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Executive Rhetoric: An Analysis of Reagan, Bush, and Clinton

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Executive Rhetoric: An Analysis of Reagan, Bush, and Clinton

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Presidential speech has defined some of the greatest moments in American history. However, over the last thirty years the public has grown frustrated with presidential oratory. This project identifies the strategies Reagan, Bush, and Clinton employed to tackle the public's increasing disenchantment with presidential rhetoric. Using rhetorical analyses of speech drafts, content analyses of weekly radio addresses, and interviews with former presidential speechwriters, this project identified the proactive and reactive ways in which presidents and their speechwriters craft speeches to appeal to a disillusioned public. Results indicate that presidents can employ "executive rhetoric" to appeal to the presidential office and obscure the office-holder. By doing so, presidents can simultaneously preserve the value of speech, and restore—if not expand—presidential power.

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Chapter One: Introduction

On September 5, 2012, John Cox experienced one of the most “exasperating” nights of his life.¹ Cox—the owner of a Los Angeles computer store—was on hand that evening at the National Democratic Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina to operate the event stage teleprompter. When handed the speech text for an address that was to be delivered by former President Bill Clinton, Cox was surprised at the length of the document. One of many Americans accustomed to a typical Clinton speech, Cox noticed that at four single-spaced pages, the speech was unusually short. True to Clinton fashion—“[the four pages were] really just a guideline to what Clinton actually wanted to say.”² Cox operated the prompter with sharp attention as Clinton flawlessly weaved in and out of his script, extemporizing nearly one-third of his speech. For Cox, the 49-minute speech was “one of the most fun experiences he’s had in almost 30 years as a prompter operator.”³

Compared to the other addresses delivered that evening, Clinton’s speech was unique. The convention’s purpose was to rally the base—to get Democrats excited about supporting President Barack Obama’s re-election. And while many of the event’s speakers galvanized the audience with ostentatious and boisterous rhetoric, Clinton’s

¹ Dashiell Bennett, “What Bill Clinton Wrote vs. What Bill Clinton Said,” *The Atlantic Wire*, 6 Sept 2012, accessed 1 July 2013, <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/politics/2012/09/what-bill-clinton-said-vs-what-he-wrote/56562/>.

² Bennett, “What Bill Clinton Wrote vs. What Bill Clinton Said.”

³ Bennett, “What Bill Clinton Wrote vs. What Bill Clinton Said.”

speech was mild, understated, and methodical. It overflowed with policy descriptions, it detailed the party's nuanced political philosophy, and it provided example after example illustrating why the Democratic Party was the superior party.

Upon the speech's conclusion, convention coverage turned back to the talking heads stationed at elevated cable news platforms around the stadium. With the seemingly contradictory sound of cheers and applause ringing in the background, pundits from every political stripe lamented that Clinton's speech had fallen short: it was too long, it asked the public to think about too much, it lacked symbolism and soaring rhetoric, and it was so policy-heavy that the audience had lost interest. Judging from the coverage that blanketed national coverage, Cox was surely the only ordinary American who would recall that evening with fond memory.

As it turned out, however, the pundits and talking heads were completely, utterly, unabashedly wrong. The next day, public opinion polls soared, unanimously indicating that the public "loved" Clinton's speech.⁴ They hailed his oratory as a perfect example of what presidential address ought to be. Results indicated that the public appreciated the speech's substance, relevance, and style. Most importantly, the public felt that Clinton's speech conveyed his trust in the American people, a belief that the public is intelligent, thoughtful, and capable.

While the pundits wrongly predicted the direction of public opinion about the speech, they were correct in predicting that whatever that opinion would be, it would be

⁴ Jonathan Cohn, "Clinton, Obama, and the Triumph of Substance," *The New Republic*, 6 Sept 2012, accessed 15 Nov 2012, <http://www.tnr.com/blog/plank/106964/clinton-obama-and-the-triumph-substance>. Cohn writes, "The pundits would inevitably pan the speeches: He was boring, he didn't have lofty themes. Then the polls would come in: The public loved it."

strong. I believe this to be the case because the American public, especially over the last three decades, has become increasingly vocal about their perceptions of politics, political leaders, and the words leaders use. Two factors contributed to this phenomenon.

The first is the inexorable decline of confidence in the presidency that began in the early 1980s. Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider first reported this finding in 1983, suggesting that the “malaise” President Jimmy Carter referred to in 1979 had reached an all-time high; a significant portion of Americans had little to no trust in the president. The authors reported similar findings in 1987; the all-time high had reached higher.⁵ A Pew Research Center report indicated that this trend coursed through the 1990s, “peaking around 1994.” The report noted that, presently, only 20% of Americans trust their leaders “to do what is right.”⁶ General Social Survey researcher Tom Smith explains that “Confidence in the executive branch is largely shaped by presidential popularity.”⁷

⁵ Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, “The Decline of Confidence in American Institutions,” *Political Science Quarterly* 98 (1983): 379-402; Lipset and Schneider, “The Confidence Gap during the Reagan Years, 1981-1987,” *Political Science Quarterly* 102 (1987): 1-23; This point is made albeit with a slight increase in 1983 and 1984 (they argue this is largely attributed to success in Grenada and at the Olympics).

⁶ Pew Research Center, “Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years Trends in American Values: 1987-2012,” 4 June 2012, accessed 15 Nov 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/06/04/section-4-values-about-government-and-the-social-safety-net/>; Pew Research Center, “The Generation Gap and the 2012 Election,” 3 Nov 2011, accessed 15 Nov 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2011/11/03/section-1-how-generations-have-changed/>; Large scale analysis by both the National Election Study (NES) and General Social Survey (GSS) indicate that the trends identified in these studies are indeed accurate. NES also confirms that this trend has endured to the present.

⁷ Tom W. Smith, “Trends in Confidence in Institutions, 1973-2006,” in *Social Trends in American Life: Findings from the General Social Survey Since 1972*, Peter V. Marsden (ed.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 189.

The second factor is an inexorable increase in partisanship over the same thirty years. A recent large-scale study calculated the ideological difference between Republicans and Democrats on 48 values questions from 1987 to 2012. The results indicate that between 1987 and 2001, a numeric measure of partisan difference hovered between nine and eleven percent. In 2002, this measure increased to fourteen percent, and again to eighteen percent in 2012. Over twenty-five years, the strength of American partisanship nearly doubled.

What do these two shifts have to do with public attitudes about presidential speech? I contend that levels of trust and partisanship have influenced not only the public's perceptions of politics and political leaders, but political speech as well; and, I believe my personal, scholarly, and civic experiences inform this assumption.

First, as someone who has been interested in presidential speech for nearly two decades, I've noticed a shift in the way my family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers talk about presidential speech. They seem to expect less from presidential address—not because they want to lower fantastic expectations, but because they are consistently disappointed. They find presidential address to be more style than substance and filled with empty promises.

As a scholar, I have documented trends of presidential speech research, noting what those trends seem to indicate about the public. Scholarship once claimed presidential rhetoric was so important it could be equated to governing. It then claimed that presidential rhetoric should be used with caution in deference to the constitution. It next claimed that presidential rhetoric actually doesn't do much to effect change and that

the public doesn't respond to rhetoric like it used to. And it now observes that presidential rhetoric is anti-intellectual and is contributing to the dumbing-down of our society.⁸ A running joke among scholars is the prevalence of “mesearch”—research that reflects personal dispositions. If the trend of political rhetoric research tells us anything about the informed, trusted, and thoughtful perspectives of reputable academics, it is that scholarly reverence for speech in the 21st century is becoming increasingly tenuous.

Additionally, as a civically oriented citizen I have paid attention to news reports and articles expressing journalists' attitudes towards presidential speech. Consider these examples of statements from the national newspaper of record, *The New York Times*:

- “President Reagan, in his television address Monday night, sought to simplify the choice of bills by quoting a Southern ‘boll weevil’ Democrat as saying that the issue boiled down to whether you were ‘for’ or ‘agin’ the President, clearly the people’s choice.”⁹
- President George H.W. Bush’s speeches “will require more than carping, more than partisanship, more than stagey deadlines for empty initiatives.”¹⁰
- “[President Clinton’s] performance called to mind why many of us backed his candidacy three years ago.” While “moving and eloquent . . . his speech never seriously confronted [our nation’s] future.” The public hoped it “might address the real racial problems facing us.”¹¹

⁸ Roderick P. Hart, *The Sound of Leadership: Presidential Communication in the Modern Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) ; Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); George Edwards, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).; Elvin T. Lim, *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁹ Leonard Silk, “Economic Scene: The Gamble On Tax Cuts,” *The New York Times*, 29 July 1981, D2.

¹⁰ Opinion, “The President’s Petulance,” *The New York Times*, 12 June 1991, A26.

¹¹ Andrew Sullivan, “Let Affirmative Action Die,” *The New York Times*, 23 July 1995, E15.

Statements like these continue today. The media both shape and echo public opinion. No matter which direction that opinion moves, the common denominator is that at some point the public likely will express the frustrations portrayed by the media.

But my personal, scholarly, and civic experiences only suffice as anecdotal data. In order to determine if my assumption is indeed correct, empirical evidence is necessary. Hence, I gathered public opinion polls beginning with those conducted at the beginning of Reagan's term—at which point research suggests positive attitudes towards the presidency began to decline.¹² Additionally, because partisanship has been identified as a particularly strong predictor of political attitudes, I limited my data collection to the end of Clinton's term—at which point research indicates partisanship sharply increases.¹³ The result was a survey of public opinion polls from January 20, 1981 to January 20, 2001 (during the presidencies of Reagan, Bush, and Clinton). I culled from this data any questions that asked a generic version of: “How do you ‘rate’ (this given presidential speech)?” The results indicate that the public responded *positively* to speeches from these presidents at respectively *decreasing* rates of 55.8%, 53.5%, and 51.1%, while the public responded *negatively* at respectively *increasing* rates of 25.6%, 32.0%, and 35.3%.

While these results are surely enough to substantiate my claim, I also found a number of particularly telling poll questions. These questions were all asked during the Clinton administration. I found them curious because they took on a particularly more

¹² Lipset and Schneider, “The Decline of Confidence in American Institutions”; Lipset and Schneider, “The Confidence Gap during the Reagan Years, 1981-1987.”

¹³ Pew Research Center, “Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years Trends in American Values: 1987-2012.”

admonitory tone towards presidential speech. Consider these questions and their answers:

- Does Clinton's speech represent a serious plan for what he wants to accomplish in the next year, or does it represent a symbolic statement he feels the American public wants to hear? (January 1995)

Answer: "Serious plan": 41%; Symbolic statements": 51%; "Don't know": 7%.

- Do you think the President's State of the Union Address really tells American what is going on in the country? (January 1998)

Answer: "Yes": 24%; "No": 67%; "Not sure": 9%.

- Do you think the President's State of the Union Address really tells Americans what is going on in the country or it is a ceremony for Washington insiders? (January 2000)

Answer: "Tells Americans": 16%; "Ceremony for insiders": 70%; "Not sure": 15%.

