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Making It Up As He Goes: Trump's Improvisational Rhetoric and the Hyper-Rhetorical Presidency

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Introduction

President Donald Trump does not speak like a president. That is to say, he does not speak in ways that we have come to expect from presidents. The most striking characteristics of Trump's rhetoric are what he says and how he says it. The crudeness and cruelty of his language, his ceaseless hyperbolic bluster, and shameless narcissism, his consistent disregard for facts, all fall well outside the norms of modern presidential discourse. However, Trump disregards the norms of presidential communication in another significant way as well, by regularly speaking or tweeting off-the-cuff with seemingly little forethought or editorial input (see Baker 2017; Graham 2017; Jackson 2018; Tett 2016; Wemple 2018). As White House administrations institutionalized presidential speechwriting and strategic communications over the past century, meticulously-crafted rhetoric became the norm. Trump's improvisational rhetoric is the antithesis of the highly-professionalized, disciplined approach to political communication we have come to expect from the presidency. President Trump does not speak like a president because, more often than not, he is making it up as he goes.

The potential for interpreting Trump's rhetorical high-wire act is multi-dimensional. Politically, his penchant for improvising is celebrated as a badge of authenticity by supporters and seen by critics as a sign that he is unfit for office. Stylistically, the president's off-the-cuff approach can possess rare emotional potency one moment, then slip into utter incoherence the next. Psychologically, his ad hoc pronouncements have been portrayed as a strategic genius by some and pathological impulsivity by others. These and other dimensions offer intriguing avenues to better understand the meaning and significance of Trump's rhetorical tendencies. However, this essay takes the position that his reliance on improvisational rhetoric is more than a matter of politics, style, and psychology; it is a matter of governance.

Along with serving as a medium for political attacks, personal grievances, self-promotion, and miscellaneous nonsense, Trump regularly uses improvised communication to make important policy decisions. Banning transgender troops from serving in the U.S. military, declaring a national emergency at the U.S.-Mexico border, and withdrawing American forces from Syria, among other examples, were policy decisions publicly announced by the president without prior consultation or

communication with all relevant stakeholders, including foreign allies, key members of Congress, and administration policy advisors. In other cases, Trump made ad hoc statements about policy decisions that White House aides had to walk back or contort the truth to reverse, such as sending undocumented immigrants to sanctuary cities, a total shutdown of the southern border, and the possibility of bombing Iran's cultural sites. In both sets of cases, the president conflated rhetoric and governance, presenting his personal decision to tweet or speak as a policy action taken by the United States government.

It is tempting to discount the president's propensity for policy-oriented improvisational rhetoric as a Trump-specific phenomenon that will exit the White House with him. Perhaps, but the aberration of Trump's behavior should not blind us to the fact that the relationship between presidents and rhetoric has not been healthy for decades. While Trump's reliance on improvisation is new, rhetorical policymaking, and the tendency to collapse the distinction between rhetoric and governing are not anomalous features of the modern presidency. Instead, they are indicators of a distorted system of governance that Trump neither caused nor created, but rather has pushed to new extremes.

To illuminate the dynamics of a political order that has long normalized the "not normal," this essay develops the construct of the "hyper-rhetorical presidency" (DiIulio 2004, 2007). It does so by outlining four theses that situate presidential rhetoric within the broader landscape of contemporary American politics:

- (1) The presidency is under relentless pressure to meet impossible expectations;
- (2) The presidency does not possess the institutional capacity to effectively address these expectations;
- (3) The presidency must maintain the perception of power and control; and
- (4) In light of the three prior theses, presidents are incentivized to innovate ever-more hyper forms of presidential rhetorical behavior.

Taken together, these dynamics contextualize and explain Trump's reliance on improvisational rhetoric as a reflection of an increasingly distorted political order and dysfunctional system of governance.

To make this case, this essay first outlines the original "rhetorical presidency" construct, then turns to an articulation of the four theses that elucidate its contemporary **hyper** manifestation. This is followed by an exploration of Trump's rhetorical behavior, which presents a series of micro case studies that demonstrate his tendency toward improvisational rhetoric and offers insights into a contextual understanding of this phenomenon. The essay concludes with a discussion of the implications for governance brought about by a hyper-rhetorical president who makes it up as he goes.

The Relevance of the Rhetorical Presidency

Reflecting on his eight months as the Director of George W. Bush's White House Office of Faith-Based and Communities Initiatives, political scientist John J. DiIulio, Jr., explained that "on many occasions during my White House tenure...I found myself focusing on how what I was witnessing fortified or falsified this or that academic concept or theory about presidents and the presidency" (2003, 247). DiIulio "struggled for a dispassionate way to summarize what has happened, and to understand why" before ultimately concluding: "My best guide is The Rhetorical Presidency" (2007, 318).

According to Jeffrey K. Tulis, the construct of the “rhetorical presidency” represents “a change in the meaning of governance” (1987, 6) that “puts a premium on active and continuous presidential leadership of popular opinion” (1987, 18).¹ This amounts to a reinterpretation of the political order in which the constitutional principle of separation of powers and inter-branch policy deliberation are supplanted by a presidency-centered system and rhetoric that both amplifies and normalizes this distorted state of affairs. Tulis argues that this shift in understanding is traceable to the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, who regarded the “separation of powers [as] the central defect of American politics” because it impeded the executive’s ability to effect change (1987, 119). Directly challenging the view of the Founders, Wilson argued that the legitimate source of presidential authority is not to be found in the Constitution, but rather in the general will of the American citizenry. Thus, it is requisite for presidents to “interpret” the popular will and act as its independent and singular representative in government, for “[t]here is but one national voice in the country and that is the voice of the President” (Wilson 1908, 202). This rhetorical responsibility involves speaking on behalf of public opinion, as well as shaping it; for, according to Wilson, the president serves as the “spokesman for the real sentiment and purpose of the country, by giving direction to opinion, by giving the country at once the information and the statement of policy which will enable it to form its judgments” (1908, 68).

