

# The Perils of Political Logic and Rhetoric for American Democracy

By Roland Moy



Roland F. Moy earned the Ph.D. in political science from The Ohio State University. After teaching for 30 years, primarily in the field of international studies, he retired from Appalachian State University in 1998. In addition to participation and office holding in professional organizations, he was active in organizing Model United Nations events each year for both high school and college students.

A life-long singer, he has been active with the local Arts Council over a 38-year period in organizing and producing musical shows to raise funds for music scholarships, and in producing 15 annual summer community chorus events.

Since joining the Torch Club in Boone, NC in 2007 Moy has developed several papers which apply a core political science concern about abuse of power to the related field of economics. Several of these have been published in *The Torch*, and two have won the Paxton Award.

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He may be reached at moyrf@appstate.edu.

The past ten years have exhibited patterns of political tactics and opposition that may logically imply a downward spiral of practice that will undercut the unwritten norms that historically have confined American democratic competition within manageable limits. At the same time, we have seen the standards for rhetorical output stretch to new extremes, in a manner that does not bode well for constitutional stability.

The following analysis will explore these two developments in the light of insights drawn from a growing literature inspired by increasing awareness that the American democratic republic is not so exceptional (despite what we have been taught to believe) as to be exempt from the experimental status reflected in the quotation attributed to Benjamin Franklin about what had been achieved at the Constitutional Convention: "A Republic, if you can keep it."

## Political Words: Quixotic and Fateful

American history has many examples of discourse that is thoughtful and inspiring, such as in the written words of the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, as well as

in written texts and speeches on record from the founders, Abraham Lincoln, and others through the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. The past also provides examples of fiery rhetoric in election campaigns, and of media commentary that is sharp and reckless as well as divisive. But recent years have witnessed the emergence of a style and content of spoken and written word that not only offers the usual rhetorical extravagance, but also challenges democratic norms and sometimes reality itself, while evidencing little of the thoughtful inspiration available in past political eras.

To begin, let's examine how communicated statements can act as a restraint on future policy options, for good or ill. What better to illustrate the point than a reference to a master of the English language, Winston Churchill, whom an associate described as "the slave of the words which his mind forms about ideas [...]. And he can convince himself of almost every truth if it is once allowed thus to start on its wild career through his rhetorical machinery" (Denson 325)

One can imagine a range of rhetorical machinery, from that of a Churchill-like Swiss jeweled watch to, in more recent times, that

of a Tinker Toy set. A rhetorical flourish may elicit a favorable crowd or internet reaction, but it may also create a trap or restriction for future policy options. A call for “unconditional surrender” in WWII precluded any less extreme war-shortening settlement offer. A call for a ban of all Muslims entering the country creates not only an imperative for questionable legal action, but also grounds for constitutional challenges to broadly based restrictions on legal entry. And statements about rejecting agreements on nuclear weapon development or trade arrangements, as well as bullying threats to potential adversaries, can, when acted on in summary fashion to demonstrate leadership results (as reported regarding the missile strike against Syria on April 13, 2018 [Levitz]), produce unintended risks for injurious trade wars or actual war, neither of which is helpful for international or domestic tranquility or likely to resolve actual problems within the democratic norms and methods of peaceful conflict resolution.

The rhetorical trap is but one obstacle in the way of a democratic republic successfully dealing with issues affecting a broad swath of citizens. Another trap is limiting discussion about American economic well-being to overall Gross Domestic Product numbers, unemployment statistics, and stock market averages. While those numbers have improved since the 2008 Great Recession, they do not convey the extent of the economic stress still in place (Pilling). The GDP expresses averages and aggregates that do not reveal, for

example, that the average hourly wage of \$20.67 for private sector non-management workers in 2014 was, in inflation-adjusted dollars, only \$1.49 (or 7.2%) higher than it was in 1964. They also fail to capture Census Bureau numbers showing a *decline* in average household income from 2000 to 2016 for the 40 percent of the bottom two quintiles (Mislinski).

