**The Hyper-Rhetorical Presidency in the Age of Trump**

Richard Holtzman, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Political Science

Bryant University, Smithfield, RI

rholtzma@bryant.edu

For presentation at the Western Political Science Association annual meeting

March 29, 2018 - San Francisco, CA

**DRAFT ONLY**

**Please do not quote or distribute**

*Abstract:*

How can the construct of the rhetorical presidency help us make sense of the contemporary political environment and the phenomenon of the Trump presidency? This project interprets Jeffrey Tulis's 30-year old construct within today's political context, marked by overwhelming levels of instant information, social media trolling, “tweet storms,” viral memes, “fake news,” “alternative facts,” an average of 3½ connected devices per person, and a pathological obsession with the American presidency. Consequently, the contemporary political order can arguably be described as that of the “hyper-rhetorical presidency.” John DiIulio, former Director of George W. Bush's Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, used this concept in my personal interview with him in 2004, later writing a short essay on the idea in 2007. What he described as the “rhetorical presidency on steroids,” paints the picture of a White House engaged in a constant struggle “to stay hyper-rhetorically ‘on message’ and ‘on offense’ no matter what the polls, Congress, or real-world results and feedback ‘say’” (2007, 321). Yet, the concept was never further developed, by DiIulio nor anyone else, even as its relevance came into focus and presidential utterances strayed further from empirical reality. This project reconstitutes and extends the construct of the hyper-rhetorical presidency to better understand the dynamic currents and contours of our presidency-infatuated political system in the Age of Trump, making a case for its critical insights into the contemporary executive office and the challenges it raises for the American system of governance.

How should we make sense of the phenomenon that is the Trump presidency? For example, how can we explain the glaring lack of rhetorical consistency regarding policy positions displayed by the president and his aides? Or the highly-chaotic organization and regular turnover of administration staff? Or the obvious gaps that exist between basic empirical facts and the president’s definitions of reality? Certainly, convincing arguments can and have been made that variously explain these peculiar features as outcomes of cynical or ingenious political strategy, a lack of governing experience, poor management, a narcissistic personality disorder, and so on. Without precluding these explanations, we can also make sense of the Trump presidency through a wider lens that situates it within a broader political landscape—a distorted system of governance signified by the hyper-rhetorical presidency.

In 2007, the political scientist and former Director of George W. Bush’s White House Office of Faith-Based and Communities Initiatives, John J. DiIulio, Jr., suggested that “Bush’s administration is perhaps best understood as a *hyper*-rhetorical presidency” (318 author’s italics). The original “rhetorical presidency” construct, developed by Jeffrey K. Tulis, argued that the normalization of presidential rhetorical leadership represents a distortion of the executive office envisioned by the Constitution and, with it, “a change in the American meaning of governance” that distorts the broader political order (1987, 6). Twenty years on, DiIulio concluded 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). Based on his experiences within the administration and reflections on relevant scholarship, he saw only the intensification of the troubling conditions in contemporary governance that Tulis identified. However, he left his notion of the hyper-rhetorical presidency largely undeveloped and it has since been neglected in subsequent literature. The current challenge, to make sense of the phenomenon that is “the Trump presidency,” is an invitation to revisit the critical insights of the hyper-rhetorical presidency and further extend DiIulio’s construct.

---

Tulis’s original argument is a valuable starting place for interpreting Donald Trump’s presidency because it 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 primarily not a study of rhetoric, nor of the presidency. In contrast to the presidency-centered perspective that holds sway in scholarship, media discourse, the public imagination, and presidential rhetoric itself—which Tulis dismisses as “institutional partisanship”—it presents a normative argument about systemic and foundational problems within the broader American political order. The rhetorical character of the contemporary presidency both *represents* and *exacerbates* these problems. Situating presidential leadership of public opinion within the 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 behavior and rhetoric in ways that further fetishize the presidency and this president in particular. Instead, it turns the focus to making sense of the Trump presidency as a reflection and further distortion of the contemporary American system of governance.