Admittedly, over the twenty years of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations, public opinion polling itself has become more sophisticated. Moreover, the increasing variety of media through which polls are conducted has increased the creativity and precision of the public opinion business. These evolutions are bound to produce more interesting questions over time. Yet, it is fascinating to me that these kinds of questions were asked; to ask them assumes some sort of presumption on the part of pollsters that this public attitude does exist. The presence of these questions, coupled with the empirical data presented, strongly suggest that the public is increasingly disenchanted with presidential speech.

But, if the public is frustrated with what presidents say, why were they so receptive to Clinton's speech? What about his speech did they like? What techniques

did it employ? What kind of language did it use? What assumptions did it make? These questions necessitate answers for both practical and theoretical reasons. If the public is increasingly disenchanted with presidential speech, then political operatives and rhetorical scholars alike ought to investigate what strategies presidents used to address those frustrations in the past and how presidents might temper these critiques in the future. To begin such an investigation, this dissertation asks: *How do presidents and their speechwriters appeal to a public disenchanted with speech?* In what follows I outline the steps taken to answer this question. I first trace the relevant literature, explaining how it informs my research. I then identify the units of analysis and the methods that were used. Finally, I conclude this chapter by outlining the remainder of the project.

LITERATURE REVIEW

My research was premised on three essential themes in communication and political science literature that contribute to the goals of this dissertation: the evolution and the effects of the rhetorical presidency; research on the speechwriting profession; and explorations of the concept of “strategic language use.”

The Rhetorical Presidency

Over the last half century the presidency has become the centerpiece of the modern American political system. There are a great many reasons accounting for this observation: technological advances in transportation allow the president to travel the country; the increasing prevalence of radio, television, and internet media give citizens instant access to the White House; the goings-on of a large, decentralized legislative

branch often prove difficult to follow. Yet, apart from these and many more examples, one explanation stands above the rest. The presidency became the hallmark of the modern American political system because its occupants learned the value of public speech. Here, I detail the rise and effects of the rhetorical presidency.

In the early 20th century President Woodrow Wilson recognized the increasing need for a unified national leader. He understood that, while Congress could not act in this capacity because it represented so many disparate parts of the country, the president could fulfill this role seamlessly. Wilson began to use frequent public speech as a primary tool of governing, employing persuasive techniques to convince the public to support his political agenda.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, Wilson's administration marks the beginning of what communication scholars call the "rhetorical presidency."¹⁵ This new kind of presidency gave the American polity a new perspective on the centrality of the commander in chief to American government. And with time this centrality grew exponentially.

James W. Ceaser, Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey K. Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette posit that "prior to this century, popular leadership through rhetoric was suspect. Presidents

¹⁴ Carol Gelderman, *All the President's Words: The Bully Pulpit and the Creation of the Virtual Presidency* (Markham, Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002), 3.

¹⁵ While generally, Wilson is considered the first modern president (Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*; Gelderman, *All the President's Words*), some consider that position held by Dwight D. Eisenhower (Craig A. Smith, *The White House Speaks: Presidential Leadership as Persuasion* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994); Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York: Basic, 1982); and some by Franklyn D. Roosevelt (Gerald Gamm and Renée M. Smith, "Presidencies, Parties, and the Public: Evolving Patterns of Interaction, 1877-1929.," in *Speaking to the People: The Rhetorical Presidency in Historical Perspective*, ed. Richard J. Ellis (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 87-110; Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2007).

rarely spoke directly to the people, preferring communications between the branches of government.”¹⁶ The authors warn that, conversely, the modern public has learned to evaluate presidential performance through words and not deeds, and that the presidency no longer functions according to its constitutional design. They lament the power of popular opinion over the executive, noting that “the Founding Fathers were concerned not to erect an executive branch that could become overwrought by constant appeals to national rabble.”¹⁷

Tulis extends this argument, highlighting the impact of the presidency on democracy writ-large. Explaining the Founders’ impetus for constraining the executive branch’s constitutional powers, Tulis notes that our leaders “worried especially about the danger a powerful executive might pose to the system if power were derived from the role of the popular leader.”¹⁸ As a result, “popular rhetoric was proscribed in the 19th century because it could manifest demagoguery, impede deliberation, and subvert the routines of republican governance.”¹⁹ The modern presidency, Tulis clarifies, violates these premises because it employs rhetorical leadership as its primary tool of governance. He laments that presidential power is derived from popular support, and that “inspirational” rhetoric is used more frequently than “policy stand rhetoric” in order to

¹⁶ James W. Ceasar, Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey K. Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette, “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11 (1981): 159.

¹⁷ Ceasar, Thurow, Tulis and Bessette, “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency,” 159.

¹⁸ Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 27.

¹⁹ Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 95.

cull that support.²⁰ In short, the ubiquity of rhetorical leadership “poses difficulties for modern constitutional rule” because even the hollowest language is imbued with significant value when spoken by the president.²¹

The rise of the rhetorical presidency has had many effects on American life. First, Carol Gelderman argues that because of the rhetorical presidency, words lack value. “The greatest loss from the evolution of the rhetorical presidency,” she explains, “has been a decrease in the integrity of the word.”²² She unpacks this assessment, illustrating how language and democracy are inextricably intertwined and often symbiotic: “Government is about ideas and their manifestations as words. Words count. The Constitution and the nation’s laws, words carefully written down, are the bedrock of personal rights and liberties. When words are devalued, the political system is at risk.”²³ Gelderman considers the decrease in political participation and civic life evidence of this phenomenon, suggesting that “Surely it is not wholly coincidental that as the number of presidential speeches has risen, voter participation has fallen correspondingly.”²⁴ While Gelderman doesn’t support this correlation with any data, it is a compelling accusation, nonetheless.

²⁰ Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 138.

²¹ Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 174.

²² Gelderman, *All the President’s Words*, 177.

²³ Gelderman, *All the President’s Words*, 178.

²⁴ Gelderman, *All the President’s Words*, 178.

Another empirical result attributed to the rise of the rhetorical presidency is the increasing presence of entertainment in presidential address. Roderick P. Hart affirms that modern presidential speeches aim to please more often than they aim to inform. He quips that “when entertainment is called for, Americans send in their presidents and not the clowns,”²⁵ cleverly suggesting the public has come to expect nothing more from a presidential address than a circus act. Highlighting the differences between the traditional and modern presidency, Hart contends that “what used to be a broad, bold line between argument and entertainment, between speechmaking and theatre, now has no substance at all.”²⁶ As a result of entertainment’s primacy, he concludes that “the very concept of politics is now threatening to slip away from us as a nation.”²⁷

Elvin Lim studies the specific ways that presidents feature this aesthetic over the substantive by analyzing trends in presidential rhetoric over 211 years. Lim’s results indicate that the presidency “in its modern mode has exhibited an increased tendency to avoid references to cognitive and evaluative processes and states as well as to substitute formal word choices for more colloquial turns of phrase.”²⁸ One interesting example indicating that “presidents of the twentieth century have not tried very hard . . . to resort to substantive arguments to sway public opinion” highlights a comparison between how

²⁵ Hart, *The Sound of Leadership*, 203.

²⁶ Hart, *The Sound of Leadership*, 132.

²⁷ Roderick P. Hart, *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter* (Sage: Thousand Oaks, 1999), 17.

²⁸ Elvin T. Lim, "Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric: An Analysis of Rhetoric from George Washington to Bill Clinton," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32 (2002): 333.

presidents William Henry Harrison and George W. Bush metaphorized freedom. While Harrison grandiloquently likened freedom to “the sovereign balm for every injury which our institutions may receive,” Bush proclaimed that “Freedom is like a beautiful kite that can go higher and higher.”²⁹ This, and other examples, illustrate that while aesthetic language has been consistently pervasive in presidential rhetoric, the degree to which it is eloquently articulated has significantly decreased.

Tracing the history and effects of the rhetorical presidency is an important step in arguing why this project is necessary for a more thorough understanding of how the modern presidency operates. Today, presidential speech is not respected but devalued, not informative but entertaining, and not formal but colloquial. My dissertation seeks to understand how presidents and speechwriters address these phenomena in the speechmaking process.

Speechwriting

In addition to literature on the rhetorical presidency, communication studies have produced important research on the role and function of White House speechwriters. Here, I review what has been written about speechwriters, which helps to clarify the purpose, motives, and unintended consequences of institutionalizing the speechwriting profession in the White House. The purpose of reviewing this literature is to support the claim that speechwriters’ perspectives are important considerations in answering the question posed by this study.

²⁹ Lim, "Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric," 333.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson explains the influence speechwriters wield in creating a relationship between the public and president. She writes, “Since much of what we know about our leaders is learned from what they say to us, their speechwriters help shape our perceptions of them.”³⁰ Speechwriters pen the language that presidents use to communicate with the public. These communications—as indicated earlier—serve as a form of governing; hence, the public legitimately relies on them to determine their support of a president. This fact has serious implications for not only how citizens judge their leaders, but for how the public chooses their leaders in the first place. Jamieson notes as a matter of fact that “The omnipresence of speechwriters has changed the rhetorical requirements for those who would be president.”³¹ Here, Jamieson indicates that because speechwriters have become commonplace in modern American politics, citizens have come to expect a high quality of public address.

Leading speechwriting scholar Martin Medhurst voices the practicality of using presidential speechwriters. He argues that speechwriters are valuable to a president because they ensure that a presidential discourse “represents the best articulation of policy or position possible.”³² Medhurst admonishes the rhetorical requirements that have been placed upon the president. He suggests that “some presidents have real difficulty putting their ideas into words” and such difficulty should not preclude who

³⁰ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 204.

³¹ Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age*, 230.

³² Martin Medhurst, “Presidential Speechwriting: Ten Myths that Plague Modern Scholarship,” in *Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond*, eds. Kurt Ritter and Martin Medhurst (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 10.

would be a successful president from taking office. Medhurst relegates the position of speechwriter to that of just a general staffer when he writes that we shouldn't "[deprive] our leaders of the specific types of help that they need."³³ This is likely to the dismay of other scholars who lament when speechwriting is relegated to a menial task.³⁴ Yet Medhurst defends his stance affirming that "Presidential speechwriters have served the nation well. Presidents know that, which is why they continue to use them."³⁵

Some scholars disagree with Medhurst on this point, and argue that speechwriters are in fact harmful to American democracy. Lim identifies characteristics of what he coins as the "anti-intellectual presidency." These are administrations in which presidential rhetoric is characterized not by thoughtful deliberation, but by "pander[ing] to and seduc[ing] the people."³⁶ Speechwriters, Lim suggests, are major culprits in the declining quality of presidential speech. He writes that while speechwriters are generally intellectual and creative, they are advised by their administrations to write "in opposition to their natural literary inclinations."³⁷ Lim explains that "for modern speechwriters, plain, conversational language, not ornate oration, is the key to effective presidential

³³ Medhurst, "Presidential Speechwriting," 11.

³⁴ Ernest G. Borrmann, "Ethics of Ghostwritten Speeches," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 47 (1961): 262-267. Borrmann writes that indicating speechwriting is a menial task "serves as a powerful indirect suggestion that speechmaking is an unimportant part of leadership and one that the personage in high leadership position delegates to hired flunkies" (263).

