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Rhetoric of exceptionalism in the American public discourse of the 21st century

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Rhetoric of exceptionalism in the American public discourse of the 21st century

Retoryka wyjątkowości w publicznym dyskursie amerykańskim początku XXI wieku

Abstract

The aim of this analytic paper is to examine the dominant rhetorical devices in the American public speeches in the early 21st century that express and justify ideologies and state policies. This research has focused on oral productions embedded in institutional American discourse selected in relation to the top policies endorsed by prominent politicians and officials. Rhetorical techniques that are discussed are used to seek public approval and consent through the construction of American exceptionalism and uniqueness. The study reveals the dominant rhetorical schemas through analysis of speeches on such topics as Iraq, economic crisis, nuclear security, military interventionism and US global leadership.

Celem artykułu jest przegląd i omówienie narzędzi retorycznych, które w amerykańskich przemówieniach politycznych z początku XXI wieku wykorzystywane są do wyrażania i uzasadniania ideologii i polityki państwa. Analiza dotyczy mówionych form dyskursu instytucjonalnego, wybranych wystąpień najważniejszych polityków i urzędników państwowych. Wyróżnione techniki retoryczne służą zdobyciu publicznej akceptacji poprzez odwołanie się do koncepcji amerykańskiej wyjątkowości. Przedmiotem analizy są retoryczne schematy używane w przemówieniach dotyczących takich tematów jak wojna w Iraku, kryzys ekonomiczny, bezpieczeństwo nuklearne, interwencje militarne i globalne przywództwo USA.

Key words

rhetoric, American public discourse, political speeches, American exceptionalism
retoryka, amerykański dyskurs publiczny, przemówienia polityczne, amerykańska wyjątkowość

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1. Introduction

Rhetorically charged discursive structures have meanings and interpretations that suit specific circumstances and purposes. Political speeches, delivered in specific contexts and through particular rhetorical devices, express policies and ideologies. Discourse parameters are used to exercise control over the audience (Fairclough 1989; Van Dijk 2011). Obviously, discourse producers have the option to change the rhetorical style in the production of public discourse in order to target specific audiences and circumstances, which explains the dynamic variety of forms of expression and rhetorical techniques (Lim 2002; Ryan 1992).

A line of studies shows that American public oral discourse is a combination of discursive practices that actively contribute to creating the images of American hegemony and exceptionalism and mean to catalyze social attitudes of support and unity (McEvoy-Levy 2001; Lockhart 2003; Edwards and Weiss 2011; Murray 2013). These tendencies have been most characteristic of the Cold War discourses, as well as conservative administrations. The questions to be addressed in this study are: how these tendencies function in the twenty-first century, if they cut across party lines, and what are the rhetorical means of their expression (cf. Factory 2010; Brooks 2014). Much has been written about the invocation of American exceptionalism in public speeches (Pease 2009; Murray 2013); however, it is beyond the scope of this empirical study to review this complex and diverse literature. For the purpose of this paper, the definition of the discourse of American exceptionalism is operationalized in rhetorical terms to project two connotations: America as “unique” (inherently different from other nations) and America as “exceptional” (characterized by distinct values and properties that endow it with the right to be a global leader).

Given this, the purpose of this research is to analyze the rhetorical devices in a collection of recent prominent American public speeches. They are thematically organized to show how they relate to each other in order to express ideas that support specific ideologies (e.g., American exceptionalism) and policies (e.g.,

American dominance). The main objective is to survey, classify and discuss the rhetorical patterns used in specific contexts, and investigate the logic of their combination (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1971).

The material for this research has been a selection of oral performances including presidential speeches and speeches of top politicians over the last 8 years, to ensure relevance to the present moment, because since the economic crisis in 2007 in the US, the world has been a stage for dramatic events in many countries, and the US always takes a standpoint in order to position itself in relation to these issues.

The task of the researcher has been to perform discursive characterizations of thematic strands, intertextual links, and structural patterns to reveal the dominant rhetorical techniques.

The research method involves discourse analysis in terms of structure, style, vocabulary and figures of speech in order to reveal the strategic devices and changing patterns that combine and create discursive realities to suit specific persuasive goals within specific contexts of delivery. The study of rhetorical constructions demonstrates which stances are taken, which images created and which attitudes guided.

