

Rhetoric of War and Peace

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Abstract

Political rhetoric is one of the instruments of public opinion control. Words and images label the reality and define the attitudes and thoughts of the people about events. This article discusses the use of abstract terms with strong connotative meaning in the rhetoric of “peace” and “war” by national leaders. The author argues that the choice of terms in the argumentation and their interpretation or reinterpretation signal the intentions of the speaker to generate public opinion favoring “agreement” and “peace” or “conflict” and “war”. The “conflict” rhetoric is employed to build up a “virtual reality” of “war” that allows the interpretation of any “response” of the “opponent” as an “act of war”. Furthermore, “war” rhetoric does not permit any arguments for “peace”, or any options for peaceful coexistence with “enemies”, either real or virtual. In a situation of true balance of power and real danger of war on national territory, there is usually a shift from the rhetoric of “war” to the rhetoric of “peace”.

Introduction

“War” and “peace” are among the main topics of political rhetoric. “Peace” seems to represent a self-evident common value, associated with “security” and “pleasure”. “War” obviously threatens “security” and “survival”. It usually involves “fear”, and is considered to be the opposite of “pleasure” and “peace”. However, political leaders may call for “war”, as they claim, “to preserve peace”, or “to be free from fear”. Their reasons may vary and they may serve different interest groups, but to speak and make decisions on behalf of the people, they have to persuade a broader audience that what they offer is “for the common good”, and the sacrifice is worth it. Without public support leaders are powerless. Since “the rulers can only rule if they control opinion” (Chomsky, 1994, 81), rhetoric has to precede policy, especially in democratic societies.

A rhetorical act is an “intentional, created, polished attempt to overcome the obstacles in a given situation with a specific audience on a given issue to achieve a particular end” (Campbell, 1982, 7). Reference to the accepted and affirmed common values makes an audience more emotionally responsive to what the speaker describes. Chaim Perelman argues that:

The speaker tries to establish a sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience, and to this end he uses the whole range of means available to the rhetorician for purposes of amplification and enhancement... Epideictic oratory has significance and importance for argumentation because it strengthens the disposition toward action by

increasing adherence to the values it lauds... Before even starting to argue from particular premises, it is essential that the content of these premises should stand out against the undifferentiated mass of available elements of agreement: the choice of premises can be identified with their presentation. Effective presentation that impresses itself on the hearers' consciousness is essential not only for the argumentation aiming at the immediate action, but also in that which aspires to give the mind a certain orientation, to make certain schemes of interpretation prevail, to insert the elements of agreement into a framework that will give them significance and confer upon them the rank they deserve (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971, 49-51, 142-143).

Commonly, there should be some "activating event" that can be interpreted as "threatening" to common values ("life", "liberty") to *encourage* the public's agreement to make a sacrifice. However, construction of a "threatening" reality in many cases is achieved through "imagination" (Burke, 1969, 79), the construction of a "virtual reality" (Campbell, 1982, 80). A leader may use a "probable" event or a threat that does not yet exist, or construct a "threatening future" to give more substance to his claims, and stronger "reasons" for "pre-emptive" actions. As Robert Oliver argues, "what is real is what is formulated in our conceptions". We know that "out there" exists because we are told that it does, and we at least partly believe it. Our minds "ingest" perceptions, conceive what they mean to us and to our associates, utilize portions of the symbolized items, and consign the remainder to the waste heap of forgetfulness. What we retain as conscious guides to our conduct depends to a considerable degree upon social agreements (Oliver, 1986, 13).

One of the means of controlling people's perception is the use of abstract terms or clichés that serve as connotative stereotypes associated with common values. These words, e.g. *freedom, justice, aggression, liberation, terrorism, democracy, security*, etc., are distinguished by a typical variance in meaning which is effective within a society at the moment (Poerksen, 1988, 27). Their "emotional" and "evaluative" "aura", and "controlling" power are drawn from the previous contexts, and are based on the social "approval" or "censure". Since the meaning of these words is not specific, different words with contrastive connotations can be used to "reflect the same reality". In his essay *Politics and English Language* George Orwell (1946, 156-170) describes these abstract terms as words with "several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another" and adds:

In the case of a word like *democracy*, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it; consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to any one meaning...The person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different. These words are usually associated with strong opinions of the audience, they seem to symbolize beliefs and values uniting certain communities. The speaker might persuade the audience by using ideas and images that identify with the kind of conduct a given audience believes is admirable.