³⁵ Medhurst, "Presidential Speechwriting," 10.

³⁶ Elvin T. Lim, *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency*, x.

³⁷ Lim, *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency*, 42.

communication.”³⁸ In a strong indictment of a speechwriter’s agency in the quality of presidential rhetoric, Lim proclaims that “speechwriters in the last half century, by their own accounts, killed oratory.”³⁹ Lim’s data, culled from interviews with former presidential speechwriters, leads him to a damning conclusion: “the cult of simplicity endorsed by presidents and speechwriters is anti-intellectualism with a demagogic smile; it is a seductive justification of anti-intellectualism that has blinded us to the gradual rot of our public deliberative sphere.”⁴⁰

Whether the cause of it or the result of it, the modern presidency is as it is because of the institutionalization of the speechwriting profession in the White House. Communication and political science scholarship has opined the benefits or detriments of speechwriters playing such important roles in creating a presidency. Much of this literature either admonishes or praises presidential speechwriters and relies primarily on the author’s personal perspective on the matter. The research reviewed here is valuable for this study because it represents the most objective, practical approaches to understanding speechwriters; and if the research presents speechwriters in a positive or negative light, that representation is supported by research rather than assumption. Such an approach is a valuable guide for my dissertation, one concerned not with the positive or negative attributes of speechwriting, but motivated solely by the observation that

³⁸ Lim, *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency*, 44.

³⁹ Lim, *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency*, 42.

⁴⁰ Lim, *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency*, 48.

speechwriters are important political players, and their narratives are indispensable for producing the most accurate analysis possible.

Strategic Language Use

The rhetorical presidency and speechwriting are important features of communication and political science literature. When drafting an address, both presidents and speechwriters engage in a process called “strategic language use,” an idea that serves as the conceptual or theoretical lens for this project. In an analysis of President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s “Atoms for Peace” speech, Medhurst concludes that “human agents can shape language and guide perception in accordance with their own purposes. . . . Language is not self-explanatory. It is a reflection of the goals, motives, and values of those who choose to use it as an instrument by which to realize their ends.” He calls his criticism of Eisenhower’s speech “a case study in the strategic use of language.”⁴¹ This piece unearths the ways in which Eisenhower’s speech was crafted with precise language that “can be clearly observed” to serve a directed, strategic purpose.⁴² Medhurst’s article, published in 1987, uses the specific concept of “strategic language use” as a rhetorical lens. This concept, though, is also the culmination of, or buttressed by, many rhetorical theories that indicate exactly how language is used strategically. Perhaps the most poignant for present purposes are those of Aristotle and Kenneth Burke.

⁴¹ Martin J. Medhurst, “Eisenhower’s ‘Atoms for Peace’ Speech: A Case Study in the Strategic Use of Language,” *Communication Monographs* 54 (1987): 218-219.

⁴² Medhurst, “Eisenhower’s ‘Atoms for Peace’ Speech,” 210.

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is a treatise on composition that outlines the strategies of rhetoric, an art he defines as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion."⁴³ Aristotle's philosophy is commonly considered to be a hybrid of the two dominant and opposing perspectives on rhetoric during the Hellenistic period. Those traditions, the Platonic and Sophistic, are tenuous because they use rhetoric in different ways. One is to communicate what Plato calls "forms," or absolute truths. These forms are arrived at by a dialectic, a systematic exchange of ideas in pursuit of a higher truth. To Platonists, the use of any technique other than logic to engender persuasion is unethical. Conversely, Sophists believe truth to be subjective—the result of gathering sensory information. Sophists were charged with manipulating auditors by using strategies often condemned as "pure bombast, sheer display with little substance."⁴⁴

Aristotle's work reflects both trajectories, illustrating how a speaker can ethically use appeals to emotion, credibility, and logic to communicate truths that while not absolute, are arrived at with experiential information. Aristotle identifies three kinds of appeals one can employ to engender persuasion: appeals to an orator's character (*ethos*), to the audience's emotions (*pathos*), and to argument (*logos*).⁴⁵ These appeals can be used to persuade audiences in three types of speech occasions or forums: epideictic

⁴³ Aristotle, *Rhetoric and Poetics*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts and Ingram Bywater, (New York: The Modern Library), 1954.

⁴⁴ James J. Murphy and Richard A. Katula, *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*, (Davis: Hermagoras Press, 1995), 41.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Rhetoric and Poetics*, 24-25.

(ceremonial), forensic (judicial), and deliberative (legislative).⁴⁶ Aristotle posits that because *logos* emphasizes factual data, it is most appropriate for deliberative occasions, while *pathos* is most appropriate for ceremonial occasions because its function is to praise or blame. Modern presidential address, as previously explained, is both ceremonial and deliberative, as the president serves as both a chief of state and chief of government. It follows, then, that persuasion utilizing both *logos* and *pathos* will be present in presidential speeches.

Much of what Aristotle outlines helps us understand how and why an author uses certain kinds of persuasion techniques rather than others. This project used Aristotle's kinds and forums of argument to help illuminate the strategic language choices presidents and speechwriters made in speech drafts. I argue that these choices infer a great deal as to how presidents and speechwriters use language to address the public's disenchantment with speech.

In addition to Aristotle, two Burkean concepts are particularly well-suited to a discussion of strategic language use: motive and language forms. Burke's philosophical focus emphasizes the role of human motives in producing rhetoric. Personal motives, he argues, are "shorthand terms for situations."⁴⁷ The motives that might propel an individual to make certain language choices over others are nuanced, complicated, and often inarticulable. What we call motives, then, are "rough, shorthand descriptions for certain typical patterns of discrepant and conflicting stimuli," the stimuli being situations

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Rhetoric and Poetics*, 32.

⁴⁷ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 29.

that must be addressed with language.⁴⁸ Further, Burke emphasizes that motives, while sometimes unconscious, ought to be unearthed and critiqued in order to better understand how language and thought cooperate. He writes, that “A distinguishing feature of consciousness is likewise a concern with motives, and a feeling that we must consider the motives for our choices.”⁴⁹ This perspective on human motives contributes to a better understanding of how humans use rhetoric, or as Aristotle calls it, “the available means of persuasion,” in a strategic manner to respond to a situation.

Burke’s second contribution to the concept of strategic language use is his distinction between two dichotomies of language. Burke, details how the “Psychology of Information” and the “Psychology of Form” result in different language choices.⁵⁰ The psychology of information, Burke explains, is a focus that emphasizes details and particulars, an artist’s forthright and frank display of a matter. The psychology of form, rather, moves away from the subject at hand and towards an audience’s consideration of it. Burke writes that the difference between the two is a “transition from the matter-of-fact to the grandiose, the full-throated and full-voweled.”⁵¹ Form, he suggests, is the “creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite.”⁵² A psychology of form, then, minimizes the role of informational details and

⁴⁸ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 30.

⁴⁹ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 30.

⁵⁰ Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1931).

⁵¹ Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 30.

⁵² Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 31.

maximizes the piece's general effect on an audience. The method Burke suggests best maintains the auditor's interest, the one "most natural to the psychology of form is eloquence."⁵³ Thus, eloquence is a method of form that induces a pleasant experience in the audience.

Burke proposes another pair that operates similarly to information and form: semantic and poetic meaning. The aim of semantic meaning is "to evolve a vocabulary that gives the name and address of every event in the universe."⁵⁴ Semantic meaning is symbolic because every entity—tangible and not—is imbued with a distinctly referential name. Semantic meaning renders these names objective and unvaried by circumstance. Poetic meaning, however, is "strongly weighted with emotional values, with *attitude*."⁵⁵ Language that is poetic is subjective, and the meaning inherent in it varies from one situation to the next. To further clarify the difference, Burke contends that semantic meaning "would try to *cut away*, to *abstract*, all emotional factors that complicate the objective clarity of meaning. The second [poetic] would try to derive its vision from the maximum *heaping up* of all these emotional factors . . ."⁵⁶ Burke's treatment of motive as well as information/form and semantic/poetic meaning are helpful for understanding distinctions in the way people use language—particularly how presidents and speechwriters make choices between different forms of language. These dichotomies are

⁵³ Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 37.

⁵⁴ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941), 141.

⁵⁵ Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 143.

⁵⁶ Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 128.

synonymous with “style and substance,” the common coupling mentioned in public critiques of presidential speech. Therefore, Burke provides theoretical basis for understanding what the public means when they claim preference for certain kind of language choices over others.

Burke’s literature contributes to this study because it provides a clear rationale for why language choice is always the specific result of a specific motivation. When composing a speech draft, presidents and speechwriters consider the significant differences between word choices. Each option weighed has particular semantic and poetic meanings attached. These inherent meanings determine which language choices are more suitable for the purposes of an individual speech.

The three areas of literature reviewed here—the rhetorical presidency, presidential speechwriting, and strategic language use—all contribute to a better understanding of the rationale for this study. This project seeks to understand how presidents and speechwriters address the public’s growing disenchantment with presidential rhetoric. Literature on the rhetorical presidency is necessary for understanding why the presidency operates as it does, and what the role of speech in the modern presidency has come to be. Research on speechwriters is necessary because it emphasizes the importance of the speechwriter in the creation of presidential messages. Concepts from Aristotle and Burke support the argument that language choices are reflective of motives and that investigating language choices helps us make sound arguments about those motives. Based upon this literature, I now describe what texts my studies investigated and the types of analyses that were employed.

METHOD AND UNITS OF ANALYSIS

This project investigated how presidents and speechwriters use speech to persuade a public disenchanted with presidential speech. In devising my study, I found it useful to outline precise frustrations the public has with speech. In order to do so, I surveyed the online comment sections from three sources: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and POLITICO. I searched for stories written about presidential speech. A second coder was used to analyze 100 reader comments for reliability ($\alpha=.89$). I identified five categories into which readers' lamenting opinions fell: Comments opined that presidential speech was arbitrary, exclusive, personal, stylistic, or trivial. Each is detailed below with descriptions that best capture the sentiment of the public's comments.

Arbitrary	-Contingent upon the president's discretion. -Not precipitated by any particular event. -Based on individual whim.
Exclusive	-Limited to a selection of people. -Partisan or party-oriented. -Not encompassing of the entire country.
Personal	-Concerned with individual success. -Emphasis on his leadership, not on the country's wellbeing. -Replete with narrative and personal detail.
Stylistic	-Lacking substance. -No real policy discussion. -Grandiose language.
Trivial	-Unimportant or insignificant. -Lacking real influence or purpose. -Having limited or no effect; inconsequential.

Table 1: Public Frustrations with Presidential Speech

Because online comment sections are a relatively new forum for public opinion, these five descriptors were mostly identified in relation to speeches given by Presidents Obama

and George W. Bush. Nonetheless, I argue that they are relevant critiques of presidential speech that produced fruitful analysis of my data. In what follows I trace the units of analysis and method for each study.