Central to Tulis’s normative concerns is that Wilson’s doctrine of rhetorical leadership has not only become “a principle tool of presidential leadership,” but normalized as a legitimate tool of governance (1987, 4). Accordingly, the idea that presidents not only will but **should** be practitioners of popular leadership is today “an unquestioned premise of our political culture”—its rhetorical character has come to be understood as the “essence of the modern presidency” (Tulis 1987, 4). This idea has framed our contemporary understanding of the office to the point that we can, in a very real sense, no longer conceptualize the American presidency without rhetoric. Yet, while Wilson’s vision of the presidency as the unitary representative of the popular will may have saturated our political culture, the constitutional system of coequal branches created by the Framers still exists. The rhetorical presidency has simply been superimposed upon it. This amounts to a “second constitution;” that is, “a view of statecraft that is in tension with the original Constitution—indeed, is opposed to the Founders’ understanding of the political system” (Tulis 1987, 17-18). The result is a convoluted political order in which the pathologies of “presidential democracy,” which stands in direct opposition to the constitution and risks metastasizing into populist demagoguery, have come to overwhelm the American system of governance.

Tulis’s argument is a valuable starting point for interpreting the meaning of Trump’s rhetorical behavior because the construct pushes our view beyond the present obsession with the man himself. It likewise demands that we expand our analytical lens beyond the executive office as well; for, despite common assumptions, *The Rhetorical Presidency* is not primarily a study of presidential rhetoric, nor of the presidency.² Instead, “it describes a redefinition of constitutional government that places the presidency at the center of the political universe” (Crockett 2003, 469). In contrast to this presidency-centered perspective which holds sway in scholarship, media discourse, the public imagination, and in presidential rhetoric itself—a perspective Tulis dismisses as “institutional partisanship” (1987, 9-13)—*The Rhetorical Presidency* presents a normative argument about systemic problems within the broader American political order. The rhetorical character of the contemporary presidency both **represents** and **exacerbates** these systemic problems. Situating the presidential leadership of public opinion within this broader political order is critical; it illuminates the consequences of a presidency-centered perspective,

rather than normalizing and legitimating it. The rhetorical presidency construct, therefore, demands that we eschew interpreting Trump's rhetorical behavior in ways that further fetishize the presidency and this president in particular. Instead, it turns the focus to making sense of his reliance on improvisational rhetorical as a reflection of the contemporary political order, with the understanding that his behavior will, in turn, reinterpret, redefine, and further distort American politics in ways that will continue to be consequential after he leaves office.

Four Theses on the Hyper-Rhetorical Presidency

Two decades after its publication, DiIulio argued that "The Rhetorical Presidency has proven to be even better as a political-development crystal ball than it was as a rear-view mirror. [...] Tulis was, if anything, righter than he knew concerning the presidency's possible future rhetorical characteristics" (2007, 317). While in the White House, DiIulio saw the intensification of the troubling conditions in contemporary governance that Tulis had identified. As a result, he ultimately determined that "Bush's administration is perhaps best understood as a hyper-rhetorical presidency," which he defined as "the rhetorical presidency on steroids" (2007, 318 DiIulio's bold).

DiIulio's 'insider case study' is the story of these pathologies of governance, their amplification, and his recognition that "the **hyper**-rhetorical presidency is now widely considered normal;" most devastatingly, within the White House itself (2007, 322). However, his only publication on the subject is a short essay that does not systematically outline the dynamics of the distorted political landscape represented by the notion of the hyper-rhetorical presidency, nor fully develop the construct itself.³ DiIulio's argument has largely been ignored in scholarship on the presidency, garnering brief references but no in-depth considerations or attempts to apply his construct empirically.⁴ The current challenge to make sense of Trump's rhetorical behavior is an invitation to revisit the critical insights of the hyper-rhetorical presidency and further develop DiIulio's construct.⁵ To do so, this essay presents four theses that aim to articulate the dynamics of the broader political order that accompany and incentivize the hyper-rhetorical disposition of the contemporary American presidency.

Thesis 1: The presidency is under relentless pressure to meet impossible expectations

DiIulio characterizes the ethos of the hyper-rhetorical presidency as "the politics of having something to say about everything" (2004). In recent administrations, this has taken the form of the generally strategic, sometimes reflexive dissemination of a continuous stream of White House messaging through ubiquitous spokespeople, press releases, political surrogates, emails, social media posts, presidential speeches, statements, informal remarks, and press conferences (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011; Farnsworth 2018; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006; Kumar 2007). But what accounts for this ceaseless flow of presidential communication? From his perspective inside the administration, DiIulio identified the cause as the unyielding pressure to provide a presidency-obsessed media with content.⁶ He explained that media is "demanding answers to things, political things, media things, global things, all day long" (2004). As a result, the reality is far from the agenda-setting-through-strategic-communications approach commonly discussed in the presidency scholarship.⁷ Instead, presidential communications are largely driven by "happenstance, the bounce of chance, what's in the news...suddenly [the White House has] to

focus on that” (DiIulio 2004).

