Shadow Rhetoric in the George Bush Eulogies—an Aristotelian Enthymeme

Richard Cherwitz

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It was unintended but funeral speakers couldn’t help but highlight contrasts with President Trump

As a communication scholar I have spent my career studying the rhetoric of presidents and other public figures. Among the things I have learned is that, irrespective of a speaker’s intent, words have consequences.

Regardless of political affiliation, most of us recognize that we are witnessing
numerous examples of this during President Donald Trump’s tenure in office.

On Wednesday (December 5) additional evidence emerged during the State Funeral for President George H. W. Bush.

This occasion called for eulogizing, perhaps the archetype of what the Ancient Greeks called epideictic oratory—a form of speech in which we praise and honor a person.

Traditionally, eulogies are not used as an opportunity to dispute political issues or indict others. However, what transpired Wednesday in a unique way may have violated this norm.

The eulogists certainly did not intend to contrast President George H. W. Bush with President Donald Trump—his name was never uttered. Nevertheless, it would be hard for those in the audience not to hear the words spoken as an implicit critique of our current President. How could this not be the case?

Consider a few examples.

Former Senator Alan Simpson noted: “He [George H. W. Bush] never hated anyone. He knew what his mother and my mother always knew: hatred corrodes the container it’s carried in.”

Similarly, former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney observed: “And let me tell you, that when George Bush was the President of the United States of America, every single head of government in the world knew that they were dealing with a gentleman, a genuine leader, one who was distinguished, resolute, and brave.”

He continued: “I believe it will be said that no occupant of the Oval Office was more courageous, more principled, and more honorable than George Herbert Walker Bush.”
Perhaps historian Jon Meacham made the implicit comparison most clearly: “George Herbert Walker Bush governed with virtues that most closely resemble those of Washington and of Adams, of TR and of FDR, of Truman and of Eisenhower, of men who believed in causes larger than themselves. His life code, as he said, was ‘Tell the truth. Don’t blame people. Be strong. Do your best. Try hard. Forgive. Stay the course.’ And that was and is the most American of creeds.”

Said Meacham, “For Lincoln and Bush both called on us to choose the right over the convenient, to hope rather than to fear, and to heed not our worst impulses, but our best instincts.”

Ironically, even former President George W. Bush said of his father: “In his inaugural address the 41st President of the United States he said this: ‘We cannot hope only to leave our children a bigger car, a bigger bank account, we must hope to give them a sense of what it means to be a loyal friend, a loving parent, a citizen who leaves his home, his neighborhood and town better than he found it. What do we want the men and women who work with us to say? That we were more driven to succeed than anyone around us or that we stopped to ask if a sick child had gotten better and stayed a moment there to trade a word of friendship?’ Well, Dad, we’re going to remember you for exactly that and much more.”

Reflecting on what he learned from his father about the presidency, he concluded: “Dad taught me another special lesson. He showed me what it means to be a President who serves with integrity, leads with courage, and acts with love in his heart for the citizens of our country.”

How could anyone in the audience not view all of these tributes to President George H. W. Bush as an indication of what we find wanting in President Donald Trump?
Again, I am not suggesting these speakers intended to critique our current Commander-in-Chief. In fact, when planning the event, President George H. W. Bush and his family wanted the State Funeral to be a celebration rather than a rehearsal of prior grievances the family had with Trump—which of course is also why, unlike Senator John McCain’s funeral, Trump was invited to join all past presidents.

In short, the implicit, though obvious, criticism of Trump constitutes what we might call “shadow rhetoric”—a reflected image. It emerged because of the stark differences the audience perceived when contrasting the virtues embodied by Bush (as eloquently delineated by the eulogists) with what they see lacking almost daily in Trump’s behavior and discourse.

Shadow rhetoric is a powerful example of Aristotle’s “enthymeme”—a rhetorical syllogism where one premise is unspoken but is a “joint production” of the speaker and audience. It also is an illustration of Stephen Toulmin’s concept of a “warrant”—one of the three necessary parts of all arguments which sometimes is implied by the speaker yet made operative by the audience.

The bottom line: Even eulogies of presidents may not be exempt from the “this is unprecedented, we have never seen it before” syndrome characteristic of the Trump Administration.

Richard Cherwitz is the Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial Professor at the University of Texas (Austin) and Founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE).