

Analysis of Bin Laden's Speech 29 October 2004

Bin Laden's recent speech stands out as quite different in tone compared to a score of earlier speeches. In the following analysis it will be tried to focus on what is the constitutive elements of this difference.

Rhetorical analysis of the speech

The following is a short neo-classical rhetorical analysis of the Bin Laden speech. The speech has enough interesting aspects to several articles, but I have chosen to single out three of these:

- The logos-aspects of his speech
- His invitations and hindrances for dialogue
- His worldview on international society and domestic American politics

To be able to assess the rhetorical style of Bin Laden in his October 2004 speech, we will need to contrast it with his earlier speeches. A good point of departure for a comparative analysis is his speech from the 18 October 2003 – almost a year on date before the analysed speech.

The focus of comparative interest here is his stance toward the primary and the secondary audience. In his 2003 speech he starts out by scolding the Americans, to whom the speech is directed 'the majority of you are vulgar and without sound ethics or good manners.'¹ This indicates that his speech is not so much meant as a deliberative effort towards the American Public, but has an epideictic function towards those who already supports him. In other words, there is no chance of a dialogue – which is made even more clear in the last few sentences of the speech:

“In conclusion, I say to the American people we will continue to fight you and continue to conduct martyrdom operations inside and outside the United States until you depart from your oppressive course and abandon your follies and rein in your fools.”²

This stance is illustrative of the general tone in his appeals to a western audience made prior to this. This interpretation is underlined by his speech to the Iraqis that was released a few days after.³ Here he is repeating his allegations against USA, but this speech also underscores that he has noticeable different modes of expression, adjusted to his audience. In his speech to the Iraqis he is drawing heavily on quotes from the Qu'ran and religiously themed language – a thing almost cleansed in the 2003 address to the US. This shows us that Bin Laden is a very conscious about aptum,⁴ assessing the nexus between situation, audience and language correctly.

¹ Bin Laden (2003a) II. 6-8

² Ibid II. 92-96

³ Bin Laden (2003b)

⁴ (lat.) “The fitting”, “The appropriate”.

Three aspects of the speech

His speech of October 29 2004 leaves an impression of a Bin Laden with an altogether different stance towards his primary audience. This can be observed in the following

The logos-aspects of his speech

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

This appeal is dominant in Bin Laden's speech. It is found in the very composition and invention behind the speech, as the structuring metaphor is one of cause and effect, openly heralded in the beginning of the speech. The effect to be explained is the attack on September 11 2001. This structure lends a very calm and scholarly air to Bin Laden and is returned to throughout the speech. That he draws on arguments that are coined in his standard jingoistic phrases somewhat masks this.

On an intermediary level the logos is also dominant as a structure for individual arguments. In line 69-75 he backs up his claim that he had sought to communicate before taking up arms by referring to specific sources, in this case journalists. Another good example is his choice of arguments: the economical ones being the incarnation of modern logos argumentation.⁵

Furthermore the appeal to logos can be found throughout the speech on elocutionary level. A good illustration of how Bin Laden manages to balance a religious ethos with quantitative logos argumentation is the following: "As for its [the war's] results, they are very positive, with Allah's grace. They surpassed all expectations by all criteria for many reasons, one of the most important of which is that [...]".⁶

His choice of causality-based logos stands out from his other speeches' reliance on "scripture-logos" and emphasis on pathos. In this aspect it can be said to be suited very well to counter prejudices with an audience that generally sees him as a religious irrationalist.⁷ This was further supported by his body language on screen.⁸

His invitations and hindrances for dialogue

Throughout the speech Bin Laden signals that he is open to dialogue. This can be located in his display of the three Aristotelian components of ethos: eunoia, arête and phronesis.

He shows his eunoia, goodwill towards the audience, by relating that he will tell the American audience 'truthfully about the moments in which the decision was taken, for you to consider'. Here he strikes a very symmetrical tone, implicitly inciting a possible response by the Americans of this truthful recount.

