

# Political myths and magic: the persuasive power of metaphor

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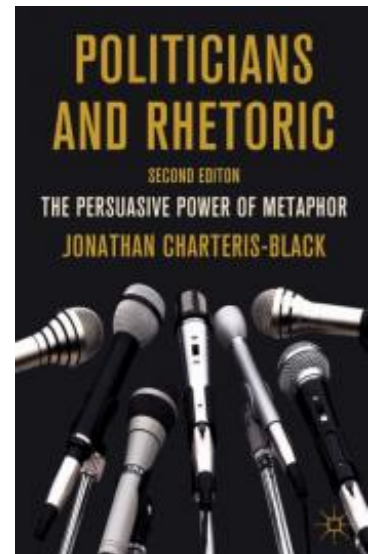
*Politicians and Rhetoric* will interest those fascinated with linguistics, rhetoric and political communication, providing a lucid insight into the way metaphors and political myths are developed by politicians seeking to achieve an intended effect, finds **Joel Suss**.



**Politicians and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor.** Jonathan Charteris-Black. Palgrave MacMillan. September 2011.

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Political rhetoric, synonymously referred to as ‘spin’, is popularly thought of with exasperation. Wooing us against our best interests, the deliberate intent to mislead and manipulate can be artfully masked by slick politicians. While skilful rhetoricians can spin the body politic astray with disastrous consequences (think Hitler or the second Gulf War), they can also inspire and motivate for a common good. In essence, rhetoric, especially through the use of metaphor, is the means politicians use to persuade an audience. Through the application of critical metaphor analysis to the corpuses of major British and American leaders, [Jonathan Charteris-Black](#), author of *Politicians and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor*, explores the systematic employment of metaphors; their interaction with other rhetorical tools in heightening conceptual associations and their use in creating political myth that appeals to fundamental and relatable life experiences.



Metaphors are powerful vehicles of persuasion. Used as a bridge between the familiar and the literal, they transfer meaning from what is easily understood to more complex concepts that are harder to grasp. By establishing ethical credentials, shaping and communicating political arguments around the recognizable, heightening emotive responses and, above all, creating potent political myths, the careful and attentive use of metaphor is a valuable weapon in the arsenal of any politician. In terms of myth-making, metaphor provides the link between the unconsciously implicit understandings of people (be it historical, cultural, physical, etc.) and the

explicit ideology and policies of a politician. Herein, the author maintains, is the real strength of metaphorical association.

Charteris-Black's main argument is that the creation of political myth, or 'telling the right story', is particularly effective in persuasion: 'By drawing on deeply rooted cultural schemata politicians are able to represent their beliefs and their policies as heroic tasks and themselves as epic heroes.' Likewise, they are able to demonize their enemies and depict opposing policies as villainous. Moreover, complex and nuanced political platforms can be communicated simply and effectively using metaphoric association and myth. Through analyzing the corpuses of the chosen leaders, readers are provided insight into the vital role metaphor and political myth play in persuasion. The distinct rhetorical style of each leader is adeptly, and at times entertainingly, pointed out. Additionally, the reader is shown how their 'spin' is intentionally manufactured and employed with calculating proficiency.

In this second edition of Charteris-Black's book, Barack Obama, Enoch Powell and Ronald Reagan are the added features on a list of accomplished rhetoricians comprised of Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King, Margaret Thatcher, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and George W. Bush. King eloquently utilized biblical and journey metaphors in creating a messianic political myth whereby he was a modern-day Moses guiding African-Americans towards salvation. Powell's political myth exploited powerful emotions, chief among them fear, by consistently decrying 'waves' of immigrants and prophesying the 'swamping' of Britain with foreigners. Reagan, 'The Great Communicator', often resorted to space metaphors in depicting a cosmic battle of good versus evil and America's ascendant journey through time. He continually characterized the Soviet Union as the 'Evil Empire' that needed to be defended against with 'Star Wars' weaponry (all the while actively financing and arming the repressive and authoritarian Central American regimes). Thatcher, the 'Iron Lady', effectively polarized the British electorate by continually associating Labour policies with Socialism and death. Interestingly, her epithetic nickname, originally meant to denote her rigidity and heartlessness, was positively spun to illustrate her conviction. Bush, although not known for his intellectual capacities or handle of the English language, successfully used financial metaphors to create an effective myth of moral accounting whereby terrorists and 'the axis of evil' owed a moral debt that had to be exacted down to the last penny by America. Obama, the 'American dream' personified, embodied the political myth of hope and projected a sense of unity and optimism that was incredibly persuasive.

Above all, this book will interest those fascinated with linguistics, rhetoric and political communication. It can also serve as a guide for those wary of political 'spin' who want to develop critical skills in discerning ethical integrity from nefarious intention. The book provides lucid insight into the way metaphors and political myths are developed by politicians seeking to achieve an intended effect. The artful use of language, Charteris-Black shows, can be incredibly persuasive.

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