

# R elevant HETORIC

## Criticism of Actions and Character: Strategies for Persuasive Attack Extended



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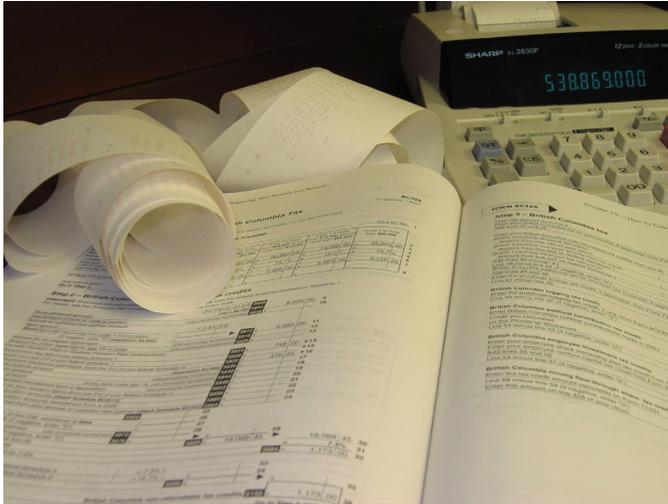
Persuasive attacks pervade society. Such attacks are messages (or components of messages) that are intended to, or have the effect of, discrediting the target. Persuasive attack is another phrase for accusations, criticisms, complaints. In ancient Greece this kind of speech was called *kategoria*.<sup>1</sup> Attacks can be primarily directed toward character and/or policy.<sup>2</sup> At times these topics are intertwined; for example, an attack on character can be reinforced by identifying offensive acts committed by the target. An attack on policy can influence perceptions of the target's character. Still, persuasive attacks typically focus on one or the other of these topics. Political election campaign attacks, for example, focus on either the candidate's character or the candidate's policies (record in office or proposals for governmental action) or both. These two topics are also at play in other domains in addition to election campaigns. This essay adduces reasons for studying persuasive attack, reviews the rhetorical and communicative literature on this kind of discourse, and proposes a typology to extend the Theory of Persuasive Attack to include criticism of character as well as behavior. The strategies advanced here are illustrated by excerpts from the 2016 Republican primary debates.



### **The Importance of Persuasive Attack**

Three important reasons can be advanced for studying persuasive attacks. First, persuasive attack is a widely used form of communication. Icks and Shiraev argue that “in every corner of history we find people of all ranks, occupations, and persuasions attempting to damage or destroy the reputation of their opponents in order to win political battles, discredit unwelcome news, or settle personal scores.”<sup>3</sup> Second, scholars in communication have spent a good deal of effort into understanding messages that *respond* to an attack: persuasive defense or image repair.<sup>4</sup> Less effort has been invested in understanding the nature and functions of persuasive attack. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that persuasive attack is not inherently or universally wrong. Some persons, groups, and organizations have attacked and ruined the reputations of innocent people, groups, or organizations. This behavior is deplorable and should be discouraged. If we understand how persuasive attacks occur it may be easier to expose unfounded or unreasonable attacks. A number of reasons attest to the potential contributions of persuasive attack. First, it can be useful when it exposes wrong-doing. For example, if abuses occur during tax audits, the IRS cannot be expected to

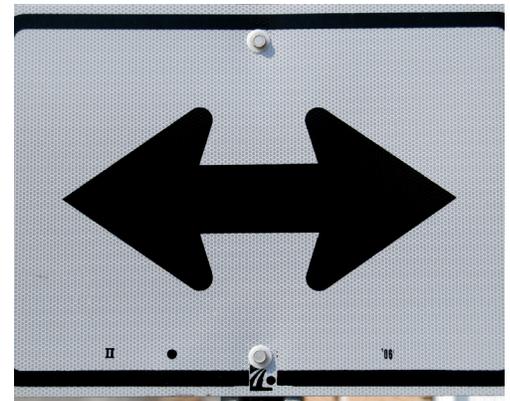
improve the situation if those who run this agency are unaware of these problems. It is possible for people who inadvertently commit offensive acts to change their behavior; however, they must first be aware that their behavior is unacceptable before they have any reason to change or make amends. Thus, one reason



persuasive attacks are important is that they can create awareness of offensive actions. Persuasive attacks can also expose wrong-doing, putting offensive action in the limelight. This unwanted publicity could embarrass perpetrators and force them to mend their ways.

