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Joe Biden's Inauguration Speech: A Persuasive Narrative

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Abstract- In Joe Biden's inauguration speech we can find standard emotional and rational stratagems that form its persuasive strategy to obtain the public's approval. The techniques and themes used by the President are the same identified in the modern principles of commercial advertising, of the persuasion theory and of the propaganda discourses, in particular from war propaganda. These techniques and themes consist in revealing a problem in order to suggest the solution, the repetition and the simplicity of the message, the use of a colloquial language and of significant and easily understandable symbols, the participation or the quote of testimonials, the bandwagon effect, the necessity of provoking emotional responses, the plain folks appeal, the card-stacking and the use of glittering words. The attention to the choice of the most persuasive words to express the author's ideas, to defend an ideal and to restore American identity is impressive. These stereotyped formulas are also used to simplify situations with no need of argumentation.

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I. Introduction

The following study is a content analysis of Joe Biden's inauguration speech whose aim is to obtain public consensus by employing emotional and rational stratagems, in other words using a persuasive strategy. The techniques and themes used by the President are the same identified in the modern principles of commercial advertising, persuasion and propaganda discourses. From the Great War onwards, propagandists have always used stereotyped formulas to package their messages and their discourses to influence the people's opinions and actions, in order to obtain public approval and to mould the agenda setting of the citizens and defend the identity of the nation.

Information communicates a truthful presentation of the facts to the public, whereas propaganda packages the same facts in a way which arouses a desired response using the principles of persuasion.

In general, through the years, propaganda has been variously understood as «a direct attack against man» (Ellul, 1965), as the «systematic mistreatment of truth and information and their procedural safeguards» (Cunningham, 2002), or simply as «a mere tool» (Lasswell, 1927a) and as «a practical process of persuasion» (Taylor, 1992) to instil a way of thinking in the recipients.

Therefore it is not simple to give a definition in a few words of «propaganda», but the one proposed by Pratkanis and Aronson (1991) is very complete in capturing its essence because these scholars see propaganda «as the dissemination of biased ideas and opinions, often through the use of lies and deception…The word propaganda has since evolved to mean mass suggestion or influence through the manipulation of symbols and the psychology of the individual. Propaganda is the communication of a point of view with the ultimate goal of having the recipient come to "voluntarily" accept the position as if it were his or her own».

«Voluntarily» means that propaganda, as persuasion does, requires an atmosphere of free choice, because, according to Simon (1986), it «is a form of influence that predisposes, but does not impose». In this way the recipient is not always conscious of its effect.

Also Marlin (2002) writes intriguing words describing it as an «organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual's adequately informed, rational, reflective judgement».

All these definitions of the term share a common understanding in relation to its purpose «to control public opinion» (Bernays, 1928) in particular its «actions by influencing attitudes» (Qualter, 1962) without a constraint and to direct the sympathies: moreover propaganda, as a strategic mix of selective facts and fiction blended to promote a particular point of view, is the «management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols» (Lasswell, 1927b) including the national flag, music (Lady Gaga and Jennifer Lopez for Biden) and words (Amanda Gorman for Biden).

In this sense we can observe the use of propaganda, this «invisible government» (Bernays, 1928), in most aspects of social life, even politics.

In fact, since the Great War, propaganda has become always more complex, drawing from fields such as advertising theory, public relations, social-psychology and political marketing.

All these notions often refer to similar discoursive strategies of persuasion or with manipulative intent, so much so that advertising, propaganda and political marketing seem to use the same rules to obtain public consent and to justify or legitimise certain actions, to create, strengthen, modify or extinguish beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, to direct public sympathies towards some values, decisions or, as above said, a subjective «point of view».

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In order to reach all these aims, propaganda tends to rely on ethically suspect methods of influence and therefore it is not necessary to tell the truth and, according to Bernays (1928), it can be easily abused «when it is used to over-advertise an institution and to create in the public mind artificial values».

Therefore propaganda becomes «a language that thinks for you» (Klemperer, 2006), a language that changes the ideas «directing the frame of thinkable opinion» (Chomsky, 1973) and the ruling class can not discard its rules if they want to construct compelling information.

In this sense we have to understand the harsh criticisms that essentially see in propaganda the tendency of the government to manipulate information to finally dominate the public opinion building the desired «factory of consent» (Lippmann, 1922; Bernays, 1928) in a fragmented society.

