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Presidential Rhetoric and the Racialization of the War on Drugs

Introduction

The issue of drug use has spanned American history, but became increasingly prominent in our nation's politics during the last three decades of the twentieth century. In a 1971 presidential speech, Richard Nixon declared drug abuse "public enemy number one," thus informally initiating the War on Drugs. This "war" involves strict enforcement policies, elevated sentencing laws, and educational campaigns that targeted drug use in American citizens. These policies do not always translate effectively into practice, however. In fact, these policies and legislative actions have created devastating social consequences for certain groups. As a result of the War on Drugs, the United States prison population exploded from 300,000 to 2 million in less than thirty years (Alexander 6). While this makes sense considering the criminal legislation passed, the laws do not explain why such a large portion of this prison population is composed of racial or ethnic minorities.

Though people of all ethnicities use and sell drugs at similar rates, some states imprison black men for drug charges at twenty to fifty times the rate of white offenders (Alexander 7). The severity of this racial disparity in drug sentencing suggests that forces outside the law are acting on minorities in our country. To examine this ominous inequality in criminal justice, the words

of the nation's spokesmen may offer some answers. Presidential speeches, from Nixon to Reagan to George H.W. Bush, suggest that certain administrations direct their policies toward specific drugs – like crack – and therefore specific demographics. The War on Drugs fosters a system of criminal justice that disproportionately imprisons and disrupts the lives of racial minorities behind a thin veneer of colorblind drug policy.

Review of the Literature

Scholars and laymen alike have begun to pay more attention to the increasingly disturbing state of criminal justice in the United States. Legal scholar and civil rights lawyer Michelle Alexander writes for the general public in her book *The New Jim Crow*, which illustrates the ways the criminal justice system currently serves as a system of institutionalized pseudo-slavery, reinforcing a “racial undercaste” through the incarceration of young black men. While this work highlights the stark racial underpinnings of American drug policy, it does not directly address presidential discourse and how it may affect the public attitude toward drug use.

The topic of the racial framing of drug epidemics is explored in a scholarly article by Rebecca Tiger, titled "Race, Class, and the Framing of Drug Epidemics: Understanding People in their Social Worlds Understanding People in their Social Worlds." The article analyzes the framing of America's opioid epidemic and what it says about the role of race in criminal punishment. The author discusses the “treatment not punishment” movement surrounding opioid use and how it contributes to a massively racist system of national drug policy. Another scholarly analysis of race and drugs comes from Jeanette Covington, who penned “The Social Construction of the Minority Drug Problem,” an article examining the difference in framing drug use between white and black youth.

Rhetoric in the context of the presidency is more clearly addressed in an article penned by Andrew B. Whitford and Jeff Yates, “Policy Signals and Executive Governance: Presidential Rhetoric in the War on Drugs.” This work utilizes the War on Drugs as a case study to examine the relationship between presidential speech and the policy agendas of middling institutions like the Drug Enforcement Administration. This article provides data and detailed analysis on the interactions between presidential proclamations and the sociopolitical realities of drug enforcement. However, the study neglects a discussion of racialized motivations behind its policy analysis. What has yet to be done is establish a connection between the racial foundations of the War on Drugs and presidential discourse. Analyzing the rhetoric of speeches from the bully pulpit may shed light onto how presidents frame issues for audiences and how these agendas are enforced in the racial reality of our criminal justice system.

Methodology

Analyzing the War on Drugs within presidential rhetoric requires a narrow examination of discourse. Which drugs are being targeted in these speeches and who uses these drugs? Who uses the drugs that are left out of anti-drug policies and decriminalized? These questions may address the racial disparity in American drug sentencing. This paper seeks to answer these questions through a study of presidential speeches and discourse analysis of government documents regarding drug control, focusing on symbols and metaphors. The analysis begins with Richard Nixon and his declaration of drug abuse as “public enemy number one,” then advancing to Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush’s speeches on national drug control strategy. In these analyses, I focus on the presidents’ employment of symbols, their framing of the issue of drug policy, their approaches to criminal enforcement, and the groups they blame. While this methodology may yield profound insights, there is still a restricted ability to directly measure the

impact that presidential discourse has on audiences; analysis is limited to how leaders frame issues for audiences.

