2005 Second Place Critical Analysis

When Fluency Fosters Frenzy: Joseph McCarthy’s Eloquence and the Era of Witch Hunts that Would Ensue

By 1945, one of the most devastating and sorrowful chapters in world history had come to a close. However, the end of World War II did not bring the much anticipated closure and peace for which many Americans had hoped. Instead, the United States was launched into an era of anxiety and social tension, which was appropriately titled the Cold War, as it was marked by ideological conflict with communist regimes around the world. By 1950, Americans were engaged in war in Korea to stop the advances of North Korean communists into democratic South Korea. Meanwhile in China, communist leaders toppled the government and set up a regime of their own, and the Soviet Union was advancing into neighboring countries. Needless to say, communism’s surging influence struck genuine fear into the hearts of many Americans. Was America a likely target for the internal subversion of communism?

On February 9, 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy delivered the first of many speeches that confirmed America’s worst fears. According to McCarthy, communists had infiltrated the national government and were guiding and shaping foreign policy. From the very beginning of his speech, McCarthy’s aligns himself with adored figures in history to build his ethos, and his argument is mainly in the form of logos. These assertions are weaved cohesively together by the emotion-wrenching pathos that he employs throughout his speech. However, due in large part to hindsight, contemporary audiences are able to identify his logos as weakened by numerous instances of logical fallacies. Therefore, two separate audiences are identified: the American people that heard the speech in the ‘50s and were surrounded by a tense and anxious atmosphere, and those of the present who know all too well the disaster that was McCarthyism. In the case of McCarthy’s audience at the time, he is very effective in his ability to establish his ethos, prey on their anxieties through the use of figurative language, and present hard evidence and use deductive reasoning to assert his logos. On the other hand, in the case of today’s
American listener that is not surrounded by the environment of paranoia, McCarthy’s argument breaks down significantly because it is filled with numerous instances of logical fallacies that undermine his logos and in turn considerably compromise the effectiveness of his speech.

As mentioned above, from the beginning of McCarthy’s speech, ethos is very apparent. McCarthy alludes to Abraham Lincoln, as he is speaking on the 141st birthday of one of America’s most beloved presidents, when he says “… I would like to be able to speak of peace in our time, of war being outlawed, and of worldwide disarmament…as we celebrate the birthday of Abraham Lincoln” (1). By aligning himself with Lincoln’s ideals of peace, hatred of war, and worldwide disarmament, McCarthy presents himself as dignified and sensible—characteristics for which Lincoln was most noted. The senator later aligns himself with yet another beloved and revered figure in human history—Jesus Christ. When he says, “The secretary of state, in attempting to justify his continued devotion to the man who sold out the Christian world to the atheist world, referred to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount as a justification and reason…” (28), McCarthy lashes out at the secretary of state for his sacrilegious and blasphemous parallel between himself and Jesus. Thus, by chastising the secretary of state, McCarthy presents himself as protecting the sanctity of Jesus in front of the Christian-majority American audience. In other words, he extends the communism-democracy conflict from merely containing political ramifications to one including ideological connotations. Hence, he does not hesitate to point out the religious discrepancies between the two camps. Therefore, he builds his own credibility by not only defending religion, but also by implicitly claiming to be religious, thereby giving him the appearance of being a just, moral, and righteous man in the eyes of the audience. In alluding to both Jesus Christ and President Lincoln, McCarthy allows his audience to make the connection between these two men of morality and himself; if he aligns himself with them, then by extension he must be righteous, as well. Thus, McCarthy opens and closes his speech by making himself not only credible but also honorable in the eyes of his audiences.

