

# A short course in Nixon's rhetoric.

by Jeff Greenfield

Twenty-five years ago, in his classic essay, "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell urged us to pay attention to the language of politicians—and explained the importance of political speech. "When there is a gap between one's real and dedicated aims," he said, "one turns . . . instinctively to boring words, exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink. . . . When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer."

This brings me to the President.

After three years in office, Mr. Nixon's rhetorical devices have gone almost unexamined. Apart from the "Let me make this perfectly clear" catch phrase, and Garry Wills's masterful book "Nixon Agonistes," the President has escaped a serious look at the way he speaks to us.

Part of the reason for this indifference is that the Vice-President's way with words is so colorful and controversial. When Mr. Agnew wants to urge law enforcement officials to kill minor lions, he does so unblushingly.

The more substantial reason, however, is that President Nixon speaks with not one but many voices, each separate from the other. Unlike the elegant, insistent, at times belligerently defiant phrases of John Kennedy, or the folksy sermonizing of Lyndon

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Johnson, Mr. Nixon has no defining voice. After a quarter of a century spent shaping himself to what he believed America wished of him—now Cold Warrior, now China visitor, now free-market advocate, now Rooseveltian economist—Mr. Nixon has succeeded too well. He has escaped from himself. There is no core, and thus there is no center from which he speaks.

There are, nonetheless, defin-

able voices of the Nixon Presidency. Herewith a short guide to the most prevalent of them.

## 1. *The Inspirational Leader*

When he seeks to uplift the American people, Mr. Nixon starts from a sound instinct: namely, that nobody is a passionate Nixon partisan. Americans may or may not respect his judgment or his political skill, but the kind of faith that has surrounded other American leaders—FDR, Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, the Kennedys—simply is not his. Mr. Nixon therefore strives to sound like his version of other leaders, scrounging through the Inspirational Appeals attic for

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used rhetorical remnants of others, speaking the words that sound to him the way a Real Leader Ought to Sound.

His 1968 acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention is a re-write of Martin Luther King's famous 1963 "March on Washington" address. Where King used "I have a dream" to describe his vision of a world where black and white will achieve equality, Nixon said, "I see a day . . . when every child in this land . . . I see a day when we will again have freedom from fear . . . I see a day when . . ."

Mr. Nixon's Inaugural Address is a straight re working of JFK's 1960 inaugural Kennedy-style conditional phrases run riot: "To those who would be our adversaries . . . with those who are willing to join . . . to all those who would be tempted by weakness." The new President absorbed whole one of Kennedy's favorite rhetorical tricks—the self-uplifting phrase, like "globe" or "planet" for "world," or great lengths of time which suggest that the speaker is part of the sweep of Time.

Thus, said Mr. Nixon in his inaugural, some moments "stand out as moments of beginning in which courses are set that shape decades of centuries . . . within the lifetime of most people now

living, mankind will celebrate that great new year which comes only once in 1000 years—the beginning of the third millennium."

And in a revision of Adlai Stevenson's tribute to Eleanor Roosevelt ("she would rather light a candle than curse the darkness"), the President said: "We have endured a long, dark night of the American spirit. But as our eyes catch the first rays of dawn, let us not curse the remaining dark. Let us gather the light."

And finally, in his most agonizing reach toward the Inspirational, Mr. Nixon told us that "the American dream does not come to those who fall asleep."

These are, of course, solecisms. Apart from the propriety of a new President describing his tenure as "the first rays of dawn," Mr. Nixon has mixed it all up. Light is not gathered. A term like "remaining dark" is intrusive, like a corporate by-law in a Keats poem. And to keep the metaphor consistent, a dream can come *only* to those who fall asleep. But to Mr. Nixon's ear, these phrases sound like what others, all Validated Inspirers, have decreed Inspirational.

## 2. The Pious Parallels

For more than a decade, we have been bombarded with the device of Parallelism as a quick fix to elevate discourse. It speaks to us not of issues but of image—not of decisions, but of declamations—not of the pious platitudes of the past, but of a firm, forward faith in a fragrant future.

Thus the President: "In throwing wide the horizons of

space, we have discovered new horizons on earth . . . we find ourselves rich in goods but ragged in spirit . . . we cannot make everyone our friend, but we can try to make no one our enemy . . . we will be as strong as we need to be for as long as we need to be . . . our destiny offers not the cup of despair, but the chalice of opportunity . . ."

Mr. Nixon's best, however, comes from an address to the Air Force Academy in June 1969: "The American defense establishment should never be a sacred cow, but, on the other hand, the American military should never be anybody's scapegoat."

Hot dog.

