The Power of Debate and Speech

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In Ancient Greece, speech played a very important role in the political paradigm of their government.   The politician's ability to convey their ideas to a crowd through speech was considered one of the major criteria to measure their performance.  The Greeks were known for their excellent ability to project their thoughts through long dialogue.  Early democracy was founded on the basic principle of debate. Also, speech played a key role in the Peloponnesian War as well. As the Peloponnesian War advanced, the Greek leaders developed political agendas through their debate and dialogue of how the war should be handled. Current and historical chaotic events have impacted all forms of government specifically the politicians of democratic governments and the political discourse they use to handle and communicate their positions on these events or problems.

Thucydides, a famous Fifth Century B.C. Greek historian who participated in the Peloponnesian War, kept records of some of the most famous speeches throughout the Peloponnesian War.  From his observations of the war, he logged the evolution of the oratory. He thought it was difficult to remember all these speeches in one’s head and that it was a mistake for people to do that. Also, he believed that one should convey their memories in written form and was one of the first historians to do so.  Thucydides reasoned that words could be misconstrued in people’s recollection of events which would scramble the messages people were delivering.  In addition to this, Thucydides believed that speeches were not written for the audience but rather written to make an impact for the future.  He said, “I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.”  11 (10).  Thucydides believed speeches by politicians should be documented and written to change the future rather than to inspire the population at the moment. Thucydides would be very disappointed in the politicians today as they all cater to the momentary needs of the people with short term promises rather than to improve the future of their country with long term realistic goals.

One could also conclude that Thucydides began to foresee how politicians slant the meaning of a situation or words so that the people take their side.  That idea is conveyed when Thucydides said, “words had to change their ordinary meaning” (112, Digireads ed.).  Thucydides is suggesting words in speech can be perceived one way, but after some debate can be altered into another meaning.  Also, one could derive from Thucydides' quote that politicians lose their influence or power after they are caught lying to the public during a speech.  Since documentation and access to information has become so easy today, politicians need to be very careful and tactful in the way they write and deliver their speeches compared to the politicians in the Peloponnesian war.  Also, Thucydides’ point about words being interpreted differently is accentuated today when politicians use campaign ads to highlight flaws in other politician's campaigns.

In the fifth year of fighting the Peloponnesian war, Corcyra was faced with a major political divide. Some prisoners of Corinth were released from capture if they promised to help convince Corcyra to leave the Athenian alliance and join the Peloponnesian alliance. The former prisoners brought an Athenian Aristocrat to trial in Corcyra for enslaving their people to Athens. The trial didn’t stick and as a result the Athenian on trial, Peithias, retaliated by putting the men who charged him on trial. In turn, the former prisoners walked into the senate meeting and killed several people including Peithias. As a result, Corcyra was divided and went into a state of chaos. After the Corcyran revolution, Thucydides suggested that the drive for power and corruption during the revolution changed the way people interpreted forums of speech. Thucydides believed that politicians were parading around positive words to hide from corrupt outcomes to gain support from its citizens. The revolution and plague changed the Peloponnesian way of life and sullied many of the Athenian Leaders. Thucydides said, “Leaders of democratic and aristocratic factions sought prizes for themselves in those of public interests which they pretended to cherish, and, recoiling from no means in their struggles for ascendency, engaged in the direct excesses; not stopping at what justice or the good of the state demanded” (112, Digireads ed.) After the revolution, Thucydides clarified that politicians changed their outlook to a selfish personal benefit attitude rather than acting in ways that is best for the state. Thucydides concluded that in times of despair and disorder the nasty nature of human nature is revealed to the people. He believed that real character and judgment was found when challenge faced people. Great leaders were defined by how they handled adversity and those who lied and committed irresponsible behavior were failed leaders.

The people are the ones who lose most after this change in leadership as the politicians just mislead them by altering their words to make the situation appear better.For example in the recent state of the union address, President Obama makes claims of the limitations of the executive branch and the crippling powers of the legislative branch have prevented his policies from achieving their full potential. Obama also claimed the unemployment rate improving however he fails to report the increased numbers of people who have removed themselves from the job market. Speeches like the state of the union are one of many examples of politicians shedding blame on other people or construing the facts so that their candidacy appears better to the people. In a complex democracy like the United States of America, the general public has not been educated enough to understand how it functions. Therefore the minds of the American people can be easily perversed by politicians who say in public forums what they want to hear. The vast majority of those people do not have the background to challenge what those politicians are saying so they count on politicians not to mislead them and unite them on solutions to the problems.

Events happening today in the U.S. could be compared to the plague and revolution during Thucydides' time. For example, the American people face the chaotic events of the stock market crash, devaluation of homes, and unemployment today. The Occupy Wall Street movement could be compared to a revolution as people are hoping to see American politicians take action and fix our government rather than sit aside and watch the American people suffer. The Occupy Wall Street Movement criticizes the financial institutions for bad management practices that resulted in the poor economy and high unemployment. Other politicians claim that there is no leadership and bad decision making in the oval office. There are a lot of challenges in the U.S. today. Like Thucydides said “fair phrases to arrive at guilty ends” (113, Digireads ed.) When politicians are faced with difficult circumstances to overcome, they tend to bend and mold their words to make a bad situation appear a lot better than it is. Corruption affected democracy both in the Peloponnesian days as well as today.

The issues Thucydides discussed are in the forefront of many of the political debates for the current Presidential election. There was a time when a politician’s word and promises meant something to the general public. Now, many campaigns are based on broken promises to get certain demographic voters. Public speeches no longer carry the value and meaning they used to because they occur so often and are documented so well that they are constantly critiqued. Every day political satire shows on cable networks criticize politicians’ speeches, specifically their flaws in their public appearances. The public have been led to think that the U.S. government is incurable and no politician will be able to fix it. Elections today are not won and lost based on who is the most qualified candidate, but who will benefit the individual voter the most.

Currently, the media only focuses on the scandals and the personal baggage of the potential candidates instead of the issues. For example, several of the CNN debates for the Republican primaries focused on the religion of candidates or how many marriages a candidate went through as opposed to the important topics. Candidates should have been debating on how they can improve America not discrediting other candidates or criticizing a candidate’s background. Today's politicians are missing the foundation of democracy and the principles on which they were founded. Like the leaders of Ancient Greece, politicians of today are constantly faced adversity. Thucydides considered it crucial to understand how the politicians responded to criticism in order to evaluate their true character.

In conclusion, political speech is no longer healthy for the public to view. The American citizen is often hearing a debased discourse of how democracy should be viewed. Many candidates for office today are delivering speeches that will appeal to the group they are speaking to and not necessarily offering up what they truly believe. Campaign ads are controversial and degrade their opponent or provide an incentive for a particular group to vote for a candidate. Promises made by many politicians today are frequently not kept. Thucydides refers to speeches as a tool to change the future, not to win approval for the moment. Debate is healthy when properly used. Without a honest discourse on pressing issues, the public is deprived of understanding their politicians’ ideas and agendas. Without that basic knowledge, people are often voting for candidates based on superficial impressions. Corruption and apathy are like a "cancer" spreading throughout the political structure in America today. Speech and debate need to revert to original values like Thucydides’ said in order to restore true meaning democracy.