Another component of this discourse analysis is applying the research to the theoretical frameworks proposed by Murray Edelman in *Symbolic Use of Politics*. In this work, Edelman explores the shifting dynamics between language, symbolization, the mass public, and various political processes. He takes careful note of the way condensation symbols influence the political arena, offering this definition: “They condense into one symbol event sign, or act patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, promises of future greatness” (Edelman, 6). In short, condensation symbols condense complex and remote situations into easily digestible signals that audiences can comprehend. Edelman’s theoretical frameworks offer a foundation for a discourse analysis of presidential speeches, especially taking into consideration his theories of symbolic leadership: “Practically every political act that is controversial or regarded as really important is bound to serve in part as a condensation symbol. It evokes a quiescent or aroused mass response because it symbolizes a threat or reassurance” (Edelman, 7). The concept of threat and reassurance – which I apply throughout the paper to specific examples of presidential rhetoric – provides an essential basis for analyzing the discourse of the War on Drugs’ most prominent political actors.

Richard Nixon

The first president to direct national attention to the issue of drug abuse was Richard Nixon. On June 17, 1971, Nixon delivered an address to the nation declaring drug abuse “public enemy number one.” While this speech was largely rhetorical and did not announce any major policy shifts or legislative changes, Nixon’s employment of political symbols and metaphors established a certain construction of the issue that left a lasting impact on national drug policy.

While speeches may appear to be simple political acts on the surface, rhetoric has deep-seated effects in the arena of politics. According to Mark Thompson, author of *Enough Said: What's Gone Wrong with the Language of Politics?*, “Rhetoric performs a vital role in an open society – which is to provide a bridge between the professionals, the political leaders, the civil servants, and the experts, and the public. It is through an effective public language that citizens can both understand and contribute to important questions and issues of the state” (Thompson, 23). The value of rhetoric in politics highlighted here speaks volumes of the strategies employed by Nixon in his discourse on drugs.

In his 1971 speech, Nixon repeatedly uses symbols to reinforce government authority in the eyes of the American public; his rhetoric legitimizes both his own leadership, as well as the power of other government institutions. To explain, I turn to an excerpt from his speech, elaborating on the duties of a newly appointed official:

With regard to this offensive, it is necessary first to have a new organization, and the new organization will be within the White House. Dr. Jaffe, who will be one of the briefers here today, will be the man directly responsible. He will report directly to me, and he will have the responsibility to take all of the Government agencies, nine, that deal with the problems of rehabilitation, in which his primary responsibilities will be research and education, and see that they work not at cross-purposes, but work together in dealing with the problem. (Nixon)

The language this president utilizes evidently displaces authority onto himself and onto other government institutions. He displaces legitimacy onto this expert, and as a consequence bolsters the legitimacy of the government in general. Moreover, the phrase “report directly to me” further elevates the authority of the president as a symbol. Here, Nixon calms the audience’s anxieties by reassuring them that the government has taken action to solve a threat. This excerpt embodies the reassurance portion of the dichotomy outlined by Murray Edelman. According to him,

“When an individual is recognized as a legitimate leading official of the state, he becomes a symbol of some or all of the aspects of the state: its capacity for benefiting and hurting, for threatening and reassuring” (Edelman, 73). The dichotomy between threat and reassurance insinuates that the reassurance for one group means a threat for another and vice versa; I argue that this binary appears repeatedly throughout American presidential discourse and is a cornerstone for justifying the War on Drugs.

Nixon continues to frame drug abuse as a threat throughout this particular speech:

Fundamentally, it is essential for the American people to be alerted to this danger, to recognize that it is a danger that will not pass with the passing of the war in Vietnam which has brought to our attention the fact that a number of young Americans have become addicts as they serve abroad, whether in Vietnam, or Europe, or other places. Because the problem existed before we became involved in Vietnam; it will continue to exist afterwards. That is why this offensive deals with the problem there, in Europe, but will then go on to deal with the problem throughout America. (Nixon)

The language of “danger” and “offensive” repeatedly characterizes this issue of drug abuse as adversative and antagonistic. Drug abuse *is* danger. Nixon consistently frames this new initiative as an “offensive,” which carries connotations of violence and implies the presence of an enemy. The important question to ask, one that is neglected in the context of Nixon’s highly symbolic speech patterns, is who is on the receiving end of this “offensive.” While Nixon’s speech was vague in terms of what this new anti-drug initiative actually consists of, one of his later presidential successors, Ronald Reagan, provided a much more solid vision of what – or who – would be targeted by the efforts of the government.

