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| “You Didn’t Build That,” Obama’s Opponents, and the Political Spectacle |
| An Interpretive Analysis of Presidential Rhetoric and Reaction |
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“If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you’ve got a business—**you didn’t build that**. Somebody else made that happen. (…) The point is, is that when we succeed, we succeed because of our individual initiative, but also because we do things together.”

*--President Barack Obama, July 13, 2012*

“[Obama] says, you know, you think you’ve been successful because you’re smart, but he says a lot of people are smart. You think you’ve been successful because you work hard, a lot of people work hard. This is an ideology which says ‘hey, we’re all the same here, we ought to take from all and give to one another and that achievement, individual initiative and risk-taking and success are not to be rewarded as they have in the past. It’s a very strange and in some respects foreign to the American experience type of philosophy. (…) So his whole philosophy is an upside-down philosophy that does not comport with the American experience.”

*--Mitt Romney, Republican Presidential Candidate, July 23, 2012*

The notion of the “public presidency” occupies a prominent position in the study of the modern office. The empirical effectiveness and normative implications of presidential efforts to shape public opinion through media are matters of debate, but it is clear that these efforts have become a defining feature of the contemporary institution; perhaps the very “essence of the modern presidency” (Tulis 1987, 4). Therefore, when it comes to understanding the nature of the presidency in American politics, we can start from the presumption that words matter.

When studying the presidency, it is also safe to assume that political language is strategic. It may be ineffective in its consequences or difficult to measure, but its intention is to serve as a tool for persuasion. Questions concerning the ability of presidential rhetoric to move public opinion, to frame public problems and policy solutions, to define oneself or one’s opponents, are all grounded in this assumption. My intention is not dispute this conception of political language-as-instrument, but rather to suggests that there is more to the story—that is, efforts to articulate the significance of presidential rhetoric are not exhausted by causal explanations and assessments of whether it “works” or not. Alongside the search for causality are interpretive searches for meaning. This interpretive approach asks different questions and considers why and how political language “matters” in different ways.

The following is an interpretive analysis of rhetoric, both presidential and oppositional. It is focused on President Barack Obama’s use of the words “you didn’t build that” during a 2012 campaign rally and the rhetorical reaction to this remark crafted by the president’s opponents. A cursory examination of Obama’s speech suggests that this line was seemingly spoken off-the-cuff; perhaps meant to provide extra rhetorical punch to his broader argument about the relationship between society and individual success. The remark was neither a key point in his speech, nor one that he or his advisors made a point of clarifying in the immediate days after the campaign rally. However, after lying nascent for three days, his opponents transformed these words into a nearly-ubiquitous meme that rapidly invaded public discourse through campaign advertisements, social media outlets, mass media, and the blogosphere. As this political spectacle grew, so did the intensity of right-wing conservatives, who understood these words as a revelation of the “real” Obama. Seizing the opportunity, the Romney campaign fashioned a narrative to bring coherence to this rhetorical reaction which sought to define Obama by casting his “ideology” as “strange,” “foreign,” and, by implication, un-American.

The Romney campaign’s response to Obama’s “you didn’t build that” remark exemplified a familiar strategy in contemporary American politics: taking advantage of an opponent’s verbal gaffe—or manufacturing the gaffe by taking statements out of context—in order to rouse one’s political base. They did so by crafting a narrative aimed at striking a chord with Obama’s opponents; just as subsequent efforts by the president’s campaign to explain what he “really meant” were likewise crafted. Approaching the uses of political language in this case as a strategic tool can lead the researcher to insightful conclusions about intentions, tactics, and effects. But there is more to be mined from this episode. This paper’s interpretive approach seeks to move beyond causal explanations by beginning with a different question: What makes this rhetoric meaningful?

With a particular focus on the rhetorical reaction of Obama’s opponents, this paper asks: How did the oppositional narrative created in reaction to the president’s remark imbue his words with meaning and why did this meaning have such a strong “grip” on some, yet seem completely meaningless to others? In other words, political campaigns attempt to negatively define their opponents on a daily basis, so why did this narrative “stick” and remain in the public discourse while most others do not? And what insights can an interpretive analysis of this episode offer for our understanding of the rhetorical nature of contemporary presidential politics?

My argument consists of three claims. First, more than just a strategic instrument, political language should be recognized as an expression political reality. Regardless of whether it satisfies the strategic aims of those who craft and speak them, these words[[1]](#footnote-1) are the “stuff” of politics. Second, we cannot adequately understand presidential rhetoric without situating it within a broader context that also considers oppositional rhetoric. Presidents may have the bully pulpit, but their definitions of political reality must still contend with competing claims. Third, efforts to conceptually construct the situational contexts in which political language “makes meaning” should recognize the presence of broader, submerged discourses. Identifying and articulating these discourses can help us better understand particular rhetorical episodes, as well as defining features and dynamics of American rhetorical politics more generally.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first introduces the “you didn’t build that” case by exploring its situational context, Obama’s speech, and his opponent’s rhetorical reaction. The next three sections take up the three claims that constitute my argument—political language defines political reality, the significance of oppositional rhetoric, and the need to recognize the import of discourses in our understanding of situational context. The final section of the paper offers conclusions.

