The Use of Slogans in Political Rhetoric

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Introduction

From the earliest days of the American republic, political slogans have been used to motivate and to convey mood or opinion. Inherent within the idea of representative government is communication between the people and their government. It is through this communication that the ideas of the public are heard and that the government must consolidate support for its actions.

This paper focuses on the use of slogans within political rhetoric. The research focuses on the phrasing of the slogan, the connotation and association of the words used within them, and the motivational quality of slogans. Simply stated, this paper is a look into how and why political slogans are successful. The research is directed away from political slogans that are specifically created and used for campaign purposes and instead looks at the political slogans that are less vote-getting in orientation and have been used to shape public opinion or motivate a public action.

The use of political slogans is one rhetorical method by which a large group of people may express their collective ideas. The American political system operates on the premise of consent of the governed and slogan is a medium through which the governed may voice collective consent or disapproval. For its vast importance as a major component of communication between the public and the government, political slogans are an area worthy of research.

Methodology

A survey of the current literature in addition to original thought will be used to offer definitions of a political slogan and examine its use in current political rhetoric. An Aristotelian analysis will be used to evaluate the persuasive ability of two slogans that are products of the post-September 11th war effort, Bush policy, and public surge of patriotism.

Political Slogan Defined

The origin of the word slogan is "from the Gaelic 'sluagh-ghairm' meaning a clan's battle-cry".[1] The linguist, William Safire in

Safire's Political Dictionary gives an introductory definition of slogan as "a rallying cry; catch phrase; a brief message that crystallizes an idea, defines an issue, the best of which thrill, exhort, and inspire." Here Safire asserts a purpose for the slogan that captures its persuasive use within American political society. To thrill, exhort, and inspire is at the heart of persuading an audience. To evoke these emotions is the start of persuasion.[2]

Barry defines a political slogan as "a catchword or rallying motto distinctly associated with a political party or other group." He goes on to explain that "(a)lthough a slogan generally originates with the president or a member of the administration, its effectiveness depends on acceptance and use by the public." It is important to note Barry's association of a slogan with a particular political party is primarily in its origin. It is possible for slogans to transcend party lines and become adopted by the nation as a whole. While its origins might remain rooted in an event or administration, the most successful slogans need not be forever tied to a particular party. [3]

In function, political slogans are typically a "brief statement of a single idea" Brevity makes them "easy to remember and repeat"[4]. Slogans can come to characterize the ideas of those who use it. They become concise expressions of consent for a political action. By adopting a slogan, the user is offering his or her approval of the action that it defines.

A single slogan contrasts starkly with an entire multi-faceted political agenda. The slogan is a generalized conception of what may in reality be a complex political initiative. For example, Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" came to mean economic renewal and assistance in an effort to rebuild the nation after the depression era. This initiative was carried out through complicated and extensive government action. For a person to approve of the "New Deal" did not mean that he personally adopted the specific government actions that were taking place. Slogans offer a broad conceptualization of what is typically an entire government agenda. It is a generalization that serves to simplify a complex system of government action. One would infer incorrectly that adoption of a slogan and the consent implied by the use of that slogan can be applied likewise to the specific actions taking place as part of the initiative that the slogan describes.

Uses of Slogans

Slogans have maintained their importance in the dialogue between the American government and its people, particularly as technology has changed the mediums of communication. The use of radio and television has "magnified the effectiveness of sound bites, defined as brief, memorable statements."[5] These sound bites may either evolve into political slogans or realize their intended purpose as such. While this process may have occurred spontaneously in the in the early days of oral-mass communication, today it is much less so. After major speeches or addresses from political figures, commentators strive to be the first to find the catch phrase. Everyone looks to see what will stick in the minds of the listener.

Slogans act as a means by which the general public may express their opinions on public issues. Bailey goes so far as to assert, "slogans or catch phrases are about the only medium through which large numbers of ordinary citizens can express their views personally and repeatedly for or against given candidates or propositions."[6]

While it is to the merit of slogans that they at least encourage interest and participation in the political system, a negative implication of their use is that they do not foster in-depth knowledge of public issues. Several authors have pointed out that slogans may have detrimental effects on the public. "Catch phrases are undoubtedly foes of sober reasoning; they implant the comfortable but illusory feeling that the user is thinking when only mouthing."[7] "A good catchword can obscure analysis for fifty years."[8] "Most people would rather die than think. In fact some do."[9] "Catch phrases are almost invariable one-sided, with little or no room for qualifiers or argument. They often contain untruth or half-truths . . ."[10]

Because slogans generalize the idea in question, typically with the intent to evoke persuasive emotion from the listener, they encourage that a blind eye be turned towards the facts surrounding the issue. Bailey touches on this phenomenon with analysis of the use of the phrase "Remember Pearl Harbor" offered as justification for the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In this type of use, a slogan serves not only to generalize the matter at hand, but also as an "opiate for the conscience."[11]   For the listener, adopting the slogan serves as a substitute for mentally weighing the moral aspects of a political decision.