Ronald Reagan

While Richard Nixon's time in office was dominated by other cultural phenomena such as civil rights movements and controversy over the Vietnam War, Ronald Reagan's leadership was characterized largely by anti-drug campaigns like D.A.R.E. and "Just Say No." On September 14, 1986, he delivered an address to the nation formally announcing his new campaign against drug abuse. He first highlights the government's success in reducing supply and usage of marijuana. He is careful to mention that the Drug Enforcement Administration convicted 10,000 marijuana users in the previous year alone and he assures the audience that he will be tripling drug enforcement efforts in the year to come.

Here, we again see how critical threat and reassurance are to the symbolic legitimization of presidential leadership. He repeatedly uses reassuring phrases that insinuate protection from some distant and remote threat: "We can defeat this enemy" and "We've taken strong steps to do something about this horror." But who is the enemy? What is the "horror" that Reagan refers to? He never explicitly links his statements to a concrete entity, but loosely slips in and out of references to amplify the remoteness of this so-called enemy.

In this speech, Reagan makes no explicit references to racial groups, only highly suggestive and racialized language. According to Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, Reagan demonstrated mastery in excluding racial language from his rhetoric, while still implicitly exploiting the effects of racial hostilities in contemporary America: "To great effect, Reagan echoed white frustration in race-neutral terms through implicit racial appeals" (Alexander, 48). An example of Reagan's implicit racial references is his fixation on crack: "Today there's a new epidemic: smokable cocaine, otherwise known as crack. It is an explosively destructive and often lethal substance which is crushing its users. It is an uncontrolled fire." Here, he pathologizes drug users in a sociopolitical context. His choice of the

word “epidemic” carries ominous and infectious connotations, something inescapable and threatening. “Epidemic” implies that those who carry this “disease” are “infected.” Moreover, his selection of smokable cocaine as a target of his initiatives speaks volumes about the racist underpinnings of his campaign choices; the relative risks and the legal classification of freebase cocaine are identical to that of smokable cocaine. The only difference in the social realities of the two drugs lies in who uses them – powder cocaine is used predominantly by whites, while crack is used by people of color and is largely concentrated in lower-income, urban neighborhoods.

In Rebecca Tiger’s article “Race, Class, and the Framing of Drug Epidemics: Understanding People in their Social Worlds Understanding People in their Social Worlds,” she addresses the framing of crack use as an “epidemic,” which continued long after Reagan’s speech: “The ‘crack epidemic’ of the 1980s is a stark example of the way the fear of drugs was used to justify increased criminalized repression of people of color” (Tiger). According to her, crack cocaine was coded as “Black,” while powder cocaine was coded as “White.” This division has contributed to a drastic sentencing disparity that reinforces the contemporary plight of mass incarceration of black men.

In his speech, President Reagan also explicitly requests for the public to take action. In some instances it was pleading for communities to educate their children on the dangers of drug use, but in one instance, it was a direct request for a shift in national attitude:

Your government will continue to act aggressively, but nothing would be more effective than for Americans simply to quit using illegal drugs. We seek to create a massive change in national attitudes which ultimately will separate the drugs from the customer, to take the user away from the supply. I believe, quite simply, that we can help them quit, and that's where you come in. (Reagan)

Here, the president explicitly requests the mass public to shift their attitudes around drug policy. He also emphasizes the fact that the government is already acting “aggressively.” According to Edelman, a critical point in leadership is the assumption of responsibility; to him, it is essential in front of an audience who is always aware the world is in perpetual flux and instability (79). Reagan’s insistence on the government’s aggressive actions serves to reassure the public that a larger institution is guarding them from the uncertain threat of drug users.

This excerpt from Reagan’s speech also fabricates a system of blame and identifies a scapegoat. Who is responsible for this “national crisis” in the first place? According to Reagan, it is the drug users. Edelman’s theories about the relationship between audience and political actor suggests that this act creates a safety valve for public dissent. During a time of public unrest, identification of a scapegoat provides a channel to vent mass anxiety, regardless of whether or not the target is responsible for any unrest: “The political realm, unlike work and church, is always available for evocative use as masses need to use it” (184). Reagan asserts that the solution to the problem is solving the moral weakness of the drug user, even though blaming the user misaligns with our contemporary, medical understanding of addiction and substance abuse.