**“…you didn’t build that”: Presidential Rhetoric and the Creation of a Political Spectacle**

*The Context*

By mid-summer of 2012, the American people were already more than a year into a presidential campaign that was “incredibly consequential and incredibly boring all at the same time” (Brooks 2012). As the campaign entered its final months, public opinion polls indicated a tight race with neither candidate establishing a sizable lead. According to Larry Sabato (2013), “underlying electoral conditions favored [Obama]—not by a wide margin, but just enough.” In particular, the distribution of reliably-Democratic voters led to a favorable Electoral College map for Obama and shifting demographic trends had increased the voting-age population of his core electorate. The president’s first four years were not marked by any significant scandals or failures, two unpopular wars were winding down, the national economy was weak but was slowly recovering, and the Republican brand had still not fully escaped the shadow of George W. Bush’s unpopularity (Sabato 2013, 10-11).

Yet, Obama’s supporters exhibited little of the energy that had defined his 2008 campaign. Additionally, the weak economy and high unemployment numbers opened wide a door of opportunity for Romney. No president since Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936 had been reelected with an unemployment rate as high as the 8 percent marker, around which the rate hovered throughout 2012—it was 7.9 percent on Election Day (Hirschfeld Davis 2012). The question was whether the opposition candidate could successfully take advantage of this opening. Certainly the defining policy issues of the campaign, according to voters’ concerns, played into the hands of Republicans—not simply the economy and jobs, but the growing federal budget deficit and national debt, concerns about ability to sustain expensive entitlement programs, and a growing tax burden for businesses and individuals. The issues that the president might be able to make a strong case on—health care reform and foreign policy—were pushed into the background as voters, by clear majorities, indicated that they were “most concerned about the economy and saw it stagnating or deteriorating rather than improving” (Hirschfeld Davis 2012). Roughly two out of every three Americans indicated that the direction of the country was seriously off course and Obama’s overall job performance had not received the approval of a majority of Americans in over a year (Balz and Cohen 2012). The Romney campaign’s pollster, Neil Newhouse, found the public attitude to be “extra­ordinarily negative” (quoted in Kranish 2012). Therefore, while underlying conditions may have slightly favored the incumbent, Obama found himself in a vulnerable position.

Despite the tight race, many voters seemed to be turned off by the confluence of entrenched partisan polarization, historic levels of campaign spending, and the dominance of negative attack strategies. At the time of Obama’s “you didn’t build that” remark, in July 2012, almost nine out of ten likely voters had already determined who they would be voting for in December. Additionally, nine out of ten Republicans indicated they would be voting for Romney, while the same proportion of Democrats indicated their support for Obama (Balz and Cohen 2012). Consequently with very few undecided voters to persuade and very little chance to “steal” voters from the other party, the candidates’ priority was not to do the difficult work of gaining new supporters, but rather to energize those who were already safely in their corner.

The resulting use of harsh tactics and extreme rhetoric made 2012 “one of the most partisan campaigns in recent memory” (Cohen and Balz 2012). These harsh tactics predominantly took the form of vitriolic advertisements, largely funded by independent expenditures. The Supreme Court’s *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision two years prior had not only abolished spending limits for contributions that were spent independently of the candidates’ official campaigns, but allowed for those funds to be contributed anonymously. In fact, more than a quarter of the $2 billion dollars spent on the 2012 presidential election was poured into issue advertisements by SuperPACs and nonprofit “social welfare” organizations (Braun and Gillum 2012). These independent expenditures supported Romney by more than a three to one margin ($418,610,490 to $131,217,824), outspent the Republican Party ($386,180,565) and nearly matched the official Romney campaign ($433,281,516) (see Center for Responsive Politics 2013).

This non-coordinated spending allowed candidates, their campaigns, and the political parties to distance themselves from vile personal attacks against their opponents, shielding them from public blame, yet reaping the benefits of the damage done by their unofficial surrogates. The result was not only the most expensive presidential campaign in American history, but one of the most negative campaigns as well. As of October 2012, 80 percent of the advertisements distributed by the Obama campaign and 84 percent of those from the Romney campaign were negative. And independent groups ran negative advertisements more than 90 percent of the time (see Hunt 2012). These advertisements sought to exploit the emotions of frustrated citizens though personal attacks that placed the blame for complex national problems at the feet of the opposing candidate.

