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ABSTRACT

Richard Nixon's "Checkers" speech, a response to charges brought against the "Nixon fund," was primarily an effort to explain the behavior of Eisenhower's 1952 presidential-campaign staff. The effectiveness of this speech was largely due to Nixon's self-disclosure within the context of the speech's narrative mode. In reaffirming his competence as a member of Eisenhower's team, Nixon left his audience with the conviction that he was an honest, sincere, and patriotic (although perhaps overzealous) crusader. (KS)

NIXON'S CHECKERS:

A RHETORIC-COMMUNICATION CRITICISM

by

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Richard M. Nixon's "Checkers" speech is not eloquent. It is not tightly organized or unified by any "centrist" principle. The language usage is neither elevated or economical. In fact, the sentence structure is often complex and awkward and sometimes ungrammatical. Nonetheless, the speech is considered responsible for vindicating Nixon, keeping him on the 1952 Republican ticket, and promoting the Eisenhower campaign. While it is possible to analyze and criticize such a rhetorical act from a variety of perspectives, we have chosen to apply concepts from theories of human communication not traditionally considered rhetorical. It is our hope that this essay will demonstrate that the additive application of communication concepts can supplement and enrich our appreciative understanding of the rhetorical act. Particularly, we will be concerned with two areas of traditional interest: the underlying motivation for the "Checkers" speech and the primary source of the speech's effectiveness. Our thesis is that the motivation underlying the speech was primarily performance team incongruities which followed in the wake of publicity concerning the Nixon fund and that the source of the speech's effectiveness lies in the story mode of self-disclosure utilized in the speech.

I

Attempting to determine the particular motivations surrounding any given rhetorical act is a difficult task. Fortunately, sufficient information concerning the situation surrounding this rhetorical act is available and clearly indicates the major factors of Nixon's motivation. We choose to view this information concerning the motivational impetus of the speech in relation to Goffman's concept of "performance teams."[1]

In this context two situational variables are of paramount importance: (1) the incongruity between the predominate themes of the Republican campaign and the implications of the "slush fund" charges against Nixon, and consequently (2) the mounting pressure from within the Republican party that Nixon resign from the ticket because of the incident.

Goffman conceives of the performance team as a group which seeks to project some front, image, or definition of the situation through "intimate cooperation."[2] A very real example of such teamwork can be found in a political campaign with the Presidential and Vice-presidential candidates being the most prominent members of the team involved with senatorial, gubernatorial, and congressional nominees from the same party in a cooperative effort to uphold the party platform. In 1952 the Republican party platform, or Eisenhower's campaign themes were "the Korean War, Communism, and corruption in government."[3] The campaign focused upon morality in national government and was labeled "THE GREAT CRUSADE." Steele and Redding in their article on the American Value System pinpoint the focus of the campaign in their description of "Puritan and Pioneer Morality."[4] They list such attributes as honesty, simplicity, self-discipline, personal responsibility and humility as aspects of this value orientation. Most assuredly, the 1952 Republican campaign "pitched pathos" to the nation's voters.

Reports of the "Nixon fund" came less than two months prior to the election. Though the fund was legally and ethically defensible, democratic campaign strategists saw it as a means of discrediting the Eisenhower-Nixon ticket.[5] Due to the nature of Nixon's aggressive role in the

campaign, this posed a major threat. Nixon's role in the campaign has been characterized as "conjured up out of the current political atmosphere; a brisk, brash, (and stupid) St. George who had come from California to slay the Communist dragon. There could be not the slightest blemish on this St. George."[6] The fund incident was more than a "blemish." It tended to undermine Nixon's image as a sincere crusader. It brought his honesty and personal responsibility into question. And this incongruity could constitute a serious political deficit considering the amplifying nature of the publicity it was receiving. Goffman describes the essence of the difficulty for the Eisenhower-Nixon ticket in noting that: "while a team performance is in progress, any member of the team has the power to give the show away or disrupt it by inappropriate conduct."[7] In essence, giving the show away constitutes discrediting the team.

