

The Words of War: The Political Rhetoric of Barack Obama and John F. Kennedy

Brett Feldman
Boston University

To many in my generation, the Cold War is a footnote relegated to the lifeless pages of history textbooks. Dead are the leaders who thundered across the highest stages of geopolitics. Gone is the sense of intense rivalry that dominated the preceding half-century. Hollow rings the yellow journalism that entranced the world's population. Though the world may have changed and the Cold War ended with the death of communism, a new specter has risen—Islamic extremism. In this new geopolitical conflict, many of the themes that characterized the Cold War have reemerged. Recognizing these parallels, scholars continue to consider the rhetorical leadership demonstrated by politicians, then and now. On the one hand, some scholars maintain that the rhetoric of the Cold War was more fluid and less polarized, pointing to John F. Kennedy's inaugural address as evidence. Others, like Columbia University professor of history Eric Foner, claim that the rhetoric of the Cold War was "a continuation of the battles of World War II."

Fifty years later, another generation, born in the waning days of the American century, has also come of age in an era of immense geopolitical turbulence. Afghanistan and Iraq have become our Bay of Pigs and, increasingly, our Vietnam. To us, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are major political events, shaping a whole generation's outlook on politics. Our political leaders have used these events to create fear in their audiences and build political support. In the beginning of this conflict, we heard apocalyptic visions of an "axis of evil" bent on our destruction. With the election of President Barack Obama, we see a less direct and more nuanced approach to our enemies. Nonetheless, much as Kennedy employed the subtle specter of Soviet aggression, Obama uses the same sort of threat to build fear and garner political support.

Both John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama, though separated by five decades, present case studies in the use of political rhetoric. Having won difficult, hard-fought election campaigns, each man attempts to build a stable and powerful political base. They do this by attacking their opposition, acclaiming themselves, and defending their records. Analyzing the inaugural addresses of both men, this paper will demonstrate that each takes on the role of strategic politician above all others.

Before exploring these inaugural addresses, however, it is important to understand some central practices in political and presidential war rhetoric; this will provide the grounding to consider the similar approaches of Kennedy and Obama.

Political scientists William L. Benoit, John P. McHale, Glenn J. Hansen, P. M. Pier, and John P. McGuire, in their work *Campaign 2000: A Functional Analysis of Presidential Campaign Discourse*, teach us that political rhetoric is a highly functional art. There are few great rhetorical

flourishes without purpose. Each word is crafted to help politicians achieve a single goal: victory. To do this, the politician must draw distinctions between him- or herself and the opposition. The adversarial electoral game of American politics makes for a rigid system of comparisons and stark choices. In order to draw distinctions in the hopes of winning a plurality of the vote, Benoit et al. argue, politicians engage in three types of political messaging. First, they acclaim themselves, or engage in self-praise. This is the most rudimentary way politicians draw distinctions. By emphasizing their particular strengths and experiences, politicians hope to convince voters that they are worth supporting—as Obama’s and Kennedy’s addresses demonstrate. Second, and conversely, politicians can make their opponents appear less favorable by attacking their character, policy positions, or experiences. In this case, the politician is not so much raising his/her own stock as lowering the value of a rival’s. Finally, a politician can defend him- or herself from an attack. In this type of message, the candidate recognizes an opponent’s charge and seeks to defend him-/herself. There are both benefits and risks associated with this final type of campaign messaging. A well-coordinated defense “has the potential to prevent further damage” and may “partially or completely restore a candidate’s preferability” (Benoit et al. 8). On the other hand, a strong defense may lend credibility to an opponent’s attack. Repeating the charge, even in defense, risks exacerbating the damage. All of these types of messages are commonplace in the pursuit of electoral or legislative victory and all are, not surprisingly, part of both Obama’s and Kennedy’s rhetoric.

While the aforementioned is helpful in explaining the *why* of our political system, it is critical to consider *how* politicians go about disseminating political messages and building support. Popular culture is an increasingly powerful avenue for politicians to exploit. It is little secret that the media, through entertainment and advertisements, pervade our daily lives to an ever-increasing degree. Politicians have begun to harness this power. According to John Street, a professor of politics and culture at England’s University of East Anglia, politicians utilize the power of popular culture in two distinct ways. First, they seek to associate themselves with popular culture. They seek to build their own “brand” as “cool” to maximize not only their political appeal but the general attractiveness of their candidacy. This can be seen clearly in what some have called the “likeability” factor. Second, politicians increasingly rely on popular culture techniques of mass marketing and advertising to increase their appeal, especially in hard-fought elections. So, politicians use the platform of popular culture to enhance their own images in the hopes of building a political coalition and weakening that of their opposition. As we will see, popular culture provides a powerful medium for politicians to attack their opponents as weak and soft-willed, while acclaiming their own resolve to triumph over the perceived threat.