This strategy of personalizing the presidential race was particularly important for Romney’s campaign, which understood that (1) Republicans did not find their candidate especially likable, but (2) many of them loathed Obama. In July, the president held more than a two-to-one edge over his challenger among all voters on the question of who is “more friendly and likable;” even a third of those who planned to vote for Romney considered Obama the more likeable of the two (Balz and Cohen 2012; Hirschfeld Davis 2012). However, according to a poll taken just days before Obama’s “you didn’t build that” remark, almost six of out ten supporters of Romney indicated that their planned vote would actually be cast “against” Obama, rather than in support of their own candidate (Craighill 2012). In fact, according to a *Washington Post-ABC News* poll, 84 percent of Republicans viewed Obama unfavorably, which is the highest such unfavorable rating ever measured by this poll, topping the Republicans view of Bill Clinton in 1996 (78 percent unfavorable) and Democrats’ opinion of George W. Bush in 2004 (76 percent unfavorable) (Cillizza, Clement, & Blake 2012). David Brooks explained this as “negative passion,” in which partisans are “driven more by hatred than by love” and “feel it would be a disaster for the country if the other side had power during the next four years” (2012).

Romney was not the only presidential candidate who engaged in this line of attack. On July 13, hours before making his “you didn’t guild that” remark, the Obama campaign released an online video called “Mitt Romney’s Bain Secret Exposed.” The video raised questions about whether Romney had been truthful regarding the date on which he ceded control of his multi-billion dollar hedge fund, Bain Capital, and called on Romney to release his tax returns (see Nakamura 2012). The campaign’s strategy was to spend heavily on advertisements throughout the summer that directly attacked Romney’s character in order to negatively define the presumptive Republican nominee before he had the opportunity to define himself. While this approach was atypical for an incumbent candidate, it was paying dividends by keeping Romney on the defensive, dominating the news cycle, and leaving little room for alternative narratives about his character.

*The Speech*

That evening, July 13, Obama sought to energize and mobilize his base at a campaign rally attended by an intensely-supportive audience of about 3000 people at Fire Station #1 in Roanoke, Virginia. From the outset, the crowd was energetic, loud, and responsive as the president painted a picture of stark contrasts. He explained:

What’s at stake is a decision between two fundamentally different views about where we take the country right now. […] The outcome of this debate that we’re having is going to set the stage not just for the next year or five years, but for the next twenty (Obama 2012a).

Following the line of argument that his campaign had been making throughout the summer and reiterated in their “Bain Secret Exposed” advertisement released earlier that day, Obama portrayed Romney’s economic priorities—identified by the president as “top-down economics”—as proxies for his opponent’s character. He explained “this is just a small example of the difference between myself and Mr. Romney.” He then littered his speech with a list of examples suggesting that Romney was out-of-touch with the needs of the middle class and was only concerned about wealthy Americans like himself:

When the auto industry was about to go under, a million jobs lost...my opponent said, “let’s let Detroit go bankrupt.”

My opponent, he invested in companies who are called “pioneers” of outsourcing.

…my opponent’s philosophy when it comes to dealing with homeowners is, let the market bottom out and let as many foreclosures happen as it takes.

By contrast, Obama framed his own economic philosophy in three distinct ways. First, he distinguished himself from Romney by restating his opening definition of the election as “a decision between two fundamentally different views” in personal terms, transitioning from repeating “my opponent” to repeating “I”:

Now, we don’t need more top-down economics. I’ve got a different view. I believe that the way you grow the economy is from the middle out. I believe that you grow the economy from the bottom up. I believe that when working people are doing well, the country does well.

Second, he framed his philosophy as an embodiment of the American Dream; implicitly suggesting that any position contrary to his (i.e., Romney’s, as he portrayed it) is antithetical to this creed. Stealing a page from the conservative rhetorical playbook, Obama explained:

…at the heart of this country, its central idea is the idea that in this country, if you’re willing to work hard, if you’re willing to take responsibility, you can make it if you try. […] That’s the idea of America. It doesn’t matter what you look like. It doesn’t matter where you come from. It doesn’t matter what your last name is. You can live out the American Dream. […] Our goal isn’t just to put people back to work—although that’s priority number one—it is to build an economy where that work pays off. An economy where everyone, whether you are starting a business or punching a clock, can see your hard work and responsibility rewarded.

And third, the president leavened this individualist vision of economic success with a New Deal-style reference to “that basic American bargain that makes us the greatest country on Earth.” He reminded the crowd: “The point is, is that when we succeed, we succeed because of our individual initiative, but also because we do things together.”

