

When Does Rhetoric Become Propaganda?

By

Joseph H. Boyett, Ph.D.

Author, *Won't Get Fooled Again:*

A Voter's Guide to Seeing Through the Lies, Getting Past the Propaganda, and Choosing the Best Leaders

Political rhetoric can be fun, informative, entertaining, and inspiring. But it can easily turn into deceitful and manipulative propaganda. How do you recognize when rhetoric has become propaganda? Surprisingly, it isn't that easy to distinguish deceitful propaganda from inspirational rhetoric. One of the reasons for this is that propaganda is so common, although we almost never recognize it as such.

Propaganda is nearly ubiquitous today. All politicians of any stature employ at least one propagandist, although none would categorize the person as such. Even if we know, or at least think we know, the leader, we are unlikely to know or even know of the person employed to frame the message and polish the image. However, we can recognize propagandists' handiwork by the clues they leave behind.

THE CANDIDATE ENGAGES IN NAME CALLING

In the late 1960s, opposition to the war in Vietnam was growing. The Richard M. Nixon White House felt itself under siege by a nation frustrated by a war that had a dubious purpose and seemingly no end. In response, Nixon unleashed Vice President Spiro T. Agnew with an artful bit of name calling meant to undermine the credibility of the administration's critics. Crafted largely by speechwriter William Safire, Agnew's rhetorical style, said *The New Yorker*, could be best described as "surrealist-alliterative." Opponents of the war, said Agnew, were "ideological eunuchs," "professional anarchists," vultures sitting in trees, and collectively "an effete corps of impudent snobs."¹ The media that reported on the protests were even worse. They were nothing more than a little group of men who lived and worked in the narrow geographical confines of Washington, D.C. and New York City. Their views did not represent those of the country as a whole. They were "nattering nabobs of negativism" who had formed their own "4-H club--the hopeless, hysterical hypochondriacs of history."²

It could all have been taken as just rhetorical good fun. But it wasn't. It was carefully crafted propaganda. By labeling the opposition as “nattering nabobs of negativism,” the Nixon administration hoped to discredit the message of their opponents by discrediting the messenger. After all, how could anyone take seriously the arguments of a nattering nabob? Their opinions weren't even worth of consideration, much less investigation or belief.

THE CANDIDATE USES GLITTERING GENERALITIES

In the early 1990s GOPAC, the political action committee of up-and-coming Republican star politician Newt Gingrich, circulated a pamphlet offering advice to other Republican candidates who wanted to “speak like Newt.”³ Entitled *Language, A Key Mechanism of Control*, the booklet encouraged Republican candidates to use certain “positive, governing words” such as “caring,” “choice,” “common sense,” “fair,” “humane,” “principled,” and the like when referring to themselves and their ideas. Likewise, they were to use negative words such as “coercion,” “corruption,” “destructive,” “permissive,” “incompetent,” and “liberal” when referring to their opponent's ideas. Newt understood that words could make a difference and that certain words served as glittering generalities, so pregnant with meaning that they became a substitute for thought. Your Republican candidates were “caring” and “principled.” They supported “common sense” programs that were “fair” and “humane.” On the other hand, opponents were “corrupt” and “incompetent” “Liberals,” who supported “destructive” and “permissive” policies that would “endanger” the country. What more did you need to know? There was no need to debate the merit of the policies. The glittering generalities would substitute nicely for thought.

THE CANDIDATE PRACTICES DOUBLESPEAK

Name calling represents an effort by politicians to get us to discredit and reject an idea without ever considering its evidence or logic. Glittering generalities are the reverse. We are encouraged to *support* an idea without considering its evidence or logic. Doublespeak is the leader's effort to make a bad or unpleasant idea sound good or at least more acceptable. Doublespeak is an intentional effort to deceive. Here are some examples that the National Conference of Teachers of English considered so extreme as to be worthy of its annual Doublespeak Award.⁴

In 2004, the Pentagon changed the name of what were called body bags to transfer tubes, in recognition of the growing concern Americans had about U.S. casualties in Iraq. They had been called human remain pouches in the Gulf war.

In 1993, when criticized for deliberately lying about the B1-B bomber in a report to Congress, the Air Force explained that it didn't lie but rather "inadvertently disclosed incorrect information."

