

Robert Talisse ([00:08](#)):

Hello, and welcome to the Why We Argue podcast, The Future of Truth edition. This season of the podcast is produced by the Future of Truth, which is a project based at the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute that explores what truth is, where it's going, and why it matters for democracy. The project is made possible by generous funding from the University of Connecticut and the Henry Luce Foundation, and our podcast features discussions with publicly minded thinkers about the cultural and political role of concepts, like truth, fact, and information. Today, my guest is Jennifer Mercieca. Jennifer is associate professor in the department of Communication at Texas A&M University Jennifer's research focuses on political rhetoric. She's the author of the book Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump. And you could follow her on Twitter at JenMercieca and that is J E N M E R C I E C A, all one word. I invited Jennifer on the program to talk with us today about why it matters how presidents speak. Hi, Jen.

Jennifer Mercieca ([01:27](#)):

Hello.

Robert Talisse ([01:28](#)):

How are you today?

Jennifer Mercieca ([01:30](#)):

I'm doing very well. Thank you. Thank you for having me on your program.

Robert Talisse ([01:33](#)):

Well, thanks for joining me. I wanted to begin with, you know, the big picture. So you study rhetoric. Why does political rhetoric matter? I mean, more specifically, I guess I want to know why does it matter how politicians and office holders, in particular and maybe specifically the president, why does it matter how they speak?

Jennifer Mercieca ([02:00](#)):

Yeah, it's an important question. Most people don't think of the word rhetoric the way scholars of rhetoric think of it, of course. We think of it as a form of knowledge. So Aristotle made the distinction between dialectic and rhetoric saying that rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic, meaning that they are equal. They are methods and they are equal methods for arriving at a different kind of truth, or a specific kind of truth. So dialectic is the method of philosophy and it leads to philosophical truth. So the Greek word is sophia. And rhetoric is the method of arriving at a different kind of truth called phronesis, which is thought of as practical truth or practical wisdom. And for Aristotle, you know, they were both viable, useful methods. Rhetoric was used in those situations where there was no absolute truth available either we, we didn't know it or we couldn't access it. And communities, political communities needed to make decisions. He thought that it was natural, that it was inherent in politics and that it was essentially the way that we solve problems. And so the study of rhetoric is the study of politics. It's the study of how we arrive at a certain kind of truth. And so yeah, the ways that political figures, citizens, presidents in particular, the ways that they use rhetoric, you know, tell us a lot about the politics of that society, but also tell us a lot about to the point of your podcast, the future of truth.

Robert Talisse ([03:57](#)):

So is there... Let me just follow up very quickly on that. So is there a sense in which for those who occupy offices that give them access to, you know, power, is there a sense in which those who hold political office are responsible for the way that they speak in ways that maybe, you know, citizens aren't or to a degree that maybe citizens aren't?

Jennifer Mercieca ([04:35](#)):

Yeah, that's a great question. You know, I think everyone should be responsible for the way that they communicate because it has an impact on others, right? So we all have access now to social media, we all have access to the public sphere and you and I are not elected officials, but we have a similar amount of access and power to the public as an elected official like Ted Cruz. He has a much larger Twitter following than I do, but there are lots of other non-elected officials who have equal size audiences. And so part of what we've always done is hold political figures accountable to how they speak and communicate. And most presidents in American history have been very careful communicators. But we're at the point now where our communication technology has developed to such a degree that we all have the opportunity to affect the public, to be propagandists, to be demagogues. And unfortunately most of us have taken that opportunity and have used communication technology irresponsibly.

Robert Talisse ([05:50](#)):

Right. So one of the one of the lessons, one of the themes, that recurs in your public work and in your book, *Demagogue for President*, is that political rhetoric can be an exercise of power in more than just the sense that you outlined that Aristotle was interested in, which is the power of persuading and moving people and getting people on the same page. Political rhetoric can also be a kind of power to suppress and intimidate and dominate others. And this is tied to the theme that the former president Donald Trump was more of a demagogue than a president. Can you just tell us a little bit about that?

Jennifer Mercieca ([06:49](#)):