## When politicians brag about how well the economy is doing, it can easily sound like deception.

When politicians brag about how well the economy is doing under their leadership, it can easily sound like deception, given the lived experience of millions of Americans, and thus create more cynicism about government and democracy. We need also to understand that a major tax cut during prosperous times with full employment not only undercuts the role of the national government acting in a counter-cyclical manner to offset economic perturbations (a relevant idea going back to the Old Testament time of Joseph advising the Pharaoh), but also ignores the lessons from 150 years of economic history, exhaustive examination of which has demonstrated the difficulty, if not impossibility, of

using tax cuts in current conditions to stimulate either Main Street growth or productivity (Gordon, Hacker).

Furthermore, Congressional Research Service data from 1945 to 2012 show that reductions in the top capital gains tax rate and top marginal income tax rate do *not* (contrary to claims typically made by their proponents) appear correlated with savings, investment, economic growth, or productivity growth. Such tax cuts *do*, however, appear to be associated with increasing concentrations of income at the top of the income distribution (Hungerford). When tax cut benefits are loudly proclaimed to be available to every employee, therefore, it creates the likelihood of later disappointment among many Main Street workers as well as an opportunity for a political gaffe (inadvertent truth) by pronouncing that the 2017 tax cut provided only crumbs for most people. The range of crumbs appears to vary from zero, for most minimum wage workers, to the famously noted \$1.50 per week gained by House Speaker Paul Ryan’s secretary, and up to the needed and welcomed \$1000 bonuses (instead of more valuable wage increases) awarded to the 4500 full-time hourly and salaried employees of Reynolds American Inc. tobacco company. The \$1000 bonus in this case seems to be comparable to the amounts awarded by similarly sized companies across the country, but it totaled a crumb sized nibble of less than one percent of the \$541 million gained by the tax cut (Craver). The vast bulk of the corporate tax cut benefit

nationwide will likely go for share buybacks to boost stock prices that reward upper management and shareholders, thereby increasing inequality (Bernstein, Shell) and providing further evidence for the critique that Republican fiscal policy fosters an economic tide that lifts all yachts.

It should be noted that the tax cut bill, along with the \$1.3 trillion spending bill passed in March, 2018, have caused much unhappiness among fiscal conservatives worried about the increasing debt, not to mention among the Tea Party inclined voters who wanted a change from the Obama era deficits. And limited budget funding for border security and other promised measures has shortchanged expectations about the results of voting for a new administration (Robinson). The same prospect of disappointment, both for the pocketbooks of voters and for the ideological hopes of free trade conservatives, can be foreseen in the proposed and actualized tariff increases (Thiessen). Meanwhile, hardline conservatives are publicly touting the budget increases for the military and celebrating the non-budget successes in court appointments, regulation rollbacks for environmental protections and financial supervision, and foreign policy changes—e.g., withdrawal from the Paris climate accord, scrapping of the multinational nuclear weapons agreement with Iran, and recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel (Hewitt, “There’s reason to smile”). As is obvious, these matters are not pocketbook issues that will improve the lives of those under economic

stress. As that stress persists, so will the pressure for change that impels a “no-compromise” style of politics and an autocratic leadership strategy, each to the detriment of democratic stability.

Insofar as conservative ideological talking points about everyone benefitting from a booming economy, tax cuts for all, and non-economic policy wins succeed, they may result in a kind of “Placebo Effect” for economically distressed voters: a continuing belief in the message that the new national administration has brought about good results—even though improved job opportunities and income increases are few and far between in many parts of the country. The longer this effect is operative, the longer it will take to shift enough votes to elect officials who will pursue policies that comport with actual economic conditions and, therefore, impact lives in a positive and long-term way.

