

Biography

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Abstract: The recent speech by Osama Bin Laden carried a more conciliatory tone. It did not have any notable effect. But was it a failure? A rhetorical analysis of the speech shows that Bin Laden is building his *persona* to allow him to deal with a democratic, western audience. That this person-building is ongoing hints that western statesmen and diplomats should reconsider their own persona. Beer and Hariman's notion of "post-realism" provides a theory that puts this rhetorical battle into a strategic framework.

Dialogue with the Devil? Bin Laden and the rhetorical construction of a strategic persona.

To read the speech, visit: <http://www.nisleerskov.com/2004/06/bin-laden-speech-archive.html>

On the 29 October 2004 a video-tape showing Osama Bin Laden turned up on the Al-Jazeera TV station.¹ This was the first videotape with clearly contemporary life-signs from Bin Laden since 2002.

The videotaped speech was directly addressed to the American people with a clear goal: to move them to hold Bush responsible for the attacks on 11 September (by not re-electing him, one must suppose).

The speech stands out from the body of earlier video and audio speeches attributed to him, and it continues a somewhat conciliatory trend that was first established by the audiotape from April 14 2004 offering Europe a cease-fire.

The obvious common-sense impression of the speech is that Bin Laden was trying to influence the outcome of the election. But in that aspect it was a failure, as the American public elected Bush again. So why did he chose to hold that speech in the first place? Apart from being a dangerous move by a man on the run some observers have pointed out that this message was seen as defeatist in the circles that normally supports him.²

This paper looks closer at the speech and tries to gauge its importance. First of all it tries to assert if the speech was a failure for Bin Laden, by looking at the possibilities of success from two angles, a rhetorical and a realist.

¹ Bin Laden (2004c)

² Carmon (2004)

After this the findings are discussed and used to back the claim that the notion of strategy is too narrow and that western policymakers need to broaden it to have success in the battle for hearts and minds in the war on terror.

Rhetorical analysis

To understand the implications of the speech it is first important to assess whether the speech had any possibility of being effective. This is in part a contra-factual question as the descriptive conclusion was that the speech did not really have an impact. But it is in part also a question of assessing the arena in which the speech operated, a curious combination of international and domestic area.

The following short neo-classical rhetorical analysis is based on a more comprehensive analysis that can be found on www.nisleerskov.com.

When one compares Bin Laden's speech with the one from a year earlier, 18 October 2003, the differences are obvious. In his 2003 speech he starts out by scolding the Americans: 'the majority of you are vulgar and without sound ethics or good manners.'³ This indicates that his speech is not meant to sway the American Public, but those who already support him and that there is no chance of a dialogue

A year later he issues a speech (the first with English subtitles) where he solemnly tries to teach the US public how to avoid further harm. The result is a much more dialogical tone that shows us a very conscious speaker, carefully assessing the nexus between situation, audience and language to attain his goal. A number of the choices made will be analysed below, namely his use of logos and ethos to facilitate a dialogue.

The use of logos

Logos is one of the three appeals that are described in classical rhetoric, and concerns the appeals to logic, appeal to reason (the others being Ethos, appeal to the rhetor's image and Pathos, appeal to the audience's feelings).⁴

This appeal is dominant in the speech. It is found in the very *inventio* behind the speech, as the structuring metaphor is one of cause and effect. The effect to be explained is the attack on September 11 2001. This structure lends a very calm and scholarly air to Bin Laden. This is somewhat masked by his standard jingoistic phrases.

Logos is also a dominant in individual arguments. In line 69-75 he backs his claim by referring to specific sources, in this case journalists. Furthermore the economical arguments, the incarnation of modern logos, are being used to a remarkable degree.⁵

Lastly appeal to logos can be found on an elocutionary level. In this way Bin Laden uses the individual words to balance a religious ethos with logos

³ Bin Laden (2003a) II. 6-8

⁴ For further rhetorical explanations see Sloane (2001)

⁵ Perelman (1969) p. 193

argumentation. In this example neutral, managerial words are used side by side with the homage to Allah: 'As for its [the war's] results, they are very positive, with Allah's grace. They surpassed all expectations by all criteria for many reasons, one of the most important of which is that [...]'.⁶

His choice of causality-based logos stands out from his earlier speeches' reliance on "scripture-logos" and emphasis on pathos drawing heavily on religiously themed quotes illustrated by his speech to the Iraqis October 2003.⁷

His choice of logos is suited very well to counter prejudices of him as a religious irrationalist,⁸ and was further supported by his body language on screen.⁹ It thus illustrates conscious choice of appropriate argumentation and elocution or *aptum*.

