

ABSTRACT

An Institutional Approach to Presidential Rhetoric

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In the United States, the relationship between presidential rhetoric and political institutions is complex. In one sense, presidential rhetoric is shaped and informed by the political structure outlined by the Constitution and embodied by the U.S. government. At the same time, presidential rhetoric itself shapes how our political institutions act and interact. When the president acts as the lone voice for the country, our politics operate in a particular way. In this thesis, I consider how the institution of the presidency itself both empowers and moderates presidential rhetoric. I use President Reagan as a case study to explore how the institution impacts rhetoric in a particular situation. For instance, looking at his memorable *Challenger* address, I liken Reagan to a pastor, a parallel that reveals the president's unique rhetorical position. In conclusion, I contend that my institutional approach has particular advantages to other frameworks for evaluating presidential rhetoric.

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AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH TO PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC

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“There is but one national voice in the country and that is the voice of the President.”
(Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government of the United States*)

"You feel me building a rhythm here? That's because I'm a speech writer - I know how to make a point." (Toby Ziegler, *The West Wing*)

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

How does one individual speak for a nation that is composed of more than 300 million citizens? Even with an increasingly diverse population with competing and often contrary interests, we still permit and expect the president to speak on behalf of our country as a whole. This expectation plays an important role in our larger understanding “of how our whole political system works, of the contemporary problems of governance that we face, and of how the polity ought to function.”¹ The relationship between presidential rhetoric and our political institutions is complex. In one sense, presidential rhetoric is shaped and informed by the political structure outlined by the Constitution and embodied by the U.S. government. The structural elements of the presidency determine the power of presidential rhetoric. At the same time, presidential rhetoric itself shapes how our political institutions act and interact. As “an amplification or vulgarization of the ideas that produce it,” presidential rhetoric can change the framework of national discourse. When we treat the president as the lone voice for the country and, moreover, assume that our president has the unique *responsibility* to speak on behalf of the country, our politics operate in a particular way.

In this thesis, I explore the complex relationship between the institution of the presidency and presidential rhetoric. In this first chapter, I discuss three authors who offer contrasting frameworks for evaluating presidential rhetoric and situate my own

¹ Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 4.

argument on the spectrum created from these different approaches. Then, I explain two particular structural elements of the presidency and explain the profound impact that they have on presidential rhetoric. I show how the president's national election and the unitary nature of the executive branch contribute to the president's unique rhetorical style. Last, I introduce President Ronald Reagan as an apt case study for evaluating how presidential rhetoric is related to the institution of the presidency. Praised for his outstanding use of rhetoric, Reagan seems to be a standard of sorts for presidential rhetoric. Additionally, he himself appreciated the power in his rhetoric, and his use of rhetoric reflects a particularly thoughtful approach.

Presidential Rhetoric: Relevant Literature

In order to place my argument in the wider context of the presidential rhetoric literature, I look at seminal authors who offer contrasting accounts of the potential power of presidential rhetoric. In examining the work of these authors, I ask, 1) "Is rhetoric an important resource for the president?" 2) "If it is, in what ways does it affect the president's relationship with his constituents?" 3) "What is the president's primary rhetorical responsibility?" In explaining each author's answers to these questions, I contrast the perspectives and frameworks presented in these texts and demonstrate how the authors fundamentally disagree concerning what presidents can hope to accomplish even with the best rhetorical prowess. Most importantly, by considering these authors who offer three different approaches through which to assess presidential rhetoric, I create a continuum in which to situate my own argument.

In his book, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit*, George C. Edwards argues that presidential rhetoric is not as powerful as popular opinion believes it to be.

He takes on the claim that if presidents are rhetorically skilled enough, they can use their “bully pulpit” to persuade and mobilize public opinion. Specifically, Edwards assesses public opinions before and after presidents “go public” on their legislative goals. Contrary to conventional thought, he argues that the bully pulpit is not effective in changing or mobilizing public opinion and also explains significant difficulties concerning the presidents themselves, their messages, and the American people. To support his argument, he investigates the success of public campaigns conducted by presidents who are striving to change public opinion on specific policy initiatives.² Surprisingly, efforts to sway public opinion can be counterproductive even for the best communicators. “Going public” is only effective, he contends, in energizing previously existing support, and private persuasion is often more successful when working with Congress.

Edwards asserts that presidential rhetoric is not useful in the way that many scholars and citizens alike believe it to be. Namely, presidential rhetoric seldom changes public opinion. He explains that we need to abandon the idea that “in exploiting the bully pulpit, [presidents] achieve changes in public policy.”³ That is, presidents do not advance their public policy goals by using rhetoric to persuade listeners and mobilize public opinion. Edwards explains, “chief executives are not directors who lead the public where it otherwise refuses to go, thus reshaping the contours of the political landscape.”⁴

² George C. Edwards, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

³ Ibid., 74.

⁴ Ibid., 74.

Edwards argues scholars and citizens alike should not expect presidents to shift public opinion by “going public.” Even the best communicators and carefully crafted speeches are not successful in creating public support for unpopular policy initiatives. Edwards gives Reagan’s attempt to transform the public’s political ideology as an apt example of the limitations of presidential rhetoric. Even with Reagan’s focus on “changing the premises on which citizens evaluate policies and politicians,” he failed to significantly move “citizens’ general ideological preferences to the right.”⁵ According to National Election Studies research, nearly the same percentage of Americans identified themselves as conservatives at the beginning and end of his presidency.⁶ Even with his sophisticated rhetorical efforts and memorable addresses, Reagan failed to change how citizens see politics and identify themselves ideologically.

While Edwards argues against the conventional wisdom that expects presidents to produce support for legislative initiatives through rhetorical efforts, he does recognize that rhetoric can be a significant tool in “exploiting opportunities for change in their environment.”⁷ That is, presidents can act as facilitators rather than directors of change by capitalizing on existing public sentiment. While they cannot initiate a shift in public opinion, the presidents who are skilled in rhetorical arts realize “the potential for exploiting public support to bring about change.”⁸ Through their rhetoric, presidents fan the flame of momentum to elicit significant change.

⁵ Ibid., 66.

⁶ Ibid., 67.

⁷ Ibid., 245.

⁸ Ibid., 245.

Moreover, they can exploit existing support for an idea and connect it in the public's mind to specific policy areas. Edwards explains, "public opinion about matters of politics and policy is often amorphous. It lacks articulation and structure."⁹ An adept use of presidential rhetoric can consolidate favorable public opinion into support for specific initiatives or the adoption of a particular perspective. In doing so, presidents can provide the necessary leadership to organize existing support in order to reach a policy goal. Edwards gives the example of President Reagan's proposal for a defense missile shield. Reagan tapped into latent support for strong national defense mechanisms by showing the connection between the value of a strong national defense and his proposed program. He did not radically transform public opinion on these issues, but rather he channeled existing support for his political purposes.

Edwards argues that the president is largely unsuccessful in influencing his relationship with his constituents through rhetorical efforts. Presidential rhetoric does not seem to alter what citizens think about, for example, the president, the state of the country, or specific public policies. Edwards explains that the link between the president and the American people is weak because "the president must overcome the predispositions of his audience if he is to change their minds about his policies or his performance."¹⁰ That is, for presidential rhetoric to be effective in changing public opinion, the message must reach its intended audience, overcome previous significant convictions, and be understood. These difficulties are not minor, and Edwards' research suggests that most presidents are not able to overcome them. It seems, therefore, that

⁹ Ibid., 245.

¹⁰ Ibid., 238.

presidential rhetoric is not a significant factor in the president's relationship with the American people.

While the president rarely transforms his relationship with his constituents through rhetoric, presidents can make the most of rhetoric by “preaching to the converted.”¹¹ Presidents can benefit from energizing preexisting support for specific policy initiatives. In battling the opposition, it is politically useful for the president to remind and reinforce the predispositions of those who already align with his policy positions. In competing for swing votes, presidents can foster demonstrations of public support and use these images to persuade individual members of Congress to follow the president's initiatives. An energized base is a useful tool for a president, and rhetoric can be effective in reinforcing predispositions.

Edwards focuses on the limits of presidential rhetoric, arguing against much of the other literature on this subject. While he does not articulate specifically a primary rhetorical responsibility of the president, his work suggests that presidents should focus their rhetorical energy on capitalizing on preexisting public opinion that leans in their favor. Presidential staffs should stay attuned to public moods and use current public opinion to their advantage. Edwards does not articulate this strategy as a presidential responsibility, per se, but it seems that he believes this is the most effective use of presidential rhetoric. It is clear that Edwards does not believe presidential rhetoric is responsible for establishing presidential power, inspiring Americans to change certain behaviors, or defining American identity, all of which some other authors suggest.

¹¹ Ibid., 244.

While Edwards contends that most observers overestimate the effect that presidential rhetoric has on its listeners, Mary Stuckey endeavors to show the unnoticed, deleterious effects of current presidential rhetoric on public discourse. Edwards attempts to demonstrate that presidential rhetoric seldom sways public opinion, but Stuckey illustrates the ways in which the simplified, dramatic tone of presidential rhetoric has degraded the quality of public discourse about important issues.

In her book, *The President as Interpreter-in-Chief*, Stuckey considers how the strategies of “going public” influence American politics. She investigates the ways in which television, specifically, has degraded our modes of political communication. Because presidential rhetoric is becoming less deliberative and more ceremonial, she contests, “our notions of community, of what it means to be a member of a polity, have been eroded, and cheapened, and have become less authentic because our beliefs are increasingly divorced from our practices.”¹² That is to say, because presidential rhetoric is increasingly more ceremonial in nature, the American people increasingly do not participate in meaningful public discourse. Presidential rhetoric does not encourage debate and discussion about the particulars of issues. Instead, presidents use rhetoric to establish support for their presidencies broadly; they strive to garner general support through the enactment of ceremonial rhetoric. As a result, Stuckey contends, the quality of our public discourse is suffering. Presidential rhetoric is cheapened for effect, and it rarely includes philosophical debates or reasoned arguments. Consequently, public discussion is not informed or substantive. While presidents continue to praise our

¹² Mary Stuckey, *The President as Interpreter-In-Chief*, (Chatham: Chatham House Publishers, Inc., 1991), 3.

country's legendary experiment in self-government in their ceremonial rhetoric, Americans are increasingly not participating meaningfully in democratic processes. Stuckey explains that "presidents continue to celebrate our national identity through ceremony; they increasingly fail to apply it publicly through deliberative rhetoric. This failure undermines the public understanding of our national ethos."¹³ Our very national identity suffers because of this disconnect between our rhetoric and practice.

If our "public understanding of our national ethos" is in danger because of shifts in presidential rhetoric in recent years, then it suggests that proper presidential rhetoric is vital. Stuckey's treatment of the effects of television on presidential communication both assumes and implicitly provides evidence for the importance of presidential rhetoric. That is to say, Stuckey demonstrates that presidential rhetoric is powerful by showing its recent deleterious effects on American politics. For example, Stuckey deplores how television "tends to both simplify and personify complex issues, privileges the presidential voice and exacerbates presidential interpretive dominance."¹⁴ Televised presidential speeches have altered the American political system. Broadly, in failing to enact deliberative rhetoric, presidents have contributed to the degradation of public discourse. It seems, thus, that presidential rhetoric has significant influence – whether that be positive or negative. Stuckey assumes that in large part, presidential rhetoric sets the tone for how the American people approach public discourse. When the president participates in the deliberative process, offering up reasoned arguments for public assessment, more of the American people discuss and weigh consequences and costs in a

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

substantial manner. In contrast, when presidents use rhetoric to foster general goodwill for their presidencies and perform only ceremonial roles, the American people do not have the same opportunity for meaningful participation in public discourse. For Stuckey, presidential rhetoric is a powerful tool that can change how the American people participate in the political system.

As the title of her book suggests, Stuckey argues that presidential rhetoric influences the relationship between the president and the American people as the president acts as “the nation’s chief storyteller, its interpreter-in-chief.”¹⁵ In telling us stories about ourselves, he is describing the kind of people we are. Using rhetoric, the president has a powerful ability to determine our national self-identity. Stuckey believes that presidential rhetoric sets the agendas in large part for our public discussions about policies. Through exercises like the State of the Union address and war rhetoric, the president can establish national priorities, set boundaries for the discussion, and define the terms in debate. Stuckey, however, emphasizes the effect that presidential rhetoric has on our national conception of our national identity. How do our presidents shape how we see ourselves? Presidents not only interpret how we ought to understand circumstances and policies, but, more importantly, they tell us what it means to be American.

