

The White House: No Drugs Allowed

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Abstract

The War on Drugs is a long-term metaphorical war designed to reduce illegal drug distribution, trade, and use by maintaining significant punishment for drug dealers and users. This paper serves to examine how U.S. presidents throughout history have impacted this drug war through their targeted rhetoric and ensuing policies. I examine the research question, “How have presidents used their rhetorical power to perpetuate the War on Drugs while pushing a tough-on-crime narrative that portrays certain drug users and minorities as deviants responsible for crime?” Historical contexts, primary sources, and existing research are used to examine the issue. Using Ideographic Criticism, Criticism of Metaphor, and Kenneth Burke’s narrative perspective, speeches and policies are analyzed to reach key findings. The paper concludes by establishing that presidents will never obtain full obedience through their public rhetoric. However, the messages they convey unquestionably impact populations across the nation, and their political progress in the War on Drugs is tangible and consequential.

Keywords: Rhetorical criticism, presidents, mass incarceration, war on drugs, crime, minorities

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Introduction/ Argument

There is no denying that U.S. presidents hold immense power and influence over the whole country, both with their policies and leadership style. Presidents often use powerful rhetoric to control public agencies yielding critical social consequences. Often presidents are mouthpieces and performers and leave policy-making to Congress behind the scenes. One of the most powerful uses of presidential rhetoric is the War on Drugs initiative. These narcotics policies have received considerable attention from the media, politics, and the general public. The War on Drugs refers to a government-led plan intended to curtail illicit drug use, trade, and distribution by increasing prison sentences for both drug users and dealers (“War on Drugs”, 2017). In a June 1971 press conference, President Nixon gave a speech officially declaring a “War on Drugs,” stating that drug abuse was “public enemy number one.” He greatly intensified the scope and existence of federal drug control organizations and forced legislation like mandatory sentencing and no-knock warrants (“War on Drugs”, 2017). However, this did not end with Nixon and these policies have had severe negative consequences, which will be explicated throughout the paper.

The drug war is a rhetorically-charged scheme designed to deepen polarization in America under the veil of protecting the country from corruption and crime. Presidents have exploited their “bully pulpit” positions to implement public policy and situate the public agenda. The bully pulpit is a position or office that bestows an official with a substantial opportunity to speak publicly on an issue (Whitford & Yates, 2009, p.159). The War on Drugs rhetoric highlights the effectiveness of militarized “war” expressions and the creation of an “us” versus

“them” grand narrative. Based on these suppositions, it is worthwhile to ask the question: “How have presidents used their rhetorical power to perpetuate the War on Drugs while pushing a tough-on-crime narrative that portrays certain drug users and minorities as deviants responsible for crime?” In this paper, I argue, using existing research, historical contexts, and my own contributions, that presidents have capitalized on their positions of power to exploit marginalized populations through moral pretenses. I argue that labeling the issue of drugs with the “war” metaphor and furthering tough on crime and us vs. them mentalities using patriotic ideographs is the reason U.S. presidents have been successful in continuing the War on Drugs and punishing people so heavily. First, it is important to review the history of the War On Drugs and how it was perpetuated.

Rhetorical Situation

In 1970, the U.S. prison population was 357,292; in 2022, it is almost 2 million people (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022). Many factors have led to this notion of “mass incarceration,” the unique way the U.S. locks up more people per capita than any other nation (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022). While the notion of law and order in the U.S. originally focused on organized crime, Nixon’s campaign created a new connotation with the phrase. In the 1960s/1970s, there was an eruption of political movements, including the Black Power and Black Panther movements, as well as the antiwar movement (“War on Drugs”, 2017). Nixon felt compelled to fight back against this disruption and created a war on crime, responding to a public outcry for law and order. Federal spending for law enforcement doubled, and in a June 1971 press conference, Nixon declared that “we must wage what I have called ‘total war’ against public enemy number one in the United States, the problem of dangerous drugs” (DuVernay, 2016). This single

statement gave birth to an era where the government decided to treat drug addiction and dependency as a crime issue rather than a health issue.

