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This text was published in *Medium* as political commentary. Unfortunately, it was not picked up by a *Medium* compiler before the 2020 election. If you detect a political slant, well, it *is* an opinion piece, but it focuses on aspects of language. Visit the original article at <https://adamadman.medium.com/going-without-saying-8c78d2583203>.

*Adam Steinberg* Oct 21, 2020 · 9 min read

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# GOING WITHOUT SAYING

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## The Political Rhetoric Gets Emptier Every Day

*Or, How to Say Whatever We Want Without Saying Anything.*



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It would be remiss, perhaps even unseemly, to say a certain world leader is a huckster without a moral center. I will not do so. Nor will this essay contain characterizations like “narcissist bully,” “fascist wannabe,” nor “habitual lying machine.” You won’t read these aspersions from me.

Now, the above might make you chuckle, or it might make you question my intentions or sanity. All are valid responses. I’ve just hit you with a rhetorical device called **paralipsis**, only one of the many pernicious and cynical tools of gaslighting that the last four years have dumped in unprecedented bucketloads on a weary public. The term, one of several referring to this technique of emphasizing an idea by professing to say little or nothing about it, brings to mind the *pair o’ lips* that emit these hypocrisies.

I don’t use the H-word lightly. Paralipsis and many other techniques used by this White House and perpetuated by its imitators are indeed forms of hypocrisy — each its own subtle, treacherous style of head-fake. But that does not mean they don’t have the desired effects. The Trump administration has made a rhetorical art out of *persuading while not saying anything*, and we do well to know the shape and sound of each logic bomb so that we can dodge its effects as best we can.

### PARALIPSIS

This brand of non-statement is not new. For instance, we might remember Obama telling the DNC in 2004 that “[w]e do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in

this country,” before going on to do just that. But that was an eyedropper; this is a firehose.

How can we forget Trump talking about primary opponent Carley Fiorina:

“I promised I would not say that she ran Hewlett-Packard into the ground, that she laid off tens of thousands of people and she got viciously fired. I said I will not say it, so I will not say it.”

Or of Marco Rubio:

“I will not call him a lightweight, because I think that’s a derogatory term. So I will not call him a lightweight. Is that OK with you people? I refuse to say that he’s a lightweight.”

Or tweeting about Kim Jong-un:

“Why would [he] insult me by calling me “old,” when I would NEVER call him “short and fat?”

Some people say that this use of language is particularly passive-aggressive. After all, you are leaving a gap between what you are saying (or *saying that you aren’t saying*) and its meaning, a gap that relies on the listener to connect to the desired conclusion. It’s the psychological equivalent of the agent provocateur that leaves bricks sitting mildly on the side of a street where angry protests are scheduled: “Oh, I didn’t leave them there to be thrown; I just needed to set down my heavy load of bricks. I can’t help if others pick them up.”

In this quality the practice bears a resemblance to less sinister literary devices such as **hypophora**, which is simply when speakers ask a seemingly rhetorical question — creating a momentary desire for closure in the listener’s mind — and then fill that gap by answering it. “Will we stand for this?” asks the speaker, before answering, “No, we will not!” You may not have asked the question; you may even disagree with the speaker, but they have engaged your grey matter in creating meaning.

Does this make hypophora an effective element of rhetorical persuasion? Yes, yes it does.

Paralipsis gets into our heads in a similar way. It’s a lazy sort of lying; you don’t even need to come up with a plausible example of why Rubio is “a lightweight”; the listener fills in what’s missing, because our brains seek meaning, consistency, and deplore incongruity. That’s why we tend to read media we agree with: it fits our world view; it doesn’t challenge us to form new neural pathways. It’s mental comfort food.

*Text continues...*