

■ “The Emperor Has No Clothes”

Date: 2003

Author: Robert C. Byrd

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

Senator Robert Byrd is generally appreciated by liberals for his long-standing commitment to progressive causes and civil rights during his early years in politics. He was known for advocating for issues such as healthcare, education, and economic equality.

Senator Byrd’s speeches before the Senate exhibited the oratorical skills of nineteenth-century statesmen, complete with flowery rhetoric and grand gestures. He recited poems; quoted historical figures, particularly the Roman statesman and orator Cicero; and frequently cited parables from history and classical fairy tales to make his point—his use of the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen’s 1837 fairy story is typical in this regard. “The Emperor Has No Clothes” Speech, one of the U.S. senator’s twenty-seven speeches on the war in Iraq given between October 2002 and April 2004, summarized his belief that Iraq posed no direct threat to the United States. The “emperor” George W. Bush, he believed, had promoted a war based on nonexistent weapons of mass destruction and no records that established that Iraq’s leader, Saddam Hussein, was involved in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. He criticizes President Bush for trying to take power from the Senate and for attacking the civil liberties of Americans.

Defining Moment

Byrd was a former defense hawk who voted in favor of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964. This resolution broadened presidential power to wage war without a formal declaration. Byrd, however, became the Senate’s most outspoken critic of the 2003 Iraqi war. He believed that giving the president such broad authority to engage in war gave away power that belonged to the legislative branch of government. He insisted that Congress alone had the right to declare war under the U.S. Constitution and that presidential usurpation of that power, particularly under the administration of George W. Bush, disrupted the Constitution’s system of checks and balances among the judicial, legislative, and executive branches of government.

Author Biography

Robert C. Byrd was born Cornelius Calvin Sale, Jr., in North Carolina in 1917. Adopted and raised by his



Senator Robert Byrd in 2003. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

aunt and uncle, Byrd grew up in the coalfields of West Virginia, where his father worked as a teamster, farmer, and coal miner. The Byrd family was poor, and Robert Byrd frequently did his homework by the light of oil lamps because their home had no electricity. After Byrd graduated from high school in 1934, he worked as a gas station attendant and a produce boy. After taking welding classes, he helped build cargo ships during World War II.

In 1946 Byrd ran for the West Virginia House of Delegates and won. In 1950 he ran for a seat in the West Virginia Senate and won. Then, halfway through his Senate term, he ran for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives and was elected in 1952. In 1958, he won the first of nine consecutive terms in the U.S. Senate.

Byrd remained a traditionalist throughout his career. He always carried a copy of the U.S. Constitution in his pocket and often waved it on the Senate

floor while he spoke. His strong defense of constitutional law resulted in his adamant opposition to proposed changes to the Constitution, such as line-item veto or balanced-budget amendments. Still, during his fifty years in the Senate, he became increasingly liberal, focusing on government spending for social programs that improved education and health care and voting for civil rights.

Byrd's congressional career spanned numerous presidential administrations. On June 21, 2007, he became the first senator ever to cast eighteen thousand roll call votes in American history, and in November 2006 he was elected to an unprecedented ninth consecutive term in the U.S. Senate. Over the years, he served as majority leader, majority whip, minority leader, and president pro tempore of the Senate as well as on such key committees as the Senate Appropriations Committee, which he chaired. While still in office, Byrd died at the age of ninety-two, in June 2010.



Historical Document

“The Emperor Has No Clothes” Speech

In 1837, Danish author, Hans Christian Andersen, wrote a wonderful fairy tale which he titled *The Emperor's New Clothes*. It may be the very first example of the power of political correctness. It is the story of the Ruler of a distant land who was so enamored of his appearance and his clothing that he had a different suit for every hour of the day.

One day two rogues arrived in town, claiming to be gifted weavers. They convinced the Emperor that they could weave the most wonderful cloth, which had a magical property. The clothes were only visible to those who were completely pure in heart and spirit.

The Emperor was impressed and ordered the weavers to begin work immediately. The rogues, who had a deep understanding of human nature, began to feign work on empty looms.

Minister after minister went to view the new clothes and all came back exhorting the beauty of the cloth on the looms even though none of them could see a thing.