The Trump presidency, however, is not the rhetorical presidency that Tulis recognized more than three decades ago. It is instead the rhetorical presidency in an age marked by overwhelming levels of instant information, social media trolling, “tweet storms,” viral memes, “fake news,” “alternative facts,” and an average of 3½ connected devices per person. It is also the rhetorical presidency in an age of brutal partisan tribalism, colossal sums of special interest cash, data scraping and the psychographic behavioral targeting of voters, foreign influence, celebritized candidates, contested election results, and intense frustration with the American system of governance. For these reasons and many others, the contemporary political order can arguably be described as one of hyper-reality, orbiting around its nucleus, the hyper-rhetorical presidency.

In this paper, I develop and apply the notion of the hyper-rhetorical presidency as a means to interpret the meaning and significance of the Trump presidency. To do so, I first explain DiIulio’s argument and how it builds on the central components of Tulis’s original conception of the rhetorical presidency. Next, I extend DiIulio’s contribution by providing it with a theoretical grounding that articulates what, exactly, makes the hyper-rhetorical presidency “hyper.” This is followed by an empirical elaboration of the construct, organized around brief case studies that consider three peculiar features of the Trump presidency introduced at the outset: (a) the lack of rhetorical consistency regarding policy positions, (b) the highly-chaotic organization of presidential aides, and (c) the obvious gap between basic empirical facts and presidential definitions of reality. The paper concludes with a discussion of what the hyper-rhetorical presidency means for contemporary American politics and why it matters.

**The Relevance of the Rhetorical Presidency**

Although he is not primarily a presidency scholar, DiIulio brought his political science sensibilities and familiarity with presidential studies literature to his role as an Assistant to the President and the first head of the Faith-Based Office. Reflection on his eight months in the White House, he 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). After leaving the position, as he “struggled for a dispassionate way to summarize what has happened, and to understand why,” he concluded: “My best guide is *The Rhetorical Presidency*” (2007, 318).

According to Tulis, the rhetorical presidency represents “a change in the meaning of governance” (1987, 6) in the United States, which “puts a premium on active and continuous presidential leadership of popular opinion,” (1987, 18). This amounts to a reinterpretation of the political order in which with the constitutional principle of separation of powers and inter-branch policy deliberation are supplanted by a presidency-centered system and rhetoric that 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” (Tulis 1987 4), but accepted as a legitimate tool of governance. 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 presidency 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” have come to overwhelm the American system of governance.

**The Rhetorical Presidency “On Steroids”**

DiIulio’s ‘insider case study’ is the story of these pathologies, their amplification, and the 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 contours of the distorted political landscape represented by the notion of the hyper-rhetorical presidency, nor fully develop the construct itself [2]. DiIulio’s argument has largely been ignored in scholarship on the presidency, garnering brief mentions but no serious considerations. My efforts to revive the construct and make a case for extending its critical insights, however, are assisted by an extensive personal interview that I conducted with him three years before the publication of his essay [3]. Taken together, DiIulio’s interview and essay introduce a rich, if underdeveloped, set of analytical tools for making sense of the phenomenon of the Trump presidency.

DiIulio argues that the hyper-rhetorical presidency represents “the rhetorical presidency on steroids” (2007, 318). To understand what that means, it is helpful to examine the office and how it is situated within the broader political order by looking at four snapshots of the dynamic political environment that it signifies.

* External pressures on the presidency to deliver rhetorically, driven by public expectations and media demand.
* A lack of institutional capacity within the administration to effectively answer these demands.
* The presidency’s need to maintain the perception of power by keeping rhetorically “on offense.”
* The institutionalization of the incentive to employ rhetoric as a replacement for policy action and the normalization of this practice of hyper-rhetorical leadership.

While this list suggests a relationship of linear causality among these elements, they are referred to as snapshots because there is no beginning or end-point to their interactions. Instead, they co-dependently play off one another, with the cumulative upshot of an iterative spiral that includes heightened expectations for presidential leadership, unrealistic and unmet promises, growing public cynicism about the capacity to govern, intensified calls for further empowering the presidency to meet these challenges, heightened expectations for presidential leadership, and so on. The following sections illuminate each of these snapshots and identifies how each is manifested in the contemporary political environment.