The rhetoric of “law and order” and “tough on crime” was, in part, a response to the chaos of urban cities unleashed by the civil rights movement (DuVernay, 2016). During a 1994 interview, President Nixon’s domestic policy chief, John Ehrlichman, released classified intelligence proposing that the War on Drugs campaign had secondary motives. Ehrlichman clarified that the Nixon administration had two opponents: “the antiwar left and Black people.”

Ehrlichman stated:

We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or Blacks, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and Blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities...Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course, we did. (“War on Drugs”, 2017)

Nixon used the protests against Vietnam and the counterculture movements occurring on college campuses as scapegoats for the drug problem. The fact that so many young people were experimenting with drugs made it an especially useful “war.” He knew he could capitalize on the levels of public outcry as a mechanism to be elected. Cultural triggers played a part in Nixon’s War on Drugs rhetoric, leaving a noticeable imprint on society that paved the way for successive presidents. In democracy, politicians typically follow public opinion, but *shape* public opinion first.

Popular opinion polls in the 1980s suggested that drugs were not deemed a large problem, but President Ronald Reagan was determined to define it as an issue and put it on the U.S. agenda (Lynch & Sabol, 1997). His wife Nancy Reagan initiated the “Just Say No” campaign, which underlined the perils of drug use (“War on Drugs”, 2017). Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which included a one-hundred-to-one sentencing ratio of powder

cocaine to crack cocaine. This structure led to a racial disparity in sentencing because Blacks are more often charged with crack cocaine offenses than Caucasians, who are usually indicted for powder cocaine possession (Beaver, 2010). Reagan capitalized on Nixon's rhetoric and transformed it to create an outright war, thinly veiled by the notion of public safety.

Considering the Democrats were defeated from 1980-1988, there was a newfound sentiment that they had to adopt a more centrist position (Beale, 2003). There was a competitive "tough on crime" environment at the time, meaning candidates had to do something big to maintain a political advantage. President Bill Clinton did just that. In 1994, Congress proposed a federal crime bill that put 100,000 police officers on the streets and 100,000 people in jail (DuVernay, 2016). Claiming that "crime [had] been a hot political issue used too often to divide us," Clinton built today's infrastructure of militarized police departments (Clinton, 1994). Clinton was also a large proponent of mandatory minimums, arguing they provided a higher level of truth and integrity in sentencing and guaranteed that criminals received the punishment they deserved (Luna & Cassell, 2010). According to Clinton, the 1994 Crime Bill responded to a feeling of insecurity among all Americans, political affiliation aside. Clinton's policies were a political force that may have alleviated people's fears about heightened drug problems, but their implications for communities of color were irrevocable. To better assess this issue, I will next explain concepts and related ideas as well as discuss existing research surrounding the War on Drugs.

Applied Concepts and Literature Review

Before one can understand the scope of the "War on Drugs" campaign, it is crucial to delineate the concepts associated with this war, including bully pulpit positioning, us vs. them

mentalities, and the prevalence of “tough on crime” ideologies. Framing public policy or societal issues under the guise of “war” is not an uncommon method. Presidents have declared “war” on many domestic issues, such as poverty, inflation, and terrorism. War parallels typically arise when the public has a sincere concern for their safety or a desire for the government to protect them against threats (Stuart, 2011, p. 37). When Americans are unnerved enough to visualize harm from an enemy, they are willing to fight or support initiatives that eliminate the problem for them (Stuart, 2011, p. 5). War tends to push an embracement of national unity (Stuart, 2011, p.5).

The rhetorical war positions drugs as being a considerable enemy to society. In Andrew B. Whitford and Jeff Yates’ book *Presidential Rhetoric and the Public Agenda: Constructing the War on Drugs*, they explain that:

Perhaps more than any other public problem, narcotics have troubled society for generations, and presidential rhetoric appreciates (and extends) this construction of threat. It does so because narcotics help define morality, and they threaten values like hard work, self-control, and stability. In sociological terms, narcotics are the core of a ‘moral panic,’ the shared perception that helps define what is deviant. (2009, p.8)

War is a symbol that connotes winners and losers, battles, and plentiful resources that can combat encompassing issues like “the drug problem.” However, the “drug problem” in America means different things to different people, allowing presidents to manipulate the polysemy of the term to create the War on Drugs.

Additional support for the potency of the word “war” is evident in Richard Weaver’s chapter on “God and Devil” terms in his 1953 book *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. Weaver delineates “god-terms” and “devil-terms,” casting connotations of good or evil upon various ideas with which they are associated (1953). This rhetorical phenomenon is not a new idea, but specific terms come and go and change over time, and their semantic investigations are valuable (Weaver,

1953). For example, current and past terms include science, fact, D.E.I., progress, American, freedom, democracy, and their opposing terms (Weaver, 1953). Opponents of liberal trends in society use words such as “political correctness,” “woke,” and “cancel culture” as current devil terms. We have had many non-militaristic wars: war on poverty, crime, drugs, terrorism, but the term has yet to be attached to more peaceful pursuits such as climate change or police brutality. One could argue that “wars” rather than “projects” or “movements,” for example, lead to prisoners, and in the case of the War on Drugs, incarcerations.

Presidents would not have supreme public influence if it were not for the manipulation of their unique position of power. Theodore Roosevelt, known by scholars as the first rhetorical executive, thought the president should be a catalyst for securing the nation's welfare and should manipulate the “bully pulpit” to move policy proposals straight to the people (Whitford & Yates, 2009, p. 13) The president operates the bully pulpit to determine how agents judge the significance of a social issue and what they can do about it (Whitford & Yates, 2009, p. 159). Building these policy measures conveys signals about the rational execution of public laws by establishing a social construction of the issue (Yates & Whitford, 2009). This technique is particularly applicable to the War on Drugs.

Researchers Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck foregrounded the essentiality of cultural values in comprehending cultural groups. Values demonstrate a collective perception of what ought to be and not necessarily what is (Martin & Nakayama, 2018). According to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, there are three potential breakdowns of human nature: basically good, a mixture of good and evil, and basically evil (Martin & Nakayama, 2018). If the United States were to view

human nature as inherently good, then our prison system would stress rehabilitation and the reduction of recidivism so that lawbreakers could rejoin and contribute to society.

Since U.S. culture insists that people carry a mixture of goodness and evil, our incarceration rates are no surprise. This value maintains that we should prioritize locking criminals up and keeping them away from the rest of society. The presidential demonization of drugs heightens the fear of “drug-ridden” communities, which “coincidentally” hold high Black populations (Drug War, 2018). This plays into the idea that Blacks are to be feared and punished so that the so-called “good” people of society don’t have to mix with the “evil” (Martin & Nakayama, 2018). Presidents strengthen their public personas by seeming to be worried for the “good” people while failing to confront the societal truths concerning drug use in the U.S.

The drug war, as a rhetorically charged phenomenon, reinforces the feeling of distrust and polarization between White people and racial minorities or “others,” positioning anyone implicated in drug operations as the antagonist of a free, American society (Lynch & Sabol, 1997). Middle-class anxieties surrounding the fine line between “us” and “them” permitted presidents like Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton to successfully hold urban minorities liable for the drug problem (Krikorian, 2001). The social atmosphere of economic insecurity and the correlated racial hostility during these eras created a welcoming reception for the War on Drugs ideologies. “Us” versus “them” mentalities are common ways of uniting some while ostracizing many (Elwood, 1995, p.103)

The grand narrative of the criminal justice system is that when someone commits a crime, they must be punished and that being “tough on crime” is the only way to impede infractions of the law (Martin & Nakayama, 2018). The “tough on crime” narrative stresses the idea that we

should fear rising crime, people make voluntary choices to carry out unlawful behavior, and police and prosecutors are experts we should trust. Public opinion polls in the U.S. during the 1990s revealed increased anxiety levels regarding crime and firm endorsement of more punitive actions (Beale, 2003). The ensuing “tough on crime” mentality meant that penalties for severe crimes required an increase due to their leniency; that the criminals victimized by the reforms were “dangerous” and minor punishments would not be successful in reducing their immoral exploits; and that mandatory prison sentences would curtail crime by discouraging offenders (Lynch & Sabol, 1997). Whitford and Yates present proof that numerous U.S. Attorneys believed that the solution to the drug problem was rehabilitation (2009). On the other hand, presidents encounter electoral pressures pushing for increased prosecution to give the impression of being tough on crime (Whitford & Yates, 2009, p.116). Presidents then employ their rhetoric to coerce prosecutors to penalize “deviant,” drug-using populations.

