

“THE BEST ... THE GREATEST ... THE MOST PRESIDENTIAL ...”
**HYPERBOLE IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE, ANCIENT
AND MODERN**

In recent years political discourse in the United States has veered to the extreme. The favored mode of political expression has become hyperbole, as may be seen not only in the harangues of Donald Trump, but also from time to time in talk of “apocalypse”, and “treason” by some of his opponents. Hyperbole, however, is often dismissed as a blunder or as a euphemism for *lie*. This may be a good moment, then, to step back and take a fresh look at this ancient and still potent mode of speech, asking how it works and bringing more crisply into focus what responses to it prove most effective.

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There is something of the teenager (meirakodes) in hyperboles, for they express themselves in the most intense manner. They are in raging passion when they speak.

Aristotle *Rhetoric* 3.11.

Aristotle has in mind a temper tantrum by Achilles (he cites *Iliad* 9. 385 ff.) but he might also have thought of the demagogues of classical Athens, who often used hyperbole -

literally *over-shoot*- in their speeches. He could also recognize in its use in today's vehement political discourse signs of arrested moral and intellectual development. But there is more to it than that.

Aristotle does not totally condemn hyperbole even though it seems to run counter to his preference for avoiding extremes and choosing the middle road. Yet in *Politics* 3. 1284 a 4 ff. he recognizes that there can be a superabundance of excellence (aretē) or by extension, wealth, popularity or other qualities that are conducive to political power. Such superabundance he also uses the word hyperbolē. It's not always a bad thing. The rhetorical figure *hyperbole*, then, may be seen as a counterpart to superiority in politics. The two go hand in hand.

It has a particularly close tie to demagoguery, ancient and modern. Demagogues seem to find ways to turn extreme language to extreme advantage. Indeed, hyperbole seems to be an essential part of their weaponry. Hence, it is especially deserving of close attention when demagogues seem ascendant and adults seem rarely to be in control.

Recent usages of the word hyperbole demonstrate its utility. The President asserts that he will eliminate the national debt (\$20 trillion); his [budget director shrugs the claim off](#) as "hyperbole." The President

explains “truthful hyperbole,” in his 1987 book *The Art of the Deal*.

The final key to the way I promote is bravado. I play to people’s fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That’s why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It’s an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion. “

Mr. Trump recognizes the power of hyperbole to worm its way into the listener’s desires and perceived needs. In deal-making what is offered is not just a useful asset; in the revealing light of truthful hyperbole it is necessary, coveted, essential. “I must have it,” says the counter party. After that, price is only a minor issue.

To be sure, deal-makers and politicians have no monopoly on hyperbole. It is a favorite mode of speech among lovers, [poets](#), travelers - everyone, it seems, except policy wonk whose soulless prose withers before its onslaughts.

Holy Men, too. Jesus of Nazareth, for example, proclaimed that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God (*Matthew*

19.24). Literal minded interpreters squabble over its implications for their rich patrons; disciples recognize in it a vivid rejection of wealth as an entrance ticket to eternal bliss. Here hyperbole teams up with metaphor, as it also simile and synecdoche and other figures of speech, to make the statement an attention-getter, and a mind-focuser.

Political speeches sometimes use a similar technique, fusing hyperbole with metaphor, as Pericles did in a tribute to the war dead of the campaign against rebellious Samos in 440-39 BCE. Their loss, he said, had taken the spring out of the year.

Other Greek political leaders, to be sure, also used hyperbole, but it is in the 420s BCE with the emergence of a new mode of politics, “demagogy,” that we see it in use in political invective. Hyperbole put to use in this way is at the core of the parody of Cleon in Aristophanes’ comedy *The Knights* and in the historian Thucydides’ account of maneuvering in the Athenian assembly over command of an expedition to Pylos. Cleon attacks the generals in command of the expedition for not being vigorous enough: “If the generals were men,” he sneers, they would already have done so (Thucydides 4. 27.5) He follows that with the over the top promise to capture the crack Spartan troops bottled up on the island within twenty days. And he did it! Even in politics not all hyperboles are false.

