The Anti-Rhetorical Presidency of Donald J. Trump

Dan T. Molden

Abstract

By considering the case of the covfefe tweet and its reception by the media and Trump's supporters, this paper seeks to analyze Donald Trump's use of the rhetorical presidency and how that use was received by his supporters. In particular, this paper considers the idea of a rhetorical presidency and the paranoid style in American politics to reframe an understanding of both Trump's rhetorical (and anti-rhetorical) prowess and the activeness or passivity of his supporters toward that message.

Keywords

Rhetorical Presidency, Donald J. Trump, Political Rhetoric, Political Campaigns, Paranoid Style

> We've seen over the past few years the ways in which the power of words has been violated and misappropriated, and what I wanted to do was to kind of reclaim poetry as that site in which we can repurify, resanctify not only the Capitol building that we saw violated, but the power of words…
>
> —Amanda Gorman, interview on Anderson Cooper 360, CNN

Introduction

In his 1987 book, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, Jeffery Tullis argued that the rhetorical role of the president of the United States was not an intentional feature of the office but one that had evolved over time as a function of what he terms the "second constitution"—an understanding of the role of the presidency in leading popular opinion to put pressure on the legislative branch of government. The tension between the powers given to the president in the original Constitution and the presumptive powers of inherent in the presidency in a media age given the understanding of this "second" constitution have led to an expansion of the power of the office and created additional pressure to understand the rhetorical duties of the presidency.

This essay argues that the 45th President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, functions as an example of both a rhetorical and anti-rhetorical president. Specifically, this does not mean that President Trump did not engage in rhetorical practices but that the way he engaged in rhetoric was an attempt to make other communicators (primarily those he saw as his enemies) seem as though they were not truthful and merely engaged in empty rhetoric. Nordquist (2018) for example, defines anti-rhetoric as "the act of disparaging an opponent's use of language by characterizing it as rhetoric or oratory, with the implication that eloquent language is inherently meaningless ("mere words") or deceitful." Taken further, this paper argues that President Trump's rhetoric not only used anti-rhetoric as a rhetorical strategy, but also relied on it to capture the attention of a set of the public and thus reduce the ability of any other political figure to influence that set of people. President Trump then refigured that set as the true "public" allowing him (for a while) to bypass

the normal understanding of the "second" constitution and refiguring his presidential power not just as a user of anti-rhetoric, but as an anti-rhetorical president.

The Development of the Rhetorical Presidency

In order to fully form this argument, it is important to begin with the concept of a rhetorical president. Tullis (2017) argues that although presidents did engage in some communication with the "public" prior to the advent of the modern mass media, those communicative acts were few and far between:

> Prior to this century, presidents preferred written communications between the branches of government to oral addresses to "the people." The relatively few popular speeches that were made differed in character from today's addresses. Most were patriotic orations for ceremonial occasions, some raised constitutional issues, and several spoke to the conduct of war. Very few were domestic "policy speeches" of the sort so common now, and attempts to move the nation by moral suasion in the absence of war were almost unknown. (4)

Additionally, Tullis notes that although the rise of mass media made the rhetorical presidency possible, it did not lead immediately to the rhetorical presidency. That is to say that the idea of a rhetorical presidency was not so ingrained in the Constitution of the United States or in the minds of the people that the use of media to communicate with the public in general or voters in particular was assumed. Tullis (2017) wrote

> Before presidents could appear on television, or radio, it had to be legitimate for them to do so. In fact, these particular technologies were usable before they were politically employed. There were available for exploitation but did not cause it. (15)

Part of the point here, then is that the development of a rhetorical (or anti-rhetorical) presidency was not inherent in the system, but rather that it developed partially out of opportunity and partially out of an acceptance by the public and the other branches of government that presidents could directly attempt to speak to them and attempt to persuade them. This understanding and acceptance forms the basis of what Tullis (2017) identified as the second constitution:

> Presidents work in a political system composed of elements in tension and, at times, in contradiction to one another. Presidents are taught to act as though they do by the theory of leadership built into the constitutional structure, and reflected in its institutional principles and incentives. Simultaneously, a very different theory, which reflects current elite and public understanding of leadership, instructs, rewards, and punishes our chief executives. (18)

So, how did the opportunity to speak to the public come to become a central role of the presidency? There are two common explanations connected to this evolution. The most obvious to the modern audience is likely the idea of campaigning for office. Tullis (2017) noted, however, that no matter how commonplace the idea of political campaigns may seem today, originally campaigning was not done by the candidates themselves as it was seen as unseemly:

> In the nineteenth century, the tone of campaigns was set by that of governance. Candidates did not issue statements in their own behalf, much less give speeches. By feigning disinterest, candidates exemplified a public teaching that political campaigns were beneath the dignity of men suited for governance, that honor attended more important activities than campaigns. Today, in a striking reversal, campaigns are becoming the model for governing. (183)

Of course, as Tullis (2017) noted further, the modern system of elections and campaigning have come to be shaped as much by the idea of a rhetorical presidency as they shape it. He wrote that, "the modern selection system mirrors the ambivalence of the rhetorical presidency itself. To the extent that this kind of rhetorical leadership is good or necessary, the modern selection system helps to elicit it" (184).

The second obvious reason that the idea of the rhetorical presidency came to be readily accepted as inherent in the role of the president is because of the need for some sort of centralized leadership in times of crisis. Tullis (2017) argued that, "the executive energy needed to contend with a crisis is a genuine need for which the original Constitution may have inadequately provided" (22). Consequently, in the face of various crises, the need for leadership and direction resulted in the development of a rhetorical presidency that continued even in the absence of a crisis:

> Popular leadership seemed necessary and suitable for presidents who faced crises as profound as World War II and the Great Depression. The continual or routine use of the "crisis tool" of popular leadership was meant to make the president more effective in normal times as well. (Tullis, 2017, 181)

The rhetorical presidency, then, was an outgrowth of several pressures and possibilities and not an original part of the powers of the president as conceived of in the original Constitution. Regardless of whether such an expansion of power was necessary or not, the rhetorical presidency created a space for popular pressure— rallying the populace (or electorate) to add their support and, in doing so, their power to the president.

The Power of a Rhetorical Presidency

What then, was the result of those pressures and opportunities? What is a rhetorical presidency? Specifically, it is the idea of the president using what President Theodore Roosevelt called the "bully pulpit" to advocate for popular support for a set of plans and policies. Writing in the forward to *The Rhetorical Presidency*, Russel Muirhead (2017) noted that the rhetorical presidency was aimed at addressing

> real and persistent defects in the Constitution, chief among them the great distance separating the formal state from the people—from popular interests, passions, and attachments. This disconnection enfeebled the national government and diminished its promise. (xiii)

By removing the distance between government (and the presidency specifically), the rhetorical president had the opportunity to appeal for popular support, or a mandate, for specific actions. Muirhead again noted that

the idea of the rhetorical presidency was called forth "to repair these defects by creating an energized president, who, bearing a mandate direct from the people, could lead the legislature and make the government govern in spite of the Constitution" (xii).

Specifically, then, the idea of the power of the mandate was connected to the earlier concern about elections and campaigning. A mandate, or popular support, meant the ability to create pressure on other political figures who might lose their support and, hence, their positions and power. In short, the presidency could create pressure on other politicians campaigning for other positions because of their willingness or unwillingness to support plans the president would propose. Tullis (2017) continued:

> Rhetorical power is a very special case of executive power because simultaneously it is the means by which an executive can defend the use of force and other executive powers and it is a power itself. Rhetorical power is thus not only a form of "communication," it is also a way of constituting the people to whom it is addressed by furnishing them with the very equipment they need to assess its use— the metaphors, categories, and concepts of political discourse. (203)

The rhetorical power of the presidency, then, allows the president to not only wield rhetorical power, but also to make more effective other powers the presidency already has. The president can also constitute, or "call into being" a group within the electorate, be that a "silent majority" or some other constituency, and provide that group of people with ready-made ideas and slogans.