Not all presidents have the same view about drug use and addiction, and some in the past have denounced the demonization of users. For example, President Abraham Lincoln was an advocate for the notion that addicts aren’t experiencing moral failures by using drugs or alcohol. In Lincoln’s Address to the Washington Temperance Society on February 22, 1842, he states: “In my judgment, such of us as have never fallen victims, have been spared more from the absence of appetite, than from any mental or moral superiority over those who have” (Abraham Lincoln on Alcoholism, n.d.). Lincoln explains that a nation where alcoholics are demonized breeds the feelings of isolation and stress that often form the root of dependency. He continues by saying: “Another error, as it seems to me, into which the old reformers fell, was the position that all habitual drunkards were utterly incorrigible, and therefore must be turned adrift and damned

without remedy” (Abraham Lincoln on Alcoholism, n.d.). He is advocating for a more remedial reaction, one that has been absent in the current drug war. Lincoln would likely agree with the irony of the War on Drugs, in that it is not a war on addiction including alcohol, which is America's legal drug of choice. Presidents have the power to use their voice to shift perspectives and a “tough on crime” agenda is not always completely necessary. To further understand this issue, it is important to review the rhetorical scholarship on the War on Drugs.

Presidential rhetoric, especially surrounding the War on Drugs has received significant scholarly attention. Many sources account for different aspects of the issue. In *Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure*, author Dan Baum (1996) exposes the War on Drugs’ ineffectiveness and stresses that the transition from identifying drug abuse as a health issue to drug abuse as a moral problem has triggered major injustices. By outlining policies through Nixon, Reagan, and Bush’s administrations, Baum exemplifies how drug arrests yield more police department funding and disenfranchise minorities. Baum has some quotes and statistics that prove how significant of an issue the drug war is and how powerful presidential rhetoric can be:

After three decades of increasingly punitive policies, illicit drugs are more easily available, drug potencies are greater, drug killings are more common, and drug barons are richer than ever. The War on Drugs costs Washington more than the Commerce, Interior, and State departments combined. . . . What began as a flourish of campaign rhetoric in 1968 has grown into a monster. And while nobody claims that the War on Drugs is a success, nobody suggests an alternative. Because to do so, is political suicide. (1996)

This powerful quote underscores the numerous systemic faults that exist within government budgets, selfish motivations, and an untouchable institution.

Kenneth Burke is the leading rhetorical theorist of the Twentieth Century, creating work that has impacted scholars for decades. In his book, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke discusses the notion of identification and contemplates the manner in which people are in conflict with one another, or identify with groups at cross purposes (Burke, 1969, p.22). Burke frames his idea of identification in his discussion of division in the form of war:

To begin with “identification” is, by the same token, though roundabout, to confront the implications of *division*. And so, in the end, men are brought to that most tragically ironic of all divisions, or conflicts, wherein millions of cooperative acts go into the preparation for one single destructive act. We refer to that ultimate *disease* of cooperation: *war*. (1969, p.22)

The War on Drugs has been framed as a series of cooperative acts to combat the destructive act of taking or distributing drugs. However, Burke may agree that war, being the “ultimate disease of cooperation,” can only produce divisive effects, rather than the sense of unity and purity that its supporters preach. The “vast network of interlocking operations” has to be “directed communally” for an effective destruction to arise (Burke, 1969, p.22). This means that presidents have to have cooperation in the War on Drugs to yield the destruction that they desire. If people were not divided, there would be no need for a rhetorician, in this case, the president, to declare their unity (Burke, 1969, p.22). Presidents benefit from division under the guise that their policies will bring people together and ostracize those that do not “deserve” to be unified. Shaping policies and public opinion to create the need for a tragically ironic rhetorical war benefits the president's political advancements and their need for partisanship.