His inclusion of the phrase “The point is…” at the start of this statement is telling. Obama had preceded it with remarks that were perhaps intended to serve as a build-up for his key declaration that we are all in this together. However, these preceding lines were fragmented, seemingly unscripted, and lacking in clarity and direction—thereby demanding the insertion of “The point is…” at their conclusion to bring needed coherence:

There are a lot of wealthy, successful Americans who agree with me -- because they want to give something back. They know they didn’t -- look, if you’ve been successful, you didn’t get there on your own. You didn’t get there on your own. I’m always struck by people who think, well, it must be because I was just so smart. There are a lot of smart people out there. It must be because I worked harder than everybody else. Let me tell you something -- there are a whole bunch of hardworking people out there.

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you’ve got a business -- you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen. The Internet didn’t get invented on its own. Government research created the Internet so that all the companies could make money off the Internet.

The point is, is that when we succeed, we succeed because of our individual initiative, but also because we do things together (Obama 2012a).

Ten minutes prior, Obama had channeled Ronald Reagan, declaring that “if you’re willing to work hard, if you’re willing to take responsibility, you can make it if you try.” Then, in the minds of the president’s opponents, the four words that followed—“you didn’t build that”—revealed him for what he truly was: anti-American.

*Rhetorical Reaction and the Creation of a Political Spectacle*

On the day of Obama’s campaign rally in Roanoke, Romney’s campaign was in crisis mode and on the defensive. That afternoon, a Friday, following the release of the “Bain Secret Exposed” attack ad, Romney surrogates gave five television interviews to rebut the accusations. However, over the weekend, Romney’s words indicated an effort to transition from defensiveness to confidence. At a fundraiser in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, he stated: “I’m not going to apologize for being a successful businessman. Those who take risks sometimes succeed brilliantly, wonderfully and that makes us a stronger economy” (quoted in Nakamura and Henderson 2012). His silence in regards to the president’s “you didn’t build that” remark seem to indicate that it had initially gone unnoticed by the campaign as an opportunity to return to attack mode. Likewise, media coverage stayed focused on the accusations leveled by Obama’s attack ad and this momentum carried straight through the weekend.

The first news story to call attention to the president’s remark, entitled “Obama to business owners: ‘You didn’t build that,’” was published by *FoxNews.com* on Monday, three days after the campaign rally in Roanoke (Fox News 2012). No other media outlet picked up the story that day, but the Fox story was “shared” on social media more than 28,000 times in less than 24 hours (Weigel 2012). On Tuesday, critical responses to Obama’s statement appeared in a small number of newspaper editorials and Romney finally pounced during a campaign speech in Irwin, Pennsylvania. After quoting the president’s comment, he explained: “That ‘somebody else’ is government in his view.” Romney then interpreted this view as “both startling and revealing,” thereby suggesting that it represented an unmasking of the “true” Obama. Latching onto a portrayal of the president as un-American, which had enlivened the “birther movement” during his 2008 campaign and the subsequent Tea Party-inspired opposition to his health care reform efforts, Romney declared: “I find it extraordinary that a philosophy of that nature would be spoken by a President of the United States” (2012a).

Just as Obama had done days before, Romney employed an attack strategy that drew stark contrasts between him and the president by using the latter’s words as a proxy for his character and framing his own philosophy as a representation of American Exceptionalism and the American Dream:

I’m convinced that President Obama’s efforts to denigrate and diminish success and individual achievement would diminish us all… I’ll tell you this: I’m convinced he wants Americans to be ashamed of success. I want Americans to welcome it, to celebrate success, to encourage people to reach as high as they can and in some cases to build enterprises. I don’t want government to take credit for what the individuals of America accomplish. Whether they work in government or work in the private sector, it’s the people of America that make America the unique nation, the exceptional nation that it is (Romney 2012a).

*Fox News* was the first to “break” the story, but it was Romney’s speech that transformed Obama’s remarks into a coherent and lasting narrative.

By the next morning, *The Washington Post*’s Aaron Blake identified “Obama’s ‘You didn’t build that’ problem,” noting that it “is starting to gain traction on the campaign trail.” Reporting that Republicans “have increasingly fixated on the remark as Case Study No. 1 when it comes to Obama’s big-government philosophy,” he concluded that “it just might work” (Blake 2012). The next day, Kathleen Hennessey at *The Los Angeles Times* wrote: “If you haven’t already, you will soon encounter an email, blog post or hashtag mocking President Obama for his recent comments about business and success. […] No Romney surrogate worth his or her salt has spoken in the last few days without mentioning it. Romney’s campaign is raising money off the quote, with an email solicitation that describes it as nothing less than ‘a slap in the face to the American Dream’” (2012). In his article for *Slate*, titled “Memewatch: Did Obama Say That Successful People Didn’t Earn What They Have?,” David Weigel concluded by quipping: “High-level political journalism means waiting for politicians to say things the wrong way, and then making progressively bigger fusses about that” (2012). He was prescient: within the week Obama’s opponents, through mass and social media, had successfully transformed “you didn’t build that” into a full-blown political spectacle.