I have investigated 15 public speeches that were delivered between 2007 and 2016 by key American public figures, ranging from the President to federal officials and leading politicians, referring to events such as the economic crisis started in 2007, the 2008 presidential elections opposing Barack Obama and John McCain, the 2012 presidential elections opposing Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, events that are relevant for the defense and military sector such as a West Point graduation, events that are relevant for the US foreign and security policy such as the North Korean nuclear test in 2013, the interventions in Syria in September 2013 and September 2015, the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the 2016 State of the Union Address in January 2016 and the Globsec2016 conference in Bratislava in April 2016. I have grouped them to refer to Iraq, economic crisis, nuclear security, US global leadership and military interventionism. The selection has been a matter of personal judgment of social relevance of the speeches, as well as a preliminary assessment of the embedded rhetoric and the significance of the context. As the speeches were delivered at an interval of a few years, another task has been to examine how the public discourse evolves in time.

2. Iraq issue

On 12 September 2007, Senator Barack Obama, already seen as one of the leading Democratic presidential contenders, delivered a speech in Clinton, Iowa,

entitled “Turning the Page in Iraq” which was critical of the Iraq approach, much in the spirit of his earlier statements (Obama 2002). Some key criticisms refer to previous presidential speeches delivered by G.W. Bush that were manipulative and justified the US involvement in the war in Iraq with no apparent goal: “This misguided war”, “George Bush was wrong”, “Too many politicians took the President at his word instead of reading the intelligence for themselves”, “there is no military solution in Iraq, and there never was”, “cynical use of 9/11” (Obama 2007). By criticizing Bush’s decisions, Obama makes a rhetorical move: while supporting the idea of American leadership, he deconstructs the discourse that defines the US as a promoter of democratic values, peace, prosperity and moral values with an argumentative antithetical listing of the failures of the US policies:

Our diplomacy has been compromised by a refusal to talk to people we don’t like [...] Our credibility has been compromised by a faulty case for war. Our moral leadership has been compromised by Abu Ghraib [...] Perhaps the saddest irony of the Administration’s cynical use of 9/11 is that the Iraq war has left us less safe than we were before 9/11 [...] The same people who told us we would be greeted as liberators, about democracy spreading in the Middle East, about striking a decisive blow against terrorism, - the same people are now trumpeting the uneven and precarious containment of brutal sectarian violence as if it validates all of their failed decisions [...] Not talking does not make us look tough - it makes us look arrogant. (Obama 2007)

Obama’s goal is not to undermine the American leadership, on the contrary, he emphasizes the need for American leadership in the world. He voices these criticisms for popularity purposes realizing that citizens no longer support the US intervention in Iraq. The word “leadership” is recurrent in his speech to position America in a relation of hegemony to the rest of the world:

It’s time for a new and robust American leadership [...] Keeping this moral obligation is a key part of how we turn the page in Iraq. Because what’s at stake is bigger than this war in Iraq – it’s our global leadership [...] When we end this war in Iraq, we can once again lead the world against the common challenges of the 21st century. We can be that beacon of hope, that light to all the world [...] It’s time to reclaim our foreign policy. (Obama 2007)

The phrase “beacon of hope” is also cyclical in Obama’s speeches. Seven years later, it is the title of his Independence Day online radio address about peace, freedom and America’s global role, delivered on July 4, 2013, in which he defines America as a defender of peace and freedom around the globe – a beacon of hope to people everywhere who cherish those ideals.

Incidentally, arguments that explicitly rely on exceptionalist ideas, are also used to criticize the Obama administration’s Iraq policy. In a speech delivered on 14 December 2011, on the Senate floor, on the topic of Iraq, after 9 years in Iraq, Senator John McCain criticizes the withdrawal of the American troops from Iraq with negative terms such as “failure” of foreign policy and military strategy,

“failure of leadership”, “negative consequences”, “expediency”, “sad case” and antithetical structures and paradoxes, such as “we won-we’re losing”:

This decision represents a failure of leadership, both Iraqi and American [...] that it was a sad case of political expediency triumphing over military necessity, both in Baghdad and in Washington [...] and that it will have serious negative consequences for Iraq’s stability and our national security interests. I fear that General Jack Keane, who was one of the main architects of the surge, could be correct again when he said recently: ‘We won the war in Iraq, and we’re now losing the peace. (McCain 2011)

Senator McCain stresses the importance of discourse in shaping realities, when he claims that the failure to use the proper rhetoric led to the lack of control in Iraq. His interpretation of the full extent influence in Iraq as “diplomacy”, not “violation of sovereignty” suggests manipulation through discourse:

That is not a violation of sovereignty. That is diplomacy. That is leadership. Leaders must shape events and public opinion, not just respond to them. (McCain 2011)

The last phrase suggests that reality can be presented according to national interests and public discourse is the primary tool to do it.

