

Rhetorical Patterns in the Australian Debate over War with Iraq

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ABSTRACT Considerable public debate surrounded the Bush Administration's policy to invade Iraq if it did not dismantle its purported stockpile of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' and the wisdom of Australian participation in such an attack. This paper invokes Albert Hirschman's well-known 'rhetoric of reaction' taxonomy to examine the patterns of persuasive discourse embodied in the Australian debate over the desirability of Australian involvement in a war with Iraq. We seek to establish whether the Hirschmanian typology does indeed adequately describe rhetorical patterns in the Australian debate and we attempt to identify shortcomings in the analytical system proposed by Hirschman.

Keywords: Hirschman's taxonomy, Iraq war, rhetorical discourse.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 in the United States, the Bush Administration launched its 'War on Terror' campaign and identified an 'axis of evil' consisting of the 'rogue' states that included Iraq, Iran and North Korea. After defeating the Taliban forces in Afghanistan, an integral part of this campaign then resided in compelling the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq to rid itself of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' (WMD) and allow United Nations (UN) weapons inspectors to verify any disarmament. The American Government indicated that it was prepared to launch a military attack on Iraq should it refuse to comply with these demands, with or without the sanction of the UN Security Council. An even more controversial strand of American foreign policy towards Iraq focused on the need for 'regime change' in Iraq, with the removal of the Saddam Hussein Administration.¹

With a long history of military cooperation with the United States going back to 1917, the Australian Government enthusiastically endorsed the American 'War on Terror' campaign. The Australian Special Air Service was dispatched to Afghanistan and the Howard Government provided air, logistical, naval and special forces support to American-led attack on Iraq, despite the fact that it did not enjoy the 'legal' backing of a UN Security Council resolution. This sparked a vigorous public

debate in Australia on the wisdom of Australian collaboration in a war with Iraq. This debate was imbued with further urgency and immediacy by the Bali terrorist attack that killed and injured a large number of Australian holidaymakers.

The present paper seeks to examine the Australian debate prior to the war with Iraq using Albert Hirschman's 'rhetoric of reaction' taxonomy.² The Hirschmanian typology is adopted for two main reasons. Firstly, it enables us to dissect an otherwise amorphous debate in an analytically rigorous fashion and discern 'patterns of rhetorical persuasion' common to all great public policy disputations. Moreover, it allows us to test the explanatory and organisational power of the Hirschman system in the laboratory of a 'real-world' debate on Australian foreign policy. At least two previous attempts have been made to shed light on Australian public policy discourse by means of Hirschman's taxonomy. In the first place, Burton, Dollery and Wallis analysed rhetorical patterns evident at the 1999 New South Wales Drug Summit;³ and secondly, Burton, Dollery and Wallis examined the debate over 'economic rationalism' in Australia using the Hirschmanian methodology.⁴

The paper itself is divided into three main parts. The first section provides a synoptic description of Hirschman's 'rhetoric of reaction' typology; and the next section seeks to apply this system to the Australian debate over the advisability of war with Iraq. The paper ends with some brief concluding remarks in the final section.

Hirschman's Rhetoric of Reaction Taxonomy

In a pioneering paper, Donald McCloskey advanced the claim that conjecture and refutation in economic debate and theorising could be characterised as rhetorical persuasion rather than 'scientific' discourse *per se*.⁵ In her subsequent book *Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics*, McCloskey went on to distinguish between two main forms of 'rhetoric': Aristotlian rhetoric that embodied 'all available means of (uncoerced) persuasion' and Platonic rhetoric that employed 'mere flattery and cosmetics'.⁶ McCloskey's use of the term seems to most closely resemble the Aristotlian definition of rhetoric. Thus economists invoke formal logic, mathematical reasoning, statistical techniques, empirical knowledge and other approaches in their attempts to persuade their fellow dismal scientists. Accordingly, Maki has described McCloskey's definition of rhetoric as 'the use of arguments to persuade one's audience in an honest conversation (and the study thereof)'.⁷ However, broader public domain debates over the appropriateness of particular public policies seem to suggest that both Aristotlian and Platonic techniques are used to persuade opponents and support proponents alike.

