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**The Influence of Presidential Rhetoric on Public Perception of Drugs
and the Government's Handling of the "War on Drugs" in the United
States.**

By

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**An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelors of Science
in University Honors
and Criminal Justice and Criminology**

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ABSTRACT

There has been a massive rise in the prison population over the last several decades, in the United States, due to the ongoing “War on Drugs.” This “War on Drugs” has had an especially negative impact on poor and minority communities. In order to better understand why this “War on Drugs” has occurred this thesis illustrates the potential mechanisms through which the drug related rhetoric of presidents might have influenced the public’s perception of the drug issue and the government’s handling of it in the United States. To illustrate these mechanisms a literature review related to this topic is completed and there is an analysis of pieces of drug related rhetoric made by each president from Richard Nixon through our current president Barack Obama. In doing this a framework is created that helps make sense of how rhetoric has likely influenced the “get tough” approach to dealing with the drug problem that has been employed over the last thirty to forty years. It is concluded that some of the solutions to the drug issue offered by presidents to the public in the rhetoric, that is analyzed, do not adequately address the social reality they are supposed help.

INTRODUCTION

Drugs are an issue that the public, in the United States, has been concerned about for decades. There has been an ongoing “War on Drugs” in the United States for since the early 1970’s. The idea of a “War on Drugs” might seem like a natural response to the drug issue for many people; but this was not the government’s official response to the drug problem until President Nixon declared a “War on Drugs,” (Alexander, 2011) and called drugs: “Public Enemy Number One” in 1971. Since Nixon’s declaration of a “War on Drugs” the drug issue has been a familiar part of presidential rhetoric, though not all presidents have had the exact same message about drugs (Harddon, 2001) and some have discussed it more frequently than others (Johnson et al., 2010). Presidential “rhetoric” is persuasive statements made by presidents that are intend to influence opinion about a particular topic, in this case drugs. We know that public opinion regarding drug related issues has not been static over time (Nielsen, 2010). So the question that arises is: how could presidential rhetoric shape public opinion about drugs and the government’s handling of the drug problem in the United States? This is a crucial question to ask because the public looks towards the president for leadership in the handling of these types of domestic problems. What is concerning is that through rhetoric the president can potentially influence public opinion on this issue in a way that may or may not reflect the objective facts about how the issue is affecting American society.

An important point to make is that the “War” metaphor did not have to be used in regards to the drug issue; any number of metaphors could have been used. Outside of the “War on Drugs,” the

“War” metaphor has not helped presidents gain public support for dealing with other domestic issues (Elwood, 1995). Using the “War” metaphor has, however, helped presidents gain public support in foreign policy issues (Elwood, 1995). The “War” metaphor inspires harsher rather than sympathetic responses to drug users. There has been a massive rise in incarceration over the last 30 to 40 years and drug-related arrests, prosecutions, and harsher drug sentencing laws have majorly contributed to this rise (Bobo & Thompson, 2006). The drug war has had the most impact on minority communities (Alexander, 2011). African Americans and Hispanics are incarcerated at much higher rates than Whites for drug offenses despite research that shows that of all races in the U.S. abuse drugs at roughly the same percentage (Alexander, 2011). The 2013 National Survey on Drug Abuse and Health found that, among person’s older than 12, the rate of substance abuse among whites is 8.4%, among African Americans it is 7.4% and among Hispanics it is 8.6% (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Presidents could have used different metaphors that supported the view that rehabilitative treatments for drug users are superior to harsher punishments. Such an approach to the drug issue may have accomplished a result that would have been more beneficial to society than mass incarceration has been. This approach would likely have had far less of a disparate impact on minority communities.

It is important to make it clear, however, that how exactly a president’s rhetoric has influenced public perception on the drug issue is complicated because the rhetoric can influence other agents who have contact with the public as well. Congress, the media, and other public employees who are involved in the criminal justice system all hear the same presidential rhetoric as the public. What is not arguable is that presidents have played a big role in promoting the drug war and that the current status of the drug issue would probably be much different today if presidents had promoted it differently, spoken out against certain practices, or had little to say about the issue. One pressing concern at the center of a lot of the work that scholars have done on this topic is the question of to what extent are presidents

responsible for the negative outcomes of the “War on Drugs?” Another important question at the center of the research is to what extent has presidential rhetoric had in stifling public dissent against the drug policies of the government?

The goal of this thesis is to illustrate the potential mechanisms by which the rhetoric of presidents could have influenced the public’s perception of the drug issue and the government’s response to it in the United States. This thesis doesn’t directly test or measure the influence that presidential rhetoric about drugs and the government’s response to the drug problem has had on public opinion. It rather provides a helpful framework for comprehending how rhetoric has likely influenced the “get tough” strategy for dealing with drugs that has been going on for quite some time. Understanding this can bring us to a better understanding of how we got to where are with the drug issue today and could influence the direction we take in the future.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis address the research question of how presidential rhetoric influences public perception of drugs and the government’s handling of “The War on Drugs” through performing a review of the literature on this topic and through performing an analysis of pieces of presidential rhetoric related to the drug issue in the United States.