In President Obama’s 2016 Address to the Nation, we understand that Iraq may be defined as a “recipe for quagmire” and, therefore, not an example to be proud of:

We also can’t try to take over and rebuild every country that falls into crisis. That’s not leadership; that’s a recipe for quagmire, spilling American blood and treasure that ultimately weakens us. It’s the lesson of Vietnam, of Iraq – and we should have learned it by now. (Obama 2016)

However, beyond the moralizing tone and the implicit criticism, there is a projection of American strength (not to be weakened any more) and the direction towards the redefinition of twenty-first-century’s global leadership in terms of strategic influence not military might.

3. Economic crisis

The economic crisis that began in 2007 was a common topic of public discourse meant to reassure the citizens that the US remains the most capable, vibrant and dynamic nation of the world. This rhetoric is based on the antithesis between the problems caused by the crisis and the positive thinking and the confidence of the American leaders in the potential of their country, which is restorative for the morale. The narrative builds on the idea of the successful nation that can never fail and particular descriptive designations that refer to America’s “uniqueness” in contrast with the rest of the world.

President George Bush's speech on the topic of the crisis, delivered on 24 September 2008, reflects this reassurance goal, so that sensitive issues could be accepted without negative feedback. His rhetorical technique is to rebuild confidence by redefining bad luck as an opportunity to re-confirm the exceptional qualities of America. He first admits the difficult economic situation: "We're in the midst of a serious financial crisis, and the federal government is responding with decisive action" (Bush 2008), and he presents broadly the recovery plan to save American finances by stressing that there is good political cooperation and good will to find solutions. The potential psychological doubt is annulled by the very optimistic tone created with positive terms such as "confident", "strength", "best", and encouraging repetitions such as "we shall overcome", and by using the metonymy "great challenge", suggesting that the US is a country that has unique qualities, and America's destiny is to succeed due to what he sees as typical American characteristics in economy: resilience to recover and entrepreneurial spirit:

Americans have good reason to be confident in our economic strength [...] democratic capitalism [...] has unleashed the talents and the productivity and entrepreneurial spirit of our citizens. It has made this country the best place in the world to invest and do business. And it gives our economy the flexibility and resilience to absorb shocks, adjust, and bounce back. Our economy is facing a moment of great challenge, but we've overcome tough challenges before, and we will overcome this one. (Bush 2008)

He stresses the ability of the leaders to respond, the Americans' talent to cope with difficulties, and to fulfill the American Dream, which is also a recurrent theme in American public speeches that capitalize on the ideology of exceptionalism:

History has shown that, in times of real trial, elected officials rise to the occasion. And together we will show the world once again what kind of country America is: a nation that tackles problems head on, where leaders come together to meet great tests, and where people of every background can work hard, develop their talents, and realize their dreams. (Bush 2008)

On the same topic of the economic crisis, Barack Obama delivered a speech in Toledo, Ohio, on 13 October 2008, entitled "The Economic Crisis and the Middle Class", as part of his presidential campaign. In the speech he admits the seriousness of the economic crisis as being "the worst since the Great depression", but he argues that unique characteristics make the US the envy of the world. Using many superlative epithets, Obama skillfully suggests that a country with such a glorious past can only have a glorious future, in which he highlights the exceptional potential America has:

We are the United States of America, we still have the most talented, the most productive workers of any country on Earth, we're still home to innovation and technology, colleges and universities that are the envy of the world. Some of the biggest ideas in history have come from

our small businesses and from our research facilities. There is no reason why we can't make this century another American century. (Obama 2008)

Obama's speech is infused with pathos: as a candidate he needs to be encouraging, reassuring of the American values and able to inspire confidence. He mentions "American Dream" twice in his speech, the word "confidence" 5 times, and "restore" 8 times. Moreover, Obama highlights the need for confidence in the future and makes a direct appeal to the citizens to have faith in the nation's future because it is America's destiny to win. The American spirit is everlasting and its history proves the resilience of the American people:

I ask of you what's been asked of the American people in times of trial and turmoil throughout our history. I ask you to believe – to believe in yourselves, in each other, and in the future we can build together. (Obama 2008)

In conclusion, the confidence in the economic resilience of the US seems to be a characteristic of the American public speeches that cuts across party lines. It may come from the history of a country that based its economy on the entrepreneurial spirit, allowed little intervention of the state in the free market and indeed altogether has enjoyed economic progress, despite periodical downturns.