In order to influence our national identity, presidents are increasingly depending on dramatic forms of rhetoric. Tracing presidential rhetoric throughout the history of the United States, Stuckey shows that recent presidents are not making fact-based arguments or providing evidence to back their positions. Rather, they “increasingly resort to

¹⁵ Ibid., 1.

dramatic forms – storytelling – to make [the] world intelligible.”¹⁶ Following the model of television, presidents spin stories to encourage the American people to adopt a particular understanding. Stuckey holds that “the president has become a presenter; public argument has been largely supplanted by public assertion.”¹⁷ As a result, our relationship with the president is shifting. The president no longer presents with us arguments that we, in turn, assess; instead, the president tells us emotionally compelling stories that we passively accept. When presidents increasingly follow the television model for capturing attention, Americans increasingly expect simplified presentations of the policy questions and quick, complete resolutions. Stuckey warns that as Americans establish such expectations, “they are potentially rendered unable to adjust to a more complex, nonthematic reality.”¹⁸ Such a trend is dangerous because an inability to evaluate complex realities “is not conducive to citizen involvement in democratic politics.”¹⁹ Citizen participation in politics is less substantial when people are only approving of presidential personalities rather than particular policies. Stuckey contends that because of recent presidential rhetorical trends, Americans demand dramatic, simplified presentations from presidents; such presentations rely on stories rather than delineated, contestable arguments. Weakened by a steady diet of such presentations, Americans are increasingly unable to participate in politics in a meaningful way.

¹⁶ Ibid., 5.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸ Ibid., 138.

¹⁹ Ibid., 138.

As Stuckey explains the emerging problem that presidential rhetoric presents for the quality of American democracy, it would seem to follow that presidents have a responsibility to fight such trends. Presidents have the opportunity to choose deliberative rhetoric in order to foster meaningful public discourse. Stuckey acknowledges that in using dramatic, simplified rhetoric, which allows little fruitful analysis or assessment, presidents are giving the American people what they want to a large degree. Speeches with this kind of ceremonial rhetoric create little controversy and meet little opposition; they are popular. Popularity, Stuckey contends, is not sufficient justification for a political decision. Stuckey argues, “public opinion polls cannot tell politicians which actions are ‘right,’ only which actions are popular. Assuming that there is sometimes a difference, and that the difference is an important one, television politics as currently conceived are not designed to facilitate ‘right’ choices but ‘popular’ ones, which can obfuscate the ‘right’ choices.”²⁰ As presidents design their remarks, they should examine political decisions to see if they are right, and the popularity of an action often does not indicate that it is right. That is to say, it is wrong to call a speech “good” just because it is popular. Even in the current political climate, presidents can give speeches that encourage reflection and citizen involvement. Stuckey encourages presidents not to be slaves to public opinion polls and the fickle desires of the public. Presidents have a basic responsibility to lead, and this responsibility includes leading public discourse through a sagacious use of presidential rhetoric.

For Stuckey, ceremonial rhetoric with its dramatic tone and oversimplified word choice is deleterious for public discourse. In contrast, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and

²⁰ Ibid., 140.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson argue that ceremonial rhetoric is vital for our political system because it, along with deliberative rhetoric, is used by presidents to establish and maintain presidential power. They contend that ceremonial rhetoric is a valuable lever for the presidency, specifically in balancing power with other branches of government.

In *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, Campbell and Jamieson consider the implications of a rhetorical presidency. Using a generic framework to evaluate the ways presidents use rhetoric to develop and sustain presidential power, Campbell and Jamieson posit that through rhetoric, presidents establish and enlarge their place in the balance of power between government branches. According to these authors, the constitution established a “structure ordered by general and interlocking functions in which much was unspecified, and hence, could be negotiated through interaction among the three branches of government.”²¹ Consequently, political processes are “infused with rhetoric,” and through successful application of rhetoric, the president is able to negotiate and establish his political power.²² Successful rhetorical acts can produce political capital for the president to use later, and when these acts are unsuccessful, presidents lose authority and prestige, surrendering power to other political entities. Campbell and Jamieson use a generic framework to evaluate similar kinds of presidential rhetoric, contrasting successful and unsuccessful examples of presidential rhetoric in different contexts and times. For example, by considering diverse farewell addresses throughout American history, these authors show what makes such addresses successful. These authors posit

²¹ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008),1.

²² Ibid., 1.

that successful addresses “create a sense that the presidency is being perfected and that the relationships among the branches of government are evolving.”²³ In eloquent farewell addresses, presidents can assume the position of “moderator who balances competing forces,” enhancing the perceived power of the presidency.

Campbell and Jamieson contend that through rhetorical acts such as inaugural addresses and veto messages, “presidents perform functions that are useful, and sometimes essential, to maintaining the powers of the executive.”²⁴ Presidents use rhetoric to explain their political decisions, frame policy debates, and perform constitutional responsibilities, and in doing so, the presidents can change or sustain presidential powers. Campbell and Jamieson argue that effective rhetoric is crucial because it is a “key part of the ways in which presidents exercise power, expand executive power, and establish precedents for its use by their successors.”²⁵ Presidents need to use rhetoric well in order to maintain an appropriate balance of power among the branches of government. As the book’s subtitle, “Deeds in Words,” suggests, these authors believe that rhetoric significantly influences the ways in which the branches of government interact with one another.

In addition to discussing the institutional implications of presidential rhetoric, Campbell and Jamieson also consider the effect that presidential rhetoric has on the president’s relationship with the citizenry. Stressing the ways in which presidential rhetoric can accomplish significant feats, for example, changing the national conception

²³ Ibid., 307.

²⁴ Ibid., 6.

²⁵ Ibid., 336.

of a crisis, these authors contend that presidents can use rhetoric to create a positive relationship with their constituents. Presidents can develop political capital and foster a receptive environment for their policy initiatives. As Campbell and Jamieson explain, in employing presidential rhetoric, “skillful presidents not only adapt to their audiences, but also engage in transforming those who hear them into the audiences they desire.”²⁶ If their rhetoric is persuasive, presidents may be able to transform their constituents in a politically useful way. Through epideictic rhetoric especially, presidents can motivate the American people to adopt a particular self-understanding. For example, they can encourage Americans to see themselves as steadfast patriots or determined innovators depending on political necessities. Campbell and Jamieson assert “all presidents have the opportunity to persuade us to conceive of ourselves in ways compatible with their views of government and the world.”²⁷ As a result, our relationship with presidents transforms as they “invite us to see them, the presidency, and the country, and the country’s role in specific ways.”²⁸ As presidents inform our understanding of these different things, our relationship with presidents evolves.

Campbell and Jamieson also discuss the different responsibilities that presidents fulfill with their use of rhetoric. On a basic level, presidents rely on rhetoric when completing responsibilities outlined in the constitution, for example, delivering veto messages or giving inaugural addresses. The primary responsibility of the president, however, is not to deliver specific kinds of speeches but rather to shape and guard

²⁶ Ibid., 7.

²⁷ Ibid., 8.

²⁸ Ibid., 8.

national values in all of their rhetoric. Emphasizing epideictic speech, Campbell and Jamieson demonstrates how the president defines and guides national values. With the president acting as the “custodian of national values,” presidential rhetoric demonstrates to the American people how “values embodied in the Constitution” operate in our modern, evolving world.²⁹ Campbell and Jamieson stress the importance of the president as the definer and sustainer of our evolving national values. As they explain, “the president must be able to speak for the nation - beyond its partisan divisions.”³⁰ In defining and shaping national values with their words, presidents can speak above contentious politics and create a sense of national unity centered on these common national values.

The Institution of the Presidency and the Rhetorical Presidency

All of these authors propose different frameworks in which to evaluate presidential rhetoric. Edwards evaluates the significance of presidential rhetoric based on the tangible, measurable results like public opinion polls and legislative votes while Stuckey assesses its effect on public discourse. In their evaluation of the significance of presidential rhetoric, Jamieson and Campbell use a generic framework. These different approaches, naturally, lead to different perspectives on the nature and significance of presidential rhetorical.

While these approaches reveal important aspects of this topic, each has its limitations. For example, in using measurable results to evaluate the effectiveness of a

²⁹ Ibid., 13.

³⁰ Ibid., 13.

speech, Edwards does not consider the intangible and evolutionary effect that rhetoric can have on its listeners. Even if a listener does not answer an opinion poll question about a specific policy differently after hearing an address, his or her conception of the presidency and the role of the legislature may shift. Because Stuckey focuses on the deleterious effects of presidential rhetoric that is increasingly, almost exclusively ceremonial, she fails to evaluate how ceremonial rhetoric is beneficial for the national discussion. While she makes a compelling argument for the danger of presidential rhetoric that does not involve deliberative elements, she does not appreciate the role of ceremonial rhetoric in interactions among branches. Using their generic framework, Jamieson and Campbell demonstrate how presidential rhetoric contributes to the balance of powers among government branches, but they do not consider how rhetoric itself is both tempered and empowered by the institution of the presidency itself. An institutional approach has obvious similarities with approach of Jamieson and Campbell in that it does not assume that rhetoric exists in a vacuum. Political interactions among branches and public opinion are profoundly affected by a president's use of rhetoric. While an institutional approach looks at such effects in evaluating how rhetoric changes the institution, this approach also appreciates the influence that forces have on rhetoric itself. Specifically, it considers how characteristics of the institution itself govern presidential rhetoric.

Presidential rhetoric is bound by the structure of the institution of the presidency. That is to say, the institution of the presidency itself has a profound effect on the power of presidential rhetoric. There are institutional elements that both qualify and equip the president to fulfill his rhetorical responsibilities and meet national expectations. In this

section, I look at how two specific elements of the structure of the U.S. government affect the presidents' ability to win legislative battles, to transform public opinion, and to communicate with constituents. First, I argue that because the president is nationally elected, he is in a unique position to speak on behalf of the American citizenry. Second, I assert that presidential rhetoric is empowered by the unitary nature of the presidency.

Because president is an elected leader, he is empowered to speak on behalf of those who gave him power – in this case, the entire nation. The presidency is unique as an institution, and as such, the president is the only federal official elected by the entire U.S. populace. As a result, when he speaks as the president, he is able to speak on behalf of all Americans in contrast with senators or congressmen who only represent a relatively small portion of the American citizenry. Even though the Speaker of the House gives remarks as the leader of the House of Representatives, he or she is not seen as a voice of the collective United States. He or she was elected by a specific congressional district in a particular state. In contrast, because of the presidency's institutional structure, the president is particularly qualified to speak for the American people. It follows that the president's ability to speak on behalf of all Americans carries immense power because it is "a way of constituting the people to whom it is addressed by furnishing them with the very equipment they need to assess its use-the metaphors, categories, and concepts of political discourse."³¹ Because he is the voice of the country as a whole, the president can effectively transform the polity in a way that other elected officials cannot.

Furthermore, because of the president's unique qualifications, we have come to expect him to lead the entire populace with his rhetoric. This national expectation

³¹ Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 203.

demonstrates that the electoral breadth of the presidency affects the scope of his rhetorical responsibility. That is to say, we expect our president to lead the American people through rhetoric because he is the de facto national spokesperson. As Jeffrey K. Tulis argues in his book, *Rhetorical Presidency*, the modern president is expected to speak for the people. “Such leadership is offered as the antidote for ‘gridlock’ in our pluralistic constitutional system, the cure for the sickness of ‘ungovernability.’” writes Tulis.³² We expect our president to use rhetoric to further our collective national interest and steer the public discourse away from partisan infighting. Increasingly, presidents “have a duty constantly to defend themselves publicly, to promote policy initiatives nationwide, and to inspire the population.”³³ Americans see this rhetorical responsibility as one of the president’s most important duties.

The president is charged with serving and representing all Americans, and so, in matters of state, he speaks as the singular national voice. As a result, the president cannot ignore the diverse and sometimes conflicting interests of all Americans when he speaks. He must anticipate that the country as a whole will be listening when he gives a speech. Even when he gives an address at a specific event, he must consider his national position. He does not have the luxury of tailoring to a specific subset of Americans while ignoring another subset. For example, a congressman can customize remarks for only his constituency. The congressman can ignore the interests of other congressional districts to a large degree and design his argument so that it appeals primarily to his district. The

³² Ibid., 4.

³³ Ibid., 4.

president is not able to tailor his message in this way. His rhetoric must reflect a consideration for the diverse interests of all American citizens.

Additionally, the unitary structure of the presidency influences presidential rhetoric. That is, because the institution of the executive branch is controlled by a single individual, the presidency conveys a distinctive style of rhetoric. In Federalist Papers No. 70, Hamilton describes the energy generated by the unity of the presidency. He explains, “decision, activity, secrecy, and despatch will generally characterize the proceedings of one man in a much more eminent degree than the proceedings of any greater number; and in proportion as the number is increased, these qualities will be diminished.”³⁴ The presidency as an institution can act with more vitality because of its unitary nature; it is not slowed down by diverse and warring wills.

His rhetoric can be more decisive than other elected officials because the president is empowered to speak for the entire executive branch. The president can be the confident, supreme voice for all executive agencies and officials. In order to understand the effect of this institutional element, it is useful to compare the unitary quality of the presidency to the many members of Congress, comprised of 535 members. The president can speak authoritatively for the executive branch while congressmen and senators can only speak for their individual offices. No single representative can speak authoritatively for the entire Congress; even the Speaker of the House, must acknowledge that there are diverse and often competing wills in Congress. There are few issues that all Senators and Congressmen agree on, and therefore, individual representatives cannot

³⁴ Alexander Hamilton, Federalist Paper No. 70, “The Executive Department Further Considered,” *New York Daily Advertiser*, November 22, 1787.

speak for the whole legislative branch. The president, in contrast, serves as the singular voice for the executive branch.

