

Fala: Through the Lens of Zarefsky's Fourth Distinction

Oliver Vettoretti

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Since the beginning of the American Presidency, the President has been scrutinized under the microscope of the media and the public. Attention to public image is an ongoing responsibility for a President in a free society, by virtue of the fact that public opinion and favorability influence voting inclinations. Power influences, legislatively and symbolically, and the way it is wielded defines each President.

The President's family too is an object of rhetorical focus, something that Americans use to define a President and his presidency. The First Family typically can either help the President or harm him and Franklin Delano Roosevelt had a very special member of his family when sworn into office: Fala. Fala was Roosevelt's beloved black Scottish Terrier, who had a great deal of influence and was often an object of media attention. Fala is different from any President's children or wife in the way that he always benefitted Roosevelt. Zarefsky's fourth distinction, the study of historical events from a rhetorical perspective, is defined as "the perspective of how messages are created and used to influence and relate to one another."ⁱ Fala's message to the American people was that despite political criticism and his disability, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was human too. Fala served as a figurative sponge that absorbed criticism against Roosevelt and wiped it away. Although public opinion regarding Roosevelt's politics was often very divided, Fala provided a positive distraction that shifted the public's focus away from Roosevelt's disability and served as a humanizing figure for adults and children alike to adore.

While observing Fala through Zarefsky's fourth distinction, it is important to look back at some of Roosevelt's most critical moments as President to understand Fala's full effect on the American people. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was running as the Democratic candidate in the 1944 election for what would be a historic fourth term for him as President.ⁱⁱ Roosevelt had been in office for nearly twelve years and was visibly aging as his disability was worsening.ⁱⁱⁱ

Republicans, in an effort to win the election, began to spread the news of Roosevelt's crippling disability to try to convey that Roosevelt was too ill to be President.^{iv} When photographed in the months before the upcoming election time, Roosevelt was visibly weakened from battling his disability and in poor health.^v To the Republican party's advantage, later in 1944 Roosevelt, a usually phenomenal speaker, gave a very poorly delivered radio address which began to worry the public.^{vi} While at the White House in May 1944, Turner Catledge, a reporter for the *New York Times*, was "shocked and horrified" by Roosevelt's condition.^{vii} According to Catledge, Roosevelt "would start talking about something, then in mid-sentence he would stop and his mouth would drop open and he'd sit staring at me in silence."^{viii} When at lunch with Vice Presidential candidate Senator Harry S. Truman at the White House, Roosevelt appeared worn out^{ix}. Even newspapers and political pundits began to suggest that Governor Thomas Dewey of New York was favored to win the presidential race over President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.^x Roosevelt had his first campaign event on September 23, 1944 and was facing many odds following a year of what turned out to be his final months.^{xi}

There was only one creature that might well turn the electoral race around for Roosevelt so quickly, and that was Fala, who did exactly that. Governor Thomas Dewey of New York's campaign had been portraying President Roosevelt as an incompetent leader.^{xii} The Dewey campaign's paramount example of Roosevelt's supposed incompetence was a story that while Roosevelt was visiting the Aleutian Islands off the coast of Alaska, he accidentally forgot his beloved Fala.^{xiii} In the summer of 1944, when the voyage that Knutson would create lies about began, Roosevelt brought Fala along on the USS *Baltimore* after the ship's victory in Iwo Jima.^{xiv} On this voyage Roosevelt and Fala met with General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral Chester Nimitz.^{xv} Franklin Delano Roosevelt spent much of the voyage resting in his quarters

because of his disability, but Fala distracted the sailors from Roosevelt's deteriorating health and "[got] all the attention".^{xvi} Many sailors on the boat cut locks of Fala's hair off and mailed it to their little brothers to get a piece of the President: a small but noteworthy way Fala distracted from his master's disability.^{xvii} Republican Representative Harold Knutson, part of Dewey's campaign, accused Roosevelt of spending 20 millions of American taxpayers' dollars for the expedition to retrieve the supposedly left behind Fala.^{xviii} Roosevelt was used to criticism against himself and his family but would not tolerate criticism against his beloved Fala. Knutson had no idea the misstep he was making for the Dewey campaign after exposing Roosevelt's disability and then accusing Roosevelt of being so careless with his dog. Roosevelt's black Scottish terrier was no ordinary dog and might have been the only creature who could help Roosevelt out and turn the election around with such celerity.