McCarthy’s pathos is the driving force in his speech and it comes mainly in the form of figurative language. It is arguably his most effective tool in captivating his audience because they are moved to action as a result of the emotions of fear and anger that he arouses within them. For example, when he says, “As you hear this story of high treason, I know that you are saying to yourself, ‘Well, why doesn’t the Congress do something
about it?” (26), McCarthy implements a rhetorical question, not to illicit a response from his audience, but rather to get them to focus on the idea that Congress is too corrupted by communist influence to act. He uses it to guide the audience’s thinking to this particular answer and evoke a particular opinion from them. In this case, he provokes anger and fear from his audience because they become aware of the government’s dishonesty. Later, in an attempt to make his audience cognizant of the crucial time in which they are living, McCarthy says, “Today we are engaged in a final, all-out battle between communistic atheism and Christianity. The modern champions of communism have selected this as the time. And, ladies and gentlemen, the chips are down—they are truly down” (3). This is a very emotionally-charged assertion, and in it he portrays America as if it is in a time of desperation and dire emergency. By making an allusion to poker chips being all in, he is depicting how high the stakes are for the United States, and by using this analogy, he makes it easier for his audience members to relate to his assertion and grasp his urgency. Just like in times of war, McCarthy creates the understanding that if members of his audience are not willing to unify with his cause of opposing communism, then they are obviously supporting communism. So, by hinting at the high stakes, he is making an implicit call for unity. McCarthy tries to capitalize on these emotions associated with war by admonishing the American people that they must be ready to unite to engage in battle with the communist enemy. In other words, he is emotionally psyching them up for the conflict that lies ahead by inducing feelings that are usually associated with high stakes, like fear, uncertainty and excitement.

Another instance of McCarthy attempting to rally the American people through the use of metaphoric imagery is found at the closing of his speech. He says, “It is the result of an emotional hangover and a temporary moral lapse which follows every war. It is the apathy to evil which people who have been subjected to the tremendous evils of wars feel…This cloak of numbness and apathy has only needed a spark to rekindle them” (27). Not only does his vivid language serve to draw in the attention of the audience, but it also evokes feelings of fear; he scares the American people into awakening to morality with his use of gloomy depictions of apathy and evil. This is effective because his audience members are afraid of being un-Christian and immoral, so they respond to his call.
McCarthy’s fear-inducing pathos is again used when he admonishes the audience about the injustices that are being committed in the state department. He proclaims:

At war’s end we were physically the strongest nation on Earth and, at least potentially, the most intellectually and morally…Unfortunately, we have failed miserably and tragically to arise to the opportunity. The reason why we find ourselves in a position of impotency is not because our only powerful, potential enemy has sent men to invade our shores, but rather because of the traitorous actions of those who have been treated so well by this nation. (8)

In this example, McCarthy first flatters his audience, and by doing so, they initially warm up to him. However, he then notes America’s failure in reaching its potential. The audience then swells with shame and regret. The power of McCarthy’s pathos and the time in which he employs it plays a key role in its perception by the audience. In ordinary circumstances, these warnings would have been bitterly rejected by the American people, but given the circumstances of anxiety and fear, McCarthy is able to turn their fear into shame about not reaching America’s potential. He then manipulates their shame and makes himself out to be a patriotic ethical crusader who seeks to root out the cancer that plagues this nation. Hence, this is McCarthy’s greatest weapon and it is why his agenda went unchallenged as long as it did. Politicians were afraid to challenge him because if McCarthy was the moral-compass, then he had jurisdiction over who or what was corrupt and who or what was not.

Finally, another reason why McCarthy’s speech seems irresistibly swaying was because of the success of his logos. Though it is a very emotionally-stirring speech, most of McCarthy’s argument is in the form of logic and evidence. To support his claim that the world has culminated in the bipolarity of the communist realm versus the democratic world and that they are on the brink of war, he includes many factual quotations of both Stalin and Lenin where they declare that war was an inevitability in their futures. Lenin says:

We are living not merely in a state but in a system of states, and the existence of the Soviet Republic side by side with Christian states for a long time is unthinkable. One or the other must triumph in the end. And before that end supervenes, a series of frightful collisions between the Soviet Republic and the bourgeois states will be inevitable. (5)
He also quotes Stalin saying, “To think that the communist revolution can be carried out peacefully, within the framework of a Christian democracy, means one has either gone out of one’s mind and lost all normal understanding, or has grossly and openly repudiated the communist revolution” (4). Instead of merely stating that the U.S. was headed on a collision course with the Soviet Union, and thereby relying on pathos alone, McCarthy proves it, and hence he validates his claims. Also, by quoting Soviet leaders who claim that the Christian democracy and Soviet communism cannot coexist, it makes them out to be the instigators of conflict instead of him. He is therefore only portrayed as defending America from a vicious assailant.