The Limitations of the Rhetorical Presidency

Of course, rhetorical power does not automatically guarantee rhetorical skill. One difficulty facing presidents attempting to exercise the rhetorical power of the presidency is the extent of their own rhetorical ability (or that of their staff). Consequently, this skill has become more and more important over time. Tullis (2017) noted that "It is increasingly the case that a president's most important governmental advisers will be those who managed his electoral strategy" (183).

Indeed, the president would not be alone in attempting to use rhetoric to accomplish goals or win public support. Other politicians (although admittedly with less "power" due to their limited access compared with the bully pulpit of the president) may seek to sway the public. In addition, members of the media may also interject and evaluate the rhetorical appeals given. Thus, the media itself functions both as a way for presidents to amplify their power and also as a potential hindrance to that power. Tullis (2017) argued:

> And there is considerable truth to a keynote of the press's defense of itself: that it is an essential aid to legislative oversight, by uncovering policies in need of defense and by forcing presidents to defend them. Reflecting the ambivalence of popular leadership the media also makes it more difficult, in some ways, for presidents to manipulate public opinion, while it reinforces the tendencies of the rhetorical presidency to undermine the possibility of deliberation. (188)

Of course, one of the original pressures leading to the development of the rhetorical presidency can offset this multitude of voices somewhat—the idea of communication based in crisis. In a time of crisis, a singular voice may seem helpful to provide leadership and reassurance. One person can move more quickly to deal with issues than 100 in the Senate or 435 in the House. This, too, creates a set of problems, however. The simplest one is that the country must always be in a crisis in order to justify the constant use of such rhetorical power. Tullis (2017) argued that this was a fundamental dilemma. The problem is "to provide institutional means for crises without making those crisis tools—and crises themselves—routine. The danger from the routinization of crisis is that the political system loses its ability to govern well between emergencies" (22).

Repeated crises, then, diminish the power of the rhetorical presidency because it becomes more difficult to wield that power when there is no emergency (or risk needing to make it seem as though there is always an emergency). Furthermore, the need to have a singular voice undermines the idea of democratic decision making. Tullis (2017) continued, but noting that the "continual attempts to mobilize the public through the use of personal or charismatic power delegitimizes constitutional or normal authority" (190).

> This deligitimization can compound itself as subsequent presidents find that they must because:
> Successors to a charismatic leader inherit "a delegitimated set of procedures" and are themselves compelled "to go outside of procedures— further delegitimating the very office they [hold]." The routinization of crisis, endemic to the rhetorical presidency, is accompanied by attempted repetitions of charisma. (Tullis, 2017, 191)

In other words, the constant use of the power of the rhetorical presidency calls into question the effectiveness or usefulness of more traditional avenues of power in government. By relying on rhetorical power over other, more constitutionally derived powers, the president may not only damage the power of other branches of the government, but also the power of the presidency itself.

The Rhetorical Presidency of Donald J. Trump

How, then, does Donald J. Trump fit into this reconsideration of presidential power? It can be argued that, despite his personal idiosyncrasies, Donald Trump does not represent a fundamentally different rhetorical figure than previous holders of the office of the presidency. Indeed, Muirhead (2017) argued that Trump merely represented the apex (or perhaps the nadir) of the idea of the rhetorical presidency:

> Trump has refined and brought to a new extreme the elements of the rhetorical presidency: he has exploited new communications technology to cultivate an unmediated relationship with citizens; he has relaxed and abandoned the formalities and norms of propriety that heretofore constrained presidential talk; and he stands poised to normalize demagoguery in the presidency more fully than any president before. Trump is the rhetorical presidency brought to its culmination, and perhaps to its breaking point. (xiv-xv)

Tullis (2017), on the other hand, contended that Trump represented a candidate that was fundamentally different, even unprecedented in his rhetorical actions and that his success was attributable, to some extent to the press' inability to react to that:

> There are many reasons that Donald Trump defied conventional wisdom and prevailed in the election, but surely one reason among many was that journalists in the media and some students of politics in the academy treated him as a normal candidate, while he broke norms in an unprecedented way. Thus, for example, while he refused to amend or apologize for demonstrated falsehoods that he uttered, journalists continued to offer coverage that attempted to give equal weight to competing sides. (225)

According to this description, Trump's rhetorical success was due in part, then to an inability on the part of other rhetorical actors (the press and academics) to adjust to Trump's rhetorical techniques. Tullis (2017) continued by claiming that Trump was able to basically keep making what would otherwise be mistakes by continuing to make mistakes and asserting that others suffered from the failings that he as demonstrating:

> How was it possible for Trump to succeed given his proclivity to break any norm that got in his way, to say anything that came into his head no matter how crude or inappropriate? Trump proliferated his outrage, repeated his claims incessantly, and projected his vices onto his opponents. These techniques— proliferation, repetition, and projection— transformed what would be gaffes or mistakes in other hands into the constitutive elements of his victory. (228)

Tullis (2017) continued noting that this doubling down was somehow capable of making Trump's supporters more passionate:

> Donald Trump amplified the power of a traditional demagogue to manipulate passion by turning traditional campaign vices into additional demagogic instruments. Faced with criticism for his gaffes, mistakes, and norm- breaking behavior, Trump not only refused to apologize, instead he reaffirmed his misstatements and uttered more of them. (229)

Indeed, Tullis (2017) attributes some of Trump's success to the strategy of repeating the big lie:

> Faced with fact-checking of his many untruths, Trump insisted on repeating them to the point that his followers believed them and the wider world became desensitized to the differences between truth and falsehood. (229)

One point which should be made about the argument being made here by Tullis, is that is seems to rely very heavily on a speaker or sender-centered focus. The sender, in this case Donald Trump, is the key factor and the audience has very little say in how that communication is received. Tullis (2017) explicated this thought when he wrote:

Donald Trump repeatedly and successfully depicts his own imaginary political world and demands that we— supporters and critics— live within it, no matter how fantastical his claims, how false his understanding, or how awful his political vision. (236)

In this view, the most frequently commented upon facet of Trump's communication strategy—the use of Twitter—becomes little more than a way to evade the press and other actors who could moderate or mediate Trump's message. Tullis (2017) noted that Trump's use of Twitter was, in this case, an example of speaking past not only Congress but also the press:

> The president uses Twitter as an additional resource to make a case over the heads of Congress directly to the people. Since *The Rhetorical Presidency* was first published in 1987, the development of the modern media, cable news, and rhetorical efforts of other political actors, such as senators, has made it more difficult for presidents to use popular rhetoric effectively to mobilize public opinion or to set a political agenda. Trump discovered that Twitter could help him do this. If the rhetorical presidency was invented to enable the president to speak "over the heads" of Congress to the people directly, Twitter enables the president to deliver messages in his own unfiltered words "over the heads" of the mainstream media. Twitter gives the president more control of his message. From the president's perspective, it seems to enhance his power. 234

While this approach to Donald Trump's rhetorical appeal seems reasonable and accurate as far as it goes, it begs the question of why it works? What is the process that leads to this result? What traps the audience in Trump's world? Why was Trump successful with this approach and not any of a number of other political or quasi-political figures?

Taking the Case of Covfefe Seriously but not Literally

In order to consider the previous questions, it may be helpful to look at a single, isolated incident in which Trump used Twitter to "go over the heads" of the media and speak directly to the audience. In this case, the example could be called the covfefe incident. At the end of May in 2017, Donald Trump used Twitter to send out a seemingly meaningless tweet. The tweet itself was merely five words long—or rather four words and one non-word: "despite the negative press" and then the non-word "covfefe."

Jessica Estepa (2018), writing in USA Today one year after the tweet summarized the communication around the tweet:

> Happy one-year anniversary, covfefe.
> President Trump unexpectedly unleashed a new word on the world on May 31, 2017, when he tweeted out a confusing partial sentence shortly after midnight.
> "Despite the negative press covfefe," the tweet read, and nothing more.
> He soon deleted the tweet, but instead of pretending it never happened, he leaned into it.

