

Radio as the Significant Context of FDR's Rhetoric

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On March 4, 1933, following Herbert Hoover's unlucky term as President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt stepped into the Oval Office and a presidency faced with challenges on almost every American front. In a twenty-seven-minute inaugural speech, broadcast nationally via collaborative radio networks, Roosevelt displayed his confidence that America would triumph over the crises at hand. Eight days later Roosevelt addressed the nation, after many sharp decisions had already been made, with the premiere of his remarkably personal Fireside Chats. His warm tone echoed to his listeners that things were indeed going to change, and change for the better. Roosevelt patiently explained the details of the existing problems and his pointed solutions for them. He assertively called for the enrollment of the nation's support, claiming that there existed "an element in the readjustment of [our] financial system more important than currency, more important than gold, and that is the confidence of the people" (12 March 1933).

Only two months later, Roosevelt, appropriately called FDR in line with his inventive acronymic relief and recovery programs, had improved the economic conditions of many Americans. With the support of Congress and the cooperation of American families, Roosevelt successfully created more than three million new jobs, re-opened hundreds of banks, established a standard currency rate, and helped stabilize farm prices. Through his most sweeping brainchild, the Tennessee Valley Authority, or TVA, he provided for the production of new electric power to millions of Americans, transforming one of the poorest regions of the country into a growing economic center. Most importantly, however, Roosevelt succeeded in lifting the morale of the country. Despite discouraging overenthusiastic "ballyhoing" back to prosperity, Roosevelt did commend his listeners during his second Fireside Chat:

To you, the people of this country, all of us . . . owe a profound debt of gratitude. Throughout the depression you have been patient. You have granted us wide powers, you have encouraged us with a widespread approval of our purposes. Every ounce of strength and every resource at our command we have devoted to the end of justifying your confidence. We are encouraged to believe that a wise and sensible beginning has been made. In the present spirit of mutual confidence and mutual encouragement we go forward. (7 May 1933).

Studies of how Roosevelt achieved these and other subsequent results have been conducted since the results themselves. Branded as everything between congenial and dictatorial, Roosevelt's style was undoubtedly persuasive. A common feeling among critics of his style is the sentiment that Roosevelt's masterful oratory was paramount in his relationship with the American people. According to Robert Brown, Roosevelt was able, through his gift of speaking, to "persuade a majority of the American people to accept his domestic and foreign policy agenda, and to support his personal political ambitions" (9). This persuasive style of oration falls into the classification of rhetoric, or more appropriately presidential rhetoric. In a 1988 study, Halford Ryan shows that presidential rhetoric has grown from a simple constitutional requirement of the "Annual Message" to the Congress, into the family of all persuasive speeches that the President delivers (2). Roosevelt's persuasive style was one of the foremost examples of the new presidential rhetoric.

Roosevelt's speeches were frequently shown on newsreels and occasionally printed in newspapers, but the principal medium for his rhetorical messages was undoubtedly radio. Although the invention, style, and delivery that characterized his speeches proved to be persuasive, listeners were affected by more than proper Aristotelian rhetoric. The existing infrastructure of radio influence and the historical environment should be taken into consideration in a persuasive study regarding the vivacity and mystery of radio at the time. Radio

held the uncompromised attention of both a pressed and impressed American people. In this environment, radio proved to be more than just a medium for Roosevelt. This study attempts to explore, through specific Roosevelt addresses and an examination of radio presence in American culture, the relationship between radio and Roosevelt's rhetoric. A study of this relationship can add to the understanding of the Rooseveltian, and possibly other, rhetorical processes by examining the impact and value of a significant context not examined in traditional rhetorical criticism.