By far, McCarthy’s most effective evidence, however, is his claim that he “[had] in [his] hand 57 cases of individuals who would appear to be either card-carrying members or certainly loyal to the Communist Party, but who nevertheless are still helping to shape our foreign policy” (16). By professing that he has hard evidence to prove his assertions about the communists working in the federal government, it strengthens his argument tremendously. It would appear to the audience that he is not merely tossing around unsubstantiated accusations, but because he had the names, he had every right to campaign against them. Therefore, this is an instance of inductive reasoning because he moves from specific to general. For example, McCarthy forms his theory that communists are working in the government based on the existence of a list of sixty communist government officials. He later gives more figures on the rising state of communism, how its support has grown by more than 400 percent (7). He does this to show how pervasive communist influence is, and because he does it in the form of comprehensible date, his assertion cannot be contradicted. Based on this contention, McCarthy goes on to reason that because it is so widespread in its influence, communism is rampant in the US government. This is an example of deductive reasoning, and more specifically, an enthymeme one at that, as he not only moves from general to specific, but his conclusion is based on an implied premise that states if communism is influential, the US is at risk. Therefore, he can draw the conclusion that the government is infested. In so doing, he logically guides the listener into believing that communism is not only present, but running wild in American governmental offices.

Though McCarthy does provide plenty of evidence, unfortunately, most of his arguments are made in the form of logical fallacies that the audience at the time could not recognize. For example, when he identifies
the Cold War as a time when the world is “split into two vast, increasingly hostile armed camps—a time of a great armaments race” (2), his intent is to give the impression that there is no middle ground in this conflict; you are either with America or you are against it. By implementing this “either-or” outlook on the Cold War, he is able to rally more supporters to his side, especially those who would ordinarily have remained neutral. This also ties into his use of the bandwagon logical fallacy because at the time, America had a Christian majority, and most conscience-abiding Christians would support his cause to eradicate the atheist influence. Therefore, his logic follows that his movement must be permissible and right because he has attracted such a momentous following. This is how he is able to gain an even larger support base, as Americans did not want to go against the grain by disapproving of his tactics. Later, McCarthy spends a lot of time discussing the cases of John S. Service and Alger Hiss, as they were both examples of communists who had been active in governmental affairs. By bringing their stories to light, he is able to expound on how the government not only neglected to punish them for their treasonous acts, but also condoned their actions by covering up for them. By putting faces behind the numbers he gave earlier, he is able to portray a communist-infested American government that is very real. However, this method is very faulty in its logic. In fact, it is hasty generalization because he asserts that because of two extreme examples of communism in the government, then the entire government is swarming with communists. It therefore has the effect of inflating the numbers of communists in the minds of the audience because they are scared into thinking that communism is more prevalent than it actually is.

McCarthy’s closing is also an attempt at logos, though it falls short as a logical fallacy. For example, when McCarthy says of Dean Acheson, “…this pompous diplomat in striped pants, with a phony British accent, proclaimed to the American people that Christ on the Mount endorsed communism, high treason, and betrayal of a sacred trust, the blasphemy…” (28), he not only rebuts an argument, but he does so by attacking the person and by using false analogy. By taking words out of context and then making the connection that the secretary of state says Jesus is endorsing communism, McCarthy makes the secretary of state’s parable, and by extension, the secretary himself, seem sacrilegious and pretentious. Thus, some of his attempts at logos were in reality very faulty. Unfortunately, only if one is able to identify his use of these logical fallacies can one discredit
McCarthy’s statements. This obviously did not happen in the case of most members of the audience at the time, as they were swept away into hysteria.

In conclusion, though this is but one of several speeches delivered by Senator Joseph McCarthy in an attempt to rally the American people against the communist illusion that he helped to create, McCarthy’s ability to enthrall his audience of the ‘50s is undeniable. Through the use of vivid, fear-inducing figurative language, deductive reasoning, and alignment with historical figures, McCarthy makes the presence of logos, pathos, and ethos very recognizable. Unfortunately, McCarthy’s eloquence and persuasion would sweep America into a mass-frenzy of paranoia and insecurity. Many innocent men of stature would fall victim to blacklisting and public persecution as a result of this hysteria, and this would in turn cost many their jobs and in some cases even their lives. Today, America looks back at this age of witch hunts as a dark stain that taints America’s constitutional legacy. And it is with this knowledge that we now judge McCarthy’s claims and see them for what they really are—hot air saturated with logical fallacy and deceit. If only America could have recognized his tactics amidst all the paranoia. Yet, the fact remains that though communism was an undeniable threat during the ‘50s, America’s most injurious aggressor did not come in the form of a wave of communist supporters or even as an invading communist army. Instead, in the end, only America was to blame for the madness that it had brought unto itself, for it had let itself be entranced by the devious persuasiveness of Joseph McCarthy.