In his seminal book *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, social scientist Albert Hirschman has recognised the significance of rhetoric as a potent element in public debates over economic and social policy reforms.⁸ Indeed, Hirschman has argued that every major stage in the development of 'citizenship' in Western civilisation, from the emancipation of slaves to the extension of the franchise to women, has been characterised by bitter and protracted debates between advocates of reform and their 'reactionary' adversaries. Moreover, he claims all these debates have exhibited common patterns of rhetorical argumentation that persist to the present day. On this basis he has developed a rhetorical taxonomy that can be used to categorise arguments for and against any particular course of proposed policy action. Thus opponents of any specific policy 'unfailingly' contest reform proposals with three

types of rhetorical argumentation: the 'perversity thesis', the 'futility thesis' and the 'jeopardy thesis'. In an analogous manner, proponents of reform always meet these 'reactionary' arguments with three 'progressive counterparts': the 'imminent danger thesis', the 'desperate predicament thesis' and the 'futility of resistance' thesis. Although Hirschman applies his rhetorical typology exclusively to the great historical debates surrounding critical reform measures in the development of full citizenship in Western democracies, such as universal adult enfranchisement and the poor laws, his taxonomy can nevertheless be applied readily to any policy proposal intended to bring about a radical change in domestic or foreign circumstances, including engaging in military conflict abroad.

It is useful for our present purposes to briefly outline the essential meaning of the Hirschmanian rhetorical taxonomy. In the first place, the perversity thesis holds that any attempt to substantially reform the existing institutions and policies of society will inevitably result in unintended and perverse consequences that will aggravate the very conditions the reformers seek to remedy. Thus, 'the attempt to push society in a certain direction will result in its moving all right, but in the opposite direction'.⁹ Hirschman argues that the perversity thesis is an especially powerful rhetorical device in the sphere of economic policy since the dominant neoclassical paradigm is based on the notion of self-correcting markets. Accordingly, 'any public policy aiming to change market outcomes, such as prices or wages, automatically becomes noxious interference with beneficent equilibrating processes'.¹⁰ When confronted with 'reactionary' perversity arguments, 'progressive' advocates of proposed reform programmes retaliate with rhetoric derived from the desperate predicament thesis in which 'it is implicitly or explicitly argued that the old order must be smashed and a new one built regardless of counterproductive consequences'.¹¹

Rhetorical attacks on reform programmes derived from the futility thesis contend that the proposed reformist policies will be entirely ineffectual and thus completely futile. Hirschman argues that, in comparison with the perversity thesis, criticism advanced on futility grounds is much more 'demoralising' and 'humiliating' since it impugns the 'meaning and motive' of those advocating reform.¹² In the realm of economic policy prescription, the assault on interventionist Keynesian economic policy by the 'rational expectations' school can be characterised as an instance of the futility thesis since economic agents will anticipate the intent of policy makers and thereby nullify the effects of the policies. Defence against the futility-style rhetoric is embodied in the futility of resistance thesis. Arguments of this kind stress the historical inevitability of the proposed reforms and the consequent futility of resisting reform. Hirschman accentuates the rhetorical synergies between these rhetorical positions by observing that both invoke inexorable 'law-like' 'forces of history' at play.

Finally, the jeopardy thesis accepts the desirability of the proposed reform programme and focuses its attack instead on the costs and consequences of reform: thus 'the proposed change, though perhaps desirable in itself, involves unacceptable costs or consequences of one sort or another'.¹³ Hirschman cites the assault on the Beveridge Report in wartime Britain contained in *The Road to Serfdom* as an instance of jeopardy rhetoric since Hayek criticised the liberty-endangering consequences of the proposed welfare state rather than its actual measures.¹⁴ Advocates of reform challenge jeopardy arguments by means of the imminent danger thesis that seeks to underscore the perils of inaction and the need to defend society against impending disaster. For example, Hirschman notes that Hayekian

jeopardy objections to the welfare state were met by arguments that stressed ‘threats of social dissolution or of the radicalisation of the masses’.¹⁵

With its claims to have identified universal patterns in social discourse over ambitious public policy programmes, it is not at all surprising that the ‘rhetoric of reaction’ taxonomy has been attacked by various scholars. Christopher Hood’s critique seems broadly representative of adverse comment the typology has attracted.¹⁶ Thus, comparing Hirschman’s bipolar dichotomisation between ‘reactionary’ and ‘progressive’ with his own fourfold taxonomy, Hood claims that it is simply ‘not rich enough to capture’ the complexities of the rhetorical arguments surrounding fundamental policy reforms.¹⁷

The Australian Debate on War with Iraq

If we consider the Australian debate over war with Iraq as it was conducted in ‘opinion’ pieces in the major ‘quality’ Australian press over the period October 2002, then this will enable us to view public discussion through the analytical prism provided by the Hirschman taxonomy. Accordingly, we now attempt to identify examples of the perversity, futility and jeopardy arguments advanced by opponents of Australian engagement in a war with Iraq, and instances of the countervailing progressive defence mounted by advocates of military force using the imminent danger, desperate predicament and futility of resistance theses.

