

Litigation #38

A Dog in Time: The Extraordinary Success of Richard Nixon's 1952 "Checkers" Speech

In my last *On the Papers* essay, I probed the reasons why President Richard Nixon's 1972 speech announcing the end of the Vietnam war was such a rhetorical failure that almost no one can quote a single sentence from it. Since President Nixon was usually a completely competent public speaker, I want this time to look at his single most effective speech, known for its canine content as his 1952 "Checkers" speech. The 1972 speech called for high rhetoric, at which he failed; the 1952 speech called for conversational rhetoric, at which he excelled so much that it saved his career. Had Senator Nixon not met this rhetorical challenge, he never would have survived politically to become President Nixon.

The factual setting that required the speech is easily stated. It became known that Senator Nixon had received a fund containing \$18,000 to offset expenses. (In 2021 dollars, that is the equivalent of about \$200,000.) General Eisenhower was running for President and had chosen Nixon as his Vice-Presidential candidate. Eisenhower had made the

decision to drop Nixon from the ticket, just weeks in advance of the election, because of this potential scandal.

The day before Eisenhower was to announce that, Nixon purchased radio and television time to put his case to the American public – the first time in history a politician by-passed the news media and appealed directly to the people. It was watched by the largest audience in television history. At the end of the speech, he asked the public to write the Republican National Committee as to whether he should stay or go. Three hundred and eighty-five letters and telegrams demanded he stay. Eisenhower had no choice but to retain him on the ticket.

Ironic note: The cost of this appearance, footed by the RNC and campaign committees, was \$75,000 – more than four times the size of the \$18,000 fund being disputed.

How did Nixon do it? (It matters not who wrote the speech: We are talking here of the speech's rhetoric. But it is likely Nixon wrote most or all of it.)

Who was his audience? Citizens. Ordinary people. Voters. What did they want? Straight talk, not flourishes of purple prose. They wanted to know if the

fund existed – and if so, was it legal? They wanted to know how the money was used. They wanted to know why he accepted it. And they got all that in the first 20 paragraphs of his 40-paragraph speech.

But they got more than that. The candidate surprised everyone by giving a detailed financial history of everything he had earned, spent, owned, and owed. These details must have sounded familiar to the entire audience. The Nixons had struggled just like everybody else not born rich had struggled.

After the eight paragraphs he devoted to this personal history, he turned political again for eight more paragraphs, attacking his critics and his opponents, re-assuming his fiery role of Communist hunter and corruption detector, all the while energetically touting Eisenhower. Using one brief, 2-paragraph piece of personal sentimentalism, he prepared for the final paragraphs attending to whether he should resign his spot on the ticket, finishing the speech by asking people to write in his support.

Let us look at some of the rhetorical techniques he employed that worked so well for him, starting with the physical set. It could not have been simpler. It looked as financially constrained as he would picture his life to have been. (It looked like a room in his humble home;

it was actually staged in a movie studio.) For 31 paragraphs, he sat in a plain chair behind a mostly plain table, with pages of notes and a carafe of water, which he never used. Nothing else. Then he dramatically rose, marking the beginning his political attack. Suddenly he made use of outstretched arms and dramatic gestures. He calmed down for the sentimental moment (a 19-year-old wife of a Korean Conflict soldier sent him a \$10 contribution with a moving letter) and then recharged the engines for the peroration at the end. Every once in a while, the camera would expand its field and discover Pat Nixon, quietly sitting in an upholstered chair. Simplicity ruled throughout. He changed what we saw only by his arising and using his arms.

He had to handle the question of the fund first. He needed to sound honest and straightforward. One phrase served him well, throughout the speech – but only if we were not consciously aware of it. He kept repeating some version of “And let me say” He was humbly asking our permission for him to tell us things. Because it was never in a position of stress at the end of a sentence, but always at the beginning, no one probably noticed that he used it 21 times in 40 paragraphs – amounting to an average of once every 13.3 sentences. He must have grown fond of it, since it matured later on in his career to become the well-

remembered “. . . and let me make this perfectly clear.”

The Stress positions, at the end of his sentences, are usually occupied by the items he wanted us most to stress. Access a copy of the speech and turn to any paragraph to check this out. A particularly good choice would be the paragraph about Checkers, #26, which we will visit below. Strongly filled stress positions make reading – both for readers and orators – sound positive, confident, assured. And if read humbly enough, they make it sound honest.

