

# Interpretation

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## Conceptual Weaponization and the Study of the Presidency

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Since James Fenimore Cooper's classic 1831 essay on the subject, almost every account of demagoguery in American political thought describes a form of rhetorical leadership that is *essentially* bad.<sup>1</sup> In this view, demagoguery is defined at the outset as divisive and destabilizing leadership that appeals to what is worst in an audience at the expense of what is best, and does so for the sake of the leader's own aggrandizement. At the same time, scholars who insist on applying a moralistic conception of demagoguery like Cooper's will also concede that rhetorical tactics traditionally associated with demagoguery, such as appeals to the passions and settled opinions (or prejudices) of one's audience, can be legitimate in special instances and when executed in a responsible way for the sake of a publicly beneficial end. It is not difficult to find instances of such rhetoric in American political history. Consider that Martin Luther King Jr.'s well-known *explicit* strategy was to deploy rhetoric to which he knew southern segregationists and racists would react violently, so as to attract

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<sup>1</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, "On Demagogues," in *The American Democrat* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics, 1981). For a brief survey, consider Reinhard Luthin, *American Demagogues* (New York: Beacon, 1954), 3; Allan Nevins, foreword to *American Demagogues*, xv; V. O. Key, *The Responsible Electorate* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 2; Michael Signer, *Demagogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Alan Wolfe, *The Politics of Petulance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Patricia Roberts-Miller, *Rhetoric and Demagoguery* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2019).

national attention to the plight of black people suffering under Jim Crow and to provoke a reaction from white supremacists that would earn them just censure and result in meaningful action on the part of the federal government.

The notion that demagoguery, while certainly subject to abuse, is not *essentially* bad, and that demagogic tactics can therefore be deployed in more or less legitimate ways, has obvious implications for the American presidency. For example, as Erwin Hargrove concedes in his masterful account of presidential leadership, though Franklin Roosevelt was “the exemplar of the good leader of the polity”<sup>2</sup> and “was not a demagogue or an abuser of power,” he did use “artifice and demagoguery at times”<sup>3</sup>—such as when he publicly welcomed the hatred of Wall Street in order to bolster support for the New Deal.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Jeffrey Tulis in *The Rhetorical Presidency* has observed that demagoguery “might be good if it were a means to a good end,”<sup>5</sup> and argues elsewhere that “if the cause is just and the circumstances require them, a statesman may justifiably use [demagogic rhetorical] techniques. We cannot know that the statesman is not a demagogue, or whether a leader is not also a statesman, without an account of the purposes and effects of his or her actions.”<sup>6</sup>

The conceptual tension between demagoguery understood as essentially bad and demagoguery understood as a rhetorical mode that can be used in better and worse ways presents several interesting research puzzles. Despite a renaissance in the study of populism and related concepts such as demagoguery in recent years, however, these puzzles have yet to be solved.<sup>7</sup> Under

<sup>2</sup> Erwin C. Hargrove, *The President as Leader* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 77.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Madison Square Garden speech, October 31, 1936, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-madison-square-garden-new-york-city-1>.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 30. Michael Signer holds out the same possibility when he characterizes Daniel Shays as a “rare beneficial demagogue” (*Demagogue*, 79). He also gives a favorable interpretation of John Brown, “a charismatic but bloody demagogue” (*Demagogue*, 93). Elsewhere, though, Signer explicitly follows Cooper’s moralistic conception (*Demagogue*, 35).

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey K. Tulis, “The Possibility of Constitutional Statesmanship,” in *The Limits of Constitutional Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 113.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Sheri Berman, “Populism Is a Symptom Rather than a Cause: Democratic Disconnect, the Decline of the Center-Left, and the Rise of Populism in Western Europe,” *Polity* 51, no. 4 (Oct. 2019): 654–67; Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Cas Mudde and Rovina Kaltwasser, *Populism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); William Galston, *Anti-Pluralism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

