

CONDOLEEZZA RICE'S RHETORIC: A CLASSICAL INTERPRETATION OF HISTORIC EXAMPLES

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In an era of increasing international chaos, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice plays a crucial role in shaping America's foreign policy. Arguably the second most powerful woman in the world (right behind German chancellor Angela Merkel), this Notre Dame graduate can be seen on any given day briefing the press, laying out a strategy for winning in Iraq, or hopping on a plane to smooth over a global crisis. A prominent figure in the Bush administration, Rice is also the most popular. In fact, she always has been. Since she took over the position of secretary of state from Colin Powell in February of 2005, Rice has consistently been the most popular main official in the government, with a positive job approval rating hovering in the mid-fifties. She has also somehow managed to avoid "sinking with the president's ship" as his—and other prominent officials'—approval ratings have plummeted to record lows. From February 2005 to August 2006, the percentage of Americans who approved of Bush's job performance fell from 48% to 34%. Meanwhile, Rice's approval ratings actually rose, from 52% to 60%, in the same period, until the departure of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Her approval ratings now hover near 46% to 50%. How does Condoleezza Rice manage to stay comparatively popular with the public while her close associates in the administration fall into extreme disfavor? The answer lies in the study of an ancient doctrine founded over two millennia ago.

This study—the study of rhetoric—born in the golden age of Athens and organized under Aristotle, explains how Rice has stayed popular with Americans. The study of rhetoric reveals that Rice has a high approval rating because of her strong *ethos* construction, which allows her to better persuade her audience. More specifically, I argue that she builds this beneficial *ethos* by citing specific historical examples in her speeches that make her appear more intelligent.

A Brief Discussion of Classical Terms

Understanding this *ethos* is crucial to understanding Rice's success. Aristotle coined the term *ethos* in *The Rhetoric*, written in 350 BCE. Aristotle defined rhetoric "as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (bk. I, ch. 2). This work details what makes some speakers—or, as he calls them, "rhetors"—more persuasive than others. Aristotle classified three "artistic proofs" that the rhetor uses to persuade the audience toward a speaker's aims. These proofs are *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, and Aristotle defined each of them:

The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker [*ethos*]; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind [*pathos*]; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself [*logos*].

Each of the three proofs governs different parts of a persuasive presentation: *ethos* the speaker him- or herself, *pathos* the audience members and their emotions, and *logos* the logical argumentation. And of these three proofs, Aristotle believed that a speaker's "character may almost be called the

most effective means of persuasion he possesses.” Current scholars agree; James Herrick maintains that, “of all three artistic proofs . . . *ethos* was potentially the most persuasive” (85). This exemplifies how the basic undertones of rhetoric, and persuasion itself, have remained unchanged for over two millennia.

Trust is another ancient concept that similarly remains unmodified in connection with persuasion. If an audience does not trust a speaker, the speaker’s message will be lost upon it. A sound *ethos* really boils down to this issue of trust; the study of *ethos* can actually be seen as “the study . . . of a trustworthy individual” (Herrick 85). Speakers develop their *ethos* and one “will seem trustworthy if he shows good sense, moral excellence, and good will” (Murphy and Katula 85).

Aristotle similarly breaks down his study of *ethos* into three constituent parts: *phronesis* (intelligence, good sense), *arête* (virtue), and *eunoia* (goodwill). All of these elements are important in constructing a positive *ethos*; however, different constituent parts matter more for different speakers. For example: an audience would most likely hope for a spiritual leader to have a more developed *arête* or *eunoia*. Similarly, American society desires its public leaders to have a good all-encompassing *ethos*, but the most important aspect for a public leader’s *ethos* is the intelligence or good sense displayed in *phronesis*.

The Phronesis of Rice’s Speeches: Effective Argumentation

This quality of intelligence or *phronesis* is easily seen in the text of Condoleezza Rice’s speeches. An important distinction to note is that all aspects of *ethos* “should develop from what the speaker says in the course of the speech, and not be imported on the basis of prior reputation with the audience” (Herrick 85). Consequently, Rice’s positive *ethos*, persuasiveness, and even popularity must originally stem from her written and spoken words. The greatest exhibitor of *phronesis* or intelligence within her speeches is her well-placed and thoughtful use of historical analogies. These historic examples serve a twofold purpose. They build a foundation of trust through Rice’s *ethos*, from which she is then able to construct her arguments.

Condoleezza Rice has managed to build her *ethos* through intelligent argumentation at each stage of the Iraq war. She used historical examples and past comparison in the buildup to the war, the reconstruction of Iraq, and the (now seemingly improbable) beneficial future outcome. Rice bases all her arguments supporting the Iraq war, at all of these stages, on the premise that it is the *best* course of action. A “political orator aims at establishing [. . .] a proposed course of action; if he urges its acceptance, he does so on the ground that it will do good” (Aristotle, *The Rhetoric* bk. I, ch. 3). Rice uses detailed historic examples to add *phronesis* to her *ethos*, and then uses her bolstered *ethos* to persuade her audience to what she thinks will be “good” for America: the invasion of Iraq.