*The External Pressure of Expectations and Demands*

DiIulio characterizes the ethos of the hyper-rhetorical presidency as “the politics of having something to say about everything” (2004). During recent administrations, this was professionalized into the “permanent campaign,” which took the form of the generally strategic, sometimes reflexive dissemination of a continuous stream of messaging through ubiquitous spokespeople, press releases, political surrogates, emails, social media, and presidential speeches, statements, comments, and press conferences. To this array of rhetorical tools, President Trump has added persistent tweeting, perhaps signaling the culmination of a nearly-century long effort to “personalize” the presidency.

But why is it necessary for the president to have something to say about everything? DiIulio explains this in terms of the relentless pressure on the White House to provide a presidency-obsessed media with material. In his interview, he explained that media is “demanding answers to things, political things, media things, global things, all day long” (2004). Far from the agenda-setting through communications commonly discussed in presidency scholarship (cite sources), communications are instead largely driven by “happenstance, the bounce of chance, what’s in the news…suddenly [the White House has] to focus on that” (DiIulio 2004).

[Section to be added that frames this using the literature about modern media environment; particularly, Herbst on proliferation of communication options and media noise]

There seem to be no realistic alternatives to this state of affairs. Consider: If media inquiries about the president’s position on an issue such as North Korean nuclear weapons, the White House has something to say. But, for example, if a self-driving Uber kills a pedestrian and the administration is asked about its position on specific regulations regarding self-driving vehicles, it is inconceivable for the White House to respond that it does not have one. Nor can the White House take a few days to review the facts to make an informed decision without appearing unprepared, out-of-touch, or simply unconcerned—*and* ceding media space that demands to be filled to the president’s critics.

[Need evidence and short wrap-up here] This bind applies to all issues, regardless of how limited or specialized they may be, at all times.

*Lack of Institutional Capacity*

Despite this relentless external pressure to deliver rhetorically and otherwise, the ability of the actual apparatus of the presidency to consider and effectively address more than a few key issues at any one time simply does not exist. As DiIulio explains:

“…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*. They can only say “taxes,” “education,” “the Taliban,” “Iraq.” Five of those things at any given time is a mess of things. It’s two or three at any given time. And the usually the world nominates one or two” (2004).

He summed up this state of affairs as “sucking water out of a fire hydrant twenty-four hours a day” (2004). As a result, in contrast to its popular image as the “agenda-setter-in-chief,” in fact the “hyper-rhetorical presidency is one where [presidents] cannot control their agenda” (DiIulio 2004). When a White House ignores a pressing issue, such as the opioid crisis, groups advocating for action and their elected representatives criticize the administration for its lack of concern and for cynically “playing politics” with the issue. However, DiIulio argues that this is often not the case. This “politics as usual” explanation “would be a lot more comforting, in a sense, because it’s sort of a politics we all understand: say one thing do another. It’s disingenuous, it’s cynical, but there it is. [But] that’s not what’s going on” (DiIulio, 2004). The reality of institutional incapacity, as he witnesses 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).

[More to come on this, which grounds DiIulio’s observations in the literature and provides evidence]

*Internal Pressure to Present the Presidency as “In Control”*

The other side of this coin is that the White House must successfully manage and maintain an image of infallibility at all times if it is to sustain its political power. This is demanded by the constructed, popular image in American political culture of the presidency as the center of government, which today is not only pervasive, but “considered normal” (DiIulio 2007, 322). The image itself is a very real power, even if only sustained by perceptions [4]. The depiction of the White House as always “in control” strengthens the president’s hand politically and in the policy-making arena by warding off potential criticisms and allowing for the favorable framing of events and agendas.

And as “the chief inventor and broker of the symbols of American politics” (Zarefsky 1986, 8), the presidency calls on rhetoric in its attempt to adequately 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 White House, therefore, engages in a constant struggle “to stay hyper-rhetorically ‘on message’ and ‘on offense’ no matter what the polls, Congress, or real-world results and feedback ‘say’” (DiIulio 2007, 321). Consequently, the image of power 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 inflates the public’s standards for presidential performance, removing them further and further from reality. Tethered as it is to public opinion, the hyper-rhetorical president faces self-created expectations that, considering limited institutional capacity, cannot possibly be met.