Similarly, for the modern times, Noam Chomsky (1973) considers that propaganda is an essential component in the entire political process and affirms that «democratic systems must control what people do and think because in a democracy the politically active segments of the population, the most educated and privileged, have to be kept under control».

II. Advertising and Propaganda Elements

Joe Biden's presidential speech is made up of fundamental elements typical of advertising and propaganda discourses.

Already in 1921 Bertrand Russell (Russell, 1941) certified that «propaganda, conducted by the means which advertisers have found successful, is now one of the recognized methods of government in all advanced countries and is especially the method by which democratic opinion is created».

Propaganda shares with advertising the need to obtain public approval, to create expectations as to succeed in guiding attitudes and behaviour. Its main technique is to reveal a problem in order to arouse an emotional reaction in the recipient and to suggest the solution. This is made using other peculiarities taken from advertising: such as the repetition and the simplicity of the message, the use of a colloquial language and of significant and easily understandable symbols, the participation of testimonials, the bandwagon effect or social proof (Cialdini, 2006) and the necessity of provoking emotional responses into the public because it is more involving and more convincing.

The Institute for Propaganda Analysis identified other basic propaganda techniques (Miller, 1937) that we have found in the President's speech, such as the plain folks appeal, card-stacking and glittering words.

Generally these stereotyped formulas are also consciuously used to simplify problematic situations with no need of argumentation and with the risk of deliberate disinformation or manipulation.

III. A Discourse Made for a Noble Cause

War propaganda teaches that in any war the real motives (economic and/or geopolitical) have to be masked behind the defence of an ideal or a value which is widely shared and legitimated by the audience.

The first impression the reader receives in examining Joe Biden's investiture speech is that it has a lot in common with war propaganda.

In persuasive ways propagandists appeal to the fundamental values and beliefs of their culture and bestow so much care on the vast verbal output with strong emotive resonance, also known as «glittering words» (Miller, 1937; McClung, 1939) or even «sham ideals» (Ponsonby 1928), which have essentially an adhesive function.

a) Unity

In fact, before the declaration of war, as in any emergency situation, the call to unity, to internal cohesion, is the first priority for every warring nation.

In Biden's speech, unity is presented as the solution to all the problems that America is facing now and with synonyms and variations («indivisible», «together», «union», «unity», «united» and «one nation») the concept appears 30 times in the text to underline the urgency of the moment.

It is now that the citizens have to demonstrate their attachment to the nation and the President will tell them how.

In all this Biden has to demonstrate to be innovative («new» appears 5 times, and «change», that entail a renewal, once), with ideas that will bring «progress» (a «glittering word» that appears twice in the text).

b) Reveal problems and offer solutions

As already said, both propaganda and advertising aim to obtain approval and to create expectations in the beholders with the final goal of controlling their actions by influencing their attitudes.

To generate the biggest impact into the recipient of the message first you have to evoke, as President Biden did, unpleasant feelings (to recall the problem to solve, that affect emotions like rage, disgust, sadness or fear) and in a second moment to evoke a feeling of approaching (the solution: surprise, trust or joy. In Joe Biden's speech: trust for democracy and truth).

To recall unpleasant feelings and their possible consequences is part of the strategy of fear.

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The reinforcement theory assumes that people are motivated to avoid pain and fairly seek pleasure, therefore the persuasive messages must include specific recommendations (as social advertising does) in order to avoid the harms, along with reassurances that if the recipient follows the recommendations, everything will be fine. We can see in the solution proposed by President Biden his endorsements too.

Some critics, in particular N. Chomsky (1988), consider that denouncing a problem and suggesting the solution, liberating the recipients from the task of finding one and guiding them along desired channels of interpretation is a manipulative strategy.

Persuasive or manipulative, we can find this stratagem in the writings and discourses of politicians and religious leaders from the first centuries a.D. until today.

The problems that the President Biden recalled are various and absolutely actual: the virus, loss of lives and jobs, growing inequalities, systemic racism, nativism, climate in crisis, political extremism, domestic terrorism, America's role in the world, the fear and demonization of the other.

The latter of these problems comes from war propaganda, where the dichotomy between *us and them* is highlighted and the «slander of the enemy is esteemed a patriotic duty» (Ponsonby, 1928), a duty that you can conduct demonizing or otherwise delegitimizing the positions of the other.