Study One: Case Study

This dissertation asks: how do presidents and speechwriters address the public's disenchantment with speech? Study One answered that question by evaluating the trajectory of presidential messages in sequential speech drafts. This trajectory reflects a proactive attempt to address the public's frustrations: that is, presidents and speechwriters actively worked from draft to draft editing language in a way that they believed would result in a publicly favorable message. I compared multiple speech drafts against each other to make informed observations about the linguistic inner-workings of the speechwriting process. I identified the ways certain themes or messages changed from one draft to the next, or how the assumed audiences were broadened, narrowed, or completely changed. The active, purposeful, motive-driven choices speechwriters and presidents made while drafting speeches helped me determine how speechwriters and presidents responded to the public's changing preferences for presidential speech.

Units of Analysis

I traveled to three presidential libraries to collect speech drafts: Reagan in Simi Valley, CA; Bush in College Station, TX; and Clinton in Little Rock, AR. Based on insight culled from numerous speechwriter and presidential memoirs, news articles and interviews, and books with insight on the writers or the administrations, I applied a number of criteria for speech selection. First, I did not select inaugurals or State of the

Union addresses, as these texts are subject to an inordinate amount of eyes and pens from all throughout the government. Second, I did not select speeches considered “rose garden rubbish,” that is, small speeches with little political importance. The speeches selected were significant enough that they were purposefully crafted to persuade the general public. Next, I did not choose speeches that have a solely epideictic or deliberative function. In order to argue that these results are generalizable, I selected speeches that moderate these two functions. Also, I did not select speeches that focus on foreign policy issues. These speeches are largely in the hands of other agencies, and the veracity of language choice is usually dulled for the sake of diplomacy or national security. Finally, I made qualifications based on the individual presidents. For example, when President Bush was to address veterans or talk about his experiences in war, he would often delete any affective language that would compromise his focus. Thus, I did not choose a speech from the Bush administration that referenced war because it was unlikely to contain a “normal” balance of language trends. The following speeches were chosen:

- Reagan: “Address on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation,” July 27, 1981
- Bush: “Remarks on the Administration’s Domestic Policy,” June 12, 1991
- Clinton: “Address on Affirmative Action,” July 19, 1995

By analyzing the multiple drafts of each speech, I attempted to determine how presidents and speechwriters address the public’s disenchantment for presidential speeches.

Method

In pursuit of this project’s objectives, Study One employed a close-textual rhetorical analysis. As Hart explains, rhetorical analysis “is the business of identifying the

complications of rhetoric and then unpacking or explaining them in a comprehensive and efficient manner.”⁵⁷ Moreover, Wayne Brockreide describes the eclectic nature of rhetorical analysis, describing the critic as having “a battery of searchlights available from which he chooses the ones that can help him light up the rhetorical experience.”⁵⁸ Rhetorical analyses are entirely qualitative, in which critics make informed, yet subjective, judgments about the linguistic inner-workings of a text. This process allowed me the opportunity to navigate the texts organically and to find rhetorical dimensions of the texts that might otherwise be concealed.

Critics make these judgments equipped with insight drawn from rhetorical theories that help explain how rhetorical artifacts persuade. While the literature reviewed earlier on the rhetorical presidency and speechwriting are necessary for understanding the scope of this dissertation, the research on strategic language use is instrumental for developing its method. My project used the concept of strategic language use as a theoretical lens, one that elucidates how speech composers move from draft to draft, editing language along the way for motivated, strategic reasons. Medhurst writes that strategic language criticism—the kind of analysis akin to my project—“is the study of how language is used by humans to channel response,” and is, in his analysis of the

⁵⁷ Roderick P. Hart and Suzanne Daughton, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism* 3rd ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2005), 22.

⁵⁸ Wayne Brockreide, “Rhetorical Criticism as Argument,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60 (1974), 170.

Atoms for Peace speech drafts, “a paradigm both of linguistic deception and strategic posturing at the highest levels of government.”⁵⁹

Strategic language use as discussed by Medhurst is a modern hybrid of theory, a recuperation of concepts from Aristotle and Burke formatted to be relevant for understanding contemporary political language. Aristotle’s pairings of rhetorical appeals (*ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*) and rhetorical forums (judicial, epideictic, deliberative) are particularly helpful for this dissertation. Aristotle paired each appeal with a forum, arguing that the appeal was not only the most effective for achieving persuasion in that forum, but also that it was the most appropriate for that forum. Many of the current anxieties over presidential speech seem to be the result of inappropriate use of certain appeals in certain forums. For example, while *pathos* (according to Aristotle) is most appropriate in epideictic situations, modern presidential policy speeches (in a deliberative forum) seem to feature a great deal of *pathetic* appeals. This language is more affective and less material than the *logos* that ought to characterize a deliberative speech. The public’s disenchantment with presidential speech—its oft heard woes that White House oratory is “mere rhetoric” or “all style no substance”—is reflective of this incongruity between appeal and forum.

Moreover, Burke’s literature provides a wealth of contributions to this dissertation’s methodology. Burke’s reflections on human motive indicate that a critic can postulate one’s motive from one’s language use. He identifies two language dichotomies that are helpful for uncovering motive. Semantic meaning, akin to the

⁵⁹ Medhurst, “Eisenhower’s ‘Atoms for Peace’ Speech,” 219.

psychology of information, is derived from objective and denotative language. Poetic meaning, akin to the psychology of form, is derived from subjective and connotative language. These dichotomies are helpful for understanding modern political language. For example, one presidential aid is quoted as indicating that in presidential speech, “the difference between ‘serious’ and ‘grave’ can mean pulling an ambassador out [of a country] versus dropping bombs.”⁶⁰ In this scenario, “serious” and “grave” are semantically similar but poetically different in their degrees of indicated danger. While semantic language is necessary for establishing a structured, coherent framework upon which shared meaning can exist, poetic meaning colors a word in an affective way.

In short, the way language is chosen, the way a writer intends for certain language to mean a certain thing, is motive. This dissertation uses Aristotle and Burke’s concepts to foster the argument that language does indeed reflect motive, and that by investigating language one can deduce motive. Specifically, by investigating the evolution of language choice from one presidential speech draft to the next, I deduced how presidents and speechwriters can address the public’s frustrations with presidential speech.

Study Two: Content Analysis

Study One used rhetorical analyses of speech drafts to determine how presidents and their speechwriters *proactively* addressed the public’s disenchantment within a single speech. This study, in contrast, determined how presidents and speechwriters *reactively* addressed public disenchantment over the course of the administration. In order to

⁶⁰ Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts: Presidents and Their Speechwriters*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 452.

answer such a question, I completed content analyses of collections of weekly radio addresses from each president.

I chose to analyze radio addresses because this is arguably the most consistent “type” of speech the president delivers—as it has been performed every Saturday since 1982 with only rare exception. Reagan was the first modern president to revive the tradition of presidential radio addresses that was initiated briefly by Calvin Coolidge but most notably by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Fireside Chats.” Although presidential rhetoric literature has thoroughly traced the subject of speech genres, the radio address curiously is overlooked.

Units of Analysis

To select speech transcripts for analysis, I consulted The University of California at Santa Barbara’s American Presidency Project.⁶¹ This database has transcripts of every modern weekly presidential address commencing with Reagan’s first on April 3, 1982. Reagan delivered 335 radio addresses, Bush delivered 18, and Clinton delivered 406. Clearly, the frequency of Bush’s radio addresses is much lower than that of Reagan and Clinton. In order to maintain some semblance of equality across the three presidencies, I decided to analyze all 18 of Bush’s speeches, and double that number for Reagan and Clinton—as, conveniently, they each served two terms rather than Bush’s one term. For selection of Reagan’s and Clinton’s speeches, I used a random number sorter to select 36 speeches per president.

⁶¹ University of California at Santa Barbara, *American Presidency Project*, accessed 8 April 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/satradio.php>.

Method

Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of manifest content of communication.⁶² This approach is objective (researchers' biases and idiosyncrasies are prevented through inter-coder reliability), systematic (sample texts are selected through consistent and explicit rules), and quantitative (analyses an accurate representation of a body of messages).⁶³ This method has high external validity (it is generalizable) and low internal validity (cannot make claims of the effects of content on an audience).

The unit of analysis was the sentence.⁶⁴ The author coded all texts in the study. A second coder examined 10% of the texts under examination.⁶⁵ The second coder was trained over several sessions. Inter-coder reliability statistics show acceptable agreement across coding decisions ($\alpha = .84$).⁶⁶

The key variable was poetic language use and it had two values: the presence of poetic language and the absence of poetic language (see Table 2). Assessing the presence and absence of poetic language use is important in this project because it reveals how

⁶² Bernard Berelson, *Content Analysis in Communication Research* (New York, NY: Hafner Publishing Company, 1971); Krippendorff, Klaus A., *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1980).

⁶³ Roger D. Wimmer and Joseph R. Dominick, *Mass Media Research and Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1994).

⁶⁴ Wimmer and Dominick, *Mass Media Research and Introduction*.

⁶⁵ Lawrence R. Frey, Carl H. Botan, and Gary L. Kreps. *Investigating Communication: An Introduction to Research Methods* (New York: Allyn and Bacon, 2000).

⁶⁶ Frey, Botan, and Kreps, *Investigating Communication*.

often presidents attempt to connect with audiences via hearts or minds.⁶⁷ Tracking the presence and absence of rhetorical patterns helps scholars better understand the rhetorical dimensions of a text and the strategies authors employ to persuade audiences.⁶⁸ The key variable was measured by counting the number of sentences (per speech) that fell into the two categories. Table 3 displays the findings from the coding.

Coding Category	President	Examples
<i>The presence of poetic language</i>	Reagan	“We’re a nation built and sustained by hope.” “Today we’re poised on the launching pad of the future.”
	Bush	“And that’s like taking out a car loan and never buying a car.” “This amendment will bring us back to shore.”
	Clinton	“The American job engine is in high gear.” “The Americans won the cold war. We must not leave them out in the cold.”
<i>The absence of poetic language</i>	Reagan	“Last week we sent up to the Congress our Federal Credit Reform Act of 1987.” “The cost would be under \$6 a month, or \$70 next year, in Medicare premiums.”
	Bush	“The Iraqi Army was defeated.” “I met the new leaders of Czechoslovakia, both Federal and Republic.”
	Clinton	“That’s a big reason crime is down to a 25-year low.” “We will make child safety seats safer.”

Table 2: The Presence and Absence of Poetic Language Use

⁶⁷ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*; Medhurst, “Eisenhower’s ‘Atoms for Peace’ Speech”; Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*; Hart and Daughton, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*.

⁶⁸ Roderick P. Hart, “Systematic Analysis of Political Discourse: The Development of DICTION,” in K. Sanders, et al. (eds.), *Political Communication Yearbook: 1984* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 97-134; Roderick P. Hart, “Redeveloping Diction: Theoretical Considerations,” in M. West (ed.) *Theory, Method, and Practice of Computer Content Analysis* (New York: Ablex, 2001), 44-60.