Ethos and dialogue

Bin Laden uses language to present the audience with a certain image of his ethos for them to interpret; this image is called *persona*.¹⁰ Bin Laden signals that he is open to dialogue by drawing on the three Aristotelian components of ethos: *eunoia*, *arête* and *phronesis*.

He shows his *eunoia*, goodwill towards the audience, by relating that he will tell the American audience 'truthfully about the moments in which the decision was taken, for you to consider' so that they can avoid harm. He strikes a symmetric tone and in theory a response by the Americans is possible.

His show of *areté*, virtue, and *phronesis*, expertise is worth noting. He implicitly prescribes a number of traits to himself, all pointing to him being in line with a classical, liberal democratic thought, and the virtue he shows, is one of the democratic citizen.¹¹

To name a few:

- Dialogue should be tried before violence and peace before war (Il. 69-71) but the right to self-defence and human rights upheld (Il. 35-42). The power is to be with the people (I. 232)
- He is well informed (Il. 140-142), has a nuanced view on the West (Il. 75-77) and is humble (Il. 129-133)

It is worth noting that this is in stark contrast to his earlier denunciation of democracy as 'the faith of the ignorant'.¹²

⁶ Bin Laden (2004c) Il. 87-89

⁷ Bin Laden (2003b)

⁸ See Rosett (2004)

⁹ Neumann (2004)

¹⁰ See Sloane (2001)

¹¹ Held (2002) p. 15

¹² Bin Laden (2003b)

But elements in the speech and situation are also hindrances for dialogue. Most obviously is the animosity between him and the US public. He also has shortcomings as rhetor, as shown by his use of the almost unknown parable about the ill-tempered goat that confuses a western audience.¹³

Lastly his use of a clear delineation of 'you' and 'us' shows the unbridgeable gap between him and his audience. He does not aim for co-existence, but rather separate existences, hardly democratic reality in a globalised world.¹⁴

Conclusion

From a rhetorical viewpoint it must be concluded that Bin Laden is a conscious rhetor, with a clear impression of his rhetorical environment.

He adapts to multiple audiences by his construction of ethos and invitations for dialogue, as well as accusations against the American government. This is in harmony with the understanding that Al-Qaeda has political goals, not cultural ones.¹⁵ Despite its cross-cultural shortcomings, the hostile audience and the jingoistic phrasing, the speech must be seen as a well-focused and deliberate rhetorical artefact.

Here it must also be underscored that a rhetorical analysis cannot show if the democratic and dialogical traits that are really inviting to a longer exchange or simply applied on a short term tactical scale to bring about a desired influence. Considering Al-Qaeda's opportunism and regard for democracy, the speech could not be taken for face value.

Realist analysis

Realism is the dominant worldview in the thinking upon International Relations and Diplomacy and a good theoretical point of departure when thinking about the effects of the speech on a systemic level. It should be noted that the following does not utilize a specific realist analysis or standpoint, but extrapolates from various realist theorists.¹⁶

In a purely realist analysis, Bin Laden's speech would probably not be worth considering as a mean to a power-end, due to the inherent worldview of realism.

The basic assumption is that the state is the sole actor on the international scene, e.g. the level of analysis is on the international level. This does not recognise Bin Laden, head as he might be of a trans-national Non-State Actor as having a decisive influence on US foreign policy.¹⁷ Furthermore it does not recognise the voting public of the United States as having their say: whoever they elect will become actors reacting in similar ways, as the systemic contingencies of the anarchic state system presses its unavoidable behaviour over them. A realist account would not ascribe anything to an actor outside

¹³ See Memri's translation of the speech (2004c)

¹⁴ Held (2002) p. 358

¹⁵ Byman (2003)

¹⁶ For an analysis that disqualifies Bin Laden's speech as being important see Rosett (2004).

