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How to Sell a War: Joe Biden's Rhetoric on the One-Year Anniversary of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

More than a year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the fighting is far from over. There are talks of peace, but they come and go like the wind. Ukraine appears to hold the advantage, however slight—for now, and in no small part thanks to aid from the United States, NATO, and its members and allies.

The desperation of the early days of the war has never completely left. But something far more nefarious than desperation is beginning to set in: tedium. Tedium at having to support a faraway land in some vague conflict, tedium at hundreds of thousands of deaths, tedium in the face of more pressing and less distant concerns in the homeland. Already, a small but growing contingent of the US Congress is beginning to question the prudence of continued unrestricted aid and has even threatened to curtail or pull funding (Satter).

Just as important as the aid being supplied to Ukraine—or perhaps even more important—is the continued justification of that aid. Without that justification and support—and without the ammunition, fighter jets, and tanks that follow—Ukraine will surely fall.

It is here, on February 21, 2023, near the one-year anniversary of the invasion, in Warsaw, Poland, that US President Joe Biden took the stage. What did he hope to gain? And how did he inspire allies to continue their participation in the war? These are the questions I will attempt to address in this essay. Using neo-Aristotelian criticism, I will analyze as my artifact

Biden's speech, using both the video recording and the transcript. I will consider the context of the speech, the five Ciceronian canons present in the speech, and how the intended audience responded to the speech.

Context

First in context is the rhetor: Biden himself. Even before his ascension to the presidency in 2021, Biden has, time and again, faced questions about his age and his capacity to serve in office (Helmore). Now eighty and seeking reelection, these questions have only increased in scale and fervor, questions about whether he has the vigor and vitality to serve another four-year term (Langer). Every action Biden takes is thus closely watched for signs of frailty and mental decline—something he and his team are surely aware of and respond consciously to. Of chief concern is live speeches: these are the times Biden makes himself most visible to the public; he has no administration or conference desk to hide behind; his foibles are most evident and cannot be edited out. But a speech, especially one about war, is also an opportunity: it is a chance for Biden to show the world firsthand that his old bones have some mileage left in them yet. And, in this context, Biden's age may actually be an asset: while gray hairs may not be what one wants when tackling climate change or racial injustice, they may be just the thing when it comes to matters of life and death on the battlefield, indicators of experience and stability as they are.

The occasion, as mentioned earlier, is the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is a time to remember the lives lost, to celebrate how long Ukraine has held out, and to worry that things have lasted this long. For time is both an asset and an enemy: the longer the war drags on, the more likely the public will revolt over the funding of death and destruction on the other side of the globe. The speech thus serves as both a look back at the accomplishments of the past year and as a rallying cry for the West to continue supporting Ukraine, even if the cause

is for something as abstract as freedom. The speech was also given a couple of months before Biden announced his reelection bid: preparation was certainly underway for the announcement and the subsequent campaigning, and the prospect of reelection likely fueled the urgency of making Biden appear powerful, vigorous, and unifying, a person who was, is, and will be capable of standing up to Putin for many years to come. It helped that, the day before, he had made an unannounced trip to Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, at potential risk to his safety (Madhani).

The audiences of this speech are many. The most obvious audience is Poland, its citizens, and its leadership. They stand right in front of Biden as he delivers the speech, and Biden often compliments them for their character and their good deeds for Ukraine: "Poland is hosting more than 1.5 million refugees from this war. God bless you." The same goes for the leadership: Biden flatters the president of Poland and his wife, such as when he says that they "have led with the heart and determination, showcasing all that's good about the human spirit." But, because the speech is televised and available worldwide, people who are not Polish will also see and hear this speech. Biden addresses at least two more audiences, one being western nations: As mentioned previously, Biden's speech is partly a rallying cry to continue support for Ukraine, and Biden almost certainly hopes that his speech will inspire western nations to continue sending equipment and funds to Ukraine. And this speech, again, is meant to show people at home in the United States that Biden is strong and can stand up to dictators. Another audience, perhaps less obvious, is Russia itself. But it's not all of Russia—it's Russian citizens. Biden speaks directly to Russian citizens, always referring to Putin in the second person to make clear that it is not them he blames but him: "President Putin chose this war. Every day the war continues is his choice. He could end the war with a word." Russia, in other words, is simply hostage to Putin's whims. By

saying all this, Biden hopes to refute the idea that the United States, NATO, and other western countries are the aggressors, and he hopes to turn the Russians against their own leader.

Analysis

Moving on to the five Ciceronian canons, Biden's invention is varied: he uses a mix of past, present, and future tense alike to convince his audience to continue supporting the war effort against Putin. Biden uses past tense—the language of blame and judgment—to vilify Putin and his actions: "Vladimir Putin had unleashed his murderous assault on Ukraine." He uses present tense—the language of tribalism and social cohesion—to discuss the values of the West and contrast them to Putin's values: "President Putin is confronted with something today that he didn't think was possible a year ago. The democracies of the world have grown stronger, not weaker. But the autocrats of the world have grown weaker, not stronger." And Biden uses future tense—the language of choices—to encourage the audience to continue, through their compassion and their policies alike, to support Ukrainians in their fight against Putin: "Democracies of the world will stand guard over freedom today, tomorrow, and forever."