Perversity Arguments

Rhetorical discourse that embodied perversity argumentation centred on the notion that war with Iraq would worsen the existing danger of terrorist attacks and thus represented an exercise in unintended consequences. At least two versions of the perversity thesis may be discerned in Australian debate over a war with Iraq. In the first place, some ‘reactionary’ critics of the use of military force against Iraq opposed any armed intervention, regardless of UN Security Council sanction. The essence of this rhetorical position resides in the proposition that war with Iraq would perversely worsen domestic security and enhance the capacity of international terrorism. For instance, writing in the *West Australian*, Chapple observed that ‘and then to our north, a Muslim nation, understandably upset by the Australians fighting against their fellow Muslims and knowing that our young fighting forces are otherwise occupied’ might take advantage of these circumstances to attack ‘our huge, largely unprotected coastline’, thereby substantially weakening Australia’s security situation.¹⁸ Similarly, *West Australian* journalist Andre Malan argued that ‘the consequences of the approaching war could be the deaths of countless soldiers and civilians, the long-term destabilisation of the region, and the creation of another generation of terrorist martyrs’.¹⁹ In much the same vein, in his regular column in the *Sydney Morning Herald* academic commentator Robert Manne claimed that ‘the war against Iraq is likely to swell the numbers of the young attracted to the ideology of Islamic fundamentalism and open recruitment into anti-American terrorist cells’, and consequently ‘assist in the growth of the very danger Americans now justifiably fear most’.²⁰ *Age* staff columnist Kenneth Davidson raised the spectre of further Bali-style terrorist attacks on Australians with the rhetorical question ‘what gain could Australia possibly achieve by being part of an invasionary force (sanctified by the Security Council or not) that would make it worthwhile to become a “soft target” for future terrorist attack’.²¹

A somewhat milder perversity argument held that Australia and other developed countries should only provide assistance to an American-led invasion if this had the support of the UN Security Council. Exponents of this rhetorical position contend that military action should only occur under the aegis of the UN Security Council since only this body can provide the legitimacy derived from 'international law'. They also maintained that any unilateral American invasion would set an unfortunate precedent for further unsanctioned US conduct in future and lead to a breakdown of collective UN-sponsored international security arrangements. In the *Melbourne Age*, former UN weapons inspector Richard Butler argued that while 'the past US posture of defence and deterrence made a massive contribution to stability in international relations', the new unilateralist doctrine of 'anticipatory defence' will produce 'an inherently unstable position'.²² Australia should thus only support American action sanctioned by the UN. A similar argument was advanced by Ray Cassin writing in the same newspaper: he observed that 'for the sake of responding to an unsubstantiated threat, the world will have turned away, once again, from the vision of an international order based on law instead of force'.²³

In terms of Hirschman's taxonomy, advocates of a given policy proposal meet perversity arguments with the 'desperate predicament thesis'. This rhetorical position holds that the *status quo* cannot be maintained and thus must be changed, regardless of the costs involved. In the Australian debate over war with Iraq, several commentators advanced desperate predicament arguments. For instance, an editorial in the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* argued that although Australian cooperation in an attack on Iraq 'involves great risk', no boundaries 'should be set in opposing' international terrorism, since 'evil can never be wished away' and thus it must be 'confronted courageously' in tandem with the US.²⁴ Similarly, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Gerard Henderson argued that 'if—and it is an if—the US launches a strike against Saddam's regime, Australia would have little alternative but to support its alliance partner'.²⁵ In a latter piece in the same newspaper in the aftermath of the Bali massacre, Henderson reiterated his earlier view and maintained that 'whatever personal positions are held about Bush, Blair and John Howard, contemporary terrorism amounts to an attack on Western civilisation' and thus Australia must participate in the war against Iraq.²⁶