While the tenets of popular leadership dictate that presidents must be (or at least, seem to be) responsive to public opinion, the reality is that the office cannot accomplish in deed that which it continually trumpets in words. Theodore J. Lowi (1985) argues that “[t]he 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). The upshot of this is the significant expectations gap that regularly exists between the promises and high ideals of presidential rhetoric and the realities that presidents can reasonably deliver. Words that are intended to illicit an audience reaction end up sounding hollow and trite, and speech strategically crafted to be inspirational and visionary is often neither. Rather than persuasion, the result of such rhetoric is cynicism.

*The Institutionalization and Normalization of Hyper-Rhetorical Leadership*

From this crucible of external demands, internal pressure, and the lack of institutional capacity to successfully navigate either, emerges the incentive for presidents to opt for a more radical form of rhetorical leadership as a means to maintain the perception of power. And with this incentive has come the institutionalization and normalization of this institutional behavior. The rhetorical presidency, Tulis argued, is organized to give “the president an increased ability to assess public opinion and to manipulate it” (1987, 185). The hyper-rhetorical presidency “is organized (one might say personalized) to do that in its sleep (or while ‘on vacation’), but also to routinely and reflexively defend presidential assertions…no matter how factually, historically, or constitutionally suspect” (DiIulio 2007, 323).

As a result, the structural make-up of the institution itself has fundamentally changed in recent decades. Tulis 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,” to the point that “speechwriters, pollsters, [are] encouraging speech even when there [are] no real issues to address (Tulis 1987, 185). Twenty years later, DiIulio saw the intensification of this state of affairs, in which “the EOP [Executive Office of the President] has become openly organized and operated like a permanent political campaign headquarters.” 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” (2007, 322).

Far short of the research, deliberation, and compromise that goes into a thoughtful development of policy proposals, in this environment “policy gets made (or un-made) on the rhetorical fly” (DiIulio 2007, 322). For example, in the case of Bush’s compassionate conservatism agenda, the White House communications apparatus turned to rhetoric to serve as rapid-response placeholders and symbolic surrogates for more tangible policy proposals. This effort amounted to improvisational policy-making by political strategists and speechwriters, followed by the president’s public deployment of rhetoric to explain these policies, despite the fact that they had not been, nor ever would be, developed (see Holtzman 2010). These presidential speeches themselves were then promoted in “fact sheets” released to the media as some of the administration’s “major accomplishments.” (DiIulio 2007, 319).

Despite the regular disconnect between rhetoric and reality, however, this form of hyper-rhetorical leadership can satisfy media demands for material; if not for days, then at least for one news cycle. As a result, the presidency has the incentive to perpetuate this cycle by endlessly promising “details to follows.” As DiIulio explains, echoing consistent findings from research on media and political sophistication [add note with citations]:

“Most news organizations, even the elite ones, do not delve very deeply into the competing perspectives and empirical evidence surrounding any given policy pronouncement, and only a few reporters know ‘thing one’ about the most basic aspects of intergovernmental relations and public administration. Likewise, hardly anybody knows whether, or how, or why the administration has, in turn, engaged “in detailed negotiations—with the departments, the Hill, and major interest groups—that will produce the administration’s proposals into public law and administrative action.

“Yet nearly everybody knows and reports whether the president has ‘said something’ about a given topic.” (2003, 252)

Politically, there is little price to pay for not doing the heavy lifting of policymaking. However, looked at from a wider lens that considers the implications of this cycle for the broader political order, this state of affairs indicates a significant breakdown in the American system of governing. And it is a breakdown that is further intensified iteration after iteration, as the White House continues to promise the impossible, more deeply securing the constructed image of a presidency-centered system, and ramping up public expectations to increasingly unrealistic levels.