The attractiveness of a slogan from a rhetorical standpoint does not determine its success with the public. Alliteration, a popular rhetor-

ical tool within political slogans, often suggests by its presence, "the absence of content: the less specific the idea, the larger the vocabulary a speechwriter can select from in order to find a matching consonant."[12] Meaning is key to the success of slogans. Regardless of the pleasantries achieved through sloganeering, the message must be one of meaning and importance to achieve popular use and success. " . . . slogans work better if they mean something." "The New Deal is short on finesse, but it put together the best-remembered pair of mono-syllables in American history."[13]

"Let's roll"

The War on Terror has produced a slogan that, given the historic context of its origin, might well be expected to endure as one of the most poignant and widely used political catchphrases in our nation's history. The phrase, "Let's roll" uttered by passenger Todd Beamer on one of the doomed September 11th flights as he and other passengers attempted to overtake their hijackers, has assumed the roles of political slogan and battle cry to both the Bush administration and the American people. It is particularly interesting to the study of political slogans because of the origin of its popular use. "Let's roll" is not one of the carefully crafted political catch phrases that today's slogans typically are. It was spoken by an everyday American and has risen to prominent political status by politicians who have adopted it.

The phrase originally referred to "wheels of conveyance . . . and dates back to the 16th century." Today, in it's popular sense, "Let's roll" means, " 'let's get going'; 'let's move.' "[14]   This popular meaning of the phrase was in use long before September 11. While "Let's roll" was not created by Todd Beamer, the phrase's newfound fervor did originate in its use by the passenger.

"Let's roll" has taken on additional meaning after September 11. It has come to mean doing the unpopular task because you are called on to do so. This describes the way that the nation sees Todd Beamer and the other passengers, as well as the Bush administration. There is a sense within the phrase's use that it is not by choice that we are rolling, but that we choose to roll rather than give up. "Many diverse Americans have latched onto the phrase 'Let's roll' to symbolize strength of character."[15]

The uses of "Let's roll," are far-reaching. It has been used as the title of an impromptu musical release from veteran rock star, Neil

Young.[16]   There is "Let's roll" paraphernalia spanning the shelves from t-shirts to mouse pads.[17]   It has been the headline of newspapers and magazines and used by high-ranking leaders from both political parties.[18,19]   Safire notes that "Let's roll's" "informal sense [has] achieved heroic status."[20]   The phrase has been adopted as a national slogan almost overnight.

For the Bush administration adoption of the phrase consolidates support for its response to the attacks. The president has made reference to either Todd Beamer or the slogan "Let's roll" in two presidential addresses. Beamer's widow was present at the president's address before the joint session of Congress on September 20. Bush welcomed her from the speaker's platform by saying; "We have seen it [American resolve] in the courage of passengers, who rushed terrorists to save others on the ground – passengers like an exceptional man named Todd Beamer. And would you please help me to welcome his wife, Lisa Beamer, here tonight." Later Bush used the phrase in a speech delivered on November 8 from the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta that helped to develop the popular meaning of the phrase.

"Above all, we will live in a spirit of courage and optimism.
Our nation was born in that spirit of courage and optimism. Our
nation was born in that spirit, as immigrants yearning for freedom
courageously risked their lives in search of greater opportunity.
That spirit of optimism and courage still beckons people across
the world who want to come here. And that spirit of optimism
and courage must guide those of us fortunate enough to live here.
Courage and optimism led the passengers on Flight 93 to rush
their murderers to save lives on the ground. Led by a young man
whose last known words are the Lord's Prayer and let's roll. He
didn't know that he had signed on for heroism when he boarded
the plan that day. Some of our great moments have been acts of
courage for which no one could have ever prepared. We will
always remember the words of that brave man expressing the
spirit of a great country."[21]

In this excerpt from a nationally televised prime-time address, Bush offers his administration's meaning to "Let's roll." The phrase comes to symbolize courage without preparation and heroism without expectation. Through the use of the phrase, Bush is urging his audience that all Americans have the potential to possess these heroic qualities when called upon.

"Let's roll" has been used to inspire all Americans to be good citizens and to be active in the effort of awareness and diligence that is unfolding as the war's home front. One author goes so far as to assert that the awareness and sense of duty of passengers who stopped the shoe-bomb attack on a flight months after September 11th, can be attributed to the spirit of citizenship that has come from the public admiration of what Beamer and the other passengers on Flight 93 accomplished.[22]

An Aristotelian analysis of "Let's roll" reveals that it has strong possession of the elements of communication critical to persuasion. "As Aristotle makes clear in his Rhetoric, persuasion is necessary whenever listeners, readers, or viewers are faced with a choice. This may be a choice involving a particular action . . . Or the choice may involve preferring one interpretation of a situation over others . . ." [23] In evaluating the persuasive qualities of a statement, in this case, the political slogan, "Let's roll" Aristotelian analysis breaks down the statement into three characteristics: ethos - the credibility of the speaker, pathos - the emotion of the message, and logos - the logic of the argument. These three interact to create persuasion.

The ethos of a speaker is further categorized into three elements: pronesis, arete, and eunoia. Beginning with the pronesis of the message we see that "Let's roll" connotes both practical wisdom and common sense that are key to this quality of persuasion. For the Flight 93 passengers, who knew through cell phone conversations with people on the ground that the hijackers planned to crash their plane into a building, attempting to take back their plane was the practical solution because it would save lives. The slogan "Let's roll" takes that courage and optimism that the president attached to the phrase and seems to convey that now it is only practical that we engage in action to counter the attacks on our nation. "Let's roll" does not consider the odds for success. It rolls along with the practical wisdom that the job must be done and that it has been called to do so.

The idea of being pre-appointed for a difficult task is part of what "Let's roll" has come to mean. This can be attributed to Aristotle's arete, or moral virtue of the speaker. There is a meaning of "Let's roll" that seems to offer that when a person is called on to "roll" it becomes their duty to do so. To shirk from this duty would be less than heroic and courageous. The passengers are viewed as being called to the task at hand by an outside force. They did not choose their role in the

attacks, but once called, nothing short of the extraordinary qualities of courage and heroism would achieve success.

The use of "Let's roll" is closely associated with the idea of good will. The act of self-sacrifice made by the passengers is certainly out of goodwill. In its uses since the attack, goodwill is present as well. The desire to own "Let's roll" merchandise, from Neil Young's single to patriotic t-shirts is an act of goodwill. This modern war has offered little in the way of home front participation. For Americans anxious to show their approval and support for the war effort, adoption of the slogan "Let's roll" is one way to voice goodwill and in turn participate in the effort.

Aristotle's *pathos* is an "appeal to those states of mind that have an emotional component."[24] "Let's roll" has been shrouded in emotional pleas since its first use aboard the doomed flight. The president ended his address in November from the CDC with an appeal to the emotion of Americans not to shirk from duty:

"We will never forget all we have lost and all we are fighting for. Ours is the cause of freedom. We have defeated freedom's enemies before, and we will defeat them again. We cannot know every turn this battle will take. Yet we know our cause is just, and our ultimate victory is assured. We will no doubt face new challenges. But we have our marching orders. My fellow Americans, let's roll." [25]

Americans are to answer our "marching orders" as the passengers answered theirs, and to display the same courage and heroism in the face of grave danger. The use of the term "marching orders" is interesting because it gives the idea that the orders are not being issued by the nation's commander-in-chief. Instead the orders come to us by an outside force that exists on a higher moral ground. The president is serving as merely the communicator of these orders, not the origin.

"Let's roll" makes a logical plea to its listener. The listener sees a past example of "Let's roll" achieving success in the passengers who foiled the plans of their hijackers. The logic of "Let's roll" is that if they can act under dire circumstance, so can we as a nation. The slogan urges action. The contraction, "let's" for "let us" tells the listener who is to act. The phrase is active in nature, commanding us through the verb, roll, that we must make a response to its call. This motivational quality of the slogan is key to its success. It is clear what action the listener is being called to and why that action is just. The action is a logical one

and the origin of the message is noble. The logos acts as the combination of ethos and pathos and together the three create a slogan that is powerful as a piece of persuasive political rhetoric.