President Ronald Reagan and Presidential Rhetoric

While authors' view on the value of presidential rhetoric and the appropriate way to evaluate presidential rhetoric vary, almost all consider President Ronald Reagan in their discussions. Likewise, I use Reagan as a case study to explore the ways in which the institution of the presidency and presidential rhetoric relate. An evaluation of Reagan's rhetoric seems to be particularly valuable for two reasons. First, with his reputation for rhetorical prowess, Reagan is the standard for other modern presidencies. Second, Reagan himself used rhetoric in a particularly deliberate and reflective manner, suggesting a personal appreciation for it as an important asset.

Because of his rhetorical legacy, Reagan is almost always discussed in any substantial treatment of presidential rhetoric. Dubbed the "Great Communicator," he is widely recognized as one of the presidents most skilled in rhetoric. From delivery to content, Reagan is remembered for his ability to engender evocative images and to connect with his listeners. For example, in his farewell address, he tells the story of desperate refugees from Indochina who call out to the dashing, young American sailors, "Hello, freedom man!" His folksy, "straight talk" style resounds with the American people who hear a friend in the rhetoric of this former actor and fatherly figure. In the introduction to his influential book, *Rhetorical Presidency*, Jeffrey Tulis explains that even the critics of Reagan's policies acknowledge his ability to use rhetoric to unify and

lead the nation.³⁵ For example, in her critical evaluation of his “Teflon Presidency,” Stuckey posits that “Reagan’s reputation as a master of imagery far exceeds his reputation as a master of substance.”³⁶ His presidential reputation is dominated by his masterful use - or as it is sometimes seen, manipulation - of compelling images, ideas, and stories. Because of this legendary reputation, it seems that any theory about presidential rhetoric must consider Reagan’s unparalleled use.

Furthermore, the rhetoric of Reagan is an apt case study for understanding the relationship between the institution of the presidency and the power of rhetoric because Reagan himself understood this dynamic well. His speeches reflect a deep appreciation for the power of presidential rhetoric; words matter to Reagan. In *Playing the Game: the Presidential Rhetoric of Ronald Reagan*, Stuckey argues that Reagan appreciated the scholarly study of presidential rhetoric; interpretations given by presidents have significant influence on the national discourse. Reagan not only recognized “the communicative nature of the U.S. presidency,” but also “used it to his advantage.”³⁷ He and his administration were “predominantly grounded in public communication” in a way unmatched by other modern presidencies.³⁸ His rhetoric reflects a deliberate effort to promote a particular vision of America. For instance, he urges Americans to remember the “lost summertime of the nation’s past, when neighborhoods were safe, when families

³⁵ Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 1.

³⁶ Mary Stuckey, *Playing the Game: the Presidential Rhetoric of Ronald Reagan*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

held together, when U.S. power bestrode the world.”³⁹ Through the use of certain rhetorical devices like simple symbolic slogans and cinematic language, he advances a consistent and directive vision. Such consistency in style and content suggest Reagan’s appreciation for rhetoric. For Reagan, policies were more important than rhetoric, but his rhetoric was necessarily bound up in his policy goals.

In Reagan’s autobiography, *An American Life*, he reflects on his experience writing and delivering speeches.⁴⁰ Reagan explains that it was difficult for him to transition to using speechwriters because he had “always taken pride” in developing his own speeches.⁴¹ He describes some of his personal guidelines for effective speechwriting and explains his use of simple sentences, memorable examples, and humor. Reagan strove to capitalize on his strength as a communicator, consistently using distinctive rhetorical devices, and his own treatment of these stylistic elements of rhetoric in his autobiography suggests an appreciation for rhetoric as an important tool. As speechwriter Peggy Noonan characterizes the importance of rhetoric for Reagan, “speechwriting in the Reagan White House was where the philosophical, ideological, and political tensions of the administration got worked out... and so speechwriting, for some, was the center of gravity for that administration.”⁴² In Reagan’s administration, rhetoric

³⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁰ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life*, (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1990), 247.

⁴¹ Ibid., 247.

⁴² Peggy Noonan, *What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1990), 67.

mattered. In the next chapter, I will explore how the institution of the presidency changed Reagan's rhetoric by comparing speeches given before and during his presidency.

CHAPTER TWO

The Impact of the Presidency on Reagan's Rhetoric

What can only the president say? What is off-limits for the president? In evaluating presidential rhetoric, it is important to recognize the profound effect that the institution of the presidency has on the content and style of presidential rhetoric. In this chapter, I consider how the institution of the presidency affects its rhetoric. To do so, I compare the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan both before and during his presidency and look at how his ascension to the presidency transforms his rhetorical approach.

A close evaluation of the rhetoric from these two periods reveals a certain degree of consistency throughout all of Reagan's rhetoric. Before his ascension to the presidency, Reagan employs moral language and striking, though criticized, dichotomies, and these rhetorical elements continue throughout his presidency. His rhetoric also consistently reflects a preference for simplicity of ideas. Reagan's style not only depends on brief, uncomplicated phrasing, but also he argues that the right ideas are inherently simple.

How are we to understand such consistencies? It seems that the institution of the presidency should have a powerful impact on rhetoric, and yet, Reagan's rhetorical style does not radically change when he becomes president. I argue that this seeming contradiction can be explained at least in part by the individual rhetorical style of Reagan. His distinctive style both contributes to and helps explain his electoral success. With his evocative language and declarative style, he seems to a national audience to be a strong leader. It might be that certain aspects of his rhetorical style do not change when he assumes the presidency because they are so connected to his individual form of

leadership. Such consistencies endure because of who Reagan is as a particular rhetorician; his populist appeal validates and encourages these consistencies. Moreover, consistencies underscore the value of evaluating the presidential rhetoric within the context of the individual president. In studying consistencies of a particular president, the transformational aspects of his rhetoric become clearer.

Reagan's rhetoric does undergo a meaningful shift when he assumes the presidency. He harnesses immense new rhetorical power that was not available to him when he was merely a public figure or presidential candidate. Because of the prestige and structural position of the presidency, Reagan can covert his own personal perspective into the American position, shaping America's identity. On the other hand, the dignity and responsibility of the presidency tempers Reagan's propensity to cast blame. Constrained by his auspicious role, Reagan's rhetoric reflects a distinctively presidential attempt to appear above petty partisanship. I contend that these differences are a testament to the influence of the institution and the complex relationship between it and any president's rhetoric. An evaluation of Reagan's rhetoric before and during his presidency demonstrates the ways in which an institution can both empower and moderate styles of rhetoric. I suggest that Reagan's rhetorical shifts could be explained by the powerful expectation for a president to adopt a presidential rhetorical style.

What Is a "Presidential" Rhetorical Style?

An explanation of what it means to have a presidential style of rhetoric is necessarily bound up in national expectations for a president. We expect our president to accomplish certain tasks and to fulfill certain roles, and these expectations are closely related to what rhetorically seems presidential. For instance, we increasingly expect our

president to use rhetoric to guide public opinion. We want our leader not only to represent but also direct the public opinion's view on critical topics. We require our president to demonstrate "popular leadership," managing both the government and the American people.⁴³ Therefore, we see it as presidential when our president "goes over the heads of Congress" and appeals directly to us. We expect our president to make a connection with the American people in explaining his policies, advocating his position, and justifying his decisions. It follows from this expectation that it appears presidential when a president uses his rhetoric to appeal directly to the people.

Additionally, we often expect our president to appear above obvious partisan politics. We want to believe that our national leader is above petty grabs for power and that he exemplifies unselfish leadership. He should not be concerned with weighing political costs but instead his primary concern should be doing what is right for the country. That is why pundits criticize presidents for obvious "political moves." For example, the American people become angry when it looks like a president is using a national tragedy as an opportunity to make an argument for their partisan policy. We are disappointed when they do not seem to live up to this ideal; even though they are part of the political system, we expect them to be different in some way from other elected officials. This expectation seems related to a desire for national leadership. We want our president to be less partisan-minded than other elected officials because he is the representative for the nation as a whole. Moreover, it seems below the dignity of the presidency to look for obvious political maneuvers. Even as we recognize the political structure in which the president operates, we criticize presidents who seem motivated

⁴³ Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 4.

only by political self-interest. Following this expectation, rhetoric seems un-presidential when it seems overly partisan.

Reagan as a Speechwriter

Reagan is a particularly apt case study for this kind of examination of presidential rhetoric because of the availability and breadth of his pre-presidency speeches and remarks. Between 1975 and 1979, after he served as the governor of California and before his presidential terms, Reagan wrote and delivered over one thousand radio addresses. The decision for regular radio broadcasts and newspaper columns came during the last months of his governorship. His assistant, Peter Hannaford, designed a plan in which Reagan would deliver short, daily addresses for the program, “Viewpoint.” These broadcasts, produced by Harry O’Connor, would then be nationally syndicated. While Hannaford drafted most of the accompanying newspaper columns, Reagan “enjoyed writing the radio broadcasts himself, and eventually wrote most of those essays.”⁴⁴ He explained in a letter to a private citizen that he liked to draft the addresses while he travelled, often on cross-country plane trips.⁴⁵ The broadcasts covered a wide variety of topics including ideology, public policies, and personal stories. These radio addresses give us a glimpse into Reagan’s personal perspectives; we learn about his position on the important issues of the time. It is clear in reading these addresses that Reagan’s views did not shift during his campaign and ascendancy to the presidency. As David Brooks puts it in his review of *Reagan, in His Own Hand*, a collection of Reagan’s

⁴⁴ Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, eds., *Reagan, In His Own Hand*, (New York: The Free Press, 2001), XV.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, XV.

own writings proves that “Reagan himself was a Reaganite.”⁴⁶ His ideology is not artificial or an affectation adopted for immediate political success, and his rhetoric consistently demonstrates how deeply held his beliefs are.

In reading these addresses, drafted by Reagan himself, we see his own rhetorical preferences. During his presidency, speechwriters produced most of his speeches. While Reagan was an active participant in the speechwriting process, requiring a distinctive style and making significant edits, these brief radiobroadcasts offer a unique opportunity to see Reagan’s personal rhetorical style. In many ways, such communications, writings written by Reagan’s own hand, do much to explain the approach reflected in other addresses drafted by other speechwriters. That is, we see that speechwriters aimed to adopt and mimic Reagan’s distinctive manner of speaking.

Consistencies in Reagan’s Rhetoric: Before and During His Presidency

A thorough study of Reagan’s rhetoric over time, both before and during his presidency, reveals striking consistency. How does the rhetoric of President Reagan follow from that of the governor and presidential hopeful Reagan? In this section, I explore three areas of significant similarity. I show that throughout his political career, his rhetoric utilized moral terms as he made arguments and endeavored to explain political realities. Additionally, Reagan consistently used sharp dichotomies, and while they were criticized by pundits for their simplistic characterization of situations, these dichotomies were memorable throughout his body of rhetoric. Furthermore, Reagan’s

⁴⁶ David Brooks, “Reagan was a Reaganite,” *New York Times*, January 28, 2001, Accessed March 04, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/01/28/reviews/010128.28brookst.html>.

rhetoric reflects a preference for simplicity over complexity. That is, he advocates an understanding of political reality in which both problems and solutions are seen as more straightforward than complicated.

Moral Language

A distinctive trait of Reagan's rhetoric is his propensity to characterize political situations using moral language. Throughout his political career, he used moral language constructs to describe opponents, advocate positions, and interpret events. This rhetorical style was not universally praised, but many recognized saw it as quintessentially Reagan. Moral language suited Reagan's ideology in that Reagan saw many current issues as simple and straightforward in contrast to his opponents who characterized them as complicated and ambiguous. As Reagan saw it, politics inherently involved morality, and the realm of international relations, especially, had deep moral implications. Reagan used moral constructs both before and during his presidency.

In a campaign speech in support of Republican presidential candidate, Barry Goldwater, Reagan declared the communist regime of the Soviet Union, evil. Delivered in 1964, "A Time for the Choosing" predated his own campaign for governor of California and put him on the national stage to a large degree. In this address, Reagan describes two paths for the future of the United States and calls for Americans to choose the path of individual freedom and national peace through strength. In advocating his position, he reminds his listeners that the stakes are high because of the threat of communism. Now, Reagan explains "we are faced with the most evil enemy mankind

has known in his long climb from the swamp to the stars.”⁴⁷ Communism, in his estimation, is the greatest evil force in the course of human civilization. Its existence raises the stakes because the United States must protect the world from the Soviet Union’s pernicious influence. Reagan does not mince words as he declares the Soviet Union “evil,” continuing to describe its actions and dispositions as its “evil ways.”⁴⁸ In using this explicitly moral characterization, Reagan suggests why appeasement stands in opposition to courage. The communist regime is evil; therefore appeasement is not appropriate. Using the moral term “evil,” Reagan supports his position of peace through strong opposition to the communism of the Soviet Union.