The Romney campaign contributed to building the momentum of this spectacle by holding twenty-four events on July 25 with small business owners in multiple swing states (Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Virginia, Ohio, Iowa, Missouri, North Carolina, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Mexico and Nevada). They also produced a television advertisement spotlighting small business owners and their visceral reactions to Obama’s remark (see Horsley 2012). Additionally, a new section of the official Romney campaign website called “Built By Us” was created and “Built By Us” merchandise was produced. These t-shirts, posters, and buttons displaying slogans such as “Government didn’t build my business, I did” were pitched by Romney’s son, Tagg, who explained: “Built By Us is a rallying cry, and also a celebration of the people who truly make America work,” adding, “I think we can all agree we need a President who embraces success, instead of demonizing it” (quoted in *CNN.com* 2012).

While these “pseudo-events”[[2]](#footnote-2) caught the attention of mass media, the oppositional narrative quickly took on a life of its own in the hands of conservative radio and cable TV commentators, social media, and the blogosphere. Within a day, #StupidThingsObamaWouldSay became one of the most popular hashtags on Twitter, with tweets parodying Obama’s remark (“If you & your wife had a baby, you didn’t father it. Others did.” “If you have an Olympic Gold Medal in an individual event, you didn’t win it. Others did.”). *The Daily Beast* named it the “meme of the week” and featured satirical posters that had been posted on Tumblr and Reddit, such as an image that juxtaposed Obama’s remark with a photograph of Apple’s founder Steve Jobs introducing the iPod. Within days, the Republican Party followed suit and posted a black-and-white photograph of the Wright Brothers and their airplane with a superimposed image of Obama saying: “You guys didn’t build that!” on their official website, GOP.com (see *The Daily Beast* 2012). Rush Limbaugh interpreted the meaning of Obama’s remarks to his radio listeners in this way: “It can now be said, without equivocation—without equivocation—that this man hates this country. Barack Obama is trying to dismantle, brick by brick, the American Dream” (quoted in Kirell 2012).

Limbaugh’s narrative—that Obama’s remark was not a gaffe, but a revelation—was a pervasive one. Behind it is the belief that the “true” Obama had been revealed and that he is driven by an ideology that is inherently un-American. In his stump speech on Wednesday, July 18, in Bowling Green, Ohio, Romney declared “[Obama] said something...which really reveals what he thinks about our country, about our people, about free enterprise, about freedom, about individual initiative, about America” (quoted in Baker 2012). By the following Tuesday, the Republican National Committee was circulating a web video with the message: “These aren’t gaffes. This is what Obama believes” (GOP.com 2012). And conservative bloggers identified the president’s comments as “The Obama Doctrine,” which stated “his goal to end constitutional protections over private property and therefore the pursuit of happiness” (The Cranky Housewife 2012).

The momentum of this political spectacle snowballed as political actors, mass media, and internet commentary fed each other. And unlike most political spectacles, this one had staying power, despite the Obama campaign’s concerted efforts to deflect it. Six weeks later, it still remained such a powerful narrative that organizers chose to make it the defining theme of the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida. *NPR*’s Ron Elving observed: “At the Tampa convention, this line of attack, legitimate or not, all but took over the proceedings” (2012). Its first full day, August 27, was dedicated to the theme “We Built It,” complete with a giant banner and a crowd of thousands repeatedly chanting these words for the television cameras. That evening also saw the debut of a country song, inspired by the manufactured controversy (“I built it with my own hardworking hands / I built it, no help from Uncle Sam”). Obama’s opponents rhetorically manipulated the president’s remarks for strategic political purposes, undoubtedly. But its significance ranges far beyond this instrumental interpretation. As Elving reported: “In Tampa, it became increasingly clear that Republicans, or at least those who attended this convention, truly believe this characterization of the president” (2012). How can we explain this? Why did the oppositional narrative underlying this political spectacle have such a strong and lasting “grip”?

**My Argument, Restated**

I argue that an interpretive approach to understanding this case can illuminate dimensions that are beyond the purview of a more instrumental approach. Through such an analysis we can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the rhetorical nature of contemporary presidential politics. As indicted at the outset, this argument consists of three claims that will be addressed below: (1) Beyond its service as a strategic instrument, political language should be understood as an expression of political reality and, therefore, as weapons in the struggle for power. (2) Examinations of presidential rhetoric are inherently limited if not situated in a broader context that also considers oppositional rhetoric. (3) In addition to recognizing the place of oppositional rhetoric, efforts to conceptually construct the situational contexts in which political language makes meaning should seek to identify and articulate the significance of broader, submerged discourses.