Methodology 1. Review of the Literature

The first methodology used to look at this issue is a review of the literature that explains how presidential rhetoric may influence policy and public opinion. The literature review is divided up into five

topics related to how presidential rhetoric influences public perception of the government's handling of the war on drugs. The first topic is the specific content of presidential rhetoric. The second topic is strategic silence, or how some presidents have had little to nothing to say about the drug issue during their presidencies. The third topic is the role that governmental agents, such as law enforcement and prosecutors, play in the drug issue and how they influence the public. This is important to take into consideration because law enforcement officials can also be influenced by presidential rhetoric related to drugs. The fourth topic that is discussed is contradictory findings between different studies suggesting either that the president directly influences the public through rhetoric or that the president only indirectly influences the public through media. The fifth and final topic in the literature review is a historical look at the American public's opinions on drug related issues over time. This literature review has shown some of the different sorts of ways in which a president's rhetoric may have influenced public opinion over the drug problem and influenced the government's direction in handling the drug problem in the United States. This literature review has produced a richer understanding of the relationship between the president, public, congress, law enforcement, and government policy surrounding the drug issue. Understanding how presidential rhetoric has shaped the public's opinion about drugs and the government's handling of the drug issue in the U.S. helps with answering the question to what extent are presidents (past and future) are responsible for the outcomes of the "War on Drugs?"

Methodology 2. Analysis of the Rhetoric

The research question has also been addressed through analyzing pieces of presidential rhetoric related to drugs. Pieces of rhetoric were gathered from Richard Nixon, who initially declared a "War on Drugs," through our current president Barack Obama. In this analysis section the pieces of rhetoric are examined in order to better understand how presidential rhetoric may have influenced the public's

perception of the drug problem and helped direct policy approaches. Specifically, two themes in the rhetoric are focused on. The first is which types of drugs are described as being problematic and how that has changed over time. For example, do presidents talk about drugs that are used less frequently (e.g. narcotics, heroin, cocaine), thus decreasing the focus of the drug issue in the U.S. to a smaller part of the population? However, if any illegal drug is the main focus of presidential rhetoric then our policy approaches would likely entangle a much larger percentage of the population. The second theme that is focused on is what presidents framed as the major problem with the drug issue. For example, when President's describe the drug issue in the U.S. do they point our attention towards drug dealers, drug users in general, or drug addiction? The focus of the drug problem in presidential rhetoric has important policy implications related to arrest/prosecution versus treatment and how "wide a net" law enforcement and the courts cast to hold offenders accountable. The analysis compares the rhetoric of when drug abuse and addiction are the primary problem focused on compared to when drug dealers are the primary problem that is focused on and to when drug users are the primary problem focused on.

Almost all of the pieces of rhetoric that have been collected have come from public speeches made by presidents. A very small number came from public debates and books written by presidents. Transcripts of audio speeches were created in Microsoft Office Word. A word search of each speech was completed in order to find the drug related statements. Over 9,000 words of drug related rhetoric from President Nixon through President Obama were collected. The analysis of the rhetoric is divided up into sections for each president, starting with President Nixon and it moves chronologically through President Obama. This helps with considering how the rhetoric has changed and considering how the different presidents addressed the themes mentioned above over time.

FINDINGS

Findings 1. Review of the Literature

Several important topics related to this issue have emerged from studies in: Political Science, Communications, Criminal Justice, The Humanities, as well as other fields. In this review of the literature The following five topics are discussed: The Specific content of presidential rhetoric, strategic silence, the role that governmental agents play in this issue, contradictory findings suggesting either that the president directly influences the public through rhetoric or that presidential rhetoric only indirectly influences the public through the media, and historical opinions of the American public on drug related issues. Ultimately the literature reveals that it is helpful to explore this complex issue through these topics.

The first topic discussed is the specific content of rhetoric. When analyzing presidential policy rhetoric in speeches James Harddon identified four types of rhetoric that president's use; communitarian, individualist, punitive, and rehabilitative (Harddon, 2001). Communitarian rhetoric argues that we must bind to together to solve the drug problem. Individualist rhetoric argues that individual rights must be protected, so we must try to stop groups who encourage others to use drugs. Punitive rhetoric argues for the punishment of users. Finally, rehabilitative rhetoric argues that we must find a cure for drug abuse. A rehabilitative rhetoric is a way of looking at drug use as a disease people catch rather than a decision people make(Harddon, 2001). These arguments are, obviously, not the only types of rhetoric presidents have used to influence public opinion but they create a helpful framework to look at presidential rhetoric. In his study of the drug rhetoric of President Ronald Reagan and President George H.W. Bush (Harddon, 2001) found that initial punitive rhetoric was successful in creating public fear about the drug issue, especially during the Reagan presidency. He found that these two presidents focused on rehabilitative rhetoric sometime after punitive rhetoric (Harddon, 2001).

(Harddon, 2001) thinks Reagan and Bush might have thought that the use of a rehabilitative rhetoric after punitive rhetoric would help sustain public concern over the drug issue because the rehabilitative rhetoric would make the public feel like there had been some success with the issue after the punitive rhetoric (Harddon, 2001). So in other words these presidents may have used the rehabilitative rhetoric after the punitive rhetoric in order to appear to be successful in dealing with the issue while simultaneously sustaining public concern over the issue (Harddon, 2001). While Harddon helpfully categorizes rhetoric William Elwood takes a different approach by looking at the use of metaphor in presidential rhetoric about the drug war. Elwood argues that the longevity of the drug war is due to presidents using “war” and “mental illness” metaphors to describe the drug issue (Elwood, 1995). This creates a framework for thinking about the issue that is easy to comprehend (Elwood, 1995). Harddon’s article reveals that the president can employ an overall rhetorical strategy that can influence the public opinion, while Elwood’s article reveals that the president can use specific metaphors to evoke a certain effect on the public. Elwood notes that the use of the “war” metaphor has been unhelpful for presidents when discussing other domestic problems, such as, the “War on Poverty.” The “War on Drugs” is an exception. The “Drug War” framework is rooted in a metaphorical choice that demonizes drug users. To have a “war” metaphor insinuates that an “enemy” exists. Because presidents often referred to the drug war in general terms, the enemy that is implied is any person who uses drugs, even casual so-called “recreational users.” Presidents could have chosen to use metaphors that inspired more empathy towards drug users. Or directed their rhetoric mostly at manufactures and high-level dealers. Examining the context of presidential drug rhetoric reveals that presidents make choices in overall rhetorical strategy, and choices in the use of specific metaphors that appear directed at achieving specific ends.