The nature of the charges were particularly damaging in the context of the themes of "THE GREAT CRUSADE" and the values to which these themes appealed. James Reston, a correspondent for the New York Times who traveled with Eisenhower during the 1952 campaign, reported the reactions of Republican politicans in this way: "The telegrams on the Nixon incident were something less than complimentary. They seemed to be saying that in an ordinary political campaign against an ordinary opponent, taking $18,234 above salary and normal expenses might be all right, but that in a 'Crusade' for moral principles it was a major embarrassment."[8] Reston continues by interpreting Eisenhower's reaction to the matter as: "It should be not whether what was done was 'illegal' but whether it was in any way immoral."[9] It might be noted that Eisenhower's indecision--his wait

and see posture--allowed further amplification of the performance team incongruities. His inaction indicated that on this issue the team was not united. This disunity at the top of the ticket allowed subsequent disunity to occur in other segments of the team. The New York Times reported a study of nationally sampled newspapers, the majority of them supporters of the Eisenhower-Nixon ticket, which showed disapproval of the Vice-presidential candidate's action by a ratio of almost two to one. Most predictions favored Nixon's withdrawal from the ticket.

The prominence of Nixon's position as a team member made it imperative that he be as above reproach as Eisenhower,[10] that his behavior not be viewed as incongruent with the team image as reflected in the campaign themes. However, such an incongruity did develop as a result of the highly publicized charges concerning the Nixon fund. It is important to note that the issue was not whether the charges against Nixon were true, rather the issue was produced because the charges were made to <u>appear</u> true and that was sufficient to discredit the performance team.

The alternatives available to Nixon were to resign from the ticket or attempt to repair the breech in the performance team image. In the long run, the first alternative would only increase the damage already done, since it would only add credibility to the Democrats' allegations. Nixon and his advisers agreed that the only practical solution was to present his side of the story to the public via television.[11] Three days prior to the broadcast it was decided jointly by Nixon, Eisenhower, and John Dewey that the broadcast would be to a national audience.[12] The broadcast was to be a public accounting of Nixon's financial status. This

general approach was suggested by Dewey and Eisenhower.[13] The intended effect of this public audit would be to dispel any doubts about Nixon's use of campaign contributions. Such an accomplishment would by implication include the reassertion of Nixon's ethos and the restoration of congruity between the performance team and the campaign themes.

In summary, Nixon was motivated to reassert his ethos and reaffirm the image of his performance team. He was motivated to counter intra-team pressures that he withdraw from the ticket, which more surely than defeat would have ended his political career. Given these motivating factors, the magnitude of the incongruity and the implications of failure to recreate congruity, one would probably predict the speaker to be highly ego-involved in his speech. Nixon was clearly aware that if he were unsuccessful in this speech, his resignation would probably be requested.[14] Thus, the rhetorical situation involved great risks for Nixon. The significance of these risks could be expected to be tension producing and likely to affect vocal and physical control, the entire range of non-verbal cues in delivery. Such effects are clearly evident in either magnetic or video-tape reproductions of the speech. And as will be noted later these cues are relevant to the effectiveness of the speech.

II

It is not possible to completely separate the underlying motivational factors of a given speaker in a particular situation from the subsequent process of rhetorical invention in which he must engage. Nixon was under considerable emotional stress and he had little time to prepare the speech. Though the influence of Dewey and Eisenhower as well as the specific charge dictated some of the speech's content, the emotional stress and time factors

are more cogent variables for explaining why Nixon chose to disclose as much as he did in the manner which he did. But regardless of the exact cluster of reasons or motives which caused Nixon to self-disclosure, the fact that he did so is crucial to appreciating the effectiveness of the speech. In essense, it is our contention that "Checkers" is an example of self-disclosure in the political arena. Of course, the speech is not entirely self-disclosure, but disclosure is predominant. Throughout the speech the emphasis is continually on presenting Nixon through his acts, beliefs, and feelings.

The speech can be divided into three parts: (1) the "discounting" of the act; (2) Nixon's self-disclosure of personal values; and (3) the resumption of his previous role in the performance team.