There seem to be no realistic alternatives to this state of affairs. If media inquire about the president’s position on a significant foreign policy issue, such as North Korean nuclear weapons, the White House obviously has something to say. However, in today’s media environment, even issues that are not directly relevant to presidential decision-making are expected to be addressed. If a self-driving Uber kills a pedestrian and the administration is asked about the president’s position on specific regulations regarding self-driving vehicles, it is inconceivable for the White House to respond that he does not have one. No matter how obscure the issue, the administration is expected to speak to it and do so in a timely way. If it does not, then **that** becomes the story. Failing to do so would also cede valuable media space to the president’s critics and, with it, the power to define the issue, and the president’s silence, in politically advantageous ways (Dickerson 2018; Holtzman 2011). Nor can the White House take a few days to review facts and develop an informed policy position without appearing unprepared, out-of-touch, or simply unconcerned. The demands placed on the presidency by today’s multi-platform, 24-hour media environment, in which several news cycles pass daily, are relentless (Cohen 2008).

What DiIulio does not discuss is that the relentless pressure to meet expectations is not only driven by media, but by American political culture. In scholarship on the presidency, “there is a general recognition...that modern presidents face a wide variety of public expectations... [which] shape how presidents are covered by the press as well as how they are perceived and evaluated by elites and the mass public” (Simon 2009, 136). Since the advent of the modern presidency during the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration, and the myriad administrative responsibilities that accompanied the expansion of the institution (Rossiter 1956), expectations have consistently followed a one-way trajectory toward the impossible (Vaughn and Mercieca 2014).

Along with the growth of institutional roles, two additional factors illustrate sources of expectations for the presidency. First, how Americans understand the presidency and what they expect from officeholders are “formed through political socialization and culture, news media, and media technologies” (Scacco and Coe 2017, 299). Research on political socialization indicates that narratives of American history, civic education, and popular culture create myths of past presidents and their heroics that result in idealized views of officeholders (Simon 2009; Greenstein 1975). Consequently, image-based expectations for how presidents should behave and what traits they should possess “are both high and exaggerated” (Simon 2009, 140). This heroic status is constructed through dramatic portrayals of past presidential accomplishments that do not accurately reflect the extent and limitations of presidential powers.

Additionally, presidents themselves are responsible for further-inflating both image-based and performance-based expectations by playing to them publicly, thereby creating a feedback loop that further exaggerates and exacerbates this untenable situation. The late Theodore J. Lowi explains, “since the rhetoric that flows from the office so magnifies the personal responsibility and so surrounds the power with mystique, it is only natural that the American people would produce or embrace myths about presidential government. The myths are validated and reinforced by popular treatments of the presidency (1985, 151). Portrayals of the office are also distorted by the perception of a presidency-centered political order and system of governance that accompanied the development of the rhetorical presidency. As a result of their reliance on the rhetorical leadership of public opinion, presidents exaggerate this perception and make policy promises that collide with the reality of the constraints in the original constitution (Tulis 1987; Crockett 2003). When combined with media demands, the pressure placed upon modern presidents by

these inflated expectations is relentless.

Thesis 2: The presidency does not possess the institutional capacity to effectively address these expectations

Modern presidents may be expected to have “something to say about everything,” but the institutional capacity to do so—let alone to take meaningful policy action—simply does not exist. Recognizing the lack of capacity to address expanding responsibilities and meet growing expectations, FDR declared that “[t]he president’s task has become impossible for me or any other man” (quoted in Dickerson 2017). Following the conclusion of the 1937 Brownlow Committee Report that “The President needs help,” the Reorganization Act was passed in 1939, expanding the Executive Office of the President. As the power and responsibilities of the institution continued to grow, a once understaffed administration became overstaffed and presented new management problems. As John Dickerson explains in “The Hardest Job in the World,” “... you might think that extra manpower would be a boon to an overextended president. But unlike a chief executive in the corporate world, a president can’t delegate” (2018). As the president is ultimately responsible for every decision made by the administration, decision-making remained centralized in the West Wing.

As a result, the institutional apparatus of the administration cannot consider and address, even in the most superficial way, more than a few key issues at any one time. And as DiIulio explains, the decisions that need to be made are countless and varied:

...the White House is always focused on something. There’s always a couple of things that are sucking the air out of the room, that are consuming the Oval Office, that are driving the president’s schedule... What’s going on is there are a lot of things that presidents want, there are a lot of things that people who have influence with presidents want...that they cannot get even in the context of unified party government, because there’s too much on his plate (2004).

He summed up this state of affairs as “sucking water out of a fire hydrant twenty-four hours a day” (2004). This was confirmed by Dan Bartlett, Bush’s former Director of Communications, who explained that “we woke up every day behind. Every day was catch-up day” (quoted in Dickerson 2018).

The problem of limited capacity is not one specific to the Bush White House; it is an institutional problem that continued into the Obama administration. Jeh Johnson, who served as Obama’s Secretary of Homeland Security, explained: “My definition of a good day was when more than half of the things on my schedule were things I planned versus things that were forced on me” (quoted in Dickerson 2018). Obama’s chief counterterrorism adviser, Lisa Monaco, agreed that “[t]he urgent should not crowd out the important. But sometimes you don’t get to the important. Your day is spent just trying to prioritize the urgent” (quoted in Dickerson 2018). As a result, the president’s work is never done. “Every hour brings another demand, another obligation, another crisis” (Suri 2017, xvi). Falling well short of meeting the public expectation that presidents act as the nation’s agenda-setter-in-chief, the “hyper-rhetorical presidency is one where they cannot control their [own] agenda” (DiIulio 2004).

Consequently, presidents cannot possibly address all issues. However, when a White House ignores a pressing issue, groups advocating for action and their elected representatives criticize the administration for its lack of concern and for cynically “playing politics” with the issue. For

DiIulio, this “politics as usual” explanation “would be a lot more comforting, in a sense, because it’s sort of a politics we all understand” (2004). When it comes to policymaking, the reality of the lack of institutional capacity, as he witnessed it, is far more disconcerting. The presidency “cannot deliver anything resembling coherent policy formulation, legislative liaison, legislative politicking, bill passage, administrative politics, implementation, execution, performance oversight. It is impossible. It cannot be done. The institutional capacity does not exist” (DiIulio 2004).