	Reagan (total units=1332)	Bush (total units=738)	Clinton (total units=1980)
Presence of poetic language	n= 279 (21%)	n= 118 (16%)	n=99 (5%)
Absence of poetic language	n=1053 (79%)	n= 620 (84%)	n=1881 (95%)

Table 3: Findings from Content Analysis

Additionally, I gathered public opinion data for each presidency as a basis for comparison to determine if any associations could be made between these measures and poetic language use ratios. I first calculated presidential approval and disapproval rates based on data provided by the Roper Center.⁶⁹ Moreover, using a collection of polling data accessed through the Roper Center’s *iPOLL* program, I identified any poll questions from 1981-2001 that specifically mentioned speeches from Reagan, Bush, and Clinton.⁷⁰ I then separated those questions into three categories. Each category contained questions that generally asked:

- Did you watch, listen to, or read the President’s speech on _____?
Answers: Yes or No
- After listening to the President’s speech on _____, how likely are you to support him?
Answers: More Likely, Less Likely, or Not Affected /Has No Impact

⁶⁹ The Roper Center, “Presidential Job Performance Ratings,” accessed 10 May 2013, [http://webapps.ropercenter.uconn.edu/CFIDE/roper/presidential/webroot/presidential_rating_detail.cfm?allRate=True&presidentName=Bush%20\(G.H.W.\)#.UaAmMbWyC5l](http://webapps.ropercenter.uconn.edu/CFIDE/roper/presidential/webroot/presidential_rating_detail.cfm?allRate=True&presidentName=Bush%20(G.H.W.)#.UaAmMbWyC5l).

⁷⁰ Roper Center Public Opinion Archives, “*iPOLL* Databank,” accessed 8 April 2013, http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

- How would you rate President Reagan's speech on _____?

Answers: Favorable, Unfavorable, or Not Sure

I considered these questions helpful because they identify how much of the population is affected in any way by presidential speech, how impactful presidential speech was, and how ratings of presidential speech changed. The poetic language ratio, public approval/disapproval rates, and responses to poll questions all contributed to an evaluation of how presidents and their speechwriters reactively addressed the public's disenchantment with presidential speech.

Study Three: Speechwriter Interviews

The presidential speechwriting institution has exponentially grown over the last half century. Administrations employ multiple speechwriters, ranging from only three to more than twenty. Speechwriters are important political players, and their insight often helps to explain the inner-workings of a text.

Units of Analysis

To solicit speechwriters for interviews, I contacted them via e-mail. The interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes each and were audio recorded. A list of those interviewed, the president for whom each worked, and the date on which each was interviewed is below:

President	Speechwriter	Date Interviewed
Reagan	Aram Bakshian Jr.	January 23, 2013
	Joshua Gilder	January 24, 2013
	Clark Judge	January 30, 2013
	Mari Will	February 27, 2013
	Bentley Elliot	February 28, 2013
Bush	Ken Khachigian	March 11, 2013
	Mary Kate Cary	January 28, 2013
	Mark Davis	February 19, 2013
	David Demarest	March 23, 2013
	Curt Smith	January 19, 2013
	William Muir	January 18, 2013
	Heather Hurlburt	January 22, 2013
Clinton	David Kusnet	January 24, 2013
	John Pollack	January 28, 2013
	Jeff Sheshol	January 31, 2013
	Carolyn Curiel	February 27, 2013

Table 4: Speechwriters Interviewed

Method

Before each interview, I extensively reviewed the writers' histories working in the White House from as many sources as possible to help direct the conversation. Below is a battery of interview questions—separated into three themes—which I used to guide the interviews.

Background and Process

1. When and how did you begin speechwriting for _____?
2. Did you hold different positions on the speechwriting staff at different times? Different focus areas?
3. How was speechwriting institutionalized in your administration? How did that affect the writing process?

4. How did the speechwriting process work between you and ____? Take me through a typical scenario.
5. Were there certain writing or language styles that you or the president was particularly fond of? That you distasted? Did you ever disagree over these?

Considerations about Presidential Address and Presidential Speechwriting

1. What did you consider to be the purpose of public address? What about the president?
2. How effective was presidential speech at creating stronger relationships between the president and the public? How effective was it for the president's ability to influence public opinion?
3. What do you think about the presidential address from your administration? What was good about it? What was bad about it?
4. What do you think about presidential address generally? What is good about it? What is bad about it?
5. Do you think, in presidential speeches, what is said or how it is said has changed over time? If so, what changes are occurring and what factors is it changing in response to?
6. We know a great deal about presidential speechwriting of the past, but how do you think it will change in the future? What factors will it change in response to?

Perspectives on the Public

1. In what ways did you and the president consider the public in drafting a speech?
2. What do you think the public's perceptions were about presidential address? Did you factor in those public perceptions about presidential address when you were writing? If so, how?
3. Can you think of an example of how knowing what the public thought of presidential address changed the text that you drafted?
4. How did your speeches change over the course of the administration based on what the public was saying about them?

5. Were you aware of those public perceptions about presidential address during the entire writing process? At certain points more frequently than others? Were you or the president aware to different degrees?
6. How valuable were the expectations of the public for the speechwriting process? Did you ever write in opposition to what you knew the public expectation was?
7. Were the president's goals for a speech ever different from what you expected the public anticipated? If so, why? How did you handle that clash?
8. Do you think the public's opinions about presidential speech have changed, or are changing?
9. How much do you think the public is aware of the involvement of speechwriters?

These interviews were used in conjunction with the case studies and content analyses in an interactive manner, each informing the other and helping to determine where to look and at what. Since interviewing former presidents is nearly impossible, interviewing speechwriters was a fruitful additional perspective that allowed for more insightful analysis. Additionally, since speechwriters often are “in charge” of drafting, their notions about the process were invaluable to my research.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

In Chapters Two, Three, and Four, I report the data pertaining to Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton, respectively. In each chapter I review three studies: a rhetorical analysis of a single speech; a content analysis of weekly radio addresses; and interviews with former speechwriters. The case study informs how presidents and speechwriters proactively respond to the public's disenchantment with presidential speech, while the content analysis informs how they reactively respond to the public's

disenchantment. The interviews further clarify the results of the case study and content analysis.

Chapter Five is a summary of my research findings. In it, I answer my dissertation question by suggesting that presidents and speechwriters employ what I term “executive rhetoric” to address the public’s disenchantment with speech. I detail precepts of this theory and document how these precepts are informed by my research results. This chapter then considers the contributions a theory of executive rhetoric might make to rhetoric and political communication. It concludes by detailing the practical and theoretical implications of my dissertation and sites for future research.

Chapter Two: Reagan

The 40th U.S. President, Ronald Reagan, entered office on January 20, 1981. During his tenure, the country experienced some pivotal moments in both domestic and international affairs. Just sixty-nine days after his inauguration, President Regan survived an assassination attempt in Washington D.C. as the only president to have ever sustained a nonfatal gunshot wound. Reagan is often credited with ending the Cold War after creating a friendly diplomatic relationship with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1986, Reagan was embroiled in the Iran-Contra affair after senior administration officials allowed arms to be sold to Iran. The president is also associated with controversial humanitarian missions like the invasion of Grenada and embargo of Nicaragua.

Just as interesting as Reagan's political moments are his rhetorical moments. The Reagan presidency is one recalled with fond memory by many Americans, and this memory is usually accompanied by Reagan's nickname, "the Great Communicator." Indeed, President Reagan's rhetoric is considered some of the best of the modern 20th century.⁷¹ His eulogy after the Challenger shuttle disaster is commonly considered the high standard for epideictic speech. Reagan famously escalated the cold war with his "Evil Empire" speech, and stirred Soviet tensions again in Berlin after shouting for Gorbachev to "tear down this wall."

⁷¹ Stephen E. Lucas and Martin J. Medhurst, *Words of a Century: The Top 100 American Speeches, 1900-1999* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Reagan's presidency marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of the office. His was the first to commonly use public address to perform the presidency, and the first to deliver speeches for mass consumption on a weekly basis. His presidency came at a time when communication technologies underwent a shift that redefined the country's politics. Television became a more prevalent source of information and entertainment in daily life, and cable news was in nascent stages of development. This confluence resulted in a new kind of presidency, one in which public opinion was more frequently sought out, held with higher regard, and tended to with speeches.

Reagan's presidency marks what I argue is the beginning of the decline in public approval of presidential address. In this chapter, I will uncover how President Reagan and his speechwriters composed speeches given this development. What did they think the public wanted from presidential address? How did they try to achieve it?

In order to answer these questions, I completed three studies. First, I performed a rhetorical analysis of nine drafts of Reagan's July 27, 1981 address on economic policy. I investigated the changes made from draft to draft, changes that signal proactive attempts to persuade the public. Next, I conducted a content analysis of thirty-six of Reagan's weekly presidential addresses to uncover any trends in Reagan's rhetorical style over time. The trends reflect changes that were made to Reagan's style based on public reaction to his speeches. The final study is a collection of interviews with Reagan's speechwriters. Their insights helped to further clarify what proactive and reactive strategies were used to ingratiate the public with presidential speech. The combined findings of these studies present a broad understanding of the rhetorical challenges

Reagan and his writers faced when considering public opinion about speeches, and how those challenges were or were not met.

CASE STUDY

The following documents a case study of Reagan's "Address on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation," delivered on July 27, 1981.⁷² I chose to analyze this particular speech for many reasons. First, it fits within the parameters outlined in Chapter One. It is not an epideictic speech; rather, it focuses on domestic policy, but includes a wealth of poetic language. The address is not a particularly notable one, but it was televised from the Oval Office and garnered a good deal of attention.⁷³ Also, I was able to secure an interview with the speech's primary writer, Bentley Elliot, prior to its selection. Lastly, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and National Archive has in its possession nine draft versions of the speech, increasing the probability that I would find enough variety from draft to draft to help create and sustain an argument.

This televised presidential address was delivered two days prior to a House of Representatives vote between the Democratic and Republican tax plans. Elliot provides background on the speech recalling, "It was really the culmination of the whole campaign or the idea that began in the campaign of cutting tax rates across the board which was

⁷² President Ronald Reagan, "Address on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation," delivered on July 27, 1981. Accessed from *The American Presidency Project*, University of California, Santa Barbara, on 8 April 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=44120>.

⁷³ The speech garnered a great deal of media attention and made front page news of nearly every major newspaper across the country. This is one such story: Steven R. Weisman, "Reagan, in speech, asks tax cut help and attacks foes," *The New York Times*, 28 July 1981 (A1).

kind of a novel concept at the time."⁷⁴ The address is a faithful example of a strategy Samuel Kernell called “going public”—that is, appealing to the American public for support in order to influence congressional decisions.⁷⁵ Elliot echoes this theory in practice when he recalls the impetus for speaking on the topic: “This was really right on the eve of the vote. It was both a culmination of the campaign but also a kind of—it was kind of like orchestrating appeals to people to get in touch with their representatives. It was kind of like going over the heads of the noise machine in Washington to speak directly to the people.”⁷⁶ In this case, the tactic was successful—the Reagan tax plan was approved by the House in a vote of 238 to 195.⁷⁷

The speech, as stated earlier, went through nine drafts.⁷⁸ The first draft, written by Tony Dolan, is dated July 24, 1981—three days prior to the speech's delivery. It is noted with the date and Dolan’s last name, and titled “Televised Speech: Taxes and Social Security.”⁷⁹ The second and third drafts—both written on July 24, 1981—were penned by Elliot. The second draft is titled “Working Draft—Televised Speech: Social

⁷⁴ Bentley Elliot, telephone interview with author, February 28, 2013.