what circumstances and through what rhetorical mode might demagogic tactics be deployed in a way that makes them legitimate? Further, how has an excessively moralistic understanding of demagoguery affected the ability of scholars to interpret past and present cases in a way that does justice to the full range of considerations necessary to produce a sufficiently nuanced analysis of the rhetoric in question? Scholars who acknowledge or at least indicate the possibility of legitimate demagoguery while nevertheless reverting to the view that demagoguery is essentially bad have intuited the ambivalent core of the concept without fully exploring the interesting possibilities that a nonmoralistic approach to it opens up. Relatedly, scholars who *begin* their analysis with a negative conception of demagoguery in mind are incentivized to paint as demagogic those figures from history whom, for whatever reason, they happen to dislike but who do not necessarily bear the hallmarks of demagoguery as it is most coherently understood. As a result, studies of this kind tend to err in two interrelated ways. First, they overlook instances of demagoguery that were used in arguably legitimate ways because these would necessitate rethinking the negative definition. Second, they mischaracterize cases which, while perhaps objectionable in the scholar's own view, do not actually showcase demagoguery. A negative conception of demagoguery incentivizes conceptual weaponization: deploying a theoretical concept which trades on a scholarly (and perhaps societal) consensus that the concept in question refers to a normatively bad phenomenon. Conceptual weaponization purports to describe when in fact it is attempting to discredit.

A case study in the conceptual weaponization of demagoguery is Stephen F. Knott's *The Lost Soul of the American Presidency*. Knott's theoretical frame of reference is that Donald Trump is the archetypal demagogue-president (chap. 9) and, as such, should be interpreted as the antithesis of the American presidential ideal, which was articulated by Hamilton in the *Federalist* and put into practice by George Washington. Knott tries to demonstrate that the presidency has suffered from a gradual decline—from dignity and restraint into demagoguery—as a result of changes in presidential norms effected by several key presidents, beginning with Jefferson and Jackson and culminating in Wilson, FDR, and Kennedy. Whereas presidents who modeled themselves after Washington understood their authority to be derived solely from the constitutional office (18), demagogic presidents claimed to represent the people writ large and used this claim to justify departures from the original ideal. Knott advocates a return to the Washingtonian model (27), which prizes rhetorical restraint, energetic leadership in foreign affairs, and a minimalistic conception of presidential leadership in domestic policy (1).

In urging us to develop a model for evaluating presidential rhetoric based on constitutional design and historical practice, Knott shows that he has begun to move beyond the unnuanced moralistic approach to demagoguery discussed above. Additionally, Knott's book is a plethora of interesting quotations from and facts about presidents and presidential scholars and is therefore quite useful as a historical resource. However, notwithstanding occasional gestures toward a more analytically robust evaluation of presidential rhetoric, Knott consistently reverts to the position that all demagoguery is undesirable. This feature of his argument, together with his rigid and unnuanced conception of the constitutional meaning of the presidency, leads Knott to misinterpret past presidents in the light of his clear (and somewhat understandable) disdain for President Trump.

Knott begins by acknowledging that the presidency is designed to be a powerful and energetic office, but he argues that it was designed to be so in a specific way. For Hamilton and Washington—according to Knott—presidents were not supposed to shape and direct public opinion; rather, they were supposed to resist changes in public sentiment in order to maintain stability in the government and to foster a deliberative ethos (chap. 1). All of this changed with Presidents Jefferson and Jackson, who, according to Knott, “displac[ed] the founders’ constitution” (41) by taking a more active role in trying to mold public opinion and advocating for a more majoritarian conception of presidential leadership (chaps. 2–3). The norms established by these presidents were then invoked by Progressives in the early twentieth century, who “disregard[ed] the Constitution” by “promis[ing] too much of the federal government, and of the presidency” (xv).

There are several problems with this analysis. First, Knott characterizes Jefferson and Jackson as demagogues but never articulates a theory of demagoguery in the light of which this allegation makes sense. Instead, he seems to presuppose a moralistic conception akin to the one described above.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, what Knott means in accusing Jefferson and Jackson of demagoguery is not that they deployed certain identifiable demagogic rhetorical tactics in their capacities as presidents. Rather, he suspects them of having been motivated by the wrong kinds of impulses, ones unbecoming of a leader with a “magnanimous soul” (210). He frequently mentions unseemly anecdotes about these men, alleging, for instance, that “Jackson’s vindictiveness was all consuming, and when he was finally elected in 1828, a major prerequisite for

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<sup>8</sup> E.g., “The demagogue preys on divisive issues...issues fraught with emotion, and seeks to inflame these emotions to banish reason and reflection from the public square” (8).

an individual to be awarded a cabinet post was that one had to demonstrate an appropriate level of hatred for [Henry] Clay” (56). While ugly, this anecdote has nothing to do with Knott’s purported subject of demagoguery; it is merely part of an effort to make Jackson seem morally unattractive.

