

Opinion: Trump offers a lesson in rhetoric

By William Simon

For thousands of years, rhetoric, the art of persuasion, was a core area of study in our schools. Over the last century or so, that changed, and rhetoric and public speaking have all but disappeared from curricula. Why? My best explanation is that the academy became skeptical of rhetoric as speaking became associated with media salesmanship.

The costs of this decline of rhetoric education are now apparent, as the country reckons with a very strange presidential campaign. The rise of Donald Trump is much easier to understand if you have been schooled in rhetoric and advocacy.

I've had three educations in rhetoric. I first learned persuasive techniques as a courtroom litigator in the 1980s. Then, in 2001 and 2002, I had a re-education in rhetoric as the Republican nominee for governor of California. Today, I blend lessons from those experiences with classic texts—from Aristotle to a 1988 book by Roger Ailes and Jon Kraushar called "You Are the Message"—to teach the Art and Science of Rhetoric and Advocacy class at UCLA's law school.

At first, I had a lawyerly conviction that the content of my trial presentations and court appearances was the most important aspect of public speaking. But when I ran for office, I learned I had been wrong.

It turns out that between 80 and 85 percent of delivering a message is non-verbal. Body language, I learned, is incredibly important. Ben Elliott, who was President Ronald Reagan's chief speechwriter, told me that Reagan would give a speech "with his eyes."

The Ailes book, and Aristotle, offered remarkably similar lessons. Make your point in one sentence. Find a way to be comfortable—and you’ll make your audience comfortable. And be memorable—or “leave footprints,” in the words of Ailes, now famous as the Fox News chief. One way to do that is to use *chiasmus*, (that’s the Latin) or what we think of as contrast. As in President John F. Kennedy’s formulation: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

After politics, I returned to my work in business, but I also wanted to share some of what I learned. Dan Schnur, a political consultant who now runs a USC institute, asked me what I would do next, and I replied, half-kiddingly, that I wanted to dress up like Julius Caesar, walk into a classroom, and declare, “*Veni vidi vici.*” That conversation got me teaching classes first at USC, then at UCLA.

I didn’t teach rhetoric at first. I taught economics, but I made a point of emphasizing speaking. I required students to make a five-minute presentation instead of writing papers. Some students told me they got a lot out of the assignment, and suggested offering a whole course on this topic.

In my rhetoric class at UCLA law, I have my students study classical texts (including the Romans Cicero and Quintilian) and great, historically important speeches. This year, the presidential campaign, and Trump, have come up repeatedly.

I’m sorry to say that Trump, with whom I don’t agree much, is an important example, for a lot of reasons. It doesn’t matter that he’s not saying very much at all about specific policies. Or that he’s repeating the same canned lines about walls and winning. Content doesn’t matter so much when you have such effective body language.

His big motions and gestures convey that he’s unequivocal. He’s offering a message of militancy and defiance. He’s not

married to his text, like so many speakers. He connects with the audience, reading them, making eye contact. He leaves people feeling that he is speaking to them. I tell my students to turn down the volume when Trump is speaking—and watch how much he is communicating without words.

It's worth trying the same thing with other candidates. Hillary Clinton's body language is pretty contained, even pained, creating the impression that she's well scripted. Sanders's body language projects sloppiness, not strength. Ted Cruz is very well organized, but he's a little bit contained, like Clinton, and doesn't give the impression that he's inviting people's opinions.

It's unfortunate that there are people who expertly use rhetorical techniques to gain power that maybe they don't deserve. But that's all the more reason people need to understand how rhetoric really works.

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