*Political Language as an Expression of Political Reality*

Scholarly literature on political language can be broadly categorized into three approaches, perhaps best conceived as forming a spectrum that ranges from instrumental to interpretive.[[3]](#footnote-3) The first approach understands language as one among a range of presidential leadership tools, employed to bring about a particular policy outcome through persuasion. The primary aim of this instrumental approach is assessing the success and failure of rhetorical leadership, and drawing conclusions about its implications for presidential power, rather than focusing on the nature of persuasive speech itself. Therefore, the fundamental question it considers is: Does it work? This dimension is best represented by Samuel Kernell’s (1986) notion of “going public” and subsequent critiques of this theory, the most notable of which is provided by George Edwards (2003, 2007).

The second approach also considers the strategic element of political language, like Kernell and Edwards, but does so by exploring the relationship between its meaning-making capacity and its impact. In other words, focusing more on investigating and identifying various forms of persuasive speech itself, this types and tactics approach asks: How does it work? Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson’s (2008) study of the genres of presidential discourse, Bruce Miroff’s (2010) conception of the “presidential spectacle,’ and Mary Stuckey’s (2004) exploration of presidential definitions of national identity are some of the seminal contributions representing this approach.

The third dimension includes variations of an interpretive approach that sidelines instrumental concerns to instead focus on analyzing the role of language as a maker of meaning. According to Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, an interpretive approach seeks “to understand what a thing ‘is’ by learning what it does, how particular people use it, in particular contexts” (2012, 23). Therefore, when examining political language, the aim is explore what it means to particular actors in particular contexts and then consider explanations of these attributions of meaning. The fundamental question asked by interpretive scholars is: *How* does it mean? This approach is best exemplified in the work of Murray Edelman (1977, 1988) and its applications to the study of presidential rhetoric are best represented by David Zarefsky’s (2002, 2004a, 2004b) notion of “presidential definition.”

My project aims to demonstrate the explanatory value of this third approach. As seen in the case study above, political language was employed as a strategic instrument—both Obama and Romney sought to define the other by creating strawmen of their respective arguments. Their purpose was to raise questions about their opponent’s character and beliefs in efforts to mobilize their political bases. And yet, while insightful, this instrumental understanding does not and cannot address the question of how these competing narratives made meaning or why the rhetorical response to Obama’s “you didn’t build that” remark transformed into a formidable and lasting political spectacle.

By contrast, an interpretive approach “potentially reveals (or raises questions about) assumed, unspoken or taken-for-granted ideas about a range of values, beliefs, and/or feelings,” which “can tell us a lot about the world of which it is part” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 23). Drawing on this approach, we can explore the “you didn’t build that” episode as a window through which we might better view some of the features and dynamics of contemporary American politics that too often escape notice. These submerged features and dynamics are discussed below in my third claim concerning the place of discourses, but before moving on a more in-depth consideration of my claim that political language is an expression of political reality is necessary.

Political language matters to the study of politics because it constitutes the building blocks of our constructions of political reality. Remarks, such as Obama’s “you didn’t build that,” have no essential or inherent fixed meanings; they are interpreted within particular contexts from the particular points of view of interested actors. These interpretations take the form of narratives, within which language is situated and thereby made meaningful. Consequently, as demonstrated above by the struggle over the meaning of the words “you didn’t build that,” politics can be understood as competitions between narratives that each proffer dueling interpretations of what a particular phenomenon means and why it matters.

For uncritical consumers of political information or those deeply ensconced in partisan echo chambers, it may appear as if political actors are simply explaining the “facts” of a situation. Yet, as Edelman argues, “language is the key creator of the social world people experience, not a tool for describing objective reality” (1988, 103). These explanations are always interpretations and therefore are always political in that “political actors *deliberately portray* them in ways calculated to gain support for their side” (Stone 1989, 282, author’s italics). This is, to borrow the words of the William Riker, “the art of structuring the world so you can win” (1968, ix). When narratives gain traction and are reproduced by mass and social media, they constitute a political spectacle, in which political actors and media “continuously constructs and reconstructs social problems, enemies, crises, and leaders and so creates a succession of threats and reassurances” (Edelman 1988, 1). In the “you didn’t build that” case, the rhetorical response manufactured by Obama’s opponents created a world in which the president’s “very strange and…foreign to the American experience type of philosophy” (Romney 2012b) was the problem. Obama was an enemy of the American Dream; he was a national threat and Romney’s presidential candidacy was the reassurance.

Therefore, in the struggle for power, competing definitions of reality are weapons. 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).

What we experience when we observe the realm of politics is most often not conditions and events themselves, but rather the symbolic language that depicts them. Consequently, “political language *is* political reality; there is no other so far as the meaning of events to actors and spectators is concerned” (Edelman 1988, 104 author’s italics). But who gives meaning to political reality?