The Backdrop

Leaving his position as governor of New York, Roosevelt rode into a discouraged Washington in 1933. He held the office of President through an unprecedented four-term tenure, remaining in the White House until his death in 1945. Roosevelt entered his presidency during hard downward turns of the Depression and finished it during the end of World War II, when America's industry and economy were beginning to flourish. His presidency was characterized by the New Deal, war isolationism and defense, and eventually America's entrance and aid for victory in World War II. Additionally, Roosevelt was known for his brilliant oratory and rhetorical skills, frequent radio addresses to the public and Congress, and keen eye for public opinion. According to Ryan, Roosevelt remains the benchmark by which the rhetoric of other presidents has been and will be measured (10). Roosevelt's speeches made an indelible mark on the American people, drawing on tenets of traditional rhetoric and exploiting the technology of his time.

Five speeches will be used in this study to examine the relationship between Roosevelt's presidential rhetoric and radio presence in America. Naturally, this set will consist only of radio addresses that Roosevelt delivered during his presidency. Following chronological order, the speeches examined are the first inauguration speech (1933), the initial Fireside Chat on the banking crisis (1933), the second Fireside Chat outlining the New Deal (1933), the second inaugural address (1937), and the Fireside Chat regarding the declaration of war with Japan (1941). Each address carries a specific agenda and remains an example of Roosevelt's prose and persuasive style. The first inaugural address shows Roosevelt's brilliant confidence in America while calling the nation away from fear and into recovery. The first and second Fireside Chats dive into further detail about relief programs being created, their use, and their positive impact. The second inaugural address praises the progress of Roosevelt's preceding term and calls for more of this action and government progress. Finally, the radio address regarding war with Japan depicts a nation, although diligent in its isolationist stance, ultimately forced into the "war upon the human race" (9 December 1941). The audience of these five speeches was all of America—including Congress. Roosevelt understood that members of Congress also tuned in to his addresses, and likewise he subscribed to the idea that public opinion influenced Congressional action (Ryan 4).

Each address will be examined briefly from the neo-Aristotelian approach to rhetorical criticism. This approach is concerned with the rhetor's ability to use the best means of persuasion available to create the desired effect of an audience. Founded on the work of Herbert A. Wichelns in 1925, this approach is based on concepts from Classical Rhetoric, relying on the five rhetorical canons – invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery (Foss 23-24). These five examples have been selected not only because of their persuasive value but also because of the visible and immediate effects, desired or not, that followed them.

Radio Presence

Although Westinghouse's first endeavor in commercial radio—broadcasting election results from Pittsburgh station KDKA—did not draw heavy national attention to its 1920 premiere, the broadcast began the development of the entire American commercial broadcasting system. Westinghouse created its own stations and programs in order to sell more of its main product, the actual radio receiver. The Westinghouse stations, which would broadcast approximately one

hour a night, grew steadily in number. Because of public demand and the influence of other radio broadcasting companies such as AT&T, radio became increasingly popular. In spite of several new government regulations in 1921, which temporarily lowered the number of operating stations to sixty-seven, there were still 500 new stations by the end of 1922 (White).

In 1926 the first national broadcast network, the National Broadcasting Company, was born out of the growing number of radio stations across the country (Brown 2). The 1930's brought the incredible growth that rapidly expanded the radio industry. There were only three million radio sets in use in 1924, but by 1936 there were 30 million (Brown 2). By 1940 radio had found its way into 80 percent of all the nation's homes (Craig 11). Between 1935 and 1941, 275 new stations went on air, making the operating total 882 (Brown 2).

According to Brown, the radio set in America became "a highly valued and permanent piece of living room furniture, and an integral part of family life" (2). Many reasons for such acceptance developed from the Great Depression. Tired families, gathering around the radio set each night to listen to their favorite program, were drawn to *Amos 'n Andy* and the shows of Jack Benny and Bob Hope, comedies that often helped families through tough times by offering escape (Barfield 21). Radio also brought many types of news, music, sports coverage, and political messages into the home. Radio became the centerpiece of the household; it brought the family together and provided an escape from the hardships of everyday life.