As for instances of actual demagoguery, the evidence Knott supplies is taken from these presidents’ private, unofficial writings (Knott quotes a private letter from Jefferson to Levi Lincoln, in which the former promises to “sink federalism into an abyss” [33]), from statements made before or after they held the office (e.g., 51–54),<sup>9</sup> and from fellow partisans and campaign officials other than the presidents themselves.<sup>10</sup> Knott also pays almost no attention to what these presidents publicly said *as presidents*. This is clearly a problem, since once in office, neither Jefferson nor Jackson gave frequent public speeches, let alone *demagogic* speeches—even though Jackson in particular had been fond of public speaking and aggressive rhetoric before assuming office.<sup>11</sup> Rather, their behavior emphatically confirms the nineteenth-century norm against presidents using public speeches to agitate for their own policies—a fact Knott himself acknowledges when he observes that Jefferson characteristically refused to publicly advocate for the Twelfth Amendment (31). Indeed, Knott writes, “Jefferson avoided the type of overt public appeals that would characterize twentieth century American presidents” (40). Further, in his chapter on Trump, Knott concedes (accurately) that “by and large presidents prior to the twentieth century relied on surrogates to savage their opponents, although there were some exceptions to this norm. Pre-twentieth century, presidents generally confined personal attacks to private correspondence, a tradition which is sadly lost” (208).

For his part, however, Knott appears to be unaware of the extent to which this admission undercuts his characterization of Jefferson and Jackson as demagogues. After all, the behavior for which he faults these presidents was overwhelmingly private and anonymous and lacked the public rhetorical

<sup>9</sup> Knott spends considerable time on the “penchant for violence” shared by Jackson and his followers, and cites an anonymous threat letter to John Quincy Adams, possibly written by one of Jackson’s advisers, as evidence of Jackson’s demagoguery (54).

<sup>10</sup> E.g., 32–33, discussing the “propaganda campaign” waged by Republicans against the Federalists. Knott gives no evidence of Jefferson having publicly participated in this campaign (through public speeches, for example). Similarly, he tries to paint Jackson as a demagogue by asserting that “the coalition Jackson assembled was, at bottom, a cauldron of boiling partisan, racial, and class resentments, and in Jackson’s case, all of those, plus decades of accumulated personal resentments thrown into the mix” (57). Notice the emphasis on Jackson’s personal feelings and motives and the absence of any discussion of his public rhetoric.

<sup>11</sup> Tulis, *Rhetorical Presidency*, 74.

character that warrants calling it “demagoguery.” Yet Knott goes so far as to accuse Jackson of being a conspiracy theorist at the level of Trump, giving the impression that Jackson undertook a public rhetorical campaign against the man he believed to have been responsible for his assassination attempt, US Senator John Poindexter (53). This impression is misleading, however. Jackson is *reported* to have made this accusation in the moments immediately after his assassination attempt, while the would-be assassin—who had attempted to fire two pistols at the president at point-blank range—was lying, restrained, in front of him.<sup>12</sup> If true—the report was published in the *Baltimore Patriot*, then a Whig publication edited by the apparently anti-Jacksonian Isaac Munroe<sup>13</sup>—Jackson’s utterance looks more like a momentary outburst from a man who had nearly been killed, than a purposeful public presidential message akin to Trump’s incessant Tweets and rally speeches promoting conspiracy theories.

The relatively few public speeches nineteenth-century presidents *did* give—Jefferson and Jackson included<sup>14</sup>—tended to be unifying and ceremonial rather than popular and partisan. The office both constrained and elevated their discourse.<sup>15</sup> Relatedly, their written public communications reflect a high degree of argumentative sophistication; consider especially Jefferson’s First Inaugural and Jackson’s Bank Veto Message. Knott, however, mentions none of this, and his characterization leaves one with the erroneous impression that Jefferson and Jackson regularly gave Trump-esque public harangues, when in fact each maintained a high degree of decorum and sought to honor the Constitution’s commitment to deliberation. Neither president is properly understood as having “displaced the founders’ constitution,” at least in the way Knott claims they did, and Knott appears to be reading his own underdeveloped notions about demagoguery back into the historical record so as to substantiate his argument that the roots of Trumpism can be traced to Jefferson and Jackson.