Absolutely. Yeah, so this is the thing that I try to make clear whenever I do interviews is that Donald Trump is a demagogue. He's not a president. He's never communicated as a president does, but always communicated as a demagogue does. So, you know, scholars who study communication, rhetoric scholars, we think of the ability to influence or persuade another sort of existing along a continuum. On one end would be that kind of, you know, pure deliberation that Aristotle talked about. Using rhetoric argument persuasion as a method to discover a certain kind of truth bound by a certain kind of ethics, essentially a meeting of the minds, right? Where you invite someone else to think like you do, to value the same values that you value, to remember, or forget history in the same way that you do, acknowledging that they have their own experiences and their own agenda, and that they may not, you know, choose to agree with you, but that it's their choice, and you sort of invite them to think like you. That's obviously an ideal but it sort of tethers one end of the continuum. The other end of the continuum would be something like compliance gaining. It's a kind of force. It's using rhetoric, language, argument, you know, propaganda as a tool to force others to behave the way you want them to. It denies consent. It doesn't give people the choice. It manipulates rather than invites. And Donald Trump is a master at that negative sense of persuasion. You know, whether it is something that he studied through marketing or you know, whether it's something that's innate to his psychology, I cannot tell you. But what I can tell you is that he is absolutely consistent with the strategies that he uses. He uses them in different ways, in different situations. So sometimes he'll pull back and use less aggressive strategies and then deploy them when he needs to and that he is just incredibly aggressive and a demagogue. And what I mean by a demagogue is, again something that I learned from Aristotle. I don't, I don't always think of myself as an Aristotelian, but today I am.

Robert Talisse ([09:28](#)):

Well, we all are.

Jennifer Mercieca ([09:31](#)):

We all are, it's true. Even if we don't like to admit it. But what Aristotle taught me is that the demagogue in ancient Athens was an unofficial leader of the people who went into the assembly and urged or advocated for policies that he was then not responsible for implementing. And so it was that irresponsibility, that unaccountability, that made the demagogue different from, you know, a more positive leader of the people. And so what I think of as demagoguery are those rhetorical strategies that someone like Donald Trump would use to prevent themselves from being held accountable. And I have never seen, to be honest, someone who is so good at avoiding accountability. You know, this is a president who was impeached twice. And so you might think, well, I guess that's some kind of accountability, but not really. He denied ever being impeached. Really. He always called it a hoax. Obviously he was never convicted in either case. You know, this is someone who led an insurrection against the government and still was not held accountable for it. The list is too long to mention here, but there are so many things that Donald Trump did that we never could pin him down for. So unfortunately he's great at using demagoguery to avoid accountability.

Robert Talisse ([11:01](#)):

Yeah. So, you know, there's a pretty morose joke and he's been impeached twice—so far. Because who knows what the next election is going to be. He could be president again. So you know, it's often said in line with this and, and as a philosopher, I've puzzled over this when I've heard people say it on the news, that Trump's critics take what he says literally, but not seriously. Whereas his supporters take what he says non literally, but seriously. And it always struck me that one of the features of his communicative style was that almost anything he said, admits of just two different kinds—at least two different kinds of—maybe interpretations isn't the right.... Two different kinds of understandings of what was being said. And often what was being said, wasn't easily discerned by just looking at the words he was using. And in fact, when you looked at... For a little while, I started looking for written transcripts of speeches, and when you read them on the page—I mean, I'm sure you've noticed this too—when you read them on the page, it's hard to see how any message could be conveyed by somebody speaking those words, because they're often incomplete sentences. They're not grammatical. They're not, you know, complete thoughts often. But in the presence of him when speaking, it was pretty, it was, it seemed to me, when I watched him speaking on the news, when I was able to do so, it never seemed to me that it was unclear what was being communicated. Does that make sense?

Jennifer Mercieca ([13:18](#)):

Oh yeah, absolutely. So irony is saying two things at once. It's negating the literal with the figural. And one of the six rhetorical strategies that I track Trump using in my book is paralipsis—colloquially, you know, that's understood as “I'm not saying, I'm just saying.” And so Trump would sometimes use that form. Literally say, I'm not saying, but I'm just saying, right. I'm not saying that Ted Cruz's ineligible to be president, I'm just saying that I heard that, or I'm just saying that that was reported. You know, sometimes he would phrase it in ways that were less directly in that form. So for example, he would retweet people that had terrible things to say. White nationalists were constantly sort of giving him tweet bait, retweet bait. They had retweet happy hours every day, trying to get Trump to retweet them. And he often did. And then, you know, the news would say, Hey what's up, you just retweeted some

white nationalists, do you agree with that? And he would say, well, I didn't tweet it. I just retweeted it. Right. I didn't say it. I just said it.

Robert Talisse ([14:47](#)):

I didn't use the word. I mentioned the word. Yeah.

