

Analyzing Logical Fallacies in President Trump's Speech on Jan 6, 2021

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ABSTRACT

This paper, written for Study.Com's Humanities 201: Critical Thinking & Analysis class, is intended to examine logical fallacies used by politicians in political speeches. President Donald Trump's speech at the "Stop the Steal" rally outside the White House on 6 January 2021 is a relatively recent speech which was extremely significant in hindsight. Trump's inflammatory speech and call to action ("*if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore*") preceded a riot by those supporters at the United States Capitol Building. The riot broke into the Capitol, destroying property and forcing an evacuation of staff, in an attempt to prevent the certification of the election results and maintain the presidency for Donald Trump. Trump's speech contained several rhetorical or logical fallacies, which did not support his outward position of arguing that the 2020 US Presidential Election had been "stolen" nor damage. While ineffective from a logic and debate standpoint, this speech was extraordinarily successful at inspiring his supporters to execute his call to action. While much can be written about the events of that day, this paper is primarily concerned with analyzing several logical fallacies from the speech and how they served (or failed to serve) the various purposes of President Trump's speech.

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on Jan 6, 2021

On 6 Jan 2021, then-President Donald Trump gave a speech at a “Stop the Steal” rally outside the White House by his supporters. At the time, President Trump was espousing a narrative that the United States presidential election, held 2 months prior, had been “stolen” by the US Democratic party for his opponent, President-elect Joe Biden. The results of the election were scheduled to be certified later that day by legislators at the Capitol in a process involving Vice President Mike Pence. After Trump spoke, urging his supporters to “walk down Pennsylvania Avenue” to the Capitol and “help” the “weak Republicans” to “take back this country”, that mob followed his directions and proceeded to storm the Capitol building in an attempt to interfere with the certification of the election to maintain Trump's presidency (The Associated Press, 2021).

Though delayed, the election results were eventually certified and Joe Biden was accepted as the new President of the United States. President Trump's speech was widely perceived to be inflammatory and encouraging of the insurrection. Trump was subsequently impeached for a second time in his four-year presidency, with a single charge of incitement of insurrection. Throughout Trump's speech that precipitated the attempted insurrection, he makes numerous logical fallacies in a speech that was intended to stoke the crowd's passions and explain his rationale for the belief that the election had been “stolen”. A handful of these logical fallacies will be presented and explained in this essay.

Red Herring Fallacy

And don't worry, we will not take the name off the Washington Monument. We will not cancel culture.

You know they wanted to get rid of the Jefferson Memorial. Either take it down or just put somebody else in there. I don't think that's going to happen. It damn well better not.

Although, with this administration, if this happens, it could happen. You'll see some really bad things happen.

They'll knock out Lincoln too, by the way. They've been taking his statue down. But then we signed a little law. You hurt our monuments, you hurt our heroes, you go to jail for 10 years, and everything stopped. You notice that? It stopped. It all stopped.

In the context of the preceding and subsequent portions of Trump's speech, this aside about the potential "cancelling" of Presidents Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln is a very noticeable non-sequitur. Trump changes subjects, from talking about the number of people present at the rally (stating that the people reach all the way beyond the Washington Monument) to talking about how a nebulous "they" want to change these memorials. This is a reference to a recent movement across the country to take down certain monuments celebrating men who fought against the United States in the American Civil War, as well as referring to a belief in a growing "cancel culture" phenomenon.

Regarding the issue of taking down statues of Confederate States of America figures, there were many efforts in 2020 to do this in the wake of national unrest over racism and police brutality. However, there were no serious efforts to "take the name off the Washington Monument", "get rid of the Jefferson Memorial", or "taking (Lincoln's) statue down" at the time, nor have there been in the ten-plus months since Trump's speech (Brockell, 2020). This was

largely a social media overreaction to a recommendation by a Washington D.C. committee to “contextualize” these monuments, acknowledging the issues posed by both Washington and Jefferson owning slaves. As there was no such particular issue at the time, this claim by Trump that “they” were trying to do this is a classic example of a red herring, and one that Trump had been using often in the prior year. This claim serves no purpose aside from distracting and inflaming the crowd further.