From this initial difficulty in Knott’s argument, several additional ones flow. Knott seems to think that presidents who try to shape and direct public opinion, and who do not simply *oppose* public opinion, are somehow violating

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<sup>12</sup> Edwin A. Miles, “Andrew Jackson and Senator George Poindexter,” *Journal of Southern History* 24, no. 1 (Feb. 1958): 62.

<sup>13</sup> “The Baltimore Patriot,” [http://skinnerfamilypapers.com/?page\\_id=1207](http://skinnerfamilypapers.com/?page_id=1207). In a letter to James Madison from August 13, 1824, Munroe declares his firm support for then-candidate John Quincy Adams and his opposition to “the ‘blood and carnage’ candidate on the one side,” presumably referring to then-candidate Jackson (<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-03-02-0351>).

<sup>14</sup> Tulis, *Rhetorical Presidency*, 64, 66, 73.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*,

the Constitution (e.g., 30). This argument is strange in itself. Why should it be a “*principle*” of the office that presidents should oppose the majority as expressed in an election, as Knott claims it is (24)? Certainly it is an *option* for presidents to do so, as Hamilton argues in his defense of executive independence from the other branches, and sometimes a *duty*, when the president regards the majority’s sentiments as dangerous for the common good or individual rights. But there is nothing in the logic of the office demanding that presidents *always* resist the majority. Indeed, why should they, if they think the majority is right? In addition, Knott himself emphasizes that the Constitution is designed to “refine and enlarge” the public’s views (10). Why not view Jefferson and Jackson—who, after their respective elections, developed deeper and more nuanced arguments to justify the positions for which they thought their own electoral majorities stood<sup>16</sup>—as doing precisely this? Why accuse them of demagoguery for trying to articulate a rationale for the positions and policies they thought they had been elected to hold and carry out? Knott himself seems to acknowledge the difficulty raised in these questions when he summarizes Jefferson’s understanding of his role as public-opinion leader: “Jefferson’s presidency was both gauging public opinion and at times shaping it and moderating it, using the presidency ‘to direct the public’s constitutional understanding and to unify public opinion’” (40). This characterization sounds more or less the same as Madison’s notion of enlarging and refining public opinion, which Knott aptly summarizes: “The task of a chief executive was to serve as a ‘medium’ by which the public’s views were refined to ensure that the ‘true interests’ of the country were protected” (10). Accordingly, it is hard to see why Knott sees Jefferson and Jackson as manifesting demagoguery. Even though these presidents believed that they should be more attentive to majority opinion than previous presidents had been, it is hardly obvious that such additional attentiveness amounts to a full-on rejection of the “constitutional presidency.” At most, it seems like a legitimate attempt to make the office as energetic as Article II says it should be.

In each of these respects, Knott’s analysis showcases the weaknesses of a moralistic conception of demagoguery. Knott wants to be able to draw clear distinctions between “good” and “bad” presidents, between Constitution lovers and demagogues. This moralistic lens leads him to make strange suggestions. For instance, he groups Jefferson and Jackson together with Progressives like Wilson and FDR because—he insists—both rejected

<sup>16</sup> For a helpful discussion of Jackson’s deliberative arguments, which were nonetheless rooted in the cruder, more amorphous views held by his electoral supporters (e.g., hostility toward the National Bank), see Tulis, *Rhetorical Presidency*, 74–75.

the Constitution in favor of a demagogic concern with majoritarianism. Accordingly, he faults the “demagogues” Jefferson and Jackson for introducing patronage into the federal government and for rejecting Washington’s commitment to merit-based appointment (41). In so doing, he ignores or disregards the fact that one of the core principles of Progressivism was the idea of enlightened administration, which rejected the patronage system and endeavored to replace it with a merit-based permanent bureaucracy.<sup>17</sup>

In trying to group the “demagogic” presidents together, Knott draws a Manichean picture of presidential history. The moralistic lens through which he views the presidency and American politics generally causes him to smooth over complications and to ignore the complexity of the subject, which is more contestable and less amenable to moralism than he is willing to admit.

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<sup>17</sup> For a helpful discussion of the rationale for civil service reform during the late nineteenth century, see Herbert J. Storing, “Political Parties and the Bureaucracy,” in *Toward a More Perfect Union*, ed. Joseph M. Bessette (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1995).