While it must contend with outsized expectations for presidential performance, the limited capacity of the modern presidency means that it can often do little more than try to play “keep-up” with developing events, respond to critics, and attempt to maintain the appearance that everything is in control. As Lowi colorfully puts it, presidents “can only put out fires and smile above the ashes” (1985, 181).

Thesis 3: The presidency must maintain the perception of power and control

While expectations are impossible to meet, and the capacity to effectively do so does not exist, presidents have no option other than to pretend that they can play at this game and win. To do so, the White House must successfully manage and maintain the appearance of control at all times if it is to sustain political power. In the presidential democracy of contemporary American politics, “there is no power in the presidency if the public is not with him” (Murtha 2006). As a result, presidents are not powerful primarily because of Article II of the Constitution—it is the perception of power that empowers.⁸ And the normalized image of the president as the center of the political order and singular representative of the American people is indeed a very real power, even if only sustained by public opinion built on perceptions. Therefore, it must be maintained.

Lowi argued that presidents need to keep and “maintain the initiative, or at least the appearance of the initiative” in order to cultivate “the reputation of power”—“The president is the Wizard of Oz. Appearances become everything” (1985, 138-139, 151). Constructing images of a presidency that is always “in control” strengthens the president’s hand politically and in the policymaking arena by warding off potential criticisms and allowing for the favorable framing of events and agendas. As “the chief inventor and broker of the symbols of American politics” (Zarefsky 1986, 8), presidents are in a unique position to use rhetoric as a means to maintain this pretense of power. Through rhetorical posturing and relentless image control, presidents and their aides take every opportunity to publicly reinforce this portrayal.

The presidency also seeks to reinforce the popular myth of a presidency-centered system of governance by constantly staying “on offense” rhetorically. DiIulio points out that while few media sources follow the nuances of policymaking, “nearly everybody knows and reports whether the president has ‘said something’ about a given topic” (2003, 252). In today’s noisy media landscape, the president saying something, anything, often matters more than what is said. The news cycle is so rapid that what the president said yesterday, let alone last week, will likely be displaced by what he says today, and possibly even forgotten. As such, in order to maintain the perception of control, the goal is to fill the space and keep the initiative (Scacco and Coe 2016).

However, according to Lowi: “The more the president holds to the initiative and keeps it personal, the more he reinforces the mythology that there actually exists in the White House a ‘capacity to govern’” (1985, 151). Consequently, the constant effort to maintain this perception has transformed the Oval Office into a golden cage. By portraying the presidency as possessing an almost-omnipresent capacity for responsiveness and action, the White House further inflates

expectations for presidential performance. And while the presidency cannot accomplish in deed that which it continually trumpets in words, it has no choice but to feed this cycle.

Thesis 4: In light of the three prior theses, presidents are incentivized to innovate ever-more hyper forms of presidential rhetorical behavior

From this crucible of inflated expectations, the need to maintain perceptions, and the lack of institutional capacity to successfully manage either, emerges the incentive for presidents to turn to hyper forms of rhetorical behavior. And as the feedback loop continues and builds, what initially appeared to be innovative rhetorical strategies become institutionalized as defense mechanisms, fundamentally altering the structure of the presidency and further distorting the American political order and system of governance. Changes in presidential rhetorical behavior should therefore not be interpreted as distinct political instruments, but collectively as a developmental phenomenon. That is, each rhetorical innovation does not simply replace the previous one but rather is layered upon it.⁹ This is done to meet the pressing demands of external expectations, as well as those self-created by the outsized portrayals of the office generated by past rhetorical innovations. In this way, like a spiral of addiction, growing within each rhetorical innovation is the need for its more-hyper replacement. A review of key rhetorical innovations over the past thirty years illuminates this process.

For decades, presidential communications have been professionalized and their processes of production formalized. Prior to reaching the ears or eyes of the American public, communications would regularly go through the hands of many authors, editors, and fact-checkers, and be reviewed for approval by various administrative departments and presidential aides (Collier 2018, 36). The development of formalized communications processes can be traced from the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, through the expansion of the White House during the FDR and Truman administrations, to the dominance of strategic communications offices in the George W. Bush and Obama presidencies. From this history, the one-directional development of this discipline is clear: “[T]he more power the presidency acquires, the more cautious presidents become when they speak” (Collier 2018, 204).

Strategic public relations are one of the more manageable aspects of the modern presidency. Far more challenging is negotiating with members of Congress, who are incentivized to represent the interests of those who get them elected. As a result, presidents must engage in the difficult tasks of persuasion and bargaining to pursue their policy goals (Neustadt 1960). During the Reagan administration, Samuel Kernell (1986) identified an innovation that aimed to pursue the administration’s policy goals by going over the heads of those in Congress by using presidential rhetoric to persuade the people instead. “Going public,” as he referred to it, “is a strategy whereby a president promotes himself and his policies in Washington by appealing to the American public for support,” with the ultimate aim of pressuring Capitol Hill (Kernell 1986, 1). Empirical evidence suggests that this approach is unable to regularly move public opinion on policy issues in the administration’s direction (Edwards 2003). Yet, all presidents since Reagan have continued to go public. Kernell explains that by “casting himself as the fount from which the answers to the nation’s problems flow, such a president may raise public expectations to unrealistic heights” (1986, 45). Consequently, as they raise expectations for their own performance by going public, presidents, in turn, create the need for more radical means of maintaining the perception of presidential power and control.