Finally a grand procession was planned for the Emperor to display his new finery. The Emperor went to view his clothes and was shocked to see absolutely nothing, but he pretended to admire the fabulous cloth, inspect the clothes with awe, and, after disrobing, go through the motions of carefully putting on a suit of the new garments.

Under a royal canopy, the Emperor appeared to the admiring throng of his people—all of whom cheered and clapped because they all knew the rogue weavers' tale and did not want to be seen as less than pure of heart.

But, the bubble burst when an innocent child loudly exclaimed, for the whole kingdom to hear, that the Emperor had nothing on at all. He had no clothes.

That tale seems to me very like the way this nation was led to war.

We were told that we were threatened by weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, but they have not been seen.

We were told that the throngs of Iraqi's would welcome our troops with flowers, but no throngs or flowers appeared.

We were led to believe that Saddam Hussein was connected to the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, but no evidence has ever been produced.

We were told in 16 words that Saddam Hussein tried to buy “yellow cake” from Africa for the production of nuclear weapons, but the story has turned into empty air.

We were frightened with visions of mushroom clouds, but they turned out to be only vapors of the mind.

We were told that major combat was over but 101 [as of October 17] Americans have died in combat since that proclamation from the deck of an aircraft carrier by our very own Emperor in his new clothes.

Our emperor says that we are not occupiers, yet we show no inclination to relinquish the country of Iraq to its people.

Those who have dared to expose the nakedness of the Administration’s policies in Iraq have been subjected to scorn. Those who have noticed the elephant in the room—that is, the fact that this war was based on falsehoods—have had our patriotism questioned. Those who have spoken aloud the thought shared by hundreds of thousands of military families across this country, that our troops should return quickly and safely from the dangers half a world away, have been accused of cowardice. We have then seen the untruths, the dissembling, the fabrication, the misleading inferences surrounding this rush to war in Iraq wrapped quickly in the flag....

The Emperor has no clothes. This entire adventure in Iraq has been based on propaganda and manipulation. Eighty-seven billion dollars is too much to pay for the continuation of a war based on falsehoods.

Taking the nation to war based on misleading rhetoric and hyped intelligence is a travesty and a tragedy. It is the most cynical of all cynical acts. It is dangerous to manipulate the truth. It is dangerous because once having lied, it is difficult to ever be believed again. Having misled the American people and stampeded them to war, this Administration must now attempt to sustain a policy predicated on falsehoods. The President asks for billions from those same citizens who know that they were misled about the need to go to war. We misinformed and insulted our friends and allies and now this Administration is having more than a little trouble getting help from the international community. It is perilous to mislead....

I cannot support the continuation of a policy that unwisely ties down 150,000 American troops for the foreseeable future, with no end in sight.

I cannot support a President who refuses to authorize the reasonable change in course that would bring traditional allies to our side in Iraq.

I cannot support the politics of zeal and “might makes right” that created the new American arrogance and unilateralism which passes for foreign policy in this Administration.

I cannot support this foolish manifestation of the dangerous and destabilizing doctrine of preemption that changes the image of America into that of a reckless bully.

The emperor has no clothes. And our former allies around the world were the first to loudly observe it.

I shall vote against this bill because I cannot support a policy based on prevarication. I cannot support doling out 87 billion of our hard-earned tax dollars when I have so many doubts about the wisdom of its use.

I began my remarks with a fairy tale. I shall close my remarks with a horror story, in the form of a quote from the book *Nuremberg Diaries*, written by G. M. Gilbert, in which the author interviews Hermann Goering:

“We got around to the subject of war again and I said that, contrary to his attitude, I did not think that the common people are very thankful for leaders who bring them war and destruction.

“...But, after all, it is the *leaders* of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship.

“There is one difference,” I pointed out. “In a democracy the people have some say in the matter through their elected representatives, and in the United States only Congress can declare wars.”

“Oh, that is all well and good, but, voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country.”