¹⁷ Non-State Actors have generally been disregarded in diplomatic thinking. Berridge (2002)

the international system of states trying to pierce the hard shell of the individual state.¹⁸

That the speech did not have any observable effect in the way it seems to be intended of course only further strengthens this argument.

Therefore a realist account would offer one explanation for Bin Laden's behaviour: he had a delusional view thinking he could influence international politics. First of all his status does not allow him to, and second the systemic imperative of the national interest of the USA prescribes eradicating him – an imperative symbolised by the incumbent president's war on terror. In other words: the speech had no chance of being effective on a systemic level whatsoever.

Bin Laden's failure?

Deeming Bin Laden's speech a strategic failure from the descriptive point of view seems obvious. Doing so from a realist viewpoint is inevitable. But the rhetoric analysis suggests that we should pause before that conclusion is made.

The speech might have been a failure to bring about a very specific goal, but it does not seem as if it was irrational or desperate behaviour.¹⁹ A rhetorical strategy was carefully formed to a very difficult task. And if we accept that Bin Laden is a rational actor – in a psychological sense - the genesis and the implications of his speech does not seem to be fully covered by rejecting its effectiveness. Three points further strengthen this interpretation:

1. The growing criticism of realist theory's power of explanation in the contemporary world.²⁰ The rhetorical appropriateness of the speech is in stark contrast to the realist inappropriateness.
2. The experiences from the election in Spain in April 2004, where interference from a terrorist attack might have been influencing the outcome *and* the deployment of troops abroad. This shows that the hard shell of the state might be pierced by outside actors, thereby affecting the foreign policy.²¹
3. The general historical move of organisations from using purely terrorist tools to becoming political (and even democratic) active, in it self or through political affiliations. This shows that the furthering of long-term strategy is an option for Non-State actors.²²

The above suggests that the notion of strategy must be widened, if we are to understand the full implications of Bin Laden's speech.

A three tiered model of strategy

¹⁸ Waltz in Keohane (1986)

¹⁹ Rosett (2004) and her assessment of the situation is belied by the analysis below as well as statements about Bin Laden's situation in Isikoff, Hosenball and Wolffe (2004).

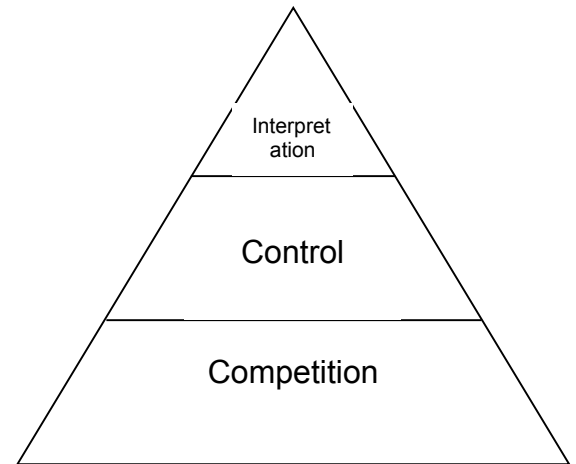
²⁰ Brown (2001) p. 63

²¹ For further discussions on this, see Evans et al (1993)

²² IRA/Sinn Fein and PLO are good examples of this.

Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman sketches out such a widening in their book 'Post-Realism'.²³ They suggest a hierarchy of strategic modes of thinking, which follows Clausewitz's move from a tactical to an operational to a critical level. All levels of the hierarchy are important, but one naturally moves from the base and up. This move is also from a functional to a linguistic mode of inquiry and it is in introducing the linguistic and rhetorical aspects into strategic thinking that their model is interesting. Their focus on allowing moral judgements into strategic thinking is also interesting but not relevant here.

On the most basic level the analysis deals with the primitive competitive situation, understood as a simple and universal immanent structure available in all human interaction. The capable actors strive to gain control over limited resources. This analysis brackets a lot of more sophisticated variables and is embodied in simple realist analyses.