## 3. The Historic First

Mr. Nixon seems to fear that History is going to forget that he is President and therefore a Figure of Historic Importance. In order to remind posterity of its duty to him, Mr. Nixon keeps telling it, and us—with statistical precision—just why his remarks are Historic.

Every dinner party, every visit, is encrusted with the trappings of Significance, much as a baseball announcer explains that *this* pop fly is a truly great play and a new record for right-handed Methodists in the second inning of play-off games on the West Coast.

Thus, Mr. Nixon greeted Canada's Pierre Trudeau with: "Every moment becomes a historical moment when it occurs. And this, Mr. Prime Minister, is a historic moment in this room, because it is the first state dinner

that has been held in this room

since the new administration came to office." (You can see what the President can do with a few skilled furniture movers.)

He told Labor Leaders a year ago that "this is a very special occasion in the history of the White House, the first occasion on which this kind of a party has been held on Labor Day."

On his foreign trips, Mr. Nixon told every airport crowd that it was (or was not) the first time that a President, or *this* President, had been to *this* city. And at the Djakarta Airport in 1969, he topped himself: "On this occasion," he said, "I realize that the position I am in is a unique one—one which will not occur again—because since I am the first American President ever to pay a state visit to Indonesia, the next American President who comes here will not be in the position I presently find myself in."

Or as they used to say on tv, "compare Pall Mall with any short cigarette: Pall Mall is longer."

This drive for Historic First apparently explains the hyperbole with which Mr. Nixon can describe some of his achievements, such as calling his 1971 State of the Union address "by far the most comprehensive, the most far-reaching, the most bold program in the domestic field ever presented to an American Congress," one which would "reform the entire structure of government," and one which the President's closest adviser called "the greatest document since they wrote the Constitution."

(Since this adviser is also the Attorney General of the United States, it is enlightening to note the ease with which the Bill of Rights was dislodged from its accustomed rank.)

The whole effect is that Mr. Nixon fears that his Presidency is illegitimate—that someday "they" will come and take it away from him, unless he can prove his right to the office by wrapping his remarks in Significance.

## 4. Bump and Run

The President came into office with a 20-year stereotype as "Tricky Dick," the vaguely untrustworthy character assassin of the 1950s who first won office by slandering his congressional and senatorial opponents. But in fact, Mr. Nixon's real style is different. He prefers to protest his respect for an opponent even as the shiv is finding flesh between the ribs. This rhetorical technique dates back at least to the 1952 "Checkers" speech, in which Mr. Nixon said, "I believe it's fine that a man like Governor Stevenson, who inherited a fortune from his father, can run for President."

As President, Mr. Nixon has used the "bump and run" tactic both to attack his rivals and to praise himself.

When Senator Muskie objected to the administration's plans for a \$3 billion tax break for business, Mr. Nixon said, "Now any senator or any critic who wants to oppose a program that is going to mean more jobs for Americans, peacetime jobs rather than wartime

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jobs (*bump*), has a right to take that position (*run*)."

Responding to former Defense Secretary Clark Clifford's appeal for faster withdrawal from Vietnam, President Nixon said that he respected Mr. Clifford's right to an opinion (*run*), but that we should remember that Mr. Clifford worked for the administration that escalated the war (*bump*).

Talking with ABC correspondent Howard K. Smith in February 1970, Mr. Nixon observed: "It is true of all the Presidents in this century, it is probably true that I have less, as somebody said, supporters in the press than any President (*bump*). I understand that (*run*)."

This same device is used by the President to point to his own achievements. In describing his Vietnam achievements at the University of Nebraska last January, Mr. Nixon said, "It is no comfort to me that when I came into office I wrote 300 (condolence) letters a week, and that this week I will write 27."

Or, in describing the economy during his 1971 State of the Union address: "We should take no comfort from the fact that the level of unemployment in this transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy is lower than in any peacetime year of the '60s."

## 5. Who Said That?

The President, befitting his role as a statesman, rarely meets an attack head on. He prefers instead to summarize it, assign its advocacy to anonymous prepositions, and then dispose of the argument he himself has set up.

In talking with a group of businessmen last February, President Nixon said: "I am not among *those* who believe that the United States would be just a wonderful place . . . if we could just get rid of *all of this industrial progress* that has made us the richest and strongest nation in the world." (My italics, here and later.)

Who said that? Who is advocating such a step? The Sierra Club? Senator Muskie? Six Druids from Southern California? We don't know. But it is a remarkable description of the goals of the movement against pollution.

Here is how Mr. Nixon described economic criticisms in an April speech to the Chamber of Commerce: "We are told that a free enterprise system which has made possible not only our standard of living but our standard of giving" (another parallel) "should be *dismantled and replaced* by a system of bureaucratic controls."