Jennifer Mercieca ([14:50](#)):

Or he'll use another strategy that you've heard him do a lot of times when you try to catch him, you know, and nail him down on what he really said and what he meant by what he said, where he'll say, oh, it was just a joke and you didn't get it. Jokes on you. You know? So like, I didn't really tell people to inject bleach into their body. I didn't say that, I was joking and the media, unfortunately, they take that seriously and they don't get it. When Selena Zito asked him about the literal serious gap that she wrote about, his response was to say, well, that's interesting. He loves that ambiguity. He plays to that ambiguity. It's one of his favorite rhetorical strategies. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but—because it was sort of off the record—but one of the reporters who I speak with a lot and had spoken with a lot prior to the 2016 election happened to be on inauguration day in Washington, DC standing next to one of Trump's ex-wives. And for some reason I'll never understand why asked the ex-wife about this, about about Trump using paralipsis, and what “I'm not saying, I'm just saying” was all about. And she said, yeah, that's, that's essentially Trump. “I'm not saying, I'm just saying” is exactly the way Trump communicates. It's exactly his strategy. And I think that we've heard the same thing from Michael Cohen in his unpacking, after the fact now what Trump is about. It's always... It's implied and never stated overtly.

Robert Talisse ([16:35](#)):

Right. So another question on this. So it seems, you know clear, and so I think you're right, that the purpose of these rhetorical tactics—talking particularly about Trump—is to deflect responsibility. But I take it that it's also one of the aims of adopting a rhetorical strategy, like the ones that Trump adopts, that they have to deflect responsibility while also appealing to people, while also leading people—again, to pick up on the, the, the Greek demagogues—leading people to do certain things, or to believe certain things, or to behave in certain ways, or to adopt certain kinds of attitudes. How do you think that the “I'm not saying, but I'm saying” strategy, how is it effective in moving or leading an audience in the, in the required way, in the way that would make it a successful strategy?

Jennifer Mercieca ([17:58](#)):

Yeah. So there's three things that I wrote about in my book that Trump does routinely to bring himself closer to his audience, to consolidate that relationship between him and his base. The first one is ad populum, so appealing to the wisdom of the crowd. Trump's followers were always the best people, the best part of America, the best version of America, the only real Americans. He had a multitude of ways of praising them, calling the smartest, telling them he loved them, talking about crowd size, all of that was a way of appealing to the wisdom of his base and saying, that they were the best and himself as their leader, he's always going to protect them, but, he's essentially the king of the best people, right? So very much needing the power of his people, obviously a demagogue is powerless without the people. The second one is paralipsis. And the thing that paralipsis does is it allows his audience to believe, first of all, that he's authentic, that he's just speaking the truth. So one of the things that you always hear them say is, well, I just love the guy, because even if I don't agree with him, I know just what he thinks. That is so untrue. You don't know just what that guy thinks, but he makes you think that you do,

because he says, “I'm not supposed to say this, they don't want me to tell you this, no one else is going to tell you this, but...” And then he'll tell you, you know, the awful truth in quotes. You know, so it's that sort of peek into the backstage where you think that you know the real authentic Trump, and that he's really telling you what he really actually thinks. The thing that he shouldn't say, he's so brave for saying it. They don't want you to know this. There's this conspiracy against us, right? All of that is really appealing for an audience, especially once they believe that they're the best, greatest part of America. And then the third thing that he uses to connect himself to his base is American exceptionalism. And for Trump, it wasn't the typical way that a president would use American exceptionalism, which is to say that, you know, America is unique, it has certain obligations to the rest of the world. We have certain values that we're trying to uphold. And those values when we uphold them, you know, make us a great nation. Trump uses American exceptionalism as America winning. And he talks about himself as the apotheosis of America and American winning. He says, I was born on Flag Day, right. I am the most patriotic person in America because, you know, I'm kind of like America itself. Not only was I born on Flag Day, but I'm such a success, I'm such a winner, and I'm going to win for America. It's so easy for me to win for you. And the combination of those three things is really enticing for an audience that feels like America's losing, that they themselves personally are losing. They feel that they need a strong authoritarian leader and here's this guy who promises to love them, calls them the best, and says that he knows how to do it, and it's so easy for him.

Robert Talisse ([21:29](#)):

Right, right. That's yeah. Good. You laid it out. So I wanted to make sure though that we got time to look forward a little bit. So, you know, I suspect I'm not the only one, and that's a way of saying I suspect that you too, have seen a lot of people on social media and even on the news sometimes expressing the idea that Biden's presidency marks a refreshing return to normalcy. And some even say, you know, it's just nice to have a boring president again, and that we're... even Biden himself said, America is back. Now I understand the sentiment. It's nice to turn on the news or to open up your social media platform and not be bombarded with the president. I mean, just, forgetting... independently of any of the content of what's being reported, it's just nice to, you know, not have every, you know ounce of psychological energy being sort of claimed by a person who holds the presidency. But I guess I'm just wondering if it's, if there is something that's... If it's possible to return to normal. I guess sort of assuming that one of the ways in which demagoguery works is not only to move a people to adopt certain attitudes, but also to dissolve trust and confidence and to cast doubt on fundamental institutions like the media. So I'm wondering if that's also part of the package of demagoguery is this dissolving of trust, so that more and more trust gets invested in the demagogue. I wonder if the removal of the demagogue is enough to mark a return. I mean, is there a way back? I mean, you've taken this attention sucking all ever-present, psychologically at least, presence out of the political environment—maybe only temporarily—and we have a standard kind of president, it seems, now. But I guess I'm just not sure that that's a return to normal. It feels like it's normal, but is there a way back?