"Who can figure out the true meaning of 'covfefe' ??? Enjoy!" he said nearly six hours after the original tweet went out.

And so, people did. They wondered what it meant. They wondered how it was pronounced. They wondered why it existed in the first place.

This short, small example meets most of the description above (absent, arguably, the sense of outrage). Trump leaned into this mistake, repeating the idea that covfefe was a meaningful and understandable word and asserting it was others who failed to understand his meaning rather than a mistake on his part.

The story of covfefe moved beyond just Donald Trump's tweets and extended to more formal forms of presidential communication. Flegenheimer (2017) noted that then press secretary, Sean Spicer, continued the conversation, intimating that the tweet had a deeper meaning that only a select few understood:

> Consensus proved elusive — to say nothing of pronunciation guidelines — and the White House appeared disinclined to help. "The president and a small group of people know exactly what he meant," Sean Spicer, the press secretary, said flatly. He did not elaborate.

Trump himself continued to maintain his stance, returning to the word three years after the original tweet. Jackson (2019) noted:

> Re-tweeting a post reporting that a horse named "Covfefe" won a race over the weekend – and noting that the winner was in fact named for the president's "famous mistweet" – Trump replied: "Great! But how do you know it was a 'mistweet?' May be something with deep meaning!"

So what is happening here, with this seemingly innocuous and possibly even playful tweet? There is very little in the way of policy (although a COVFEFE act was proposed in Congress) and very little in the way of appeal to action or even authority. One possible answer may provide a fuller understanding of the phenomena surrounding Donald Trump and the group of people supporting him.

Peter Thiel, cofounder of PayPal and a Trump supporter was quoted in CNBC trying to explain to the news media why Trump supporters and the media understood Trump and his messages differently. He, borrowing a phrase from Salena Zito, argued that the difference in understanding lay in the media taking Trump literally (that is, taking each word to mean what it would literally mean) but not seriously (that is, taking him as a serious political figure engaged in the serious business of running a nation using rhetorical tools like hyperbole to get his point across, even if stretching the truth or credulity). Yarrow (2016) quoted Theil as saying:

> I think one thing that should be distinguished here is that the media is always taking Trump literally. It never takes him seriously, but it always takes him literally. ... I think a lot of voters who vote for Trump take Trump seriously but not literally, so when they hear things like the Muslim comment or the wall comment, their question is not, 'Are you going to build a wall like the Great Wall of China?'

or, you know, 'How exactly are you going to enforce these tests?' What they hear is we're going to have a saner, more sensible immigration policy.

A BBC reporter interviewing Trump supporters found much the same attitude among Trump supporters after the 2016 election. Smith (2016) wrote:

> Talking to Trump voters in the neighbouring state of Ohio, I found that they had never really taken his promises too literally.
>
> Joe Tellup, who was a campaign volunteer, told me that you had to "read between the lines" to understand what Mr Trump was really saying.
>
> Everyone I spoke to seemed remarkably sanguine about reports that Mr Trump is already rethinking his positions on Obamacare and his threats to prosecute Hillary Clinton.
>
> Eddie Swope, a retired autoworker, said simply, "politicking and campaigning is one thing - governing is another".

In a sense, then, Trump's rhetorical appeals were not as important as the way his supporters used those appeals. In fact, that is their specific use if not their intent. Trump's success in crafting a kind of anti-rhetoric is found in the lasting appeal of covfefe, a nonsense word with no "intentional" meaning. Roose (2021) reported on a Valerie Gilbert, a Trump supporting actor and writer who attended Harvard:

> On a recent day, her feed included a rant against Covid-19 lockdowns, a grainy meme accusing Congress of "high treason", a post calling Lady Gaga a Satanist and a claim that "covfefe", a typo that Trump accidentally tweeted three years ago, was a coded intelligence message.

Again, though, what is happening here? What is the mechanism by which Trump's words (and even Trump's meaning or intent) matter less than the possibility of secret and hidden meanings his supporters can discover within those words?

