

An Introduction to the Rhetoric of Trump's "Battle"

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*In 1939 Kenneth Burke released an astute and foretelling essay analyzing Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (published only four years prior in 1925) entitled *The Rhetoric of Hitler's "Battle."* He identifies four main persuasive ornaments Hitler used that explain the communication in which he came to power: inborn dignity, projection device, symbolic rebirth, and commercial use. I use Burke's essay to parallel the development and successes of Hitler's rhetoric with President Trump's rhetoric and media presence in order to encourage using Burke's sheer perceptiveness to foreshadow and protect against similar swindle in United States leadership.*

In 1939 Kenneth Burke released an astute and foretelling essay analyzing Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (published only four years prior in 1925) entitled *The Rhetoric of Hitler's "Battle."* Burke guides readers through the work, pointing out rhetorical patterns that divulge Hitler's tactics of persuasion. He concedes Hitler as a powerful orator who uses unification devices to sway audiences, and accurately cautions against the "peace of one voice, amplified by social organizations, with all the others not merely quieted, but given the quietus" (Burke, 1939, p. 220). He identifies four main persuasive ornaments in Hitler's rhetoric that explain the communication in which he came to power: inborn dignity, projection device, symbolic rebirth, and commercial use (Burke, 1939). Burke's essay can be used to parallel the development and successes of Hitler's rhetoric with President Trump's present-day rhetoric and media presence.

For Burke (1939), the most prominent feature of Hitler's unification process was his idea of inborn dignity. Hitler stresses the "natural born" dignity of man, the "religious and humanistic patterns of thought" typically including *all* mankind (Burke, 1939, p. 202). Hitler also, however, posits that this dignity is innate only to his own bloodline. Other "races," such as Jews or black people, are innately inferior and belonging to a different bloodline (Burke, 1939). His twisted version of inborn dignity shifts to instead become inborn *superiority*. His public discourse and private writings on the topic connect this idea under religious terms and folklore. Traditionally, Catholic and Christian traditions trace bloodlines through Hebrew ancestry (Burke, 1939). By denying this lineage and suggesting only one race, Aryanism, was superior and truly deserving of the progression of the German nation, Hitler was able to start the process of instilling inborn superiority among his chosen members of German society. Citizens who felt Germany was in turmoil after World War I could get on board with believing they were deserving of something better, even if it meant buying into a superiority complex.

Donald Trump's rhetoric and personal writings hold a similar theory of superiority, though under a different religious anthem. He projected this shifting twist in religious inborn dignity when he held a press conference after the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally in August 2017. At the rally, white nationalist

protestors and counter-protestors clashed, leaving one dead and several injured. CNBC reporters Christine Wang and Kevin Breuninger (2017) transcribed the press conference and published it online; Trump received backlash from his statement, “You have some very bad people in [the white nationalist group], but you also had people that were very fine people on both sides.” Throughout the conference, Trump does nothing to clearly oppose or support the white nationalist group, instead pushing for an equal moral plane, suggesting that good and bad people exist “on both sides” and violence occurs “on many sides” (Wang & Breuninger, 2017).

This unwillingness to contend the issues of race in America supports comments from biographer Michael D’Antonio, who claimed in a PBS interview for Frontline (2016) that Donald’s father had taught him the family’s success was genetic. D’Antonio told PBS, “The family subscribes to a racehorse theory of human development. They believe there are superior people and that if you put together genes of a superior woman and a superior man, you get a superior offspring” (Kirk, Wisner, Bennett, Gilmore, & Schonder, 2016). Trump once tweeted, “More than anything else, I think deal-making is an ability you’re born with. It’s in the genes.” Like Hitler, President Trump not only seems to believe inborn dignity is innate in certain literal bloodlines, but he connects admirable traits such as the drive to succeed, to be healthy, to be able to communicate and make a deal is also inherited through bloodline. Thus President Trump, like Hitler, shifts the spiritual thought that all human beings are gifted with dignity and worthy of success to the theory that inborn dignity is material and can literally be traced. Under these perceptions, success can be denied to certain communities based on genetic worth.

President Trump mimics Hitler’s religious folklore rhetoric concerning this theory by claiming to support the “true” American: the hard working, middle-class citizen who is fed up with the government as it has been existing. He never outright says he supports white nationalists, as expressed by his claim that good and bad people “exist on many sides” (Wang & Breuninger, 2017) of the neo-Nazi and white nationalist issue. In our post-Holocaust era it would be taboo to privilege inborn superiority and assert openly that white citizens deserve better than other races. So instead of speaking transparently, Trump feeds the public a picture of an ideal American, which, ironically, looks a lot like a German Aryan citizen in Hitler’s era.