Beginning in the Reagan administration, but reaching an apex during the Clinton administration, scholarship turned to explore the ways in which presidential rhetoric was increasingly being used on behalf of the “permanent campaign” (Blumenthal 1980; Edwards 2000). The permanent campaign involves using the tools of governing, image-making, and strategic calculation as a means to gain and hold popular support (Edwards 2000; Hecla 2000; Ornstein and Mann 2000). In essence, this involves going public for political, rather than a policy-oriented advantage. Like going public, the permanent campaign is more than a strategy—structurally, it has become “a permanent feature of the contemporary presidency” (Cook 2002, 762).

The normalization of going public and the permanent campaign demonstrate that rhetoric is more than an instrument; it is “increasingly is what the presidency is about” (Zarefsky 2004, 607). In other words, the modern presidency not only uses rhetoric, it is constituted by rhetoric. Building on Murray Edelman’s claim that “language is the key creator of the social world people experience” (1988, 103), David Zarefsky maintains that rhetoric “defines political reality” (2004, 611).¹⁰ To satisfy the need to portray the presidency as powerful and always in control, administrations increasingly turned to define reality through the rhetorical innovation of image management. Far from efforts to persuade Congress or the American people to support the president’s policy agenda, the crafting of presidential image is a purely political undertaking. It is intended “to force the media to cover the pictures and narratives [the White House] provides” (Mayer 2004, 625), thereby attempting to turn its symbiotic relationship with the press to the president’s advantage.

In his study of the image management of George W. Bush, Jeremy D. Mayer highlights the essential role of discipline in crafting strategic visual messages and designing sets that serve as backdrops for the president (2004). This aligns with DiIulio’s observations about the Bush administration’s constant struggle “to stay hyper-rhetorically ‘on message’ and ‘on offense’” (2007, 321). Doing so and keeping the initiative by defining reality—and in particular, advantageously defining the president himself—was valued above all else. Playing to heroic expectations and pre-packaging dramatic content for media, the Bush White House delivered ready-made spectacles for public consumption. As Douglas Kellner explained at the time, in “today’s infotainment society, entertainment and spectacle have entered into the domains of the economy, politics, society, and everyday life in important new ways” (2005, 62). Bruce Miroff developed this observation into the notion of the “presidency as spectacle,” in which “the White House strives to present the president as a winning, indeed a spectacular, character” (2018, 231).

Just as each subsequent president adopted, professionalized, and innovated upon the rhetorical techniques relied upon by their predecessors (i.e., formalized speechwriting, going public, the permanent campaign, and image management), Kellner argues that it was Obama who mastered the art of “blending politics and performance in carefully orchestrated media spectacles” (2017, 76). And yet, the Obama White House still utilized an extensive, deliberate speechwriting process, along with the other rhetorical innovations. This is the developmental phenomenon of the hyper-rhetorical presidency: one rhetorical discipline layered upon the other, each more hyper than the last.

With these rhetorical innovations came a restructuring of the institution to meet the dynamic demands of the hyper-rhetorical presidency. In 1987, Tulis argued that the rhetorical presidency is organized to give “the president an increased ability to assess public opinion and to manipulate it.” He expressed concern that the “speechwriting shop has become the institutional locus of policymaking in the White House, not merely an annex to policymaking.” Consequently, “the

imperatives of rhetoric structure policy” (Tulis 1987, 185). Ten years later, DiIulio quipped that the hyper-rhetorical presidency “is organized (one might say personalized) to do this in its sleep” (2007, 323). Structurally, Bush’s Executive Office of the President had “become openly organized and operated like a permanent political campaign headquarters” and, as a result, the “senior staff offices that matter most—speechwriting, communications, press secretary, and ‘strategic initiatives’—completely overawe those more tethered to information gathering, policy analysis, and policy implementation” (DiIulio 2007, 322). The developmental phenomenon of turning to ever-more hyper forms of rhetorical behavior has fundamentally changed and continues to change, the institutional structure of the presidency.

When the structural emphasis on presidential communications supplants and even subsumes policy-oriented work, governance suffers. Far short of the research, deliberation, and compromise that goes into a thoughtful development of policy proposals, in the environment of the hyper-rhetorical presidency, “policy gets made (or un-made) on the rhetorical fly” (DiIulio 2007, 322). Under pressure to meet expectations and lacking the institutional capacity to do so, there is little incentive for engaging the process necessary for developing informed policies, let alone support accompanying legislation, for anything but the president’s top priorities. Attempting to do so would require a great expenditure of limited presidential resources, such as time and political capital, and increase opportunities for very public failure. Instead, and in stark contrast to the strategic policy-orientation of going public, the primary objective of rhetoric in the age of the hyper-rhetorical presidency is to maintain perceptions of power and control. For Trump, this means making it up as he goes.

Trump’s Improvisational Rhetoric

The Trump presidency is not the rhetorical presidency that Tulis illuminated more than three decades ago. Nor is it DiIulio’s hyper-rhetorical presidency of the Bush era. Today, we are inundated with overwhelming levels of instant information, social media trolling, tweet storms, viral memes, fake news, alternative facts, deep fakes, image-based communication, and an average of nearly four connected devices per person. It is also an era of brutal partisan tribalism, colossal sums of special-interest cash, data scraping and the psychographic behavioral micro-targeting of voters, foreign influence, celebritized candidates, contested election results, and intense public frustration with the American system of governance. Consequently, the contemporary political order is arguably one of chaotic hyper-reality, orbiting around its nucleus, a chaotic hyper-rhetorical presidency.

Trump’s version of the hyper-rhetorical presidency represents both continuity and change. He uses speechwriters, goes public, engages in the permanent campaign, practices image management, and is the “King of the Spectacle” (Kellner 2017, 76). What he has abandoned is the **discipline** that had been normalized by previous administrations. The historical trajectory of these rhetorical innovations proceeded along a linear path toward ever-more choreographed, deliberate, and constructed communication. Rather than following this trend toward more disciplined, institutionally-controlled messaging, Trump’s rhetorical behavior obliterates it.