The Paranoid Style in Trumpian Politics

One plausible explanation for Trump's supporters is found in the work of Richard Hofstader. Hofstader (1965) wrote about the "paranoid style" in American politics and its connection to conspiracy theories:

> The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies here or there in history, but that they regard a "vast" or "gigantic" conspiracy as the *motive force* in historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade. 29

In particular, the sense of helplessness and paranoia feeds into a kind of active reshaping of the narrative of history. The paranoid style allows the personification of troubles and difficulty into something concrete that can be fought against. Hofstader (1965) noted:

Unlike the rest of us, the enemy is not caught in the toils of the vast mechanism of history, himself a victim of his past, his desires, his limitations. He is a free, active, demonic agent. He wills, indeed he manufactures the mechanism of history himself, or deflects the normal course of history in an evil way. He makes crises, starts runs on banks, causes depressions, manufactures disasters, and then enjoys and profits from the misery he had produced. The paranoid's interpretation of history is in this sense distinctly personal: decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequence of someone's will. (32)

Presaging Trump's use of "false news," Hofstader (1965) noted that the paranoid style often imagined the news media as working against the common good:

Very often the enemy is held to possess some especially effective source of power: he controls the press; he directs the public mind through "managed news"; he has unlimited funds; he has a new secret for influencing the mind (brain-washing); he has a special technique for seduction (the Catholic confessional); he is gaining a stranglehold on the educational system. (32)

Of course, this is a very difficult position to find oneself in. The users of the paranoid style are typically somewhat isolated as the power of the media and the schools ensures, in their minds, that most other people are unaware of the larger powers at play. Hofstader (1965) noted:

As a member of the avant-garde who is capable of perceiving the conspiracy before it is fully obvious to an as yet un-aroused public, the paranoid is a militant leader. He does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of a working politician (30-31).

Part of the power of being a Trump supporter or QAnon follower or Proud Boy or any number of other affiliated groups is that they maintain the sense of isolation from the "general public" but still allow for a sense of community and provide support. Typically, as Hofstader (1965) noted, the adherent of the paranoid style might use pre-supposed or confirming evidence to ignore and dismiss contradictory evidence:

He has little hope that his evidence will convince a hostile world. His effort to amass it has rather the quality of a defensive act which shuts off his receptive apparatus and protects him from having to attend to disturbing considerations that do not fortify his ideas. He has all the evidence he needs: he is not a receiver, he is a transmitter. (38)

Imagine then the power of discovering a group of people who also accept and support not only the evidence they have (or imagine themselves to have) but also the world implied by that "evidence."

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While Tullis analysis of Trump's rhetoric works to explain a certain percentage of Trump's supporters, this essay contends that another set of Trump supporters are not trapped by Trump's vision, but rather have

created their own "Trump." This Trump is essentially a cypher, a fact aided by his often undiplomatic or inappropriate communication style and content. One expression of these was a meme known as 3D chess or 4D chess and even, on occasion, 5D chess. Know Your Meme (n.d.) explained the meme thus:

> Trump is Playing 4D Chess is an expression used by supporters of the 2016 Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump when speculating that his campaign is using advanced political strategies to manipulate and dominate the news media.

This invented Trump, then, empowers them to imagine a kind of revenge story in which the normally controlled and oppositional media are being manipulated by Trump to betray the conspiracy or to aid Trump in his goals. Bump (2019) wrote that;

> There is a theory among some supporters of President Donald Trump that the chief executive's public comments and tweets are all part of a grand strategy aimed at tripping up his opponents.
>
> When he reaches for his phone to, say, disparage the city of Baltimore because he's mad about how a congressman from Maryland is investigating his daughter, this theory holds that the tweet is simply another gear in Trump's enormous, carefully planned lib-owning machine. It's not just that Trump saw a broadcast on Fox News and reacted. If not three-dimensional chess, it's at least savvy movements of various chess pieces.