Athenian political life, we can see, was never the same after these new politicians of fifth century Athens. In the

demagogues, the next century Demosthenes proved himself the master of Greek hyperbolic oratory. In attacking King Philip of Macedon, for example, he sneered:

Not only is he not a Greek, he's not a relative of the Greeks; he's not even a barbarian from any decent place. He is a damned Macedonian from a country where you could never even buy a good slave."

Demosthenes, the ancient and venerable master of hyperbole, although he knew well that it "is the natural disposition of mankind to listen readily to obloquy and invective, and to resent self-laudation" (*On the Crown* 3) could not resist hyperbolic self-praise later in the same speech:

"Regard my fortifications as you ought, and you will find armies and cities and outposts, seaports and ships and horses, and a multitude ready to fight for their defense. These were the bastions I planted for the protection of Attica so far as it was possible to human forethought; and therewith I fortified, not the ring-fence of our port and our citadel, but the whole country."

Demosthenes *On the Crown* (19) 299f. tr. Vince

Demosthenes could be equally vitriolic about his domestic opponents. For example, he attacks Aeschines in these terms:

"With all this on his conscience the unclean scoundrel will dare to look you in the face, and before long he will be

declaiming in sonorous accents about his blameless life. It makes me choke with rage. As if the jury did not know all about you: first the acolyte, reading the service-books while your mother performed her hocus-pocus, reeling and tumbling, child as you were, with bacchanals and tipsy worshippers...

Demosthenes *On the Mishandled Embassy* (18)
sec.199, tr. Vince

Hyperbole, ancient and modern, is most fierce when an enemy is in sight. But while [modern politicians have found](#) that compressing their attacks into a repeated phrase (“33,000 emails) or epithet (“little Mario,” “lying Ted,” “low-energy Jeb”), Demosthenes, as we have just seen, exploits the sonorous complexity of the Greek language, letting the scale of his attack correspond to the enormity of his opponent’s alleged depravity. In this he was following a basic principle of Greek rhetoric: that the scale of discourse should correspond to the magnitude of the achievement, or the depravity under discussion.

Hyperbole works. But how and why? It is difficult to generalize, since hyperbole comes in several convenient sizes, shapes and intents. It is not a thing in itself, but a cluster of different forms

of exaggeration, which stand in the midst of a wide variety of linguistic forms, including superlative, and exclamations. At any moment it can turn into one or another of a multitude of speech acts, including self-promotion, boasts, threats, promises, bombast, accusations, slander and invective. Many of these are parodied in the shouting match between Paphlagon-Cleon and the Sausage Seller in Aristophanes *Knights* 275 – 450.). To that list we can now add fantasies (“the largest audience to witness an inaugural, period.”), and paranoid delusions (“the single greatest witch hunt in American history”).

Underneath all this variety, however, is a dynamic that operates in both ancient and modern settings. That dynamic is more powerful than some ancient rhetoricians let on when they write about hyperbole. Quintilian, for one, having noted that there are some tropes “intended for embellishment only,” goes on to discuss one trope in more detail, metaphor, noting that some are used to add force and significance while others are purely ornamental:

... we say that a man is inflamed with anger, burning with desire, and has fallen into error, with a view to significance or force of expression,

while other expressions (often hyperbolic), such as “... storms of public assemblies, thunderbolts of eloquence, are used merely for ornament.” (8.6.7)

Would that more of Longinus' discussion of this topic were preserved in his treatise *On the Sublime*! He, more than Quintilian or any other ancient critic, recognized the power of language to sweep listeners off their feet. Yet even so, one can detect among the ancient rhetoricians a respect for the almost poetic power of hyperbole, so that sometimes, as Heinrich Lausberg puts it:

"... the audience allows itself to be carried along by the poetical fascination of the hyperbole in the upsurge of sympathy with the speaker." *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric* (Leiden, 1998) p. 410

There's more to hyperbole than ornament, as a recent conversation brought home to me.