Political scientists Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner describe another important aspect of our political system. In their article “Shaping Public Opinion,” the two scholars provide a case study in a political tactic with a long history—fear. Gershkoff and Kushner argue that by juxtaposing allusions to 9/11, al-Qaeda, and Iraq, President George W. Bush was able to rally support for his invasion, a form of acclaiming himself and his policies. This is but one example of a general feature of political rhetoric. Politicians create a sense of fear, and then claim to protect the nation. When you attack your opponent as “soft”—whether on crime, terrorism, or communism—the outcome is to rally people to your cause. By doing this, as Gershkoff and Kushner demonstrate, a politician can build support for his or her initiatives. This idea has important implications for an analysis of both Obama and Kennedy. Both men use the juxtaposition of images and ideas to create fear and build support.

Eric Foner provides an analysis very similar to Gershkoff and Kushner's, though his argument is more nuanced. He suggests two important ideas about Cold War rhetoric. The first is that Cold War presidents acclaimed America as the leader of the free world. He contends that American presidents anointed their nation as "the leader of a global crusade for freedom" and recognized a "national responsibility to lead the forces of the Free World." The second of Foner's major points regards American presidents' portrayal of the enemy. Cold War rhetoric attacked the Soviet Union as "a demonic, ideologically-driven antagonist." They derided the Soviet Union specifically, and communism in general, as the antithesis of all that Americans held dear. Foner's argument is a more nuanced analysis of the same idea Gershkoff and Kushner express; where Gershkoff and Kushner see only fear, Foner places greater weight on presidential self-representation. By conjuring images that evoke a visceral fearful reaction, and then going further to contrast them with the image of a strong and powerful United States, presidents were (and are) able to further build political power.

Together, the views of these scholars provide a groundwork for examining the inaugural addresses of John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama. It is clear that each man, though separated by time and space, utilizes rhetoric with the same motivation—building political support. The way each man attempts to do just that, by delivering that political message, is similar as well. Whether juxtaposing images, creating fear, or exploiting popular culture, both presidents acclaim and attack in similar and pragmatic ways.

At the very heart of Kennedy's inaugural address is the idea of American leadership. The speech opens with a resolute statement of principle that functions as an acclamation. Kennedy declares that the United States will "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty." Such a declaration is explicit in its assumption of leadership. Kennedy thunders that the United States will let nothing deter it from its solemn obligation as the leader of the free world to protect and defend liberty around the world. The newly inaugurated president assumes leadership for the United States again when he speaks to "those people in the huts and villages across the globe." He contends that the United States will not help them simply because "the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right." Here we see Kennedy take up the burden of world leadership once more. He contends that our moral compass dictates that we, as a nation, ought to work with and help poorer and less developed countries. Kennedy thus ties America unconditionally to a standard of liberty, equality, and moral superiority. Foner's claim in regards to the way Cold War presidents accepted a "responsibility to lead the forces of the Free World" helps explain this pledge. There are also important implications for the nation as a brand. In associating powerfully evocative ideas like liberty, freedom, and self-determination with the United States, Kennedy attempts to present a softer, less bellicose nation, in implicit contrast with the repressive Soviet Union.

Beyond simply accepting a mantle of responsibility for the United States, there is an added significance to Kennedy's words. It is important to note that the newly inaugurated president makes unequivocal and explicit references to American leadership. He does this to cast the United States in the best light possible. Rather than emphasize the ideological conflict with the Soviet Union, the president chooses to accentuate the pacific, more defensive aspect of his message. For instance, Kennedy argues that "[i]n the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger." Here Kennedy acknowledges challenges to America and the freedom we hold dear. It is interesting that he stops there. There is no fire, no brimstone, no explicit vilification of the Soviet Union. Instead, the president pledges the

United States to stand behind freedom unconditionally and to aid undeveloped nations. By choosing to focus on the ideas of leadership and aid, Kennedy downplays the conflict with the USSR that prompted these promises. According to contemporary American historian Herbert S. Parmet, Kennedy's leadership sent a "message of clear pragmatic idealism . . . that inspired a new generation of Americans" (33). Parmet captures the essence of Kennedy's purpose. His goal was to project the highest vision of American ideals in the most politically beneficial way possible. By explicitly elucidating an American commitment to freedom and aiding other nations, Kennedy accomplished just that. The strategy allowed the president to appease the less belligerent, more dovish elements in the American body politic. By appealing to this audience, Kennedy is building support—imperative to a president at the beginning of his first term.