By becoming less of a novelty and more of a necessity and by winning Americans' trust and attention, radio truly held a presence in the lives of the average American. Radio was constantly growing and renewing its appeal through fresh and enriched programming. The industry was fertile and open for development, and Roosevelt jumped at this opportunity. Roosevelt's warm tone and comforting words fit perfectly into the existing radio presence of the 1930's and 1940's. Although Roosevelt's being in the right place at the right time may have been coincidental, Ryan holds that "radio's and Roosevelt's rise were inextricably linked" (25). Douglas Craig notes that although Roosevelt was not the first president or politician to use the radio to address the nation, his practice using the radio for political means while governor of New York helped hone his skills to an unparalleled aesthetic level (154). In the middle of the Great Depression, radio set itself up as a venue and foundation for a savior to the American public, and Roosevelt filled that role.

Aristotle Revisited

Analyzing Roosevelt's addresses from the neo-Aristotelian approach is appropriate since Roosevelt's form suggests that he was sensitive to the five classical canons of rhetoric. Aristotle categorized rhetoric into three different classifications: forensic (courtroom), deliberative (political), and epideictic (ceremonial) (Griffin 276). Roosevelt combined two of these forms, political and ceremonial, in most of his speeches. According to Em Griffin, these two classifications involved attempts to sway makers of future legislation and to heap praise or blame on others for the benefit of the audience (276). Roosevelt effectively did both simultaneously.

The first canon involved in this approach, invention, involves finding the best means of persuasion by constructing the materials for the speech (Foss 28). Persuasive content has three areas that the rhetor must consider—logos, the logical proof; ethos, the ethical proof; and pathos, the emotional proof (Griffin 276). These proofs are evident throughout the five selected speeches in this study. In his first inaugural address, Roosevelt cites many examples of the Depression-ridden country and then suggests a course of action through what Aristotle called the enthymeme. According to Griffin, an enthymeme is a strong logical proof that is one part short of a deductive syllogism, specifically leaving out the missing premise to enhance rhetorical effect (278). Roosevelt suggests his idea by pleading, "[Our] greatest primary task is to put people to work. This is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously" (4 March 1933). Roosevelt omits the assumed premise that this problem seems unsolvable and requires careful work. In the first and second Fireside Chats, Roosevelt outlines the logical plan of action to the American public after giving several examples of the "bad banking situation" (12 March

1933) and the “extraordinary hardships on all persons working for wages” (7 May 1933). Logical invention is seen as a common characteristic of Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats and other political addresses.

Additionally, the President successfully used ethical and emotional proofs. In his second inaugural address, Roosevelt proves his credibility by reflecting on his past term:

Four years of new experiences have not belied our historic instinct. They hold out the clear hope that government within communities, government within separate States, and government of the United States can do the things the times require, without yielding its democracy. Our tasks in the last four years did not force democracy to take a holiday. (20 January 1937)

Here, Roosevelt shows that his views align with the American public’s view of treasuring democracy, displays his goodwill through rapport with his audience through informal “you,” “we,” and “our” references, and demonstrates his knowledge of the situation. According to Sonja Foss, integrity, intelligence, and goodwill are the three essential elements of ethical proof (30). Finally, Roosevelt makes frequent use of the emotional proof throughout his radio addresses. His Fireside Chat on the declaration of war with Japan is no exception, drawing out his intense feelings and perceived national emotion towards the war case, rallying the American people:

We are now in this war. We are all in it – all the way. Every single man, woman, and child is a partner in the most tremendous undertaking of our American history. We must share together the bad news and the good news, the defeats and the victories – the changing fortunes of the war. (9 December 1941).

Although the pathos inventive element is often composed of only style and delivery, Roosevelt is not speaking metaphorically here. Instead, he is speaking with straight and honest words that characterized the exact situation.