There is no movement afoot to “cancel” these monuments, but the claim that such a movement exists angers the crowd. Simultaneously, Trump declares that he won't let that happen (and that he has acted to prevent such), gaining the crowd's appreciation for working against something that was never an issue to begin with. Had Trump instead claimed that there was a movement afoot to let extraterrestrials settle on the moon and he had created the Space Force to prevent this, it would be similarly nonsensical. This is a complete distraction from the issue of the election which Trump claims he won, serving only to work up the crowd further about a non-existent issue. In hindsight, it could be argued that the fallacy (and the speech as a whole) was successful. However, from a perspective of legitimate debate, the only way in which this fallacy could be “corrected” is if it were removed entirely, given its purpose is solely to distract from the actual argument at hand.

Appeal to Emotion (Flattery)

And I just, again, I want to thank you. It's just a great honor to have this kind of crowd and to be before you and hundreds of thousands of American patriots who are committed to the honesty of our elections and the integrity of our glorious republic.

...

Many of you have traveled from all across the nation to be here, and I want to thank you for the extraordinary love. That's what it is. There's never been a movement like this, ever, ever. For the extraordinary love for this amazing country, and this amazing movement, thank you.

...

If this happened to the Democrats, there'd be hell all over the country going on. There'd be hell all over the country. But just remember this: You're stronger, you're smarter, you've got more going than anybody. And they try and demean everybody having to do with us. And you're the real people, you're the people that built this nation. You're not the people that tore down our nation.

...

So we're going to, we're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue. I love Pennsylvania Avenue. And we're going to the Capitol, and we're going to try and give.

The Democrats are hopeless, they never vote for anything. Not even one vote. But we're going to try and give our Republicans, the weak ones because the strong ones don't need any of our help. We're going to try and give them the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country.

So let's walk down Pennsylvania Avenue.

Throughout this speech, President Trump repeatedly flatters his audience, weaving this flattery throughout his speech and even including it in his call to action at the very end. Trump castigates his opponents and flatters his supporters, strengthening the “us vs. them” narrative and

strengthening his bond with the crowd, incorporating the listeners into the “us” in-group. Complementing someone is an effective way to get the compliment-receiver to have a higher opinion or feel closer to the compliment-giver, and the impact of getting a compliment from someone in a position of authority or someone you respect or admire is even larger.

Trump uses this to fantastic effect, calling his supporters “patriots” and praising their intelligence and strength. This elevates his supporters far above the Democrats and even above some of his allies, the “weak Republicans” that he claims his supports should be an example for. Trump also uses more subtle compliments, commenting how his followers “have more going than anybody” and that they are “the real people, you’re the people that built this nation”. This carries some very significant implications.

Immediately apparent is that Trump is stating to the crowd that their collective opposition are not “real people”. There is significant writing from a number of sources that dehumanization of an opponent is an important element of getting one person to commit violence against another. The vague statement that his supporters “have more going than anybody” allows for a favorable interpretation in the mind of the listener, but it generally implies an investment and involvement in the country and its affairs than those of the opposition. Especially in combination with the claim that his followers were exclusively responsible for building the nation as a whole, Trump is very much implying a significant amount of ownership of the nation to his followers. At the same time, Trump denies such ownership to their opponents, actively implying and outright stating that their opposition is stealing or destroying this thing that his followers have previously built, currently own, and have greater investment in.

While these last examples are not overtly flattery in the sense of traditional complements, they are a subtle type of complement in that they provide recognition and validation. Trump’s

proclamations that his followers built the nation, that they have a greater investment/involvement in society, or even that their opponents are not “real people” are not ideas uniquely conceived of in the mind of Donald Trump to the exclusion of all other people. These are ideas that many of Trump's followers would share, especially those most fervently dedicated to his cause to show up to a rally 2 months after an election that was legitimately lost. By naming these internal beliefs of his followers, Trump uses his position of authority to validate those beliefs. That validation is just another type of flattery and helps to further strengthen his followers' dedication to Trump.

