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How Biden wants us to think about Ukraine's conflict

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Recommended Citation

Shea, Rainer, "How Biden wants us to think about Ukraine's conflict" (2022). *Communication 300 Papers*.

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How Biden wants us to think about Ukraine's conflict

Part 1: the rhetorical situation

The most pertinent way Joe Biden as an individual relates to the Ukraine situation is in how he was part of the administration which began Washington's current paradigm for relating to Ukraine. It was during Biden's time as vice president that the United States started to treat Ukraine as not just another post-Soviet state, but a focal point in the new era of great-power competition. Since the Obama administration decided to back Ukraine's war against the Donbass separatists in 2014, the U.S. and Russia have been engaged in tensions, which are now reaching an unprecedented level.

In March of this year, when Biden was giving this speech, Putin had last month begun what he called a special military operation within Ukraine. Putin's central argument for why this operation needed to happen was that Ukraine had a strong presence of neo-Nazi militias, ones which were directly tied to Ukraine's military apparatus and government. Biden's administration and NATO were seeking to provide Ukraine with the means to fight off this operation, and to counter Putin's arguments for why Ukraine's government shouldn't be treated passively.

Part 2: the 5 rhetorical canons (Sellnow 37)

Invention

In constructing this speech, Biden had invented a dual strategy for justifying aid to Ukraine: instill a sense that the United States is fighting for "freedom," and attempt to rebuke Putin's argument that Ukraine is a Nazi-influenced state. He uses the phrase "iron curtain," which refers to the idea that Soviet Russia was oppressive, to create an analogy between the Cold War and the current conflict. He argues that Putin's Russia represents another iteration of this oppression, and that therefore Ukraine must be helped in fighting off Russia's operation. He describes the fighting in Ukraine as the "latest battle in a long struggle: Hungary, 1956; Poland, 1956 then again 1981; Czechoslovakia, 1968," referring to the series of anti-communist uprisings that occurred within those places (Remarks by President Biden). The idea he conveys is that whether or not the current struggle is one against communism, it's a struggle for freedom, or for Biden's concept of "freedom."

To repudiate the idea that Ukraine represents Nazism, Biden talks about the Jewish heritage of Zelensky. He points to Zelensky's having ancestors who were victims of the Holocaust, and argues that this makes Putin's idea about Zelensky being pro-Nazi absurd (Remarks by President Biden). What this argument centers around is the personality aspect of the conflict, in regards to both Russia and Ukraine. Biden frames Russia's operation as not being representative of the Russian people, who he portrays as victims of an oppressive government, but rather as Putin's operation. This emphasis on the individual leader, rather than on the state the individual represents, applies to the way Biden addresses the accusation of Ukraine being a pro-Nazi state. To counter this

claim, Biden exclusively focuses on Zelensky as a person, and on Zelensky's family history, rather than on the state apparatus which Zelensky is operating within and what its nature might be. Biden's analysis treats the characteristics of the leaders of the two countries as the predominant lens through which these countries should be viewed while analyzing the conflict.

The exception to this is in how Biden frames NATO, which he defends from Putin's accusation of intent to destabilize Russia. Biden calls NATO a "defensive alliance," not referring to the organization's leader but to the organization as a whole (Remarks by President Biden). This may be because an international entity like NATO is less recognizable by any of its individual leaders than countries tend to be.

Arrangement

Biden structures the speech by placing all of its arguments in between two quotes from a speech given by Pope John Paul II in 1978. The first quote, included near the beginning, is "Be not afraid," and the second one near the end is "Never, ever give up hope, never doubt, never tire, never become discouraged." Biden uses these statements to put forth his rallying cry to support Ukraine indefinitely, which he first does with his callback to the Cold War and then expands upon from there (Remarks by President Biden).

The way in which Biden carries out this expansion on his initial point is by first making clear how he seeks to portray Putin's Russia—which is as a force for "autocracy" that must be combated—and then engaging with the arguments that Putin has put forth. After comparing the Ukraine conflict to the anti-Soviet revolts, and comparing modern Russia to the Russia of yesteryear, he counters the accusations Putin has made about Ukraine being a fascist state and NATO being a bad faith actor. He then describes the efforts Washington and its allies have undertaken to economically penalize Russia, and the experiences of Ukrainian refugees, before addressing the Russian people on how he feels they should respond to their government's actions. He uses this to pivot towards the final section, in which he returns to the concept of "freedom" winning out against "autocracy."

The arrangement that Biden's speech makes for by placing these topics in this order is one in which the audience is incrementally introduced to the building blocks of his argument. They're first reminded of the sense of Cold War patriotism that they may feel, then they're led to view Putin as an extension of the old Cold War enemies, then they're led to see Putin's ideas about NATO and the Ukrainian government as not worth taking seriously. This primes them for the rousing final part of the speech, which is made effective through the style which Biden employs for communicating these ideas.