**The Rhetorical Presidency and Hyper-Reality: Three Brief Case Studies**

Based on his experiences within and observations of the Bush presidency, DiIulio understands the hyper-rhetorical presidency as reasserting the relevance, rather than challenging the critical insights of Tulis’s original construct. In this sense, his conception of “hyper” can be understood as a sense of *hyper-activity* that has been layered upon the already-problematic characteristics of the rhetorical presidency identified two decades prior. The rhetoric comes at us faster, more often, more intensely, and from more sources than ever before. This has the effect of widening the gap between rhetoric and reality, as White House personnel attempt to “stay hyper-rhetorically ‘on message’ and ‘on offense” no matter what the polls, Congress, or real-world results and feedback ‘say’” (DiIulio 2007, 321).

The following brief case studies of the Trump presidency suggest the need to add a further layer to DiIulio’s construct. Rhetoric is still divorced from reality and the presidency still aims to stay “on offense,” but the ability—even the attempt—to stay “on message” seems to have disappeared. Communications agenda-setting, bemoaned by Tulis, and the institutional embrace of the permanent campaign, noted by DiIulio, have given way to early-morning, presumably un-vetted tweets from the president and the scrambling of aides to explain, without claims of definitiveness, what Trump may have actually meant. The remainder of my paper argues that making sense of the Trump presidency demands a new layer that conceives of “hyper,” not only in the sense of hyper-active, but borrows from Baudelaire’s theory of *hyper-reality*—namely, the difficulty of effectively distinguishing between reality and its simulation.

[The best part and I’m not there yet! But here is an indication of where I’m going]

*Trump’s Cabinet Room Reality Show*

It has been regularly observed that President Trump sometimes changes his policy positions day-to-day and, on occasion, does not appear to understand the issues.

Focus on discussion with stakeholders in cabinet room, in front of the cameras, about immigration, in which he appeared to not understand what “clean bill” means. And similar discussion on guns in which he floated the idea of taking away guns before due process. Both has to be explained away later.

*A Government of Strangers, Even in the White House*

Cases of president and aides being on different pages

Tweet about transgender persons in the military basically ignored by Pentagon

Considering vetoing spending bill the afternoon of the deadline, after Congress left town

Staff turnover

Hiring of Fox Contributors

*Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics*

It is incontrovertible that President Trump makes things up. According to an analysis conducted by the Washington Post, the president has made false or partially false statements [ ] percent of the time during his first [ ] months in office.

Case of false information regarding popular vote, attendance at presidential inauguration, claim about trade deficit made to Justin Trudeau.

**Implications and Conclusions**

[The following is writing and raw notes that you can ignore]

Beyond subverting Nuestadtian deliberation with Congress and going public. “Besides, isn’t ‘deliberation,’ like reality itself, in the eye of the beholder, and don’t many or most citizen-beholders now prefer sound bites or partisan prattle?” [322] [like Trump’s policy deliberation shows on immigration and guns]

Tulis was concerned of “…possibility that rhetoric designed to make a complex or technical issue intelligible and appealing to those who are not in a position to understand the ‘real’ policy will come to constitute the policy it was supposed to explain.” (1987, 201) [316]

DiIulio mentions “reflexive tendency to offer the presidential word as the policy deed” [very Trump]

[Speech was like policy, or at least confused for it.]

Now the tweet is

 [If not to reflexively defend presidential assertion regarding reality, no matter how suspect].

“Intended to ameliorate crises, the rhetorical presidency is now the creator of crises, or pseudo crises.” (Tulis 181). This holds the initiative.

Trump eschews valence issues, which is the heart of the permanent campaign (DiIulio 2003, 246). Instead, he takes multiple, shifting positions on position issues (and even some issues we presumed were valance issues).

And charges of flip-flopping are long gone

Tulis identified a “steep decline in Constitutional speech” [none today]

“DiIulio’s point is amplified by the presidency of Donald J. Trump.” “Trump has refined an brought to a new extreme the elements of the rhetorical presidency: he has exploited new communications technology to cultivate an unmediated [xiv] relationship with citizens; he has relaxed and abandoned the formalities and norms of propriety that heretofore constrained presidential talk; and he stands poised to normalize demagoguery in the presidency more fully than any president before. Trump is the rhetorical presidency brought to its culmination, and perhaps to its breaking point.” [xv] Maybe not breaking point, but instead another layer on top.

lurches from self-made crisis to crisis.