Bump (2019) continued, explaining that the manipulation of the press was, to some of his supporters, aimed at revealing and arresting a secret cabal kidnapping children and exploiting them in any number of ways:

> It's easy to understand why Trump supporters would be willing to believe that his actions are deliberate and thoughtful. It's more complimentary to believe that Trump isn't simply riffing off a cable news broadcast and, instead, executing a clever plan. At its extreme, Trump supporters have wandered outside the bounds of rationality, embracing the bizarre QAnon conspiracy which posits that Trump's actions are all centred around uncovering a giant paedophilia ring.

Like most classic anti-rhetorical moves, then, Trump's anti-rhetoric (or the Trump create by his followers) relied on the idea of action vs. words—that is to say, the idea that what counts is policy or action while words are merely a distraction. ThisInterestsMe, or TIM (n.d.) noted the difficulty of aligning this imagined Trump with the real world Trump when he engaged in actual policy, like supporting the move of the Israeli capital to Jerusalem:

> A lot of conspiracy theorists dislike Trump because of his supportive stance towards the state of Israel. This means that a number of the president's most die hard supporters have to do extreme mental gymnastics in order to defend him on the issue. In this post, a user thinks that Trump's support of Jerusalem being made the capital is some sort of 4D chess move to direct further criticism towards Israel.

Of course, much of what Trump tweeted, like covfefe, is empty enough and unclear enough to avoid that difficulty. Still, with the recent admission that a new administration would start of January 20, some of that difficulty came to a head. Beaumont (2021) noted that on "social media channels and chatrooms like Parler and 4chan, where far-right Trumpists have gravitated as other social media sites have increasingly shut out the president, there were complaints of betrayal."

A good indication of the activeness of this set of Trump supporters in relationship to (or in opposition to) Trumps actual words is the way that sense of betrayal has worked back around, first into concern for Trump— worry that he might have been forced into making the video or that someone created the video electronically without his consent—and later into support for Trump's true message—that the battle against the hidden cabal continued and was, in fact, growing stronger. Beaumont (2021) wrote:

> Others turned to conspiracy theories, not least in the dark corners of 4chan and Parler, where the cult of QAnon holds sway. Many here saw not a Trump concession but either a "deep fake" video concocted by Trump's enemies, or secret messages that indicated Trump was still on track to deliver on QAnon's deranged promises.

These supporters, then, are back to taking Trump seriously—as a threat to the deep state cabal—but not literally—as acknowledging his electoral loss and the coming of a new administration. Beaumont (2021) reported on some supporters who even took it one step farther, trying to find a way to take Trump's words literally—even if not in the typical meaning of the literal words:

> For the bitter-enders, like TrumpSupporterLTD, the sentiments were of a piece with the QAnon crowd over on 4chan – an almost metaphysical belief that Trump, despite the wealth of evidence, continues to move in mysterious ways
>
> "Trump did not concede. He used language to buy a little extra time because the senators and congressmen who support him are being threatened with dirty bombs and their families' lives by the Deep State and/or communist Chinese … I have it on good grounds that Trump will be moving with the military And regarding the transition to a new administration, means Trump with a new VP Pence is obviously a traitor and is 'fired'."

This is a secondary sense in which Trump's presidency could be considered anti-rhetorical. Trump's rhetorical "power" may not rest in any skill or technique or intention on his part, but rather be an invention of his supporters. In an ironic reversal, Trump's lawyers in his defense against his second impeachment actually argued that Trump should, in fact, be taken literally. Edelman (2021) writing for NBC News reported that Trump's lawyer "Van der Veen said, 'the president's remarks...explicitly encouraged those in attendance [at the rally] to exercise their rights peacefully and patriotically.'"

In a sense, this paper argues for a hopeful conclusion: it would be quite difficult to replicate Trump because there is no strong rhetorical blueprint to follow. On the other hand, the conclusion is, in part, that Trump rose

to power because the supporters used him (or an idea of him) rather than Trump rising to power by using them. That, frighteningly, suggests that the next Trump could come from anywhere and be anyone—not through any real effort on their part other than a willingness to be used as a figurehead, but simply because a group of people found them and their rhetorical acts useful rather than meaningful.

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