Response Paper #1: Aristotle’s Enthymeme and the Joe Arpaio Pardon

On August 27, President Trump elected to pardon Joe Arpaio, the former sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona, following Arpaio’s conviction for contempt of court. (Arpaio also courted strong accusations of racial profiling, though he was never legally convicted of such.) The Trump Administration’s official statement on the decision is brief. Like most short rhetorical declarations, it takes the form of an enthymeme, particularly its final sentence: “Sheriff Joe Arpaio is now 85 years old, and after more than 50 years of admirable service to our nation, he is (a) worthy candidate for a Presidential pardon.”

Stripped bare, the same sentence might read something like this: “Arpaio is elderly and has served in law enforcement for a long time; therefore, he deserves a presidential pardon.” If one were to expand this claim into something more syllogistic, it might read:

(A) Arpaio is elderly and has served in law enforcement for a long time;
(B) old age and police service merit lenience under the law;
therefore, (C) Arpaio deserves a presidential pardon.

It benefits Trump, though, to make his case as an enthymeme since premise B is vulnerable to criticism, both legal and ethical. (Do old dudes automatically obtain get-out-of-jail-free cards now?) The enthymeme instead allows audiences to “fill in the blank” with comfortable assumptions, or commonplaces, about the nobility of old age and service in law enforcement.
But as Edward Corbett notes in his introduction, the Aristotelian enthymeme isn’t just a formal device (an incomplete syllogism); it is also an elastic tool for evoking connotative meaning (xviii-xix). With this notion in mind, one can also place Arapio’s pardon within the context of current politics—specifically, the escalating racial and cultural tension that has followed Trump’s election. Because Arapio (a long-time Trump-supporter) has faced accusations of racism against Latino/as during his tenure as sheriff, Trump’s enthymeme seems also to imply that such accusations should not be taken too seriously. (Again, Trump suggests, Arapio’s many years of service—an abstract, emotive, and loaded term—are what really matter.) This is, once more, an uncomfortable claim to make explicitly, but an easier one to evoke enthymematically.
A few guidelines for response papers (and other rhetorical criticism):

(1) Like other forms of textual criticism (literary, for example), good rhetorical criticism moves efficiently through the necessary context (here, Arpaio’s identity) and textual evidence (here, the Trump Administration’s exact words) in order to emphasize the actual analysis of textual evidence. A good rule of thumb: Two-thirds of your own text should constitute some form of specific textual analysis. Specific is the operative word—show us the evidence up close and dig in.

(2) Rhetorical terms like enthymeme (or ethos, commonplace, rhetorical situation, epideictic rhetoric, topos, and so on) should serve what Aristotle would call a heuristic function: That is, they allow us to systematically analyze and generate insights about texts. (The response above, for instance, is impossible without the terminology of enthymeme and syllogism.) Some terms will better suit the analysis of a given text more than others. This is why it pays to build a large, mutually complementary set of rhetorical vocabulary.

(3) The rhetorical critic is not necessarily a neutral, detached bystander. (Rhetoric might make you feel things.) You’re welcome to voice opinions about what you analyze, provided those opinions don’t derail the process of analysis itself. In fact, reflecting on one’s own reactions can often illuminate questions of audience.

(4) A political statement like the one analyzed above is an obviously rhetorical genre with an obviously persuasive purpose; it is, therefore, obviously fair game for rhetorical analysis. But rhetoric infuses all manner of texts—movies, books, YouTube videos, Internet memes, etc., etc.—sometimes overtly, sometimes subtly. I encourage you to write about texts that you find interesting (or enjoyable, maddening, etc.—but hopefully not boring) in these response papers and in your larger essays.