In August of 1978, Reagan wrote and delivered a radio broadcast entitled “Two Worlds” in which he argued there was a profound difference between the founding and mission of the United States and that of the Soviet Union. Again here, he uses moral contrasts to draw this sharp distinction. He explains that in opposition to communism, the United States supports “freedom to the greatest extent possible consistent with an orderly society.”⁴⁹ While communist ideology seeks to suppress and dehumanize its people, the United States allows its people to flourish with as much freedom as possible. In making this argument, Reagan compares quotations from early Americans to that of their communist counterparts and shows the stark contrast in mindset and perspective. For instance, he reads the quotation from John Winthrop, who urged the first pilgrims in

⁴⁷ Ronald Reagan, *A Time For Choosing*, eds. Alfred Balitzer and Gerald Bonetto, (Chicago: Americans for the Reagan Agenda, 1983), 56.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁹ Ronald Reagan, “Two Worlds,” in *Reagan, In His Own Hand*, eds. Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, (New York: Free Press, 2001), 13.

the United States to act as “a city upon a hill” and an exemplar for all peoples.⁵⁰ In contrast, the oath of the Communist Party in the United States instructs its members to be a “vigilant and firm defender of the Leninist line of the party” as it is the only way to establish Soviet control.⁵¹ Reagan implies that these two quotations speak volumes to the purposes of the United States and the Soviet Union. While the founders of the United States aimed to be an example of godly living, the Communist Party designed to conquer other regimes at any cost. In another comparison, Reagan shows that communism does not value human life. In the United States, the inscription on the Statute of the Liberty offers protection to “your tired, your poor, [and] your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”⁵² The United States extends a welcome to the downtrodden, and doing so seems to imply recognition of the intrinsic value of human life. America welcomes the lowest of society because it recognizes their worth. In direct contrast, the early founder of the Soviet Union, Lenin posits that it would not matter if the majority of the human race were to die as long as the survivors were communists. Communism aims only to advance its ideology, which necessarily involves disregard for the dignity of the human race. In summing up the essential difference between communism and American ideology, Reagan paints a clear moral contrast. While our nation strives for “social justice, decency, and adherence to the highest standards,” the Soviets design for “treachery, deceit, destruction, and bloodshed.”⁵³ As Reagan characterizes it, the American ideology

⁵⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁵¹ Ibid., 13.

⁵² Ibid., 14.

⁵³ Ibid., 15.

is superior because of its adherence to common morality, which values human life and aims to serve humanity. The communist ideology, however, encourages evils like treachery and deceit and tolerates ignoble destruction and bloodshed.

Similarly, as president, Reagan used moral constructs to describe political realities. His address at the Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1983, often called the “Evil Empire Speech,” is particularly remembered for Reagan’s moral characterization of the Soviet Union as an “evil empire.”⁵⁴ He argues that it is a prideful temptation for Americans “to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.” Ignoring the moral dimension of the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union is prideful in that it assumes you can somehow proclaim yourself “above it all.”⁵⁵ Reagan argues that the moral dimension of the situation must be recognized, and as he understands the struggle with the Soviet Union, “the real crisis” faced by America is “a test of moral will and faith.”⁵⁶ The conflict will not be determined by military strength but more by a spiritual commitment. Reagan argues that America’s greatest strength “has been its capacity for transcending the moral evils of our past,” and we should continue to recognize the morality of our decisions.⁵⁷ To Reagan, the conflict

⁵⁴ “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida March 8, 1983, ” The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, accessed February 23, 2013, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/30883b.htm>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

between the United States and the Soviet Union is not ambivalent because there is a demonstrative evil dimension to the communist regime. Reagan argues that we cannot ignore the “sin and evil in the world” and instead must “oppose it with all our might.”⁵⁸ President Reagan’s “Evil Empire Speech” demonstrates consistency in his rhetorical style in its use of moral language.

Sharp Dichotomies

Additionally, throughout his political career, Reagan presents stark dichotomies in his rhetoric. In using dichotomies, he allows listeners to make a kind of choice but provides them only one viable answer: his own position. Dichotomies suit his ideological outlook in that he believes Americans face pressing decisions about the future of their country, and through dichotomies, Reagan forces his listeners to make a kind of choice. Appropriate for the content of his rhetoric, dichotomies provide a straightforward explanation for situations. Moreover, in offering these contrasts, Reagan is able to simplify complex problems and characterize his opponents’ perspectives as absurd. In this section, I demonstrate and explore how Reagan consistently employs dichotomies in his rhetoric.

To a degree, it seems that Reagan’s sharp contrasts inappropriately simplify political situations. Reagan does not present all the relevant facts, and he creates false dichotomies that did not accurately represent the situation. Like many politicians, Reagan presents the information that is political useful. Moreover, Reagan is criticized for his use of sharp dichotomies to demonize his opposition or to portray them as backwater and

⁵⁸ Ibid.

stupid. Characterizing “all his opposition in such demeaning terms” is not ideal democratic rhetoric.⁵⁹ In a democracy, debate and discussion is desired, and this kind of rhetoric discourages political opponents from entering into genuine dialogue. By emphasizing the differences between him and his opponents, Reagan makes it more difficult for meaningful political debate.

In “A Time for Choosing,” Reagan argues that Americans have an important opportunity to determine the future of the United States in the election of 1964. Throughout his address, he describes the historical strength of the country and its potential for future greatness; he also warns against the recent trend of a growing welfare state and bureaucracy. The future of the United States depends on the upcoming decision of the American people. Reagan introduces the choice, saying “either we accept the responsibility for our own destiny, or we abandon the American Revolution and confess that an intellectual belief in a far-distant capitol can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves.”⁶⁰ As Reagan portrays this “time for choosing,” the American people have exclusively two options. They accept individual responsibility, guarding the future of the United States, or they allow the federal government to run their lives. In this quotation, Reagan suggests that patriotic Americans cannot tolerate the current rate of growth of the federal government. He uses this dichotomy to show that the bureaucratic state is incompatible with what it means to be an American. Namely, to be an American, to be loyal to the American Revolution, is to claim responsibility over your individual

⁵⁹ Stuckey, *Playing the Game*, 36.

⁶⁰ Reagan, “A Time for Choosing,” 43.

life. It means that you must be a free thinker, independently taking care of yourself and spurning attempts by the federal government to make your decisions for you.

Reagan presents his listeners with a similar decision to that of the one facing voters in 1964 in the radio broadcast entitled “Shaping the World for 100 Years to Come.” As he depicts it, Americans can resolve to work toward ensuring prosperity and peace for future generations or blindly accept a dark fate of government-dominated society. Reagan reflects on the idea of “the world of tomorrow,” and he speculates what the world will look like 100 years from now in terms of landscape, technology, and problems.⁶¹ He asks if future generations will be grateful or resentful for the legacy we left them. Americans can decide either to support “fiscal responsibility, limited government, and freedom of choice for all our people” or tolerate “an irresponsible Congress” that “has set us on the road our English Cousins have already taken... the road to ruin and state control of our very lives.”⁶² Reagan suggests that Americans have these only two options, and their decision is paramount. His dichotomy suggests that the negation of one option necessarily implies the other; if Americans do not embrace the first set policies, described and endorsed by Reagan, the United States will inevitably become a welfare state in which society is run by the government. Reagan explains that if Americans “meet the challenges confronting us” now, future generations will live in a world “of beauty, peace, prosperity” and individual freedom, and if we fail, they may

⁶¹ Ronald Reagan, “Shaping the World for 100 Years to Come,” in *Reagan, In His Own Hand*, eds. Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, (New York: Free Press, 2001), 9.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 10.

never even get to read about “individual liberty or freedom of choice.”⁶³ Again, He uses a stark dichotomy both to suggest the gravity of the current political situation and to demonstrate that state control is incompatible with human flourishing.

Following the same vein, in his first inaugural address, President Reagan suggests that Americans are entering an important moment in time, requiring significant decisions. He outlines the objectives for his presidency as he encourages his listeners to appreciate the significance of this time period in American history. Discussing the role of the federal government in coming years, Reagan explains that he will work to “curb [its] size and influence.”⁶⁴ Based on his understanding of the nature of government, it will either “work with us” or “over us.”⁶⁵ Reagan wants to orient it “to stand by our side, not ride on our back.”⁶⁶ This time, Reagan does not present a dichotomy of options from which Americans should choose, but rather he argues that his administration faces these two opposing approaches. He will choose to work to foster individual liberty and, thus necessarily, to diminish the influence of the federal government. By stifling the control of the federal government, Reagan’s administration can encourage “opportunity, not smother it.”⁶⁷ Similar to American voters in earlier speeches, Reagan, as president, faces a paramount decision affecting future of the United States. He explains that he is

⁶³ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁴ “First Inaugural Address January 20, 1981,” *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, accessed March 5, 2013, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/12081a.htm2>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

resolved to “foster productivity, not stifle it.”⁶⁸ The contrasts presented in this part of his first inaugural address reflect an important consistency, evident throughout his body of rhetoric. Because of the way he characterizes the option he does not endorse, Reagan implicitly suggests that there is only one acceptable choice. Throughout his rhetoric, Reagan uses dichotomies to show the gravity of important decisions and distill the alternatives to two diametrically opposed options.

A Preference for Simplicity

Another clear consistency in Reagan’s rhetoric is his avowed preference for simplicity. Throughout speeches both before and during his presidency, he argues for simplicity: in ideas, solutions, and understandings. Again and again, he posits that the reality of a situation is simple contrary to what his opponents want Americans to believe. This preference for simple over complex is also reflected in his rhetorical style. He consistently employs short, straightforward sentence construction, and his rhetoric uses strong, unqualified declarations. His affinity for simplicity is aptly demonstrated both in the content and the style of his rhetoric.

Reagan closes “A Time for Choosing” with a warning about desiring for peace at any cost. He tells his listeners that they must face the reality that accommodation is – by its essence – appeasement in the context of the Soviet Union. By seeking to placate the Soviet Union in such a way, the United States acts cowardly and ultimately puts itself in a vulnerable position. He disagrees with others who say that the situation “is too

⁶⁸ Ibid.

complex for a simple answer.”⁶⁹ Drawing a distinction between easy and simple, Reagan argues, “there is no easy answer, but there is a simple answer.”⁷⁰ The right path for the United States is not easy in that it will require courage to oppose the Soviet Union and risk military conflict in endeavoring to advance individual liberty. The answer, however, is simple because it is a moral choice. As Reagan portrays the situation, the United States needs the courage to act “morally right.”⁷¹ If we do not oppose the Soviet Union, we are choosing our own short-term safety over the freedom of peoples worldwide. Reagan describes this reasoning as “simple;” he seems to mean here that the answer is clear and obvious. In one sense, he may be suggesting that the answer is simple for rhetorical effect. That is, if the answer is simple, then it must be right and even uncontested. At the same time, he may be portraying the choice as simple because he wants to reveal the morality that is involved in the decision-making process. The United States, in his description, is not making a prudential decision, but rather the choice is an inherently moral one and thus obvious or simple. The problem is not complex because it is not related to particulars or judgment calls, but rather it is a matter of right and wrong.

Reagan also uses basic sentence construction and declarative sentences to suggest the simplicity of problems faced by the United States. For instance, in his first inaugural address, he famously declares that “the government is not the solution to our problem; the government is the problem.”⁷² With this witty quotation, Reagan distilled his ideological

⁶⁹ Reagan, “A Time for Choosing,” 56.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁷¹ Ibid., 56

⁷² “First Inaugural Address.”

outlook into two basic clauses. Reagan is responding to a popular perspective that expects and desires the federal government to solve societal ills through social and economic policies and programs. In delivering this clever line, Reagan espouses his direct opposition to this line of thinking. The rhetorical style of this line, namely its simplicity, implies an inherent rightness of his perspective. He does not use academic language or complex sentence structure to subvert subtly his opponents' outlook, but instead he declares it plainly. Government has caused the current crisis, and it cannot cure the problem. The United States does not need more government but less. He does not get bogged down by substantiating his argument here. In using simple, declarative sentences, Reagan suggests that the political reality is also simple to discern.

In a similar manner, almost 20 years later, in his "Evil Empire Speech," President Reagan outlines in simple terms how the United States will act in its relations with the Soviet Union concerning arms reduction. Repeating the phrase, "we will never" four times, he speaks emphatically and firmly. He proclaims:

At the same time, however, they must be made to understand *we will never* compromise our principles and standards. *We will never* give away our freedom. *We will never* abandon our belief in God. And *we never stop* searching for a genuine peace. But we can assure none of these things America stands for through the so-called nuclear freeze solutions proposed by some.⁷³

This strong declaration communicates to its listeners that the United States plans to stand firm in its convictions. Moreover, through repetitive, simple sentence construction, Reagan suggests that he does not hold a complicated position; his intentions are not

⁷³ "Speech to the National Association of Evangelicals," emphasis added.

difficult to understand. The repeated phrase “we will never” stands unqualified. The intentions described might be complex to execute in actuality, requiring prudence and political reasoning, but Reagan wants to portray the designs as simple.