Trump's flattery does not directly address the issue at hand of the election that Trump contends was stolen from him by a Democrat conspiracy. Had the issue instead been about something benign (announcing a new state park, perhaps) or had the compliments been more overtly superficial (for example, declaring his followers to be pretty and handsome), nothing would change, as the compliments and the issue have no bearing on each other. From a perspective solely concerned with the logical appeal of an argument, this fallacy could only be corrected by removing it from the speech, as it was immaterial to the issue at hand. However, Trump used this appeal to emotion to cast the issue in the context of a larger culture war between “us” and “them” while also predisposing the crowd to his eventual call to action. In that sense, Trump's usage of this fallacy was quite successful, though it did result in his impeachment.

Strawman Fallacy

There's only one reason the Democrats could possibly want to eliminate signature matching, opposed voter ID, and stop citizenship confirmation. “Are you a citizenship?” You're not allowed to ask that question, because they want to steal the election.

In this instance, President Trump misrepresents the opposing view regarding his proposed changes to elections. Where Trump is espousing a series of changes for the purpose of “increased security” within elections, opposition to these changes is based on a number of counterarguments. Using Voter ID laws as a single example, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) published a number of reasons for its opposition to Voter ID legislation in May 2017:

- 11% of US citizens lack a government photo ID
- Those citizens lacking ID are disproportionately of minority groups
- Procurement of IDs costs time and money, and minorities often lack both
- Studies indicate that Voter ID laws reduce election turnout
- Voter impersonation is an exceedingly rare crime

In his speech, Trump stated that “there’s only one reason” for opposition to his proposed law regarding Voter ID, and that reason is stealing this election from him. The incomplete list of reasons provided here for the ACLU’s opposition to these laws clearly demonstrates that this is not the case. Here, Trump has both oversimplified and misrepresented the opposing view regarding Voter ID, along with the other proposed election changes. In doing this, he commits a strawman fallacy by creating (and attacking) a distorted opponent position rather than addressing his opponent’s actual position. Had Trump reframed this in any way other than the actual opposing position (for example, by claiming that the opposition wanted to get rid of elections entirely and install a monarchy), it would have remained a strawman and failed to adequately support his arguments regarding election security and the election he was contesting.

While a “strawman” is classically used to manufacture an opposition position that is easier to defeat in your own argument, Trump uses this strawman to further demonize the opposition alongside many of his other statements in this speech. Had Trump been inclined to address the issue without committing the strawman fallacy, he could have instead briefly described these concerns to his audience and then explained why each concern was invalid. Addressing the actual concerns of the opposition would eliminate this fallacy in Trump's speech.

False Cause Fallacy

We will restore the vital civic tradition of in-person voting on Election Day so that voters can be fully informed when they make their choice.

Among his list of things that he believes need to change in US elections, President Trump makes a mention of restoring “in-person voting”, referring indirectly to options for dropping off ballots at approved “ballot boxes” or mailing them in via the United States Postal Service. Trump may subjectively have an opinion that any given method is superior to another, but he commits a false cause fallacy when he states that this will be done for the purpose of allowing voters to be fully informed. Trump is making the argument that voting in person somehow makes voters “fully informed” in a way that other options (ballot boxes, mail-in ballots) do not. Trump does not explain this argument at all, connecting two things in a causal relationship which do not share any such relationship.

This fallacy might be understandable if there were an objectively obvious or intuitive explanation of the causal relationship. For example, a causal argument in a policy position that “increasing violent crime rates reduce property values” may not require explanation because all listeners recognize an intuitive element in that argument that no one wants to pay more for a

home where they're more likely to be victim of a violent crime. No such objectively obvious or intuitive explanation exists for the idea that in-person voting will produce more informed voters. Arguably, the opposite may actually be the more intuitive case because voters at home can take more time to research the candidates and initiatives on their ballots than in a booth at a polling station.