"Axis of Evil"

On January 29, 2002, Bush delivered his State of the Union Address, soon to be known as the "axis of evil speech". Early in the address, the president declared that, "States like these [Iraq, Iran, and North Korea] and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world."[26] This phrase has come to be known as the "Bush Doctrine" and represents the administration's intended policy to broaden the War on Terror to include countries other than Afghanistan. "It [the speech] was a historic action heralding the Bush Doctrine of possible preemptive strikes"[27]

The phrase conjures up images of the axis powers during World War II, a struggle that the nation's current war is often compared to. Inside the administration, that this new axis was intended to remind us all of the WWII axis is both confirmed and denied. "Some aides insisted the phrase was a conscious reference to the World War II axis powers; others argued it was not."[28] That a professional speech writer, or any high-ranking political official could not presume that the "Axis of Evil" statement would be seen as a reference to WWII seems a bit unbelievable. Surely the reference was intended as such. Safire defines an axis as "alliance of powers; specifically, the Axis Powers . . . during World War II. The word comes from the imaginary line that can be drawn though a body, and around which that body could revolve." [29] It turns out that the new axis was thrown into the speech as an "afterthought, a means of lifting Bush's rhetorical sights. . ."[30] White House Counselor Karen Hughes commented that the "Axis of Evil" was meant to be a "good quotable phrase."[31]

Intentional or not, the "Axis" will likely be one of the more memorable statements of the Bush presidency. It is powerful as a political slogan, gaining its initial credibility from the formal and time-honored setting of a State of the Union Address, which reentered it into the national lexicon. The phrase is emotional, with its images of World War II. This association lends it a moral virtue as well; World War II is seen as one of our nation's most noble endeavors. WWII connotes a just-cause, which serves as a much needed rhetorical boost for the Bush Doctrine. The logic of the phrase is carefully established as well. The

speech lays out the misdeeds of the new axis nations and swiftly concludes that action is needed. The use of the word evil is reminiscent of Ronald Reagan's speech that dubbed the Soviet Union an "evil empire."[32] This black and white description of right and wrong touches on both the logic and moral virtue of the slogan.

Despite longstanding etiquette among White House speechwriters that discourages claiming authorship of presidential terms and phrases, there has been considerable discussion of who authored the phrase "axis of evil." In the days after the address, the wife of deputy White House speech writer David Frum sent out and email to family and friends expressing "wifely pride" that her "husband was responsible for the 'Axis of Evil' segment of [the] State of the Union address." Time magazine credited both Frum and director of speech writing, Michael Gerson with penning the phrase. Frum has become the author popularly credited with the phrase though he comments that he wrote it only in part. "His version was 'axis of hate.' 'I think it was actually the president who changed hate to evil,' [Frum] said." While other sources have attributed the word evil to Gerson, crediting the president with putting the key term into the phrase may be a "gracious fib" on Frum's part.

The phrase "Axis of Evil" has achieved both notoriety and memorability, but Bush's "axis" seems to have failed in generating support for widening the war on an international front. "There is mounting international concern about President George W. Bush's grouping together of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an 'axis of evil'." "The phrase has revived Bush's reputation abroad as a swaggering unilateralist, just at the very moment his message is supposed to be coalition, coalition, coalition." Calling the three nations an axis is a bit of a rhetorical stretch. The WWII axis powers were allied nations as the term axis implies. Iran, Iraq, and North Korea have no formal alliance between them. They are not working together for any common purpose and have no common ideological ground.

Interesting to note is that Bush's "go-it-alone" attitude concerning foreign policy is in keeping with the use of the slogan "Let's roll" as a characterization of policy. The phrase communicates a willingness to do what is right despite popularity. The "Axis of Evil" draws clear distinction between good and evil, while "Let's roll" promises to act in a way that is noble regardless of the difficulties that may be encountered and perhaps without fully taking these difficulties into consideration.

Slogan and the Power of Association

There are some less prominent examples of the power of slogans in our current political atmosphere. Slogans, by design, stick in the minds of the audience. This is a wonderful rhetorical tool when the slogan well-characterizes a message that a political figure wants to be remembered. The following examples illustrate how slogans may have negative implications and how association with a slogan is sometimes avoided.

When Governor George W. Bush was campaigning for the presidency in summer of 2000, the use of a Texas slogan during his nomination acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention was disturbing to at least one commentator. Bush, making reference to the Late Lt. Gov. of Texas, Bob Bullock, stirred up the crowd by belting out a popular banter of his home state, "Don't Mess with Texas" in response to his opposition's criticism of the state in an attempt to show the governor unworthy of the White House. Paul Merrion writing for Crain's Chicago Business commented on Bush's use of the popular Texas motto, "George W. Bush didn't invent that line, but his decision to use it may have been the most revealing statement in the whole speech. It goes to the heart of what type of president he would be . . . In spouting this cliché of Texas politics, Gov. Bush showed we have a candidate for president of the United States who believes that one state in particular has some sort of special status."[33]

This point illustrates the power of association within a well-established political slogan. The association of a particular slogan, this case, "Don't mess with Texas" is considered indicative of the candidate's motivations and may go so far as to give hints to future policy action if Bush were elected.