⁷⁵ Kernell, *Going Public*.

⁷⁶ Elliot, telephone interview.

⁷⁷ Edward Cowan, “Reagan’s 3-Year, 25% Cut in Tax Rate Voted by Wide Margins in the House and Senate,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 1981, accessed 8 April 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/07/30/politics/30REAG.html>.

⁷⁸ Speech Drafts, Address on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation, folder “Address to the Nation (Dolan/Elliot), July 27, 1981 (1-2) 07/27/1981 (1-2),” box 13, White House Office of Speechwriting: Speech Drafts Files, Ronald Reagan Library. [For future reference, each draft will be indicated by its chronological placement; for example, “Draft One,” and so on.]

⁷⁹ Draft One, Ronald Reagan Library, 1. [*Dolan and Elliot wrote their drafts simultaneously. So, while Dolan’s draft isn’t technically the first, it will be referred to as Draft One for simplicity.]

Security and Taxes.”⁸⁰ The third is titled “Televised Speech: Taxes and Social Security.”⁸¹

The fourth draft was written by President Reagan himself. It is dated July 25, 1981 and "From Camp David" is handwritten at the top of the first page.⁸² Based on my research with speech drafts in the Reagan archive, the president typically wrote his drafts by hand. This draft is type written, so it is likely a dictated or type-copied version of his composition. The content of Draft Four is a combination of both Dolan’s draft and Elliot’s second draft, along with Reagan’s own thoughts.⁸³ This draft is the result of what Elliot suggests is a common process. He recalls that in writing for President Reagan, “The goal was to get your best stuff in there and then hopefully he’ll use that, but make it into his in some manner—which is, I think, that’s kind of what happened [in this case]. . . . He was really good at knitting things together.”⁸⁴ While some of the content Reagan pulled from his speechwriters was used as a guideline for conceptual or organizational purposes, much of it was copied verbatim into Draft Four.

⁸⁰ Draft Two; Ronald Reagan Library, 1.

⁸¹ Draft Three; Ronald Reagan Library, 1.

⁸² Draft Four, Ronald Reagan Library, 1.

⁸³ The draft contains among its pages eleven typewritten inserts with handwritten edits. These inserts were composed by the writers after they reviewed Reagan’s draft. They are incorporated into the text of Draft Five, and as such, they will be attended to as edits to Draft Four.

⁸⁴ Elliot, telephone interview.

Draft Five is dated July 26, 1981 and entitled “Televised Speech.”⁸⁵ The edits made to Draft Four are incorporated almost verbatim into Draft Five. The archive holds four copies of the fifth draft. Each is identical in text, but has different handwritten edits (with noticeably different penmanship). Most of these edits are not incorporated into Draft Six. According to Elliot, these are likely from staff in the research department or lower level speechwriters. One copy, however, contains handwritten edits composed in a meeting between Elliot and President Reagan. Many of these edits are included in the following draft. While I reviewed each draft for handwritten edits that manifest in Draft Six, for simplicity, I treated them as a single draft when referring to Draft Five.

Drafts Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine contain minor edits. Drafts Six and Seven are dated July 27, 1981 and titled “Televised Speech to the Nation.”⁸⁶ Draft Eight is a teleprompter copy with few handwritten edits. It is titled “RR changes made at practice session 7/27/81.”⁸⁷ Draft Nine is the official press release for the President’s address. The speech was delivered from the Oval Office at 8:01 P.M. EST on July 27, 1981.⁸⁸

While the results from interviews with Reagan’s speechwriters will be addressed later in this chapter, one is particularly appropriate for prefacing the results of this case study. Speechwriter Aram Bakshian explains how thoughts about the public influence draft edits:

⁸⁵ Draft Five, Ronald Reagan Library, 1.

⁸⁶ Draft Six, Ronald Reagan Library, 1; Draft Seven, Ronald Reagan Library, 1.

⁸⁷ Draft Eight, Ronald Reagan Library, 1.

⁸⁸ Draft Nine, Ronald Reagan Library, 1.

The only way we would change language from draft to draft would be if people had different interpretations of the public's view. And what you have there is not so much one set of polling figures being read, but different people with different views of what the public wants or will accept. If the president pretty much liked what was in the first draft and we thought it was important enough, the first draft and the last draft resembled each other more.⁸⁹

This statement is significant for two reasons. First, it confirms that Reagan and his speechwriters did indeed consider the public and its view when drafting an address. Second, this statement suggests that most of the draft edits will take place earlier on in the process. While arguments may occur regarding how to best persuade the public, these are likely to take place sooner rather than later because the president is not yet involved. Once he has reviewed and approved a draft, little is likely to change. This is precisely the manner in which this speech unfolded. While edits were made to every draft, the more interesting edits were made earlier. In what follows, I explain what those edits were.

In reviewing the drafts, I found three language evolutions that were particularly telling about the way presidents and speechwriters approach persuading an audience that is increasingly disaffected with speech. The first was that from draft to draft, the language made the situation seem particularly more worthy of the audience's attention. The prose became more urgent, inclusive, and engaging. Second, the speech mimics the inconsistent attitude the public has towards Congress. It addresses political opponents (most often Democratic House members) in an increasingly hostile and indirect way, similar to the way the public reveres individual representatives but despises Congress

⁸⁹ Aram Bakshian Jr., telephone interview with author, January 23, 2013.

itself. Last, the speech communicates with the audience using rhetorical flourish. The drafts are increasingly replete with poetic language—mainly instances of metaphor. They progressively imbed charged feelings into the language in an attempt to move the audience more fervently to persuasion. In what follows, I provide examples of these trends. Consistent with my argument, I suggest the drafts undergo these changes in pursuit of a final draft that reflects what the President and speechwriters believe is the best way to persuade an audience that is disenchanted with speech.

Attracting the Audience's Attention

First, the language evolves in a way that suggests the writers are attempting to make the speech more resonant with the public. They pursue this strategy by making the problem seem urgent, by increasing the scope of those affected to create a wider audience, and making the audience feel as if they are already engaged in the issue and invested in the outcome.

Urgency

In order to feature the speech's urgency, the President and his speechwriters attempt to make the problem and its consequences more immediate. This strategy conveys the situation as somewhat of a "crisis" to which the audience must pay attention. I've provided three examples to illustrate this point.

The first example reveals how emphasizing the danger of a situation makes that danger feel more immediate. Draft Two reminds the listener of a speech that Reagan delivered six months prior, a speech that demanded prompt solutions to economic problems. In the February address, Draft Two states, Reagan avowed that "We were out

of time."⁹⁰ This declaration is direct enough to warn of impending disaster. It informs the audience that the problem is not a new one, that it required attention months ago. Surely, the audience will assume that six months later the situation must be even direr and in need of immediate attention. Draft Three doesn't leave that assumption to chance. It adds another layer of alarm, now stating that in February, "We were out of time and government was out of control."⁹¹ Simply stating that it is now time to take action suggests that the government must finally pay attention to the issue. But, the Draft Three addition notes that the government—the very institution who must act at this departure—is itself unable to handle the problem. This creates a demand in the audience's mind for action, rather than allowing them to rely on their elected leaders.

In a second example, the speech's stated purpose becomes more comprehensive as the draft progresses, making the exigence seem more critical. Drafts One, Two, and Three simply relay the situation—not unlike a news broadcast relays information: Draft One asserts the speech's purpose is to discuss "the vote this week in the House of Representatives;" Draft Two is even vaguer, stating its purpose is "to talk to you tonight about another problem . . . And that's the problem of taxes;"⁹² Draft Three is more pointed, noting "tonight I want to speak to you about...taxes, because passage of our

⁹⁰ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 1.

⁹¹ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 1.

⁹² Ronald Reagan Library, Draft One, 4; Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 7; Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 7.

bipartisan tax bill is the most crucial item left on our agenda for prosperity."⁹³ In contrast, Drafts Four and Five make clear that the speech is not merely a survey of current events, but an appeal to the public to take action on an impending piece of legislation. The fourth draft communicates a focused and specific purpose: the "Day after tomorrow—Wednesday—The House of Representatives will begin debate on two tax bills and once again they need to hear from you. I know that doesn't give you much time, but a great deal is at stake."⁹⁴ All of the drafts contain pieces of this comprehensive fourth draft: Draft One mentions a House vote this week, but not the subject of the vote; Draft Two notes the speech is about taxes, but identifies no legislative action; Draft Three links the problem of taxes to a congressional bill, but makes no mention of an impending date. The fourth draft incorporates every significant detail from each of the drafts: the bill, the subject of the bill, the date of the bill's vote. Moreover, it communicates that the purpose of the speech is not expository, or even just an attempt to persuade the public of an opinion. Rather it is specifically designed to motivate the public to a singular action—to contact their representatives.

Finally, a third example of the developing urgency is marked by a significant change in the speech's topic. Both Drafts One and Two tended to taxes and social security in equal measure—Draft One with taxes first, and Draft Two with social security first. Draft Three places taxes ahead of social security, a gesture that suggests a new sorting of issue priority. Yet the fourth draft eliminates the topic of social security

⁹³ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 2.

⁹⁴ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Four, 3.

completely and speaks only of the impending bill. Draft Five includes mention of social security, but turns its attention from the topic: as it states, Reagan "intended to make some remarks about the problem of social security tonight" but "the immediacy of House Action on the tax program...has to take priority."⁹⁵ The speech drafts reveal that the urgency developed over time. It is important to note that while the draft progression contributes to a better understanding of the text's rhetorical dimensions for the purposes of this project, the public was not aware of this topical change. They were privy only to what was communicated in the speech, that the president originally scheduled a speech to discuss social security, but a different issue was so pressing that it required immediate attention.

Scope

Additionally, the drafts try to make the message more resonant by broadening both the scope of the problem and the scope of those affected. The imagined audience increasingly feels it is necessary to listen to the speech because of its personal and global implications. The speech progressively identifies more categories of people that might be affected and more difficult situations in which they might find themselves if the Republican tax plan is not approved. Three examples illustrate this claim.

First, in order to make its message more resonant, the speech increasingly identifies particular groups of people and hypothetical situations in which they might find themselves. Draft One speaks of the American people largely as a conglomerate. It

⁹⁵ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Five, 1.

specifically mentions "businessmen and investors" in passing, and relays an anecdote about a farmer's conversation with his elected representative.⁹⁶ Other than that, it refers to the public as "the American people" and "Americans."⁹⁷ Draft Two's inclusion of specific groups is a bit more expansive. It identifies "Democrats and Republicans, from every profession, every background, and every region of this land" as supporters of the president.⁹⁸ It addresses retirees, people about to retire, and young people investing in their futures. Draft Three includes all of these, and adds to the list Independents, the middle class, orphans, shopkeepers, farmers, the disabled, and government employees. It employs an anecdote about an elderly woman in a wheelchair who is frightened for her financial security. The fourth draft evolves from simply identifying categories of people to positing devastating hypothetical circumstances they might weather if the Democratic plan is approved. For example, it states that Reagan's approach to taxes will eliminate "the marriage penalty, that unfair tax that has a working husband and wife pay more tax than if they were single."⁹⁹ Additionally, Reagan's plan will amend the estate tax "so that farmers and family-owned businesses don't have to sell the farm or store in the event of death just to pay the taxes."¹⁰⁰ Particularly interesting is the fifth draft, which includes this last situation about "sell[ing] the farm" but adds an extension of it later in the speech.