In 1987, Tulis claimed that rhetorical leadership is the “essence of the modern presidency” (4). “The diagnostic power of The Rhetorical Presidency seems to multiply with each new administration.” (Foreword to 2nd edition, [xiv]) Tulis lamented that the presidency’s turn to rhetorical popular leadership subverts deliberation and impedes compromise between the White House and Capitol Hill, robbing the latter of its constitutional role in the legislative process. What do tweets do?

Undoubtedly, going public remains an important motive for the use of presidential rhetoric. Yet, the fact that rhetorical leadership is today a principal governing strategy does not mean that its objectives are necessarily limited to the persuasion of Congress and the passage of legislation. The primary concerns of hyper-rhetorical presidency are more immediate and less substantial—maintaining the image of power by advantageously “defining political reality” (Zarefsky 2004), keeping the initiative to highlight the president’s responsiveness to public concerns, and doing so in a way that allows the White House to adequately address pressing policy issues that cannot be dealt with rhetorically.

The bottom line that there are essentially no political incentives for presidents to develop concrete policies, let alone support accompanying legislation, for anything but their very 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. Previous argued that the White House is motivated to frame policy initiatives in the broadest possible terms. In contrast to the strategy of going public, the primary objective of such rhetoric is not to influence Congress—it is rather a tool of political survival. Consequently, for the hyper-rhetorical presidency, cultivating and sustaining a relationship with Capitol Hill is not a priority. [cite myself]. Way beyond this.

It’s possible that the Trump presidency simply fails to paper over (or doesn’t care) the perpetual crises that existed in past recent administrations.

Not fulfilling the rhetorical norms of the office, but why should we care? Because it tells is something about our current political order and the diagnosis isn’t good. The hyper-rhetorical presidency represents the continued distortion of these manifestations of the rhetorical presidency. It is more than a logical extension, and further perversion, of the rhetorical presidency envisioned by Wilson. It has entered the realm of the illogical.

**Notes**

[1] Although fully developed by Tulis, for the original formulation of the “rhetorical presidency” thesis see Ceaser, Thurow, Tulis, and Bessette, “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency” (1981).

[2] DiIulio is very clear about leaving the hyper-rhetorical construct generally undeveloped and 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 such as 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 rhetorical presidency merit further reflection and research” (DiIulio 2007, 319).

[3] DiIulio first mentioned the notion of the “hyper-rhetorical presidency” to me during an interview in Philadelphia, PA, on May 20, 2004, conducted for my doctoral dissertation research. I am grateful to Professor DiIulio for introducing me to the idea and supporting my efforts to run with it.

[4] This argument regarding the perception of presidential power has perhaps been made most succinctly by former U.S. Representative John P. Murtha (D-PA):

“You know its 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).

**References**

Ceaser, James W., Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette. 1981. “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11 (2): 158–71.

DiIulio, Jr., John J. 2003. “A View From Within.” In *The George W. Bush Presidency: An Early Assessment*, Edited by Greenstein, Fred I., 245–59. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

DiIulio, Jr., John J. 2004. Personal Interview, Philadelphia, PA, May 20.

DiIulio, Jr., John J. 2007. “The Hyper-Rhetorical Presidency.” *Critical Review* 19 (2–3): 315–24.

Holtzman, Richard. 2010. “George W. Bush’s Rhetoric of Compassionate Conservatism and Its Value as a Tool of Presidential Politics.” *Issues in Political Discourse Analysis* 3 (1): 1-21.

Murtha, John P. 2006. “Interview with Michael J. Brna.” Veterans Oral Histories Project, California University of Pennsylvania, California, PA, April 18. <http://www.cup.edu/education/aam/index.jsp?pageId=1580830010421160991206470> (December 2008).

Tulis, Jeffrey. 1987. *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Wilson, Woodrow. 1908. *Constitutional Government in the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press. <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=CsWh4c7X-Y0C&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA4>

Zarefsky, David. 1986. *President Johnson’s War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History*. University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press.