Studies have shown that the president’s can influence public perceptions of through a lack of rhetoric or a strategic silence. For example; when little attention was paid to the drug issue during the Carter presidency less attention was paid to it in the media (Johnson, Wanta, & Boudreau, 2010). It has

been argued that keeping some things out of the public attention can be an effective part of the president's strategic behavior (Canes-Wrone, 2001). These studies reveal that it is important to consider the implications of a president being silent about an issue, or mentioning it less than other pressing issues. The above studies demonstrate that some presidents have discussed drugs considerably less than others. Ultimately a lack of rhetoric about the drug issue also influences how the public perceives the government's handling of the drug issue. The strategy of strategic silence can, possibly, have a wide ranging societal influence and should, therefore, be thought of as a way in which the president can directly and indirectly influence public perception.

An important indirect factor that undoubtedly contributes to how the public thinks of drugs is how presidential rhetoric influences governmental agents. Several studies have looked at the influence of presidential rhetoric on congress. The influence presidential rhetoric on the public's opinion can impact the legislative activities of congress (Oliver et al., 2011). There is also evidence which suggests the president's rhetoric can directly influence congressional legislative behavior (Johnson et al., 2010). In addition, it has been found that the president can influence legislative activity through public appeals (Canes-Wrone, 2001). What's unique is the potential reciprocal nature of these relationships. In other words, presidential rhetoric can influence both public opinion and the behaviors of congress, which in turn may boost each other by the public calling for action from congress. In summary, the literature shows that it is very important to take into account the role of rhetoric in the complex legislative process.

There are other governmental actors who can potentially be influenced by presidential rhetoric. In a 2003 study by Whitford and Yates found that there were more drug cases on the caseloads of United States Attorneys when there were more presidential statements emphasizing drug policy. Whitford and Yates also found there were fewer drug cases on caseloads when there were fewer

presidential statements regarding drug policy. (Whitford & Yates, 2003) The shift in U.S. Attorney's attention to drug cases was not so drastic that other issues were not completely ignored (Whitford & Yates, 2003). This study is an essential part of the conversation because it provides evidence that presidential rhetoric can influence bureaucratic agents. These agents; police, prosecutors, public officials, etc., often have wide discretion on how to handle drug problems at the community level. The influence of presidential rhetoric over how they do their jobs could cause, for example, a prosecutor or police officer to be inspired by a president's rhetoric about a "War on Drugs" and then use the discretion provided within their jobs to treat drug problems in their communities differently than they would have before. How governmental agents go about responding to drug issues undoubtedly influences how the public perceives the governmental handling of the drug issue. This is another way in which the president's rhetoric can indirectly influence public perception of the drug issue.

The president can heighten public concern over an issue by simply mentioning it (Cohen, 1995). Presidents influence public concern about the drug issue when it has been mentioned in State of the Union Addresses (Oliver et al., 2011). To sustain public concern over the issue the president has to continually address it (Cohen, 1995). In a contradiction to their 2011 study Oliver Willard et al. found, in a 2012 study, that the president influences public opinion only indirectly through the media. This study actually suggested that it is likely that the media actually influences the president's concern over the drug issue (Oliver et al., 2012). In contrast a 2010 study by Thomas J. Johnson et al. found that the president has more influence over the agenda setting process than the media does. It also found that presidential statements about drugs had more influence over the public than the media (Johnson et al., 2010). This study found the less a president talked about drugs the less attention was given to the issue in the media. The contradiction that arises out of these studies is whether the president directly influences the public through speeches and statements or does the president only indirectly influence the public about the drug issue via the media? In addition, to what extent is the rhetoric of Presidents

possibly influenced by the media? It is unclear what the relationship is between the president and the media in the agenda setting process. Methodological differences in different studies could have caused conflicting results. In the conflicting studies done by Oliver Willard et al. different methodologies were used. The first study considered how State of the Union Addresses affected public opinion polls about drugs. The second used the same polls but found the president had no direct influence over public opinion. The difference was that in the second survey they didn't look at the State of the Union Addresses in relationship to the polls. This may suggest the president only directly influences the public through highly important speeches such as the State of The Union etc. There will have to be more research into this before it can be determined that this is the case. It could also suggest that new methodology needs to be developed in order to get closer to the truth.

What the contradicting literature shows is not that we have to choose between either A) the president only directly influences the public or B) the president only indirectly influences the public through the media, but rather that it is likely that both of these things can happen. We must realize that there are many variables that can influence the outcome. Ultimately the literature reveals that we have to take direct and indirect factors into consideration when thinking about how it is that the president affects public opinion about drugs.