In 1986, NASA at one point described the space shuttle *Challenger* explosion, which led to the deaths of all of the astronauts on board, as "an anomaly." The bodies of the astronauts were described as "recovered components," and their coffins were termed "crew transfer containers."

In 1984, the U.S. State Department announced that it would no longer use the term "killing" in official reports on human rights. Instead, "killing" would be referred to as unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of life.

In 1979, the nuclear power industry received the Doublespeak Award for its innovative jargon. Explosions weren't explosions; they were energetic disassembly. Fires weren't fires; they were rapid oxidation.

THE CANDIDATE USES FACTOIDS

In 1980, President-elect Ronald Reagan won the NCTE Doublespeak Award for the dubious achievement of campaign oratory "filled with inaccurate assertions and statistics and misrepresentations of his past record."⁵ *The New York Times* noted at the time that Mr. Reagan "doesn't let the truth spoil a good anecdote or effective symbol. ... Mr. Reagan's speeches are peppered with ... omissions, exaggerations, and reinterpretations of his experience as Governor of California and as a candidate."⁶

Factoids are rumors, gossip, tall tales, urban legends, and, in the words of novelist Norman Mailer who coined the term, "facts which have no existence before appearing in a magazine or newspaper."⁷ Factoids aren't facts and are often so weird or outrageous as to be unbelievable--but we believe them anyway. Factoids are big lies repeated frequently and with confidence. They are often quite entertaining in a "who slept with whom" kind of way.

Additionally, once in circulation, factoids are hard to investigate and disprove. As Mark Twain said, “A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.”⁸

Voter’s Guide: Propaganda Detection and Defense

How do you know if what you are hearing is just excellent rhetoric or dangerous propaganda? The truth is that it is hard to tell. The dividing line between rhetoric and propaganda is very thin. With that in mind, here are some suggestions for how to protect yourself at election time.

Always assume that the rhetoric you are hearing is propaganda at least to some extent. Never assume that the so-called truth you are being told by a leader is the whole truth, particularly if it is coming from someone who has something to gain by your accepting the truth as he defines it. That advisory includes just about every leader.

Monitor your reaction to the candidates’ rhetoric. If you are responding emotionally, and you usually will be, ask why. Are you reacting to the content of the idea or to how it is presented? If the idea was presented in a less dramatic way, would you react the same?

When watching a politician give a speech, close your eyes. Listen to the words without the pictures. Do you react the same? Better yet, don’t listen at all. Read a transcript of the candidate’s words. Read a media report summarizing the leader’s statements or a description of the event. Ask yourself if you are reacting to the candidate’s ideas or his his oratory.

Step back from the rhetoric and ask yourself, “What is the real issue?” Search out opposing points of view.

Watch out for the candidates’ use of humor and snappy comebacks, and appeals to collective memory. Such rhetorical devices may sound good and be enormously entertaining, but don’t let the entertainment distract you from objectively considering the content.

Look for name calling, glittering generalities, doublespeak, and factoids. Ask, “Why is he using these propaganda techniques?” Would you react the same if these propaganda techniques had not been used?

Consider a candidate’s communication method when judging his message. Is he resorting to propaganda and tricks to sell his ideas? Why is he choosing to be deceptive? Is his position so weak that he can’t sell it without resorting to tricks? Why?

When a leader labels events and positions--using phrases such as "Operation Iraq Freedom" or "Pro-Life" or "Pro-Choice," for example--ask why he is using these labels rather than saying "war" or "abortion." Would your perception of the event, situation, or policy be different if it had a different and more common name? Why and how?

Adopt the role of the devil's advocate, even if you initially agree with a candidate's platform. What is the source of his information? Is it reliable, credible, and free of bias? What choices or options is the leader offering? What courses of action? Why is he offering these particular options in this particular way? What would really happen if everyone rejected the leader's solution and opted for an alternative solution instead? What alternative solutions are there?