Arrangement, the second canon in the approach, involves the organization and structure of the rhetoric throughout the speech. In the selected addresses, Roosevelt seems to follow a loose, yet distinct, pattern. He initiates his speech by briefly summing up previous matters significant to the speech itself, usually adding an artistic rhetorical flair in the process. Next, he boldly states his purpose and main point of the speech and follows his assertion with detailed examples, rhetorical arguments, and reasons for such a statement. Roosevelt then restates his initial assertion and calls for a specific plan of action. Finally, Roosevelt assesses how he and his audience can and must cooperate in his plan of action. Usually, Roosevelt ends his address with a divine request or expression of gratitude to God.

The initial assertion can be different for each case. An honest approach at relief or recovery is evident in the first and second Fireside Chats as well as the first inaugural, while a statement of faith and future vision is seen in the second inaugural address. In the Fireside Chat on the war with Japan, Roosevelt’s initial assertion is the announcement of the nation’s involvement in World War II. Among the selected addresses, this speech exhibits Roosevelt’s pattern most clearly. Roosevelt begins with the short explanation of the previous two days’ events, dramatically depicting the Japanese as “powerful and resourceful gangsters” who through their alliance with the Axis powers “have banded together to make war upon the whole human race” (9 December 1941). Roosevelt declares that the United States is now involved in the war and proceeds to explain by historical examples why the war is also against all the Axis powers. According to William Kinsella, Roosevelt successfully treats the fascist regime of Germany as a real and growing global problem, involving Europe and Asia (3). The President restates his initial assertion, while denouncing any statements regarding the war that do not come from the administration. Roosevelt’s plan for action calls for the cooperation of every citizen to “speed up all existing production” for the war effort and “to do without many things to which we are accustomed,” among many war preparation directions (9 December 1941). Finally, the President explains how the cooperation of the country and his leadership can “win the war and . . . the peace that follows” (9 December 1941).

The third canon, style, is the study of the language of the rhetor and the effect that it brings to the rhetoric (Foss 30). Roosevelt made significant use of metaphor, which during Aristotle's time was thought of as decorative element that gave extra force to language. Aristotle, however, saw more to metaphor. He built the foundation of thought that views metaphor as a way to process symbols and view reality (Foss 357-58). Countless instances of effective metaphors fill Roosevelt's addresses, each being a bold and forceful statement of Roosevelt's reality. One such example is found in the second inaugural address when Roosevelt describes the American republic as the "temple of our ancient faith," charges that recent progress has driven from it "those who had profaned it" (20 January 1937). While describing the bleak state of the nation in the first inaugural, Roosevelt labels industrial enterprises as "withered leaves" and condemns greedy businessmen as "unscrupulous money changers" (4 March 1933). Additionally, Roosevelt's style often contains instances of repeated phrase for effect. The phrase "one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished" not only describes the actual circumstances, but the repeated "ill" also conveys a sickening feeling (20 January 1937). The insight into Roosevelt's thoughts confirms his rapport and concern for the well-being of the American public. Along with bold rhetorical statements that give the air of confidence, the President's rapport strengthens the ethical proof of his rhetoric.

According to Griffin, rehearsal is the modern equivalent for memory, the fourth canon (283). For Roosevelt, memorizing his radio address was not required, but rehearsal certainly was. An average address would go through four to ten drafts, and Roosevelt would read the final text several times aloud to get a sense of what each word would sound like (Brown 16). This attention to detail, in the end, added to the overall effectiveness of Roosevelt's rhetoric.

The fifth canon is delivery, which refers to the manner of presentation, including movement, gestures, eye contact, vocal skill, pronunciation, and rate of speech (Foss 31). For Roosevelt's radio addresses, only half of these elements affected his delivery. The inherent element of radio, which incidentally hid Roosevelt's paralyzing condition of poliomyelitis, also made the movement, gestures, and eye contact of a traditional speech unnecessary. On radio the voice had the most effect. For Roosevelt this was very beneficial.