Before his inauguration, Bush announced that a political slogan that had been on the plates of presidential limousines under the Clinton administration would no longer be allowed. The plates read, "No taxation without representation" and were a statement in favor of D.C. statehood, a proposition that Clinton supported. The Bush administration, opposed to D.C. statehood, ordered that the plates be removed, the president-elect commenting, "He was not interested in using license plates to make a 'political statement.'" Once again, this can be used to underscore the importance of slogans in the political atmosphere. Bush, not wanting that he be associated with the resurrection a powerful slogan

now used to favor D.C. statehood, had the plates were removed.

Conclusion

The role of slogans within the political discourse of our democratic government is an important tool for masses of Americans to voice their opinions about public action. It remains one of the few ways for the public to show their approval or disapproval of their government. The Bush administration illustrates the powerful public association that slogans may have. Slogans work best if they are composed of meaningful, persuasive messages that move the audience on the basis of emotion, reason, and credibility. A slogan that is comprised of these elements may illicit action from its audience and shapes the mindset of those who adopt it.

Notes

[1]Geoffrey Hare, "Studying political slogans as communication." *Francophonie: The French Journal of the Association for Language Learning* 3 (June 1991) : 24.

[2]William Safire, *Safire's Political Dictionary* 3d ed., An enlarged, up-to-date edition of *The New Language of Politics* (New York and Toronto: Random House, 1978, 654.

[3]Herbert Barry III, *Politically Speaking*, ed. Ofer Feldman and Christ'l De Landtsheer (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998) 161.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6]Thomas A. Bailey with Stephen M. Dobbs, *Voices of America: The Nation's Story in Slogans, Sayings and Songs*, (New York: The Free Press, 1976) 501.

[7]Ibid., 502.

[8]Wendell Willkie, qtd. in Bailey, *Voices of America*, 502.

[9] Bertrand Russell, qtd. in Bailey, *Voices of America*, 502.

[10] Bailey, *Voices of America*, 502.

[11]Ibid.

[12]"Alliteration Abuse," *The Economist*, 15 January 1994, 20.

[13]Ibid.

[14]William Safire, "Roll's Roles" *New York Times Magazine*, 23 December 2001, 16.

[15]Charlotte Faltermayer, "Let's Roll," *Time*, 31 December 2001, 108.

[16] Ellin Martens "An Old Rocker Rolls Again for September 11," *Time Atlantic*, 24 December 2001, 67.

[17]Charlotte Faltermayer "Let's Roll," *Time*, 31 December 2001, 108.

[18]*National Review*, 15 October 2001, cover page.

[19]Tom Daschle, "Democratic Response to the President's Weekly Radio Address," 15 December 2001.

[20]William Safire, "Roll's Roles" *New York Times Magazine*, 23 December 2001, 16.

[21]George W. Bush, "Presidential Address," 8 November 2001.

[22]"Let's Roll," *Wall Street Journal* – Eastern Edition, 28 December 2001, W13.

[23] William A. Covino, *The Elements of Persuasion*, The

Elements of Composition Series, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1998), 5.
    [24]Ibid., 8.
        [25] George W. Bush, "Presidential Address," 8 November 2001.
        [26]George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," 29 January
2002.
        [27]Caspar W. Weinberger, "Current Events," *Forbes*, 4 March,
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        [28]Carney, James and John F. Dickerson, "A Message Machine
with the Hiccups," *Time*, 11 March 2002, 39.
        [29]William Safire, *Safire's Political Dictionary*, 30.
        [30]Carney, James and John F. Dickerson, "A Message Machine
with the Hiccups," *Time*, 11 March 2002, 39.
        [31]Karen Hughes, qtd. in: Carney, James and John F. Dickerson,
"A Message Machine with the Hiccups," *Time*, 11 March 2002, 39.
        [32] Paul Merrion, "George W. Must Clean Up his 'Don't Mess'
Message" *Crain's Chicago Business*, 14 August 2000, 1-2.
        [33]"Political License Plate Out, Bush Says," *New York Times* 19
January 2001, A27.

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