Political Rhetoric in Postmodern America

by Samuel Wigutow (December 2024)

Programme Speech (Sandor Bihari, 1891)

In John Ford's *The Man* *Who Shot Liberty Valance*, a Western too earnest for its own good (except where it becomes heavy-handedly ironic), Jimmy Stewart's doggedly idealistic young attorney elicits from one of his civics students, an immigrant, the declaration: "The United States is a republic, and a republic is a state in which the people are the boss. That means us! And if the big shots in Washington don't do like we want, we don't vote for them, by golly, no more!" We can leave aside the loaded definition of a republic. Part of the context is an ongoing dispute over statehood for a western

territory, pitting small homesteaders against big cattle ranchers; in classic Western fashion, the latter are mostly vicious bullies. The “us” who are the “boss” of the American republic, to judge from the makeup of the civics class and the general thrust of the film, consists basically of the small homesteaders.

If this doesn’t sound like a piece of blatantly obfuscating rhetoric, likely that’s because it is a staple of our public discourse, especially on the part of politicians and journalists. It is the “American people” without qualification to whom are attributed all virtuous aspirations, all impatience with alleged corruption or evil, all striving for salutary change. Yet if “we the people” has any natural meaning, it cannot be restricted to the spunky underdogs of Jimmy Stewart’s civics class; if “the people are the boss,” that includes the cattle ranchers too.

American society today is not so different (if ever a society was) from the semi-mythical Western frontier. The mystical People is invoked on behalf of an aspiration so banal as to be trivial—a better life—or else in a question of such heated contention as to preclude any sort of popular unity. This is not to say that all contention is incompatible with civil society. Perhaps in the Wild West, mythical or real, the farmer and the plowman eventually became friends, to borrow from Rodgers and Hammerstein. Were “compromise” an empty word, virtually all achievement would be impossible. But neither is compromise a magical solvent of contention. Compromise only works in the presence of some shared goal, or at least of compatible goals; and where these are wanting, the only lasting solution possible is victory for one party and loss for the other. As far back as 1981, Alisdair MacIntyre observed that debates on such issues as abortion were afflicted by a kind of value incommensurability, where the arguments *pro* and *contra* appealed not just to opposed principles, but to different *kinds* of principles. Each side

relied on an implicit understanding of the good life without, perhaps, being aware of it—and so without, perhaps, consistently holding to it either, resulting in political opinions justified *ad hoc* rather than as part of a coherent system.

Ad hoc argumentation is certainly a prominent feature of our political life today, inevitably so when positions are so often motivated by the repetition of arbitrary, tautological, or otherwise empty slogans: "Love is love"; "the opposite of poverty is justice"; "I believe in Science." When I see a sign reading something like, "Whoever you are, we're glad you're our neighbor," I muse on the likely strength of that sentiment in the face of finding out that a neighbor voted for Trump; an unreflective age, especially one that prizes sentiment over reason in practice, is apt to be drawn to principles that don't generalize well and thus don't make good first principles.

All the same, fickleness and impressionability seldom destroy all human tendency towards habit; and so the use of slogans and other functional principles of opinions usually tends in a single direction for a person or group. For many people "free speech" is something like a first principle, but only, it is understood, for one's ideological allies. Hence the prominence of dog whistles, yes—but also the seemingly constant adjustment of the Overton window we face today. First principles can survive, in a sense, even where they do stand up to rational scrutiny in as simple a form as a coherence test, but at the price of a certain extreme malleability. And this malleability heightens the effect of the value incommensurability described by MacIntyre. True discourse requires stable concepts with clearly identifiable content and implication.

If we only talk past each other in our political disputes, this is not just a communication problem but one of intellectual substance. A wide divergence of worldview

precludes most rational compromise; the best that can typically be hoped for is a half-sustainable stalemate. It shouldn't surprise anyone that such profound polarization now exists in our country. I run the risk of beating a dead horse here because from the way people on all sides are prone to talk, one wouldn't always be sure it was dead. And while the problem does not admit of a facile solution, we can at least try to better understand what we're dealing with, if only to lend greater urgency to the will for a real solution. If nothing else, we can try to clear our rhetorical arsenal of anything that tends to obscure the real problems.