Along with employing a simple style of rhetoric, President Reagan also argues that political realities are simpler than his opponents realize or espouse. In his presidential Farewell Address delivered in 1989, Reagan summarizes the legacy of his administration and bestows the American people with his last words of advice. In doing so, he marvels at the simplicity of his chosen path and explains that future challenges are not as complex as they may seem. Concerning the path of the United States during his administration, he repeats the phrase, “common sense told us.”⁷⁴ He seems to suggest that his decisions were not inordinately difficult or the result of complex deliberation, but rather they follow the dictates of common sense. Implicitly, he indicates that his position is simple and straightforward. His reasoning is not sophisticated; he just obeys what common sense suggests. In the future, when “our challenges seem complex,” we should continue to follow the path determined by common sense, our first principles, and confidence in our nation.⁷⁵ Reagan contends that even when political situations seem complex, the path we ought to take is usually not. This address reflects Reagan’s striking tendency toward simplicity. In his final words to the nation, he chooses to remind his listeners that while future problems may seem complex, the answers are simple.

⁷⁴ “Farewell Address to the Nation January 11, 1989,” *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, accessed March 7, 2013, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1989/011189i.htm>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Rhetorical Consistencies Explained

What do consistencies in rhetorical style suggest about the relationship between the institution of the presidency and presidential rhetoric? In exploring this connection, it seems important to imagine how consistencies can be explained. As shown, an assessment of seminal speeches from both before and during Reagan's presidency reflects notable similarities in rhetorical style. It does not seem particularly significant to the study of presidential rhetoric that these speeches would be consistent in substance. Americans do not anticipate that the institution of the presidency will change fundamentally an individual's ideology, policies, or viewpoints. Moreover, in a democracy, we expect the candidate that we elect to continue to follow the beliefs and policies we supported during the election. If we support a candidate, we want that individual to continue to espouse the opinions described during the election. For these reasons, it is to be expected, then, that the substance of Reagan's rhetoric is consistent in large part.

I would suggest, however, that there is something special about the nature of uniformity in his rhetorical style. Reagan's remarkable consistency – I would argue – is attributable to his particular political appeal. As a candidate, Reagan enjoyed incomparable electoral success. (Case in point: his landslide victory in the presidential election of 1984 in which he won every state except Minnesota.) Reagan's general consistency in rhetorical style may be a consequence of his personal appeal as a candidate. As demonstrated, he continued to employ similar rhetorical habits even after he assumed the presidency. It might be the case that he did so because he understood their connection to his electoral and popular appeal. His vivid language, with its striking

moral overtones and sharp dichotomies, appealed to Americans; he captivated their interest as a public figure and candidate. As a president, he continued this rhetorical style in order to maintain the same level of public popularity. His consistency is not so much a foreshadowing of his presidential voice, but rather a continuation of his populist appeal. With his preference for simplicity of ideas, Reagan touched Americans on a basic level, and his evocative language moved them.

Reagan's consistency in rhetorical style illustrates the importance of evaluating the relationship between the institution of the presidency and presidential rhetoric within the context of a particular president. For example, it would be a mistake, after looking at the presidential rhetoric of Reagan, to assume that it is necessarily presidential to use moral language. You need to evaluate the rhetorical style of a particular president to examine how the institution moderates and empowers that president in his speech. Considering and accounting for relevant similarities helps you understand the impact of the institution. Development and changes in rhetorical style after an individual assumes the presidency are clearer when you first understand the consistencies

Shifts in Reagan's Rhetoric: From Political Figure to President

The impact of the institution of the presidency on presidential rhetoric can be seen in the rhetorical transformation of President Reagan. An examination of Reagan's rhetoric both before and after his presidency demonstrates how the institution of the presidency both limits and grants powers to rhetoric. It is significant to consider Reagan, who was praised for his ability to communicate with and connect to the American people even before his presidency. In this section, I consider two ways in which Reagan's rhetoric changes after he assumes the presidency. First, I contend that the presidency

empowers Reagan to shape American identity. As the president, he can speak as if his opinions are the general American position and also act as the national spokesperson. In doing so, he is able to shape American identity, suggesting what it means to be an American. At the same time, his assumption of the presidency tempers his rhetoric, specifically his propensity to cast blame. His presidential rhetoric, in contrast to earlier speeches, reflects a concerted effort to appear presidential and above petty politics.

Shaping Identity as the Spokesperson

As president, Reagan has the advantage of treating his personal position as the distinctively American perspective. He voices his opinion on issues and describes it as what Americans believe and think. In speaking, he repeatedly conflates his political perspective with the American outlook and thus implicitly suggests that his perspective is the primary American position. In doing so, he shapes American identity. Moreover, the prestige, responsibility, and structural position of the presidency grant Reagan this opportunity to speak on behalf of the American people. As the national spokesperson, he is able to transform the average American's understanding of national identity. In this way, the institution of the presidency enhances his rhetorical advantage, empowering Reagan to speak on behalf of the American people in a way he could not before his election.

President Reagan uses third person plural pronouns to create a sense of unity in support for his political positions; he suggests to his listeners that his personal political perspective is the distinctively American position. For example, in his farewell address, Reagan reflects on his journey to the presidency and the times in which some political pundits scorned his proposed policies. As Reagan describes the situation, they criticized

“our programs,” saying “our views on foreign affairs would cause war.”⁷⁶ Here Reagan does not focus on the political opponents attacking his policies, but instead he implies a sense of unity and national support. Those who criticized Reagan’s domestic and foreign policies stood in opposition to the general public opinion. As Reagan describes the success of the past eight years, he credits “our experience, our wisdom, and our belief in the principles that have guided for two centuries.”⁷⁷ While he does not explicitly say that all Americans supported his position on these issues then or now, his repeated use of the word, *our*, creates a sense of unified support for his policies.

As the president, Reagan can also suggest a definition of what it means to be an American, using such an explanation to justify his political position. For instance, Reagan follows in the “great tradition of warnings of Presidential farewells” and implores Americans to work to develop what he calls “an informed patriotism.”⁷⁸ In order to do so, they must be educated about what it means to be an American. He explains that in earlier time periods, our families, communities, schools, and even popular culture helped us understand our national heritage and develop a sense of powerful patriotism. Unfortunately, “well-grounded patriotism is no longer the style,” and so we need to do a better job of teaching what it means to be an American.⁷⁹ Demonstrating the power of presidential rhetoric, Reagan then goes on to suggest the important characteristics of America. Namely, “America is freedom – freedom of speech, freedom of religion,

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

freedom of enterprise.”⁸⁰ The idea that America is freedom of enterprise, even among other things, is not universally held. (For example, consider FDR’s Four Freedoms speech, specifically “freedom from want” or the ideology of the Socialist Party of America.) Reagan supports the expansion of freedoms in the business sector and the loosening of government regulations; he believes this will lead to increased productivity and prosperity. Here, by slipping this into his definition of what it means to be an American, he attempts to inculcate these ideas as quintessentially American – even if the majority might disagree. Even his decision to define America in terms of freedom has a partisan slant and voices his conservative ideology more than he acknowledges. Conservatism, historically, champions the expansion of personal freedoms, and Reagan’s definition of America reflects this preference. When he suggests we need “more attention to American history and a greater emphasis on civic ritual,” he seems to mean we need to educate a younger generation to value what he does: individual freedoms including “freedom of enterprise.”⁸¹ This is an apt example of how, as president, Reagan is able to mold American identity in a way that supports his political policies.

Similarly, Reagan uses an evocative story to suggest that to be an American is to be a supporter of freedom worldwide. He explains that when he reflects “on what the past eight years have meant and mean,” he is struck by an image from “the early eighties, at the height of the boat people.”⁸² He tells the story of refugees on cramped boats in the South China Sea who call out to young American sailors, “Hello American Sailor. Hello,

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

freedom man.”⁸³ Creating this memorable image in the minds of his listeners, Reagan can again reinforce that to be American is to be a beacon of freedom internationally. As the refugees articulate it, “American sailor” is synonymous with “freedom man.” This quotation suggests that American military action is purposed toward freedom for all human beings just as the sailor stands as a symbol of freedom for these desperate refugees. Moreover, this story indicates that Americans, represented by this “young, smart and fiercely observant” sailor, are an important symbol of freedom to the world. As such, the United States plays an important role in providing hope for other peoples. Using this story, Reagan is able to vividly portray a definition of what it means to be American and advocate his perspective on America’s role in international relations.

When speaking on behalf of the United States, Reagan also conveys American perspective. While his position is not necessarily held by all of the American people, his declarations shape national identity. For example, in his inaugural address, echoing the words of Dr. Joseph Warren, Reagan encourages the American people to “act worthy of ourselves.”⁸⁴ We must rise to the obstacles confronting by our nation in order to ensure that future generations enjoy peace and prosperity. Then, speaking on behalf of all Americans, Reagan addresses first “neighbors and allies that share our freedom” and then “enemies of freedom, those who are potential adversaries.”⁸⁵ In this section of his speech, Reagan voices his own political perspective on these groups of people but also speaks as if this is the American position. He is able to do so because he is the president

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ “First Inaugural Address.”

⁸⁵ Ibid.

and thus the national spokesperson. He tells allies, “we will strengthen our historic ties and assure them of our support and firm commitment.”⁸⁶ Importantly, “our own sovereignty is not for sale,” and “we will not expect to buy theirs.”⁸⁷ Continued support for countries that respect individual freedoms is a contestable political question, but here Reagan treats it as a commonly shared American value. Addressing potential enemies, he warns, “When action is required to preserve our national security, we will act.”⁸⁸ Again, while speaking on behalf of the American people, he is able to advocate his position that peace comes through a willingness to engage militarily. Justifying military build-up, he declares, “we will maintain sufficient strength to prevail” over enemies of freedom, “knowing that if we do so we have the best chance of never having to use that strength.”⁸⁹ This portion of the inaugural address demonstrates the ways in which Reagan is able to infiltrate the American sense of identity with his political views. Through such rhetoric, Reagan shapes American identity, persuading listeners that his opinions are essentially American. In acting as the national spokesperson, Reagan inexorably intertwines his position and that of all Americans.

Presidential: Above Partisanship

Reagan’s rhetoric changes when he assumes the presidency; in rising to his new stature, he seems to make an effort to appear above obvious partisanship. His attempt to

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

be presidential and distance himself from political wrangling transforms the way in which he communicates with the American people. His earlier rhetoric as both a public figure and a presidential candidate involve a propensity to blame political opponents sometimes by name and often in other apparent ways. As the president, he seems to avoid finger-pointing and instead focus more on creating a sense of unity in his remarks. More frequently than in other earlier periods, Reagan describes the problems faced by all Americans and declines the opportunity to identify fault when speaking on behalf of the country. It seems that this transformation is an example of how the institution moderates presidential rhetoric; the prestige and an awareness of the inordinate weight of presidential remarks seems to put real limits on what Reagan can say. Because he is the face and voice of such a revered institution, Reagan feels pressure to appear presidential, and he is less willing to cast blame on others.

In “A Time for Choosing,” Reagan did not shy away from assigning blame in his diagnosis of the problems facing the United States in 1964. Pre-recorded and incorporated in a television segment entitled *Rendezvous with Destiny*, this speech was obviously political in nature; it was a campaign speech in support of Republican candidate, Barry Goldwater. In many ways, it launched Reagan on the national political stage, and soon after, he was asked to run for governor of California. This speech is worthy of notice, in part, precisely because of its partisan slant. Reagan celebrates the wisdom of the Republican Party and conservative ideology while ridiculing and debasing the political opposition. He warns his listeners at the beginning that he “is going to talk of controversial things” and makes “no apology” for doing so.⁹⁰ In his first paragraph,

⁹⁰ Reagan, “A Time for Choosing,” 41.

Reagan takes issue with those who do not approve of the terms *pink* and *leftist*. He argues that they consistently stoop to name-calling; they are “guilty of branding all who oppose their liberalism as right wing extremists.”⁹¹ Reagan opens his address with controversy and discussion of his opposition. Even as he feigns disdain for “name-calling and the application of labels,” a partisan slant is apparent in the first moments of his address by whom he chooses to criticize.

Reagan blames the current state of affairs on the people who seek “the answer to all the problems of human need through government.”⁹² The growing size of the welfare state is the fault of the proponents of liberalism, who seek to centralize dangerous power in the federal government. In attacking his opponents, Reagan uses a memorable image to explain their line of thinking in terms of wealth distribution. He warns that “today there is an increasing number who can’t see a fat man standing beside a thin one without automatically coming to the conclusion the fat man got that way by taking advantage of the thin one.” With this evocative image, Reagan mocks those who support the welfare state.

In his closing, Reagan discusses the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, and as he frames it, the United States can choose “appeasement or courage.”⁹³ He sarcastically explains that “our well-meaning liberal friends” refuse to admit that their policy of accommodation is, in fact, appeasement. While they espouse policies for friendlier relations with the Soviet Union, their policies would put the United

⁹¹ Ibid., 41.

⁹² Ibid., 42.

⁹³ Ibid., 56.

States in more danger. Reagan accuses these “liberal friends” of bullying Americans into buying a sense of safety at the cost of “selling into permanent slavery our fellow human beings enslaved behind the Iron Curtain, to tell them to give up their hope of freedom because we are ready to make a deal with their slave masters.”⁹⁴ Liberals endeavor to scare Americans with the threat of the nuclear warfare, encouraging Americans to ignore the suffering in the Soviet Union. Reagan uses this vivid image of the suffering slaves trapped in the Soviet Union to demonstrate the horror of communism. He implies that when liberals advocate accommodation for the Soviet Union, they act cruelly and cowardly. In his estimation, they have distorted the national discourse, and Reagan is not afraid to blame his opponents for national misconceptions about our relationship with the Soviet Union.