Futility Arguments

According to Hirschman, the futility thesis holds that the proposed policy will have no effect at all and is thus completely ineffectual since it does not remove, or even reduce, the purported problem the policy is supposed to ameliorate. In the Australian (and indeed global) debate over war with Iraq, futility arguments most commonly focused on placing the 'War on Terror' in a broader historical context, with American support for Israel and past Western policies prominent. This rhetorical perspective emphasised the 'underlying' causes of Islamic terrorism and the role of poverty and social dislocation in the Arab world. War on Iraq is therefore 'futile' in the sense that it did not address the root socio-economic and foreign policy issues fuelling international terrorism. For instance, in a piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Guy Rundle argued that 'militant Islamic fundamentalism is a potent ideology for people battered and humiliated by the extension of Western power and money into every area of global social life': and since 'it gives meaning to lives thrown into disarray, people are willing to die for it'.²⁷ In the same

newspaper, Robert Manne contended that ‘contemporary American policymakers . . . would be wise to remember that it was the military struggles fought by the mujahideen in Afghanistan against the Soviet army that provided the crucible in which fundamentalist Islam was transformed into that vicious ideology Islamofascism, which now imperils the world and which was, on October 12, almost certainly responsible for the murder of 100-or-so fine young Australians, in the prime of their lives’.²⁸ In his column in the *Weekend Australian*, Phillip Adams provided an even more stark version of the futility thesis: ‘Bush’s brand of US triumphalism has been ticking away like a time bomb for years and the administration was opportunistic in response to its terrorist attacks’ and thus ‘suddenly everything and anything could be justified’.²⁹ Angela Shanahan summarised the essence of the futility hypothesis by noting that ‘the attacks on Western institutions from September 11 onwards are often seen as a sort of reasonable payback for the evils of US foreign policy and cultural hegemony’ that war with Iraq will do nothing to remove.³⁰

In terms of the Hirschman taxonomy, futility arguments are normally countered using the ‘futility of resistance’ rhetorical technique. Exponents of this form of persuasion typically underscore the historical inevitability of the proposed policy and the consequent pointlessness of resistance. In the Australian debate this defence of Australian engagement in a war against Iraq was often placed within the context of a global ‘clash of civilisations’, with post-industrial secular democracies pitted inexorably against pre-modern theocratic dictatorships. Thus Melbourne *Age* associate editor Shaun Carney argued that ‘radical Islam is the new communism, except that it is more interested in the annihilation of the West than it is in its conversion’ and consequently ‘the litany of events that keep us in the fight against radical Islam will, it is to be hoped, not grow too long, but it is a fight we cannot avoid having’.³¹ In the same newspaper, author William Shawcross also relied on this persuasive technique: ‘There is no escaping war . . . whatever the faults of the West—our greed and our arrogance and our carelessness—we did not seek it . . . but we have to fight it’.³² A similar argument was advanced by writer and humorist Clive James in the *Age*: ‘That fundamentalism loathes the Western democracies goes without saying; or rather, it goes with a lot of saying, at the top of the voice’, and since ‘Australia . . . was one of the most mature, generous and genuinely multicultural democracies on Earth’, it is ‘in the firing line’ and thus cannot escape conflict.³³

Jeopardy Arguments

Jeopardy arguments are advanced to persuade an audience that even though some proposed reform policy may be desirable in its own right, it nevertheless involves other adverse consequences that make its implementation unacceptable. This rhetorical position was widely employed in the debate over Australian involvement in any war against Iraq. For example, in the *Age*, feminist academic Germaine Greer argued that ‘Australian defence expenditure will certainly increase, with little effect on Australia’s stature as an ally and policy maker but with crushing impact on the Australian people’ since ‘funding for essential services has been cut and long-term welfare initiatives are being abandoned’. Moreover, ‘tension between Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia is mounting’, and war with Iraq will exacerbate these conflicts.³⁴ Similarly, in the *Age*, Melbourne writer Randa Abdel-Fattah expressed the view that Australian military collaboration with the US had severe effects on

multiculturalism in Australia: 'Instead of restoring our faith in the unity of Australians, and giving us courage to resist turning against one another, those with power to influence have conjured up *Apocalypse Now* visions of Islam versus the West'.³⁵ A somewhat different jeopardy rhetorical tack was adopted by Anne Chapple in the *Western Australian* who argued that 'the majority of our young men and women between the ages of 20 to 35 . . . leave this country and go elsewhere to fight': some of these Australians 'will not come back and of those that do, many will be so affected by what they have experienced, their lives will never be the same again'.³⁶