Since terms of this type do not have any specific denotative meaning, they may be applied to reflect any "reality", labeling it as "agreeable" or "disagreeable" with the "common values" in the imagination of the public. Imagination persuades by going beyond mere argument. It is used "in

rhetoric to convince the audience of the “reality and truth” of the speaker’s assertions” (Burke, 1969, 79). Through the change in the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of the public, virtual reality gets materialized.

“Peace” and “war” rhetoric employ different terms and clichés to redefine “realities” and to affect public opinion. “Loaded” abstract terms link the described “reality” to common values. In some cases, the “virtual reality of conflict or war” is constructed long before the occurrence of the “necessary activating event” to start it. In the following examples from well-known political speeches in English by heads of states (mostly American presidents) we can trace these tendencies. In this article we examine the symbolic abstract terms and common-places used as signals of a rhetoric advocating peace or war.

Rhetoric of Peace

Although the words of the founding fathers still possess an unshakable power of political authority, and are used as common-places in any political argumentation, George Washington’s “counsels” in the field of foreign policy are commonly “consigned to the waste heap of forgetfulness” in modern political rhetoric. In his Farewell Address Washington defines “good faith and justice toward **all nations**” as instruments of peace and harmony, and gives clear explanations of what they mean: neither “antipathy” nor “sympathy” in one nation, no insult and injury to one nation, no “participation in the quarrels and wars” of another (key words used in the characterization of opponents and peaceful policy are in bold):

Observe **good faith and justice toward all nations**. Cultivate **peace and harmony with all**.
 ...Europe has a set of priority interests which to us have none or a very little remote relation. ...It is our true policy **to steer clear of permanent alliances** with any portion of the world.
 ...**Antipathy** in one nation against another disposes each more readily to offer **insult and injury**.
 ...**Sympathy** for the favorite nation, facilitating the **illusion of an imaginary common interest**, in cases where no common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, **betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars** of the latter, without adequate inducement or justification.

Abraham Lincoln supported the same idea arguing that a strategy for “just and lasting peace” with all the nations is “malice toward none”. He argued that “you can have no conflict without being yourself the aggressors” (Waldman, 2003, 45).

In Lincoln’s words (Second Inaugural Address):

With malice toward none, with charity for all...to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and **with all nations**.

In 1916, before the reelection, Woodrow Wilson claimed that “the use of force” is not a means to prove that you are “right”: “There is such a thing as a man too proud to fight. There is such a thing as a nation being so right that it **does not need to convince others by force that it is right**” (Waldman, 2003, 79).

Wilson called for “peace without victory”, and later, in 1918 made it clear that he did not see Germany, or at least its people, as an enemy (Waldman, 2003, 87).

In the Address to Congress on Peace Terms he stated:

No statesman who has the least conception of his **responsibility** ought for a moment to permit

himself to continue this **tragic and appalling outpouring of blood and treasure**. ...What we demand in this war...is **nothing peculiar for ourselves**. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in. ...**Unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us**. We have no jealousy of German greatness... We do **not wish to injure her or to block** in any way **her legitimate influence or power**. We **do not wish to fight her either with arms or with hostile arrangements of trade**, if she is willing to associate herself with us and the other peace-loving nations of the world in covenants of **justice and law and fair dealing**.

John Kennedy made a major shift in the Cold War changing the tone of rhetoric towards a more respectful and friendly one which was followed by significant treaties advocating peace.

Kennedy (in a Commencement Address to the American University in 1963) asked:

What kind of peace do we seek? **Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war**. ...I speak of peace because of a new face of war. ...We must reexamine our own attitude...for **our attitude is as essential as theirs**. ...If we cannot end now our differences, at least **we can make world safe for diversity**. ...The United States, as the world knows, will never start a war. **We do not want war. We do not now expect a war**.

President Carter's peaceful rhetoric opened the opportunities for international peace initiatives.

In his Inaugural Address Carter stated:

The passion for freedom is on the rise. Tapping this new spirit, there can be no **nobler nor more ambitious task for America** to undertake on this day of a new beginning **than to help shape a just and peaceful world** that is truly **humane**.

Facing great criticism from those Arabs and Palestinians who believed that the UN had no right to expropriate their land and who wanted to continue a state of war against Israel, Anwar Sadat agreed to recognize Israel as a state and cease hostilities. In the speech at the signing of Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty he declared:

Let there be **no more war or bloodshed between Arabs and Israeli**. Let there be **no more suffering or denial of rights**. ...And **God** does call to the abode of **peace** (Greene, 2002, 111-118).