All these problems have put America in a «difficult moment», «a dangerous period», «a dark winter», and it has become «a devasted land», a «harsh and ugly reality», with an allusion to his predecessor as the creator of the present situation where «facts (…) are manipulated or even invented» for a need of «power and personal gain».

The result is an identity crisis, and according to Cialdini (2016) to defend someone's own identity is a principle of persuasion. The solution is to struggle together against «the forces that divide us», because a united nation is stronger and can defend itself better. Hence «I'm going to be a president for all Americans. All Americans».

Biden repeats almost twice these problems and all his concepts, because this way the message is perceived as more important and repetition is a notorious mechanism of organising the mind of the beholder and his agenda setting. The repetition has also a lot to do with familiarity. According to Cialdini (2006) familiarity belongs to the principle of persuasion named «liking».

Most research on the repetition suggests that putting the strongest argument either first or last is the best strategy. According to Miller (1959) with time the recipients tend to remember information they receive first. The latter influences the result. But if you want to be sure of your impact repeat the message first and last.

Repetition is a powerful weapon of persuasion, but the way people respond to it depends on how personally relevant the message is to the audience.

According to Petty and Cacioppo's *elaboration likelihood model* (Petty, 1986), there are two distinct routes to persuasion: a central route and a peripheral route. The first includes thinking or cognitive elaboration, the second relies on mental shortcuts or heuristic cues. The authors conceptualize motivation as a central cue to persuasion, and we can say that the examples and the stories told by President Biden are very involving for the audience. Repetition and stimulation of both central and peripheral routes contribute to make the discourse very persuasive.

c) Democracy

Words and images that you evoke are the most effective weapons in a war of ideas, overall if they are skillfully used.

The most important value that compose the American identity is democracy. At the very beginning of Biden's speech this term is repeated 5 times (11 times in all the discourse): «This is the day of democracy», «We are celebrating the triumph (…) of democracy», «democracy is valuable», «democracy is fragile», «democracy has prevailed».

According to Miller (1937) «democracy» is a «glittering word», a «virtue word», such as «truth, freedom, honor, liberty, social justice, public service, the right to work, loyalty, progress, the American way, Constitution defender», that are mentioned from the source of a message because they are positively perceived by the collective imagination even if they are vague and ambiguous. With the language you can shape the ideas, the thoughts and manipulate the will of the people who look for heuristics or simple recognition devices to make sense of perplexing political realities.

According to Weaver (1953) it is a sort of simplification thanks to which some words labeled as charismatic in our culture (over all «democracy») have a power that is in some ways mysteriously and inexplicably given.

To Miller' list (1937) also «security», that appears twice in the text (the search of certainties influences our lives) and «opportunity», 3 times in the text (1 with the synonymous «possibilities») could be added. America is also known as the "Land of Freedom and of Opportunities", two terms that also belong to the war propaganda. Sure enough during the Great War the words «chance», «freedom» and «opportunity» were perhaps the most repeated words on the billboards to convince the volunteers leaving for the front: the Great War was presented as an opportunity to make a «great adventure» (T. Roosevelt), to learn a trade, to travel, to be happy, to express the self-esteem, identity, pride, virility and the own patriotism (defending the freedom of the land).

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These terms are all present in the discourse of the President and the message that Biden wants to communicate is that «America had a problem, now it faces the solution», as the second sentence of the speech «America has once again put to the test and America has taken up the challenge» confirm, using two euphemisms of «war».

Moreover, in the same semantic field of «war» (term that appears 4 times) are «challenge» (4), «put to the test» (3), «violence» (3), «struggle» (2), «conflicts» (2), «battle» (1), «attacks» (1) and «rebellious mob» (1).

It is interesting to note that in 1963, Edward R. Murrow, Director of U.S. Information Agency, used the same analogy to underline the importance of intangible sources: «Our arsenal of persuasion must be as ready as our nuclear arsenal and used as never before» (VV.AA., 2008).

During wartime the importance of the war of ideas is as powerful as the weapons, especially when such ideas motivate the fellow citizens.

Returning to the presidential speech, we note that Biden's predecessor, who is never mentioned, represented the obstacle to democracy, a threat to the traditional values of «hope, truth and justice» that assemble «democracy». Hence, the election of Biden is part of the solution to restore democracy.