The speech that saved Roosevelt's campaign, the "Fala Speech," began with Roosevelt's usual blows against the Republican Party and defense of his own administration's efforts.^{xix} What is now known as one of the greatest campaign speeches of all time seemed completely normal at its beginning. Then, nearing the end of the speech, the tales of Fala came to Roosevelt's rescue:

These Republican leaders have not been content with attacks on me, or my wife, or on my sons. No, not content with that, they now include my little dog, Fala. Well, of course, I don't resent attacks, and my family doesn't resent attacks, but Fala does resent them. You know, Fala is Scotch, and being a Scottie, as soon as he learned that the Republican fiction writers in Congress and out had concocted a story that I'd left him behind on an Aleutian

island and had sent a destroyer back to find him—at a cost to the taxpayers of two or three, or eight or twenty million dollars—his Scotch soul was furious. He has not been the same dog since. I am accustomed to hearing malicious falsehoods about myself ... But I think I have a right to resent, to object, to libelous statements about my dog.^{xx}

Conrad Black, author of *Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom* praised Roosevelt for making such a speech during the meeting with the International Teamsters Union such “an emotional meeting: the Democrats were inexpressibly relieved that their leader still had the magic.^{xxi}” Fala provided the magic Roosevelt needed to win the race and divert attention from his disability. Years and months prior to the “Fala Speech,” Roosevelt’s “physical condition inevitably became his defining characteristic,” “the issue of his health overshadowed all others,” and many Republican-owned New York Newspapers “deemed the decision to draft him for office ‘unfair,’ ‘pitiless,’ and ‘pathetic.^{xxii}’” All thanks to Fala, Roosevelt “had swung a full roundhouse blow” to all his doubters and secured his fourth term.^{xxiii} It was obvious “to the newsmen on the Dewey Special that [Dewey] had been hit hard – as plain as when a boxer drops his gloves and his eyes glaze.^{xxiv}” The images and voice of an ill Roosevelt faded away and the public refocused their lenses on the president to see the witty and venerable man they elected four years prior. Without Fala, Roosevelt might not have won the historic and unprecedented fourth term he had.

Fala’s rhetorical image was also very important to how he shielded Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s fitness for office being questioned based on his infirmities. During President Roosevelt’s time in the White House, over 35,000 photographs of him exist with “only two

show[ing] him in a wheelchair.^{xxv}” Of the two photographs of Roosevelt in a wheelchair, only one was an authorized photo. The unauthorized photo is of “President Franklin D. Roosevelt being pushed in his wheelchair while visiting a sick Cabinet member at the old Naval Hospital on E Street.^{xxvi}” The single authorized photograph is “a 1941 family snapshot, [where] FDR holds his Scottish terrier, Fala, and chats with the daughter of his Hyde Park caretaker.^{xxvii}” Along with loving his dog, Roosevelt understood Fala’s political importance to him and used Fala to his advantage; Roosevelt knew that having Fala in a photo of him handicapped would avoid the blow that would come if Fala were not there.

Born on April 7, 1940, Fala was gifted to Franklin Delano Roosevelt by Mrs. Augustus G. Kellog of Westport, Connecticut, and brought to Roosevelt by his cousin, Margaret “Daisy” Suckley on November 10, 1940.^{xxviii} Anecdotes best portray how Fala humanized President Roosevelt. Fala was brought up a bone every morning with Roosevelt’s breakfast and “was so cute that the staff could not resist feeding him.^{xxix}” In August 1941, President Roosevelt had Fala accompany him to the Atlantic Charter Conference in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland with Winston Churchill.^{xxx} Fala also went with President Roosevelt on two inspection trips of defense plants in Mexico where he visited President Camacho of Mexico, once in September 1942 and once again in April 1943.^{xxxi} Roosevelt keeping Fala by his side displayed his naturally human affection for his dog that so many people have and lets them connect with Roosevelt. During World War II, American soldiers asked each other the name of Roosevelt’s dog in an effort to ensure that there was not an enemy that had secretly infiltrated the American soldiers’ ranks.^{xxxii} Every American knew the President’s dog’s name and connected with each other and Roosevelt just through knowing who Fala was. Roosevelt gave the American people a figure to look up to,

one who had navigated hardships successfully and gracefully, and a figure to sympathize with, a man who simply loved his dog.