The peril of delayed policy solutions within a democratic republic is exacerbated by “truthful hyperbole” (as Donald Trump characterized his communication style in *The Art of the Deal* in 1987), a rhetorical tactic that has challenged fact-checkers to keep pace. Such communications can be reinforced by the many well financed conservative think tanks and spokespersons, prodding web algorithms to produce the impression that the truth is no more than what is trending on internet platforms. This rhetorically repurposed reality can more easily become politically weaponized by

bypassing “fake news” outlets—like the *New York Times*—and also avoiding “the left’s political correctness assault against free speech” (Brown). The President’s voluminous and unmonitored tweeting, according to his defenders, “means normal Americans get to hear their president give voice to things many of them think (sans the saltiness) but were afraid to say” (Brown). But this type of verbal incontinence also aids the “placebo effect” by offering a language of resentment that displaces economically induced anger into vilification and blaming of others, while also producing what research has identified as a “Trump Effect” of elevated levels of hate speech, placing people in harm’s way and making political agreement for policy solutions more difficult (Holland). And this combative element of the president’s performance style, along with disdain for media independence, is seen by his supporters as a positive feature that will carry him to victory in 2020 (Hewitt, “Trump is our combatant in chief”).

### Linguistic Malpractice

For the past year, the more extreme conservative circles in the media, among congressional Republicans, and even in the White House have been promoting the idea that top levels of the FBI have been conspiring since mid-2016 to undermine and/or bring down the incoming president. This effort to discredit elements of the Justice Department and FBI has gained strength, it might be argued, by being part of a closed communication system that rewards

the ability to internalize, repeat, and embellish fictions generated by the extremes of right-wing media while lacking (unlike left-wing media) robust mechanisms for self-correction (Benkler). Such closed communication systems also protect participants from the cognitive dissonance created by new and accurate information that is a prerequisite for progress in confronting and accepting reality, an acceptance that itself is a precondition for discussion and policy resolution within a democratic republic framework.

In recent years, internet communication and platform vehicles have aided the “silo segregated” spread of fact-free claims, including those of rigged elections, millions of fraudulent voters, a crime wave by breeding immigrants infesting the country, WITCH HUNT (with its inevitable all caps) investigations, a media environment in which unfavorable news equals FAKE NEWS, a biased judiciary, and anti-president conspiracies in the FBI, CIA, and the Justice Department. Then there are continuing authoritarian style claims of criminality and conspiracy against the losing opposition party and candidate amid calls to “lock her up!” And authoritarian style purges from government web sites and mission statements of certain words and phrases: “climate change,” “diversity,” “vulnerable,” “entitlement,” “transgender,” “evidence-based,” “science-based,” “nation of immigrants,” “free from discrimination”; the State Department mission no longer mentions “democratic,” “peaceful,” or “just”; the

Guantanamo Bay Detention Center no longer mentions “legal” or “transparent”; and the Department of Justice website no longer includes a section on “the need for free press and public trial” (Greenberg).

Fictions are added to the mix by a Press Secretary staff willing to assert power over truth by promoting “alternative facts” to advance a narrative more comfortable to the president, claiming achievements greater than any ever before seen, whether it is crowd size, electoral vote numbers, or number of bills passed during the first year in office. Research shows that clever distortions and use of fictional conspiracy explanations can recruit support from people who have endured loss of status or who feel victimized (Douglas), but when rhetorical spectacle displaces substance and factual statements are increasingly scorned as evidence of liberal bias, the resulting truth decay allows administration supporters to self-deport from reality, impedes the consensus building which allows policy to be made within democratic norms, and impels the country to confront the question of whether post-fact normality is also pre-fascist manipulative authoritarianism. The October, 2019 presidential decree that all federal agencies cancel subscriptions to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* added an exclamation point to this perilous trajectory.

Two recent political science books explore authoritarian tendencies in a broader framework: *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky)

and *The People vs. Democracy* (Mouk). Both volumes employ comparative analyses of the experiences of other countries undergoing the degradation of democratic practice to illuminate trends exhibited in this country in recent years, including the rhetorical issues reviewed above and the logic of politics examined below.