In terms of the Hirschman scheme, jeopardy arguments are countered by means of the 'imminent danger' thesis. This rhetorical position stresses the dangers associated with inaction and the importance of defending society against impending danger. In the Australian debate, advocates of the 'War on Terror' who employed this technique typically emphasised the immediacy of the Islamic 'fundamentalist' threat to liberal democracies, such as Australia, and the urgent need to take preventative security measures. Perhaps the best exponent of this position was *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist Jennifer Hewett. She argued that 'there are no trade-offs possible with terrorism . . . no possibility of negotiations based on fear or some desperate hope of rational exchange, no concessions that offer cover from such viciousness'. Islamic terrorism 'is about destruction of symbols of Western decadence, using the deaths of innocent people wherever and whenever possible'. The alternative to military action, passivity in the face of this threat, 'means walking away from who we are—a liberal democracy with strong ties to the US' and 'that is clearly impossible'.³⁷ Writing in the *Australian*, James Bennett is another articulate journalist who adopted the imminent danger technique: 'Australians were attacked not for what they had done, but for what Australians are'. Thus 'if radical Islamists conclude that the easiest way to change Australian behaviour is to kill a substantial number of Australians, then Australians will be murdered in large numbers again and again'. Accordingly, the only viable policy option for Australia 'is an expansion of the policies that have been successful to date . . . the US is the only ally, existing or potential, that has both the capability to effectively aid Australia and the long-term commonality of outlook and interests to be willing to do so permanently'.³⁸ It follows that 'Australia has no option but to fully commit itself to the struggle'.

Concluding Remarks

We have sought to demonstrate that the Hirschman 'rhetoric of reaction' taxonomy can assist in identifying patterns of rhetorical persuasion in political debates in contemporary Australia by examining the polemical discussion over the desirability of Australian involvement in war with Iraq. Our analysis of 'opinion' pieces in the quality Australian press over the period October 2002 seems to show that the structure of arguments for and against Australian military collaboration with the US in a 'War on Terror' does indeed fit the Hirschman typology.

Despite the explanatory power of the Hirschmanian rhetorical system, it should nevertheless be stressed that it did not capture the full range of argument deployed in the debate. In the first place, Hirschman's taxonomy cannot accommodate debate revolving round disputed empirical evidence. In the Australian debate over war with Iraq this shortcoming is not insignificant. For instance, a good deal of discussion focused on the factual question of whether or not Iraq still possessed

WMD. Similarly, much debate took place over the purported links between the Saddam Administration and al-Qaeda: a critical point that President Bush was at pains to demonstrate. These and other substantive empirical factors seem to lie outside of the sphere of the 'rhetoric of reaction'. It is interesting to note that in their analysis of the applicability of the Hirschmanian system to the debate on 'economic rationalism' in Australia, Burton *et al.* drew the same conclusion.³⁹

Secondly, notwithstanding its effective predictive capacity, Hirschman's taxonomy does not enable its users to detect complex changes of argument by participants in a debate. For example, Canadian commentator and media analyst Mark Steyn highlighted an intriguing conceptual shift on the part of those who opposed war with Iraq, drawing an analogy with earlier 'leftwing' opposition to the American policy of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War. Steyn argued that many of the same observers who were then in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament (or at least nuclear arms reduction) by the US, now presented their case against war with Iraq using the same deterrence paradigm that they had earlier dismissed as incoherent. In terms of this argument, Saddam Hussein is a 'rational actor' who carefully calibrated his actions against likely American reaction in terms of self-preservation. Writing in the *National Post*, Steyn contended that 'in the Cold War they wanted no truck with this repulsive theory' since 'the notion that "Mutually Assured Destruction" and a "balance of terror" would protect us was morally contemptible and consigned our children to live under the perpetual shadow of Armageddon'. However, 'now with Saddam it'll work just swell' since 'he's a "rational actor"'. According to this view, 'even if he gets nukes—even if he has them now—he's not crazy enough to use them'.⁴⁰ Thus, if the Bush Administration made it clear that military invasion of Iraq was inevitable, Iraq would have no incentive to constrain its behaviour. Indeed, it then would have every incentive to widen the conflict to include Israel and other adversaries. Under this 'logic of deterrence' framework, American (and Australian) rhetoric expounding the desirability of war with Iraq thus serves to make war not only more probable, but also more bloody. The Hirschmanian schema does not allow for this kind of analysis.

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