Roosevelt's voice is regarded as his greatest asset as a political broadcaster (Brown 20). According to Brown, the most effective quality of Roosevelt's voice was "its innate ability to inspire confidence among listeners (20). One listener remembers the President's voice as powerful, yet warm and convincing (Edgar). According to Brown, Roosevelt scarcely missed a word or cleared his throat, never letting on that he was reading a prepared address (20). Roosevelt's delivery itself was slow and steady. Ryan calculates that his speaking rates were far below normal speaking levels, averaging less than 120 words per minute while average orators are timed at 125-175 words per minute (19). During his Fireside Chat on the war with Japan, his rate dropped to an astounding 88 words per minute, a level to which the term "hesitant" is applied (Ryan 19). The speaking rates of his first two Fireside Chats, however, were 130 and 126, respectively. No formal reason has been discovered as to why Roosevelt controlled his speed of delivery, but it was apparently successful in giving a sense of "trust, competency, and tranquility at the helm of state" (Ryan 21). According to Brown, it was a pleasure for network technicians to work with such a smooth voice, as they were not forced to continually adjust for any severe peaks or valleys in Roosevelt's voice (20). The set of addresses examined here, excluding the address on the war with Japan, exhibits this steady, controlled speaking rate. In these five radio addresses, Roosevelt's warm voice reinforced his content by assuring listeners that he was in control.

Roosevelt followed the ideas and structure of the neo-Aristotelian approach quite well. These ancient ideas proved to be relevant more than 2,000 years later. Roosevelt spoke to the nation in a way that no other president had before, shifting the focus from Congress to the American public. In a way seldom used before, he developed a common man's language to speak to anyone in his broad 120-million-member audience. The popular or mass rhetoric that was once rarely used by presidents is now quite common, due largely to Roosevelt's use and

impact; it is considered essential to a president's endeavor to govern the nation (Ryan 2). Roosevelt took ancient concepts, applied them to a modern significant context, and successfully persuaded his audience.

Roosevelt's persuasiveness is credited not solely to his brilliantly crafted rhetoric but also to the quality of his voice and the medium that carried it. Thomas Bailey, David Kennedy, and Lizabeth Cohen assert that Alfred Landon, Republican candidate in 1936, lost because of his inferiority in using Roosevelt's specialty medium: "Landon was honest, sincere, homespun, commonsensical, and as American as cherry pie. But he had a poor radio voice, and seemed schoolboyish on the stump" (815).

Roosevelt's simultaneous rise with radio is noted by historian Daniel Boorstin, who adds, "Perhaps never before had there been so happy a coincidence of personal talent with technological opportunity as under his administration" (qtd. in Winfield 2). The *New York Times* quickly applauded the efforts of Roosevelt, who delivered twenty-four speeches in the first six months after his inauguration (Craig 154-55). By exploiting radio and forming sheer rhetorical innovation, Roosevelt was able to draw out his desired effects from his audience.

The Brilliant Moves of the Thinking Communicator

In addition to his rhetorical ability, Roosevelt proved to be a very capable example of a media facilitator. The President's relationship with the media did not start on March 4, 1933. Rather, Roosevelt had a long personal interest in radio and a twenty-two-year history with the growing medium (Winfield 11). In his campaign for governor of New York in 1930, Roosevelt carefully consulted with Democratic friends around the state, learning which stations provided the best quality reception and coverage in their areas. With this information, Roosevelt decided on which stations to broadcast his addresses, forming a strategy for best coverage (Craig 154). Douglas Craig says that although other politicians eventually saw radio as a powerful public relations and political tool, their ignorance of its technical nature and demands overshadowed their eagerness to use it (xi). Roosevelt's interest in the medium augmented his understanding and creative mastery of it.