An important part of this discussion is historical opinions about the drug issue that the public has held. Two important topics within the drug issue are: 1) How much should be spent on drug treatment programs? and 2) Should marijuana be legalized? Public opinion of these two questions has varied over time. There were times when Americans were more likely to favor increased spending on drug treatment and marijuana legalization and times when Americans have been less likely to support either (Nielsen, 2010). This means the American public has not remained static in its views of how the government should handle the drug issue. The content of presidential rhetoric has not remained exactly

the same about the drug issue over time either (Harddon, 2001). So the historical knowledge that rhetoric and public opinion are two variables that change over time shows that this is a more complex issue than it might first appear. Changing public opinion could be influenced by different rhetorical content and strategies as well as by other indirect factors related to the president's rhetoric. We must carefully consider all of these variables when thinking how the president has influenced public opinion on the drug issue and may do so in the future.

Conclusion to Findings 1. Review of the Literature

The literature review was created to help answer the question: How could presidential rhetoric influence public opinion about drugs and the government's handling of the drug problem in the United States? The following topics were examined: specific content of presidential rhetoric, strategic silence, the role that governmental agents play in this issue, contradicting findings suggesting either that the president directly influences the public through rhetoric or that presidential rhetoric only indirectly influences the public through the media, and historical opinions of the American public on drug related issues. The literature reveals that presidential rhetoric can influence more audiences than just the public, which complicates determining how the public and governmental approaches are ultimately influenced by presidential rhetoric. The process which starts with the president mentioning drugs and ends with the public being shaped by the rhetoric involves multiple factors that must be explored individually in order to get a better picture about how presidential rhetoric has, directly and indirectly, shaped public opinions and the government's handling of the drug problem in the United States.

Findings 2. Analysis of the Rhetoric

In this section pieces of drug related rhetoric made by presidents are analyzed. The analysis begins with a look at rhetoric from President Richard Nixon and move chronologically through the rhetoric of each president and finish with rhetoric from our current President Barack Obama. There are

two themes that are focused on in the analysis of the rhetoric. The first is: which drugs are mentioned as being the biggest problems? This is very important because it makes everyone who is influenced by the rhetoric focus their attention on people who abuse and sell the particular drug(s) mentioned. So if all illegal drugs are said to be problematic then it indicates that far greater numbers of people are problematic to society rather than just those involved with “so-called” hard drugs.

The second theme that this analysis focuses on is what the presidents describe as being the primary problem in the drug issue. This is important because different things characterized as the main problem with the drug issue elicit different responses. If drug abuse and addiction are characterized as the main problems then this argues for a more treatment-oriented response to the drug issue rather than for a harsher law enforcement approach to the drug problem. A focus on drug abuse/addiction frames the drug issue as more of a public health concern rather than as a law enforcement concern and an ethical failure on the part of individual drug abusers. A focus on drug sellers as the major concern with the drug issue inspires people to focus their attention on a smaller part of society. Ideally, this intense attention on a small part of society will make the fight against drugs more efficient and more cost effective. Finally, a focus on all who use drugs as the major problem opens the door to having a very large number of people be at risk for arrest and incarceration because this rhetoric argues for a harsh law enforcement oriented approach to solving the drug issue. Accordingly, a law enforce approach to the drug issue attempts to use fear of punishment to scare the “immoral” casual/recreational user into recognizing the “harm” they’re causing to society.

Richard Nixon:

The War on Drugs began with President Richard Nixon, during his Special Message to the Congress on Drug Abuse Prevention and Control, June 17, 1971. During the beginning of the speech he boldly stated that:

“America's public enemy number one in the United States is drug abuse. In order to fight and defeat this enemy, it is necessary to wage a new, all-out offensive” (Woolley & Peters, 2016).

Notice how Nixon defines drug “abuse” the greatest threat facing the U.S. So he is not implying that the moral failures of drug users are the major issue facing the nation. This frames the drug issue as more of a public health concern, which should influence the public and government response to consider more treatment options for drug abusers. It was discussed in the literature review of presidential rhetoric about drugs that presidential rhetoric also influences congress, and in this speech Nixon elicits congressional help after his earlier rhetoric implied the need for more drug treatment options to combat drug abuse. He says:

“Therefore, I am transmitting legislation to the Congress to consolidate at the highest level a full-scale attack on the problem of drug abuse in America. I am proposing the appropriation of additional funds to meet the cost of rehabilitating drug users, and I will ask for additional funds to increase our enforcement efforts to further tighten the noose around the necks of drug peddlers, and thereby loosen the noose around the necks of drug users” (Woolley & Peters, 2016).

Nixon again tries to stress that drug abuse is the major problem and therefore treatment is the best solution to the drug issue. Here Nixon also talks about increased law enforcement for drug dealers. He does not try to stigmatize all people involved with drugs but rather only a smaller portion, or at least what is assumedly presumed to be a smaller portion, of the total population of people involved with drugs. In fact, he makes a strong effort to not stigmatize all people involved with drugs by expressing that his plan is to “loosen the noose around the necks of drug users” through “tightening the noose around the necks of drug peddlers” (Woolley & Peters, 2016).

In this speech Nixon also gets specific with which types of drugs that he wants to focus on:

“Narcotics addiction is a problem which afflicts both the body and the soul of America. It is a problem which baffles many Americans. In our history we have faced great difficulties again and again, wars and depressions and divisions among our people have tested our will as a people-and we have prevailed” (Woolley & Peters, 2016).

He specifically mentions “narcotics” rather than all drugs in this instance. This attempts to escalate fear of narcotics above that of all other illegal drugs, making the drug issue more focused on a specific group of drugs. In this 1974 State of the Union Address Nixon says the following:

A massive campaign against drug abuse has been organized. And the rate of new heroin addiction, the most vicious threat of all, is decreasing rather than increasing” (Wolley & Peters, 2016).