Second, persuasive attack can also help voters in decision-making.<sup>5</sup> Casting a vote in a contested election is an inherently comparative decision: People vote for the candidate who is superior on the criteria that are most important to each individual voter. Superiority can be indicated in two ways: by praising the strengths of oneself or by attacking the weaknesses of the opponent (a third function is defending, or refuting attacks). So, persuasive attacks can help people decide how to vote in the election. Criticisms of political candidates can be false and scurrilous: candidates may stoop to mud-slinging, engaging in inappropriate persuasive attack. We should strongly condemn such attacks. The inherently divisive nature of politics means that a given action or trait often will be considered desirable to some and undesirable to others. If political attacks are reasonable, voters' decision-making can benefit from such criticism.

Similarly, persuasive attack can help consumers decide how to purchase goods and services. One company (or consumer advocates) may point out weaknesses in a company's product, discouraging consumers from buying that product. As in politics, attacks in consumer advertising can be either legitimate or illegitimate. The point is that persuasive attacks can influence consumer buying decisions.



Third, it is also possible that making a persuasive attack can be beneficial to the attacker. Sometimes it feels good to express oneself. Even if the intended audience does not accept the attack, a person, group,

or organization making an attacks may feel better for having expressed their concerns and dissatisfaction with the target of attack.

So, persuasive attacks can have important functions and effects. They can reveal where changes need to be made. They may provoke offenders into making those changes. Threat or fear of a persuasive attack may impel offenders to make changes. Attacks can help make political and consumer decisions. Finally, they may make the source feel better about having expressed his or her beliefs. It is clear that persuasive attacks are not only pervasive, but also are an important communication phenomenon. There is no question that persuasive attack can be – and has been – misused, but it can be beneficial at times.

Persuasive attacks do not always succeed. Persuasive attack is a form of persuasive discourse, and persuasion at times succeeds and at times fails. Any given persuasive attack can be more or less successful; a given attack may convince some of the target audience but not others.<sup>6</sup> Because people react in different ways to a given message it is probably better to say that attacks can persuade some, all, or none of the intended audience.

### Literature Review

Despite considerable evidence of interest among scholars in responses to or defenses from persuasive attack (called apologies, *apologia*, and image repair in the rhetorical literature, and accounts in social science literature<sup>7</sup> – persuasive attack itself, the pervasive form of communication that provokes such responses, has been the subject of relatively little investigation. In the rhetorical literature, Fisher acknowledges the importance of such discourse by identifying subversion, creating a negative image as one of the four motives of communication.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, he does not develop his analysis of subversion in detail. This section will review approaches to persuasive attack from rhetorical and communication perspectives.



#### *Rhetorical Approaches to Persuasive Attack*

King and Anderson conceptualized a genre identified as the rhetoric of polarization, which they define as “the process by which an extremely diversified public is coalesced into two or more highly contrasting, mutually exclusive groups sharing a high degree of internal solidarity in those beliefs which the

persuader considers salient.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, polarization attempts to divide the audience into (at least) two groups: us and them. Two strategies characterize this genre: affirmation (reinforcing the group that is “us”) and subversion (vilifying a common enemy, “them”).