For example, cabinet meetings provide presidents with opportunities to construct advantageous spectacles that can be controlled and, therefore, stay on message. To do so, they may include props, such as the sign reading “CHAMPIONS” set behind Trump’s head during an October 2019 cabinet meeting billed as a discussion of the administration’s “successful rollback

of the abuses and the high cost of the bloated regulatory state.” However, Trump’s tendency toward improvisational rhetoric immediately sent the spectacle off message. It was described as a “71-minute affair that was part news conference, part stream-of-consciousness bragging and all about Trump” (Dawsey 2019). Without prompting in many cases, the president boasted about capturing ISIS combatants (“I’m the one who did the capturing”), dismissed the Constitution’s “phony emoluments clause,” attacked President Obama and House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff (D-Calif.), advertised his Trump Doral golf resort (“I’m very good at real estate”), bragged about filling arenas at political rallies (“I can set a world record for somebody without a guitar”), and made a number of false statements, all while his cabinet officials sat by silently, also serving as props (Dawsey 2019).

Trump’s rhetoric is “neither deliberate nor cautious, and to an unusual degree, it appears to be impromptu, reactive, situational, and improvisational” (Jamieson and Taussig 2017, 621). As such, it represents a significant deviation from the trend toward ever-more disciplined, professionalized presidential communications. And yet, at the same time, this tendency to rely on improvisational rhetoric squarely aligns with the trend of presidents adopting ever-more hyper forms of communication, incentivized by the dynamics of a distorted political order that seemingly provides them with no other choice.

The following three micro case studies provide brief glimpses into Trump’s use of policy-oriented improvisational rhetoric. As relevant examples maybe number in the hundreds, the few selected here are intended only to illustrate the phenomenon, rather than be comprehensive. And while the defining characteristics of Trump’s rhetorical behavior can only be suggested by such a small sample, each case clearly illustrates the conflation of rhetoric and governance that is the signature of the hyper-rhetorical presidency.

Banning Transgender Troops from Service

In July 2017, Trump tweeted a decision to ban transgender troops from the U.S. military. Although he claimed that this decision was made “[a]fter consultation with my Generals and military experts” (Trump 2017), the Pentagon was caught by surprise as they had not been informed and an uncompleted policy review on the issue was in the works (Rucker and Parker 2018). Military officials were also unclear whether the tweet effectively served as an order, since it lacked specifics about implementation and the legal status of command-by-tweet has not been determined (Collier 2018, 37).

Pre-Midterm Election Tax Cut

In October 2018, in the lead-up to midterm elections, the president spent days tweeting teases about an imminent tax cut. Then, at a political rally in Houston for the re-election of Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), he announced: “We’re going to be putting in a 10 percent tax cut for middle-income families. It’s going to be put in next week. We’ve been working on it for a few months” (Trump 2018b). Neither administration officials nor members of Congress knew anything about a planned tax cut. Additionally, Congress, which would need to pass legislation to institute a tax cut, was out of session at the time of Trump’s announcement and would remain so until after the election (Rucker and Parker 2018).

The Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Syria

While as a candidate he campaigned against further American involvement in Middle East conflicts, in April 2017, Trump ordered a missile strike on Syria in retaliation for a chemical attack on Syrian civilians by President Bashar al-Assad. According to the White House, he did so after being moved emotionally by images of children who had been victims of the attack. Then, in March 2018, during a rambling speech in Ohio, ostensibly about infrastructure, Trump announced that “we’ll be coming out of Syria, like, very soon. Let the other people take care of it now” (Trump 2018a). This took his national security and military advisors by surprise and the administration later issued statements clarifying that no timetable for the withdrawal had been set. When the president pushed to move on this withdrawal in December 2018, Secretary of Defense James Mattis resigned in protest and the policy decision was shelved. Then, in October 2019, at the prompting of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during a phone call, Trump announced by tweet that “it is time for us to get out of these ridiculous Endless Wars...and bring our soldiers home” (Trump 2019). His impromptu decision to withdraw as rapidly as possible once again took the military by surprise, resulting in American military materiel left behind and the abandoning of Kurdish allies to Turkish forces.

Why Improvisational Rhetoric?

As his presidency has disregarded norms in so many different ways, it is tempting to dismiss Trump’s rhetorical behavior in these micro cases as a Trump-specific phenomenon. Certainly, his idiosyncrasies are part of the story. However, interpreting these examples of policy-oriented improvisational rhetoric in the context of the distorting dynamics of the hyper-rhetorical presidency offers broader insights into this “not normal” phenomenon. Like his immediate predecessors, Trump faces the relentless pressure of impossible expectations, his White House lacks the necessary institutional capacity to address these expectations, and his presidency needs to maintain the perception of power and control. As a result, he is incentivized to innovate hyper forms of presidential rhetorical behavior as a survival instinct. His reliance on improvisational rhetoric offers Trump a means to attempt to navigate these dynamics in three ways.

First, in the simplest sense, his improvisational rhetoric is able to fill space and attention that otherwise would be filled by political opponents and unfriendly media commentary. Steve Bannon, Trump’s former chief strategist, reportedly refers to this tactic as “flood[ing] the zone with shit” (see Illing 2020). Media needs content and he provides it. His rhetoric falls far short of strategically-crafted speech intended to, say, go public; but it gets the president through the next news cycle. Previous presidencies have used rhetoric as placeholders to buy time while the administration frantically goes to work on policy details (Holtzman 2010). Trump’s frequently-used rhetorical signature “we’ll see” or “we’ll see what happens” suggests the same is occurring behind-the-scenes in his White House; but the “details to follow” rarely materialize.¹¹ Instead, his improvisational rhetoric seems to be no more than talking for the sake of talking.