Though Kennedy may have sought to present American interests in the best possible light, he was not conciliatory toward the Soviet Union. Much of his rhetoric was, in fact, designed to demonize America's rival. Early in the address, Kennedy describes the passing of the mantle of leadership to "a new generation . . . unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed." This statement is emblematic of the sort of nuanced rhetorical attacks Kennedy launches at the Soviet Union. Kennedy protests the "slow undoing of those human rights" without naming who or what is undoing them. It is obvious that his implication is the force of international communism personified by the USSR. We see this again later in the address. Kennedy expresses his hope to find developing nations "strongly supporting their own freedom," but immediately warns them to "remember that . . . those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside." Once again, Kennedy makes a subtle swipe at the Soviet Union. He warns the developing world not to be tempted by the promises of America's Soviet rivals—without explicitly referring to the communists.

The preceding examples demonstrate both Foner's and Gershkoff and Kushner's claims about political rhetoric. These passages exhibit implicit attempts to demonize the Soviet Union. Kennedy suggests the communists are waging war against human rights and depicts them as vicious beasts, willing to lure and consume their prey. By utilizing such rhetoric, Kennedy fits the Foner mold of vitriolic rhetoric. Additionally, Kennedy's rhetoric supports Gershkoff and Kushner's commentary on the power of fear. Kennedy claims that our core values are under siege and vows to safeguard them. By evoking a visceral fear in his audience and then acclaiming his ability to defend them from it, Kennedy demonstrates Gershkoff and Kushner's broader point about political rhetoric. The new president essentially plays on the fear of his audience. As we will see, Obama employs much the same strategy in his inaugural address.

Kennedy gains a strong advantage from this sort of implicit attack. Rather than focus on the enemy itself, he hones in on the American reaction to the perceived negative influence of the Soviet Union. Doing so allows the newly inaugurated president to claim that his speech is focused on peace. Simply vowing to defend human rights, omitting the name of the entity besieging those rights, Kennedy can, paradoxically, claim that he is committed to peace and yet remain aggressive in the defense of American values. Essentially, Kennedy is playing both sides of the Cold War fence. He is taking a tough stand against Soviet aggression, thus cultivating his Cold Warrior image. He promises to meet challenges to freedom unconditionally. This is a clear affront to Soviet power. And yet, by not naming the Soviet Union explicitly, he can claim a peaceful posture. Despite this, the fact remains that he delicately takes swipes at the Soviet Union. By focusing on the American response to Soviet actions and not the Soviet actions themselves, the president positions

himself for maximum political gain: playing to both sides and the middle of the political spectrum and building political support early in his term. On one hand, he plays to the doves by accentuating the peaceful posture of his address. By vowing increased humanitarian aid to the developing world, he placates those who favor the soft power politics of goodwill. On the other hand, he plays to the hawks by maintaining a tough, though veiled, stance towards the Soviet Union, thus hoping to satisfy those pushing for a more confrontational policy towards the communists. By appealing to both sides of the spectrum, Kennedy's purpose is to build support for his foreign policy.

It is important to place Kennedy's rhetoric in relation to Cold Warriors before and after. The veiled attack Kennedy employs in his address establishes the young president as a Cold Warrior in different way than other Cold War presidents. Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan created their Cold Warrior personas by hurling invective against the Iron Curtain. By doing this, both men were able to effectively acclaim their own abilities to defend the nation. President Eisenhower, in his "Crusade for Freedom" speech, ascribes "political wickedness," "cold-blooded betrayal," and "godless depravity" to the Kremlin (142). Ronald Reagan, in his "Evil Empire" speech, decries the Soviet Union as the "focus of evil in the modern world." Rather than engage in this sort of language of confrontation, Kennedy chooses a more tempered approach, in line with the rhetoric of Harry S. Truman. In the "Truman Doctrine" speech, the president speaks at length about the spread of totalitarianism without naming the Soviet Union and its expansionism explicitly. Truman then goes on to pledge U.S. aid to free peoples around the world. Kennedy does much the same thing. By attacking the Soviets only implicitly and elucidating the benefits of American leadership and intervention, both Kennedy and Truman maintain a less bellicose posture.