Ryan developed an early approach to understanding persuasive attack in the rhetorical literature. He observed that accusations may focus on policy, character, or both. However, he asserted that “An accusation always begins with, but is not necessarily limited to, the accused’s policy.” Furthermore, he declared that a policy accusation “always begins with Cicero’s *stasis* of fact, *conjectural is*, which focuses on whether an action was done or not.”<sup>10</sup> Ryan also employs two other *stasis*, definition and quality, which function to increase the severity of the accusation (and he discusses the *stases* of jurisdiction as well). Finally, Ryan suggested that accusations against character – which “must be based on the fact of a policy or practice”<sup>11</sup> – emphasize “ethical materials.”<sup>12</sup> However, he offered a more general set of *stases*, not a more specific list of *topoi* for persuasive attack. Ryan’s concept of *kategoria-apologia* as a speech set was amply illustrated in his edited book *Oratorical encounters: Selected studies and sources of twentieth-century political accusations and apologies*.<sup>13</sup>

In the literature on political communication, two books that consider persuasive attack deserve mention. First, Pfau and Kenski’s *Attack Politics* offers “a theoretical and empirical examination of the role and impact of the attack message approach in modern political campaigns.”<sup>14</sup> Pfau and Kenski provide an interesting and useful analysis of such messages but their goal is not to provide a set of *topoi* for constructing persuasive attacks. For example, when they mention the “limited number of strategic options available to candidates,” their analysis concerns three very general options: attacking first, counterattacking, and prevention (a refutation strategy).<sup>15</sup>



A second book that touches on attacks in politics is Jamieson’s *Dirty Politics*.<sup>16</sup> She has a chapter entitled “Tactics of Attack.” She identifies two major approaches, identification (association) and apposition (contrast: “to make their candidate’s name a synonym for everything the electorate cherishes and to transform the opponent into an antonym of those treasured values.”<sup>17</sup> Each process is further divided into verbal and visual aspects. Verbal identification is subdivided into personal (image) and policy identification. She also offers an interesting discussion of the importance of television and highlights inherent differenc-

es between television and both print and radio political advertising. However, this analysis, while clearly useful and relevant, is quite general (association and contrast being its two tactics). It does include medium (verbal, visual) but again does not have as its goal the development of a set of *topoi* or strategies for persuasive attack.

Benoit, Klyukovski, McHale, and Airne used Bormann's Fantasy Theme/Rhetorical Vision approach to understand political cartoons on the Clinton-Lewinsky-Starr affair.<sup>18</sup> They identify a complex rhetorical vision: "Our public figures are engaged in a Tawdry burlesque drama."<sup>19</sup> Cartoons lampooned such figures as Bill Clinton, Kenneth Starr, the U.S. Congress, the Democratic and Republican parties, Monica Lewinsky, Hillary Clinton, and Linda Tripp. They conclude that these cartoons are "important symbolic (and visual) messages in public affairs."<sup>20</sup>



Photo credit:  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Clinton\\_Lewinsky\\_1998\\_Abkhazia\\_stamp.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Clinton_Lewinsky_1998_Abkhazia_stamp.jpg)

Rhetorical research on persuasive attack is not limited to political discourse. The scandal of sexual abuse by Catholic priests has attracted a great deal of attention. Benoit and Stein investigated persuasive attack in cartoons about this scandal. They identify three recurrent themes in the cartoons they analyzed: the horrific abuse, the cover-up perpetrated by the Catholic Church, and the Church's ineffectual attempts to deal with this problem. The essay also argued that the attacks were intensified with two arguments: the victims were innocent and helpless and priests (and the Catholic Church) had a special obligation to protect these victims.<sup>21</sup>

In 2006, the Apple computer company launched an advertising campaign called "Get a Mac" (buy Macintosh computers rather than PCs, or IBM compatible computers using the Windows operating system). Benoit and Delbert undertake a textual analysis of 47 television advertisements from this campaign. They found seven recurrent themes: PCs are more susceptible to viruses, they are vulnerable to spyware, it is difficult to upgrade PCs, it is difficult to upgrade to the Vista operating system, Vista has several weaknesses, the PCs and their operating system are produced by different sources, and PCs are not well-designed for children. The campaign offered eight advantages and four unique abilities of Macintosh computers, and ten criticisms of PCs and three positive elements of Macintosh computers. The ads were often humorous and personified this comparison through the behavior of the two actors (one representing Macs

and one representing PCs) which generally reflected the arguments advanced in it. This campaign was evaluated as effective, a judgment corroborated by awards for the ads and increases in Macintosh sales.<sup>22</sup>

