contributed to the project. Moreover, acknowledgments tend to follow an insipid and formulaic path; therefore, most readers, except those expecting to be acknowledged, usually eschew this particular reading experience. Thus, this acknowledgment's brevity.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In October 1991, President Jean Bertrand Aristide of Haiti was forcefully removed from office following a coup d'état led by Haiti's military leader, General Raoul Cedras. In response to this event, President George Bush issued Executive Order 12775, which officially elevated the situation in Haiti to the level of a "national emergency" for the United States. The Bush administration immediately called for economic sanctions and, in cooperation with the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS), initiated an embargo that would last throughout Bush's term as president.

In January 1993, Bill Clinton was sworn in as president and inherited Bush's Haitian policy. Throughout his candidacy, Clinton had derided the Bush administration's policy on Haiti. Yet upon taking office, Clinton essentially left Bush's policies in place, made them his own, and modified them in the ensuing months. Throughout 1993, the situation in Haiti remained unstable, and several key events occurred to which the president and the press responded. On 19 February 1993, the freighter *Neptune* sank, leaving over 800 Haitians dead. On 13 March 1993, the Haitian military arrested a soldier after he had been granted political asylum by the United States. On 15 March 1993, President Aristide visited President Clinton in Washington. On 3 July 1993, the Haitian leaders signed the Governors Island agreement that set a specific time for President Aristide's return to Haiti. Finally, on 11 October 1993, U.S. and Canadian military engineers and trainers were prevented from disembarking in Port-au-Prince.

Although these events prompted criticism of the Clinton administration, they were also used by the Clinton administration to justify increased action. The press focus was primarily upon the legal battle

ensuing over the constitutionality of the Clinton administration's repatriation policy and upon the general plight of Haitian refugees. The administration's focus was bifurcated: one, the return of President Aristide and democracy to Haiti; and two, the prevention of a humanitarian tragedy in the form of a massive refugee flotilla from Haiti. These competing foci produced different discourses about Haiti and the broad divergence of the contending frames through which the president and the press viewed the situation even after significant action had been taken by the chief executive.

Haiti was not, however, the only crisis to face President Clinton during 1993. In March, North Korea announced its withdrawal from the international nuclear nonproliferation treaty that banned the development of nuclear weapons. This was an especially delicate crisis for the fledgling administration. Soon after North Korea's announcement, both North and South Korea had placed their militaries on alert. This situation directly involved the security and interests of the United States. Not only did the United States have mutual defense treaty obligations with South Korea; it also had over 35,000 U.S. soldiers stationed in South Korea. The possibility of North Korea using its enormous military—1.1 million soldiers—let alone developing nuclear weapons, was of immediate importance to the United States; furthermore, nuclear nonproliferation was of early stated importance to the Clinton administration. However, this crisis received little press attention, and the Clinton administration released few public statements concerning the situation. Those statements that were released did not always correspond in content to what the press was reporting about the crisis.

Bosnia was another situation of stated importance to the Clinton administration. The war in Bosnia was well under way when Clinton assumed office, and it was also a situation that seemed to persist throughout the early years of his presidency. However, in November 1995 the Clinton administration announced it would participate in the implementation of the Dayton Accord. The warring Bosnian parties had agreed to this peace plan, and the Clinton administration had agreed to send approximately 20,000 U.S. soldiers to help implement the Accord. This was an issue of great importance to the United States. Questions about the Bosnia mission immediately surfaced, and the press devoted a great deal of attention to the issue. Moreover, the press supported the president by adopting the Clinton administration's assertions about the mission as its own. However, the press also took an oppositional stance to many of the assertions the president and his officials made. These contentions were most notable with the issues of congressional approval for the mission and Bosnian Serb protests over certain provisions of the Dayton Accord.

Using these three cases, this work employs a comparative frame analysis to answer the following questions: (1) How did the Clinton administration frame the situations in North Korea, Bosnia, and Haiti? (2) How did the press, responding to President Clinton, frame the situations? and (3) At what time, if at all, did these frames converge to present a unified contextual whole?

RHETORICAL SITUATIONS, ADMINISTRATIVE RHETORIC, AND CRISES

This work seeks to better understand the interaction of press and presidential discourse in the context of crisis formation. With the Cold War arguably over, President Clinton was the first atomic-age president unable to draw upon the Cold War meta-narrative. This raises the issue of how a president can now frame an international event as a crisis. In the past, it would have been relatively easy for an American President to use North Korea, Bosnia, or Haiti, as a stalking horse for the Soviet Union, thereby justifying almost any level of action/involvement. In the post-Cold War environment, President Clinton appeared unable to do this. He seemed to have lost the authority of unilateral definition, and his assessments were constantly scrutinized and challenged by the national media. This volume analyzes crisis rhetoric at a crucial period in the history of presidential studies. The very nature of how presidents must now frame international events has changed with the demise of the Soviet Union. Thus, this work examines the beginning of the creation of a new and more dialogical method of legitimating international crises. In order to explain how this work will proceed, I will spend the bulk of this chapter describing how I employ the concepts of rhetorical situation, administrative rhetoric, and crisis.