Ryan Teague Beckwith (2016) of Time Magazine published the transcript of Trump’s acceptance speech at the Republican Convention online where Trump forged the path to encouraging certain people, certain Americans, to accept an endowed worth that ought to receive benefits from the government. He said, “Americanism, not globalism, will be our credo. As long as we are led by politicians who will not put America first, then we can be assured that other nations will not treat America with respect, the respect that we deserve.” He constructs ‘Americanism’ into a folkloric religion, the congregation having a bloodline that is superior to the rest of the world.

In that same speech he goes on to stress the importance of securing borders, deporting immigrants, denying entrance of Syrian refugees, ending “radical Islamic” terrorism, and shaming the Democratic party (Beckwith, 2016). All of these themes serve to further define Americanism, to separate who might or might not belong in this ‘religion’ and who might or might not be worthy of the new government Trump will forge. For Hitler, warped humanistic beliefs about inborn dignity spurred his personal hate for the Jewish people (Burke, 1939). For Trump, inborn dignity has served as a surreptitious ‘Americanism’ movement supporting hatred for immigrants and refugees. Trump’s Americanism idolizes an implied definition of what it means to be a true American (white, Christian, male, Republican, with a long-standing family heritage living on United States soil).

This inborn dignity device serves as the gateway to Hitler’s next persuasive ornament: projection device, or scapegoating. Hitler’s projection device was united into one singular categorical enemy: Jewish people. Burke (1939) writes that Hitler’s incrimination of the Jewish people succeeded because individuals are willing to accept that they are not alone responsible for their conditions. To use Burke’s Guilt-Redemption Cycle (assuming that the guilt-redemption cycle works for audiences digesting and repeating rhetoric as well as rhetoricians themselves), an Aryan German who felt guilt over his or her status in society after World War I was allowed purification by victimizing the Jews in order to attain his or her own redemption by advancing in Hitler’s new

political structure. “This was especially appealing to the middle class, who were encouraged to feel that they could conduct their business without any basic change whatever, once the businessmen of a different “race” were eliminated” (Burke, 1939).

Similarly, Trump’s rhetoric promises victory to American middle class masses. In his acceptance speech at the Republican Convention in July of 2016, he claimed, “A lot of people can’t get jobs. They can’t get jobs because there are no jobs, because China has our jobs and Mexico has our jobs” (Beckwith, 2016). By suggesting that Americans are being denied things they deserve, eliminating competition that doesn’t fit the ‘Americanism’ persona by the scapegoating technique becomes easier to justify. Trump uses Mexico as the projection device for blame. Earlier that year in June during his speech announcing his presidential bid, Trump again defined the true Americanism citizen, and repeated his use of projection device onto the people of Mexico. “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best...They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems to us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists” (Parnass, 2016). Painting Mexicans and foreigners as evil or stealing jobs allows citizens to buy both into his projection device and into the idea of inborn dignity. Immigrants are considered unfit to be Trump’s true Americans, and supporters of Trump’s rhetoric parrot his ideas amongst each other and others who might disagree.

Almost simultaneously, Trump established inborn dignity, began the process of scapegoating, and pounced into Hitler’s third ornament of persuasion: symbolic rebirth. Hitler described audiences as the “feminine” masses that “desire to be led by a dominating male” who “woos them” and “when he has won them, he commands them” (Burke, 1939). Hitler and Trump place themselves as the wooing orator, the prophet who will lead their countries anew. They are the instigators of each nation’s symbolic rebirth, offering their provision of followers with a positive view of life, a goal, and the “feel of *moving forward*” (Burke, 1939, p. 203).