During the 2016 presidential campaign a friend, a kindly, upbeat person, told me that she agreed with [Trump's assertion](#) that Putin was a better leader than Obama. When I replied that I thought that Trump had spoken in a very extreme way, she responded, "Oh sure, it is extreme, but I think I know what he means." I was too shocked and appalled to inquire what she thought he meant, but her tone of voice conveyed a greater meaning. It resembled that of a mother coming to the defense of a wayward child. She understood, she thought, a good intention behind an ostensibly outrageous speech act. She felt,

I believe, empowered by Trump's hyperbole. It put her in the driver's seat and made her an interpreter rather than a mere listener.

Hyperbole can work in a similar way with a large audience. For instance, when Trump asserted that he would be "the greatest jobs president God ever created," he was not inviting his audience to evaluate a specific set of proposals, but inviting it to recognize his intention to give such efforts his highest priority. Hyperbole used in this way can transform both individuals and groups from passive observation into an active participation. The listener hearing hyperbole is aroused from the familiar oratory-induced slumber. Used in the right setting it seems to activate another part of the brain, intense and passionate. The skillful hyperbolist warms up his audience and at the right moment proclaims his opponent a "crook." The audience rises to its feet chanting "Lock her up! Lock her up!"

To be sure, once power is attained, the hyperbolic chickens come home to roost. A rhetorical shift may follow, from invective to threats, against new set of enemies, sometimes including former allies. But promises made along the way do not always need to be fulfilled, if supporters read them as statements of intent rather than as plans for action. It may then prove sufficient to be seen trying as strongly as possible and to blame an enemy for one's failure.

Responding to Hyperbole. The Advice of Dienece:

Hyperbole is a powerful force, more often, I fear, for ill than for good. How can one stand up against it? Since hyperbole is not a single thing but a cluster of modes of speech, no single response is likely to work in every occasion, but if the view advanced in this paper is correct, it is at least clear why conventional responses to it are ineffective. It does little good to add to the [New York Times' list "Trump's Lies"](#) what an audience understands as a statement of intensity of intent, or experiences as empowerment. The label *lie*, while often justified, looks only at one of the parties in the communication – the speaker; it does not ask the more difficult question why listeners respond as they do. Alternative strategies may prove more effective: If fight hyperbole with even greater hyperbole, as the Sausage Seller does for a while in Aristophanes' *Knights*, risks a downward spiral in political discourse, other forms of comedy and satire may help in some settings. In other cases it may be best to make explicit the implicit anxieties from which hyperbole often derives its power.

Even better, I believe, is the example set by the Spartan war-hero Dieneces:

... being informed by one of the men of Trachis that when the Barbarians discharged their arrows they obscured the light of the sun by the multitude of the arrows, so great was the number of their host, he was not dismayed by this, but making small account of the number of the Medes, he said that their guest from Trachis brought them very good

news, for if the Medes obscured the light of the sun, the battle against them would be in the shade and not in the sun." (Herodotus 7 226)

Dieneces does not dismiss the Trachian's report or label it a lie; he doesn't do the numbers and prove it implausible. Instead, he treats it ironically, making the exaggeration 'of small account,' as Herodotus notes. He counters hyperbole with its opposite mode of speech, understated confidence. In Greek terms, he is an ironist, an eirōn, rather than a boaster, an alazōn.

It worked. If the intent of the Trachian's story was to demoralize the Spartans before going into battle with a vastly superior force, Dieneces deflected it, as a strong man might flick off a fly. The Spartan warriors, to a man, died at Thermopylae but no hyperbole could make them give up or run away.

W. Robert Connor

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This is a draft. Comments and criticisms welcome at
wrconnor1@gmail.com