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the surrounding area. Many held perceptions that the response of FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) was woefully inadequate and some blame was laid at the feet of the President, George W. Bush. Kelley-Romano and Westgate analyzed political cartoons blaming President Bush for mismanagement of the crisis. They identified two key themes: Bush's decisions were ineffectual and he lacked the intelligence and integrity to deal effectively with this crisis.<sup>23</sup> Bostdorff adopted a Burkean approach to understand-



ing political cartoons lampooning Secretary of the Interior James Watt. She focused on two key concepts: perspective by incongruity and the burlesque attitude. She also examined metaphor, irony, synecdoche, and metonymy in these cartoons.<sup>24</sup>

Delbert and Benoit investigate the use of persuasive attack in music using two case studies: "Fighting Trousers" and "The Very Model of a Mad Attorney General." "Fighting Trousers" is a song and a music video by "Professor Elemental" from 2010 which criticized a competing artist, "Mr. B." This song was characterized as "Chap Hop," a phrase evoking "Hip Hop" and the artist's British heritage. A common theme was that Mr. B was derivative rather than original and did not exhibit key elements of Chap Hop. In the same year the *Richmond Times Dispatch* released a song attacking Virginia's Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli in a parody of the Gilbert and Sullivan song "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major General" (from the *Pirates of Penzance*). The song ridicules Cuccinelli's positions on the environment, his attempts to sue the federal government on health care and the LGBT community. It also makes fun of his personal character. The essay argues that these persuasive attacks use the burlesque frame for criticism: reducing a situation to absurdity and mocking inconsistency in the targets' behaviors. A number of studies provide insights into persuasive attack from a rhetorical perspective.<sup>25</sup>

Seeger and Sellnow wrote about narratives of blame.<sup>26</sup> They discussed the Theory of Persuasive Attack.<sup>27</sup> Then they addressed responses to blame. They begin Kenneth Burke's concepts of concepts of victimage, mortification, and transcendence.<sup>28</sup> Next they move to Image Repair Theory.<sup>29</sup> Then they discuss

macro-level blame narratives which transcend specific cases. They end by pointing to two specific instances of blame narratives: Union Carbide's Bhopal gas leak of 1984 and salmonella contamination of Conagra's chicken pot pies in 2007. The rhetorical literature is rich in studies on persuasive attack.

*Communicative Approaches to Persuasive Attack*

In addition to these rhetorical approaches to persuasive attack, communication scholars also investigate this phenomenon. McLaughlin, Cody, and Rosenstein identified four types of reproaches, or utterances that provoke accounts or apologies: (1) expressing surprise or disgust, (2) suggesting that the person being reproached is morally or intellectually inferior, (3) requesting an account, and (4) rebuking another person.<sup>30</sup> McLaughlin, Cody, and O'Hair identify five strategies for eliciting repairs or accounts: projected concession, projected excuse, projected justification, projected refusal, and silence.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, McLaughlin, Cody, and Rosenstein identified



four types of reproaches: “(1) surprise/disgust; (2) moral/intellectual superiority; (3) direct request for account; and (4) direct rebuke.”<sup>32</sup> Morris developed six methods for finding fault: “(1) formulating conduct as problematic. . . (2) accusing, (3) demanding explanations, (4) stopping present problematic conduct, (5) explaining stops, and (6) giving advisories.”<sup>33</sup> Alberts describes five categories of couples' complaints: “behavioral, performance, personal characteristic, personal appearance, and complaining.”<sup>34</sup> Vangelisti, Daly, and Rudnick developed a typology of strategies used to induce feelings of guilt. They conclude, “The most common verbal techniques for creating guilt in another were (a) stating relationship obligations, (b) enunciating sacrifice, (c) stating role obligations, (d) making comparisons, and (e) interrogating the other.”<sup>35</sup> Sharkey reports six tactics used to cause embarrassment; one of them is criticism/correction (others include teasing and praising to evoke modesty). These typologies are helpful for identifying techniques and tactics, but none of this work is intended to provide either a conceptual understanding of the nature of persuasive attack or a typology of persuasive strategies that can be used as a set of topoi for persuasive attack.<sup>36</sup>