Reagan employs a variety of symbols to aid him in framing drug users as the enemy. He calls upon historical American values to root his assaults in some form of morality. Reagan’s rhetoric largely depends on notions of liberty, hope, freedom, and promise to anchor his arguments, even if these themes have little relevance to the sociopolitical issue at hand:

In this crusade, let us not forget who we are. 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. Can we doubt that only a divine providence placed this land, this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all those people on the world who yearn to breathe free? The revolution out of which our liberty

was conceived signaled an historical call to an entire world seeking hope. Each new arrival of immigrants rode the crest of that hope. They came, millions seeking a safe harbor from the oppression of cruel regimes. They came, to escape starvation and disease. They came, those surviving the Holocaust and the Soviet gulags. They came, the boat people, chancing death for even a glimmer of hope that they could have a new life. They all came to taste the air redolent and rich with the freedom that is ours. What an insult it will be to what we are and whence we came if we do not rise up together in defiance against this cancer of drugs.

(Reagan)

This excerpt demonstrates a subtle yet powerful dynamic underpinning the entirety of Reagan's speech – the balance between the dominant group and the “others.” He not only refers to his new initiative as a “crusade,” but also explicitly positions drug users in the hierarchy of American society: “Drug abuse is a repudiation of everything American is.” Here, Reagan unequivocally positions drug users as the enemy of the American public. To Michelle Alexander, Reagan ultimately fulfills his promises of “cracking down” to the American people: “By waging a war on drug users and dealers, Reagan made good on his promise to crack down on the racially defined “others” – the undeserving” (Alexander, 49). While politics has always traditionally depended on the tension between group interests, this particular form of discourse involves much more than just this tension; it serves to divide populations and brand the impoverished black crack addict as the enemy.

This excerpt also pathologizes the existence of drug users; he refers to addiction as a kind of “cancer.” His references to the American dream and his glorification of immigration also connote the nation's ethnic history. These concepts inherently establish an association between moral strength and freedom from oppression. His words imply that the existence of drug users threatens the existence of all Americans. Here, he utilizes the “us/them” dichotomy to separate the users from the workers, the diseased from the pure, the criminal from the morally straight.

Reagan notes that drug abuse is a “repudiation of everything America is.” This quite literally separates the drug user from the rest of the nation, forever branding them as “other.”

George H.W. Bush

On September 6, 1989, President George H.W. Bush formally announced his administration’s new national drug control strategy. According to Bush, the “gravest domestic threat facing our nation today is drugs.” But for Bush, there was one drug in particular that dominated in terms of danger: “Our most serious problem today is cocaine, and in particular, crack. Who's responsible? - Let me tell you straight out. Everyone who uses drugs.” Here, Bush takes a step beyond Nixon and Reagan. While they shifted blame onto drug addicts in more subtle ways, Bush explicitly identifies drug users – specifically, crack users – as the cause for the deterioration of the nation.

President Bush also announces sweeping criminal justice policy reform: “I am also proposing that we enlarge our criminal justice system across the board - at the local, state and Federal levels alike. We need more prisons, more jails, more courts, more prosecutors.” This demonstrates the nature government’s response to drug use; the administration seeks to enhance punishment rather than supply social support. Perhaps Bush’s most damning statement is directed at the poor:

And while illegal drug use is found in ever community, nowhere is it worse than in our public housing projects. You know, the poor have never had it easy in this world. But in the past, they weren't mugged on the way home from work by crack gangs. And their children didn't have to dodge bullets on the way to school. That is why I'm targeting \$50 million to fight crime in public housing projects - to help restore order, and to kick out the dealers for good. (Bush)

Here, the president identifies a clear and unmistakable scapegoat for the plague of drug abuse in American society: the urban poor. It's not all poor people who are to blame, however. Bush is careful to argue that the national crisis comes from public housing projects. These references carry distinct racial undertones, especially with his blaming of the "crack gangs." He makes no mention of powder cocaine users, which we know are predominantly white. He instead focuses on the drug of choice for poor, urban, black communities. Bush goes a step further than blaming poor blacks for the moral deterioration of America. He offers \$50 million to police public housing projects. This leaves little room for the imagination when wondering why blacks are imprisoned so much more frequently than whites, despite the fact that all races use drugs at the same rate.