Here Nixon again does not treat all illegal drugs as equal he focuses on heroin, a narcotic, which he calls “the most vicious threat of all.” Ultimately, the specific mention of heroin draws people’s attention to that specific drug so that public perception will be influenced into seeing that specific drug as the most problematic and people associated with that drug as the worst of all drug abusers.

Gerald Ford:

President Gerald Ford had significantly less to say about the drug issue than his predecessor. However, he did discuss drugs in his 1976 State of the Union Address where he made several statements about drugs:

“The sale of hard drugs is tragically on the increase again. I have directed all agencies of the federal government to step up law enforcement efforts against those who deal in drugs. In 1975, I am glad to report, federal agents seized substantially more heroin coming into our country than in 1974” (Miller Center, 2016i).

“I recommended months ago that the Congress enact mandatory fixed sentences for persons convicted of federal crimes involving the sale of hard drugs. Hard drugs, we all know, degrade the spirit as they destroy the body of their users” (Miller Center, 2016i).

In statements aimed at influencing law enforcement, congress, and the public President Ford continues President Nixon's trend of not making all illegal drugs equal. He mentions "hard drugs" in both statements. He makes it clear that he wants tough law enforcement efforts made in the drug issue, however he specifically wants to focus on the *dealers* of "hard drugs." So he is not calling for harsher law enforcement efforts for all illegal drugs. Like Nixon, President Ford tried to influence people to see heroin in particular as a very dangerous drug.

Nixon tried to frame drug abuse as the primary concern with the drug issue. Ford on the other hand portrays drug dealers as the primary concern. This aims to bring people's attention more to a specific group of people who are involved with a certain types of drugs, hard drugs. Ford also begins to talk about harsh punishment as a response to drug dealers with the threat of "mandatory fixed sentences."

Jimmy Carter:

While President Ford had very little to say about the drug issue President Carter had virtually nothing to say about the drug issue. In the literature review there was a discussion about how silence on the drug issue is a rhetorical strategy for some presidents. Carter's decision to choose to remain very quiet about this issue is very interesting considering that Nixon, who was just two presidents before him, said that drugs were "public enemy number one." It is possible that Carter's silence on the issue was an attempt to reduce public fear of drug related issues.

Ronald Reagan:

Deviating from Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter President Reagan made drugs and important issue during his presidency. Reagan rhetoric focused heavily on certain types of drugs. Early on in his presidency Regan focused on hard drugs, namely, narcotics and heroin. He also focused on getting tough on drug sellers. Regan told an interesting story during his speech at the Conservative Political

Action Conference in February of 1983. The rhetoric was aimed at going after drug peddlers as well as framing heroin as a particularly dangerous drug:

“Two narcotics agents, based on the evidence that they had, obtained a legal warrant to search a home of a man and woman suspected of peddling heroin. They searched the home. They didn't find anything. But as they were leaving, just on a hunch, they turned back to the baby in the crib and took down the diapers, and there was the stash of heroin. The evidence was thrown out of court and the couple went free because the baby hadn't given permission for the violation of its constitutional rights” (Miller Center, 2016).

This story appears to be is the harshest rhetoric against drug sellers from any rhetoric at this point. This story makes drug sellers seem like people who will go to any length to achieve their ends, which makes it easier to argue for harsher law enforcement efforts against them. The story also notes how the evidence was tossed out, thus the rhetoric of President Reagan is challenging courts and legislators to close down perceived “loopholes” in the arrest and successful prosecution of people involved in the drug issue.

As the Regan presidency went on he directly focused his rhetoric on more types of drugs than narcotics and heroin. In 1986 he made the drug problem a huge national focus. On September 14, of 1986 he addressed the country in his Speech to the Nation on the Campaign Against Drug Abuse, in this speech he stated:

“Despite our best efforts, illegal cocaine is coming into our country at alarming levels, and 4 to 5 million people regularly use it. Five hundred thousand Americans are hooked on heroin. One in twelve persons smokes marijuana regularly. Regular drug use is even higher among the age group 18 to 25—most likely just entering the workforce. Today there's a new epidemic: smokable cocaine, otherwise known as crack. It is an explosively destructive and often lethal substance which is crushing its users. It is an uncontrolled fire” (Miller Center, 2016).

Reagan’s speech was given after the heavy media attention surrounding the death of college basketball star Len Bias from a overdose on cocaine in June, 1986 and during the legislative session that passed the toughest drug laws in the nation’s history (Weinberg, 2004), (Frontline, 2014). Here Regan discusses two other types of drugs alongside of heroin; marijuana and cocaine, which was a newer drug at the time. Regan does not describe all illegal drugs as equal, however, by introducing

marijuana and cocaine it greatly expands the number of people involved with drugs who could be stigmatized. As was discussed in the introduction and literature review there has been racially disparate outcome of who has been incarcerated through the war on drugs with African Americans being incarcerated at far higher rates than Caucasian people (Alexander, 2011), (Bobo & Thompson, 2006). A factor that has contributed significantly to this is harsh law enforcement efforts against crack cocaine (Alexander, 2011). In this speech we see Regan characterizing crack as a very dangerous drug. He elevates its danger above that of regular cocaine by calling crack “explosively destructive and often lethal.” In her book *The New Jim Crow* Michelle Alexander argues that powder cocaine became associated more with white Americans and crack cocaine became more associated with African Americans (Alexander, 2011). Ultimately Regan’s expansion from rhetoric about heroin and narcotics to include marijuana and cocaine increases the number of people involved with drugs who would be seen as a threat to society. His rhetoric targeted specifically at crack cocaine makes a target out of minority communities that came to be associated with that specific drug. Reagan’s rhetoric also has implications for society and community associating the drug issue as an “uncontrolled fire.” If this is interpreted literally this implies the drug issue could be spread anywhere and must be controlled by any means necessary to stop imminent destruction. Was this rhetoric potentially “code words” to imply the issues of African American communities could penetrate into White communities, thus creating more fear in the general population?