Garner<sup>37</sup> developed a typology of strategies for expressing dissent in organizational settings: ingratiation, direct-factual appeals, exchange, circumvention, coalitions, pressure, inspiration, repetition, threatening resignation, solution presentation, venting, inspiration, and humor. This is an interesting approach; however, these categories so not seem to be exhaustive (e.g., are indirect-factual appeals possible?)

or mutually exclusive (e.g., repetition repeats one of the other strategies).

Icks and Shiraev edited a collection of essays on character assassination.<sup>38</sup> The chapters are grouped by time period; three essays each on character assassination in ancient Rome, middle ages, early modern, and modern. Icks and Shiraev identify three key elements of character assassination. They stipulate that for a message to be considered character assassination it must be intentional: “the attacker is deliberately attempting to damage the victim’s reputation”<sup>39</sup> Second, because “character attacks are concerned with reputation, they are by nature public.”<sup>40</sup> Finally, they argue that veracity is not a defining feature of character assassination: “it does not matter whether the allegations used by character attackers are true or false, grossly exaggerated or mildly distorted.”<sup>41</sup> Shiraev identifies six methods of accomplishing character assassination: anonymous lies, misquoting, deleting information about the target, vandalism (e.g., defacing photographs or paintings), name-calling, and accusations of deviance. As noted above, persuasive attacks can be justified or unjustified.<sup>42</sup>



Benoit developed the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse.<sup>43</sup> This theory explains that political election messages can enact three functions: acclaims (positive statements about the candidate), attacks (criticisms of opponents), and defenses (responses to, or refutations to, attacks). The nature of acclaims<sup>44</sup> and defenses<sup>45</sup> are outside the scope of this essay. The concept of attack is clearly relevant to this review. Benoit notes that attacks can occur on two topics: character (the personality and experience of the candidate) and policy (past and future proposals for governmental action and problems amenable to governmental action). He and his colleagues have applied this theory to a variety of candidate messages (e.g., TV spots, debates, candidate webpages, direct mail advertising), to messages in all three phases of an election campaign (primary, nominating convention, and general election), for a variety of offices (e.g., president, chancellor, or prime minister; Senator, member of the House of Representatives, governors, mayors), in the U.S. and abroad. This work employs content analysis to quantify the frequency of functions (acclaims, attacks, defenses) and topics (policy, character).

The Theory of Persuasive Attack, initially articulated by Benoit and Dorries,<sup>46</sup> is designed to add structure to the literature in this area. It is based on Pomerantz’ analysis of complaints, which posits that complaints (or criticism or attacks) have two key components: blame and offensiveness<sup>47</sup> (these two con-

cepts parallel Fishbein & Ajzen’s concepts of belief and value).<sup>48</sup> The weekly television news magazine *Dateline NBC* aired a report on Wal-Mart’s “Buy American” sales promotion on the December 22, 1992. The general accusation against Wal-Mart was that its “Buy American” campaign is deceptive. Specifically, it is accused of putting “Made in the USA” signs on foreign goods, of buying from foreign factories that exploit children, of shifting suppliers of good (such as sweaters) from domestic to foreign manufacturers, and of selling cheap goods smuggled from China in violation of import quotas. Wal-Mart was accused of several offensive acts (deceiving the public, selling goods made by exploited workers, and shifting orders from plants that provide jobs for Americans to foreign manufacturers). Wal-Mart’s apparent responsibility was heightened by using one of the strategies listed in Table 1: that it was aware of the harmful effects of its business practices. The perceived offensiveness of its actions was increased by using four of the potential strategies in Table 2: depicting the extent of the damage, indicating effects on the audience, portraying victims as innocent and/or helpless, and alleging that Wal-Mart’s actions were hypocritical.<sup>49</sup>