The next level of the hierarchy builds on the first and is dealing with the impact of experience on the basic competition. The analysis on this level tries to describe how the actor is looking beyond the immediate tactical situation and tries to strengthen his performance in a longer perspective. Realising that much is beyond the actors' control and in the hands of *Fortuna*, the focus lies on the actor's self-control and the strategic control of the construction of ethos. 'Stated otherwise, the strategist strives to devise the personality that is most likely to prevail in a competitive environment sufficiently complex that it can not be mastered solely through the manipulation of a few preformed strategies.'²⁴ This level of strategy reflects the Machiavellian emphasis on the ruler's need for regulating his own behaviour to bring predictability in an environment of constant change. The analysis on this level is corresponding with mature, sophisticated classical realism that acknowledges the importance of experience and image.

The third level tries to overcome the strategic liabilities inherent in the two other levels. On this level the strategic analysis deals with revising prior definitions of the conflict by interpretation. This is done by broadening the range of possible areas to be explored and thereby broadening the language that can be used when talking strategy. Here the strategist can reintroduce considerations that had been bracketed on the lower levels of analysis. 'Instead of an autonomous mode of analysis and a single language and persona of calculation, the strategist recognizes that different languages offer different selections of reality, different programs for attributing meaning, and different means for motivating reactions.'²⁵ This leaves room for among other things discourses of moral, ethics and culture.

²³ Beer and Hariman (1996)

²⁴ Ibid p. 397

²⁵ Ibid p. 402

A rhetorical-strategic interpretation

From the above it is clear that it would be possible to interpret Bin Laden's speech as a strategic uttering with some effect. The realist interpretation, concerning the basic competitive situation does conclude that Bin Laden 'lost'.

But as soon as we move up to the second level it might dawn on us that instead of trying to achieve short-term tactical effects, the speech might be working on Bin Laden's strategic persona. As shown he is trying to cast himself in a more democratic mould to be able to address an audience that has hitherto been outside his reach. The obvious question to ask would be why he would be doing that. The first level of analysis would provide us with the specific competition-situation – the election - as an important factor.

On the second level of analysis, it can be guessed that he furthermore must have considered his prior persona as being insufficient. The general onslaught on Al-Qaeda so far might have hinted to him that sheer violence and antagonism might be an unstable platform against a superior enemy. That realisation would reflect those of the other organisations mentioned above.²⁶ A 'democratic persona' would allow Bin Laden to utilise the internal discord in the democratic societies to more effect and would be an obvious strategic advantage in the longer run.

The possibilities on the third level of the analysis are innumerable and will only be touched lightly here. It is interesting to consider the mere fact that Bin Laden is able to change his approach to suit another audience. Here he clearly has an advantage by not having a democratic constituency backing him – changing his persona for strategic purposes is easier for him than for an elected president. It shows that he to some extent is capable to be reflective on the use of discourse – and this is a strong signal to his adversaries in the western world. If they are not able to vary their discourse and do the same, they will not be able to compete in the same arena, namely that of strategic personas. This is interesting in regard to President Bush and his use of religious and ethical language, domestic as well as internationally.

Conclusion

The above analysis shows that Bin Laden is making a strategic choice by giving his speech on October 29 2004. It is a choice that can only be understood by broadening the IR thinking about strategy. This enlargement in turn suggests that diplomats and policymakers first of all can play a role in the combat against the Non-State Actor Bin Laden and that this is done in other arenas than the primitive, competitive realm.

Bin Laden is addressing a very specific audience here. He is doing that by putting on a certain persona. It seems that this personal appeals to a number of values that could be described as democratic – at least on the surface.

²⁶ See note 25

It shows us that the fight is being taken to the realm of persona-building. This in turn means that diplomats and politicians should think harder about designing messages specifically to a middle-eastern audience. As it is, certain values are being propagated in ways suited to a western audience and by persons already embroiled in US domestic arguments.²⁷ Considering the importance of gaining the support of the soft supporters and the middleclass that share Bin Laden's grievances but not his worldview, it is of outmost importance that western politicians learn from Bin Laden and use values and ideas in a language that will resonate among these.²⁸

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²⁸ Mockaitis (2003) p. 29

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