In a 2009 study by researchers Jeff Yates and Andrew Whitford, they set out to see if presidential rhetoric had a disproportionate effect on “target populations” in the context of the War on Drugs. As anticipated, their study found that enforcement presence increases when the

president discusses the War on Drugs and decreases when the president focuses on less targeted policies (Yates & Whitford, 2009). However, the “magnitude of the coefficient [was] larger for Black arrests than for White arrests” (Yates & Whitford, 2009). This finding indicates disparate victimization for drug arrests and corroborates Yates and Whitford’s argument that the ramifications of presidential rhetoric fall excessively on “targeted” (predominately Black) populations (Yates & Whitford, 2009). When the president utilizes the bully pulpit and takes advantage of executive power, they control how public agents discern the significance of a social issue and what power they have over it. Next, the rhetorical artifacts of the War on Drugs and related presidential rhetoric will be analyzed through my research and subsequent interpretations.

Artifact Analysis and Interpretation

Power is often wielded without any semblance of duplicity. The president distinguishes a situation as a “crisis,” summons the forces, and implores Americans to unify behind the movement (Lee & Blood, 2016, p. 217). Those who hold the authority to determine the conditions of a controversy possess a prodigious rhetorical advantage (Lee & Blood, 2016, p. 218). The drug problem is manipulated through moral discourse and plays into cultural and racial power dynamics. There are policies, like the powder cocaine to crack cocaine discrepancies, that prioritize different types of drug users. As an emotive term, crack has more potency than the word cocaine, making it evident that public perceptions of certain terms can be changed through rhetoric. It is commonly known that presidents have to have a religious and moral strain present in their campaign to appeal to large groups of voters and provide a sense of comfort that the person leading the country has an element of superiority and theological conscience. A primary

interest of politicians is to be reelected, so they will rhetorically do anything to keep themselves in office.

To completely understand the issue, it is crucial to analyze a specific speech from one of the most influential characters in this rhetorical war. Reagan's 1986 Address to the Nation on the Campaign Against Drug Abuse is a prime example of how presidents "'invent' or define an issue, the possible resolutions to that issue, and the framework to perceive that issue and its resolutions" (Elwood, 1995). It is also useful to examine this speech through a Burkean lens, an aforementioned famous rhetorician.

In 1951, Kenneth Burke observed that "rhetoric can work toward the promotion of "'identification,' which can include a partially unconscious factor in appeal" (Burke, 1969, p.20). For example, Reagan uses symbols connotated with family, danger, and patriotism, among others. Upon introducing these symbols, a listener or reader may recognize the distinctions of threat, familial protection, and freedom consciously or unconsciously. The speech begins by creating a sense of familiarity, concern, and an attempt at relatability:

Nancy and I are here in the West Hall of the White House, and around us are the rooms in which we live. It's the home you've provided for us, of which we merely have temporary custody...And we speak to you not simply as fellow citizens but as fellow parents and grandparents and as concerned neighbors. (Reagan, 1984)

Reagan establishes the location of the speech delivery to show that though Nancy and him are sitting in the esteemed White House, they refer to it as a home and give credit to the people that voted for them. The notion of "temporary custody" alludes to the idea that though their stay is provisional, they intend to make great change in the programs they later delineate.

Characterizing themselves as citizens, parents, grandparents, and concerned neighbors makes them appear more grounded and relatable, even if *their* neighbors are not the ones they are

claiming to be concerned about. These symbols that Reagan implicates arouse the sense of emotion that Burke talks about and pull the listener into caring about and believing what Reagan communicates.

Continuing with Reagan's drug address, Nancy Reagan's rhetoric also creates powerful effects related to Burkean themes. Nancy states:

Many of you may be thinking: 'Well, drugs don't concern me.' But it does concern you. It concerns us all because of the way it tears at our lives and because it's aimed at destroying the brightness and life of the sons and daughters of the United States. (Reagan, 1964)

Nancy's language choice creates a sense of social cohesion that suggests that drugs involve everyone and no one is exempt from their implications. Explaining how drugs tear at people's lives and bringing it back to the children theme, she frequently uses "clouds the vision" for anyone that has a child or thinks of drugs in a youth-destructing way. Nancy, as Burke suggests, "[justifies]...inclinations toward conflict, war, and destruction" by pairing both a patriotic and threatening theme, pushing people to support the War on Drugs. Mrs. Reagan urged people to welcome this metaphorical war and simultaneously justified that her efforts were in the name of "cooperation, peace and survival" for all Americans.