**Increasing Perceived Responsibility for the Act**

- 1) Accused committed the act before
- 2) Accused planned the act
- 3) Accused knew likely consequences of the act
- 4) Accused benefitted from the act

**Increasing Negative Perceptions of Act**

- 1) Extent of the damage
- 2) Persistence of negative effects
- 3) Effects on the audience
- 4) Inconsistency
- 5) Victims are innocent/helpless
- 6) Obligation to protect victims
- 7) Victims are dignified/honorable/noble\*

Source: Benoit & Dorries (1996); \*Legge, DiSanza, Gribas, & Shiffler (2012)

**Table 1. Strategies for Persuasive Attack on Actions**

The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, a group with 130 organizations as members, promulgated newspaper advertisements attacking the tobacco industry for attempting to addict children to their deadly product. Benoit and Harthcock analyze forty of these persuasive messages. The ads were aimed at three groups: the general public, elected officials, and voters. The analysis identifies six strategies for enacting persuasive attack: victims are vulnerable, extent of harms to victims, inconsistency, malicious intent (delib-

erately marketing to children), profiting from the harms created, and knowledge of dangers in the products they market to children.<sup>50</sup>

Legge, DiSanza, Gribas, and Shiffler extended the typology of Persuasive Attack, adding the strategies of arguing that the victims were dignified, honorable, or noble; pejorative labeling, and identifying the target with an offensive value or ideology. They examined the attacks on Rush Limbaugh after he attacked Sanda Fluke, concluding that more criticism focused on the offensiveness of his statements rather than on his responsibility for these insults.<sup>51</sup> DiSanza and Legge applied this typology to Keith Olbermann's attacks on the NFL and the Atlantic County DA's office over the Ray Rice incident (a video tape showed him attacking his girlfriend, Janay Palmer), focusing on extending the typology to include Aristotle's categories of ethos.<sup>52</sup>



By Limbaugh\_Award.jpg: Nicolas Shayko derivative work: Connormah (This file was derived from Limbaugh Award.jpg) [CC BY 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Two studies investigated the frequency of the persuasive attack strategies in presidential nomination acceptance addresses from 1960-1996. The first found that reported that extensiveness was the most frequently used of these the five strategies investigated (71%), followed by effects on the audience (14%); inconsistency (6%), persistence of effects (5%), and vulnerability of victims (4%) occurred infrequently in these speeches. The authors noted that these strategies all concerned offensiveness, not blame.<sup>53</sup> Benoit, Blaney, and Pier also investigate the frequency of these five strategies in presidential campaign messages from the 1996 campaign. They found that extensiveness accounted for 60% of elaborations of acclaims and attacks, effects on the audience comprised 16% of elaborations, vulnerable victims accounted for 10% of elaborations, with inconsistency (8%) and persistence (5%) occurring less frequently.<sup>54</sup> Although these strategies are not employed in precisely the same order, both studies found that extensiveness and effects on the audience were the two most frequently used strategies. So, a growing literature investigates the nature of persuasive attack in rhetorical discourse, most employing rhetorical criticism but two studies using content analysis. Benoit and Dorries' typology of strategies for persuasive attack provides a framework for analyzing attacking messages.<sup>55</sup>

### Extending the Theory of Persuasive Attack

Remember that criticisms can concern policy (action) or character: *Who* a person (or group or organization) is and what that person (group, organization) *has done*. Benoit and Dorries consider the former,

policy or actions by the accused.<sup>56</sup> It is time to extend the theory of persuasive attack to include character as well as actions. It is important to realize that these two topics are inexorably intertwined. We infer character from behavior and we can predict behavior based on character. For example, knowing that one person has taken money from another person (committed theft) allows us to infer something about the first person's character (he or she is a thief). On the other hand, one can speculate about what a person is likely to do based on his or her character (e.g., if someone is thought to be greedy, he or she might be expected to try to con others out of money).

