

The Role of Pride in Effective Rhetoric

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At first, television commercials may seem shallowly and simply designed to convince their audiences to perform a one specific actions whether that action is buying a certain product or supporting one specific cause. However, within certain rhetorical contexts, commercials can serve a deeper purpose than straightforward persuasion. Commercials may distract viewers from another event or simply serve as a reminder to the audience about something important that has seemingly been forgotten. Both the Penn State and the US Navy commercial manipulate notions of pride among their audiences in an attempt to sway negative public opinions about their respective organizations; the Penn State commercial does so by redirecting public attention away from the college culture at Penn State in the wake of the Jerry Sandusky scandal while the Navy advertisement achieves this by reinforcing the idea of American policing of the world as that role comes under fire in the midst of conflict in the Middle East.

Penn State has a long and storied football program which includes several national championships, numerous College and Pro Football Hall of Fame Inductees, and the most winningest coach in College Football, Joe Paterno. Why then, did this 2013 commercial for Penn State make no mention of such a program? In fact, barely any mention was made about the culture at Penn State at all – aside from a quick shot of the Nittany Lion mascot, the commercial focused solely on the academic benefits of attending Penn State. For a school with the best student section in the country and whose infectious school spirit is a big draw for prospective students, leaving such a big part of campus life out of a commercial seems like a poor choice.

In 2011, Penn State was rocked as allegations of sexual abuse by long-time assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky came to light. The community and America as a whole were even more shocked when reports emerged that university officials including head football coach Joe Paterno and board members were made aware of Sandusky's activities yet took no action (CNN Library, 2016). Many pointed to Penn State's football culture as a primary reason why the abuses were not investigated further; critics claimed that the university and its staff prioritized Penn State's football program over the well-being of Sandusky's victims. In a statement released following the NCAA's 2012 decision to levy a \$60 million fine against Penn State and impose severe restrictions on its football program, NCAA president Mark Emmert specifically cited the "athletic culture" at Penn State as the reason the abuse continued for so long. Emmert also said that the punishments imposed on the university were meant to "make sure the university establishes an athletic culture... in which football will never again be placed ahead of... protecting young people" (Kane, 2012).

The Sandusky scandal and its aftermath provided an extremely compelling exigence for Penn State to place less emphasis on its athletic culture. It's no surprise that in light of the Sandusky scandal Penn State would want to focus on something outside of its famous football culture. The commercial focuses on Penn State's academic qualities: the variety of internships available, the fact that it's a top target for corporate recruiters, and the alumni network. Oddly enough, the commercial also mentions that there's no application fee, a seemingly trivial matter. It's almost as if the advertisers were running out of things to say. Yet the commercial desperately avoids the subject of football, a

subject about which a lot could be said. Just one year after the NCAA levied sanctions against the university and two years after the scandal initially broke, Penn State's athletic culture and football program were still incredibly sensitive topics. In previous commercials, football was prominently featured (or at least it wasn't completely ignored). By distancing itself from football, the commercial also serves to distance the university as a whole from the scandal as if to say that a significant shift in priorities had taken place. No longer would Penn State focus so heavily on football and athletics in general; a new, greater emphasis would be placed on its academics as a direct result of the Sandusky scandal. In essence, the commercial acts to remind viewers that in addition to having a football team, Penn State is first and foremost an educational institution; it also serves to redirect public attention away from Penn State's football and athletic programs towards academically-focused aspects of the university.

The commercial for the US Navy, though seemingly dissimilar at first, shares the same goal as the Penn State commercial – to remind and redirect its audience. The slogan used in the 2014 commercial is “a global force for good” which seems odd coming from a sovereign military. In fact, for much of history the idea of any single nation having a global influence similar to that of the Navy today would have been preposterous.

American exceptionalism is an idea that permeates the history of the United States. In essence, American exceptionalism is composed of three key points: American history is fundamentally different from that of other nations, the United States has a duty to exercise its influence on the rest of the world, and this combination of duty and mission makes the United States superior over other nations (New World Encyclopedia,

2016). This idea has greatly shaped American foreign policy. The Monroe Doctrine, Gettysburg Address, and Manifest Destiny all have roots in American exceptionalism. Throughout history, American exceptionalism has been used to justify interventions, military action, and full-scale wars in foreign countries. Most recently, President Obama cited American exceptionalism as a justification for intervention in a 2013 speech regarding the Syrian Civil War (Tumulty, 2013). However, there have been many critics of American exceptionalism and many who would rather see the US take a more passive role in foreign affairs. In response to Obama's speech, Vladimir Putin published an op-ed in *The New York Times* warning against the dangers of exceptionalism (Tumulty, 2013). Others share Putin's sentiments and desire for the US to mind its own business, so to speak.

By drawing on the perceived shared enterprise of the American public and its general desire for continued American success, the Navy commercial seeks to positively influence public opinion about the Navy regarding the American military's interventionist policies in the Middle East. By highlighting just how dependent a global society is on its waterways and following up by asserting that the US Navy is monitoring or controlling 100 percent of these waterways, the commercial demonstrates just how important the US Navy is to a safe and healthy world. Furthermore, the commercial conveys and reminds its audience of a few key values including national pride and patriotism. The commercial portrays an aircraft carrier – the ultimate symbol of American military might – sailing through the ocean. Nothing says national pride quite like the ability to project military power anywhere in the world. In the final graphic

displayed in the commercial, stars are used to denote the locations of US Naval bases on a map of the world. Not only does this remind viewers of the stars on the American flag, but it also aims to inspire awe and pride at the extent of US military power. By stirring feelings of patriotism within its audience, the commercial attempts to distract viewers from criticisms of American foreign policy by filling their hearts with the shared enterprise of national pride.

Both Penn State and the US Navy are placed in rhetorically similar contexts; public opinion of each organization has fallen dramatically. Interestingly enough, the two commercials take almost polar opposite approaches in utilizing ethos to sway public opinion. By neglecting to mention football at all, the Penn State commercial is in a way suppressing school pride and spirit to redirect public attention due to the connection between school spirit and controversy. On the other hand, the Navy commercial does everything it can to inspire pride in its viewers; because this pride isn't "tainted" by scandal, the commercial is free to utilize it without any backlash to redirect its viewers from criticism of American interventionism.

Furthermore, each commercial has a slightly different target audience. The Navy commercial is primarily aimed at high school students trying to decide on their next step in life. This audience is generally perceived to be more inexperienced in worldly things and more naïve than a typical adult audience; the commercial assumes that they will be more easily influenced by simple feelings of national pride and accordingly keeps its message simple without straying from the idea of American greatness. On the other hand, the Penn State commercial is targeted to both parents and students. The mention of the

lack of application fee (which in most households would be paid by the parents) as well as the strong emphasis on academic and extracurricular performance shows that the commercial understands that its audience is more mature and skeptical; therefore, pure emotion will not be enough to sway its opinion.

Because of this difference in ethos and audience, the Navy commercial is able to effectively make use of Black's second persona in an attempt to project ideologies onto its audience. By invoking strong feelings of national pride, the commercial attempts to make its viewers identify as one collective body in support of the Navy and the American military. In contrast, the second persona of the Penn State commercial is much less effective. Because of the commercials inability to use pride, it is unable to make its viewers identify with any particular body or cause and so must rely purely on logos to achieve its intended effect.

Both Penn State and the US Navy were placed in situations where public opinion of each organization took a steep dive, and each commercial approaches their audience in different ways to change that public opinion. At their hearts, both commercials are relying on pride – pride in a school or pride in a country, it doesn't matter. People at heart are prideful creatures; when that pride can be manipulated is when any form of communication will be the most powerful and effective.

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