The ethos of the hyper-rhetorical presidency, according to DiIulio, is “the politics of having something to say about everything” (2004). To this, Trump has appended “...or about nothing.” In defense of their argument that “presidential rhetoric is dead,” Stephen John Hartnett and Jennifer Rose Mercieca point to the George W. Bush administration’s efforts to “confuse public opinion, prevent citizen action, and frustrate citizen deliberation” by “marshaling ubiquitous

public chatter, waves of disinformation, and cascades of confusion-causing misdirection” (2007, 600). As a consequence, this rhetoric has “left the nation awash in white noise, literally drowning in communicative trash” (Hartnett and Mercieca 2007, 601).

Trump’s improvisational rhetoric, while perhaps not strategically crafted to mystify like that of the Bush White House, has the same primary effect: the production of white noise and communicative trash. Importantly, it also contributes to the creation of a “ubiquitous presidency” that cultivates a “highly visible and nearly constant presence in both political and nonpolitical arenas of American life via engagement in a fragmented media environment” (Scacco and Coe 2016, 2). Even if the president is speaking or tweeting incoherent nonsense—flooding the zone with shit—doing so holds the initiative, keeps public and media attention, and continuously thrusts the presidency into the center of the American political order.

The second way in which the reliance on improvisational rhetoric helps Trump navigate the dynamics of the hyper-rhetorical presidency is that it is a behavior easy to practice. Unlike the onerous processes involved in professionalized speechwriting or the time, resources, skills, and expertise needed to effectively manage presidential images and spectacles, all Trump has to do is grab his phone. In this sense, it is a low-cost enterprise with considerable upside potential politically. Additionally, in a media-information environment in which truth is contested along partisan lines, there are few incentives for the president to maintain a relationship with facts or acquire an informed understanding of the issues about which he communicates. This lowers the costs even further. The ease of this rhetorical innovation renders the lack of institutional capacity faced by modern presidencies largely inconsequential. “The president needs help” is no longer true when he is relying on improvisational rhetoric.

Finally, Trump’s improvisation has the effect of further personalizing the office, which is valuable currency in a presidential democracy. According to Lowi, the “personal” presidency “extends democratization by making himself more accessible—appearing to make himself more accessible—to the people” (1985, 152). Digital technology presents the presidency as more accessible than ever before (Scacco and Coe, 2016). His constant use of social media and unscripted, off-the-cuff style creates “the impression that Trump **says what he really thinks** (Jamieson and Taussig 2017, 622 authors’ bold), thereby conveying a sense of authenticity. The hyper-personalization of Trump’s presidency, brought about in part by his reliance on digital rhetorical improvisation, functions as a means of maintaining the perception of power and control, at least among his most intense supporters.

| The Implications for Governance

Trump’s policy-oriented improvisational rhetorical has a detrimental impact on the American system of governance. When the president improvises, the administration’s policy officials are left to improvise as well, “scrambling to reverse-engineer policies to meet Trump’s sudden public promises” (Rucker and Parker 2018). In the Trump presidency, members of the administration appear to do so reflexively, with little apparent concern for the relative rationality or potential outcomes of his pronouncements. For example, the Pentagon moved to create a “Space Force” after Trump’s public comments mentioned it in March 2018; National Guard troops were dispatched to the U.S.-Mexico border after Trump, at an April 2018 photo opportunity with Baltic leaders, announced that he would be sending the military; and the Commerce Department planned for auto tariffs after Trump threatened, by tweet, to impose them on Canada, Japan, and

Europe in June 2018. The president consistently conflates rhetoric and governance by presenting his personal decisions to tweet or speak as policy actions taken by the United States government—and the United States government follows suit.

Rhetoric is not policy; and yet, the administration's policy apparatus is put into motion and guided by the whims of a president publicly communicating off-the-cuff. This lack of coherent policy process suggests organizational dysfunction within the White House (Pfiffner 2018, 164). This dysfunction is not simply the result of Trump's personal style of management and "disinclination toward formal organization" (Pfiffner 2018, 153). Instead, it is a structural consequence of eschewing the disciplined presidential communication processes that had been normalized for decades by previous administrations. Those processes included relevant parties from across the executive branch, which had the effect of uniting disparate elements of the administration. Additionally, in regard to its policy-oriented impact, former Bush counselor Karen Hughes explained that "[t]he process of writing the speech forces the policy decisions to be finalized" (quoted in Max 2001). Without such processes, the structure of the presidency is altered, perhaps beyond the current administration, and the capacity to produce coherent policy is compromised.

Tulis (1987) emphasized that the tendencies and incentives to favor rhetoric as a tool of presidential leadership were not only a matter of communication, but a matter of governance. The result of this distorted system of governance is the same as the result of Trump's reliance on improvisational rhetoric: policy incoherence. In describing the hyper-rhetorical presidency, DiIulio identified the Bush administration's "reflexive tendency to offer the presidential word as the policy deed" (2007, 319). The public's inclination to mistake speech as policy—in that "[w]hatever the president says is generally assumed to be the position of the executive branch and the policy of the United States government" (Collier 2018, 36)—is actively promoted by the presidency itself. Except, in the Trump presidency, tweets have come to replace speech and likewise "have been treated as policy by much of the nation, reflecting the degree to which whatever a president says is treated as policy—however he says it" (Collier 2018, 37). This state of affairs represents a country currently governed by "ad hococracy" (Haass 2017),¹² which has been made devastatingly apparent by the president's erratic management of the Covid-19 crisis.