Jennifer Mercieca ([24:11](#)):

Yeah, it's such a great question. And I absolutely agree with the premise. I was surprised that Biden was the Democratic party nominee. I would not have picked him as the nominee in January of 2020. But then especially after the virus started, it became clear to me that he was actually the perfect choice. And part of that was his compassion and his ability to talk about loss, which is one of the roles of the presidency that Trump was never able to do. They call it the priestly role of the president. During moments of crisis we call on the president to invoke our values and tell us how they're going to get us through. And Biden is amazing at that. I'm not sure if there's been a better president who can really play that role on a daily

basis. Reagan had his moments, the Challenger speech was a really fine example, but this is every day. But anyway you know, and they did nominate him and he did win. And I think part of that is longing for someone to play that role, but also, like you say, wanting to return to normal and going back to Biden–Obama time, before Trump, and just like have a do-over. Part of that, I think, was his appeal. And then to your other point, Patricia Roberts Miller, who's a colleague of mine at University of Texas–Austin, she writes about demagoguery as, like, the demagogue emerges from demagogic culture, right? And that the culture itself turns to demagoguery as a dominant form of communication. And that provides the context within which the demagogue can flourish. And I think she's right about that. In my book, I explained that we were already, when Trump entered the political scene in 2015, experiencing historic and crisis-levels of distrust and polarization and frustration, and that Trump's rhetorical strategies were absolutely designed to increase all of those negative things to his own advantage. And so I tell six different stories for each of those three things: how he used those rhetorical strategies to increase distrust, how he used them to increase polarization and then frustration. And he really took advantage of all of those negative things, really attacking our public sphere, attacking America in the process—an absolutely anti-democratic strategy. So can we recover from that? I think we see other people trying to do what Trump did, right? To use outrage to control the public sphere, to set the nation's agenda. Trump is better at it than they are, right? So there's a vacuum now where these other politicians are trying to use his strategies, and I don't know that it can work as well as it worked for him, for a couple of reasons. We're a little bit wiser now. But not much, frankly. And also Trump was unable, unwilling, absolutely defiant, unable to accept like any kind of sanction or admit any kind of error. And I think that that is a very unusual quality to have, to be honest. I think that most of us acknowledge communal norms and he is unwilling to do that. And so I think it's actually hard to do what Trump did, because I think that there's, there's sort of an element of humanity that prevents most of us from taking it to the extreme level that he did. And I'm not qualified to diagnose what that might be that prevents him from doing it. It's just something I observe,

Robert Talisse ([28:27](#)):

But is there something that you think Biden...? I mean, it seems as though Biden's strategy so far has just been to be normal, which again, you know, I'm all for it. But I just wondering if just the return to the ex-ante, you know, condition, that might be refreshing, but I don't know that it actually repairs anything.

Jennifer Mercieca ([28:55](#)):

Yeah. I mean, I think that he's trying to show that the government can do things, that government is a positive, good. It should not be dismantled and deregulated and starved of its power. And that by succeeding in disseminating the vaccine, by getting the kids back to school, by doing all these things that he's trying to do. I think that he's trying to show that by succeeding that, you know, you can trust the government, and that's a huge win if he's able to accomplish that, right. Because we've seen declining levels of trust in all branches of government for the last 20, 25 years. And he's working against a political agenda from the opposition party that says you shouldn't trust the government to do anything. And yet we do trust the government to do a lot of things. So he's fighting against that kind of perception. And you know, I wish him the best, frankly. I'd like to see the government solve some problems.

Robert Talisse ([30:06](#)):

That's an adequately positive note to wrap up our conversation with. Jennifer Mercieca, it's been really wonderful to talk to you. Thank you for joining me on Why We Argue.

Jennifer Mercieca ([30:19](#)):

It's my pleasure. Thank you.

Robert Talisse ([30:21](#)):

And thank you listeners for tuning in. This is the Why We Argue podcast, the Future of Truth edition. I want to thank our podcast team. Toby Napoletano at University of California at Merced handles our sound production. Elizabeth Della Zazzera of the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute is our communications coordinator. Andrew Johnson handles research for us at the University of Connecticut. We also want to give special thanks to Matt Guariglia for creative inspiration. I'll just remind you that the podcast is produced by the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute's Future of Truth project with generous funding from University of Connecticut and the Henry Luce Foundation. Thank you for listening and bye for now.