In contrast, Reagan’s first inaugural address seems to make a concerted effort not to cast blame. Early in his remarks, he addresses his predecessor, President Carter, and thanks him genuinely for his role in the democratic process. Reagan explains that he wants the American people to appreciate Carter for what he did to continue the important tradition of peaceful transfers of power. In praise, Reagan says to Carter, “By your gracious cooperation in the transition process, you have shown a watching world that we are a united people...”⁹⁵ In this speech, his first as an inaugurated president, Reagan devotes time to describing the importance of his political opponent and to praising his good faith and assistance. For sure, Reagan can afford to be gracious as an electoral victor, and his praise for Carter is limited to his role in “maintaining the continuity” of

⁹⁴ Ibid., 56 – 57.

⁹⁵ “First Inaugural Address.”

electoral process.⁹⁶ However, the prominence of this praise for his political opponent seems to indicate a shift in rhetorical style. Reagan uses the beginning of his address to recognize the cooperation of the opposition and more generally to praise the political system as a whole, which also necessarily includes his opponents. As the president, Reagan wants to focus on what unites, rather than what divides. All parties share in the tradition of “orderly transfers of authority.”⁹⁷

Transformation Explained

This study of Reagan’s rhetoric over time, both before and during his presidency, demonstrates how the relationship between the institution and its rhetoric operates. The institution conveys certain powers to the president in that he can speak on behalf of the country and suggest definitions of national identity. It also, however, puts constraints on the rhetoric, compelling presidents to avoid obvious partisanship and to appear presidential. In contrast to the citizens he represents, an American president does not have the freedom to say certain things – even though another public figure might be able to do so. While the institution itself does not formally grant these powers or place these limitations, structural elements of the institution inform the electorate’s expectations. Additionally, the rights and responsibilities of the presidency transform the individual’s own self-understanding. The office becomes part of his identity. As James Madison explains in Federalist 51, in each branch of government, “the interest of the man” is

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

“connected with the constitutional rights of the place.”⁹⁸ That is, the individual’s identity incorporates his constitutional role, and a president has an interest in protecting his rights and developing his privileges. Campaigning from outside of the presidency, a candidate must knock down others in order to create a place for himself, but as president, it looks petty to attack others who are perceived to be in a weaker position. In the same way, a candidate needs to persuade others to embrace his ideology and policies, but the president, by virtue of his constitutional office and popular election, can claim to speak for the nation without appearing presumptuous. Rhetorical style and approaches are not radically changed by the presidency, but they are altered. In the next section, I will look specifically at Reagan’s *Challenger* address and here liken Reagan to a pastor, a comparison that demonstrates his unique rhetorical position.

⁹⁸ James Madison, Federalist Paper No. 51, “The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments,” *New York Daily Advertiser*, November 22, 1787.

CHAPTER THREE

The *Challenger* Address Examined

As the national priest, the president is in a unique position that enables him to deliver a national eulogy. Employing rhetoric best understood as pastoral, Reagan eulogized of one of the greatest American disasters of his term: the *Challenger* explosion. On the morning of January 28, 1986, thousands of Americans watching live television coverage of the launch of the space shuttle, *Challenger*, saw it explode in flames about a minute after its take-off. The space shuttle was originally scheduled to take off January 22 at Cape Canaveral, but the launch was delayed for various reasons including inclement weather. Finally, two days later, after an additional two hours of delay, the crew boarded the *Challenger* in front of both a live and television audience.

The crew of seven included a schoolteacher, Mrs. Christie McAuliffe, who would be the first ordinary American in space. Much of the media attention focused on McAuliffe because she was the first participant in a new program, the Teacher in Space Project. This NASA program was created to inspire students, recognize teachers, and build excitement in mathematics and science educational programs. When Reagan announced the inception of this program, he explained that the first citizen passenger in space would be “America’s finest: a teacher,” recognizing the crucial role of education in America.⁹⁹ Reagan saw McAuliffe’s presence on the flight as an opportunity to raise the prestige of the teaching profession and foster enthusiasm for future NASA projects.

⁹⁹ Philip M. Boffey, “First Shuttle Ride by Private Citizen to Go to Citizen,” *The New York Times*, August 28, 1984, accessed on October 21, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/08/28/science/first-shuttle-ride-by-private-citizen-to-go-to-teacher.html>.

NASA selected McAuliffe from a pool of 11,000 applicants. She planned to tape two classes while in space to be broadcasted later in American classrooms. Because McAuliffe was on board, significant numbers of schoolchildren across the nation watched the launch live in their classrooms.

The *Challenger* launch at 11:36 EDT appeared to go smoothly at first. After rising for a minute with a trail of flames and smoke, the *Challenger* shuttle suddenly exploded into a ball of fire. Initially, onlookers were confused by the sight of smoke, debris, and fire. The live audience was stunned into silence as television commentators struggled to explain the event to viewers. For the rest of the day, national television was dominated by coverage of the explosion and discussion of possible explanations. Later that night, President Reagan chose not to deliver the scheduled State of the Union address and instead gave a national address about this tragedy.

The Challenger Address

Beginning his address, President Reagan recognizes its timing. He mentions that he was scheduled to give the State of the Union address, but in light of the *Challenger* explosion, he has changed his plans. “Today is a day for mourning and remembering,” he declares, announcing a time for sharing pain and acknowledging tragedy. Opening the speech, he recognizes the profound loss and expresses his own personal grief.

Next, Reagan explains that this is the first NASA exercise in which the United States lost astronauts in flight. “Nearly nineteen years ago,” three crewmembers died in a cabin fire on the launch pad of the Apollo 1, but today is the first time that U.S. astronauts have died in flight. Reagan praises the bravery and brilliance of the “Challenger Seven,” listing names of the individual crewmembers. While

acknowledging the deep loss felt by their family members, he describes the unique desire for exploration exemplified by the crewmembers. They sought to serve the United States through exploration and discovery. Reagan then shifts to describe the importance of the United States space program, explaining how it dazzles the American people. We have forgotten that space exploration is new, and these crewmembers were valiant “pioneers” who reminded us. He explains to watching schoolchildren that bad things can happen as part of this process of exploring and discovering, and learning new things often requires the bravery to take risks.

Reagan argues that the *Challenger* explosion should not degrade the respect we hold for our space program. He praises NASA’s open, public manner of proceeding and suggests that freedom requires this commitment to openness. Despite the tragedy that took place today, Reagan declares that America will continue its exploration with more space shuttles and more civilians in space.

Reagan closes his address with two allusions. First, he mentions Sir Francis Drake, an English explorer of oceans, who died on the seas. Reagan likens the crewmembers’ dedication to Drake’s commitment, declaring both “complete.” The crewmembers’ deaths, like Drake’s death, were aptly symbolic of their lives as a whole – they were “all in.” Next, Reagan recounts the final moments of the crewmembers’ lives by quoting from American aviator, John Gillespie Magee, Jr.’s poem, “High Flight.” Reagan declares, “We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for the journey and waved goodbye and ‘slipped the surly bonds of earth’ to ‘touch the face of God.’” In comparing their deaths to the experience

of touching “the face of God,” he suggests that this was fitting end for these brave pioneers.

The Challenger Address as a National Eulogy

The *Challenger* address derives much of its rhetorical power and form from its genre, eulogy. In their book *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson explore the category of national eulogy, arguing that in such a speech, the speaker “must make sense of a catastrophic event that unexpectedly kills U.S. civilians while also assaulting a national symbol.”¹⁰⁰ In this section, I will consider the characteristics that Campbell and Jamieson describe as essential to national eulogy and demonstrate how the *Challenger* address follows their description.

Campbell and Jamieson contend that the genre of national eulogy is “comparatively new,” linked to the emergence of television. With the advent of modern technology, more events are experienced collectively as a nation through live television coverage, and as a result, the president plays a critical role in responding to tragic events. In delivering a national eulogy for the American people, the president “acknowledges death and begins the process by which physical death becomes spiritual continuity.”¹⁰¹ Through television, millions of Americans are able to witness simultaneously tragedies, and thus the president has a growing responsibility to transform national despair into a symbol of national strength, implanted in our collective memory.

¹⁰⁰ Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 73.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

Campbell and Jamieson hold out Reagan's speech following the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* as an example of a national eulogy. In a national eulogy, "the president assumes a priestly role to make sense of a catastrophe and transform it from evidence of destruction into a symbol of national resilience."¹⁰² His *Challenger* address satisfies these criteria; namely the speech is necessarily responsive, transforms the feeling of national loss to a feeling of national strength, and is given by President Reagan in his role as national priest.

First, a national eulogy responds to "a perceived need in the community."¹⁰³ That is, in the wake of the spectacular tragedy, the national community of citizens has suffered a great loss and needs leadership, comfort, and hope from the president. The impetus for such a speech cannot be engineered by a political strategist because the prompting event cannot be created – or even anticipated. Given after the explosion of the *Challenger*, Reagan's address fulfills this criterion for a national eulogy. Reagan is responding to an unexpected event in an effort to meet a need felt by Americans. Beginning his remarks, Reagan acknowledges that he had planned to give his State of the Union address, but "the events of earlier" led him to change these plans.¹⁰⁴ Many Americans had witnessed the event on television and were shocked by the unexpected explosion. They did not know

¹⁰² Ibid., 73.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 74.

¹⁰⁴ "Address to the Nation on the Explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger January 28, 1986," *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, accessed October 27, 2012, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/12886b.htm>.

what to think or how to process their collective loss, and through his words, Reagan helps them understand what happened and how to think through the implications of the event.

Second, a national eulogy uses a national catastrophe to foster a feeling of national resilience. In such an address, a president aims “to define for the country the meaning of the catastrophe and to assuage the associated trauma.”¹⁰⁵ That is, he wants both to explain the national tragedy and to provide comfort for those suffering because of the tragedy. Furthermore, by transforming the tragedy into a symbol of national strength, he can “assuage the associated trauma.” That is to say, in properly interpreting the loss, a president can comfort his listeners. In his address, Reagan seems to focus on accomplishing both of these objectives. To put the explosion in its rightful context, he says that tragedies like this are associated with the important process of “expanding man’s horizons.”¹⁰⁶ Reagan does not detail the specific problems that led to the physical explosion, but instead he offers a way for his listeners to think about the event. Americans are encouraged to see it as a necessary risk – an unavoidable component – of an incredibly worthy cause: man’s pursuit of knowledge.

To engender a feeling of national strength when giving a national eulogy, a president suggests that the deaths will not be in vain. Campbell and Jamieson explain that the president says “that those who died exemplify the best of the nation that will survive this moment because its ideals cannot be undermined by events such as those that took their lives.”¹⁰⁷ When alive, these individuals were symbolic of the strength of the

¹⁰⁵ Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 77.

¹⁰⁶ “Address to the Nation on the Explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger.”

¹⁰⁷ Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 77.

nation, and thus in their deaths, they will continue – perhaps even to a greater extent – to be symbols of the enduring strength of the nation. Their deaths do not mark the end of anything because the symbolic value lives on. The president asserts that a national catastrophe does not negate the value of these individuals and their lives.

Consistent with this paradigm, Reagan makes clear that the deaths of the Challenger crew will not be in vain. Reagan declares that America will not falter in its commitment to open exploration. He says that even after this tragedy, “nothing ends here; our hopes and our journeys continue.”¹⁰⁸ This tragedy will not affect America’s unswerving commitment to continued exploration. These deaths are significant in that they demonstrate the depth of this commitment. Americans – as exemplified by the Challenger team – are willing to take significant personal risks to continue to explore the unknown, and Reagan suggests that is what makes America great. In this way, Reagan engenders a spirit of national resilience by declaring that these deaths are not in vain because America will not abandon its great strength of exploration.

Third, a national eulogy must be given by the president in a priestly manner. Such an address cannot accomplish its objectives if the public perceives the president to be speaking as a politician. In order to unify and comfort us, the president must assume the position of “the national priest of our civil religion.”¹⁰⁹ As such, he can both speak on behalf of us and to us from a somewhat removed position. Campbell and Jamieson explain, “if the rhetorical act is to unify and comfort us as well as enhance our appreciation of presidential leadership, the priestly role cannot be tainted by self-

¹⁰⁸ “Address to the Nation on the Explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger.”

¹⁰⁹ Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 80.

interest.”¹¹⁰ A national eulogy will not be effective if we think that the president is motivated by potential political gain; self-centered rhetoric is incompatible with the idea of a national priest. A national priest stands aloof from the typical selfish nature of politics and speaks from as wise, unbiased authority.

