

# Controversy, Context, and Theory: David Zarefsky on Political Argumentation

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Since the Greeks initiated the study of argumentation, scholars have recognized the importance of developing general theories that described and provided norms for testing argumentation, while also recognizing that any argument must be understood as shaped by context and purpose. Contemporary research on fields, spheres, contexts, forums, controversies, as well as particular case studies reflects the ongoing need for both generalizable theory and for analyses that include the particular forces shaping argument of the moment.

While argument scholars long have recognized the importance of focusing on both theory and practice, achieving a balance between these approaches has proved difficult. One of the criticisms of the theoretical literature on argument fields, for instance, is that the theories are not always generalizable to particular cases. On the other hand, a case-study of a particular controversy may carefully describe the argumentative encounter without revealing anything about argumentation in general. In the introduction to *Political Argumentation in the United States*, David Zarefsky recognizes this conflict, noting that his research has fallen at “the intersection” of the study of argumentation and public address. Something very interesting happens in the writings of Zarefsky, however, at this point of intersection—he melds a careful analysis of a given case with judicious use of theory to produce case-studies that both inform our understanding of the particulars of the case and also advance our understanding of argumentation theory in general.

*Political Argumentation* contains twenty case-studies, most of them previously published in journals dealing with rhetoric and argumentation in the United States. The essays are organized into four sections focused on American argumentation

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from the constitutional period up to the civil war, Lincoln's use of argument and rhetoric, American foreign policy, and American political argumentation since the 1960s. It is a hallmark of the book and of Zarefsky's writing in general that he can demonstrate such mastery of argumentative controversies from the debates about the constitution to the contemporary argumentation of President Obama, a topic that is confronted in the final essay in the book, "Obama's Lincoln: Uses of argument from historical analogy."

The final essay can be treated as typical of Zarefsky's approach. He begins by noting that immediately after the assassination Lincoln was transformed into a mythical figure and then briefly discusses the evolution of that mythic image. Since myths often provide the value grounding for ideological argument, Zarefsky's focus on Lincoln as mythic enactment of the American experience is a shrewd one. Lincoln, as Zarefsky makes clear, is not merely remembered as the nation's greatest president, but as a president who represented the best values of the nation, values to be aimed at if not always achieved, something Lincoln himself was getting act when he appealed to the "better angels of our nature" in his First Inaugural. From the discussion of Lincoln as mythic figure, Zarefsky discusses comparisons that have been made between Lincoln and Obama in order to establish the importance of the analysis to follow. He then turns to theories of how analogies function in order to explicate Obama's use of Lincoln. He identifies four different ways that analogies can work in historical argument: as "direct comparisons," "as templates for thinking about the present," as a teleological means of predicting the future, and in order to set up *a fortiori* argument, the use of analogy that will be Zarefsky's focus in the remainder of the essay (377–378).

If his focus is on the fourth kind of work done by historical analogies, one might wonder why Zarefsky takes the time to develop the other three types. The answer becomes clear in his discussion of both the potential benefits for Obama of using historical analogies about Lincoln and also the costs. For example, Zarefsky notes that such "comparisons could raise false expectations for Obama, as if he must achieve within normal political constraints what Lincoln was able to achieve only in apotheosis following his death" (378). Zarefsky's goal is clearly not merely to lay out the particular case-study, but to provide the reader with a broader understanding of the multiple potential uses of historical analogies and an understanding that such usage comes with both potential benefits and risks. Given the difficulties that Obama has faced in the United States and Europe in living up to what were clearly unrealistic public expectations about his presidency, Zarefsky, who wrote the essay in 2009, was clearly prescient about the potential downside of relying on historical analogies about mythic figures.

In the final section of the essay, Zarefsky first explains that *a fortiori* analogies allow a political leader to claim that if something applies in one case that there may be still more reason to believe that it applies in a second case. He notes, for example, that on the night he was first elected president, Obama argued that if the nation had come through the crisis of the Civil War than it certainly could come through the economic crisis of fall 2008. Zarefsky then explains how Obama drew on this form of historical analogy in a developed analysis of a particular speech, concluding that such use of analogies may be a means of achieving what Chaim

Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca called “presence,” not just added credibility, but a sense that the argument that is being made demands attention.

The approach that Zarefsky took in analyzing how President Obama uses historical analogies about Abraham Lincoln can be treated as typical of this wide-ranging volume, which also includes three chapters on the argumentation in the escalating crisis that eventually became the American Civil War, five chapters on Lincoln’s use of argument in crucial works such as the House Divided Speech, the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, and the First Inaugural, five chapters on argument in American foreign policy stretching from John Foster Dulles to LBJ and Vietnam, George W. Bush and terrorism, and Obama’s foreign policy, and six chapters on post-1960s political argument, including a discussion of Johnson and the War on Poverty, Martin Luther King, the American Dream, and Vietnam, and Ronald Reagan’s use of argument by definition. The breadth of the issues covered in the book is obvious.

While the chapters cover the entire history of the American experiment with democracy, their approaches are remarkably similar. Zarefsky’s work includes a careful discussion of contextual factors and larger frames that define political argument in any given controversy. Such a focus on context often leads to a devaluation of theory, but Zarefsky is careful to avoid that trap by carefully developing theoretical principles that are applicable to the particular case, drawing appropriate distinctions about that theory, and pointing to boundary conditions beyond which the theory does not apply. Theory development and application is especially prevalent in the more recent essays. What follows is a careful application of the theory to the argumentative controversy, an application in which Zarefsky is careful to point to instances where the theory does not map perfectly onto the argumentation. Finally, Zarefsky often discusses the costs as well as the benefits of taking a particular argumentative approach. In so doing, he points toward the importance of identifying boundary conditions for all theoretical claims. While the chapters cover very different controversies, the approach is consistent, whether the topic is John Tyler or George W. Bush.

Zarefsky’s perspective on political argument is quite valuable. He illuminates particular controversies, but also makes important theoretical contributions by pointing to cases where theory usefully can be applied and also identifying boundary conditions beyond which its application lacks utility. On occasion, he makes important contributions to theory itself, especially in his work on argument by definition. All of this is done in a style that is both academically rigorous and highly accessible. Such an approach may not be appealing to all students of political argument. If one is searching for grand theory applicable to all political argument, that is not Zarefsky’s agenda and this book implicitly builds a strong argument that such a grand synthesis is neither possible nor desirable. Similarly, if one is looking for a postmodern theoretical approach to American political argument, one will not find it here. In fact, the combination of the essays in this volume can be seen as making a strong case that such an approach is not needed that there is great analytical power in a critical perspective combining careful analysis of context and text using theories developed out of the pragmatic argument tradition.