Overall, Bush's rhetoric employs aggressive and even violent language to frame the issue of drug use for America. He states that "drug kingpins" will receive the death penalty, quite literally threatening to remove the deviant people not only from active society but also the face of the earth. Bush also brags that he will fund the construction of 24,000 spaces for prison inmates, providing a stark image for just exactly how racial-based social control manifests itself in government institutions. His explicit targeting of poor, black communities may explain the pervasive racism ingrained in the criminal justice system today.

Conclusions

Ultimately, presidential rhetoric surrounding national drug control strategy involves highly symbolic messages and metaphors to communicate implicit messages. The theoretical framework proposed by Murray Edelman in *Symbolic Use of Politics* suggests that highly publicized speeches like the ones examined in this paper have profound influences on the audience; formal political acts reinforce the legitimacy and authority of the actor or institution

(Edelman, 190). The traditional understanding of politics views it as the process of how the people get what they want from government, but analyzing these presidential speeches suggests a contrasting view. Political acts influence and mold what men know and desire in politics, rather than the other way around (Edelman, 172). The discourse of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan's famed speeches both employ political symbols to confer authority and legitimacy onto their administrations, though in different ways. Richard Nixon – who has historically made no effort to disguise his distrust of certain racial groups – named drug abuse “public enemy number one” in 1971. This was the first public identification of drug users as an enemy of the state and was done so on the national stage.

Ronald Reagan intensifies and enhances the messages first purported by Nixon in his speech. Though he never uses explicit racial terminology, Reagan employs political symbols that convey underlying messages of division and ethnic otherness by criminally targeting drugs that are predominantly used by specific ethnic groups. He cites public health and crime control as his concern, but his laws cannot explain his disproportionate hostility toward crack cocaine users in comparison to freebase cocaine users. Reagan's framing of the issue of drug abuse focuses overwhelmingly on what he calls the “crack epidemic,” and completely neglects the drugs that are abused predominantly by whites, like powder cocaine or opioids. The racialization of crack continues in the speech by George H.W. Bush, who insists that crack users are responsible for the deterioration of America. His policies targeted crack users exclusively, as well as public housing projects, known to be populated densely by low-income African Americans.

Research in the fields of cognitive and social psychology suggest that the construction of the drug war on the part of political and media elites has resulted in a conflation of “blackness” with drug crime in the public eye (Alexander, 107). According to Michelle Alexander, “The

conflation of blackness with crime did not happen organically; rather, it was constructed by political and media elites as part of the broad project known as the War on Drugs...a legitimate outlet to the expression of antiblack resentment and animus” (Alexander, 199). Here, we see how powerful the association between drug crime and ethnic groups can be; as we know from Edelman, mass publics respond to political symbols rather than facts (Edelman, 172). The disproportionate mass incarceration of minority groups cannot be explained by the law or statistics; white people compose the overwhelming majority of both drug users and suppliers (Alexander, 99). The startling cycle of exclusion of black men from society is better explained by the political attitudes and discourse of the drug war. Though the experience of politics is always mediated by language, the millions of incarcerated individuals experience politics firsthand from behind the bars of prison cells.

The sociopolitical implications of presidential drug war discourse are far-reaching. The racial caste system imposed by mass incarceration is not limited to the walls of a prison. Those convicted for drug crimes often remain on probation and parole, sometimes even disenfranchised or barred from employment, locked into a perpetual cycle of exclusion and inferior status in society. Convicted drug offenders are subject to constant monitoring, police supervision, stigmatization, and legal harassment. The brand of “drug addict” or “criminal” not only labels an individual permanently, but subjects them to a perpetual cycle of legal discrimination in most areas of life – housing, employment, government benefits, education, and civic duties like voting or jury service. Why are so many black drug users imprisoned at twenty to fifty times the rate of white offenders, even though research concludes that whites use and deal more frequently? The law provides no answers, but an examination of government language may provide some. The words of the president claim that these initiatives target drugs, but their underlying messages

suggest that their true target is different. Drug abuse has no concrete physical form; it is abstract, intangible, and therefore symbolic. Since there is no physical manifestation of drug abuse, no concrete object to externalize these forces upon, the ambiguity of the “public enemy” effectively gave the public the opportunity to choose their own public enemy: drug users.

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