A good start is not to follow John Ford in describing popular political power. There is no such thing as a simple "we the people" as decision-maker in most cases—certainly not in a country as large as the United States and with such a range of incommensurable opinion. For every "we" with a claim to be "the boss," there is at least one other "we" that finds itself entitled to the same claim, and when the groups are divergent enough, there is no way either victory or stalemate vindicates each claim unless one is willing to engage in Rousseauean intellectual contortions, euphemizing political defeat as being "forced to be free." Victory itself may prove pyrrhic if the triumphant group is a coalition; an opinion may be widespread because it is obviously compelling or true, if the world is in a state that lets it be seen to many as such, or else because there are different and sometimes incompatible motives for holding it. Transgenderism, for instance, answers to a number of desires: the desire to embrace whim wholesale; the desire to assert technology against nature; the desire for a sense of self-creation; the desire to undermine previously common family structures and relations between the sexes. All of these can and likely do account for some of the fad's appeal, whichever may have motivated its earliest or most influential proponents. *Cui bono?* can be a difficult question to answer.

“Conspiracy theorist” should never be used as a slur—conspiracies do exist—but these considerations about coalitions suggest the caution that should be taken by those who would willingly claim the title. It is safest not to assume that every successful movement, no matter how nefarious, is united by a single final purpose, that its original instigators were wholly of one mind, or that instigators’ motives alone or even significantly account for their public success. Motives are hard to generalize about, and we should simply avoid doing so when we don’t have to. More importantly, let’s stop appealing to “the American people” as an of agent of wish or choice. In matters concerning the good life or good action, or even the nature of political action, there is no one American people, since we are profoundly split not only on how social, moral, or political goods are best achieved, but on the very identity of those goods and the criteria for determining them. When someone declares “what the American people want,” he nearly always means just that subset in his own coalition, with all the caveats the nature of coalition should suggest. One could argue that extreme pluralism in such matters has political benefits, but transcending factionalism or tribalism surely cannot be among them.

Similarly, divisiveness need not be something to condemn. Where polarization is both broad and deep, even demagogues have little room to *create* division. Of course, real division does not always need to be emphasized or stoked, and it can be exploited. But attempts to gloss over it usually conceal an attempt at stealth persuasion. If unity is achieved by a kind of political peer pressure or by appeal to the “right side of history,” it is as good as creating a wasteland and calling it peace. Division is a very real political phenomenon; it is not a dirty word or something we can escape by ignoring it.

Rhetoric is central to electoral politics. Any effort to realign political rhetoric in light of reality must consider

this foundation of political careers upon rhetoric and our own rhetorical response to politicians. Where electoral politics occupies a broad canvas—certainly at the federal level, and perhaps in anything larger than a small city—and where that canvas is marked by the polarization discussed above, including the often coalitional nature of practical alliances, candidates for elected office have no choice but to try to manufacture a unity of the ballot box. Most of the time, intellectually serious discourse about principles, aimed at persuasion, is not an option, not only for the reasons discussed above but also because of the inconsistency in intellectual capacity that is virtually inevitable in any large group. Mass production demands a certain watering-down. And the simplest kind to practice here is often to pretend polarization away. This doesn't always mean the same thing: there is the "primary" model, in which disunity among a practical coalition is glossed over, and the "general election" alternative in which we are given some version of Thomas Jefferson's "We are all Americans."

In order to stand before crowds—crowds of people who can hardly be expected to be of one mind in all matters of political or social importance, let alone with the rest of the country—and appeal to their unanimity, one has to be either stupid or dishonest. Of course, any successful candidate must have a certain kind of cleverness, but this is often more a honed instinct for mimicry and survival than any ability to think seriously about the serious matters that are the business of politics. Such serious thought does not sit well alongside the pat formulas that are seem to motivate voters—except for dissimulators.

For this reason, it is good to assume that any given politician who has any national success is a person of low character in some sense—either a liar or someone whose stupidity seems culpable in a position of great responsibility. Call it the Puritan Witch-Trial Rule: floating

(which is to say winning an election) is a sign of guilt. I don't mean that every nationally successful politician is a person of low character in this sense, but that it is the norm. There are conditions in which it may not be, but they all involve the kind of deep general unity that a large, polarized society is hard-pressed to achieve in peacetime. And even the manifestly honorable war hero whose valor translates into political success cannot always be counted on to be a good judge of domestic political questions.

What may we achieve by fighting fire with fire in this matter of political cynicism? If nothing else, a keener sense of reality. Being on guard against rhetorical tricks will not resolve value incommensurability, but it can help us to become more honest in accepting the real as it comes to us. It will cure us of fundamentally unreasonable assumptions about politicians as a class: that they can somehow cure the ailments of soul or mind that preclude any true or good political unity; that they may be any better than creatures of vaulting ambition who must be abetted by either unscrupulousness or emptiness of mind; that a dignified mien or adherence to ceremonial protocol is sign or proxy of effective governance.

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