Rhetorical Situations

Bitzer's classic definition of a rhetorical situation entails "a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigency which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigency."¹ For Bitzer, an "exigence is an imperfection marked by some degree of urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something to be corrected."² The audience consists of those individuals capable of modifying the exigence. Constraints influence both audience and rhetor(s) and are com-

posed of "persons, events, objects, relations, rules, principles, facts, laws, images, interests, emotions, arguments, and conventions."³ The above concepts (exigency, audience, and constraints) are interanimated. The three taken together require some type of discourse to fuel their interaction and possible modification. The discourse, or utterance in Bitzer's terminology, "participates naturally in the situation, is in many instances necessary to the completion of situational activity, and by means of its participation with situation obtains its meaning and its rhetorical character."⁴

An important distinction in a situational perspective may be drawn between the concepts of "situation" and "context." Context, a necessary component of human communication, is both more and less than the historical facts surrounding a rhetorical situation. Context is, in part, constituted by the various interpretive communities that apprehend a text. In this vein, Gregory Bateson's definition of context proves illuminating: "a collective term for all those events which tell the organism among what *set* of alternatives he must make his next choice."⁵ Thus, contexts have the potential of having broad influences upon our understanding of any particular text. In contradistinction, rhetorical situations are not to be understood at a general level but rather are entered into through the rhetor/text's interaction with audience, exigency, and constraints. Contexts help shape the general level of interpretive precision that produces a text (and its subsequent interpretation); it is this text that enters into the rhetorical situation. Rhetorical situations are a part of the larger context; they "come into existence, then either mature and decay or mature and persist. . . . Situations grow and come to maturity; they evolve to just the time when a rhetorical discourse would be most fitting."⁶ Contexts allow for the general interpretation of utterances; rhetorical situations provide moments for a "fitting" utterance through which modification of an exigence may be achieved. For example, consider the destruction of Iran Air flight 655 in 1988. The larger contexts that could have influenced texts entering into the rhetorical situation included the upcoming U.S. presidential election, the Iran-Iraq war, and the historical/cultural understandings of Americans concerning our role in the world. The rhetorical situation, on the other hand, is modified by utterances that are shaped by these contexts. The utterance, however, can have a bearing upon which contexts subsequently wax or wane in influence.

Administrative Rhetoric: Conflation of Role and Text

Many communication scholars view the modern presidency as a *rhet-*

orical presidency.⁷ This view of the presidency is justified on three grounds: One, the president sets goals and provides solutions for the nation's problems; two, the mass media dramatize the content of what presidents say, thus moving the emphasis away from what presidents *do* to what they *say*; and three, the continual campaigning by presidents encourages an emphasis upon presidential image and personality, while deemphasizing deliberation on the issue in question.⁸ As Denton and Woodward stated: "[T]he presidency is an office, a role, a persona, constructing a position of power, myth, legend, and persuasion. Everything a president does or says has implications and communicates 'something.' Every act, word, or phrase becomes calculated and measured for a response."⁹

What a president or his representatives say, then, is a text. Communication scholars have traditionally associated the term *text* with *rhetor*, but rhetor and text could be conceived in broader terms. A rhetor can range from a lone individual to a collectivity of individuals speaking on behalf of an organization, institution, or presidential administration.¹⁰ A text can consist of several discrete elements/utterances if the set of such elements was conceived as a unified whole (e.g., an advertising campaign) or if all the elements aim to achieve a common purpose. Such a construct does not deny the possibility for members of a collectivity to speak as individuals. It does, however, recognize the tendency of such collectivities to speak with a single voice and permits the analysis of those voices as a collective whole. Furthermore, such a conception recognizes that the discourse situated within rhetorical situations consists of complex episodes: "a conception wherein the entire constellation of rhetoric surrounding a specific event is treated as the rhetorical text."¹¹ The term *text* in this work refers specifically to the discourse produced by the Clinton administration concerning the situations in North Korea, Bosnia, and Haiti. This "administrative rhetoric" possesses two interacting dimensions. One dimension accounts for the relatively entrenched and stable aspects of administrative systems everywhere, while the other accounts for the "personalities" of various presidential administrations.¹²

