
I'm Just a Rhetorical Dirtbag, Baby

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Donald Trump's America has forced modern rhetoric to undergo a radical ethical shift in what some see as a dangerous direction. Trump's way of communicating—more bluster and pettiness than reflection and humility—is the elocutio of the modern age. This shift was set in motion earlier, with the emergence of things like the Tea Party movement, an American conservative movement that gained attention in 2009 with fiery protests and a focus on things like reductions in both immigration and taxes (Britannica, Tea Party Movement section). The pace of this shift has accelerated over the past four years, revealing discourse that has become increasingly vulgar, incessant, and merciless. In the United States, many citizens feel that discourse has turned more volatile, and politicians, in particular, should mind what they say publicly (Drake & Kiley, 2019). Many Right-wingers (who for the purposes of this piece include American Republicans, Canadian Conservatives, and more fringe groups that tend to be fiscally and socially conservative) engage in persuasion free of niceties, and as a result of their “take no prisoners” philosophy, they reap the persuasive benefits. Their arguments are fiery, passionate, and compel their listeners to action. For the Left (who, for the purposes of this piece, are American Democrats, Canadian Liberals/New Democrats/Green Party, and any progressive or socialist-leaning group) to have the same impact, they have to abandon rhetorical politeness. Surely, I am not suggesting that people embrace being deceptive, dishonest, or devious? In a word, yes. In several words, yes, no, sometimes, and it depends.

Like the rhetoric of old, modern rhetoric is a living, changing thing. Several players in the media landscape embrace the elastic nature of truth in a way that mirrors the Russian and American Right's way of manipulation. Whether it be Fox News relying on pathos to stir up passion and outrage in their viewers or the costume of man-in-the-street that Andrew Callaghan employs on his *Channel 5 with Andrew Callaghan* YouTube channel. I believe leaning into a more theatrical and dynamic way of communicating is not only a healthy urge but an imperative one. Adhering to outdated modes of integrity is only helping those on the Left lose. If you would indulge me, I will attempt to persuade you of the wisdom of being a rhetorical dirtbag.

Undoubtedly, political bombast garners attention. Networks that host Right-wing provocateurs often have high ratings, illustrating the potential of rude and volatile discourse to draw an audience. For years, Fox News has dominated the airwaves, only under-performing CNN and MSNBC for the first time in 21 years after the U.S. Capitol attack (Baker, 2021). Fox's audience may have many hate-watchers, but a disdainful viewer is a viewer, nonetheless. Though he lost the popular vote, Trump did endear enough people to him to win 62,985,106 votes (New York Times, 2017), proving his rhetoric resonated with a large number of people. The trick for those on the Left is to navigate how to utilize this style of rhetoric without destroying their morals.

How can politicians and commentators fuse ethics with efficacy in their discourse? Michelle Obama's suggestion, “When they go low, we go high” (Scipioni, 2020), has become the encapsulation of the attitude many hold regarding rhetoric in the modern age—civility at all costs. Traditional ideals suggest that an argument, a message, a speech, or any other

communication should be polite, proper, and earnest. Ideals of courtesy have likely been with us for at least as long as recorded history—many religions have their take on the golden rule, after all. Yet, this courteous discourse may not be the most powerful way to convey a message and often highlights a speaker's intention to save face more than propel the argument. This adherence to politeness comes at the cost of good ideas, more often than it should, however.

Some hold dear to the assumption that to be rhetorically courteous is, at minimum, on par with having socially or politically progressive ideas. I would ask, who ultimately benefits from polite discourse besides the speaker? I find it hard to imagine people hurt by a policy decision that ends up denying them housing aid warming themselves instead with the comfort of knowing their advocate failed to help them but did so "politely." If an idea is sound, that should be the metric of the idea's worth, not how few toes were stepped on in its presentation.

Another attribute of the Dirtbag left is its abandonment of the fossilized ideal of balance. Many don't believe that any news outlet or political talking head is bias-free. Therefore, clinging to this illusion is not only pointless but potentially harmful. A reporter or commentator admitting their bias does not preclude them from being fair. In fact, it can lead to superior reporting, as journalists who acknowledge they are Left-leaning don't need to waste time ensuring they appear "fair" when they could instead be doing the work of reporting. Humans are inherently biased beings, and constantly attempting to conceal these biases is deceptive and futile. The contempt talking heads on Fox News display for "bleeding-heart Liberals" can give their audience a cheap release. The Dirtbag Left gives their audience permission to feel that same release by similarly utilizing derision. A desire to laugh at or feel superior to one's ideological enemy may be a less-than-noble one, but it is a human quirk that all facets of society have in common. The best among the Dirtbag Left can weave together both release and a stripping of the emperor's clothes.

Some mourn the days of the past, where men were gentlemen and women were ladies, politely disagreeing with each other before bowing and bidding adieu. This observation of etiquette should not be confused with superior morals. Though the modern method of discourse is often louder and brasher than the discourse of old, the past's graciousness is a memory clouded by sentiment. Though the famous figures of the more recent past often presented themselves elegantly, they were as cruel as many are today. The televised bitch fights between Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal may have been steeped in gentility, but they were far from kind (The Dick Cavett Show, 1971). The two very learned White men were afforded both the space and the time to be cruel due to their privilege and intellectual sheen. The insults flung and the messages spread today are no less heinous than they ever were. However, if those advocating for human rights swear too much, they are castigated for being impolite, though their message may be humane and morally impeccable.