The *New York Times* article entitled “Why We Know Iraq Is Lying” displays Rice’s effective, calculated, and intelligent use of historical analogies during the buildup to the Iraq war. In the beginning of this article Rice gives a history lesson on the patterns of peaceful, voluntary, and cooperative disarmament by citing the specific examples of South Africa, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. She later compares these cases to the contrary and apparently dishonest actions of Iraq. First she states:

In 1989 South Africa made the strategic decision to dismantle its covert nuclear weapons program. It destroyed its arsenal of seven weapons and [. . .] presented [International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors] with thousands of documents

detailing, for example, the daily operation of uranium enrichment facilities as well as the construction and dismantling of specific weapons. (1)

Rice also goes on to tell Ukraine and Kazakhstan's story of peaceful disarmament. She details how the United States aided in the process and even cites an event in which "missile silos and heavy bombers were destroyed [. . .] in a ceremony attended by the American and Russian defense chiefs." She does not insert all of these minute details in vain. Every additional piece of information—the dates, what the disarmament documents detail, the public ceremony—makes Rice appear more intelligent to her audience.

Rice's intelligence or *phronesis* builds her own *ethos*, which in turn creates a strong bond of trust between Rice and her audience. Once the crucial element of trust is established Rice can begin to sway the audience to her point: that Iraq is not acting honestly (as South Africa, Ukraine, or Kazakhstan did) but is hiding weapons of mass destruction and must be invaded. This argument from comparison, showing the differences in Iraq's behavior when compared to the three aforementioned nations, persuades the audience more powerfully because of Rice's positively perceived *ethos*. Even though her argument—that Iraq has something to hide—was eventually proved false, because of Rice's earlier *ethos* construction she manages to maintain more of the audience's trust than other officials. Rice then uses the exact same tools (positive *ethos* construction, exhibiting *phronesis* through specific examples, and effective argumentation) on a different subject.

Rice uses these tools to compare the difficulties of post-World War II reconstruction to the challenges facing the United States in the Middle East today in many of her speeches, including "International Support for Iraqi Democracy" and "Dr. Rice Addresses Foreign Policy." Rice chooses the Second World War as a topic for obvious reasons. It evokes a strong response from the audience, who sees that era as a simpler time and views the people that took part in the war as part of "the greatest generation," which binds Rice to the audience. However, Rice first paints a picture that is not so perfect. She imagines our predecessors' dismay as "they watched strategic defeat after strategic defeat, whether it was [. . .] in 1948 Germany permanently divided or the 1948 Czechoslovak Coup" ("Iraqi Democracy" 9). In that statement, the comparison to the setbacks in the Second World War and in Iraq is implicit. Here Rice directly compares the challenges of a European reconstruction to the challenges faced in Iraq: "SS officers—called 'werewolves'—attacked coalition forces and engaged in sabotage, much like today's Baathist and Fedayeen remnants" ("Foreign Policy" 3). Her examples yet again are incredibly detailed; she lists dates and specific party groups and even inserts distinct minutia such as the "werewolves." These detailed and specific comparisons help persuade the audience by increasing her perceived intelligence and consequently boosting her *ethos*. Rice also makes use of the *topoi* or "topics of persuasion" of past/present argument (where a speaker compares a past event to a similar situation in current time, arguing that the current situation will have a parallel outcome) in her historical examples. In this case, both Rice's heightened *ethos* and her effective argumentation from past example help her persuade her audience that the difficulties concerning the Iraq war are similar to those that faced policy makers after World War II.

Stemming from this notion of effort poured into Europe after the war, the secretary of state uses an even deeper and more effective historical example when she cites the advantageous outcome of European reconstruction. After displaying all the hard work that was put into the reconstruction of Europe through the Marshall Plan, she notes the reward of prosperity and peace between the great powers of Europe. In the lecture Rice gave to the Heritage Foundation on

“International Support for Iraqi Democracy” she states, “Today, no one can imagine a war between the great powers of Europe ever again. [This] was not inevitable in 1945 or 1946” (9). Rice enumerates how certain efforts culminated in a rewarding security arrangement for Europe. For example: the success of transatlantic relations after the creation of NATO, the efforts to “promote economic integration—efforts that eventually evolved into the European Union,” or the “commitment to creating a democratic Germany—which became a linchpin of a democratic Europe” (“Foreign Policy” 3). Her citing of these detailed efforts and positive results again exhibits a large degree of *phronesis*. She constructs her *ethos* based on her calculated examples. Now that her *ethos* is built, the correct conditions exist between her and her audience; the stage is set for her argument. Rice then asserts that the work and beneficial payoff of the post–World War II reconstruction is similar to the experience Iraq must undergo. She states, “The historical analogy is important. Like the transformation of Europe, the transformation of the Middle East will require a commitment of many years” (“Foreign Policy” 3). This effective past/present argument is accepted more easily by the audience because of her earlier productive *ethos* creation through her good sense. The audience more willingly accepts this unspoken conclusion: like World War II, the Iraq war will take a great amount of effort and concentration, but will ultimately be worth it because of the peace and prosperity that will ensue.

