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Obama’s Syrian War-Topoi

Dr. Ronald Reid contended that one could understand wartime behavior if they comprehended the persuasive aspects of three different basic appeals: territorial, ethnocentric and optimism. In the face of war, politicians and many other influential pundits utilize different approaches to persuade their audiences towards supporting different ideals and positions. On September 10th, 2013, President Barack Obama addressed the nation in efforts to convince his audience that Syria should be targeted for a precise military strike. Obama contended that the strike was necessary in retribution and to prevent further chemical weapon use by the Syrian government against opposition forces in the midst of a civil war. Using Reid’s war topoi I will discuss, “Obama’s Remarks on Syria” and dissect his speech in accordance to the categorical evaluation that Reid considers vital in convincing an audience to favor war.

Reid considers territory to be one of three important aspects when presenting an argument in favor of war. Territory has long been a key factor in war mongering for centuries. We can trace history back through Roman times and beyond where men fought over land and what they considered to be their property or territory. In current times, territory is just as if not more important than hundreds of years ago. A simple violation of countries’ boundaries can have you indefinitely imprisoned; just consider what happened to American hikers that accidentally crossed onto Iranian soil just a few years ago. In the Syrian situation, territory is more figurative, that is it is less about specific boundaries and more about philosophical standpoints and ideologies. How can territory relate to ideologies you might wonder? During his speech President Obama said, “In 1997 the United States Senate overwhelmingly approved an international agreement prohibiting the use of chemical weapons, now joined by 189 governments that represent 98% of humanity. On August 21st, these basic rules were violated along with our sense of common humanity.” This is an example of territoriality because the United States along with 188 other countries have decided that these certain boundaries should not be violated. Although these ideals are not borders attached to countries continental lines, they are still moral lines that should not be crossed.

Furthermore, along the lines of territoriality Obama cites the right to respond when there is a “violation of international law and danger to our security…” In what seems to be a slippery slope argument, Obama contends that “if we fail to act…other tyrants will have no reason to think twice about acquiring poison gas and using it.” President Obama then further argues that our troops along with our allies and many innocent civilians may be at risk of being attacked by these weapons from maniacal, nefarious forces that deem to use them in warfare. These are all territorial arguments as they contend that our country has an obligation to defend and consider the different boundaries that are not just our own but also our allies and those we consider to be both innocent and worth protecting. Thus territoriality is not just a border that we draw on a map but also an invisible line that our country and leaders may argue is also drawn in treaties, agreements and moral obligations not just in our country but also in global interests.

According to Senator Rand Paul while being interviewed by Bret Baier on Fox news, “I think what he [Obama] needed to lay out for the American public was a compelling American interest or national security interest in Syria…” This is an argument that suggests President Obama failed to convince his audience that there is a territoriality argument in relation to the Syrian debacle. “We just don’t see a military or an American objective here,” Paul says later in his interview. This is a formidable argument that challenges the basis of one of Reid’s three pillars of war time rhetoric. Does President Obama make a clear and established case for intervention in Syria based on territorialism? The answer is no. Although Obama does establish some weak arguments as to why Syria has violated territorial lines, he does not fully establish a strong enough line of reasoning as to why we should commit our resources and intervene in the matter.

Reid’s second category of war topoi is ethnocentrism. This is the belief that the ideals of your culture are dominant and superior to any other ethnic group or culture. Obama uses multiple instances of ethnocentrism throughout his presentation to the American people. The part of his speech most prominently peppered with ethnocentrism is the introduction and initial couple of minutes. Obama states, “America’s worked with allies to provide humanitarian support, to help the moderate opposition, and to shape a political settlement.” This is completely ethnocentric because President Obama is judging who he deems to be America’s allies, its opposition and what constitutes humanitarian support and political settlement in the viewpoint of our country, not every country or just Syria. That statement completely correlates with how America views certain aspects of Syria thus maintaining broad ethnocentrism.