Kenneth Burke in his "Dictionary of Pivotal Terms," defines discounting as the rhetorical device of showing "things are not as they seem."[15] Nixon directly approaches the question of morality. He asserts that he has not given any special favors to contributers and therefore the fund is not immoral. On questions of the legality of the fund per se, he reports the finding of an independent audit showing no misuse and the testimony of a lawyer showing the legality of the fund "under appropriate tax laws." With this modest attempt at refutation completed, he begins the second and most self-disclosing portion of the speech. Nixon proceeds to give the audience his "financial" history, which turns out to be more his life story in an accountant's package. Nixon through his self-disclosures presents himself as the epitomy of the American value system. Why?

Research conducted by Sidney M. Jourard concerning self-disclosure

indicates that people tend "to disclose more about themselves to people who resembled them in various ways than to people who differed from them. This leads me to propose that disclosure of self is a by-product, among other things, of the perception or belief that the other, the target-person, is similar to the self. Probably the similarity which is crucial is similarity in values. We disclose ourselves when we are pretty sure that the target-person will evaluate our disclosure and react to them as we do ourselves."[16] Applying this finding to Nixon's "Checkers" speech which was televised to an audience of millions is not particularly difficult. Nixon's target-person was not a single other person who was emotionally significant to Nixon, rather it was to the generalized other American, the average man, the typical member of the Silent Majority, whose evaluation had taken on a crucial significance in a situation in which Nixon was risking his political career.

Insofar as he shared the values of his audience, it follows that his audience would respond to appeals based on these values much as he would himself (i.e., positively and acceptantly); thus explaining the effectiveness of the invention process. Henry E. McGuckin in his analysis of "Checkers" notes thirty-nine instances of value appeals utilizing categorizations from Steele and Redding.[17] In every instance Nixon does not appeal to the audience to act in a certain way because of some value, rather he discloses himself as a person committed to these values. The values are not dealt with in the abstract, rather they are implicit in the material that Nixon chooses to disclose throughout the speech. When he speaks of repaying his debt to his parents, the dog he will not return, or the check he will

cash; he exemplifies rather than appeals to the value. Consider specifically the Checkers segment of the speech, Nixon said:

> One other thing I probably should tell you because if I don't they'll probably be saying this about me too. We did get something--a gift--after the election. A man down in Texas heard Pat on the radio mention the fact that our two youngsters would like to have a dog. And believe it or not, the day before we left on this campaign trip, we got a message from the Union Station in Baltimore saying they had a package for us. We went down to get it. You know what it was? It was a little cocker spaniel dog, in a crate that he had sent all the way from Texas, black and white, spotted, and our little girl, Tricia, the six-year-old, named it Checkers. And, you know, the kids, like all kids, love the dog, and I just want to say this, right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're going to keep it.

McGuckin identifies the values of courage and sociality as inherent in this selection. But notice Nixon does not appeal to courage or sociality, those values are taken to be attributes of the speaker which the audience infer from the passage. Because Nixon exemplifies the values presumably characteristic of the generalized other American, Nixon becomes appealing.

This explanation is not without limitations. It is obvious that not all speeches which appeal to generally accepted American values, nor all speakers which attempt to exemplify them are effective. One situation in which the audience might not accept such appeals is when the honesty and integrity of the speaker are in question. Presumably, this was the case with the "Checkers" speech. In order to overcome audience skepticism concerning his motives, the speaker must persuade them of the genuineness of his intentions and disclosures.

Three factors intrinsic in the presentation of the speech, in

conjunction with previously noted situational factors known to the audience, acted to persuade the audience of the genuineness of the self-disclosure. First, the delivery both visually and vocally was taken as a sign of genuine feeling by the audience. Prior audience awareness of previously noted motivational factors was crucial to making this behavior credible. Second, the audit answered in part the charges and provided some consentual validation for Nixon's assertions of integrity. Thus, the audience did not have to rely solely on Nixon. Some "objective" supporting evidence was available and presented. Finally, the lack of polish in the speech was an asset insofar as it tended to minimize fear of rhetorical trickery.