For this reason it is essential to have an antagonist in order to perceive yourself as a close and reliable group. According to Cialdini (2006) this belongs to the principle of social proof. An enemy, or just a problem to solve, helps to outline and reinforce the identity of a nation by means of contrast. Following this rule the argumentation of Biden's speech lies into the presentation of simple couples of opposite nouns that highlight his intent: war/peace, truth/lies, open our souls/hardening our hearts, hope/fear, unity/division, light/darkness, decency/dignity.

This is another expedient taken from war propaganda. During the Great War the propagandists convinced volunteers to support the war effort by frightening them with the consequences of a possible defeat: autocracy vs. democracy, slavery vs. freedom, chaos vs. order. Safeguarding values and lifestyles is directly linked to the strategy of fear, which facilitated acceptance on the part of its public of messages containing indications of how to confront the threat. From the time of Machiavelli politicians have often manipulated public fear and, according to Cialdini (2006), this strategy belongs to the principle of scarcity.

d) We have to defend our identity

«To defend» is another important verb both for propaganda and in Biden's speech. Threats to survival have always drawn people's attention. From the Great War onwards every war has always been presented as a self-defense.

Actually President Woodrow Wilson justified armed intervention as the defence of American ideals and values (democracy, liberty, justice and family). According to Cialdini (2006) also this belongs to the principle of scarcity.

Lord Ponsonby denounced this motivation as a well-known lie because every belligerant nation supported the priority of defense, and he added that «if the truth were told from the outset, there would be no reason and no will for war» (Ponsonby, 1928). In any case this priority is well motivated because «so great are the psychological resistances to war in modern nations, that every war must appear to be a war of defence against a menacing, murderous aggressor. There must be no ambiguity about whom the public is to hate. The war must not be due to a world system of conducting international affairs, nor to the stupidity or malevolence of all governing classes, but to the rapacity of the enemy». (Ivi)

This factor still exists in the description of every conflict because it is «the fundamental doctrine according to which the State is in itself good and guided by the most noble intentions, only trying to defend itself and does not figure as an active subject in world affairs but simply reacts to the crimes of others, at times imprudently because of its own naivety, the complexity of history or its incapacity to understand the evilness of the enemy» (Chomsky, 1973).

According to neuropsychology theories to promise to protect the *status quo* from what someone can lose is always more persuasive than put forth new conquests (Kahneman, 2012). Therefore, Joe Biden promises (verb that returns 5 times in the speech, and once the variation «I give you my word») that he wants «to defend the truth», «to protect the nation» and he concludes his discourse by declarating that «I will defend the Constitution. I will defend our democracy. I will defend America».

The identity of America is in danger and the President wants to save it by looking at the «future» (4 times in the text, and «children», as a metaphor of future, appears 6 times) «in our uniquely American, restless, bold, optimistic way».

This emphasis of the uniqueness of America is very interesting because it is a principle of the modern marketing: if you want to spark interest into your target you have to underline the extraordinariness of your product or project (Godin, 2003).

Biden knows «the strength of our nation», because «this is a great nation. We're good people», and to save the identity of the nation is a «duty and a responsability», an «obligation» for everyone. To call people to their duty is an expression relentlessly repeated in times of war, when everyone has to demonstrate his love for the country and his sense of belonging. According to Cialdini (2006, 2016) when you give someone a duty, you stimulate them to be

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consistent with the idea and role that you are expecting from them.

Now the destiny of your country depends on you, you are the solution to the problem, it is your responsability to help.

In this way the system strengthens the self-guiltiness of the individuals, and this is also a stereotyped formula in the rules of manipulation (Chomsky, 1988): the individual is at fault in his bad luck and therefore to blame, and instead of protesting against the political system, he passively accepts the situation. This is the sense of the following statement of the speech: «each of us has a duty and a responsibility, as citizens, as Americans, and above all as leaders — leaders who have pledged to honor the Constitution and protect the nation — to defend the truth and fight against lies». The turning point is «now» (with «today» 16 times repeated).

e) The emotional register

To Aristotle, rhetoric consisted in three elements of persuasion named ethos (character and qualities of the speaker), logos (the message) and páthos (to cause emotions in the beholder). In *The Rhetoric* (1932) he wrote that the public has always to be moved emotionally (páthos). And that is right even today because scholars generally agree that masses are almost exclusively governed by the unconscious and irrationality (Kahneman, 2012). Therefore propaganda semplifies the problems in presenting only one side of the story to draw attention to «truth» done on purpose and provoking an emotional response. Miller (1937) baptizes this phenomenon «card-stacking».