The First Lady continues with her symbolic language by the identification of American ideographs and metaphors. She stresses that:

Drugs steal away so much. They take and take, until finally every time a drug goes into a child, something else is forced out-- like love and hope and trust and confidence. Drugs take away the dream from every child's heart and replace it with a nightmare, and it's time we in America stand up and replace those dreams. (Reagan, 1964)

The comparison of drugs to a thief and the allusion to the precious American Dream combine to create a sense of fear and anger. There is a connection between drug use, the American Dream,

and what it means to “be an American.” Reagan's rhetoric suggests that “you are not an American if you use drugs.” Burke explains that “in the process of completing the association, the differences are discarded and the likenesses emphasized...the metaphor ‘brings out the thisness of that, or the thatness of this’” (Anderson et al., 2016, p.99). Reagan emphasizes the likeness of drugs with stealing and nightmares, juxtaposes them with love, hope, trust, and confidence, and regards them as responsible for capturing children’s dreams. Nancy’s string of associations are effective in comparing drugs with everything that is wrong in the world and suggests that if you are not a part of the “we” in America that is taking a stand, then you effectively support the nightmarish, dream-crushing nature of drugs.

In Reagan’s 1986 drug abuse address, he explains that his “generation will remember how America swung into action when [they] were attacked in World War II.” He continues by saying, “Well now we're in another war for our freedom, and it's time for all of us to pull together again...It's time, as Nancy said, for America to ‘just say no’ to drugs” (Elwood, 1995). The allusion to World War II, a time when Americans won together and felt united as a country, is an example of one of Reagan’s beloved appeals to nostalgia. Though drugs have always been used and were used in WWII, there is an assumption in his message that Americans were focused on fighting together, and that they had no time for drugs in their recreational form. Now, the country is being attacked by a non-living entity and people must swing into action once again. Nostalgia is a powerful tool and, as we know, “Make America Great Again” -style rhetoric is surprisingly effective. The idea that drugs are threatening America's freedom is questionable but fitting for Reagan’s typical patriotic style.

The Just Say No program is a simplified explanation of a complex drug problem. Ronald and Nancy's "just say no" rhetoric implies that excluding oneself from drug relations is as simple as a White, middle-class student denying a cigarette at a party. The Just Say No campaign has an undertone of privilege that suggests that a certain group of people may be happy that the "underside" was taking drugs because it prevented them from advancing in society and joining their elite group. The campaign neglects the social-economic parameters that so often force underprivileged populations into dangerous but proximal drug-related encounters. Framing drug use as a momentary choice plays into the "us" versus "them" narrative that casts unruly others as criminals who did not have the self-control and guidance to "just say no."

President Reagan concludes his Address to the Nation by establishing himself as a heroic protagonist that treats drugs as completely anti-American. In this impassioned speech he claims:

Drug abuse is a repudiation of everything America is. The destructiveness and human wreckage mock our heritage. Think for a moment how special it is to be an American...As we mobilize for this national crusade, I'm mindful that drugs are a constant temptation for millions. Please remember this when your courage is tested: You are Americans. You're the product of the freest society mankind has ever known. No one, ever, has the right to destroy your dreams and shatter your life. (Reagan, 1964)

While it is fair to claim that this is hyperbolic and dramatic, there is no denying that Reagan is establishing himself as a leader that is willing to fight for America's supremacy. All presidents are actors in their roles as president. Burke considered rhetoric as "symbolic action." The militant use of "mobilize," and "national crusade" suggest that America is facing a metaphorical war against an inanimate being threatening to kill them all and take away what they have fought so hard for.