It is also apparent in President Obama’s speech that he uses territorialism and ethnocentrism closely and that the two topoi complement each other in his rhetoric. Obama states, “In 1997 the United States Senate overwhelmingly approved an international agreement prohibiting the use of chemical weapons, now joined by 189 governments that represent 98% of humanity. On August 21st, these basic rules were violated along with our sense of common humanity.” This statement illustrates through the viewpoint of our country (ethnocentrism), that Syria has violated an international agreement that they were not in agreement with. How much more ethnocentric can our president be? Obama is judging the Syrian government based on an agreement that they have not been a part of. No matter how big of a travesty the events is question were, Syria should not be judged on the basis of an agreement they were not party to. Furthermore, this is an argument blended with territorialism because it shows that the United States assumes a stake in world governments not using chemical warfare. With Syria using chemical warfare, the country is going against 98% of the world that has deemed this practice unlawful and inhumane, including the United States. With our country being outspoken in our defense of innocent victims, it goes without saying that Syria crossed an invisible border of territoriality by using chemical weapons on civilians when the United States is part of an agreement against that usage.

Optimism is Reid’s third category of pro-war topoi. Obama did not use much optimism in his address of action against Syria. Multiple factors affected Obama and caused him to not utilize optimism as a prime tool in convincing his audience of his specific viewpoint. One of the reasons that optimism is not a great tool in this argument has to do with the target audience and recent occurrences. The target audience of Obama’s speech was the American public, this can be determined by his opening and closing salutations along with some other phraseology throughout the presentation. The recent occurrences that detrimentally affected Obama’s argument were acknowledged as the military invasion of Iraq and occupation of Afghanistan. “The idea of any military action…is not going to be popular…our troops are out of Iraq, our troops are coming home from Afghanistan…” said Obama.

A vital difference between Obama’s speech and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s address to the nation following the Pearl Harbor attack were the facts and imminent dangers facing the United States. President Obama attempted to stretch his speech and argument to cover all of Reid’s three aspects of pro-war topoi and it was not successful because it was a weak argument that could not be constructed to convince a broad audience. Optimism was definitely Obama’s weakest point, this was due to the fact that we have been in conflict with the Middle Eastern region since 2003 when we invaded Iraq. Not only did we invade one country but since then we have moved our presence into other nearby countries (Afghanistan, etc.) and we have been also suffering horribly at home, “I know Americans want all of us in Washington…to concentrate on the task of building our nation here at home, putting people back to work...growing our middle class…” President Obama completely idolizes this nation in this one, small, but pertinent part of his address.

Reid’s three elements of pro-war topoi are evident and at the same point almost irrelevant in ascertaining support for President Obama’s speech in support of striking Syria to disable their alleged chemical weaponry. These topoi are mostly irrelevant because they are difficult in some cases to identify and did not convince the audience to support the president’s ideal. It is definitely possible that these topoi exist and are just not attributable to the success of the president in this endeavor. This would be because the president made inferior arguments or argued for a position that was not superior in correlation with these elements.

President Obama spoke from a standpoint that classic philosopher Aristotle determined as ethos, pathos logos; that is character and credibility, emotional appeals to the audience, and inductive or deductive reasoning. Although Obama’s speech could be considered a failure to constructively use Reid’s war topoi, it is better considered a success at using Aristotle’s three different types of rhetorical proof. Obama attacked the character and creditability of Syria by citing international law, scientific data and the position of 98% percent of the world when it came to chemical warfare. Obama then made logical arguments as to how and why the United States should intervene in the Syrian civil war and not just witness international injustices occur over and over again via satellite news coverage. Furthermore, President Obama then emotionally appeals to his audience by citing the risks America and other innocent countries and civilians may face if we do not intervene in this conflict.

President Obama’s speech was effective in terms of Aristotle’s three different types of rhetorical proof, however, it was a failure in terms of Reid’s war topoi and also convincing his audience to support his ideal. Essentially, Obama faced a battle to convince American’s to enter another conflict in the Middle East and that juggernaut proved to be too big of a challenge for his rhetoric. Analyzing this speech using Reid’s topoi was a disadvantage because there were other rhetorical methods and search models that would have been preferred to make an assessment of Obama’s success rate.

In conclusion, Reid’s three war-making topoi are apparent but also unsuccessful in categorizing Obama’s speech on Syria. It is not just that Obama clearly was ineffective in using these topoi, but it is also apparent that there are other critical elements of pro-war classifications that exist and need to be taken into consideration. Although territorial, ethnocentric and optimism are three aspects that should be dissected when examining a speech aimed at supporting military action—these aspects are also not the lone characteristics when it comes to supporting or opposing an initiative, especially when it leads to monumental decision making in the face of an influential nation such as the United States of America.