Attacks on character have two basic components, analogous to the two elements of persuasive attacks on action: declaring that the target possesses a trait and arguing that this trait is offensive. Table 2 offers a list of potential strategies for discussing these two concepts.<sup>57</sup>

**Enhancing Perceptions that the Target Possesses a Trait**

- 1) Accused has performed acts consistent with the trait
- 2) Accused has made statements consistent with the trait
- 3) Accused associates with people who share the trait
- 4) Accused is contrasted from people who do not share this trait

**Enhancing Perceptions that the Trait is Offensive**

- 1) Exemplify the trait with a particularly offensive example
- 2) Observe that the audience or people they care about can experience the negative effects of this trait

**Table 2. Strategies for Persuasive Attack on Character**

*Strategies for Persuasive Attack on Character in the 2016 Republican Primary Debates*

Most observers would agree that political election campaigns are replete with attacks. In order to illustrate these categories, I examined the 2016 Republican presidential primary debates with these strategies in mind (I identify the debate in which the attack occurred). Many attacks addressed the character of opposing candidates.

*Enhancing Perceptions that the Target Possesses a Character Trait*

One element of persuasive attacks on character concerns strategies for enhancing perceptions that the target possesses a particular character trait. First, a rhetor can argue that the accused has performed acts consistent with a trait in the past. Ted Cruz worked to establish that Donald Trump was really a liber-

al rather than a conservative. He declared that for Trump’s “entire life, he supports liberals from Jimmy Carter, to Hillary Clinton, to John Kerry. In 2004 he contributed to John Kerry. Nobody who cares about judges would contribute to John Kerry, Hillary Clinton, Chuck Schumer, and Harry Reid” (RD9). An attack on character can also argue that the target has made statements consistent with this trait. Cruz also talked about past statements by Trump that suggested he was a liberal. The Senator from Texas asked, “How do we nominate a candidate [Trump] who has said Hillary Clinton was the best secretary of state in modern times, who agreed with her on foreign policy, who agrees with Bernie Sanders on health care, who agreed with Barack Obama on the Wall Street bailout?” (RD10). Guilt by association is another option for criticizing a target’s character. Ron Paul attacked Chris Christie for associating with a prominent Democrat, President Barack Obama: “I don’t trust President Obama with our records. I know you [Christie] gave him a big hug” (RD1). Another strategy for criticizing a target’s character, which I call guilt by contrast, can be identified. Jeb Bush critiqued Carly Fiorina’s attitude toward negotiations with world leaders in the second primary debate: “Carly Fiorina said we’re not going to talk with Putin. Well, think if Reagan had said that during the Cold War?” These four strategies are all options for establishing that a target of persuasive attack possesses a particular character trait.



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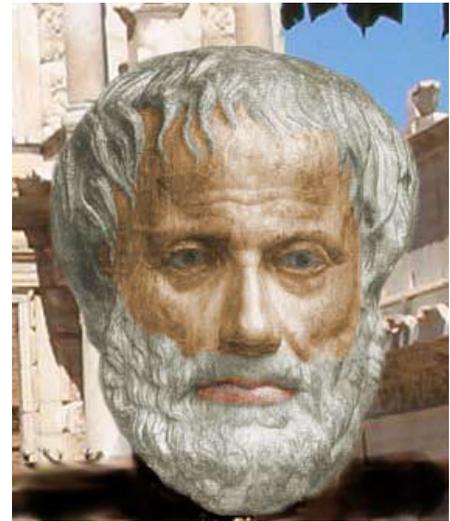
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### *Enhancing Perceptions that a Character Trait is Offensive*

Some of the strategies of persuasive attack on character are designed to increase the perceived offensiveness of a particular character trait. For example, Christie criticized Hillary Clinton’s attitudes on abortion in this excerpt, offering a particularly offensive example associated with this trait: Hillary Clinton “believes in the systematic murder of children in the womb to preserve their body parts, Dana, in a way that maximizes their value for sale for profit” (RD2). This remark does not address Clinton’s actions but her attitudes, although this attitude could be taken to imply likely Clinton policy positions. It is also possible to argue that the audience – or people the audience cares about – can experience the negative effects of a trait. Ben Carson discussed the implica-

tions of attitudes toward government regulation of business: “Every single regulation costs... The cost gets passed on to the people. Now, who are the people who are hurt by that? It’s poor people and the middle class” (RD3). The audience for Carson’s attack could be poor or middle class Americans; if so, this statement describes the effects on those listeners. On the other hand, the audience could include those who, while not poor or middle class, nevertheless care about effects on those people. Those who have attitudes toward the appropriateness of governmental regulations on business are attacked in this remark. These strategies tend to increase the perceived offensiveness of a character trait.