⁹⁶ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft One, 3.

⁹⁷ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft One, 2.

⁹⁸ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 1.

⁹⁹ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Four, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Four, 5.

This extension reads, "No longer...will a widow have to sell the family source of income to pay a tax on her husband's death."¹⁰¹ This appeal is the most direct, connecting with any woman in the audience and compelling her to imagine her own husband's death.

In another example, the draft evolves in a way that widens the scope of the problem by making the consequences direr. Draft Two recalls public announcements of late claiming that social security is about to run out. Although the draft assures those dependent on the program that their benefits won't disappear, it warns that, indeed, a "problem does exist, it is serious."¹⁰² While the language semantically states that a serious problem is afoot, the lack of poetic language limits the seriousness with which the warning is heeded. In the modern world, there are many problems, many of them serious. The language describing the problem does little to communicate urgency to the audience. In Draft Three, however, the problem's severity becomes more immediate and daunting. It cautions that the problem "is serious. It is here. It is now—And it must be faced before the American people lose faith."¹⁰³ The use of anaphora to introduce three descriptions of the situation—serious, here, now—makes the situation seem impending. The next phrase departs from the anaphora but carries the same sentiment in demanding that the problem "must be faced." It alleges what will be the inevitable consequence if not for action—a loss of faith in the country's ability to serve its people. Presented with

¹⁰¹ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Five, 7.

¹⁰² Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 3.

¹⁰³ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 9.

this alternative, the audience senses the immediacy of the speech and takes its message more seriously.

In a final example, the scope of the speech's message is expanded to include international implications. Each draft presents a central reason that the audience should oppose the Democratic plan. In Draft Three, the reason the Democratic plan is harmful is because it "will eliminate people's ability to plan ahead. . . . [They] will be denied the certainty they must have to begin saving or investing."¹⁰⁴ This harm is a serious one, and undoubtedly affects many listeners in some way. Draft Four presents a more serious harm. The effects of the Democratic plan will ensure that "a genuine and lasting commitment to the future of working Americans" is a thing of the past.¹⁰⁵ Here, the scope of the problem is widened, and the charge is brought that the Democratic plan will result in a future of jobless citizens. Draft Five takes the expanse one step farther beyond predicting the domestic harms of this plan. It indicates that "the rest of the world is watching America carefully to see how we will act at this critical moment" because "our allies depend on a strong and economically sound America."¹⁰⁶ This implication is two-fold: first, if America fails its people, the country will no longer be looked to as a world leader; second, if America's economy crumbles, other countries will follow suit. Approval of the Democratic plan will eventually result in the deterioration of the world economy.

¹⁰⁴ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 4.

¹⁰⁵ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Four, 7.

¹⁰⁶ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Five, 5.

Engagement

Finally, the draft takes on a more engaged tone as it seems to speak for the audience. In every draft, the speech reports that in response to Reagan's address six months before, the public contacted legislators and conveyed their opinions. However, the way this situation is depicted in each draft changes. The speech initially talks of the public's actions and demands in a distant and impersonal way, but becomes more engaging over the course of its evolution. Consider two illustrations of this point.

Draft Two reports that the government "has begun" listening to "the voices of the people."¹⁰⁷ In contrast, Draft Three boasts that the government "is" listening to "your voices."¹⁰⁸ Changing from a passive to active verb makes the audience feel that the government currently is listening and not simply that it is in the beginning stages of the listening process. This makes the audience more certain that their input is being actively sought out. Moreover, stating that the voices being heard are not those "of the people" but "your[s]" makes the audience feel more directly involved in the situation. Being told they are already partner to the conversation naturally gives the audience the sense that they have long since had an investment in the outcome and therefore must take action to protect that investment.

Similarly, Draft Two claims that these voices "have made Washington" understand that "it's time to clean up its act."¹⁰⁹ That statement is edited and in Draft

¹⁰⁷ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 1.

Three reads that those voices "are making Washington" understand that "that you want a new beginning."¹¹⁰ Again, the verb tenses suggest a temporal shift—Draft Two sounds as if the voices have completed their job, whereas Draft Three more clearly informs the audience that Washington is presently listening. This focus of action in the present rather than past obliges the audience to feel more compelled to speak. Additionally, Draft Two—in noting that Washington must "clean up its act"—considers Washington the actor. By shifting this responsibility to "you" and your desire for "a new beginning," the audience isn't a mere spectator waiting and watching for Washington to do better. Rather, the speech attempts to persuade the audience that they are the agent of change. In doing so, the speech places more agency in the audience's hands to take action in achieving their desired reform. Coincidentally, the speech tells the audience exactly what action to take. "The way to start doing that," Draft Two reads, is to help get the tax bill passed.¹¹¹ Again, in an effort to make the audience more invested in the bill's passage and move them to action, the draft is edited to read in its next iteration that getting the bill passed is "the way you intend to do that."¹¹²

All of these examples are instances showing the President and speechwriters are progressively compelled to make the audience feel they have a preexisting investment in the situation. The language enables the audience to believe they are in control of the situation and have a responsibility to ensure a successful outcome. The three trends

¹¹⁰ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 1.

¹¹¹ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 1.

¹¹² Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 1.

identified here—an increase in urgency, scope, and engagement—are all developed to make the speech more resonant with the audience. I argue that these trends illustrate how Reagan and his writers were in pursuit of a persuasive argument that they believed met the public’s preferences and expectations. They envisioned a particular audience when creating this argument, and so the argument reflects what the President and his writers thought about the audience and what it wanted from a speech.

Dealing with Congress

The next shift I identified in the drafts is in relation to Reagan’s opposition, most notably the House Democrats. As the drafts progress, three developments occur. First, the language becomes less hostile toward the House Democrats. Then, the language becomes more hostile, still naming the House Democrats as the opponent. Finally, the speech maintains a high quotient of hostility towards the opposition, but eliminates any direct mention of Congress as the target of that hostility. Instead, the target becomes an ethereal “other.” I contend that the speech evolves in this manner because the President and speechwriters are trying to mimic the way the public feels about Congress—they are less hostile towards a specific target like a particular representative, but more comfortable being hostile to Congress as a more abstract body.

Decreased Hostility

The changes in the first few drafts illustrate a shift from critical, sarcastic, and snide comments about congressional Democrats to a less hostile tone. In explaining why a portion of the Democratic bill is hypocritical, Draft Two chides, "it amazes me that

they" believe their bill is superior.¹¹³ The third draft presents the same message more candidly asking, "frankly, I wonder how they" support their own bill.¹¹⁴ The language is more moderate, seems to deride less, and is—as the line conveys—more frank. Similarly frank is the language in Draft Three introducing an inconsistency in the Democratic bill. Draft Two highlights this inconsistency asking, "isn't it ironic that" a seven-year tax cut is amenable, but a three-year cut is out of the question.¹¹⁵ In Draft Three, "they claim" the same position.¹¹⁶ The change leaves the statement more matter of fact than matter of irony, as irony is by definition the presentation of an incongruity. The second draft, then, suggests the Democratic plan is illogical and poorly thought out. The latter simply states that this position constitutes their plan, and leaves the audience to identify the incongruity on their own.

Moreover, Draft Two warns of the affliction that will fall upon the country the longer "congress persists in shirking its obligations."¹¹⁷ In Draft Three, "the longer congress waits" the more severe the consequences.¹¹⁸ Surely the claim that one is avoiding a responsibility is a more damning and direct accusation than delaying a task.

¹¹³ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 7.

¹¹⁴ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 3.

¹¹⁵ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 7.

¹¹⁶ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 3.

¹¹⁷ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 4.

¹¹⁸ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 9.

The first version assigns all the blame to Congress, whereas the second doesn't necessarily identify the Congress' ineptitude as the reason for the lag.

Additionally, while Draft Three maintains that Democrats in Congress shouldn't make older Americans fearful about the future of Social Security, it is absent Draft Two's mention of "the kind of cynical political maneuvering" undertaken by Congressional Democrats to scare the elderly.¹¹⁹ This erasure is an obvious instance of eliminating name-calling and ad hominem insults about a serious accusation. The deletion can be understood as a peace offering just as much as any added compliment would be. It is replaced with a kinder sentiment in Draft Three which displays new instances of compromise, including a "call on the congress" to "join me" in "working together to solve" the country's economic problems with the announcement of a "bipartisan Task Force."¹²⁰ These appeals for mutual respect and camaraderie lend to the speech a demonstrable instance wherein Reagan seeks to strike an accord.

Increased Hostility

Although the initial drafts evolve in a less hostile manner, the subsequent drafts develop in an entirely opposite direction. This change begins to take form between drafts two and three. Draft Three injects a healthy degree of sarcasm in this example, conceding that the Democratic tax cut is indeed a good short-term plan. The draft encourages the audience to vote for it—that is, only "if you are only planning on living 2 years."¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 3.

¹²⁰ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 8.

¹²¹ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 3.

Mocking the unlikely success of a two-year plan gives the audience the choice to decide among two "good" plans, and choose for itself which is better. Less playful is the next addition, a scornful accusation that "the House majority leadership seems less concerned with protecting your family budget than with spending more of the federal budget."¹²² This juxtaposition makes clear how irresponsible the Democrats are. Not only are they unsatisfied with taking your money but they insist on taking more from the federal government as well.

Drafts Four and Five continue this trajectory. In Draft Five, Reagan reveals "I've been deeply disturbed by the way you who are dependent on Social Security have been needlessly frightened and in some instances by those who place politics above truth."¹²³ This charge is both direct and indirect. Without naming the source of these rumors, the speech forces the audience to rely on the most immediate information available, regardless of its veracity. In doing so, the audience is likely to believe that these rumors are indeed being circulated, simply because it was said so. Naturally, the audience will assume the perpetrators of this claim are Reagan's congressional opponents. They understand that Congress is the entity that "needlessly frightened" the public and "place[s] politics above truth." These accusations are serious and signal another instance of the speech becoming more hostile towards Congress.

¹²² Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Four, 7.

¹²³ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Five, 1.

Removing Congress

Interestingly, the drafts then take another shift. They maintain the tone established in the middle drafts, but eliminate Congress as the subject of derision. Instead the perpetrator of faulty actions and comments becomes an ethereal other, a nameless, generic "some." For example, Draft Two mentions that "some in the Congress" accuse the Republican Party of being pessimistic.¹²⁴ In Draft Five, however, the direct attribution to Congress is eliminated, leaving the accusers as just "some."¹²⁵ The draft isn't necessarily becoming less hostile to Congress, but rather removing a naming of the institution.