A traditional view of presidential roles, based upon the duties described by the Constitution, highlights the stable form of administrative systems. Edward S. Corwin described five roles: chief of state, chief executive, chief diplomat, commander in chief, and chief legislator.¹³ Clinton Rossiter described five additional, extra-constitutional roles that have developed since Corwin's listing: chief of party, protector of peace, manager of prosperity, world leader, and voice of the people.¹⁴ These generally agreed upon roles constitute "ideas about what people expect to do in certain situations as well as what others expect them to do in certain situations."¹⁵ They combine presidential

and public perception about what a particular role entails. Yet each president's administration adopts its own role(s) to enact. For instance, the Reagan administration viewed itself as working for peace throughout the world, a variation of protector of the peace. This irenic role in international affairs shaped the manner in which the administration could respond to various situations.¹⁶ Roles adopted by administrations act to constrain and foster presidential discourse.

Murray Edelman's early work analyzing the "role-taking" characteristic of administrations is illuminating here: "Factual premises alone are certainly not sufficient to explain administrative decisional choices; but factual premises in conjunction with observable role-taking are: for the role both specifies the value premises operative in a particular instance of decision-making and establishes a probability that these same value premises will be operative in future decision-making in the same policy area."¹⁷ It is the role-taking action that is of importance to this book. The Reagan presidency, for example, had consistently referred to its peacekeeping role in foreign affairs, especially during the Iran-Iraq war. Throughout this conflict, the United States had stressed its role as a neutral third party acting in the capacity of peace broker. This stance in the international arena was a vital one for the Reagan presidency, and it had been used repeatedly to justify various policy decisions.

To be sure, the nature of the threat to the United States posed by the Iran-Iraq war was never truly clear in the mind of the American public; nor was it explained clearly by the Reagan administration. Yet this very ambiguity acted to enhance the image the government hoped to project. The rhetorical potency of ambiguity is explained by Edelman: "Only an intangible threat permits this kind of administrative role taking. In the measure that a threat is clearly observable and subject to systematic study, perceptions of its character and of techniques for dealing with it converge. Polarization and exaggeration become less feasible."¹⁸ In addition, the government's political response to events in the Gulf also highlighted the way that role-taking affects presidential administrations. For example, President Reagan used his administration's role as defender of democracy to justify the United States' invasion of Grenada, and President Bush used his administration's role as world peacekeeper to help justify our early involvement in Kuwait and the Gulf War. By the roles he has highlighted, each president has attempted to "personalize" his administration.

It is in this sense, then, that this work uses the term *administrative rhetoric* to refer to specific governance styles employed by presidential administrations. Through rhetorical grounding of particular actions or policies, each administration will of necessity project the image that it has chosen to highlight and will adopt public roles that are integral to

that image. Thus, administrative texts do not necessarily advance procedural aspects of an administration; rather, such texts may function to create and to maintain the roles chosen by a political leader as part of his constituted identity.

Thus, we can begin to see the possible interaction between administrative text, context, rhetorical situations, and crisis formation. I have previously demonstrated elsewhere that crisis situations may begin with no stable means for interpreting the discursive surroundings and that one of the purposes of the administrative text is the creation of a stable contextual frame.¹⁹ The appearance of this frame requires substantial interaction of text and context. Robert J. Branham and W. Barnett Pearce highlighted this reflexivity: "Every communicative act is a text that derives meaning from the context of expectations and constraints in which it is experienced. At the same time, contexts are defined, invoked, and altered by texts. Particular communicative acts simultaneously depend upon and reconstruct existing contexts."²⁰

In order for a text to modify an exigency successfully, it must "fit" not only the particular situation into which it enters but also the context in which it is situated. In fact, the creation of a stable context of meaning may be the first step for the successful modification of an exigency that occurs in a situation composed of multiple contexts. Thus, an administrative text (e.g., President Clinton's first utterances about the Haiti situation upon taking office) will act to set the interpretive stage in a crisis drama. These first utterances will draw upon the role(s) that the administration has adopted as well. In President Clinton's case, these first utterances will also be acting to establish the role(s) his administration will enact. This corresponds well with Theodore Windt's first stage of crisis formation—the obligatory statement of facts.²¹

Because they involve interanimation of text and context, are rooted in situations, constrain presidential utterances, and draw upon earlier presidential utterances, international crises may be viewed as rhetorical constructions rooted in material circumstances. Crisis rhetoric occurs when a president chooses to speak on an issue, whether to promote it as a crisis or downplay its perceived significance as a crisis. Thus, presidents act to control the definition of international events. The exigence that the president chooses to address—material condition, the president's credibility, the president's popularity, the perception of crisis itself—is part of the crisis itself and is thus highly unstable and alterable. The president acts to define the context through which the event is viewed.