At the beginning of the speech, Reagan attempts to assert himself as a common protagonist sitting on his couch, just like the people watching at home. He reminds them that ultimately he is a father, grandfather, and an everyday citizen, just like them. However, as the speech proceeds, Reagan's ethos switches into a more heroic manner as he shows how passionate he is individually about this issue and how he will use his power to mobilize the rest of the country. By stressing that he is "mindful that drugs are a temptation for millions," he sets himself apart from these millions and contends that he has never surrendered to this form of "human wreckage." The function of this narrative is clearly to inspire measurable action, making it appropriate for Reagan to serve as a heroic protagonist. Nancy Reagan, on the other hand, wants to invoke sympathy and understanding as she manipulates the children theme and establishes herself as an "ordinary people like us" protagonist. After all, if Nancy and Ronald are the protagonists, then drugs must be the antagonist. The combination of these two characters served to create a narrative that left a bipartisan impact on the American people and united the country in furthering the War on Drugs.

Ultimately, the U.S. will never "win" a war on drugs as they did in World War II because narcotics will never be coerced into wholehearted surrender (Henry & Burkholder, 2016, p. 110). Declaring "war" on drugs as Nixon, Reagan, Bush, and many other presidents have done may create a fleeting rhetorical triumph in the shape of public approval for their policies, but will result in a longing for outcomes that will never come to fruition (Henry & Burkholder, 2016, p. 110). If presidents framed the drug problem as an issue of addiction and adopted health-related terms, perhaps enough empathy would arise for public support of more rehabilitative treatment programs. However, the social atmosphere that existed during these sequences of presidents

pushed them to believe that a “tough on crime” approach was the only solution. Reagan’s rhetoric contains frequent use of American ideologies, as do many other presidential speeches. An ideological critique of this rhetoric is important in understanding how presidents are effective in public persuasion using their patriotic speeches.

America is founded on a series of ideographs. The core purpose of an ideograph is to justify the exertion of power (Lee & Blood, 2016, p. 222). In this sense, “taking or not taking action is justified in the name of ideographs” (Lee & Blood, 2016, p. 222). Many ideographs, like equality, liberty, and freedom, are favorable, and actions that can be rationalized by positive ideographs are widely accepted (Lee & Blood, 2016, p.222). Americans, in particular, comprehend certain ideographs by their relation to others. For example, freedom is perceived in connection to responsibility, order, and the rule of law (Lee, 2016, p. 296). This means that when drugs are painted as a rampant danger plaguing the streets of America, they are in opposition to key patriotic ideologies, crystallized in ideographs like “law and order.” Therefore, the public is quick to support any behavior that bolsters the preservation of freedom and its relationship with law and order.

In his “Remarks on Signing the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994,” President Clinton declared, “My fellow Americans, this is about freedom. Without responsibility, without order, without lawfulness, there is no freedom. Today the will of the American people has triumphed over a generation of division and paralysis.” Freedom and lawfulness are oxymoronic in many ways, but they are so intertwined in American ideologies that the public supports their attachment. The pairing of these key American ideographs and their juxtaposition with negative ones, like division, creates a veil of unity, one that would be broken

by the 1994 Crime Bill's consequences. During Clinton's two-term presidency, the collective population of state and federal prisons climbed by 673,000 inmates (Krikorian, 2001). This was a greater increase than any other president, including Nixon, Reagan, and Bush. Clinton used his powerful presidential rhetoric to call the nation to support his policies created to "decrease division." His "tough on crime" attitude may have won him the presidency, but his agenda put hundreds of thousands of Americans in jail – all in the name of "freedom." Finally, it is important to discuss the implications of this rhetoric and government policies, while examining related issues.

Implications/Epilogue

Throughout this paper, I have argued that presidents throughout recent American history have wielded their rhetorical power to construct and sustain the War on Drugs by framing drug use as a threat to American ideologies, manipulating the war metaphor, and imploring Americans to reject and punish deviant populations. In conjunction with the maxim that "no politician has ever seen [their] approval ratings decline by being tough on drugs," numerous administrations maintained and expanded these strict penal policies (Stuart, 2011, pp. 11-12). From its conception, the War was distorted as an "us-versus-them" phenomenon. The targets altered throughout, but the true motivation prevailed. Presidents were impressively and repeatedly victorious at promoting the War on Drugs as an "us-versus-them" proposal, failing to disclose that "us" had the same drug problems as "them."