Advocating for nonviolent struggle to liberate Tibet, Tenzin Guatso, the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, argued that violence and hatred could not be the answer to aggression:

The suffering of our people during the past forty years of occupation is well documented. Ours has been a long struggle. We know our cause is just. Because **violence can only breed violence and suffering**, our **struggle must remain nonviolent and free of hatred**. We are trying **to end the suffering** of our people, **not to inflict suffering upon others**. It is with this in mind I proposed negotiations between Tibet and China on numerous occasions.

In his effort to create peace in the Middle East and to stop suffering, Yitzhak Rabin, at the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles, cut through the decades of hostilities with a moving prayer for peace:

We say to you today in a loud and clear voice: **Enough of blood and tears**. Enough. We have no desire for revenge. We harbor **no hatred** towards you. ...The **time for peace** has come.

The rhetoric of peace is based on the universal values of harmony, justice, and love for all nations

and all people, irrespective of differences in their traditions, beliefs, interests, or ideologies. People are not divided into potential friends and enemies. The maxims - “treat others as you want to be treated yourself”, “respect others if you want to be respected”, “do not hate or hurt not to be hated or hurt”- are used as the main premises in rhetorical argumentation.

Rhetoric of War

After the reelection in February 1917, Woodrow Wilson told Congress that Americans would stay neutral unless Germany attacked their ships, which “would be **armed** as a precaution” (Waldman, 2003, 79), preparing the public for a possibility of war. Later he made a Request for Declaration of War on Germany, (key definitions and policy characterization are in bold):

The present German submarine **warfare against commerce** is a **warfare against mankind**. ...I advise that the Congress **declare** the recent course of the Imperial German Government **to be, in fact, nothing less than war** against the Government and people of the United States. ...Our **motive will not be revenge** or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only **the vindication of right, of human right**, of which **we are only a single champion**. ...**Armed neutrality**, it now appears, is **impractical**. ...Indeed it is now evident that its (Prussian autocracy’s) **spies were here even before the war began**; and it unhappily is not a matter of conjecture, but a fact proved in our courts of justice. ...We have no quarrel with the German people. We have no feeling toward them but one of sympathy and friendship. We **fight thus for the ultimate peace** of the world and **for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included; for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience**. The world must be made safe **for democracy**. ...But **the right is more precious than peace**. ...**We will not choose** the path of **submission**.

Franklin Roosevelt employed war rhetoric to re-define an “economic emergency” as a “military” one, and mentioned some imaginary “foreign foe” in his First Inaugural Address. He prepared the public for the “war time” discipline and for American international role in the “world of good neighbors”:

These are **the lines of attack**. ...In the field of world policy I would dedicate this nation to the policy of **good neighbor**; the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he so does, respects the rights of others; the neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors. ...We must move as a trained and **loyal army**... We are, I know, ready and willing to submit our lives and property to such discipline, because it makes possible a leadership which aims at a larger good. ...I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis, **broad Executive power to wage a war** against the emergency, as broad as the power that would be given to me **if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe**.

Roosevelt built up the “virtual reality” of “war” situation long before 1941. He appealed to “fear” and divided the world into friends and foes:

This is not a fireside chat of **war**. It is a talk on **national security**. ...Three powerful nations joined...**in the threat that if the United States of America** interfered with or blocked the expansion program of these three nations – a program aimed at **world control** – they would unite

in ultimate action against the United States. ...The **Axis** proclaims that there can be **no ultimate peace** between...their philosophy of government and our philosophy of government. ...Our **American cities could be bombed by any hostile power** which had gained bases in the Western Hemisphere. ...No nation can appease the Nazis. ...They ask for the implements of war, **the planes, the tanks, the guns, the fighters** which will enable them to fight for **their liberty and our security**. **Emphatically, we must get these weapons** to them. ...Nail any talks about **sending armies to Europe as deliberate untruth**. Our national policy is **not directed toward war**. Its sole purpose is to **keep war away from** our country and away from our people.