Fifty years later, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in a conflict similar to the one Kennedy faced all those decades ago. Though the enemies now are shadowy terrorist organizations and other sub-state actors, the rhetoric of this new war is not so different from that of the previous generation. The inaugural rhetoric of President Barack Obama and John F. Kennedy is similar. Like Kennedy, President Obama lays out a statement of guiding principles. Obama is firm and overt in his acceptance of American leadership in a mono-polar geopolitical climate, thus acclaiming his and our position as world leaders. "Know that America is a friend of each nation," the new president thunders, "and every man, woman, and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity and that we are ready to lead once more." Here Obama, like Kennedy, is explicit in his acceptance of the American mantle of responsibility. He promises people the world over that the United States will work for the benefit of all those looking for "peace and dignity." This statement is very similar to Kennedy's pledge to help "those people in the huts and villages across the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery." In these instances, both Obama's and Kennedy's messages imply American aid to the developing world. Because both men inherited nations already deeply embroiled in world politics, it became their obligation to sustain the energy of the American public for international intervention by acclaiming themselves as engaged leaders. Accordingly, they recognize the power of American leadership and accept the responsibility of using that power for human progress. Obama's purpose is much the same as Kennedy's—pragmatism. While we may reserve judgment on the character of Presidents Kennedy and Obama, the political aspect of pledging American humanitarian support—acclaiming their abilities to deliver the American ideas of progress and liberty to a dark world—is undeniable.

While the two presidents may have similar rhetorical styles in regards to American leadership, the way they approach their respective enemies does differ. On the one hand, Kennedy attacks by

implication. He almost chides the emerging world by reminding it that in the past, “those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.” The tiger is unmistakably a metaphor for the Soviet Union. Or take Kennedy’s commitment to prevent the “slow undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed.” Someone must be undoing those human rights, but Kennedy leaves that party nameless. Obama is much more direct in his denunciation. He calls out terrorists explicitly: “For those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken; you cannot outlast us and we will defeat you.” These lines are unequivocal: those who create terror and prey on innocents in the hopes of advancing their agenda will be destroyed. There is no innuendo or metaphor or implication. There is no debate or hesitation. Obama pledges to explicitly defeat terrorists. The purpose behind such an unambiguous statement is simple. Because terrorism continues to cast a pall over the American people, acclamations of strength such as this go a long way towards gaining the confidence and trust of the people—an element essential to governing.

There are important theoretical implications in the characterization of the enemy. Here, both presidents are attempting to build their public personas. It is important for Kennedy not to name the Soviet Union to continue the duality of his image: keeping alive the idea that he is both peacemaker and Cold Warrior. For Obama, it is imperative that he single out his enemies the way he does. He is working to build his public persona as a strong commander in chief. Questioned on the issue of his strength during the preceding presidential campaign, Obama needed to appear strong on defense issues. Next, the contrast between the two inaugural addresses has important implications for Eric Foner’s argument about Cold War rhetoric. Obama’s rhetoric in the context of the War on Terror appears to fit the Foner argument better than John F. Kennedy’s speech at the height of the preceding conflict. Foner describes American presidents assuming a mantle of world leadership and assailing a “demonic, ideologically-driven antagonist.” Obama does just that five decades later. He unequivocally promises aid and friendship to the developing world and explicitly demonizes his enemy as those “inducing terror and slaughtering innocents.” Kennedy similarly pledges leadership, but he employs a less direct method of demonization; rather than name the Soviet Union explicitly, he attacks by implication.

In the end, for a nation that supposedly prides itself on its devotion to human progress, it is troubling that our national discourse remains little changed from an era we thought we had passed. It is clear that the way we discuss our enemies has changed little between the Cold War generation and the emerging War on Terror generation. Whether the threat to our nation is Russian communists or militant jihadists, the way our leaders discuss these foes is the same. This conclusion is unsurprising, for what motivates our politicians has not changed. Johns Hopkins University professor Benjamin Ginsberg, in his piece “The Political Uses of Political Issues,” asks, “[W]hat motivates our politicians?” On one hand, the optimist might suggest the welfare of the people. Surely, the belief holds, our leaders enter the political realm for the betterment of the people they serve. It follows, then, that the motivations of our leaders are pure. On the other hand, cynics like Ginsberg contend that politicians are interested not so much in the benefit to the public of their policies as in the political benefits those policies create. For example, Ginsberg suggests Democrats favor labor-friendly policy in order to enjoy the electoral power of unions, while Republicans favor supply-side economics to curry favor with the business community. The static nature of political motivations helps explain the similarities in rhetoric we have observed.

Motivation for politicians is simple: employment. Rare is the politician who can think past the next election cycle. As Robert F. Kennedy once said, “[M]oral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence.” While I concede there are politicians of honor and integrity, their presence is too seldom felt. Money and politics intermingle freely. Political posturing for the next election begins just days after the preceding one ends. Compromise, the engine of our political system, is toxic. These signs point towards a more Ginsbergian reality. Political rhetoric is focused on winning elections, not a true statement of principle. Because of this simple truth, the quality of discourse has deteriorated, along with the quality of politicians. The remedy to this nasty evolution of our political system remains to be discovered. In a cultural climate so darkened and pessimistic, so willing to destroy the very heroes it creates, it may be near impossible to resurrect what was once a noble profession. Sadly, all that is certain is that tactics like those used by Kennedy and Obama will continue into the near future.

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