4. Nuclear security

When Vice-president Joe Biden delivered a speech entitled "The Path to Nuclear Security: Implementing the President's Prague Agenda" at the National Defense University on 19 February 2010, his pretext was President Obama's speech in 2009 in Prague on nuclear weapons. In a combination of argumentative and persuasive styles and antithetical constructions, the speech betrays the double standards in dealing with international issues - while expressing the intention to curb nuclear race and to prevent other countries from increasing their nuclear assets, America maintains its unilateral right to possess and make use of its nuclear arsenal:

President Obama [...] made clear that we will take concrete steps toward a world without nuclear weapons, while retaining a safe, secure and effective arsenal as long as we need it. We will work to strengthen the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty. And we will do everything in our power to prevent the spread the nuclear weapons to terrorists and also to states that don't already possess them [...] Until that day comes, we will do everything necessary to maintain our arsenal. (Biden 2010)

The sensitivity of the US to the international nuclear issue remains a fact. In February 2013, North Korea made a nuclear test and the powers of the world offered responses that reflected their ideologies and their positions on the global stage.

For example, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed disagreement because of the threat to the regional security: "The Chinese government 'resolutely opposes' North Korea's nuclear test. [...] We strongly urge (North Korea) to abide by (its) promise to denuclearize and take no further action that will worsen the situation"¹. The South Korean president, Park Geun'hye, also reacted in the name of the international community², and the Russian ministry of foreign affairs spoke in the name of the community of nations and even called on the other nations not to show military feedback to it³. In March 2013, Jia Qingguo, a professor from Beijing University publicized the article entitled "Shifting emphasis: Beijing's reactions to the North Korea nuclear test", saying that China has had a cooperative approach and tone with North Korea, to persuade it that nuclear race is not a constructive way to find its place in the international community. China wants security and peace in its neighborhood. Destabilization would trigger refugees, security breaches and the US intervention in the region and this is not China's desire. While condemning the test, China does not wish the fall of the DPRK regime and China had tougher reactions this time "but not as tough as many may expect" (Qingguo 2013).

Unlike these moderate reactions, the US response proves that it sees itself as the leader, and appropriates global interests as US interests. President Obama spoke from the unilateral perspective of the national US security and he took it as a "highly provocative act" and "a threat to U.S. national security and to international peace and security" (Obama 2013a) and undertook the messianic role of the savior. The word "provocation" appeared 4 times in his short speech:

This is a highly provocative act [...] North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs constitute a threat to U.S. national security and to international peace and security. The United States remains vigilant in the face of North Korean provocations and steadfast in our defense commitments to allies in the region [...] The United States will also continue to take steps necessary to defend ourselves and our allies. (Obama 2013a)

At that moment, however, what the "necessary steps" may have been was not clear. It was only in 2015 that the international community concluded a nuclear deal with Iran, thus proving that dialogue can lead to an outcome.

5. Military interventionism

On 10 September 2013, President Barack Obama gave a long speech at the White House, making the case for a military strike against Syria. In an persuasive

1. Ed Payne. „World Leaders react to North Korea's nuclear test". CNN International. 12 Feb 2013. <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/02/12/world/north-korea-nuclear-reax/index.html>

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

style, President Obama tries to argue for a targeted military intervention in Syria meant to deter the use of chemical weapons and to degrade Assad's capabilities, in a context that does not project America in a favorable position, with many voices against more military interventions. Indeed, the president himself admits: "One man wrote to me that we are 'still recovering from our involvement in Iraq.' A veteran put it more bluntly: 'This nation is sick and tired of war'. And finally, several people wrote to me, 'We should not be the world's policeman'." (Obama 2013b)