This fallacy could be avoided if Trump either explained how in-person voting leads to a more informed voter, or how the alternatives create a less informed voter. This might not have resulted in an objectively correct argument, but it would've avoided the false cause fallacy. However, this was likely a deliberate on Trump's part. A subjective explanation may exist in Trump's mind, and in the minds of his supporters, that a "fully informed" voter is one who voted for Trump. In this particular regard, Trump was likely correct, if disingenuous, given that Republican voters were more likely to vote in person than Democratic voters, compared to other methods (Mithani & Rakich, 2021).

Ad Hominem Fallacy

Many of the Republicans, I helped them get in, I helped them get elected. I helped Mitch get elected. I helped. I could name 24 of them, let's say, I won't bore you with it. And then all of a sudden you have something like this. It's like, "Oh gee, maybe I'll talk to the president sometime later." No, it's amazing.

They're weak Republicans, they're pathetic Republicans and that's what happens.

...

The weak Republicans, and that's it. I really believe it. I think I'm going to use the term, the weak Republicans. You've got a lot of them. And you got a lot of great ones. But you

got a lot of weak ones. They've turned a blind eye, even as Democrats enacted policies that chipped away our jobs, weakened our military, threw open our borders and put America last.

President Trump goes on the attack throughout his speech at various segments of his opposition, but the primary targets of ad hominem fallacies in his speech are the “weak Republicans”. These are the members of Trump’s own Republican party who are not, in Trump’s judgment, adhering closely enough to the party lines and positions. The ad hominem ignores any legitimate argument for or against the positions of those “weak Republicans” and instead seeks to weaken his opponents by attacking them personally, ignoring their arguments. In this context, Trump is casting these “weak Republicans” as being responsible in part for all the negative things that Trump lists off: job losses, a weakened military, open borders, and “America last”.

In doing this, Trump is “othering” these members of his own party amongst his supporters, to an extent. In the overall narrative that Trump builds throughout the speech of “us” vs “them”, these “weak Republicans” are near to being placed into the out-group of “them”. Trump doesn’t quite go this far though, instead leaving them as a member of the “us” in-group who just need to be policed into doing what Trump considers to be the right thing. This feeds directly into Trump’s later call to action, asking his supports to go to the Capitol and give these “weak Republicans” their “bravery” and “courage”.

In the context of Trump’s position that the election was stolen from him, calling these Republicans “weak” doesn’t strengthen his own argument. If we reframe this to an extreme and he had instead called these Republicans traitors, it still would not improve his own argument (nor address the arguments of any of the individuals he was attacking). In this regard, the ad hominem accomplishes nothing from the standpoint of the arguments involved. However, Trump’s speech

on January 6 was not solely (or perhaps, even remotely) concerned with actually advancing his position. In the context of trying to radicalize a group of people to take action and police these “weak Republicans” into failing to certify the election. Again, the success of Trump’s speech is plainly evident.

Slippery Slope Fallacy

The American people do not believe the corrupt, fake news anymore. They have ruined their reputation. But you know, it used to be that they'd argue with me. I'd fight. So I'd fight, they'd fight, I'd fight, they'd fight. Pop pop. You'd believe me, you'd believe them. Somebody comes out. You know, they had their point of view, I had my point of view, but you'd have an argument.

Now what they do is they go silent. It's called suppression and that's what happens in a communist country. That's what they do, they suppress. You don't fight with them anymore. Unless it's a bad story. They have a little bad story about me, they make it 10 times worse and it's a major headline.

...

No, we have a corrupt media. They've gone silent. They've gone dead. I now realize how good it was if you go back 10 years, I realized how good, even though I didn't necessarily love them, I realized how good. It was like a cleansing motion, right?

But we don't have that anymore. We don't have a fair media anymore. It's suppression. And you have to be very careful with that and they've lost all credibility in this country.

...

And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore.