*Presidential and Oppositional Rhetoric*

The positions of power from which actors attempt to persuasively interpret phenomena are not equal for all, and therefore neither are opportunities to compete in this negotiation of reality (see Edelman 1988). Presidents, as the “chief inventor and broker of the symbols of American politics,” occupy an incomparable position from which to define political reality (Zarefsky 1986, 8). Yet, they cannot do so with impunity.[[4]](#footnote-4) Obama’s inability to redirect public focus from his “you didn’t build that” remark in the face of the powerful political spectacle that emerged demonstrates these limitations. Therefore, it follows that an understanding of the contemporary presidency and its rhetorical essence demands a consideration of the dynamics of its relationship with oppositional rhetoric.

The “public presidency” is reliant on informal powers, such as the ability to mobilize popular opinion and cultivate an image of leadership. As Richard Neustadt (1990) argues, the system of separated powers restricts the ability of presidents to simply command others to do their bidding; so instead they must rely on the power of persuasion. However, with the proliferation of modern mass and social media, the primary means of presidential persuasion has shifted from bargaining with political elites to mediated communication with citizens. As my review of the literature on presidential rhetoric indicates, the potential political benefits of using the bully pulpit to favorably frame events, issues, and individuals (including themselves) have not been lost on presidents and their strategists. Consequently, the construction of narratives has increasingly become the central feature of presidential leadership.

Of course, the effectiveness of presidential rhetoric is dependent on an array of factors. Much research has focused on factors such as a president’s rhetorical skill, understanding of the issue at hand, recognition of various audiences and their respective interests, and ability to interpret the challenges and constraints of particular situations. While these factors are wholly in a president’s hands, we cannot ignore that presidents regularly find themselves in rhetorical situations—such as that brought about by the “you didn’t build that” spectacle—that either spin out of their control or were never under control in the first place. One of the primary reasons for this lack of control is the noise generated by oppositional narratives which, with the advent of 24-hour cable news and the ubiquity of the internet, has become increasingly louder and more distracting.

The case at hand demonstrates that political language does not exist in a vacuum and that oppositional rhetoric is a central feature of the situational context in which presidential rhetoric is situated. In an attempt to reclaim the message from Romney, the Obama campaign vigorously protested that his remark had been taken out-of-context (Obama 2012b) and accused the Republicans of “distorting the president’s words” (quoted in Hennessey 2012). Within days, the president appeared in an advertisement explaining:

Of course Americans build their own businesses. Every day hardworking people sacrifice to meet a payroll, create jobs, and make our economy run. And what I said was that we need to stand behind them as America always has (Obama 2012b).

Despite these efforts, Obama had already lost this episode in the struggle to define political reality. Without considering the role of oppositional rhetoric from this interpretive standpoint, the “you didn’t build that” spectacle might be attributed simply to a verbal gaffe, brought about by the lack of clarity and coherence in the president’s speech. But there is nothing essential or inherent to any remark that makes it a gaffe or, in the minds of Obama’s opponents, a revelation. Meaning is imposed by interpreters of political language and, in this case, meanings that coalesced into a political spectacle were manufactured by the opposition. But why was this oppositional narrative meaningful? *How* did it mean?

*The Place of Discourse in the Conceptual Construction of Situational Context*

Conceptually constructing the situational context in which political language makes meaning provides a method to analyze how it makes meaning. It is also a means to explore why some narratives, such as that reflected in the “you didn’t build that” case, come to “grip” the public discourse while others fail to gain traction. If politics is a competition to define reality, it is essential to articulate the defining features and dynamics of the context within which this competition takes place and meaning is made. The reason, framed negatively, is that if political language and context seem at odds, the former will fall on deaf ears.

Along with oppositional narratives, institutional and structural features—such as constitutional and statutory laws, the organization of government and distribution of its powers, impending elections, voter turnout and composition, media influence, interest groups, political parties, and so on—define the landscape within which struggles for power occur. Additionally, as Christopher Bosso argues, “culture, commonly held values, ideology, political socialization, and ideas all matter” (1994, 182). Narratives are called into existence by the particulars of its situational context—the rhetoric exists as a response to a particular situation and its meaning is constructed within the context of that situation. In the case at hand, the oppositional narrative was called into existence by Obama’s “you didn’t built that” remark. Without this remark, Romney’s rhetoric would have taken an alternative form and had an alternative meaning.

At the same time, beyond reflecting its situational context, narratives seek to shape the context in which they are situated by advantageously defining and redefining it. For the researcher, this raises obvious analytical challenges. For example, Romney’s interpretation of Obama’s “upside-down philosophy that does not comport with the American experience” (2012b) is fundamentally intertwined with the context within which his narrative emerged—the rhetoric is simultaneously a product of this context and a co-creator of it. Consequently, the dynamic and complex relationships between context and political language cannot be studied as static phenomena; nor can the defining aspects of a particular context, itself a conceptual construction and therefore contestable, be outlined in full. Yet, important characteristics of particular situational contexts can be imperfectly isolated and interpretively explored.