Another limitation of the self-disclosure explanation at its present stage of development is that it does not describe audience reaction to the manner of self-disclosure. Gerard Egan explains two modes of self-disclosure. The first is history which he considers pseudo-self-disclosure. He notes that "In history the manner of self-revelation is usually somewhat detached. There is little ego-involvement and thus little risk."[18] The second mode is story which does tend to generate audience involvement.

> Story is not actuarial; it is rather selective in detail, for the revealer intuites that it is not the transmission of fact that is important but the transmission of self. It does not avoid detail, but the choice of detail is secondary to the act of communication. Story usually avoids interpretation, too; it allows experience to remain unintellectualized and thus to speak for itself. . . Facts are selected for their impact value, for their ability to reveal the person as what he is now through what he has experienced.
>
> The storyteller is taking a risk and he knows it. Therefore, story is always an implicit request for human support.[19]

From the viewpoint of rhetorical potency it seems clear that story is

more effective than history. Thus, since Nixon's speech falls into this mode, one might expect the audience to be "moved" by their involvement with Nixon's life story, by his implicit call for human support. It was a story with which the audience could identify. They could empathize--they could fill in the feeling between the figures. And yet this speech could have responded to the charges against Nixon in a more detached historical manner. If that manner had been chosen it is possible that the charges against him could have been substantively refuted. But is seems unlikely that such a speech would have generated over two million responses which stand as the empirical testiment to the effectiveness of the speech. The manner of the presentation--the story mode of self-disclosure--allowed audience involvement which was essential to the effectiveness of the speech.

The final section of the speech reflects a return to Nixon's typical campaign style. Quite in tune with the dominant themes of a moral crusade, the crusader who has cleansed himself through baring his soul, returns to the offensive. Nixon displays campaign themes and supports his ticket:

> Why do I feel that in spite of the smears, the misunderstandings, the necessity for a man to come up here and bare his soul, as I have, why is it necessary for me to continue this fight? And I want to tell you why. Because I love my country. And I think my country is in danger. And I think the only man that can save America at this time is . . . Dwight Eisenhower.

And having disclosed himself, he can now more credibly challenge Stevenson and Sparkman to do likewise concerning their "funds." This marks a reintegration of the performance team, Nixon no longer stands alone. He fights not for himself along, but for the leader of his team. He returns

to his original aggressive role on the team, congruity restored.

It has been our contention that the "Checkers" speech was motivated primarily by the implications of performance team incongruities created by charges concerning the "Nixon Fund." That the effectiveness of the speech was largely due to the manner and matter of the self-disclosure. In reaffirming his competence as a member of his performance team, Nixon probably left his audience with the conviction that he was an honest, sincere, patriotic though perhaps overzealous crusader. It is our hope that this essay has indicated the potential value of the conjunctive use of traditional rhetorical concepts and concepts drawn from other theories concerning human communication in enhancing our understanding of the rhetorical act.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), p. 79.

[2]Ibid., p. 77.

[3]Marguis Childs. EISENHOWER: Captive Hero (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), p. 151.

[4]Edward D. Steele and W. Charles Redding, "The American Value System: Premises for Persuasion," Western Speech 27 (2) 1962, p. 85.

[5]A comprehensive review of the incident can be found in Richard M. Nixon. Six Crises (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1962), pp. 73-131.

[6]Childs, p. 157.

[7]Childs, p. 82.

[8]James Reston, The New York Times, September 21, 1952, p. 1.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Nixon quotes one of his campaign advisors Murray Chotiner as saying: "The Democrats have attacked you and will continue to attack you because they are afraid to take on Eisenhower." Nixon, Six Crises, P. 95.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid.pp. 98-100/

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid., pp. 73-129.

[15]Kenneth Burke, Attitudes Toward History 2nd Edition (Los Altos: Hermes Publications, 1958), p. 224.

[16]Sidney Jourard, The Transparent Self (New York: 1964), p. 15

[17]Henry E. McGuckin, Jr. "A Value Analysis of Richard Nixon's 1952 Campaign Fund Speech," in The Speakers Reader. Edited by Robert L. Scott. Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1969), p. 70.

[18]Gerard Egan, Encounter (Belmont, California: 1970) , p. 235.

[19]Ibid., p. 236.