He kept his sentence length moderate throughout – almost no Hemingwayan brevity and only one moment of Faulknerian excessiveness. In half of the paragraphs, the sentences average from 15 to 15 words. Another third of the paragraphs average from 25 to 35 words. That leaves only a handful below 15 words and a half a handful from 35 to 45 words. The sentences are markedly on the short side in the eight paragraphs in which he narrates his personal history. Just the facts.

There is one outlier: The one-sentence 13th paragraph contains 94 words, in which he summarizes why he took the money. A third of the way through that sentence, he digresses to attack the Communism and corruption in the existing Administration. He gets lost

at that point and has to start his grammatical structure all over again. This, I suspect, was carefully planned, since it portrays him as wholly human, inspired by his role in politics, and irrepressibly passionate.

He fills the speech with metadiscourse – which is discourse about discourse. He raises three questions at the beginning as to how the fund may have been morally wrong. If it was, X, Y, or Z, it was wrong. Then he tells us, “And now to answer those questions.” He guides us through his structure.

He relies on rhetorical techniques that go all the way back to ancient times. He likes *anaphora* – the beginning of several units with the same word or phrase. The moment after his 94-word explosion, he hits us with three indications that none of his contributors ever asked anything of him in return. “And let me say that I am proud of the fact that [no one asked for favors]. I am proud of the fact that [no one asked me to vote a certain way]. And I am proud of the fact that [taxpayers weren’t burdened with my expenses].” This goes beyond mere organization: This is a hammer made of *anaphora*.

In the eighth paragraph, he combines *anaphora* (underlined here) with its rhetorical sibling, *epistrophe* (in italics here) – the ending of several units with the

same material:

Do you think that [when Senators write speeches, the expenses] *should be charged to the taxpayers?* Do you think that [when Senators travel home to make political speeches that] *should be charged to the taxpayers?* Do you think [when Senators make radio or television broadcasts that] *should be charged to the taxpayers?* Well, I know what your answer is. . . . The answer is no.

Notice there are three of these questions. He uses this triplet form over and over. It is easy for audiences to detect. It guides them from beginning to end of a section without the need for metadiscourse. We encounter it as early as childhood, it being standard in our earliest experiences of reading and of being read to. Think Goldilocks and her bears.

And, straight from Cicero 2,000 years ago, he makes skillful use of *praeterito* – the art of saying something by saying that you will not say it. It is an especially handy way of striking out at your enemies. In his political outburst, he suggests that Stevenson (the Democratic presidential candidate at the time) had received funds, and he notes that Sparkman (the vice-presidential candidate) had put his wife on his payroll, which Nixon never did. He follows this with, “I don’t

condemn Mr. Stevenson for what he did, but until the facts are in there is a doubt that will be raised. And as far as Mr. Sparkman is concerned, I would suggest the same thing. He's had his wife on the payroll. I don't condemn him for that but I think he should come before the American people and indicate what outside sources of income he has had." He condemns by "not condemning." And in the process, he congratulates himself for his present soul-baring effort.

Beyond matters of detail, Nixon's speech is brilliantly structured. How much time you give an issue and where you place it affects how the audience perceives it. Halves and quarters are handy dividing measures for making structure function. The first half of this speech (20 of the 40 paragraphs) focuses on the \$18,000 fund. The second half is itself divided almost into halves: 8 paragraphs are used for the personal history; 9 paragraphs are used for his mounting his political attack pedestal; and two paragraphs (the \$10 donation), just before the end, become if not personal at least emotional.

This certainly could be called neatly organizational; but I've used the word "brilliant." Where is the brilliance? It has to do with the placement of that dog by whose name the speech is known.

He finished his personal history in the 25th paragraph. And then, like the television detective Columbo, he pauses to say, “Oh, but one more thing.” He tells us a man in Texas has heard that the Nixon girls (4 and 6 years old at the time) wanted a dog.

And believe it or not, the day before we left on this campaign trip we got a message from Union Station in Baltimore, saying they had a package for us. We went down to get it. You know what it was? It was a little cocker spaniel dog in a crate that he'd sent all the way from Texas, black and white, spotted. And our little girl Tricia, the six-year-old, named it "Checkers." And you know, the kids, like all kids, love the dog, and I just want to say this, right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it.