Reagan's campaign poses the question of what kind of drug users we support. There exists a sense of pity for White, upper-middle-class drug addicts who receive costly rehab help. We are subconsciously taught to condemn the poorer drug users, perpetuating the idea that some

kind of drug addiction is acceptable and some is not. There is a distinct lack of human kindness when we blame the user whose life circumstances have led them to this point. When the victim of the drug abuse is someone we can sympathize with, we can more easily blame the drug companies or the situations that led them to turn to drugs. Drugs also help cement a permanent underclass of Americans. For rich White people, drug addiction is a medical problem, while for non-White, poor people, it is represented as a moral problem. There are many ways to fight drugs other than through temperance. By focusing solely on the initial decision to say yes or no to drugs, it neglects forms of rehabilitation that could support those that could not or did not “just say no.” However, presidents know that they can capture the people’s votes by framing some people as morally defective so that their richer, Whiter constituents feel better about their situations and can shift blame onto an imperfect “other.”

Today we recognize the consequences of rhetorical missteps. Black people constitute 13 percent of the U.S. population and are recorded regularly by the U.S. government to use drugs at comparable proportions to people of other races (Drug War, 2018). However, Black people make up 30 percent of arrests for drug law infractions and almost 40 percent of those incarcerated in federal or state prisons for drug-related crimes (Drug War, 2018). At the end of 2018, the Black incarceration rate was almost twice the rate of Latinos and more than five times the rate of White people.

The War on Drugs is still running rampant in the streets, but it is starting to take a different form. The Opioid Crisis has brought up the issue of who is to blame for this dangerous epidemic. Are drug corporations, doctors, and pharmaceutical firms fueling peoples’ drug addictions, or are drug addicts hooked on oxycodone as much to blame as those abusing heroin?

Opioids have been framed with the word “epidemic,” indicating a health-related, widespread issue, contrasting with the “war” on illicit drugs, targeted at specific populations. The U.S. is seen as the victim of drugs, and while non-White drug users are victims, they are also viewed as victimizers in the sense that they are uniquely responsible for the drug “epidemic.” White drug users are largely represented as victims especially in the case of prescription medications where prescribing physicians and pharmaceutical companies are held responsible. While Black citizens and other non-Whites can only redeem themselves by going to prison, White Americans seek redemption by apologizing for their addictions and going to rehab centers, which they rationalize as a response to the stresses of life.

Many corporations and “Big Pharma” are being held accountable for opioid addiction, not the user. This poses the question of why opioid addicts, or the so-called “everyday user,” are not receiving the same blame as those using drugs like marijuana. If the user is the problem, we must examine what rhetoric has been used comparatively in these issues to expose the contrasting condemnation. The issue is reminiscent of the prostitute and the John; are both equally culpable, or do the buyer and seller have different levels of liability? It will be interesting to observe how the Opioid Epidemic is treated in the future and whether presidential rhetoric will influence public perception and policy.

Domestic policy chief John Ehrlichman was not shy in revealing Nixon’s true intentions for the drug war, listing his enemies as Black people, the political left, and hippies (“War on Drugs”, 2017). Other presidents claimed that their war declarations and policies were designed for the good of the American people and hid their targets more closely. However, the effects of presidential rhetoric on target populations cannot go unnoticed. Our societal propensity to

welcome war as the resolution to a social policy and disregard the moral and social consequences yielded by such a proposal needs to be addressed. I argue that presidents capitalize on their bully pulpit position to victimize marginalized populations through moral pretenses and appeals to nostalgia, protection, and the American Dream. Furthering us vs. them and tough on crime ideologies using appeals to tradition and utilizing the “war” metaphor has collectively substantiated the War on Drugs and ensured that it will continue with future presidents. On no occasion will presidents obtain full compliance through their public rhetoric, but the messages they convey unquestionably impact populations across the nation, and their political progress in the War on Drugs is tangible and consequential.

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