George H.W. Bush

The major drug that the earliest drug rhetoric of Bush Sr.’s campaign focuses on is cocaine. Cocaine was actually a topic during his Inaugural Address in January of 1989:

“There are few clear areas in which we as a society must rise up united and express our intolerance. The most obvious now is drugs. And when that first cocaine was smuggled in on a ship, it may as well have been a deadly bacteria, so much has it hurt the body, the soul of our country. And there is much to be done and to be said, but take my word for it: This scourge will stop!” (Miller Center, 2016).

Here Bush's rhetoric makes cocaine a major threat right at the start of his presidency. He specifically sates how cocaine is a "scourge" that will be defeated rather than saying that all illegal drugs were scourges that would be defeated. This pulls attention towards cocaine specifically as a threat. Bush still utilizes the rhetoric of an imminent destruction to our society if nothing is done combat the spread of drug contagion.

Although Bush had a specific focus on cocaine in his Inaugural address he tried to escalate the efforts against all illegal drugs. In an Address Before a Joint Session of Congress in February of 1989 he said:

"Over 23 million Americans used illegal drugs last year, at a staggering cost to our nation's well-being. Let this be recorded as the time when America rose up and said no to drugs. The scourge of drugs must be stopped. And I am asking tonight for an increase of almost a billion dollars in budget outlays to escalate the war against drugs"
(Miller Center, 2016).

By saying that he wanted to "escalate" the war against all illegal drugs it brings many more people into the mix of being a problem that needs to be stopped. Also by using the "war" metaphor he is inspiring harsher law enforcement efforts to combat drugs. Note how the illegal drugs is a major issue, thus all drug users are possibly culpable and part of the problem.

As part of his efforts against drugs President Bush also seems to focus heavily on punishing drug dealers. In his Address Before a Joint Session of Congress in February of 1989 he said:

"I mean to get tough on the drug criminals. And let me be clear: This President will back up those who put their lives on the line every single day—our local police officers. My budget asks for beefed-up prosecution, for a new attack on organized crime, and for enforcement of tough sentences—and for the worst kingpins, that means the death penalty. I also want to make sure that when a drug dealer is convicted there's a cell waiting for him. And he should not go free because prisons are too full. And so, let the word go out: If you're caught and convicted, you will do time" (Miller Center, 2016).

Here tries to encourage law enforcement and prosecutors by focusing their attention on the drug dealer population. He even argues for the death penalty for the "worst kingpins." Employing

rhetoric about the death penalty really pulls attention to the danger that drug dealers present to society. It is important to note, however, that at the same time he may be sending mixed messages because his statement begins by saying he means to get tough on “drug criminals,” which is ambiguous as to who exactly that is. It could be drug dealers or drug users in general.

George Bush’s rhetoric against drug dealers continued throughout his presidency. In his 1992 State of the Union Address he said:

“And as we fight crime, we will fully implement our national strategy for combating drug abuse. Recent data show that we are making progress, but much remains to be done. We will not rest until the day of the dealer is over, forever” (Miller Center, 2016).

Bill Clinton:

The drug issue was a very personal one for President Clinton because his brother was a drug addict. In a debate with George Bush Sr. and Ross Perot in 1992 he said:

“Like Mr. Perot, I have held crack babies in my arms. But I know more about this, I think, than anybody else up here because I have a brother who's a recovering drug addict. I'm very proud of him. But I can tell you this: If drugs were legal, I don't think he'd be alive today. I am adamantly opposed to legalizing drugs. He is alive today because of the criminal justice system” (Miller Center, 2016).

Perhaps because of personal experience, Clinton’s approach to the drug issue was to favor treatment yet also be harsh to drug dealers. During a speech to the Convocation of the Church of God in Christ in Memphis in 1993 he said:

“We want to pass a health care bill that will make drug treatment available for everyone. And we also have to do it, we have to have drug treatment and education available to everyone and especially those who are in prison who are coming out” (Miller Center, 2016).

Here Clinton argues that drug addiction treatment should be made available to everyone, including those convicted of crimes. While wanting to have treatment options available for addicts Clinton also wanted go after drug dealers. In his state of the Union Address in 1997 he said:

This balanced budget includes the largest antidrug effort ever, to stop drugs at their source, punish those who push them, and teach our young people that drugs are wrong, drugs are illegal, and drugs will kill them. I hope you will support it” (Miller Center, 2016).

Clinton clearly wanted to focus drug resources against dealers. Another characteristic of Clinton’s rhetoric about drugs is that he does not focus on specific drugs. He merely tires to focus law enforcement efforts against illegal drugs in general. This ultimately expands the number of people involved with drugs who would be seen as problematic and bringing down society.

George W. Bush

For George W. Bush drug abuse became the major concern in the drug issue. Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and Reagan were more concerned with putting efforts towards combating drug dealers than George W. Bush. Bush also had considerably less to say about drugs than the previous three presidents. During his State of the Union Address in 2003 he stated:

“Another cause of hopelessness is addiction to drugs. Addiction crowds out friendship, ambition, moral conviction and reduces all the richness of life to a single destructive desire. As a government, we are fighting illegal drugs by cutting off supplies and reducing demand through antidrug education programs. Yet for those already addicted, the fight against drugs is a fight for their own lives. Too many Americans in search of treatment cannot get it. So tonight I propose a new \$600 million program to help an additional 300,000 Americans receive treatment over the next three years” (Miller Center, 2016).