Crises may develop rapidly, as with the North Korean situation, the KAL 007 and Iran Air 655 (Airbus) shootdowns, or they may slowly evolve, as with Haiti. Either way, text and context interplay alter the situation, eventually providing appropriate moments for "fitting"

utterances that can bring the perception of crisis to an end. Utterances in response to crisis situations (or the perception thereof) are historically mandated and culturally based. They draw upon public knowledge; the president's text and the press, however, act as providers of preknowledge (knowledge as yet unassimilated into the public consciousness). Eventually, portions of this preknowledge will evolve into public knowledge. Yet the public's perception of the situation and the initial presidential utterances are viewed through the public's initial knowledge held in general: the historical and cultural knowledge. With no Cold War meta-narrative, however, public knowledge concerning international crisis situations is in flux. The absence of this meta-narrative makes the rhetorical construction of crisis problematic.

Definition of Crisis

Many communication researchers view crises as rhetorical creations of the executive branch of government. Although the declaration of crisis may be unilateral, all subsequent discourse is both coded and rule governed. Theodore Windt argued that a crisis is announced by the president as such and that the situation demands that he "act decisively."²² By announcing the crisis, the president asks for his decision to be supported, not for debate upon what should be done. According to Windt, so long as the crisis is not one of a military attack upon the United States, it is to be considered a political event "rhetorically created by the president."²³ However, the president is not free to do as he pleases when discursively responding to a crisis. His rhetorical options are limited by "precedent, tradition, and expediency."²⁴ The discourse of crisis is shaped by the political culture that authorizes it.

An international crisis often appears suddenly and provides no stable means for interpreting the discursive surroundings. Presidential utterances act to create a stable contextual frame from which to interpret the event. As Windt suggested, presidential speeches announcing a crisis "begin with an assertion of the President's control of the facts of the situation and an acknowledgement that the New Facts which occasion the speech constitute a New Situation—crisis for the United States."²⁵ Windt suggested three basic lines of arguments that distinguish presidential crisis rhetoric from other types of presidential utterances.²⁶ First, there is the obligatory statement of facts. Second, there is the establishment of a "melodrama" between good (the United States) and evil (traditionally the Soviets). Third, the policy announced by the president and the asked-for support are framed as moral acts. Although this structure may hold true for post-World War II presidents up to Bush, President Clinton was unable to frame his responses to crises

in this manner due to the ending of the Cold War. The "Evil Empire," as Ronald Reagan put it, no longer exists. So then, how may a president frame crisis situations?

Outside of military attack, the situation does not create the crisis; the president's response does. The president's perception of the situation and the rhetoric he uses to describe it have the potential to elevate the situation to the status of crisis. D. Ray Heisey argued that the president must build certain images of the "enemy" or must make links with values embedded within American culture and history if he is to mitigate a crisis successfully.²⁷ In short, "leader[s] must find the acceptable images of political reality suitable for his/her people."²⁸ Since the dawn of the Cold War, all presidents have been able to call upon the topos of good (the United States) versus evil (the Soviet Union). Yet with the culmination of the Cold War, the Soviet Union is (at least at this writing) in financial, political, and social ruins: the "Evil Empire" is no more. The destruction of the Soviet Union meant the concomitant destruction of the Cold War meta-narrative. This was politically unfortunate for President Clinton; he had to respond to potential crisis situations without the benefit of this action legitimating meta-narrative; and if we grant Windt's stages of presidential crisis rhetoric as necessary criteria, it follows that President Clinton will be unable to define a crisis unilaterally, at least without first redefining how four generations of Americans view the enemy.

THE AGENDA-SETTING AND AGENDA-EXTENSION FUNCTIONS OF THE PRESS

Scholars of mass communication are not certain whether to call agenda-setting a function, a theory, or a hypothesis.²⁹ Its relevance here, regardless of its status, is to help explain how the press interacts with presidential discourse during crisis situations. Bernard C. Cohen made an early observation that the press "may not be very successful in telling its readers what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."³⁰ If Cohen's statement is accepted as accurate, then it behooves us to consider presidential crisis rhetoric in relation to the press, not because the press represents public opinion but because it is a good indication of the issues and ideas that informed voters and opinion leaders will be talking about. Thus, the president will be aware of the issues, ideas, and responses that circulate in the press—not because they represent popular opinion but because they are a good indicator of that which still needs to be addressed in his policy or that he should be talking about.