Many believe the truth must always be explicitly conveyed, free of hyperbole or passion. There are many bad actors in the modern age who play fast and loose with the truth, to be sure. However, those who argue and advocate in the modern era are not dealing with opponents playing by the same set of rules. The tactics employed by Donald Trump and his team, for example, set a precedent regarding American political rhetoric. Though a clear connection between Donald Trump and Russia has never been definitively proven, the similarities between their use of rhetoric are notable. In the early 21st century, a new propaganda model was employed in Russia, called "the firehose of falsehood," as coined by the Rand Corporation (Paul

& Matthews, 2016). This technique aims to befuddle and fatigue one's opponent. The basic components of this technique, according to the report by Paul and Matthews (2016), consist of messaging that is high in volume and is disseminated on a multitude of channels, that has no adherence to objective reality, and lacks consistent integrity.

Russian-American journalist and activist Masha Gessen noted that this technique is not about persuasion but power (Maza, 2018). To illustrate this notion, Gessen describes the effect this technique has on an opponent: "There is nothing quite so humiliating and disempowering as trying to prove the truth" (Maza, 2018). Attempting to combat this strategy—where morality and truth are abandoned entirely—with kindness is destined to fail. It is like bringing a knife to a gunfight—you may be skilled in knife work, but the bullet is likely to kill you regardless.

Those seeking to fight this kind of virulent propaganda should not attempt to match it beat for beat. While outright lying is unethical regardless of the aims, those advocating for the Left can learn from the tactics of those who defy polite society's conventions. Right-wing provocateurs frequently abandon notions of propriety to gain the rhetorical upper hand. The refusal by some on the Left to even spice up their rhetoric with some bad manners only leads to that rhetoric being impotent.

However, there are examples of personalities on the Left who utilize discourteousness to their advantage. A burgeoning movement in popular online discourse called the "dirtbag left" is louder, ruder, and more combative than the mainstream media usually allow themselves to be. There are many flavours of Dirtbag, some notable examples including podcasts like *Chapo Trap House* and *Behind the Bastards*, and YouTube channels such as *All Gas No Brakes* and Vic Berger's namesake account. Unlike characters such as Donald Trump, Tucker Carlson, or Ezra Levant, these personalities don't inundate their audience with lies masquerading as truth. However, they share similarities in their insolence, ferocity, and ruthlessness. Vicious, cursing, and loud, they are unapologetic in their insults to their opponents. On a recent episode of *Chapo Trap House*, the hosts describe Florida Congressman Matt Gaetz as a "completely hairless demon-creature and the dumbest man alive" (Biederman et al., 2021, 5:42). These crude insults are funny and help deflate the pomposity of Gaetz. It can also be refreshing for an audience to hear someone accused of sexual misconduct referred to in such an insulting way. While brash, the hosts of *Chapo Trap House* are educated in history and political theories. They hold no one holy, regardless of political affiliation. While they were guests on another podcast, the two members of *Chapo* that were present were even disrespectful enough to eat while the show was being recorded, calling to mind Diogenes eating during one of Plato's lectures. Their contempt for the hosts of a more typically Neoliberal podcast is conveyed not only through their words but via mastication.

Another flavour of chaotic rhetoric is vivid satire, such as that utilized by Vic Berger. His YouTube channel contains satirical videos that border on the surreal. Through the use of skillful editing—lingering excessively on an awkward pause; removing a studio audience's reaction, so it appears the speaker is bombing; replaying a physical tic on a loop—he renders his subjects foolish. His edits exaggerate absurdities already present in his targets, a bending of the truth, perhaps, but not an outright lie. Focusing to an absurd degree on Donald Trump's odd way of speaking and gesticulating does not invent those characteristics out of whole cloth.

These rhetorical choices—rudeness, irreverence, satire—may be viewed as unprofessional. However, that opinion neglects to consider the attitude of those on the receiving end of a message. One of the keystones of rhetorical discourse is knowing your audience. Millennials and subsequent generations were reared on *South Park* and Tom Green—their second language is snark. Millennials can see through politicians' facade of politeness and don't respond to mainstream news outlets' still relatively staid approach. It is more useful to appeal to the sensibilities of those who consume content on the most popular forms of media—podcasts, YouTube, TikTok. Many of these people display a lack of respect, but any respect they do bestow is earned, not given out of duty or expectation. These groups meet their audience where they are.

We live in a post-truth world. To reach generations raised on sarcasm and distortions of the facts, communicators are wise to employ some theatre. Fun, humour, and satirizing the world to reveal absurdity are wise and effective strategies. It's not enough to dryly convey the "facts," which are up for interpretation anyway. One must engage in the modern version of elocutio. A debunker will be labelled an enemy by the opposition, so why not have fun with it?

The point of rhetoric is to persuade, using all the means available to you. Any claim to the contrary is itself a distortion. As defined by the ancient Greeks, rhetoric's skeleton is an excellent way to ensure one's rhetoric is sound: having exordium (introduction), narratio (statement of fact), confirmatio (arguments in your favour), refutatio (your opponent's arguments, countered), and peroratio (conclusion) present lend an argument coherence and credibility. However, we are arguably in an era where the gloves are off as never before. To be effective, communicators must be prepared to tailor their message. Ultimately, if people have something they wish to convey, it is in their best interest to ensure that message is heard. It is more important to be an advocate who achieves results than adhere to outdated rules of politeness that many on the opposing side don't obey. The cliché of "adapt or die" applies to rhetoric as much as anything else. To halt the calcification of the Left's messaging (at minimum) and help it have actual teeth (ideally), the Left's battle tactics must change to meet the needs of the people they claim to want to help. If one's message is righteous but unheard, it may as well not exist at all.

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