As a systematic means to analyze the terrain of this meaning-making environment, Lloyd Bitzer offers the construct of the “rhetorical situation,” which is constituted by “a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence” that demands a rhetorical response (1968, 6). This perspective was adapted to the study of presidential rhetoric by Martin Medhurst, who argues that Bitzer’s rhetorical situation “parallels the political situation faced by all Presidents who must daily deal with people, events, objects, and relationships and the various problems or exigencies they present,” and consequently provides a heuristic for the analysis and assessment of presidential rhetorical leadership (2007, 61). Medhurst emphasizes that the exigencies, constraints, and audiences that constitute a rhetorical situation are “constantly shifting and evolving,” and therefore successful rhetorical leadership demands that presidents, or any political actor, must continuously adapt to meet these dynamic conditions (2007, 81) As a consequence, a political actor’s interpretive ability to “read” these developments and choose effective responses to them is essential.

In developing the oppositional narrative that transformed into the “you didn’t build that” spectacle, what defining features and dynamics of their situational context was Romney “reading”? While my discussion of Obama’s speech above identifies some the key, readily observable characteristics of the context—partisan polarization, historic levels of campaign spending, and the dominance of negative attack strategies—my argument’s final claim is that the picture becomes more complete when broader, submerged discourses that contribute to the contextual landscape are also identified and articulated.

Discourses as definitions of political reality that have become entrenched ways of thinking, to the point at which we un-reflectively take them at face value as common sense. Like a narrative, a discourse “rests on certain assumptions, judgments, and contentions that provide the basic terms for analysis, debate, agreement and disagreement” about the political world (Glynos, Howarth, Norval, and Speed 2009, 8). But they are broader and deeper than more transient narratives in that they delineate patterned ways of thinking and behaving (“rules” of reality, if you will) and become hegemonic for extended periods of time. In this sense, discourses provide a conceptual framework for the ideational elements that Bosso (1994) identified as contextual: “culture, commonly held values, ideology, political socialization, and ideas.” Narratives are meaningful because they are contextual; *how* narratives mean is determined in relation to the broader discourse into which it taps.

The narrative constructed in response to the president’s “you didn’t build that” remark was meaningful to Obama’s opponents because it tapped into a long-established conservative discourse that articulates a Manichean conception of political reality in which active government and individual freedom are inherently at odds. The defining features of this “fear of big government” discourse have sedimented over time into the contemporary ideology of American right-wing conservatism. The roots of this discourse can be traced back through American political thought to the Founding debates of the Federalists and Anti-Federalists, but began to take on its present flavor in the rhetorical opposition to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. It became further entrenched during the Reagan Revolution, and has bloomed into the Tea Party-driven rhetoric of politics today (Holtzman 2013).

The fear of big government discourse presents itself in political language in three characteristic ways—each on display in the rhetorical reaction to Obama’s “you didn’t build that” remark: (1) Fear-mongering claims that conflates an active federal government with a loss of individual liberty; (2) the portrayal of those who favor a more active federal government as socialists (or communists); (3, and the depiction of both active government and those who advocate for it as fundamentally “un-American” (Holtzman 2013). By drawing on these rhetorical devices, thereby grounding their narrative in this fear of big government discourse, Obama’s opponents were able to make his remark meaningful—in fact, threatening—to those for whom this conception of active government as the enemy of individual freedom rings true.

These characteristic manifestations of the discourse are clear in the oppositional narrative crafted to meaningfully define Obama’s remark. In an interview with CNBC on July 23, ten days after Obama’s remark, Romney said of the president’s views (as Romney portrayed them):

This is an ideology which says hey, we’re all the same here, [government] ought to take from all and give to one another and that achievement, individual initiative and risk-taking and success are not to be rewarded as they have in the past (2012b).

To ensure that the implications of his point were clear, Romney summed up by declaring: “It’s a very strange and, in some respects, foreign to the American experience type of philosophy” (2012b).

[*Note to reader*: Unfortunately, I need to end it here for now. Forthcoming is further case-specific discussion of the fear of big government discourse and a conclusion.]

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1. While my study is focused on language, the definition of objects, actions, events, images, etc., are also strategic expressions of political reality. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more on “pseudo-events,” see Boorstin (1961), who originated the concept, and Heclo’s (2000) discussion of its role in the “permanent campaign.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These categories are employed solely for heuristic purposes and may not align with categorization schemes of others, including the authors themselves. Additionally, this section is not intended to serve as a comprehensive review of the seminal contributions in the study of presidential rhetoric, but rather focuses solely on areas of this scholarship that have direct relevance to my project. For example, any comprehensive review must consider the constitutionalist approach of Jeffrey Tulis (1987), among others. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an interpretive analysis of a president’s inability to control the narrative, see Holtzman (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)