Obama gave this speech before the UN's report on Syria was made public. Two weeks later, the confirmation of the use of chemical weapons by the UN did not specify that the sarin gas had been used on 21 August 2013 on the rebel-held Damascus suburb of Ghouta by the Syrian government. However, before knowing the findings, President Obama had suggested that the user was the Syrian government and created an apocalyptic image of the gassed people, with strong images meant to stir emotions and achieve consent for military intervention:

The images from this massacre are sickening: Men, women, children lying in rows, killed by poison gas. Others foaming at the mouth, gasping for breath. A father clutching his dead children, imploring them to get up and walk. On that terrible night, the world saw in gruesome detail the terrible nature of chemical weapons. (Obama 2013b)

Obama's speech positions America as the savior of the world and global leader, "the anchor of global security" and that "the world is a better place because we have borne [the burdens of leadership]" (Obama 2013b). The audience's understanding to be achieved is that the Syrian issue is a matter of "national security" much more than a matter of international or regional security and America cannot tolerate this situation. By using key phrases "to make clear to the world" or "we will not tolerate", Obama expresses authority and domination:

I determined that it is in the national security interests of the United States to respond to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons through a targeted military strike. [...] Our ideals and principles, as well as our national security, are at stake in Syria, along with our leadership of a world where we seek to ensure that the worst weapons will never be used. (Obama 2013b)

President Obama ends his speech in a skillful association of the words: "humility" and "resolve", which appear oxymoronic because humility means unassertiveness, while resolve implies assertiveness, and with the characteristics of the US as "exceptional" and "different". These few sentences reflect at the same time: intention of multilateral approach, compliance with international decisions but also America's unique right to intervene:

America is not the world's policeman. Terrible things happen across the globe, and it is beyond our means to right every wrong. But when, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children

from being gassed to death, and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act. That's what makes America different. That's what makes us exceptional. With humility, but with resolve, let us never lose sight of that essential truth. (Obama 2013b)

Two years later, on 28th September 2015, Obama delivers a speech at the UN General Assembly in New York at the time of the critical crisis in Syria, when ISIS decapitates people and sends messages of outrageous violence in the media, but a few days before the Russian air intervention on ISIS positions in Syria. The speech first describes the current global state of affairs, and it gives hints about the goals of the US foreign policy, implicitly defining the US as the savior and the global preserver of stability. Although he cyclically projects the US as the leader during his speech, Obama's statements reveal a more cooperative attitude of the US in dealing with global issues and suggests a sharing of the burdens such as terrorism, flow of migrants and global warming.

From the very beginning, Obama subtly positions the US as unique and as a leader by skillfully creating a sentence in which he places the US first, singularizing the US in opposition to the rest of the world, although apparently giving the impression of equal footing: "Out of the ashes of the WWII, having witnessed the unthinkable power of the atomic age, the United States has worked with many nations in this Assembly to prevent a third world war" (Obama 2015). Later on, he defines the US as the unique nation either directly, calling the US "the most powerful nation in the world", or through metonymies hinting at its military might and at its top economy. Likewise, Obama praises the strong points that make the US exceptional: military strength, entrepreneurship, attractiveness for immigrants. He uses absolute adjectives to define the US, suggesting hegemony and power:

I lead the strongest military that the world has ever known [...] No matter how powerful our military, how strong our economy, we understand the United States cannot solve the world's problems alone. (Obama 2015)

Many figures of in this speech create a graphic image of the relations between the US and the other countries. Interestingly, Obama does not specify any partner countries, but only enemies. Antithetical constructions, stylistic tricks, reiterated words: "fear", "dangers", "dark", but also "cooperation", "cooperative" and "cooperatively" and equivalents such as "work together" and "work with other nations", as well as medical words such as "infected" and "immune" are meant to stir feelings. The final part of Obama's speech encourages a more cooperative approach in dealing with international human issues, reminding of the philosophy of the *melting pot*:

our nation of immigrants mirrors the diversity of the world... in this country, everybody can contribute, everybody can participate no matter who they are, or what they look like, or who they love – that’s what makes us strong. (Obama 2015)

At that moment, European countries were divided over the issue of Middle East migrants that were invading the Schengen area. However, historical and economic contexts are totally different. Immigrants in the 18th and 19th century in America have little in common with today’s immigrants. Today, the US has barbed wire on its border with Mexico, illegal migrants are chased by the US Police and sent back, and in terms of integration, unless one has clear qualification and skills, will not have access to a US visa.