In these portions of his speech, President Trump is bemoaning the “fake news media”, and he is specifically taking issue with how he feels they don't advance his point of view fairly. Trump states that “10 years ago” he used to be able to argue with the media and they would present his view and an opposing view. In this way, Trump is complaining that the media is no longer letting him give “his side of the story”. Trump claims that this is “suppression” and states that this is what happens in communist countries.

This is a classic slippery slope fallacy, where Trump states that unless he's given what he wants (presumably, the ability to say anything he likes on any media) that there will be grave consequences far beyond what is actually possible as a result of him not getting his way. Trump doesn't come right out and say “If the media doesn't let me give my side of the story at all times, then you'll have a communist dictatorship”, but it's exactly what he is implying by saying that this “is what happens in a communist country” with a state-run media. Not letting President Trump say whatever he wants doesn't suddenly make the United States into a communist nation with a state-run media, but Trump wants his audience to think that this slippery slope exists and to concern themselves with that outcome. Given any significant consideration, the idea quickly becomes obviously absurd because a state-run communist media could not suppress the leader of the state which ran that media, and at that time, Trump and the Republican Party were in control of all three branches of the US government.

Trump provides another great example of a slippery slope fallacy in the final quote listed above, which comes as a part of his call to action that concludes his speech. In it, Trump calls upon his followers to “fight like hell” to avoid losing their country. This ties in somewhat to the

previous comments and serves as another link in a chain to go from “The news doesn’t let me say what I want” to “you’re not going to have a country anymore”. Throughout Trump’s speech, he has laid out a number of grievances and complaints, all of which feed into this final premise that his supporters will be disenfranchised and living in a communist nation, without any logical evidence for the links between cause and effect. A rhetorically sound approach would’ve been to clearly outline the cause-and-effect links that Trump believed would follow a certified election win for Joe Biden, which would’ve necessarily been much less dramatic than the claims he made instead.

Throughout Trump’s speech, he repeatedly commits logical fallacies that fail to advance his arguments regarding the 2020 Presidential Election being “stolen” from him. From this wholly rhetorical perspective, many of these fallacies undermined Trump’s position. However, this is not the perspective that Trump was likely concerned with at the time of this speech. On January 6th, Trump and his legal team had already been working to have the election results changed for the last two months, and their arguments were being rejected at every occasion. This speech and the looming certification of the election results represented the last opportunity for Trump to have the election results changed, and all of his attempts to use legitimate means to do so had come up empty. At this point, Trump had one option left to retain the presidency, and he took it.

Trump’s speech was not intended to be rhetorically sound, because rhetorically sound arguments don’t inflame the heart. Trump’s needed to stop the election certification, and the only way to do that was to get someone to stop it for him. Trump’s approach was instead to inflame the hearts of all of the “patriots”, the “real people” who were his most fervent supporters at a

rally two months after he had lost an election, whose internal beliefs he validated as he denigrated the opposition. He stoked their passions by invoking the names of classical American heroes like Washington and Lincoln and fabricating claims that these heroes were in danger of being torn down by the opposition, while casting his supporters into an “us” vs “them” conflict against that opposition. He raised the stakes by repeatedly misrepresenting topics or arguments as being singularly concerned with oppressing himself and his supporters, and he pushed the crowd to take action, to “fight like hell” in order to ensure that they would not be disenfranchised and lose their country to “them” as a result of all of this. Trump’s speech was rife with logical and rhetorical concerns, but it was very carefully and specifically concerned only with igniting anger and emotion within the crowd, to rouse them to action. With the crowd primed and ready to act, Donald Trump simply asked the crowd to take a walk down Pennsylvania Avenue and lend their bravery and courage to the “weak Republicans”.

The crowd rioted at the Capitol building in an attempt to prevent the certification of the election results, breaking into offices and taking the floor of the Senate. While President Trump’s speech wasn’t successful in a logical or rhetorical view, it was undeniably a phenomenal success at getting his supporters to do his will, even if they weren’t able to execute his ultimate goal. A week later, Trump was impeached for inciting the insurrection with his actions, chiefly the speech made that morning.

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