Biden next follows a very specific arrangement for his speech. He introduces himself by establishing his *ethos*, his character: he mentions that last year, he spoke in the exact place as he is speaking now. And, last year, he spoke just a little after Putin launched his invasion of Ukraine. The repetition of location and time helps convince the audience that Biden has been with the conflict all the way, that he cares, and that he knows what he's talking about. He then launches into a narration, the *logos*, of the conflict. But instead of describing the bleakness of the invasion, he turns the story into a shining example of western resolve and a "test" for democracy and nations. By reframing the invasion as a challenge, the invasion becomes not something to fear but something to rise to.

Biden now begins to weave the *logos*, the proof portion, of the Ciceronian canons into his narration with figures of speech. He contrasts Putin's aims to the results and his ideals to the west's ideals with epistrophe: "When President Putin ordered his tanks to roll into Ukraine, he thought we would roll over." But with some chiasmus, Biden reveals that, while Putin expected "the Finlandization of NATO," he got "the NATOization of Finland." While he says this, he employs gesture, variation in tone, and a bit of humor in his delivery: whereas Biden has stood straight and spoken loudly for most of the speech, now he leans forward into the microphone and quiets his voice for dramatic effect. Biden uses antithesis to simplify the issues and the events for the audience, throwing in some rhyme for good measure: "President Putin's craven lust for land and power will fail. And the Ukrainian people's love for their country will prevail." He also heightens the memorability of his speech by emphasizing the words "no" and "freedom," repeating them several times to increase their stickiness. Biden concludes by relying on a bit of *pathos*, on a bit of emotion: he challenges the audience to build a better world for their grandchildren, one where all can live in freedom.

Biden is also mindful of style. He uses the virtue of proper language to fit into the vernacular of his many audiences, combining the best of both the worlds of formality and informality. At times, he takes on a folksy demeanor: one of his first lines begins with "you know," as if he is catching up with old friends. But he proceeds to a more statesmanlike manner almost immediately when he says the very noncasual "murderous assault on Ukraine." Biden's informality also means he is usually clear about his intentions: when he says that "our support for Ukraine will not waver, NATO will not be divided, and we will not tire," he means exactly that. The third virtue, vividness, is also present in spades with all the stories Biden tells: he doesn't have to say that "through partition and oppression, when the beautiful city was destroyed after

the Warsaw Uprising, during decades under the iron fist of communist rule, Poland endured because you stood together"; but he says that because he knows it's an engaging and romantic story, one that will play to his immediate audience's ego. In terms of decorum, Biden refers frequently to commonplaces, like democracy, freedom, and "all of our children and grandchildren." And his speech is stuffed with ornament, figures of speech that see him attempt to outwit Putin through wordplay.

For memory, it is unlikely that Biden completely memorized the speech. Instead, he probably read off a teleprompter, as most speakers and politicians do (though he stumbles in a few places, likely from misreading a word). He therefore had constant access to his wit and his words, as he did not need to come up with anything on the spot. But it's likely that Biden at least partly memorized the speech: very few people would be able to deliver it as fluently as he did without at least being familiar with the content and where to pause and emphasize.

Speaking of delivery, Biden is usually upright, calm, and convicted when delivering his speech. But, at times, he leans into the microphone and lowers his voice for comedic effect, such as when he drops his "NATOization of Finland" line. This contrast between his stately persona and his more lighthearted side increases his *ethos* as a person instead of a robot and strengthens his speech with *pathos*, the audience being taken on a rollercoaster of emotion that makes the highs all the higher and the lows all the lower.

Effects

The immediate response to Biden's speech was applause, applause from Polish citizens and Ukrainian refugees alike. While there may have been dissenters within the crowd, they were drowned out by the positive responses. It seems safe to say that most of Biden's audience members standing in front of him responded to his speech favorably.

On February 24, a few days after the speech, the US Treasury and Commerce Departments sanctioned a combined 116 people and companies who they alleged had assisted Russia's war effort (Shear). Additionally, the US Pentagon announced that it would send $2 billion's worth of military aid to Ukraine in the form of drones and anti-drone systems, more recently committing another $1.2 billion (Schmitt; Seyler). Biden has so far been consistent: when he promised continued aid to Ukraine, he has delivered.

On the world stage, no allies appear to have pulled out of the pro-Ukraine coalition since Biden's speech. If they needed convincing in the first place, it seems Biden succeeded in his convincing—or, at the very least, he did not convince them otherwise.

On the other hand, the tribal language of the speech likely strengthened each tribe's animosity toward each other, with Russia and its surefire and potential allies having even fewer reasons to pull out of the conflict. A day after the speech, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev raised the specter of nuclear war, and China announced its intent to strengthen ties with Russia (Faulconbridge; Neukam). More speeches, it would appear, are in Biden's future—provided he wins reelection, which his speech and the unity and enmity that have come from it will no doubt help him pursue.

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