I want to remind readers that, as Aristotle declared in *The Rhetoric*, rhetoric is enthymematic.<sup>58</sup> The target audience may already accept some ideas (I would characterize them as beliefs or values) which are relevant to the rhetor’s purpose. In this context, members of the intended audience may already believe that a person (or group, or organization) possesses a trait – or may already accept the idea that a specific character trait is offensive. This means it is not always necessary to discuss both elements of a persuasive attack on character in a message: It may be enough to argue just that the target possesses an offensive character trait, or argue only that a particular character trait is offensive. Although both elements of persuasive attacks need not be present in a message, it is possible that the rhetor will discuss an idea already accepted by the audience in order to strengthen that idea. Nor is it necessary to use all four of the strategies for enhancing perceptions that a target possesses a trait, or necessary to use both strategies for increasing the perceived offensiveness of a character trait.



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### Conclusion

Persuasive attack, for better or worse, is alive and well in America and around the world. Some instances of persuasive attack are reprehensible but others attacks are turn out to be socially desirable (e.g., exposing wrong-doing or enabling choices based on both strengths and weaknesses). Human beings (as well as groups and organizations) can be thought of as having two dimensions: who they are (character) and what they do (action or behavior). Persuasive attacks can target either dimension. This essay is designed to complement and extend Benoit and Dorries’ Theory of Persuasive Attack to address attacks on

character as well as attacks on actions.<sup>59</sup> Two general elements of attacks on character are identified here: enhancing perceptions that a target possesses a trait and increasing perceived offensiveness of a character trait. Four strategies for implementing the first idea and two strategies for the second idea are identified. Illustrations of these strategies are drawn from the 2016 Republican presidential primary debates, providing some insight into the most recent presidential campaign. This typology is more comprehensive than other approaches in the literature, and is capable of providing useful insights into persuasive attack. Future research should be able to analyze attacks on action and/or character. It would be useful for studies to take both rhetorical and content analytic approaches to understanding the strategies of persuasive attack.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Halford R. Ryan, *Kategoria and apologia: On their rhetorical criticism as a speech set*. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68 (1982): 256-261; and Halford R. Ryan, *Oratorical encounters: Selected studies and sources of twentieth-century political accusations and apologies*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, J. Clarke Rountree, "The president as God, The recession as evil: Actus, status, and the president's rhetorical bind in the 1992 election.," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81:325-352.

<sup>3</sup> Martijn Icks and Eric Shiraev, *Character Assassination Throughout the Ages* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2014), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example William L. Benoit, *Accounts, excuses, apologies: A theory of image restoration strategies*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press); William L. Benoit, *Accounts, excuses, apologies: A theory of image restoration strategies*, 2nd ed. (Albany, NY: SUNY University Press, 2015); W. Timothy Coombs, *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2012); Keith Michael Hearit, *Crisis management by apology: Corporate response to allegations of wrongdoing*. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006); Timothy L. Sellnow and Matthew W. Seeger, *Theorizing crisis communication* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); B. L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, "They spoke in defense of themselves: On the generic criticism of apologia.," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 273-283.

<sup>5</sup> William L. Benoit, *Communication in political campaigns*, Frontiers in Political Communication Series (NY: Peter Lang, 2007).

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<sup>20</sup> Benoit et al, 2001, p. 391.

<sup>21</sup> William L. and Kevin A. Stein, *Kategoria of cartoons on the Catholic Church sexual abuse scandal*. In Eds. J.R. Blaney & J.P. Zompetti, *The rhetoric of Pope John Paul II* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), pp. 23-35.

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