Following this model, Reagan begins the Challenger address by demonstrating his unique authority, declaring the day “as a day for mourning and remembering.”¹¹¹ He is not establishing a formal national holiday, but Reagan’s remarks do suggest that he is speaking from a position of authority. Because of his position institutionally as president and implicitly as national priest, he speaks on behalf of America. His speech also reflects a sense of unity through his use of “we.” At the beginning of his address, Reagan says of the members of the crew, “we mourn their loss as a nation together.”¹¹² In doing so, he declares on behalf of and to the American people that they are mourning. He later mentions that we, the American people, are “dazzled” by the accomplishments and discoveries of NASA. In choosing words like this, he assumes the voice of the American people; he speaks both to them and for them. As biographer John Patrick Diggins articulates, “Reagan voiced the mourning of the nation.”¹¹³ Additionally, in playing this priestly role, Reagan avoids any hint of partisanship. His words do not seem to be policy-oriented or supportive of any particular political party. His listeners trust his

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 80.

¹¹¹ “Address to the Nation on the Explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger.”

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (New York City: W.W. Norton & Co, Inc., 2007), 376.

words because they do not come across as self-seeking; he does not appear to have ulterior motives. Instead, he emphasizes the unity of the nation, saying of the explosion, “this is truly a national loss.”¹¹⁴ Such word choice indicates that this devastating tragedy is a moment for national unification and not division. In giving this national eulogy, Reagan does not seem to advance a particular political agenda, and as a result, his words offer greater hope and comfort to the American people.

A classic example of a national eulogy is the famous “Gettysburg Address.” On November 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln delivered a brief speech at the consecration of a new Union cemetery at Gettysburg. Just months before, in July, over 50,000 Confederate and Union soldiers had died at the Battle of Gettysburg; this three day battle was the bloodiest in American history. The reburial of Union soldiers had started in October, and Lincoln was invited to speak at the cemetery’s consecration ceremony. Delivering his speech, Lincoln follows the discussed paradigm for a national eulogy. In only ten sentences, Lincoln transforms the sight of destruction into an image of America’s strength for his listeners. Moreover, his words have a pastoral tone that both provide comfort during the ongoing Civil War and encourage a particular understanding of the mission of the Union forces.

In the Gettysburg address, Lincoln advances an edifying interpretation of the ongoing war. He does not mention the states in rebellion or the confederacy, but instead he characterizes the war as a test of the strength of the United States. He begins by referring to the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and asserts that America was born with a commitment to liberty and equality. The Civil War, Lincoln explains, is a test to

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 376.

see whether such a nation can endure. Through his narrative, Lincoln comforts his listeners and inspires them to see the war in a new context. First, his listeners draw strength from knowing that this war has an important meaning. Those who had died in battle were working toward an important goal: the preservation of the United States. Not only did they fight for this union, they also fought to demonstrate that a government by the people could endure. Charged with this important mission, those buried did not die in vain.

In uplifting his listeners, Lincoln transforms the images of 50,000 dead soldiers into a vision of the spiritual consecration of this cemetery. He says that no pomp or words delivered make the cemetery sacred – instead these fighting soldiers have already done so. More than that, he suggests that “brave men, both living and dead” have sanctified the struggle to guard the United States’ unique style of government. The bloody war, as Lincoln describes it, is a painful trial to see whether the United States – with its unique dedication to liberty and equality – can stand. Presented thus Battle of Gettysburg not only represents a national tragedy but also serves as a symbol of America’s dedication to this endeavor. As Lincoln explains, those who died “gave their last full measure of devotion,” and the living ought to follow their example.

A comparison of the “Gettysburg Address” and the *Challenger* speech reveal many similarities. Both addresses portray a particular understanding of the issue and, as a result, the speakers implicitly guide their listeners to adopt their point of views. Neither speaker defends his characterizations, but rather the descriptions given are persuasive in part precisely because they do not consider objections. That is, neither president justifies his understanding and instead treats his perspective as fact. In responding to the national

tragedies, both presidents explain why the deaths were not in vain and how their deaths carry an important meaning, pivotal to the character of America. In the Gettysburg Address, the bravery and deaths of the soldiers advanced the experiment of self-government. In the *Challenger* speech, the risks taken and sacrifices given by the shuttle crew made space discovery and exploration possible.

Demonstration of a Pastoral Tone

The classification of the *Challenger* address as a “national eulogy” fails to demonstrate the full extent of rhetorical power employed by President Reagan in this address. A national eulogy implies that an address is apolitical, but the *Challenger* address supports specific policies. This speech is not exclusively or even primarily apolitical. Reagan is able to accomplish specific political, even partisan, goals because of his pastoral tone. In doing so, he utilizes a particular rhetorical power, available only to the president. In this section, I show how his pastoral tone advances specific policies.

In many ways, the *Challenger* address is similar to a sermon that a preacher would give. Responding to this national tragedy, Reagan uses a distinctively pastoral approach. In teaching Scripture, a preacher seeks to educate and to rouse. As St. Augustine articulates, a preacher “must not only teach so as to give instruction... but he must also sway the mind so as to subdue the will.”¹¹⁵ Reagan’s address accomplishes similar ends. Like a preacher who reassures his parishioners of God’s immutable nature, Reagan comforts his listeners with reassuring words about America’s unshaken strength,

¹¹⁵ St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. Rev. Professor J. F. Shaw (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2009), 143.

and like a homily that aims to inspire action, this address motivates listeners to adopt a particular view of the challenge.¹¹⁶

In his remarks following the *Challenger* explosion, Reagan qualms fears by rekindling his listeners' faith in America's commitment to openness. When tragedy strikes a community, a pastor can share with his congregation his own unshaken confidence in God's providence and explain the reasons that he holds these beliefs. In explaining his own faith, he mixes the styles of speaking for himself and for the people. For example, he sometimes speaks personally and, other times, uses "we" and "our" to speak on behalf of his church. In this way, he motivates their continued faith by reminding them of their own beliefs. These beliefs, in turn, provide comfort even during a tragedy.

Similarly, Reagan speaks to and on behalf of the American people when he reminds them of America's commitment to discovery and exploration. Like a pastor who reminds his congregation of God's strength and promises, Reagan reassures his listeners that America is a resilient nation with a steadfast commitment to the spirit of exploration that makes it great. Reagan acknowledges the risk involved in space exploration and then asserts that these goals of exploration and discovery are worth such a risk. He explains the tragedy did "nothing to diminish" his own "great faith in and respect for our space program."¹¹⁷ By proclaiming his unwavering commitment to the space program, he

¹¹⁶ For example, in C.H. Spurgeon's sermon, "The Immutability of God," he reminds his listeners that God's essence and attributes do not change; his promises and his threats are the same throughout time. Spurgeon then outlines how this fact brings salvation for God's children.

¹¹⁷ "Address to the Nation on the Explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger."

encourages his listeners to adopt a similar posture. Reagan says that America will “continue to follow” the Challenger crew into the future.¹¹⁸ He declares, “there will be more shuttle flights and more shuttle crews, and yes, more volunteers, more civilians, more teachers in space.”¹¹⁹ That is, America will not halt its ambitious projects and instead will continue to take risks for the sake of exploration and discovery.

Additionally, Reagan uses pastoral rhetoric to persuade his listeners to remain supportive of future NASA projects. In *On Christian Doctrine*, discussing the duty of the Christian teacher, St. Augustine explains that listeners might “require to be roused rather than instructed, in order that they may be diligent to do what they already know, and to bring their feelings into harmony with the truths, they admit.” When Reagan speaks on behalf of the America, he acts as such a teacher, reminding Americans to remain steadfast in their support for space exploration, to be “diligent to do what they already know.” He suggests that this tragedy did not lower the priority of these ideals. Americans already know the importance of space exploration and discovery, and they should remain in their support.

Beyond appealing to listeners’ faith in America, Reagan inspires his listeners to adopt a particular perspective. Specifically, he encourages them to see that the crewmembers’ deaths were a crucial step in the process of exploration and discovery. In giving a homily, a pastor encourages his listeners to understand a portion of Scripture in a particular way. He may suggest that a Biblical story is analogous to a recent event or indicates that a particular verse reflects an important characteristic of God. Drawing

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

conclusions from Scripture, the pastor makes a case for specific understanding of that portion of Scripture. Similarly, Reagan encourages his listeners to see this tragedy as a crucial – if not inevitable – step in the process of exploration and discovery. He likens their deaths to the “great explorer Sir Francis Drake” who died at sea.¹²⁰ Reagan explains that the crewmembers like Drake died while exploring new frontiers and suggests that their dedication, like his, was complete. Their deaths were indicative of their highest ideals in that they died while demonstrating their dedication to exploration and discovery. Reagan suggests that we should see their deaths as part of exploration and a risk that they took willingly because they understood the potential gain. He describes the crewmembers as “daring and brave” and claims that they “had a hunger to explore the universe and discover its truths.”¹²¹ Reagan’s words suggest that because the crewmembers were willing to risk their lives for these goals, we should understand their deaths as a praiseworthy sacrifice to further the process of exploration and discovery. Like a preacher who interprets a Scriptural passage for his congregation, Reagan interprets this tragedy for the American people.

Moreover, in encouraging his listeners to adopt this particular understanding of the tragedy, Reagan suggests that these deaths have profound meaning. Like a pastor who suggests that current suffering has eternal value, Reagan suggests that the crewmembers sacrifice had long-term implications. In acknowledging and praising a deep commitment to exploration and discovery, Reagan shows the significant value of such a great sacrifice. Pastors often adopt this logic when making sense of suffering.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

First, a pastor communicates and encourages a deep commitment to the development of virtues and the process of becoming Christ-like. He suggests that suffering helps us develop these desired virtues, and therefore, suffering has great significance and value. Although Reagan does not articulate particular reasons why exploration and discovery are important to America, by showing the unswerving commitment to these projects even in light of this tragedy, Reagan suggests that these projects are very important. He explains that the seven “wished to serve, and they did. They served all of us.”¹²² That is, the seven crewmembers served America in their willingness to take personal risks for an important national goal. Essentially, Reagan wants to communicate that there are risks involved when man tries to do something new. In describing the crewmembers as pioneers and as serving America, Reagan suggests that they were playing a crucial role, and it follows that their deaths have meaning. Just as a pastor reminds his congregation the meaning of suffering, Reagan uses this address to show his listeners that the crewmembers did not die in vain.

Policy Promotion in the Challenger Address

This speech addresses particular, pressing policy questions, and ironically, his pastoral tone, which depends on an apolitical appearance, helps accomplish these policy initiatives, namely solidifying national support for NASA and differentiating between the United States and the Soviet Union. While Reagan may seem removed from partisan positioning when he delivers this address, these policies that he supports result from partisan concern.

¹²² Ibid.

First, with his words of reassurance, Reagan helps solidify national support for NASA in the future. He does not outline a developed argument in favor of continued investment in NASA. Such a speech likely would be ineffective and deemed highly inappropriate after such a tragedy. Much softer, his words of unswerving commitment to our national spirit of discovery and exploration gently remind the American people why NASA is important. He explains that “we’ve only just begun” investigating space, implying that mistakes and errors are an unavoidable part of the process.¹²³ America will continue to send astronauts into space and take risks for the sake of “expanding man’s horizons.”¹²⁴ In doing so, Reagan elevates the importance of NASA, claiming that the Challenger crew is “pulling us into the future.”¹²⁵ In other words, NASA is necessary because it provides a pathway to the future through discovery and exploration. As we learn more about the universe and sciences, we are preparing for our future. In undertaking their projects, NASA and the crewmembers “served us all.”¹²⁶ In linking this sacrifice to our future national success in scientific fields, Reagan rallies the American people’s support for NASA.

Reagan’s implied argument for continued support for NASA is not apolitical. President Reagan believed that the growth of NASA was critical to America’s victory in the Cold War. He believed that continued success in space exploration would demonstrate the superiority of capitalism in the contrast to the socialism approach of the

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

Soviet Union. Reagan used the “space race” to confront the Soviet Union indirectly. Such tactics were not universally heralded in the United States. Some critics claimed his methods led to unnecessary escalation of tension with the Soviet Union. By investing significant financial resources and national focus on space projects, they argued, America failed to meet more pressing domestic concerns like welfare and unemployment. In contrast, Reagan thought America could not afford to turn exclusively inward. In a ceremony commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Normandy Invasion, Reagan articulates the lessons from World War II, declaring that America “learned that isolationism never has and never will be an acceptable response to tyrannical governments with an expansionist intent.”¹²⁷ He believed that the United States could not ignore the Soviet Union and should instead focus on countering its power. By supporting and developing NASA programs like the *Challenger*, the United States conveyed its power to the Soviet Union.

Second, Reagan uses this very public tragedy to communicate America’s commitment to openness in contrast to the Soviet Union’s secrecy. In doing so, he highlights a significant difference between the two nations. He argues that this public failure does not diminish the prestige of NASA; rather he emphasizes the openness of the space program, saying “we do it all up front and in public. That’s the way freedom is, and

¹²⁷ “Ceremony commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Normandy Invasion, June 6, 1984,” The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, accessed April 6, 2013, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/60684a.htm>.

we wouldn't change it for a minute.”¹²⁸ Thousands of Americans including classrooms of young schoolchildren watched the explosion live and experienced the tragedy personally because of its publicity. They did not hear about the event secondhand, but instead in a way, they experienced it themselves. As discussed, Reagan converts this sense of tragedy into a national spirit of resilience. America as a whole experienced the tragedy, and all of us can unite in our national commitment to openness and freedom.