In 1941 in the Annual Address to the Congress Roosevelt continued to negate the opinion that the increase in arms production and military supplies to the allies could be “directed toward war”, and were in the violation of the principles of neutrality. He argued that American freedom and democracy were threatened not only by foreign but also domestic foes:

I find it, unhappily, necessary to report that the future and **the safety of our country and our democracy** are overwhelmingly involved in events far beyond our borders. ...**No realistic American can expect** from a **dictator’s peace international generosity**, or return of true independence, or world **disarmament**, or **freedom of expression** – or even **good business**. ...It is not probable that any enemy will be stupid enough to attack us by landing troops in the United states from across thousand of miles of ocean, until it had acquired strategic bases from which to operate. ...**The first phase of invasion** of this Hemisphere would not be the landing of regular troops. The necessary strategic points **would be** occupied by **secret agents** and their dupes – and **great numbers of them are already here, and in Latin America**. As long as the **aggressive nations maintain the offensive**, they, not we – will choose the time and the place and the method of **attack**. ...Therefore, the immediate need is a swift and driving **increase in our arms production**. ...**Our most useful and immediate role** is to act as an **arsenal for them as well as for ourselves**. ...**Such aid is not an act of war**, even if the **dictators** should unilaterally **proclaim it so to be**.

...We **must always be wary of those who** with sounding brass and tinkling cymbal **preach the “ism” of appeasement**. A **free nation** has the right to expect **full cooperation** from all groups. ...The best way of dealing with the **few slackers or trouble makers** in our midst is, first, **to shame them by patriotic example**, and, if that fails, **to use the sovereignty of Government** to save Government. ...We look forward to a world founded upon four **essential human freedoms**. The first is **freedom of speech** and expression – everywhere in the world. ...**Freedom means** the supremacy of **human rights** everywhere. To that high concept there can be **no end save victory**.

In 1941, in the Request for Declaration of War Against Japan, Roosevelt interpreted the attack on the Hawaiian Islands (that became the 50th state of the USA only in 1959) as an attack on the United States of America, and suggested that American navy and military bases on the Islands could not have “provoked” the attacks:

The **United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked**. The attack yesterday on the **Hawaiian Islands** has caused a **severe damage to American naval and military forces**... No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American

people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory. ...We will not only **defend ourselves** to the uttermost but will **make it very certain** that this form of treachery **shall never again endanger us**. ...**Our territory, our people, and our interests are in grave danger.**

President Truman started the use of Cold War rhetoric and set a new global role for America in the world. He divided the world into two opposing forces in his Address to Congress on Greece and Turkey, 1947:

I believe it must be the policy of the United States **to support free peoples** who are **resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures**. ...That integrity is essential to **the preservation of order** in the Middle East. ...To ensure the **peaceful development of nations**, free from coercion, the United States has taken a leading part in establishing the United Nations. ...The peoples of a number of countries of the world have recently had **totalitarian regimes** forced upon them against their will. ...At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. **The chose is too often not a free one.** ...I believe that **we must assist free peoples** to work out their own destinies in their own way. ...I believe our help should be primarily through economic and financial aid. ...In addition to funds, I ask the Congress **to authorize the detail of American civilian and military personnel** to Greece and Turkey, **at the request of those countries...** If we **falter in our leadership**, we may **endanger the peace of the world** – and we shall surely **endanger the welfare of this Nation.**

Truman continued to build up confrontation between the socialist and capitalist worlds and defined the opponents as the enemies of democracy and freedom. He also negated the proposition that America was using old imperialistic means aimed at the exploitation for the foreign profit:

The United States and other like-minded nations find themselves **directly opposed by a regime** with contrary aims and totally different concept of life. That regime adheres to **a false philosophy** which **purports to offer freedom, security**, and greater opportunity to mankind. ...That **false philosophy** is **communism**. ...**The old imperialism** – exploitation for foreign profit – **has no place in our plans.**

John Kennedy defined the quest for peace and freedom as joining with “friends” and “opposing foes” anywhere in the world. However, he did not exclude the possibility of negotiations and some cooperation with “adversaries” :

Let **every nation** know, whether **it wishes us good or ill**, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, **support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty**. ...Let all our neighbors know that **we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion** anywhere in the Americas. ...To those nations who would make themselves **our adversary**, we offer not a pledge but a request: that both sides **begin anew the quest for peace** ... We **dare not tempt them with weakness**. ...**Defending freedom** in its hour of maximum danger.

President Nixon interpreted any peace without total victory of a “strong country” as defeat:

Let us not record that when **America was the most powerful nation** in the world we passed on the other side of the road **and allowed the last hopes for peace and freedom of millions of people to be suffocated by the forces of totalitarianism**. ...I pledged in my campaign for the

Presidency **to end the war in a way that we could win the peace.** ...Let us **be united for peace.**

Let us also **be united against defeat.**

Ronald Reagan stressed the determination to fight for “freedom and peace” with any “potential adversary”:

As for the **enemies of freedom**, those who are **potential adversaries**, they will be reminded that **peace** is the highest aspiration of American people. We will negotiate for it, sacrifice for it; we **will not surrender for it**, now or ever. ...When action is required **to preserve our national security we will act.** We **will maintain sufficient strength to prevail** if need be...

