The Tale of a Man, a Nation, and a Speech

Introduction

This essay shall serve as a critical analysis of former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew’s speech, “Television News Coverage”. Three dramatistic approaches – the narrative paradigm, fantasy theme analysis, and Burkian analysis – were utilized and are inseparably intertwined with each other throughout the analysis. The following critique will prove that a construct which is perceived to be a social norm can be so strongly rooted within a society that it requires the true situation to be explained in narrative terms in order to be perceived.

Description of Context

The year 1969 was President Richard Nixon’s first year in office. America had already been fighting the Vietnam War for fourteen years and it was a time in which the general public “lost confidence in what their government has told them…” (Nixon). The Vice President at this time was Spiro T. Agnew. Agnew was the son of a Grecian immigrant and was a staunchly idealistic Republican. Despite his political orientation, he managed to get elected as a county executive and later governor of Maryland which was heavily Democratic at the time (Greene 124). To the surprise of the Republican Convention and – so he claimed – to himself, he was chosen as Richard Nixon’s running mate in 1968 (Interim History 9). When Nixon won, Agnew stepped into the role of Vice President. Throughout his time in the public eye, be it on a state or national level, Agnew was well known for his incendiary remarks about minority groups and quickly became “one of the leading race baiters in American politics” (Greene 125). It has been suggested that Nixon chose Agnew as his running mate and eventual Vice President because of
this trait as it would distract the American public from the unpopular war in Vietnam (Greene 126) though Nixon himself claimed that it was because of Agnew’s ability to perform under pressure (Interim History 12). Yet this perceived ability to perform well under pressure was not to help him with the utter devastation he was to face. As President Nixon was struggling through the Watergate scandal, Vice President Agnew became embroiled in a crisis of his own. On January 15, 1973, Lester Matz, the president of a Maryland consulting engineering firm, revealed that he had been paying off Agnew since the beginning of Agnew’s political career (Cohen and Witcover 10). Using this testimony, Agnew was investigated, primarily by Barnet D. Skolnik and George Beal (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1a.-5, -8), and then charged with violating statutes regarding “conspiracy, extortion, bribery and income taxes” (Osborne 14) in 1973. Agnew pleaded no contest to “one count of tax evasion” (Cohen and Witcover 302). On October 9, 1973, Agnew informed President Nixon of his intention to resign from the Vice Presidency (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1c.-11). As a private citizen, he “received a ten-thousand-dollar fine and a three-year jail sentence that was suspended immediately” (Greene 132). Agnew then did his best to disappear from the public eye, leaving behind only his tarnished political record and the recordings of his speeches.

Description of Text

One of Vice President Agnew’s more famous speeches was “Television News Coverage,” given on November 13, 1969, prior to any hint of scandal. Agnew begins his speech by briefly recapping President Nixon’s speech, “The Silent Majority”, which was about the protestors of the Vietnam War. He then goes on to berate the media, specifically television news networks, for their response to Nixon’s speech, saying that “their minds were made up in advance.” He next expounds upon how the network news have developed into a very powerful force directed by a
small, relatively homogenous group of men who “do not […] represent the views of America.” These men, Agnew claims, are creating a monopoly out of the airwaves which actually “belong to the people.” To prove his point, Agnew talks about how “Bad news drives out good news.” He gives specific examples, such as the House of Representative Commerce Committee’s report about the representation of police violence in Chicago, as well as more generalized examples such as perpetuated stereotyping of African Americans and students. Vice President Agnew ends his speech by challenging the network news media to “turn their critical power on themselves, […] to structure their own civic ethics” and by challenging the American people to insist on responsible, balanced reporting.

*Analysis and Interpretation*

Vice President Agnew presents his speech like a story in which he is the narrator. This story he tells is about three main characters: President Nixon, the news media networks, and the American people. Each of the characters represents a classical literary figure, with Nixon being the champion who must struggle to overcome the evil, the news media taking the role as good-turned-evil antagonist, and the American people as the innocent masses being oppressed by the antagonist. It is set all across America, with Washington D.C. and New York City being the strongholds of the news networks. Agnew’s speech presents a classic underdog tale (Kim, Allison and Eylon 2551) where the evil media is thrashing President Nixon at every opportunity, especially his recent speech, to which the media “expressed in one way or another their hostility to what he had to say.” Some news networks had even been “encouraging the country to not listen to him [Nixon].” The evil media is so powerful that it has the ability to shape and control the perspectives of the American masses. The only way in which this story can have a happy ending, Agnew claims, is for the American masses to join together with him and Nixon to
combat the news networks and force the evil to relinquish the negativity for which their power is
used.