6. Global leadership

At the NATO Summit in Strasbourg, France, on 3 April 2009, President Barack Obama made a speech based on the claim that the US is the leader of the world and is indispensable to the rest of the world. His technique was to simultaneously position America as a partner and as the leader: “The United States came here to listen, to learn, and to lead, because all of us have a responsibility to do our parts” (Obama 2009). By mentioning America at the end of his statements, he actually stresses America’s position as the main agent in international politics. This claim seems to be reproducing the ideology of American exceptionalism by recasting it as egalitarian and democratic arrangement or agreement of other nations.

Interestingly, during a follow-up press conference, President Barack Obama received a question regarding his belief in American exceptionalism from Ed Luce, a *Financial Times* journalist who asked: “could I ask you whether you subscribe, as many of your predecessors have, to the school of American exceptionalism that sees America as uniquely qualified to lead the world, or do you have a slightly different philosophy?”. Barack Obama’s answer: “I believe in American exceptionalism just as the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism” was the beginning of a series of critical remarks. Political opponents and analysts separated his statement from the rest of the context that actually completed the meaning.

Obama’s speech in Strasbourg has not been recognized as exceptionalist because it is softer, and it has a more reconciling and cooperative propensity calling for shared responsibility in the world which can make the impression that America gives up its leadership: “It’s always harder to forge true partnerships and sturdy alliances than to act alone, or to wait for the action of somebody else” (Obama 2009). However, Obama emphasizes America’s unique qualities: its strength, its endeavors and its leadership. He subtly criticizes those who blame America, suggesting

this is ungratefulness towards the sacrifice America makes for the world in its messianic effort: “Instead of recognizing the good that America so often does in the world, there have been times where Europeans choose to blame America for much of what's bad” (Obama 2009). This remark subtly defines America as leader and requests general recognition thereof.

However, Obama’s statements during this interview at the NATO summit in Strasbourg praised the exceptional American institutions and practices in absolute superlatives such as “the largest”, “unmatched”, “exceptional”:

The United States remains the largest economy in the world. We have unmatched military capability. And I think that we have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality that, though imperfect, are exceptional. (Obama 2009)

A criticism to Obama’s reply may not be grounded because Obama mentioned two former big empires, the British and the Greeks, and his first sentence can be interpreted as an implicit comparison.

Continuing this pattern of argumentation, President Barack Obama gave a speech on 17 November 2011 in the Australian Parliament in Canberra, Australia, focused on America’s interests in the Pacific region in which he reiterated the ideas of “biggest economy” and “largest military capabilities”. The first half of his speech is a narrative meant to stir flattering emotions by hints to history and experiences shared by the US and Australia. He speaks of historical similarities between the US and Australia and the perfect cooperation at time of wars. The second part is more argumentative, as Obama shifts his focus on America’s interests in the Pacific region, by stressing, in epithets and enumerations, America’s economic strength, its greatest military power, its right to be the leader of the world and to expand its influence. His arguments about America’s “larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future” are likely to be well received by the audience after the first emotional part of his speech. He describes America as the biggest economy of the world but he places it artfully in the international context of G20 to suggest that responsibilities are shared and to avoid potential questions about the economic domestic problems that may lead to the conclusion that American economy has become weaker:

The United States remains the world’s largest and most dynamic economy. But in an interconnected world, we all rise and fall together. That’s why I pushed so hard to put the G20 at the front and center of global economic decision-making -- to give more nations a leadership role in managing the international economy, including Australia. (Obama 2011)

By repetitions of “Asia Pacific”, “the future”, “critical”, “priority”, “strategic”, “enduring”, and especially “we”, superlatives such as “fundamental truth” and

“highest priority”, he reiterates America’s priority to maintain global leadership:

Our new focus on this region reflects a fundamental truth -- the United States has been, and always will be, a Pacific nation [...]. Here, we see the future. As the world’s fastest-growing region -- and home to more than half the global economy -- the Asia Pacific is critical to achieving my highest priority, and that's creating jobs and opportunity for the American people. With most of the world’s nuclear power and some half of humanity, Asia will largely define whether the century ahead will be marked by conflict or cooperation, needless suffering or human progress. (Obama 2011)