Touching. Human. An example of a “gift,” whether legal or not, that he insists on keeping. Pat may have been sitting in a chair, mostly out of sight; but these two little girls have now burst onto the scene, unseen, to dominate our consciousness, playing with their dog.

That is great thinking and really good writing. But brilliant?

Let us look at the prose rhythms of the most affecting

part of this passage. I have divided the passage into separate lines, relying on the rhythmic units that Nixon used in his performance, with the number of prose beats in each line indicated in parentheses and the accented syllables printed in bold.

- (2) We **went** down to **get** it.
 (2) You **know** what it **was**?
 (4) It was a **little cocker spaniel dog**
 (4) in a **crate** that he'd **sent** all the **way** from **Texas**,
 (2) **black** and **white**,
 (1) **spotted**.
 (3) And our **little girl Tricia**, the **six** year old,
 (2) **named** it "**Checkers**."
 (3) And you **know**, the **kids**, like **all** kids,
 (2) **love** the **dog**,
 (3) and I **just** want to **say** this, right **now**,
 (4) that **regardless** of **what** they **say** **about** it,
 (2) we're **gonna keep** it.

The paragraph to this point has proceeded rather unmusically. It has sounded haphazardly narrative. This happened. That happened. But suddenly, at this moment of "suspense," two, short, 2-beat lines appear, balancing themselves against each other, and establishing 2 beats as the rhythm off of which all other units must play. "We went down to get it." (Yes, yes?) "You know what it was?" (What? What?)

And then a 4-beat little cocker spaniel dog jumps out of the crate, fulfilling the arrival so anticipated. And that 4-beat line is made even more expansive by the 4-beat line that follows, taking us all the way to Texas. But it is not yet finished! From the two 4-beat lines, we dramatically drop down to another 2-beat line, “black and white.” And even that doesn’t finish it off: The final word, just one word and one beat, gets a whole unit of importance from Nixon’s reading: “spotted.” And could “spotted” be any cuter?

With a fresh grammatical breath, Nixon reads the next 3-beat line, identifying Tricia, fast enough so that it takes up the same amount of time as the following creativistic naming moment – “named it ‘Checkers.’” Let there be Checkers, and there was Checkers.

The last four lines play their own music. They repeat the 3 then 2 of the preceding two lines. And the final motion sounds like it is going to be another 3-beat line followed by a 2-beat line; but it is interrupted by a long line swelling to 4 beats, as Senator Nixon insists that he doesn’t care what the rest of the world thinks.

Really wonderfully done – both the writing and the performance of it.

Do you know about the Fibonacci Series, and the

resulting “Golden mean” number referred to by the Greek letter *phi*? If not, look it up. You have wonders awaiting you.

In the 12th Century, Fibonacci created a numerical series in which every new member was the sum of the two members that preceded it. It therefore starts out 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55 . . . and continues to infinity. If you continually divided any of these numbers into the one that follows it, you get results that get closer and closer to an irrational number that starts out .61803 As you go further and further out doing this, the answers will alternate going above or below a number that will never be reached. That number – about 61.8%, is called *phi*.

The numbers in the series and the *phi* number appear everywhere not only in nature but also in art, architecture, and literature created by humans. Flowers have 3 or 5 or 8 or 13 or 21 or 34 or 55 petals. Pine cones expand according to the same numbers. In literature, the percentage 61.8 often functions as a location for the furthest extent of building stress before the arrow is let fly from the structural bow.

Take a look at any of the following Shakespeare sonnets: ## 18, 29, 60, 65, 71, 116, or 138. 62% of the way through a sonnet lands you in the second half of

the ninth line. Note how the tension of the poem's progression reaches its furthest limit there before releasing the energy that takes us to the poem's end. I have found this to be true also of long works that are supremely well written.

What sentence lies at the 62% way through of this speech of Nixon? "We went down to get it." Checkers arrives at the *phi* moment of this speech. No one is counting; but everyone can feel that this speech has reached a point past which things must change, must heat up, must barrel forward to its conclusion. And that is why I call it brilliant.

Have you got a document or an oral presentation that is of special importance? Take some care as to how you develop your material leading up to that 62% moment.

Next time we will look at a speech that certainly has to be in the running if they ever have a contest for "best 20th century American speech" – Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.