Agnew presents his arguments in such a storytelling way so as to create a fantasy, a story
about events involving the group about “topics that may seem, at first, to be irrelevant to the
group’s task” (Stoner and Perkins 202). Certainly it would not seem to be the responsibility of
the unspecialized American public to determine the highly specialized content of the news media.
Yet this is what Agnew is urging them to do. He does so in an attempt to persuade the general
public to accept his rhetorical vision, his view of “how things should be” (Stoner and Perkins
202), through appealing to the social truth that the media should always strive to be unbiased. To
paraphrase Spider-man, because they have such a great power in American society, they must
wield their power responsibly (Koepp). By not doing so, the news networks are dividing
themselves from the role that they should be playing as an unbiased information provider.
Because they are not reporting in a neutral fashion, Agnew claims, it means that they are
violating the American public’s “right to make up their own minds and form their own opinions.”
Naturally, the only way that the media would be able to infringe upon the right of the American
public would be if there was a dichotomic social hierarchy in which the news media would have
power while the public would not. Such a lack of power creates a negative, “a powerful symbolic
tool human beings use to create categories of experiences” (Stoner and Perkins 215), to create a
division in the minds of the audience members where they would recognize that they are in the
‘have not’ category. Yet since “[…] the principle of any hierarchy involves the possibility of
reversing highest and lowest” (Burke 140), and since it is only natural to desire to be higher up
within the hierarchy, Agnew attempts to convenes his audience that they have the power to
reverse the hierarchy because “They [the airwaves] belong to the people.” If the audience, the
American public, accepted Agnew’s rhetorical vision about the media, they would be more likely to attempt to reverse the situation. Thus, emphasizing the perceived hierarchal inequality was necessary for the instigation of the desired social change.

However, Agnew seemed to be unaware of the rhetorical issues present in his speech, which possibly caused his audience to apparently do nothing to instigate the social change that he was arguing for. It certainly was not for lack of narrative probability, the coherence, of the speech itself. Instead, the problem lay with the narrative fidelity: that which deals with the truth, logic, and values of a story (Stoner and Perkins 190). Several of Agnew’s arguments were quasi-logical in that either they were irrelevant to the actual issue, such as Nixon’s preparedness and experience of previous world leaders. Other arguments presented options as the only possible options, such as choosing only between television and phonographs, without considering that there might be other options,. And then there is the matter of values. It is very possible that Agnew caused his audience to reject his rhetorical vision due to his own inconsistency over the course of his time in the public eye. For example, in a speech just the previous month, Agnew calls students “an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals” (Agnew, Rhetoric Aimed at 'Effete...Snobs' 41). During his time as governor of Maryland, he said that Black leaders were “caterwauling, riot-inciting, burn-America-down type of leaders” (Greene 125). This is certainly a sharp contrast to his criticism of the media for what he says is unfair coverage of both these groups. Such a lack in consistency of values may be what lead critics to claim that Agnew’s comments on the media “both misrepresent and misinterpret the news functions of television” (Interim History 64).

However, it is highly probable that Agnew chose to suddenly show support for the minority groups he had previously belittled so as to make himself appear more favorable in
comparison to the news media. This would logically be necessary to sway the American public to want to identify with him instead of the ‘bad’ media. Not expounding upon the manner in which the news media covered minorities and the events they were involved in would cause Agnew to break from his narrative form as he would no longer be able to ascertain news networks as a powerful antagonist. If they were not the powerful antagonist, then there would be no reason for the media to hold any power over the American public and therefore no reason for the media to be any higher within a social hierarchy over anyone else. Should this be the case, Agnew’s speech would serve no purpose and carry no weight. Nevertheless, Agnew clearly sees his role as narrator as a way to convince the American public that there is a social hierarchy in which the news networks hold power “equal to that of local, state, and Federal Governments all combined.” A change needs to be made in the hierarchal structure he establishes in his story because Agnew believes that the media is an antagonist not only to President Nixon but to him and the American public. What this fundamentally implies is that America is not a land of equality, but of social hierarchies that are very complex and difficult to perceive. Such a cultural situation is so deeply ingrained that it requires a narration, an application of real-life events to a common story-telling theme, in order to be perceived. Agnew’s goal, therefore, is to convince his audience of this and help them believe that they are capable of changing the situation so as to make America become closer to the land of equality that it is believed to be.

*Evaluation*

At the time at which it was given, Vice President Agnew’s speech “Television News Coverage” was not very effective. It has narrative probability in that the story displays definite sequence of thought and is free of internal contradictions. However, it lacks narrative fidelity in that its reasoning is not necessarily sound as was explained above. Another way in which it can
be determined that Agnew’s speech was not very effective is by looking at history and noticing the lack of noticeable change. While the early 1970s did show a new audience interest in television programming (Dominick 232), it was certainly not focused on the news networks as Agnew had hoped that it would be. Even so, it must be mentioned that Agnew’s choice in rhetorical style, choosing to present a story as opposed to a listing of cold, hard facts, was appropriate for the nature and purpose of this speech as it was the best way for Agnew to attempt to persuade the American public to accept his ideology.

In current times, Vice President Agnew’s speech remains ineffective and ironic. It has come to be taken for granted that network news will always have some sort of political slant. It is also now common form for anything done or said by anyone of importance to instantly be analyzed by news networks as well as millions of the general public thanks to the internet. In addition, this speech has become ironic due to Agnew’s concerns about the ethics of the news coverage at the time when he later proved himself to be equally as unethical due to his bribery and income tax evasion scandal. His actions lead to the ineffectiveness of his speech in the modern era because he clearly saw himself as being above the law despite arguing against the power vested in the news networks. In sum, it can be concluded that former Spiro Agnew’s “Television News Coverage” speech was ineffective when it was first given and has retained its ineffectiveness in the current era.
Bibliography