As previously acknowledged, there is little doubt that Trump's idiosyncrasies, and his impulsivity in particular, play a significant role in his reliance on improvisational rhetoric. However, a Trump-specific explanation is not the whole story. Instead, it is important to widen the lens and recognize how his aberrant style of governance is incentivized by the dynamics of a distorted political order organized around the hyper-rhetorical presidency. The four theses on the hyper-rhetorical presidency articulated in this essay are not insulated from one another or static; they are co-dependent and dynamic, further intensifying iteration after iteration. The current dysfunctional system of governance was dysfunctional when Trump inherited it. He will leave it more broken still and that brokenness will be normalized. The fundamental problem is not this president, it is systemic. Put another way, the fundamental problem is not that Trump improvises, but that the American polity abides it.

Postscript for Hopeful Possibility

In his Foreword to the second edition of *The Rhetorical Presidency*, Russell Muirhead references the hyper-rhetorical presidency construct and agrees that "DiIulio's point is amplified

by the presidency of Donald J. Trump,” who has “refined and brought to a new extreme the elements of the rhetorical presidency” (2017, xiv). This raises questions of how extreme the rhetorical behavior of presidents can get and what systems of governance are possible in a political order organized around such a presidency.

Muirhead does not address these questions, but asserts that “Trump is the rhetorical presidency brought to its culmination, and perhaps to its breaking point” (2017, xv). This “breaking point,” he suggests, would mean the overwhelming of constitutional restraints by presidential demagoguery (Muirhead 2017, xvi). But there is an alternative interpretation of how the rhetorical presidency, and its current hyper-rhetorical manifestation, could reach their breaking point. In identifying the pathology of the “personal presidency,” Lowi argued that “the solution ultimately lies not in specific reforms...but in a mature awareness of the nature of the problem” (1985, xii). Perhaps Trump’s rhetorical behavior is so radically “not normal” that it will finally jolt us awake, opening our eyes to how far down the road toward abnormality we have already traveled with the rhetorical presidency. And then, when the distorted American political order and its dysfunctional system of governance come into full focus, perhaps we will maturely choose to leave the rhetorical presidency behind and travel a better path.

Endnotes

1. Although fully developed by Tulis, for the original formulation of the “rhetorical presidency” thesis, see Ceaser, Thurow, Tulis, and Bessette 1981.

2. For more on common mis-readings of Tulis’s rhetorical presidency construct, see Crockett 2003.

3. DiIulio is very clear about leaving the hyper-rhetorical presidency construct undeveloped and generally undefined: “Whether that concept can be refined to mean more than something like ‘the rhetorical presidency on steroids’...I must leave to others” (2007, 318). Likewise, he leaves aside questions of where it came from, when it emerged, how to stop it, and so on. “What I can do, however, is briefly highlight some preliminary answers and offer suggestive examples from my own reading and experiences indicating why I think such questions about the hyper-rhetorical presidency merit further reflection and research” (2007, 319).

4. For examples of references to DiIulio’s hyper-rhetorical presidency construct, see Basinger and

Rottinghaus 2012; Holtzman 2010, 2011; Saldin 2011; Scacco and Coe 2016.

5. Three years before the publication of his essay, I conducted an extensive interview with DiIulio for my dissertation research, during which he discussed his nascent notion of the “hyper-rhetorical presidency.” I am grateful to Professor DiIulio for introducing me to the idea and supporting my efforts to run with it.

6. Research on the relationship between the presidency and media is a robust subfield in the scholarship on the American presidency. For examples of some of the seminal contributions in this area, and in media politics more generally, see Cohen 2008, 2009; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011; Farnsworth 2018; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006; Graber and Dunaway 2017; Iyengar 2018; Kumar 2007.

7. For examples of some of the seminal contributions on presidents and agenda-setting, see Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Canes-Wrone 2001; Cohen 1995; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2004; Kingdon 1995.

8. This argument regarding the perception of presidential power has perhaps been made most succinctly by the late U.S. Representative John P. Murtha (D-PA): “You know it’s an interesting thing when you think about presidents, you think of how powerful they are. The presidency is only a perception of power. There is no power in the presidency if the public is not with him. (...) So an awful lot of what happens...has something to do with the public relations and the public perception of what goes on” (2006).

9. This idea of rhetorical innovations as layered constructions of a developmental phenomenon is borrowed from an essay by Stephen Skowronek (2009), in which he addresses the development of presidential power. Particularly relevant is his notion that “constructions of [presidential] power superimpose themselves one on another, each implicated in the next” (2009, 2074). This developmental perspective mirrors that of Tulis, who uses similar imagery to explain how the “second constitution” of the rhetorical presidency does not displace but is instead superimposed upon the original Constitution.

10. Concerning the defining of political reality, Zarefsky explains: “The definition of the situation affects what counts as data for or against a proposal, highlights certain elements of the situation for use in arguments and obscures others, influences whether people will notice the

situation and how they will handle it, describes causes and identifies remedies, and invites moral judgments about circumstances and individuals” (2004, 612).

11. For more on Trump’s use of the phrases “we’ll see” and “we’ll see what happens,” see Cillizza 2019; Keith 2017; Lucey and Thomas 2017; Nussbaum 2017.

12. “Adhocracy,” according to Richard Haass, former State Department Director of Policy Planning and advisor to Secretary Colin Powell, is a style of governing that “favors the unstructured and at times downright chaotic” and “offers a sharp contrast to more formal styles of decision-making, in which participants with a legitimate stake in the outcome are included and others excluded; options are rigorously weighed in memos and then discussed at carefully run meetings; and those meetings in turn lead to decisions followed by clear assignments, closely monitored execution, and periodic review” (2017).

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