Glossary

unilateralism: a policy of taking action without consulting or considering the reactions of others

we were told in 16 words: reference to George W. Bush’s statement, in his 2003 State of the Union speech, “The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa”

weapons of mass destruction: nuclear, biological, radiological, chemical, or other forms of weaponry capable of killing large populations in a short time

yellow cake: a form of uranium that can be used for making nuclear weaponry

Document Analysis

One of Byrd's twenty-seven speeches on the Iraq War, referred to as "The Emperor Has No Clothes" Speech, summarized his belief that there was no direct or imminent threat from Iraq. Byrd used Hans Christian Andersen's classic 1837 fairy tale to make his point. In the story, an emperor decks himself out in a suit of clothes thought to be visible only to those pure of heart and mind. All the townspeople exclaim over the beauty of the raiment as the emperor appears before them—except one child, who proclaims the truth of the emperor's nakedness.

On October 17, 2003, Byrd gave his speech prior to the Senate's vote on the Iraqi Supplemental Bill, an \$87 billion presidential bill that would provide additional funding for the U.S. military in Iraq and for the reconstruction of the country. Continued military force, it was argued, would make Iraq more secure from outside terrorists groups and provide for the training of a new Iraqi military, and more funding was needed to rebuild needed public services such as electricity and water systems. Byrd pressed for improvements in the bill at least twelve times, calling for more accountability and congressional oversight of the money. Each time, President Bush garnered enough support to override Byrd's amendments to the proposed legislation.

In this speech, the "emperor" is President Bush, who, according to Byrd, promoted a war on the basis of something that was not there. Before the war, Bush claimed the war was necessary because Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, but no weapons of mass destruction were found during the months and years after the invasion. Bush also claimed that Iraqis were oppressed under Saddam Hussein's regime and that American troops would be seen as liberators, yet, Byrd insists, American troops were not welcomed with open arms. Despite the belief that Hussein's Iraq sponsored terrorism in America and was collecting materials from other countries to build nuclear weapons, Byrd says that no records were found to indicate that Hussein was involved in the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and no evidence shows that he bought material to produce nuclear weapons from other nations. Bush told

Americans that the conflict was over two months after the initial invasion while standing on the deck of an aircraft carrier, the USS *Abraham Lincoln*. Dressed in his "new" clothes, a flight suit worn by U.S. military pilots, Bush gave a speech in front of a large banner that proclaimed "Mission Accomplished." However, the mission was not over. The war dragged on, and, Byrd notes, more soldiers died after Bush declared the war over than during the invasion. Byrd claims that although the emperor knew nothing was there, he continued to insist Iraq was a threat to America. Since these threats, like the emperor's clothes, could be seen only by those who were "pure of heart," or patriotic, many Americans agreed with the "emperor."

Byrd maintains that by stirring up fears of imminent danger and denouncing those who did not believe in the danger as unpatriotic, Bush persuaded Americans to believe in something that was not there. Byrd ends the speech by comparing Bush's leadership to that of the Nazi Hermann Goering, the second man in Adolf Hitler's Third Reich, Germany's Fascist and racist government during World War II. Goering believed that leaders determined policy in any society and could always sway people to follow their policy by telling them they were being attacked and then denouncing pacifists for their lack of patriotism. Goering's belief led millions of innocent people to their deaths during the war. Byrd attracted widespread criticism for these remarks.

Essential Themes

In his "The Emperor Has No Clothes" speech, Senator Robert Byrd has a very clear message for the American people: "you are being deceived." This deception is coming from the highest levels of the government of the United States. In particular, he attacks the Bush administrations misuse of patriotism to persuade Americans to support the war in Iraq. He argues that in his arrogance Bush created a war based on falsehoods and that he lied to the American people as well as to America's allies throughout the world.

Many of Byrd's criticisms of President Bush stemmed from his belief that Bush had little regard for the Constitution. He accuses Bush of trying to

usurp the power of the Senate, particularly the power to declare war, and he insists that Bush abused the civil liberties of Americans as established in the Constitution through the creation and passage of laws such as the USA Patriot Act (October 26, 2001), a law that expanded the authority of U.S. law-enforcement agencies. Intended to provide agencies with widespread power to fight terrorism, the act authorized the search of telephone and e-mail communications and medical and financial records and redefined “terrorism” to include domestic terrorism.

—Connie Park Rice, PhD

Bibliography and Additional Reading

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