As it turns out, Mr. Nixon must have been told this by the Secretary of the Treasury, now administering the most rigid set of bureaucratic controls in American peacetime history (another historic first!). But who has called for the "dismantling" of the free enterprise system within the American political forum? The Chicago Seven? Ralph Nader? Hubert Humphrey? Against whom is this directed?

Labor Day address to the nation. "We are told," he said, "that the desire to get ahead must be curbed because it will leave others behind. We are told that it doesn't matter whether America continues to be number one in the world economically, and that we should resign ourselves to being number two or number three or even number four."

It is possible, given the diversity of voices in our society, that somewhere *someone* is saying: "Okay, USA, forget it. You'll never make that international monetary Superbowl any more, old timer. West Germany and Japan are the Nebraskas and Alabamas of our economic coaches poll and we're number four even." But the suspicion remains that Mr. Nixon is picking up some very dim signals from very special voices in the American political world.

## 6. The Wilsonian Burden

As Garry Wills has noted in "Nixon Agonistes," the President's political hero and model is Woodrow Wilson—insistent on a national and world model of self-determination, convinced of America's moral rectitude in the world, and determined to shoulder the burden of global leadership.

But in a larger sense, all of our post-war Presidents have been Wilsonians, obsessed with themselves as heroic leaders taking the nation down a dangerous, unpopular course and prevailing by their own force of will. Just as Kant refused to let personally gratifying choices count as moral choices, so Presidents seem to think that if they do what the people want them to do, they are failing to prove their manhood. Thus, the Wilsonian Burden has been imposed on our Presidents as a key test in their administrations (it was in part Lyndon Johnson's inability to impose a heroic vision of Vietnam on us that led to his downfall).

For Mr. Nixon, the Wilsonian Burden is an ideal device to por-

easy one. None of the *great decisions* made by a President are easy."

On Vietnam Withdrawal (April 1969) "Discussion about unilateral withdrawal does not help . . . I will not engage in it although I realize it might be popular to do so."

Our Allies (July 29, 1969): "It would have been easy for this government and the people of Thailand to say simply that their problems were enough."

Ending the War (May 7, 1969): "It would have been very easy, I assure you, on the first day after the inauguration, for me to have announced that we were immediately going to bring all the men home from Vietnam."

Demonstrations (December 1969): "It would have been very easy for me to say I agree with them and I will do what they want."

Inflation (November 21): "I can assure you, it was not the easiest way, to cut a budget by \$7 billion, to ask for an extension of a tax. . . . These were certainly not the easiest courses to follow."

Given Mr. Nixon's past political life, and the persistent charges of opportunism, the temptation must be great for him to prove his willingness to stand up to popular demands. But it is also true that the President has used the Wilsonian Burden in palpably ridiculous circumstances. The hardest burden to bear is to tell the parents and widows of 55,000 American men that "we blew it, we lost the war, we didn't deserve to win it." But this kind of burden is neither Wilsonian nor Nixonian.

Nor is it clear why any President, difficult as his job is, is as heavy as, for example, a villager in My Lai or a draftee from Des Moines. The constant expression of pride in burdens which neither he nor our other political leaders ever really carry is the most objectionable feature of the Wilsonian Burden. But it is simply too

comfortable a rhetorical device for Presidents to abandon.

We can, of course, make too much of a man's speeches. Indeed, the last decade is littered with shining words stretched over shabby facts. Yet political speech is important. Whether ghost-written or composed by the political figure himself, the words he chooses tell us the way he seeks to reach us. They tell us the kind of world he sees, so that we may assent if we see it that way, or choose another if we do not.

But what of a leader who cannot or will not tell us *what* he sees? What of a leader who shrouds himself with borrowed images and emotions? In a limited sense, such language is totalitarian—because it deprives people of the chance for judgment, unless we choose to judge that a leader who does not trust us has in turn forfeited his right to our trust.

"Someday," George Orwell wrote in his essay of 25 years ago, "we may have a genuinely democratic government, which will want to tell people what is happening and what must be done next. . . . It will need the mechanisms for doing so, of which the first are the right words, the right tone of voice."

That is one thing, I think, that is perfectly clear.

Against whom is this  
There is no way to find out.

Most recently the President played "who said that?" in his

tray himself as brave, committed, and unswayed by opportunism. Everything for him is a chance to demonstrate what a brave fellow he is. I am indebted to columnist Clayton Fritchey and the anonymous Potmocus of the Progressive magazine for some of these examples.)

On the ABM (March 1969):  
"The decision has not been an