America’s exceptional military power appears to be the tool to preserve international order in the Asia Pacific region which suggests once again the structure of power: America vs the rest of the world. The repetition “we will”, and the use of “we” instead of the US or America is a clever strategy to create the feeling that America does not impose its power. However, “we” is ambivalent: it creates a feeling of solidarity in action with the other countries, while remaining individualistic in interests as it refers to America:

As we plan and budget for the future, we will allocate the resources necessary to maintain our strong military presence in this region. We will preserve our unique ability to project power and deter threats to peace. We will keep our commitments, including our treaty obligations to allies like Australia. And we will constantly strengthen our capabilities to meet the needs of the 21st century. (Obama 2011)

In the same spirit, Vice-president Joseph Biden delivered a speech at Sichuan University in China, on the topic of the US-China relations, on 21 August 2011. He also suggests that the US is the leader in the Pacific, irrespective of other nations present there, because of an implicit superiority. The narrative discourse that emphasizes similarities and the historical connections between China and the US leads to an argument that America is unique. His rhetorical technique is to play on complementarities: he creates subtle, implicit comparisons by which he intends to highlight America’s qualities. He first mentions China and its achievements, and then he adds something about America that highlights America’s unique qualities and its leader position in the world. For instance, he evokes the example of an American politician of Chinese origin who has held high positions in the administration. To complement the story, he continues with a phrase that suggests that it is America that is the only country that gives equal opportunities to all and facilitates personal self-fulfillment:

I share this story with you not because it’s unique, but because it is uniquely American. While not every child or grandchild of an immigrant will reach the pinnacle of society as Ambassador Locke has, America continues to put such possibilities within reach of all those who seek our shores (Biden 2011).

America's position as the global leader in the 21st century and its exceptional qualities unparalleled by other countries are reflected in Republican Senator Marco Rubio's address to the Brookings Institution, in Washington DC, on 25 April 2012, which is entitled "Is The American Order Sustainable and Necessary in the 21st century?". Senator Marco Rubio is young, of Cuban origin, and he seems to be also a promoter of the US leadership in the 21st century, based on its messianic role successfully accomplished in the world after WW II, and therefore entitled to preserve this position unchallenged. Moreover, he suggests that it is not America that wants to impose its rules, but the world requests American values because they are the best to ensure progress. Key words that are usually associated with America's image are repeated several times in his speech: "leadership", "democracy", "free market", and "prosperity":

What world order might have existed from the end of World War II until the present if America -- absent American leadership. Could we say for certain that it would look anything like America's vision of an increasingly freer and more open international system where catastrophic conflicts between great powers were avoided? Democracy and free market capitalism flourished? Where prosperity spread wider and wider, and billions of people emerged from poverty? Would it have occurred, if after the war, America had minded its own business and left the world to sort out its affairs without our leadership? Almost surely not. (Rubio 2012)

One can recognize the use of rhetorical questions to force a pre-defined conclusion that American leadership has shaped the world as we know it. By comparisons and repetitions, especially the possessive "our", and without providing clear arguments, he suggests the further need for America's leadership in the world:

what happens all over the world is our business. [...] The security of our cities is connected to the security of small hamlets in Afghanistan and Pakistan and Yemen and Somalia. Our cost of living, the safety of our food, the value of the things we invent, make, and sell are just a few examples of everyday aspects of our lives that are directly related to events abroad and make it impossible for us to focus only on our issues here at home. (Rubio 2012)

Rubio's arguments and rhetoric are another demonstration that exceptionalist discourse has not been removed from American public speaking and that it is likely to be strategically used by both Democrats and Republicans, incumbents and challengers, for domestic and foreign audiences.

Also domestically, President Obama's remarks at the US Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., commencement ceremony on 28 May 2014, in the context of the Ukrainian conflict, hint at the role of the US global leadership. As this is an epideictic speech, President Obama develops it into an idolization of America's leadership in the world, due to its exceptional qualities, strength and military power which ensures American leadership. He makes use of comparisons, metaphors and epithets with superlative and absolute meaning such as "the most dynamic",

“the most innovative”, “has no peer”, “indispensable”. America’s strong points are listed in the order: military, economy and business, attractiveness for immigrants, humanitarian aid. Then he uses two metaphors reminding of the historical themes of the “city upon the hill” and the “savior”, suggesting that America has always been “indispensable” to the world and it will remain so in the 21st century:

The values of our founding inspire leaders in parliaments and new movements in public squares around the globe. And when a typhoon hits the Philippines, or schoolgirls are kidnapped in Nigeria, or masked men occupy a building in Ukraine, it is America that the world looks to for help. So the United States is and remains the one indispensable nation. That has been true for the century past, and it will be true for the century to come. (Obama 2014)

After mentioning the security needs of the world, President Obama designates America as the global leader, suggesting that no other power can equal America’s strength and will to protect the world, and he expresses the propensity to unilateral action whenever American interests are at stake around the world, without taking into account international opinion. The use of the verbs “must lead”, “will use military force” and “should never ask permission” impose a clear relation of power and subordination of the others to America’s interests:

America must always lead on the world stage. If we don’t, no one else will [...] The United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it -- when our people are threatened; when our livelihoods are at stake; when the security of our allies is in danger [...] International opinion matters, but America should never ask permission to protect our people, our homeland or our way of life. (Obama 2014)

Even when speaking of “collective action”, Obama defines America as the leader in taking decisions and distributing responsibilities to allies and partners, while preserving its right of unilateral action:

we should not go it alone. Instead, we must mobilize allies and partners to take collective action [...] The partnerships I’ve described do not eliminate the need to take direct action when necessary to protect ourselves. When we have actionable intelligence, that’s what we do. (Obama 2014)

Most recently, during the GlobSec2016 conference in Bratislava, while speaking of the current security issues, senator Christopher Murphy, a member of the US Senate since 2013 and, at 43, one of the youngest members of the Foreign Relations Committee, mentions the same phrase “indispensable nation”, thus suggesting that the US is the leader when it comes to global issues. He says that “the rise of China, the future of Russia’s interventions, the future of Europe and climate change” are his primary concerns. Regarding global terrorism, Murphy outlines that both military and non-military means should be employed as deterrents.

He positions the US as the leader in solving the world's security problems, clearly defining it as unique compared to the rest of the world and also uses the theme of the saviour in his speech: "the US is accustomed to solving all problems, the U.S. will remain the indispensable nation, will continue to be everywhere and to share responsibilities with the others" (Murphy 2016).

7. Conclusions

This analysis aimed to catalogue and discuss the rhetorical techniques used by politicians in the American public discourse, which have recently been used to describe America's identity and institutions and to define and legitimize its policies. The analyzed speeches show the speakers' propensity to use such devices as: absolute and superlative epithets, the first person "we" with dual meaning (the world and the US), the possessive "our", antithetical constructions, metaphors, metonymies, paradoxical constructions, repetitions. At times, descriptions of American social reality and history are hyperbolized while strategically combined figures of speech facilitate desired association of concepts and celebratory symbolism. One significant example is Barack Obama, who changed his discourse from more critical, when he was a senator, to a global leadership-focused discourse when he became the president. Another example is Senator John McCain who clearly says: "Leaders must shape events and public opinion, not just respond to them" in an attempt to discredit Obama by comparing his deference to the "tougher" Republican measures.

As shown here, American public discourse is adapted to the political circumstances (campaigns, crises, strategic alliances, dramatic events) and it is meant to shape opinions, mindsets, and attitudes of the voters to be more susceptible to accept official policies. It is channeled rhetorically to persuade and to ensure cognitive consonance, hence it relies on common underlying ideological bases: American uniqueness and American exceptionalism – both of which can be used to legitimize American global hegemony (van Dijk 2011).

Both in Republican and Democratic discourses there seems to be a permanent need to define America as unique and to position it as separate from any other country in public discourses. Even criticisms of certain American values at a specific moment are counterbalanced by ideas that make America stand out, or the speaker picks other facets of the US seen as unique. Irrespective of the context – economic, military, political, international or domestic, campaign or institutionalized, there is clear strategy to identify America as the unique country for the sake of the public. This rhetorical aim is supported by arguments derived from past or present stances or manifestations of uniqueness in American history, society, institutions and culture which stand out as singular and indispensable.

The research has been performed on a limited sample of texts, but given the wide variety of speeches delivered during this 8-year timespan on various occasions, we can conclude that public figures, especially the president, the top politicians, but also personalities of various socio-professional backgrounds make use of such rhetorical techniques in order to discuss the current US national interest or legitimize the need to uphold American global dominance with references to the country's assumed exceptional or unique qualities.

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