Roosevelt communicated with the American public more than 300 times by radio. He proclaimed the good of the medium he used, praising radio and helping listeners to be content with the context. The President would often voice, on air, his positive opinion of radio's educational and cultural additions to American life (Brown 9). According to Craig, Roosevelt preferred radio because it allowed listeners to receive information without the coating of newspaper owners' bias and because it concealed his paralytic disability as well (156-57). Roosevelt used a team of scriptwriters to assist him and used the taboo "I" and "you" in his formal speeches to create a feeling of intimacy. Separating his address into five minute blocks enabled him to keep track of time during his delivery (Craig 155-56). The speeches were broadcast coast to coast, usually during the evening when families could all tune in. Watching his ratings, Roosevelt scheduled his Fireside Chats on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday nights, when his audiences were largest (Craig 155). More than Roosevelt's mellifluous voice was involved in the total effect: Ryan notes that his bright face and characteristic grin, familiar from staged newsreel performances, accompanied listeners' aural conception during the addresses (1).

Roosevelt also helped the radio industry itself. When his Rural Electrification Administration helped bring electricity for much of rural America, Roosevelt provided the means for heavy industry growth while, naturally, increasing his audience size. Robert J. Brown says that Roosevelt's cooperation with the rules about cues and microphone angles made every early radio engineer anxious to work with him (15). After promising easy regulation for the industry during the Depression days, Roosevelt received return favors from the networks, such as free broadcasting time. The Fireside Chats proved the only occasion in broadcasting where all networks dropped their programming and constructed a giant network to carry his address (Brown 14). Roosevelt also made moves that are subject to ethical debate. Because of his general dislike for newspapers and their general dislike for him, Roosevelt helped Federal

Communications Commission Chairman Frank McNinch in a push for separation of newspaper and radio network ownership (Brown 11). Roosevelt's charmed work throughout the industry, questionable or not, helped him become a veritable champion in radio's golden age.

Of course, radio had a phenomenal presence in the United States independent of President Roosevelt's involvement. Before television stole radio's golden age, radio was regarded as "the most powerful unifying force in the world," effortlessly bridging colossal distances (Craig xv). Radio created a smaller, more unified America. The homogenizing effect of having statements resound from the radio, such as "Coming to you live from coast to coast," brought, as Brown notes, the feeling of unity and nationalism to a greater level for the listeners (5). It is said that on warm summer nights when windows were open, a person could walk down a city street during one of Roosevelt's addresses and not miss a single word (Brown 21). During the war years, radio was used for reports from overseas, bringing the immediacy of the struggle into American homes. Clearly, World War II, not Vietnam, was the first "living room war." Radio presence had a strong, and total, grasp on American life.

Conclusion

Franklin Roosevelt obviously had a gift for oratory. Just as obviously, radio presence alone had a profound impact on American society. It is even apparent that Roosevelt used radio as a component of his rhetoric. However, it is rarely noted that the relationship between the two elements created nothing less than a synergism, giving each increased power and influence. Neither element, Roosevelt's rhetoric nor radio presence, would carry the same weight or effect without the other.

Still, the true characteristic of radio as the significant context of Roosevelt's rhetoric shows reason for further study. Radio was unquestionably popular, yet still somehow nostalgic. It held a characteristic that drew even Roosevelt towards it. Roosevelt used this technological sensation as the significant context of his rhetoric because of this very quality—a quality Craig labels "radio exceptionalism" (xvii). Radio exceptionalism is seemingly the extremely rare quality that makes radio the significant context in this rhetorical situation.

A rhetorical study of significant contexts can be useful for the better understanding of traditional rhetorical criticism. The significant context augments the scope of other rhetorical approaches, such as the neo-Aristotelian approach used with the Rooseveltian rhetoric and radio presence study. The existence of a significant context in a rhetorical situation effectively supersaturates the persuasion involved. Case examples that include effective significant contexts are rare, and these significant contexts are not required to be of a technological nature. This study has shown, however, that the 1930's and 1940's housed the significant context of Franklin Roosevelt's rhetoric—radio presence.

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