The emotional response to the message (already recommended in former times by Aristotle) is also shared by advertising and war propaganda. In fact, Bernays (1928) underlines its importance in the messages of war propaganda and amongst the duties of the public relations experts because «abstract discussions and heavy arguments . . . cannot be given to the public if they are not previously simplified and dramatised». In this way the recipient's instincts of projection and identification are simplified.

The use of the emotional register causes a sort of shortcut in the rational analysis and enables to open the door to the unconscious mind in order to inject ideas, desires and fears and to cause behaviours. That's the reason why «the psychological factor in war is just important as the military factor» (Ponsonby, 1928).

Politicians establish an emotional relationship with the voters telling stories, narratives of hope (3 times in the text), empathy, pride, and feeling of being part of the same group as well. That's why Biden very often speak to the public using «we» (rather than «I»): «we aim to be the nation we know we can be and should be».

It is interesting and meaningful to note that in the presidential speech the terms «story» and «history» are repeated 17 times in total. You have to tell stories to the people to strengthen the national identity. Stories that tell to them how the country is and how you see it (as we have seen talking about identity), in which you put simply daily and familiar scenarios shared by your public. Therefore Biden, as advertising does, recall his «father» and his «mother» in everyday life situations. This is a cornerstone of the persuasion named the principle of «liking» (Cialdini, 2006).

Persuaders and leaders present themselves as «just plain folks» (Miller, 1937) to establish an identity with ordinary people thinking that «I am one of you, I have your tastes, I live the same problems, that's why you can trust in me». Other words used by Biden during his speech that belong to the same register are: «heart» (5 times), «soul» (5), «love» (5), «dream» (twice) and «angels» (once).

Even during his political campaign three of the most repeated terms by Biden have been «folks» (once in the text), «light» (1) and «soul» (5). Besides protecting democracy his mission is to give light and soul to America once again after four years of his predecessor. Significantly, «again» appears 12 times in the text to communicate he wants to restore the situation before Trump.

In the emotional strategy of the speech there is also a phenomenon known as the *indentifiable victim effect*, which suggests that people are more willing to help specific, recognizable victims than anonymous ones, statistical victims who belong to a vaguely defined group. According to Lee and Feeley (2017) an identifiable victim evokes stronger emotional reactions than a statistical victim. Following this rule, Biden doesn't only tell that 400,000 Americans have lost their lives due to Covid-19, but he specifies in a longwinded way that they were «moms, dads, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, friends, neighbors, and colleagues». In this sense it is simpler for everyone to feel involved.

IV. Conclusion

According to Aristotle sources facilitating the persuasiveness of the message (ethos) are highly regarded, worthy of confidence, authoritative, believable, expert (competent, professionally successful), honest and trustworthy.

Joe Biden's speech results very credible and compelling because it is a composite of these characteristics. To be credible, President Biden had to demonstrate to know what he was talking about and to be experienced, informed, qualified, skilled, intelligent, expert, competent and bright.

That's the reason why he quoted authoritative sources or testimonials (such as G. Washington, A. Lincoln, Dr. King, St Augustine and the Bible) to endorse his principles, and it doesn't matter if he quoted some fragmentary information only. In any case authority is a

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strong principle of persuasion (Cialdini, 2006) also known as «experts heuristic» (Kahneman, 2012).

In his speech Biden used many devices to demonstrate his trustworthiness and goodwill: he belongs to the people and he cares about them, he will work for their interests, he is not self-centered, he is sensitive and he understands his folk. Therefore his speech results to be a multidimensional construct that depends on the audience and on the context.

In *The Rhetoric* Aristotle (1932) proclaimed that the ingredients «which inspire confidence in the orator's character…that induce us to believe a thing apart of many proof of it…are good sense, good moral character, and good will». Together with many principles of propaganda, advertising and persuasion theory we can find even these precepts in the careful and accurate discourse of President Biden.

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