Like children of first families, dogs mess up too. Unlike first family members, dogs are not held to nearly as high a standard as a child of the President is. Fala allowed for FDR to have a constantly lovable figure that gave him a huge advantage politically, as seen by the famous “Fala Speech,” and personally, as seen by anecdotes about Fala. Fala provided Franklin Delano Roosevelt with a common ground to build upon. If someone did not like Roosevelt, this person could not reasonably dislike his dog, too. First children and First Ladies do not get this same luxury, as they are humans with consciences and able to make decisions on their own, for which they then can be blamed. Although some children of Presidents over the last two centuries proved to be popular with the public, “many more suffered defeat and failure, and they flood history in a sad and angry tide.^{xxxiii}” Fala was not like another Presidential child or wife subject to blame because he was just a dog; Fala had no secret vices or affairs for which the media could harangue him and consequently his owner, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Fala was not a figure either political party could justly attack, as shown by the Dewey campaign’s failure to do so.

Many First Ladies are not as famous as Fala, except for his female owner, Eleanor Roosevelt. Of all the memorials on the National Mall in Washington D.C., Fala is the only dog memorialized just as Eleanor Roosevelt is the only First Lady memorialized. For a dog to be the only family member on the National Mall, except for Mrs. Roosevelt, proves to be very significant. Michigan Senator Carl Levin made sure Fala was included in the memorial erected in 1997 not “to be frivolous but rather to portray the human side of a great man,” yet no one ever thought to memorialize a President’s wife on the National Mall other than First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.^{xxxiv} The reason that no other Presidential family member has been memorialized the

same way as Fala is because as time passes, people can change their opinions on the political statements a First Lady made or how appropriately she behaved and dressed. As Fala's black-turned-bronze coat on the National Mall continues to prove, the public will never forget Roosevelt's adorable little dog as the figure that kept him human. Almost eight decades after Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his best friend, Fala, have passed, they live on together, forever. Fala continues to represent Roosevelt's humanity today and always will.

Taking Zarefsky's fourth distinction into account, there are two perspectives from which to view the messages that Fala created: one that lessened the emotional and political burden of Roosevelt's disability and one that made Roosevelt seem more humane. The two rhetorical messages relate to one another in the sense that by drawing attention away from Roosevelt's disability, Fala humanized Roosevelt and necessarily by humanizing Roosevelt, Fala showed the American people that there was more to Roosevelt than his disability. Fala helped swing the election and gave Franklin Delano Roosevelt one of the most memorable, greatest campaign speeches in history by reminding the voters in the 1944 American Presidential election of the confident President they had elected in 1932, 1936, and 1940 despite his disability. Fala is in a category of his own in the sense that he illuminated President Roosevelt in a purely positive light, something no other member of the First Family can do except for a dog. Fala defined Roosevelt's Presidency and is the rhetorical voice that eternally humanizes FDR and shifts focus away from Roosevelt's disability in history.

Notes

- ⁱ See Zarefsky's *Four Senses of Rhetorical History*
- ⁱⁱ See Sparrow's *The Adventures of Fala, First Dog: The Case of the Dog Who Didn't Bark on the Boat*
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{iv} See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^v See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{vi} See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{vii} See Pressman's *Ambivalent Accomplices: How the Press Handled FDR's Disability and How FDR Handled the Press*
- ^{viii} See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{ix} See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^x See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{xi} See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{xii} See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{xiii} See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{xiv} See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{xv} See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{xvi} See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{xvii} See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{xviii} See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{xix} See Sparrow's *Defending Fala – A Lesson in Effective Campaigning*
- ^{xx} See Roosevelt's "Fala Speech"
- ^{xxi} See Black's *Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom*
- ^{xxii} See Pressman's *Ambivalent Accomplices: How the Press Handled FDR's Disability and How FDR Handled the Press*
- ^{xxiii} See Black's *Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom*
- ^{xxiv} See Black's *Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom*
- ^{xxv} See Black's *Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom*
- ^{xxvi} See Clausen's *The President and the Wheelchair*
- ^{xxvii} See Clausen's *The President and the Wheelchair*
- ^{xxviii} See FDR Library & Museum's *Fala Biography*
- ^{xxix} See FDR Library & Museum's *Fala Biography*
- ^{xxx} See FDR Library & Museum's *Fala Biography*
- ^{xxxi} See FDR Library & Museum's *Fala Biography*
- ^{xxxii} See National Park Service's *Fala*
- ^{xxxiii} See Emery's *Why Have So Many President's Kids Gone Wrong?*
- ^{xxxiv} See National Park Service's *Fala*

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