In making this commitment a point of national pride, Reagan contrasts America with the Soviet Union. As he praises the way NASA dealt with this tragedy publicly, he implicitly criticizes the Soviet Union for attempting to hide and deny its mistakes. Reagan says of America, “We don’t keep secrets and cover things up,” drawing an assumed comparison to the Soviet Union where tragic events were not reported by domestic news.¹²⁹ The Communist leadership worked to hide tragedies and scientific failings from both national and global attention. In celebrating NASA’s commitment to openness, Reagan suggests that the Soviet Union and America are fundamentally different. He wants his listeners to see the inherent differences between two countries. America, he contends, is brave enough to be open – even when it makes mistakes. It allows its space program to be seen and to be criticized on the global stage. America is confident enough in its way of doing things that it is open to such criticism. In contrast, the Soviet Union, Reagan implies, is not successful enough to endure criticism and instead is dishonest with the global community about how things are done.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Reagan's effort to draw a distinction between America and the Soviet Union is policy-oriented. In his view, there is no room for ideological compromise with the Soviet Union. While Reagan was eager to negotiate with Gorbachev, he was not willing to weaken America's stance concerning authoritarian tactics in order to develop a friendship with the Soviet Union. Throughout his presidency, Reagan used harsh words about the Soviet Union and seemed to believe that the battle of words was important. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly in the fall of 1985, he spoke with candor, declaring, "The differences between America and the Soviet Union are deep abiding."¹³⁰ About America, he said, "we build no walls to keep [our people] in, nor organize any system of police to keep them mute. We occupy no country... and as deeply as we cherish our beliefs, we do not seek to compel others to share them."¹³¹ Reagan asserts that America is not comparable to the Soviet Union; the countries are fundamentally different. Through his rhetoric – even that of a national eulogy – Reagan saw himself as "fighting" the Cold War. He gave words to those who opposed the Soviet Union in Russia and its satellite states. Critics of Reagan argued that he created unnecessary antagonism between the two countries. They worried that his rhetoric would incite retribution from the Soviet Union, and they argued that Reagan should use conciliatory language. As Reagan spoke of it, however, "appeasement, no matter how it

¹³⁰ "Address to the 40th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, October 24, 1985," The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, accessed February 23, 2013, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/102485a.htm>.

¹³¹ Ibid.

is labeled, never fulfils the hope of the appeasers.”¹³² His *Challenger* address reflects this overwhelming conviction about drawing distinctions between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

While giving the *Challenger* address on television, Reagan performs the role of the mourning leader well. His tone, facial expressions, and speaking tempo suit his pastoral words of comfort and inspiration for the American people. He gives a masterful national eulogy, transforming the disturbing images of the burning shuttle into a lifelike symbol of national resilience in the minds of his listeners. Acting as the national priest, he reminds Americans of their common commitment to openness. This speech, however unifying, is not apolitical. Using his position as the national priest and this opportunity to speak to the American people, Reagan advances specific policies concerning the Soviet Union. By appealing to national pride and rekindling America’s desire to pioneer and explore the unknown, he lays the foundation for continued support of the space race. Moreover, by drawing implicit comparisons between the United States and the Soviet Union, Reagan underscores his hard-line approach to interact with the Soviet Union.

¹³² Reagan Ronald, *The Great Communicator*, (San Francisco: The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation, 1995), 41.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Meaningful studies of presidential rhetoric must consider the immense impact of the institution of the presidency itself. All rhetoric, including that of the president, exists within context. Every address is delivered to a specific audience or audiences, in the midst of a particular political situation, and toward a particular purpose. This thesis looks at the contextual factor of the institution in order to evaluate the complex relationship between it and the presidential rhetoric. Elements of the presidency simultaneously grant powers and place limits on the president rhetorically. In order to study how this happens, I turned to Reagan as a case study in recognition of Reagan's reputation as a rhetorician and his administration's valuing of rhetoric. In studying his rhetoric before and during his presidency, both striking consistencies and important differences emerge. Throughout his career, he uses moral language and sharp dichotomies as he makes arguments and explains political realities. Additionally, his rhetoric reflects a preference for simplicity over complexity. He characterizes problems and solutions as straightforward rather than complicated. These consistencies seem related to the electoral appeal of Reagan, and they suggest the importance of considering the individual president in any evaluation of presidential rhetoric. Even in the face of these noted consistencies, we can see the effects of the institution of the presidency by considering the significant shifts in Reagan's rhetoric. The rhetorical transformation is evidence of the impact of the institution. As president, constrained by the image of institution, particularly expectations to appear presidential, Reagan seems to feel less comfortable with ascribing blame in describing the political situation. At the same time, empowered

by his place in the governmental structure, Reagan acts as the national spokesperson both to advance his position and shape American identity.

Moreover, Reagan exemplifies the unique rhetorical powers of the presidency in his delivery of the *Challenger Address*. As a kind of national priest, he gives a national eulogy in which he makes sense of this devastating national tragedy and transforms symbols of destruction into emblems of national resilience. Moreover, in this address, like a preacher would his congregation, Reagan encourages his listeners to adopt particular understanding of the tragedy and endeavors to rouse them to support his initiatives. Additionally, this speech addresses particular, pressing policy questions, and ironically, his pastoral tone, which depends on an apolitical appearance, helps accomplish these policy initiatives.

Clarification: Study, Not Approval

This study considers how the institution empowers the president to aim for certain things and looks at the broad institutional context of such an employment of rhetoric. It does not, however, endeavor to assess the success of such attempts. An investigation of the relationship between the presidential rhetoric and the institution of the presidency is most fruitful in an examination of particulars. Namely, in order to understand this relationship, it is best to look at a particular president and observe the dynamics between his uses of rhetoric and the institution. I chose to look at Reagan's use of rhetoric, and his appeal as a case study is related to his rhetorical reputation and the corresponding literature available about his rhetorical style and influence. My purpose is not to endorse or condemn specific policies. Nor am I suggesting here that this is the most successful

example of employing presidential rhetoric. Rather in studying Reagan's rhetoric in particular, I study how presidential rhetoric and the institution of the presidency relate.

The Advantages of an Institutional Approach to Presidential Rhetoric

In closing, I will reflect on the advantage of an institutional approach that looks at the important relationship between the institution of the presidency and presidential rhetoric. Such an approach recognizes that presidential rhetoric is bound by the structure of the institution of the presidency. Institutional elements both qualify and equip the president to fulfill his rhetorical responsibilities and meet national expectations. Not only does my approach consider the contextual effect of the institution, but also it employs Reagan's rhetoric, in particular, as a case study. I will show how this institutional approach compares to ones employed by authors Edwards, Stuckey, Campbell and Jamieson. Turning first to Edwards, I suggest that this study demonstrates the limitations of his approach, which focuses on measurable effects of rhetoric. An institutional approach recognizes that subtle changes in Americans' conception of the presidency have important, long-term ramifications. Stuckey offers a compelling argument for the danger of presidential rhetoric that is mostly ceremonial, and this approach shows how ceremonial rhetoric is influenced by the institution of the presidency. Structural elements both equip and qualify the president to employ certain ceremonial components in his rhetoric. Last, I show how studying a particular president's rhetoric in depth offers advantages to the generic framework employed by Jamieson and Campbell. In examining specifically Reagan's use of rhetoric, we see both the powerful effects of the genre and that of the institution. Moreover, we can explore the relationship between the institution and rhetorical genres.

The Limitations of Edwards' Approach

In his book, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit*, Edwards argues that presidents do not impact significant change with their uses of rhetoric, contrary to common thinking. He evaluates the success of rhetoric by considering shifts in public opinions on specific policies as measured in nationwide polls. In showing the limitations of the “bully pulpit,” he fails to recognize the immeasurable impact particular instances of rhetoric can have on national conceptions of presidency. For example, it is impossible to measure subtle changes in how citizens understand the presidency, but these changes can have long-term ramifications for the political system.

An institutional approach demonstrates that it is important to evaluate what citizens expect of a president. For example, Reagan is empowered to deliver a national eulogy after the *Challenger* explosion because Americans accept him as a kind of national priest. His rhetoric is comforting and persuasive because he seems removed from the political scene. This widespread understanding of the presidency contributes to the powers of Reagan as president. He can act as a national priest as long as Americans believe that the presidency is somehow different from other political positions. In Edwards' approach, you do not notice subtle shifts in this kind of understanding. By focusing on public opinion on specific policies, Edwards fail to consider how particular instances of rhetoric can have long-term effects on the national conceptions of the presidency. In fact, such conceptions and other abstract ideas can have long-term effects on a president's pursuit of policy. I suggest that ceremonial rhetoric is used to elaborate a particular vision of American politics so that issues can be framed in a way that supports the president's specific policies. When Reagan delivers the *Challenger* address, for

instance, he implicitly advances his policy initiatives like support for NASA and an uncompromising posture toward the Soviet Union. American understanding of the presidency is vital for the success of such a rhetorical attempt by Reagan – something that Edwards cannot measure.

How an Institutional Approach Adds to Stuckey's Work

Stuckey explains that presidential rhetoric that is increasingly overly ceremonial in nature is damaging for national discourse. When a president does not offer substantial evidence for his position or make reasoned arguments, he discourages the public from participating in meaningful public discourse. Americans do not engage in debate about specific policies, but instead they just accept or reject the president's interpretation of the issue. Stuckey contends that in contrast to deliberative rhetoric, ceremonial rhetoric focuses encouraging support for the person of the president rather than his espoused policies.

An institutional approach can help to explain just how the president is empowered to use this kind of ceremonial rhetoric for his political ends. Because of structural elements of the presidency, the president can assume certain ceremonial roles, unavailable to other political figures. For instance, as president, Reagan can act as the national spokesperson, treating his own political position as *the* American perspective. Because he is nationally elected, he is expected to be the voice of the country. Reagan does not have to make arguments for his policies, but instead he can assume that his position is the commonly held opinion. Rather than employing deliberative rhetoric, he can depend on ceremonial rhetoric, declaring his interpretation without argument. The institution of the presidency grants presidents the immense power of ceremonial rhetoric,

and an approach, therefore, that studies this institution can help explain Stuckey's assessment by showing how presidents derive their overly ceremonial rhetoric.

In contrast to Stuckey's work, an institutional approach also emphasizes the president's important role in framing national debate through ceremonial rhetoric. We expect our president to provide important leadership in public discourse, and often this comes in the form of framing national discussion by employing ceremonial rhetoric. As a national leader, he is expected to guide and even direct the country's consideration of policies. He can act as the national spokesperson and use broad declarations. It seems that meaningful leadership would require his participation in this process, and because of his institution, he is in the unique position to frame the debate rhetorically. Stuckey fails to recognize that the president's use of ceremonial rhetoric, used to frame public debates, is an important part of his role as a national leader.

Campbell and Jamieson: The Value of Context

Using a generic framework, Campbell and Jamieson explore how presidential rhetoric affects the balance of power among the different branches of government. They posit that successful uses of rhetoric enhance presidential power while unsuccessful attempts force presidents to cede influence to the other entities vying for power. In employing generic framework, their approach recognizes the importance of context and expectations. Campbell and Jamieson believe that particular presidents are successful in their rhetorical goals insofar as they satisfy or even exceed expectations for specific genres of rhetoric. The generic framework for evaluation is similar to an institutional approach in that both consider the impact of contextual elements. Campbell and

Jamieson look at how genre empowers and restricts presidents in their uses of rhetoric, and an institutional approach does the same with the institution of the presidency.

Furthermore, this institutional approach offers a compelling way to see the impact of context because it looks at a specific presidency as a kind of case study. Framing their discussion in terms of genre, Campbell and Jamieson do not investigate a particular president in depth, but rather they compare different instances of the same genre. By considering Reagan in particular, we are able to isolate the variables in a way because we can better determine what is an individual's rhetorical style and what is essentially presidential. When we look at Reagan's rhetoric before and after his presidency, we observe how the one contextual element of the presidency transforms the way he speaks. Campbell and Jamieson, in contrast, have a less systematic approach in that they select various speeches in the same genre to define expectations and requirements. By looking in depth at a president, we see how the institution of the presidency specifically influences rhetoric.

Assessing Candidates in the Future

A rigorous understanding of both presidential rhetoric and national expectations for the presidency can help us assess presidential candidates in the future. Such an understanding necessarily appreciates the complexity and significance of presidential rhetoric. We see the ways in which the president both bears difficult duties and enjoys immense influence, and as such, we take seriously candidates' rhetorical approach in the past. We ask better questions of their previous speeches, addresses, and communications when we hold a better picture of the rhetorical powers of the presidency. In judging candidates, we can consider, for example, the responsibility of the president to act as

national priest in times of significance like national tragedies. We can reflect upon a candidate's potential as the national spokesperson, not only speaking for our nation to the international community but also shaping our own sense of national identity through declarations. An examination of presidential rhetoric teaches us about the responsibilities of the presidency, and in studying presidential rhetoric, we see crucial criteria on which to evaluate presidential candidates. Presidential rhetoric is important to examine because it can help us understand what we value, how we connect, and why we listen. In choosing a particular president, it seems we elect a kind of rhetoric, and it would seem important, thus, we study it.

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