⁵ Perelman (1969) p. 193

⁶ Bin Laden (2004c) II. 87-89

⁷ This view is reflected in Rosett (2004)

⁸ Neumann (2004)

His show of areté, virtue, and phronesis, expertise is worth noting. He implicitly prescribes a number of traits to himself:

- That he holds that dialogue should be tried before violence and that he prefers peace to war (ll. 69-71)
- That his motives are misinterpreted and he would like to defend them. (This is done with references to Bush's speech to Congress on September 21, 2001) (ll. 5-6)
- That he is well informed (about events in the West, with the meeting at RIIA as a striking example serving as a synecdochical illustration of 'informedness').
- That he has a nuanced view on his audience, with Robert Fisk being 'neutral' (ll. 75-77)
- That he is humble and sober in his analyses (ll. 129-133)
- That he shares the fond of common wisdom, shown in his use of parables and sayings (notably 226-227)
- That he upholds the right to self-defence and human rights (ll. 35-42)
- That he has a sure hand and will not be distracted concerning his goals as long as the injustice persists (ll. 8-12)
- That he believes the power to be with the people (l. 232)

Interestingly enough these traits correspond very well to classical, liberal democratic thought, and the virtue he shows, is one of the democratic citizen.⁹ This is in stark contrast to his denunciation of democracy in his speech to the Iraqis, where it is described as 'the faith of the ignorant'.¹⁰

However there are several hindrances for dialogue. The most obvious one is the wide gap and animosity between him and the US public, but Bin Laden also has some shortcomings as a rhetor. The most notable sign of the latter is his use of a parable about the ill-tempered goat by the 9th-century Arab poet Jahiz.¹¹ This cannot be taken as known by the audience and the parable does not enlighten but confuse. Furthermore his clear division of his audience from the Bush-government has the effect that he is ascribing a lot of negative traits to one group that very easily could be seen as 'rubbing off' on the general audience. Lastly his use of a clear delineation of 'you' and 'us' shows the unbridgeable gap between him and his audience on the very linguistic level. We understand that he does not aim for co-existence, but rather separate existences. This is hardly connectable to the democratic reality of a globalised world.¹²

His worldview on international society and domestic American politics

The last area connects the rhetorical analysis with the following IR approach. Throughout the speech he hints some basic notions about the international society, as well as American domestic politics and this can show us his take on international politics.

⁹ Held (2002) p. 15

¹⁰ Bin Laden (2003b)

¹¹ See Memri's translation of the speech (2004c)

¹² Held (2002) p. 358

Most strikingly here is the emphasis on 'security'. This is the theme around which the entire speech is formed on the surface level, and he makes it clear that 'Security is one of the important pillars of human life'. This points to a 'realist' worldview. The overriding importance of security is used as an argument for redefining the notion 'terrorist' and in line with this he makes an almost oxymoronic statement 'terror is [the real meaning of] 'freedom' and 'democracy', while they call the resistance 'terrorism' and 'reaction'.¹³ The underlying focus on power in this sentence is in harmony with 'realist' thinking.¹⁴

But it is also clear that he ascribes a certain value to 'justice' and 'right', for example in his concerns for human rights mentioned above. He mentions the split in the international community over the allegations of Iraq having WMD and uses a sort of straw man to show that he recognizes that sanctions would have worked (ll. 177-184).

His view on the internal dynamics of American politics is almost Marxist, with a clear emphasis on a ruling, capitalist class that is deceiving the people. This view is summed up in his eloquent closing paragraph 'Your security is not in the hands of Kerry or Bush or Al-Qa'ida. Your security is in your own hands.'¹⁵ This clearly shows a view that domestic politics is influential on foreign relations – at least in regard to al-Qaeda.¹⁶

Conclusion

From a rhetorical viewpoint it must be concluded that Bin Laden is a conscious rhetor, with a clear impression of his rhetorical environment. He chooses an approach that to some extent both appeases his primary (the American public) and his secondary audience (others, notably his supporters). This is done by his construction of ethos and the invitations for dialogue, as well as fielding clear accusations against the American government. This is in harmony with the understanding that Al-Qaeda has political goals, not cultural ones.¹⁷ All in all the speech, despite its cross-cultural shortcomings, the hostile audience and the jingoistic phrasing, must be seen as a well-focused and deliberate rhetorical artefact.

However, here it must also be underscored that a rhetorical analysis cannot show to which extent the various democratic and dialogical traits that are in essence inviting to a longer exchange are genuine or simply applied on a short term tactical scale to bring about a desired influence. When considering what we know about Al-Qaeda, its opportunism and regard for democracy, the speech should not necessarily be taken for face value.

¹³ Bin Laden (2004c) ll. 53-55. It is interesting to note that he does not try to redefine Al-Qaeda's status but rather alter the 'signified' in the term 'terrorism'. This line of argument is a recurrent theme and can be found in his speech of January 2002, Bin Laden (2002a)

¹⁴ For Bin Laden's focus on power see Byman (2003) p. 145

¹⁵ Bin Laden (2004c) ll. 232-233

¹⁶ That this analysis is a natural result of a Wahabist worldview is possible. See Blanchard (2004)

¹⁷ Byman (2003)

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