“Our nation is blessed with recovery programs that do amazing work. One of them is found at the Healing Place Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. A man in the program said, "God does miracles in people's lives, and you never think it could be you." Tonight let us bring to all Americans who struggle with drug addiction this message of hope: The miracle of recovery is possible, and it could be you” (Miller Center, 2016).

By primarily focusing on drug abuse, Bush asks for resources to be put into treatment programs. Unlike many of the previous presidents who wanted resources put into treatment programs as well as law enforcement efforts. President Bush did not make considerable efforts to highlight particular drugs except, interestingly enough, steroids. In his State of the Union Address in January of 2004 he said:

“To help children make right choices, they need good examples. Athletics play such an important role in our society, but unfortunately, some in professional sports are not setting much of an example. The use of performance-enhancing drugs like steroids in baseball, football, and other sports is dangerous, and it sends the wrong message, that there are shortcuts to accomplishment and that performance is more important than character. So tonight I call on team owners, union representatives, coaches, and players to take the lead, to send the right signal, to get tough, and to get rid of steroids now” (Miller Center, 2016).

All of the other specific types of drugs mentioned by presidents are not typically associated with role models and celebrities. Steroids on the other hand are often associated with professional athletes. So Bush was the first president to try to influence celebrities into being better examples for youth who look up to them in terms of the drug issue.

Barack Obama:

President Obama’s drug related rhetoric is unlike that of any of his predecessors. In fact he is the first president to be critical of the war on drugs. At speech he gave at the NAACP Conference in July of 2015 he said:

“Over the last few decades, we’ve also locked up more and more nonviolent drug offenders than ever before, for longer than ever before. (Applause.) And that is the real reason our prison population is so high. In far too many cases, the punishment simply does not fit the crime. (Applause.) If you’re a low-level drug dealer, or you violate your parole, you owe some debt to society. You have to be held accountable and make amends. But you don’t owe 20 years. You don’t owe a life sentence. (Applause.) That’s disproportionate to the price that should be paid” (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2015).

In this speech Obama is being critical of the intense efforts of his predecessors to police drug dealers. He is also being critical of the fact that our prison population has grown so high. Obama’s rhetoric does not target any specific types of drugs or drug dealers. He also has not said much about increasing treatment options. For Obama, the major focus has been on reducing, and eliminating, the

length of sentences for non-violent drug offenders. Obama is also the first president to acknowledge the role that race has played in the drug war. In a speech that he gave on Criminal Justice Reform at the Screening of the HBO documentary "Fixing the System" he said:

"For too many individuals, particularly non-violent offenders caught up in an environment in which drugs are pervasive and opportunity is lacking. The punishment does not fit the crime. Too often prosecutions, arrests are not being applied in way that reflects our belief in equality under the law. And the effects of this mass incarceration ripple through families and communities, especially communities of color in ways that are not just a problem of the here and now but continue across generations. So as a society we have to acknowledge that there is something wrong when we are locking up this many folks with this kind of frequency" (The White House, 2015).

In this statement Obama recognizes the impact in which the War on Drugs has had on minorities. Ultimately he argues that the drug policies of his predecessors "do not fit the crime." It is likely that the Obama presidency has marked the beginning of the end of mass incarceration for persons involved with drugs. His rhetoric is aimed at reforming how it is dealt with by congress and the criminal justice system and ultimately how it is seen in the eyes of the public.

Conclusion to Findings 2. Analysis of Rhetoric

In this section the two themes analyzed in the presidential rhetoric are the types of drugs that presidents have focused on and what the presidents' primary concern have been in dealing with the drug issue: drug abuse, drug dealers or drug users. During the Nixon and Ford years heroin and narcotics were characterized as being particularly dangerous. During the Regan presidency cocaine, crack cocaine, and marijuana were included alongside of narcotics and heroin as being particularly dangerous drugs. Bush Sr. and Clinton did not highlight any specific drugs but focused on all illegal drugs. Bush Jr. was the first president to specifically highlight illegal steroids. So the trend in the rhetoric about specific types of drugs mentioned involves stigmatizing greater numbers of people as being part of the drug problem. When Reagan expanded Nixon and Ford's emphasis on narcotics to also include crack, cocaine, and marijuana this obviously increased the amount of people who could be stigmatized as being part of

the drug problem. When Bush Sr. and Clinton just focused on all illegal drugs the amount of people who could be stigmatized increased even further.

Richard Nixon began the “War on Drugs” with a focus on drug abuse as the primary problem. With President Ford we begin to see a shift to drug dealers being the primary problem. From President Reagan to President Clinton there is very harsh rhetoric aimed at drug dealers. Bush's rhetoric shifts back to focusing on drug abuse as the primary problem. President Obama’s rhetoric has marked the most significant shift. He has focused on the moral and legal concerns brought about by the “War on Drugs.” Nixon’s focus on drug abuse frames the issue as more of a public health concern. So the public is not necessarily influenced to see a specific group of people as the cause of the drug issue. The very harsh focus on punishing drug dealers made specifically by Reagan, Bush Sr., and Clinton frames a certain group of people as the primary concern in the drug issue. The drug issue shifts from being framed as a sickness people get to a problem that is being perpetuated by specific group of people. Although presidents since Ronald Reagan have focused on getting very tough on drug dealers, they have also placed an emphasis on all drugs as being part of the issue. This sort of rhetoric has potentially increased mass incarceration because the distinction between a “dealer” and a “user” in the eyes of law enforcement agents and in the courts is perhaps not as simple to differentiate as the presidential rhetoric claims.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis an attempt has been to understand the question of how has presidential rhetoric shaped public opinion and the government’s handling of the drug problem in the United States? In the review of the literature on this topic the following five topics were discussed: specific content of presidential rhetoric, strategic silence, the role that governmental agents (such as prosecutors and law enforcement) play in the issue, contradictory finding suggesting either that the president