Style

The style of Biden's speech is one that feels designed to invoke memories of past speeches by world leaders during times of war or crisis. The way Biden frames the

USA's tasks in Ukraine parallels the speech that George W. Bush made at the World Trade Center after the September 11, 2001 attacks ("I can hear you!"). In both speeches, the speaker was seeking to rally support for a war effort, and the crux of their argument was that an enemy had committed a transgression which couldn't go unpunished. Biden was posturing in a defiant fashion, like he viewed Putin as a hubristic criminal who's going to be stopped by the righteous work the U.S. is doing. The speech had a moralistic feel to it, like Biden was speaking on behalf of the heroes in the situation (the U.S. and allies) so that he could put the villains (the Russian government) in their place.

This contrasts with the way that presidential speeches go when they're designed not to tell off an adversary, but to provide comforting words in the midst of a catastrophic event which doesn't have to do with any wars. In those instances, presidents are addressing incidents which could be described as tragedies, rather than as provocations from abroad. In the midst of events like the Pearl Harbor bombings, 9/11, or the Ukraine conflict, presidents have been prompted to make their speeches more pointed than they would otherwise, to assign a clear culprit to the destruction. Which has made them speak in a decidedly accusatory way. In the case of Biden's speech, what goes along with the accusatory aspect is an effort to instill in the audience a sense of pathos for the destruction's victims. Biden's descriptions of the Ukrainian children who've been forced to flee their homes get across the sense of sadness he intends to convey, and makes it easier for him to foster a sense of outrage against Russia. So long as someone already shares the view of Russian and Ukrainian history that Biden bases his portrayal off of, they can be made to feel profound anger towards Russia upon hearing his words.

Memory

The ways Biden tries to make his speech memorable are primarily by recounting the John Paul II quote, and by conveying pathos for those displaced by the conflict. His invoking such a powerful statement from a historical figure regarding the need for hope and determination, along with his illustrating the pain that the victims of the crisis are going through, serve to create strong emotions in the audience. Emotions that have the potential to stay a lasting fixture in one's consciousness.

The use of the John Paul II quote can make someone recall it during times in their life when they're feeling hopeless, afraid, or overwhelmed. It can also be recalled when one is witnessing or experiencing future tumultuous political events; if the Ukraine conflict is lost by Ukraine, Biden's having used this quote during the conflict's beginning could inspire pro-Ukraine individuals to hold on to hope that the general cause they believe in can still be fulfilled. Biden's use of pathos can have a similar effect; the next time someone who's listened to the speech hears about a war, they may be more likely to recall Biden's stories about the Ukrainian families, and to empathize with the victims of these future upheavals.

Another part of what makes the speech memorable is its element of moral outrage. Biden wants the audience to feel angry at Vladimir Putin, and he wants that anger to stick with the audience as they continue to observe the current geopolitical struggle. Biden's statement "For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power!" (Remarks by President Biden) has the ability to make one feel progressively more angry about Putin's actions the longer Putin stays president. If Putin is still president five years from now, many may think back on this speech and get the sense that there's been a failure of history to progress the right way.

Delivery

The way Biden delivers the speech is congruent with the speech's style: angry, blaming, and with a sense of righteousness. What his delivery adds to this are tonal and body language cues which communicate to the audience that he's not making these statements about Putin insincerely, but genuinely feels outraged at what Putin is doing. Whenever Biden talks about actions from Putin, he takes on an aggressive tone, along with a stern facial expression where his eyes are narrowed while he's frowning. During these moments, he also lifts one or more of his hands, signaling that his emotions are making him animated. He isn't staying still, neither in his movements nor in his manner of speaking. He's giving a speech about something that he wants to make into a national outrage, not so much about something he wants the U.S. to be proud of. So he makes his nonverbal language match this sentiment.

For the parts where Biden does seek to instill a sense of pride—namely in which he's celebrating the damage the sanctions have done to Russia—this stern delivery stays present. He doesn't start smiling during these moments, he continues to utilize the outraged tone. It's as if he's saying "we've made progress in combating Russia, but we can still make so much more."

Part 3: the overall effect & implications

In policy terms, Biden has gotten what he's wanted since he made this speech. The U.S. and its allies have continued to provide aid to Ukraine, the sanctions on Russia are still in effect, and these things aren't likely to stop. The sentiments from the speech have proven to represent the sentiments of Washington's guiding authorities on foreign policy, making for a solid dynamic of U.S. support for Ukraine's counteroffensive efforts.

In terms of public sentiment, these ideas from the speech have also prevailed within how American society has viewed the conflict. The majority of Americans believe the U.S. should back Ukraine until Russia retreats (Saric), proving most in the country share the views Biden put forth. These factors aren't necessarily attributable to this particular speech. Its ideas about Ukraine and Russia have also been proliferated throughout the U.S. media at large, which has had a vast impact on public opinion. And adhering to these ideas is in the best interests of U.S. foreign policy elites, as countering Russia is what's currently needed in order to advance Washington's strategic goals. So this

speech can be considered only one of the things that have brought the current international situation to where it's now at. Though the speech is a notable factor.

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