### Logical Malpractice

For most of the years since the Civil War, the configuration of our two major political parties had been one of crosscutting interests, with conservative and liberal elements in both of them. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, these alignments started to shift. The 1964 presidential nomination by the Republicans of Barry Goldwater, with his anti-federal government rhetoric, started a voting shift which the Reagan election in 1980 helped to solidify. This entailed a logical move of Southern Democrats, opposed to federal government desegregation policies, to shift to the Republican party, along with small government conservatives throughout middle America. By the 1990s a hard line split with few crosscutting elements divided the Republicans and Democrats, leading to a logic of more opposition, to the point of government shutdown threats or actualities, as in 1995 and 2011.

Bi-partisan cooperation was still possible, but became less common and mostly disappeared during the two terms of Obama. We became aware of the 2009 pledge



by Republican Senate minority leader McConnell to use opposition tactics that would (hopefully) make Obama a one-term president. Republican efforts to filibuster and block Obama judicial appointments at the District and Appeals Court levels led Democrats to employ the “nuclear option” of a simple majority vote for confirmation. A logical response came after a Republican Senate majority was gained in 2014 and all court nominations were thereafter blocked, including a nomination for the Supreme Court in January of Obama’s final year of his second term, despite the constitutional stipulation that the Senate “advise and consent” to federal court nominations. Rejecting any vote or even consideration of the nomination violated the spirit, if not the letter, of this constitutional norm.

The sharp party divide on economic policy propelled the political logic of passing a tax-cut bill that had no opposition support, and very little support among professional economists, but met an ideological goal while retaining the financial support of campaign donors (Blinder). The need for party unity in policy wins has also induced the current majority party to largely abandon the Congressional role of maintaining traditional guardrails on executive overreach or curbing threats against judicial and investigative independence. And the desire to maintain political majorities in Congress, amidst a long-term trend of population decline in the current conservative voting base, produced the logic of state legislatures

skewing the voting process with mid-cycle re-districting, excessive voter ID requirements, and other vote restriction measures to maintain control such that of the nation’s 3113 counties, the number of politically competitive ones has declined from 30 percent to 10 percent since 1992, while the number of blowout counties won by 50 percent or more went from 93 to 1196 (Gibbs). As placebo effectiveness declines, the need for opposition disenfranchisement increases.

The standard set by the winning presidential election strategy of 2016 may well force new election logic on the future.

If these manipulative tactics along with plentiful financial backing fail to bring continued election success, it may impel conservatives further down the authoritarian path, as is currently happening in other imperiled democracies. Meanwhile, conservatives are using current executive control to implement an ideological hostility to regulation and growth in government size. Hundreds of executive appointment

slots remain unfilled, agencies are losing the needed knowledge and experience of career professionals, and departments are being headed by persons known to be hostile to the agency function (Johnston), despite majority support for most all of the functions of government that are now being undermined.

When long run negative consequences of ineffective government become belatedly evident (unlike 2017, when protests were mounted in real time during efforts to repeal Obamacare), it will produce even more cynicism about the government that democracy has produced. Demographic trends that increase population in coastal cities will also increase cynicism, as the constitutional logic of Senate seat allocation will enhance the political advantage of a smaller minority of voters in rural states as they continue to leverage their (veto) pool of votes in the Senate.

The standard set by the winning presidential election strategy of 2016 may well force new election logic on the future. For Republicans, it may require a promise of even greater disruption of norms and fearful inspiration for racists, misogynists, xenophobes, and anti-LGBTQ voters, thereby starving the Republican party of moderates and radicalizing the rest. If Democrats avoid the temptation to go equally “low,” they may reactively advance a candidate that advocates a Martin Luther King standard of judgment on the basis of character content along with due respect for traditional democratic norms and decency.

## Conclusion

The several perils for American democracy discussed above raise a basic question about our national government. Can continuing administrative turnover, and the resulting governing incompetence, protect the country from on-going governing malevolence and from the destruction of political norms long enough for a mobilized, informed electorate to outvote the placebo-affected *before* they become a more cynical voting majority, one that fatally supports an increase in authoritarian rejection of democratic norms, or before a catastrophic event ensues which will accelerate that negative outcome?

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