directly influences the public about the drug issue through rhetoric or only indirectly influences the public through the media, and finally how opinions about drug related issues has changed in the American public over time. In the conclusion to my literature review it is argued that presidential rhetoric probably can directly influence the public and government response as well as influence the public and government response indirectly through a multitude of factors. Ultimately, it is argued that how this relationship works out is complicated. In the analysis of specific pieces of rhetoric the focus was on two themes that presidents have used to frame the issue in the mind of the public; the specific types of drugs mentioned and whether drug abuse, drug sellers, or drug users were the primary concern with the drug issue. To conclude this essay it is important to discuss the implications of the specific pieces of rhetoric used in the previous section.

Overall the rhetoric analysis shows that the Presidential rhetoric against drugs in the last forty-five years really escalated during the Regan, Bush Sr., and Clinton years. The 1980's – 1990's also experienced the greatest increases in arrest, prosecution, and incarceration rates, and drug sentencing law severity (The Leadership Conference, 2016). Harsh “War on Drugs” rhetoric declined during the Bush Jr. and Obama years. Of course, what is concerning is that there has been a massive rise in the number of people incarcerated during this period of escalation, particularly in minority communities (Alexander, 2011), (Bobo & Thompson, 2006). So the question, then, is why did the public support something that had such a negative impact on so many people? And why, other than President Obama, did the presidents all offer a very limited number of solutions to the drug problem?

While there is no easy concrete answer to these inquiries Stuart Scheingold offers some helpful theories in his article “Crime, Culture, and Political Conflict.” He argues that:

“The public ordinarily responds to symbols rather than direct experience and is not really aware of the “concrete” effects of public policy.” “The policy promises made in political campaigns are part of a cycle of symbolic politics and have no necessary connection to concrete problem solving.” (Scheingold, 2011).

His idea is that claims made in political rhetoric are often symbolic. It is easier for politicians to make broad symbolic statements about crime rather than get getting into the nuts and bolts of policy making with the public. Scheingold very importantly points out that the solutions offered in the rhetoric can possibly be things that would never work in reality. In the case of the drug issue much rhetoric was aimed at punishing drug abusers and helping drug abusers. However, in practice, this is not as straight forward as it seems because many drug abusers sell drugs in order to support their habit. Thus, it must be asked if they are really dealers who need to be punished? Or are they drug users who need treatment? Maybe this was a question that was too complex to for law enforcement and courts during the height of the war on drugs to handle effectively. Also persons can be arrested and incarcerated solely for being in possession of drugs meaning, they obviously do not have to be caught in the act of selling drugs. So we can see that in practical application promises made to the public about the handling of the drug issue did not happen. Scheingold goes on to argue that:

“Campaigning is largely a symbolic exercise in which the politicians do their best to conceal what is really at stake. Policy making, in contrast, pitches politicians headlong into the arena of concrete politics where they must interact with public officials who are keenly aware of the states of the game. These officials understand, as do most politicians, that crime is not amendable to simple solutions.” (Scheingold, 2011).

So his argument is that politicians actively try to hide the complexity of the issues that they are addressing in order to hide what is really at stake. This is an important argument to consider in relation to this topic because it helps us see that the presidents probably knew that the solutions to the drug problem were more complex than they made them out to be. In spite of widespread drug use among all races and classes, the drug war focused on communities where arrests would be easier because of greater levels of public drug dealing and use which were caused by extreme

economic disadvantages and desperation (Alexander, 2011). (Alexander, 2011) also explains that the “War on Drugs” took place in communities that were the least likely to provide any sort of organized resistance to very pro-active law enforcement – predominately economically disadvantaged inner city communities of color. Scheingold also argues that:

“But the attraction of punitive solutions go beyond the consensus they engender and their traditional place in American culture. Punishment, as Durkheim has pointed out, provides unequivocal reassurance that the society’s norms and values are still intact – fully supported by the powers that be. Punishment also, Lasswell has suggested, has a cathartic effect – assuring us that complicated problems are amenable to simple solutions.” (Scheingold, 2011).

Ultimately it is hard to assess to what extent presidents should be held as responsible for the massive rise in incarceration that resulted from the war on drugs. What can be said is that there was obvious political gain from taking a stance against drugs. What Scheingold helps us see is that presidents likely knew that offering punitive solutions to the drug problem would please the public. This appeal to the simplicity of punishment is heightened to an even greater extent when the presidential rhetoric associated drugs with a contagion that was a danger to the functioning of all communities across the nation. In reality the issue is much more complex. So, tragically, in focusing on the punitive measures of punishing drug dealers presidents never, at least not until President Obama, focused on the underlying problems that cause people to become involved with drugs in the first place. Problems like lack of opportunities, economic injustice, systematic discrimination, etc. Ultimately presidential rhetoric about the war on drugs tried to influence the public into seeing the drug problem as simple issue with simple mostly punitive solutions when in reality the drug issue should be an issue that makes us question the very bedrock of our society.

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