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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—though the focus is on aspects of language. I hope its partisan nature will not obscure its qualities in readability and style. (Underlines show links to external sources; some may not work in this document. Read the original [here](#).)

Adam Steinberg Oct 21, 2020 · 9 min read

GOING WITHOUT SAYING

The Political Rhetoric Gets Emptier Every Day

Or, How to Say Whatever You 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 eye-dropper; this is a firehose.

[. . .]

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 worldview; it doesn't challenge us to form new neural pathways. It's mental comfort food.

[. . .]

SHOUT, THEN SHRUG

A modern type of gaslighting was recognized by Jennifer Mercieca in GVWire who points out that “Trump repeatedly amplifie[s] racist white nationalist content on his Twitter feed while denying that he agree[s] with them.” She cites as an example his denial of responsibility over retweets, in which he told Jake Tapper of CNN, “I don't know about retweeting. You retweet somebody and they turn out to be white supremacists. I know nothing about these groups that are supporting me.” This allows Trump to “say and not say” what he wants, says Mercieca.

He's done the same with QAnon, which he and his family may retweet repeatedly, but which he, surprisingly after all this time, doesn't know much about.

TWEET-AND-DELETE

Closely allied is the modern phenomenon of the *tweet-and-delete*. There was a good example of one of these let fly back on June 3. The White House released a misleading video accusing leftist protesters, their scapegoat of choice during the George Floyd demonstrations—and occasional riots— of placing those aforementioned bricks, without any evidence. Supposedly the leftists wanted to nudge protestors towards property damage and violence against law enforcement. (Let's put aside for the moment the notion that such violence arguably helps Trump more than it helps the protestors.)

But then the White House deleted the video. So did they post it, or not? What about the post naming a whistleblower or doctored videos that slow down Nancy Pelosi just enough to sound inebriated? If you make note it was dishonest to share such false information, they will say, well, we deleted it, so no foul. But the video is already out there in the rumorsphere, so like Schrodinger's Tweet, it both exists and doesn't.

THE TRUTHFUL HYPERBOLE TRAP

In the realm of saying/not saying, the crown jewel of Trump's success as a politician may be related to his habit of what he shamelessly calls "truthful hyperbole." He's referring to his tendency to paint anything and everything he does in superlatives: It's "the greatest," even if it's not. It's "beautiful," even if it's, well, a piece of paper, or coal. Sometimes it's the "first," even if this is demonstrably false. He has said he sees this not as lying, but as "playing to people's fantasies" (which is what carnival barkers do to draw in the rubes at the *Half-Snake, Half-Naked-Lady* tent...but anyway).

But then he goes beyond this. Trump makes a claim that already seems notably positive or negative and simply exaggerates the numbers, knowing that fact checkers who realize he has "exaggerated" the statistic are hesitant to call him on the lie. Why? An example reveals the con: On August 25, *The Hill* reported of the Republican National Convention, "Trump at times overstated his administration's efforts, including saying that he was close to appointing 300 judges to the federal bench. The Senate confirmed Trump's 200th judicial appointment at the end of June."

OK, is that a "lie"? Yes, by definition, but it doesn't even matter: If his opponents cry foul, saying, "It's not true, he *only appointed 200 judges*," he gets free publicity for what is, even to his enemies, a notable accomplishment. Agree with Mitch McConnell's questionable tactics or not, two hundred slots filled is *not so shabby*. So his opponents either have to shut up and live with the 300 figure, or they have to give explicit acknowledgement of his dubious accomplishment.

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