Both Hitler and Trump came to power by manipulating internally divided nations consisting of citizens with varying levels of unhappiness with previous governance- socially and financially. They were both able to portray themselves as new visionary leaders. Hitler saw parliament as a “babel of voices” consisting of a “wrangle of men representing interests lying awkwardly on the bias across one another, sometimes opposing, sometimes vaguely divergent” (Burke, 1939, p. 200). In less poetic terms Trump sees the U.S. government in a comparably negative light. On December 3, 2017 he tweeted (2017), “After years of Comey, with the phony and dishonest Clinton investigation (and more), running the FBI, its reputation is in tatters - worst in History! But fear not, we will bring it back to greatness” (realDonaldTrump, 2017). Trump constantly portrays his frustration and disgust with previous leadership. He stays consistent in this tweet by putting down Hilary Clinton and FBI leadership, offering a small aspect of symbolic rebirth- the implied promise that himself and his own administration can do better after several years of failure from other leaders. Even while campaigning in 2016, Trump persuaded audiences to accept his symbolic rebirth. His campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” implies that the social and political change under previous government leadership was the opposite of great. The slogan offered a simpler linear spectrum of good and bad, something people can relate to and more easily understand. His new goal for the nation would be to simply “make America great.” Trump’s slogan is not only a stepping-stone to symbolic rebirth, it is part of Hitler’s fourth persuasive ornament: commercial use.

In Hitler’s movement, commercial use was a provision of “noneconomic interpretation of economic ills” (Burke, 1939, p. 204). For Hitler this meant providing constant attribution to Jews for every struggle or divisive issue of economic wealth in Germany and the world. “He ends his diatribes against contemporary economic ills by a shift into an insistence that we must get to the ‘true’ cause, which is centered in ‘race’” (Burke, 1939, p. 204). Hitler was able to expand already-existing prejudices towards Jews by campaigning the theory that if Jews were economically successful then no one else could be. He claimed there was “a distinction between ‘good’ capitalism and ‘bad’ capitalism, with those of a different lodge being vessels of the ‘bad’ capitalism” (Burke, 1939). Trump imitates this rhetoric in his ‘Americanism’ viewpoint, primarily with the narrative that foreigners are taking “our

jobs” and are dangerous to the safety of our country (Beckwith, 2016). He claims democrats are preventing us to move forward. Only Trump and the Republican Party push tax cuts and wish for the middle class to succeed. Muslims are terrorists and a danger; immigrants and refugees are sneaking in and don’t pay taxes (Beckwith, 2016). In June 2017 at an Oval Office meeting, Trump claimed that Haitian immigrants “all have AIDS” and Nigerian immigrants will never “go back to their huts” in Africa (Finnegan & Barabak, 2018). On January 11, 2018 he grew frustrated with lawmakers discussing a bipartisan immigration deal that would protect Haitian, El Salvadorian, and African immigrants and said, “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?” (Finnegan & Barabak). By repeating these racially charged comments, he sticks to his warped religious Americanism standard of valued humanity.

By implying that immigrants (especially immigrants of darker or different skin tone) are sickly and have diseases and live in poor conditions in their own countries, he is also implying that those conditions are inborn. Trump essentially suggests that immigrants are inferior, and that their entrance into the United States would “infect” the superiority of the current population. Hitler used this device as well, calling it “blood poisoning” (Burke, 1939), claiming that the simple intermingling of ideas between separately inborn groups would infect the bloodline of the superior group. Trump’s rhetoric on economy and Americanism equate Hitler’s psychological ingredient that “you cannot possibly derive dignity from economic stability. Dignity must come first- and if you possess it, and implement it, from it may follow its economic counterpart” (Burke, 1939, p. 205). For Hitler, only Aryans could achieve economic success. Jews were persuasively situated as Aryan demise. For Trump, only his true Americans can achieve economic success in this new “great” America.

Burke’s essay offers many more stylistic ornaments of Hitler’s persuasion that this essay is unable to explore due to the sheer plethora of insights. Many of those persuasive tropes compare to Trump’s present-day public discourse, and I would encourage the exploration of this subject to move beyond just academia. Burke’s analysis recognizes the importance of civic action and refusal of illogical persuasion. To understand his desperate call we must first understand the true depth and power of rhetoric as symbolic action, posed in its most dangerous form through the spread of Nazi Germany.

According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2018), Hitler began his rise to power in 1919. He published *Mein Kampf* in 1925, a work that Burke describes in his analysis as “exasperating, even nauseating” (1939). Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, opening the Dachau concentration camp outside of Munich just months after his appointment. The Nuremberg Race Laws went into effect the next year, greatly lowering the quality of life of every Jew. The world had an opportunity to recognize and stop the Holocaust that was beginning in Germany when the Olympics were hosted in Berlin, but instead Hitler managed to deflect attention, and the civic world turned a blind eye. November of 1938 marked the *Kristallnacht*, often referred to as the “Night of Broken Glass,” where members of the Nazi Party, SS, and Hitler Youth destroyed and plundered Jewish-owned homes and businesses and arrested hundreds of Jews throughout Germany. 267 synagogues burned through the night; local firefighters received orders only to intervene if flames began to spread to other buildings.