If the leader's message is simple and repetitious, be particularly cautious. Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels' propaganda was based primarily on a simple observation. He wrote:

It would not be impossible to prove with sufficient repetition and psychological understanding of the people concerned that a square is in fact a circle. What after all are a square and a circle? They are mere words and words can be molded until they clothe ideas in disguise. ...⁹

The rank and file are usually much more primitive than we imagine. Propaganda must therefore always be essentially simple and repetitious. In the long run only he will achieve basic results in influencing public opinion who is able to reduce problems to the simplest terms and who has the courage to keep repeating them in this simplified form despite the objections of intellectuals.¹⁰

The Power of Rhetoric and Propaganda

Politicians know that it is not enough for them to have just a powerful vision. They must present the vision in a powerful way. That's why rhetoric is so important and dangerous.

The problem with judging political leaders--or any leaders for that matter--by their rhetoric is that you can be fooled by style. It is easy to be seduced by artful delivery and engaging stories. It is easy to get caught up in visions when they are framed to stress common history, group identity, self-worth, high values, hope, faith, and change. It's particularly hard to

resist politicians who spice their rhetoric with name calling, glittering generalities, doublespeak, and factoids. They are so much fun that we forget that they are propaganda intended to deceive and mislead.

Leaders can make their vision sound very appealing even when they have little of substance to offer. You must recognize that leadership is a perception as much as a fact. In one sense--or perhaps in many senses--it is like a romance. The moon is just a moon. The stars are just stars. The music, while lovely, is just music. The champagne, while bubbly, is just a pleasant sparkling white wine. What transforms these commonplace things into an evening to remember is the perception of the lovers. So it is with leaders and followers. Leadership, to the extent that it exists, exists within the perceptions of those involved in the leader--follower romance.¹¹ Like any romance, the relationship can be real or contrived. The suitor can be legitimate or false-hearted. Sometimes it is hard to tell which, particularly when you do not know the person very well and are caught up in the giddy excitement of the moment. So, when a speech sounds really good, it's wise to be a skeptic. It might be nothing more than artfully delivered propaganda.

NOTES

¹ Quoted in “Nattering Nabobs,” *The New Yorker* (July 10 & 17, 2006), p. 33.

² Quoted in “Nattering Nabobs,” p. 33.

³ See Propaganda, “Examples: How Newt Gingrich Used These Techniques,” available at <http://www.propagandacritic.com/articles/examples.newt.html>, accessed January 27, 2008.

⁴ For more information on the Doublespeak Award, see The National Council of Teachers of English, available at <http://www.ncte.org/about/awards/council/jrnl/106868.htm?source=gs>, accessed February 7, 2008 ???. For additional examples of doublespeak, see SourceWatch, “Doublespeak,” available at <http://www.sourcewatch.org/wiki.phtml?title=Doublespeak>, accessed January 27, 2008; and William Lutz, “Life Under the Chief Doublespeak Officer,” available at <http://www.dt.org/html/Doublespeak.html>, accessed January 27, 2008.

⁵ See The National Council of Teachers of English, available at <http://www.ncte.org/about/awards/council/jrnl/106868.htm>, accessed January 27, 2008.

⁶ Quoted in The National Council of Teachers of English

⁷ Anthony R. Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1992), p. 104.

⁸ Quoted in Pratkanis and Aronson, p. 112.

⁹ Quoted in Pratkanis and Aronson, p. 49.

¹⁰ Quoted in Pratkanis and Aronson, p. 182.

¹¹ For more on the “romance of leadership,” see Boas Shamir, “Attribution of Influence and Charisma to the Leader: The Romance of Leadership Revisited,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 22, no. 5 (1992) pp. 386–407; Robert G. Lord and Karen J. Mahler, *Leadership and Information Processing: Linking Perceptions and Performance* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1991), pp. 56–57; Jane M. Howell and Bruce J. Avolio, “Charismatic Leadership: Submission or Liberation?” *Business Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (Autumn 1995), pp. 62–70; Stefani L. Yorges, Howard M. Weiss, and Oriel J. Strickland, “The Effect of Leader Outcomes on Influence, Attributions, and Perceptions of Charisma,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 84, no. 3, (1999), pp. 428–436; Charles Lindholm, *Charisma* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 183–189; and James R. Meindl, Sanford B. Ehrlich, and Janet M. Dukerich, “The Romance of Leadership,” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 30 (1985), pp. 78–102.