The Alteration of an Ethos

As a good rhetor should, Rice knows how to alter the *ethos* she presents depending on her audience. Aristotle believed that a speaker “should choose to present his *ethos* differently when speaking to one group as opposed to another” (Murphy and Katula 99). Rice completes this task. For example: her tone and argumentation in her column “Why We Know Iraq Is Lying” definitely suits the intelligent, diverse, and global characteristics of her audience of *New York Times* readers. When speaking to a group of African American journalists, Rice successfully modulates her *ethos* to reflect the collective identity of race and culture that she shares with them. She adds to her credibility with this audience with this statement:

Like many of you, I grew up around the homegrown terrorism of the 1960’s. I remember the bombing of the church in Birmingham in 1963, because one of the little girls that died was a friend of mine. Forty years removed from the tragedy I can honestly say that Denise McNair and the others did not die in vain. (“Foreign Policy” 4)

This statement adds to Rice’s *ethos* through the constituent quality of *arête*. Because of her shared identity with the black journalists Rice comes across as being more virtuous. She starts off with the phrase “Like many of you,” uses “I” quite liberally, and has the personal historic example of her friend Denise. By connecting herself to her audience members through these strategies their perceived notion of her credibility, noble character, and *ethos* increases. Because of her increased *ethos* Rice can attempt to persuade her audience:

Knowing what we know about the difficulties of our own history, let us always be humble in singing freedom’s praises. [. . .] And let us never indulge the condescending voices who allege that some people are not interested in freedom or aren’t ready for freedom’s responsibility. That view was wrong in 1963 in Birmingham and it is wrong in 2003 in Baghdad.

Rice uses the historic example of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and compares it to the struggle for freedom in Baghdad. She maintains that all people, from the oppressed minorities in

America in the twentieth century to the war-torn Iraqis in the twenty-first, are ready for and deserve freedom. This past/present argument also connects Rice to her audience through her use of “us,” “our,” and “we,” and through collective cultural history. In this speech, Rice first builds her *ethos* through *arête*, then expresses her effective argumentation through *phronesis*.

Conclusion

Condoleezza Rice knows what she’s doing. Dates, facts, personal stories, and different types of minutia all contribute to Rice’s quality of *phronesis*. Her calculated insertion of these details both makes Rice seem more intelligent so the audience trusts her and, at the same time, helps strengthen her effective argumentation through past comparison. The simultaneous implementation of *ethos* construction and argumentation is the most powerful tool she uses to keep her popularity among Americans. But for how long can Rice keep this aura of intelligence and trustworthiness shrouding her popular image? With the current political landscape appearing so dim for Republicans and the flaring-up of even more incredibly difficult international crises (Iran’s nuclear ambitions, for one), historic examples and analogies may simply not be enough.

Recent data suggests that the population may be so dissatisfied with the Bush administration that Rice’s historic examples, no matter how well placed, intelligent, or specific, may not build her *ethos* as they once did. Her approval ratings have slid to 46% in recent months (“Bush’s Approval Ratings”). While still well above the president’s, her ratings are not what they once were. Her power, both in international and domestic arenas, has diminished. In early 2003, she specifically told Iraq that “[i]t should know that time is running out” (“Lying” 2). The days of such aggressive diplomacy are now far behind her. A recent CNN article captures the essence of Rice’s declining *ethos*:

Rice remains the most popular member of the Bush administration; her approval ratings in polls are higher than Bush’s. But the honeymoon is clearly over. Rice has inherited the role Rumsfeld played as a primary spokesman of the Iraq war—and the primary lightning rod for criticism about it. (Labot)

With Rumsfeld gone, Rice’s *phronetic* examples and illustrations will not be enough to shield her from all the criticism fired at her over the Iraq war. Another constituent part of *ethos*—her *arête* or “virtue”—suffers from the administration’s false claims of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. If *eunoia* means “goodwill,” the exact opposite of that is directed at Rice because of her association with the unpopular Bush administration. While Rice’s *phronesis* remains consistently impressive, the faltering *arête* and *eunoia* segments of her *ethos* drag her approval ratings lower and lower. It appears as though Condoleezza Rice’s time—of easily elevating her *ethos*—has run out.

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