When World War II began in 1939 with the invasion of Poland, it did so after a more than a decade of Hitler’s hate-fueled rhetoric had settled into the world, making Germany and other nations utterly complacent to destruction, hatred, and bigotry. Burke swiftly published his criticism and analysis of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, but it would be years before the United States would be prompted to join the fight, and only because of an attack on home soil. The fact remains that many countries took up the fight only after military action from Germany was involved. Hitler had been grooming a country for righteous gratification through the slaughtering of select peoples years before he initiated war.

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen published *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* in 1996, where he explains that Judeocide was not just carried out by members of the SS and Nazi Party, but also by German citizens themselves. He claims regular Germans were willing to accept the demand for action in Hitler’s

rhetoric because they were already predisposed to anti-Semitism and had been for quite a long time. “The evidence that so many ordinary people did maintain at the center of their worldview palpably absurd beliefs about Jews like those that Hitler articulated in *Mein Kampf* is overwhelming...” (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 455). The economic crisis and Hitler’s persuasive ornaments only activated a latent anti-Semitism that already existed. He argues that a scapegoat cannot be created from thin air, but “people’s preexisting beliefs channel their misfortune, frustration, and anxiety in the direction of the people whom they already despise” (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 45).

We can see this theory becoming proven true today in the United States. For example in March of 2018, Tahnee Gonzales and Liz Dauenhauer posted a Facebook Live video where they take their kids to a Mosque in Tempe, Arizona. These women vandalize the mosque with their kids and harass patrons in the area (Phillips, 2018). At one point the women saw an announcement about tax assistance on a bulletin, which prompted Gonzales to say: “What do they work and do? They don’t even work.” Later, Gonzales can be heard telling her children not to touch the playground slide because it could be covered in “germs.” Gonzales told her Facebook viewers, “This is the infiltration of the Arabic Muslim, coming in and destroying America... Muslims are nothing but evil Satan worshipers” (Phillips, 2018). According to the Washington Post, pictures and videos on Gonzales’ Facebook page show that she and Dauenhauer often attend anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rallies with their kids. Her profile picture features her wearing a “Make America Great Again” cap with an American flag with President Trump’s face on it in the background.

According to Goldhagen, it is likely these women already had hate for Muslims and immigrants. Their hatred and outspokenness on the issue arose with Trump’s campaign and style of rhetoric. Trump, like Hitler, has invited rhetoric of complacent, even righteous, abhorrence to the citizens of an entire country. Burke had the foresight to anticipate the power of Hitler’s rhetoric and the actions it could lead to. Publishing the same year as the start of World War II means that he recognized the dangerous symbolic action of Hitler’s oration at least ten years prior. But his research and his work and efforts in academia did nothing in the moment. His efforts to find and reveal the root of the perils in Hitler’s rhetoric did not become widespread, and the world still erupted into war. Millions died. It was not the job of Burke as an academic to spread opposition to Hitler by publishing tedious and harrowing essays, but rather it was a civic duty to attempt to do what is right. To see the signs and to act on them and fight back openly and civically does more to break the guilt-redemption cycle than an essay ever could. In his own analysis, Burke wrote, “if the reviewer but knocks off a few adverse attitudinizations and calls it a day, with a guaranty in advance that his article will have favorable reception among the decent members of our population, he is contributing more to our gratification than to our enlightenment” (1939). Simply discussing Trump’s appalling words and actions amongst friends and strangers with similar shock is no longer enough. At some point, academia and non-academia alike must see and do more than what Kenneth Burke once foresaw and wrote about. Trump, like Hitler before him, has established a church and outlined his churchgoers.

The most conspicuous and dangerous comparison of Hitler’s rhetoric to Trump’s is the establishment of distortion of religious thought: Americanism. In 1939 Burke wrote, “*German* nationality is unified by the *spiritual* quality of Aryanism” (p. 217) and professes that Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* shows to a disturbing degree the power of endless repetition, through which he created his own slanted political religion and subsequent revolution and genocide. Burke (1939) says our job, our “anti-Hitler battle, is to find all available ways of making the Hilterite distortions of religion apparent in order that politicians of his kind in America be unable to perform similar swindle” (p. 219).

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APPENDIX

FIGURE 1
THE RHETORIC OF TRUMP'S "BATTLE"