Reagan continued to support the escalation of arms as the “prerequisite to peace” defined as the triumph over some abstract “evil”:

It is the **Soviet Union** that runs against the tide of history by denying **human freedom and human dignity** to its citizens. ...**Our military strength is prerequisite to peace...** the forces of good ultimately rally and **triumph over evil.** ...For the sake of **peace and justice**, let us move toward a world in which all people are at last **free to determine their destiny.**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, American control of world affairs was not challenged by any serious power. The “enemy of democracy” is seen as less specific and more global. The public is prepared to interpret any “crime” as an attack of the “imagined enemies” on symbolic “freedom” and “democracy”. It is clearly reflected by George W. Bush in his First Inaugural Address at the beginning of 2001:

The enemies of liberty and our country should make no mistake: America remains engaged in the world by history and by choice, shaping a balance of power that favors freedom. We will **defend our allies and our interests.** ...We will meet **aggression and bad faith** with **resolve and strength.**

In the Address after the Attack of September 11 Bush labeled any opponent of American policy as a supporter of terrorists, excluding any negotiations and discussions:

Enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country. ...This group and its leader – a person named **Osama bin Laden** – are linked to many other organizations... There are **thousands of these terrorists** in more than **60 countries.** ...By **aiding and abetting murder**, the **Taliban regime is committing murder.** ...And tonight, the United States of America makes the following **demands on the Taliban...** These demands are **not open to negotiation or discussion.** ...They will hang over the terrorists or they will share in their fate. ...**Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them.** ...**Our war begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.** ...We are not deceived by **their pretenses to piety.** ...Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. **Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.** From this day forward, **any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.** ...We will come together to give **law enforcement the additional tools it needs to track down terror here at home.**

In the Address on Iraq in 2003 Bush created a virtual reality of the attack on the US, based on the supposition that some terrorists might use the means and weapons they did not yet possess.

The danger is clear: using chemical, biological or, one day, nuclear weapons, obtained with the help of Iraq, the terrorists could fulfil their stated ambitions and kill thousands or hundreds of thousands of innocent people in our country, or any other. ...Before the day of horror can come, before it is too late to act, this danger will be removed. ...The tyrant will soon be gone. The day of your liberation is near. It is too late for Saddam Hussein to remain in power. ...It is not too late for the Iraqi military to act with honor and protect your country by permitting the peaceful entry of coalition forces to eliminate weapons of mass destruction. ...Do not destroy oil wells, a source of wealth that belongs to Iraqi people. Do not obey any command to use weapons of mass destruction against anyone. ...War crimes will be prosecuted. War criminals will be punished. ...The United States, with other countries, will work to advance liberty and peace in that region.

The rhetoric of war divides the world into two camps: “potential friends” and “enemies”, “nations or groups who support us, and the ones who are against us”. It uses abusive labels for the latter, and claims that they are against “democracy” and “freedom”. The rhetoric of war is based on the assumption that “peace” means “victory”, and it is shameful to negotiate any peace terms with the enemy if you are “armed” and “strong” enough to win. There can be no peace, unless “all the enemies” are defeated. So, war can be indefinite in duration. Most importantly, war rhetoric appeals to “fear”. It constructs a virtual reality of the “inevitability of war”, “rejecting any possibility of peace”, and makes the war present (“spies”, “horror at home”) for the public, labeling anyone who calls for peace an enemy of “freedom” and “peace”. War rhetoric reinterprets the reality and labels it with a negative or positive abstract term.

Conclusion

The choice of terms in the argumentation and their interpretations or reinterpretations by a speaker, signal his intention to form the public opinion favoring “peace” or “war”. “Peace” rhetoric advocates “justice” and “peace” for “all” nations and governments, without any preconditions. It is based on the assumption that no nation can be in a conflict “without being the aggressor” and every nation should respect all other nations and their “freedom” to “choose their way of life”. “War” rhetoric divides the world into “friends” and “enemies”, blocks any options for “peace”, labeling any opponent of “war” as an enemy of “peace”. “Conflict” rhetoric is employed to build up a “virtual reality” of war that creates political prejudices and allows the interpretation of any “response” of the opponent as an “act of war”, without further discussion. The shift from “war” to “peace” rhetoric occurs in a situation of balanced forces, when there is no guarantee that the “strong” country will not have the “war” on its territory.

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