In a similar example, the speech recalls talk about social security benefits being taken away. Reagan reports in Draft Four his concern about rumors promulgated "by those who place politics above truth."¹²⁶ One draft later, Reagan's concern has changed—he now is worried about "some of the inaccuracies which have been given wide circulation."¹²⁷ This distinct change removes Congress from the accusation and obfuscates the source of the "inaccuracies"—we don't know who has been circulating them, simply that they "*have been given* wide circulation."¹²⁸ The focus is taken off of the actor, and placed on the act.

¹²⁴ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 4.

¹²⁵ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Five, 6.

¹²⁶ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Four, 2.

¹²⁷ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Five, 4.

¹²⁸ Emphasis mine.

Another instance of this tactic comes in the transition from Draft Five to Six. In the former, the draft states that "some who have caused confusion and fear by their irresponsible charges have been in a position to do something constructive about these financial problems for more than 20 years—and they have done nothing."¹²⁹ The latter draft reads, "these financial problems have been building for more than 20 years—and nothing has been done."¹³⁰ This mimics the change in the previous example: the actor is removed from the situation's description, displacing the target of the blame. There is no clear indication of who has "done nothing." The suggestion that those in charge could have done something is no longer present.

A quite clear example of this trend is seen in the evolution of a single line about Will Rogers. Celebrity Will Rogers once said about the famed Russian Marxist, Leon Trotsky, "I would have found him a very interesting and human fellow, for I never yet met a man that I didn't like."¹³¹ This latter part of the quote became synonymous with Rogers, and a version of it appears in a number of iterations throughout the drafting of the speech: Draft Two reads, "it seems *too many of the House leadership* never met a tax they didn't hike;" in Draft Four, "it seems *too many of those opposing our bill* never met a tax they didn't like;" in Draft Five, "I'm afraid we have *some people around* who never

¹²⁹ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Five, 1.

¹³⁰ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Six, 1.

¹³¹ Ben Yagoda, *Will Rogers: A Biography* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 234.

met a tax they didn't hike."¹³² This example is the clearest employed in support of my argument. The evolution of the sentence's subject is an obvious turn away from specificity, ending with a quite generic attribution.

The evolution of the speech's treatment of Congressional Democrats is quite unusual, but just as telling. In any speech, the president must temper aggression towards the legislative branch for reasons of both expediency and legacy; a hostile relationship will prevent anything from getting done, and will give the president a bad reputation. In this situation, the speech maintains a high level of hostility, but removes Congress as the target of that hostility. In doing so, the President can say what he wants about the opposition without consequence because he's chosen not to explicitly name them. Rather, the opposition becomes an ethereal "other"—intangible, impersonal, and incapable of retort. I argue that in doing so, the speech mimics the unusual relationship individuals have with Congress. That is, they have a great deal of hostile feelings towards Congress as a whole—not as it is composed of individual representatives, but as a general body.

Metaphor

The final component of draft evolution that characterized this speech is an increasing use of metaphor to communicate Reagan's policy arguments. Of course, metaphor is a commonplace in political communication to enhance or buttress an explanation. In this case, however, one can see the policy statements used in prior drafts

¹³² Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 8; Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Four, 6; Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Five, 8 (emphasis mine).

were replaced by metaphors. The policies behind the messages remain the same, but the language used to convey them is much more concerned with poetics. In what follows, I document four of these changes. I argue that from one draft to the next, the poetic language—language of eloquence or form in the Burkean sense—becomes a more featured technique for persuasion, particularly through the use of metaphor.

Throughout the evolution of the speech, a number of statements are replaced with elaborate or affective metaphors to convey an identical sentiment. Most of these edits take place early on and remain unaltered in the subsequent drafts. The first example is a description in Draft Two of older Americans: they are a "community asset."¹³³ In Draft Three, this sentiment is still suggested—albeit more emphatically—when senior citizens are considered a “national treasure.”¹³⁴ The relative semantic meaning of each is similar: both assets and treasures are things to be valued, coveted, and protected. Yet, the poetic meaning behind “treasure” is such that the word itself inherently makes something more valuable than a mere asset. The sentiment behind the statement is that the President would not consider passing any legislation that would hurt older Americans. Arguably, in changing the wording, the President and speechwriters give the audience—especially the older audience—more of a reason to trust him.

A second illustration of this point comes from an attempt to convince the American people that taking a chance on the Democratic tax plan is a bad idea. Draft Two explains what the risks are if we take the wrong measures to try to fix the economy.

¹³³ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 3.

¹³⁴ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 8.

It demands that we can't "be wrong," suggesting that any other plan—particularly the Democratic plan—is wrong.¹³⁵ In the following draft, this language is changed to convey that while some want to grant the Democratic plan a chance to work, we can't "play Russian roulette" with the economy.¹³⁶ This metaphor equates the Democratic plan to an arbitrary option among many, much like the risk of pulling the trigger on a revolver with a single bullet loaded. It is much riskier, and the smart choice is to trust the Republican's proven plan for success. With this metaphor in use, success here is equated to living, while any other option could mean death. There are also implications of using this particular metaphor while embroiled in a Cold War with the USSR. To some degree, the metaphor might cause the audience to associate the Democratic plan with the Soviets. Such an association is powerful, and it's difficult to imagine the President and speechwriters weren't consciously aware of this association when they implemented the metaphor.

Another example comes from an explanation in Draft Two of the severity of the economic situation. The draft acutely states that the economic situation "remains very serious."¹³⁷ The third draft, however, states, "We're still not out of the woods and back on the road toward permanent economic recovery. But we have made a start."¹³⁸ The edit incorporates two idioms in a metaphorical way to communicate this same sentiment that

¹³⁵ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 5.

¹³⁶ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 10.

¹³⁷ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 1.

¹³⁸ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 1.

the situation is far from over. The syntax and sound of the two phrases are similar, making for a euphonious message. It serves little purpose in demonstrating exactly how serious the economy's problems are, but serves a rhetorical purpose in communicating the same message as the previous iteration in a more eloquent manner. By using this eloquent language to supplant the previous iteration, the speech carries a different tone and engenders a different, more affective, reaction in the public.

A final example demonstrates how language is used to communicate the exact same message, but in a more poetic and affective way. The bill that Reagan champions contains provisions that—in Draft Two—will "cause the rate of inflation to begin to decline."¹³⁹ In the following draft, these provisions will "help us gain the upper-hand in the war against inflation."¹⁴⁰ An obvious point of commentary for a political communication scholar is the use of the "war against" phrase. This has been a common phrase over the past thirty years for key initiatives to "combat" problems—George H.W. Bush's "War on Drugs," Bill Clinton's "War on Poverty," and George W. Bush's "War on Terror." Its use signals a more serious attitude that attention to a problem is necessary and worthwhile. Moreover, using the idiom of having the "upper-hand" is a more persuasive use of language than simply stating that the rate will decline. It indicates a win or a position of power over the problem, allowing the audience to anticipate a victory. Predicting one will be victorious in war is more appealing than simply stating a statistical trend.

¹³⁹ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Two, 2.

¹⁴⁰ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 2.

All of these metaphors contributed a more poetic tone to the speech. Not only did many of them buttress a statement of fact for rhetorical purposes, but they actually replaced those statements of fact. This trend suggests that Reagan and his speechwriters were keen to the use of poetic language for building arguments.

This case study reviewed three ways in which Reagan's July 1981 address evolved to make its message more resonant. The speech increasingly used language that made the message more deserving of the audience's attention, it adjusted its approach for dealing with Congressional opposition, and it developed a more poetic style with the use of metaphor. Reviewing these drafts is an exercise in exploring the rhetorical dimensions of a text. Although analysis of speeches as they are delivered is a treasured practice in communication studies, it is often more telling and more interesting to look at speech drafts. In this case, the conclusions of the analysis help us to understand how the language changes reflect a proactive attempt by Reagan and his speechwriters to persuade the public. The changes indicate what the President and his writers thought the public needed to hear in order to be persuaded.

This case study contributes valuable data for answering the question posed in this dissertation; that is, how do presidents and their speechwriters persuade the public in an era of increasing distaste with presidential speeches? These results highlight three answers.

First, Reagan and his speechwriters tried to make the speeches more relevant and worthy of the audience's attention. This suggests that in responding to the public's distaste for presidential speech, Reagan and his speechwriters were compelled to make a

strong case to the public that what the President had to say was important. They operated with the impression that the public wouldn't necessarily consider the subject important simply because the President was speaking on it. This is a marked difference in presidential speechwriting of the past thirty years as compared to speeches prior to Reagan. In light of the increased distaste for presidential speeches, Reagan and his speechwriters tried to persuade the public by actively using the speech itself as a mechanism for convincing the public to listen. They were unable to rely on the stature of a presidential oration in and of itself as that mechanism.

Second, the President and his speechwriters used language that was hostile towards Congress as a body. In doing so, the speech invited the audience to join on the side of the President in opposition to Congress, forcing the audience to displace its disaffection with presidential speech onto Congress. Framing the Congress as an entire body is key because individual congress people are better liked than the institution as a whole. Kernell points out that while John F. Kennedy was the first president to use the "going public" strategy, its use increased significantly during the Reagan administration.¹⁴¹ In light of the increased distaste for presidential speeches, Reagan and his speechwriters tried to persuade the public by using the "going public" strategy as a way to redirect the public's disaffection away from presidential speech and towards Congress. In doing so, the public becomes more vulnerable to persuasion by the speech.

Third, Reagan and his speechwriters used poetic language not in addition to policy language, but in place of it. They largely cast their policy arguments using

¹⁴¹ Kernell, *Going Public*. Chapters 4-6 trace the use of the strategy from Kennedy to Reagan.

metaphors. While one could typically use poetic language to describe a policy, Reagan's speech used metaphor to construct the policy. In doing so, any criticism that the speech is too poetic is likely forced to use policy language to support that claim. This would render the criticism less valid because the policy language is difficult to distinguish from poetic language. In light of the increased distaste for presidential speeches, Reagan and his speechwriters tried to persuade the public by blurring the line between policy and prose so that they were one and the same. These answers will be taken into consideration with the results from the content analysis and interviews, and discussed further in this chapter's conclusion.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

This dissertation seeks to understand how presidents and speechwriters persuade the public through speech, in spite of the public's increasing disenchantment with presidential address. The case study outlined at the beginning of this chapter illuminated how Reagan and his speechwriters proactively appealed to the public through speech. It is necessary also to consider how presidents and their speechwriters appeal to the public reactively—how their messages and communication styles change in response to the public's attitude towards and expectations of speech.

Poetic Language Use Ratio

I conducted a content analysis of 36 of Reagan's weekly addresses to determine the ratio of poetic language in each, and document any trends of those ratios. The proportion of poetic sentences varied across time with an average $M(.21)$ of poetic statements per speech and range of (.06 to .38). Some examples are listed here:

- “We’re a nation built and sustained by hope.” December 18, 1982
- “Today we’re poised on the launching pad of the future.” February 9, 1985
- “We’re reaching out to every American who yearns to board the freedom train that can take them to the destination of their dreams.” July 27, 1985
- “We can travel wherever the eye of our imagination can see.” April 2, 1988

Upon completion of coding I plotted the analysis for each speech chronologically. The chart below illustrates the results:

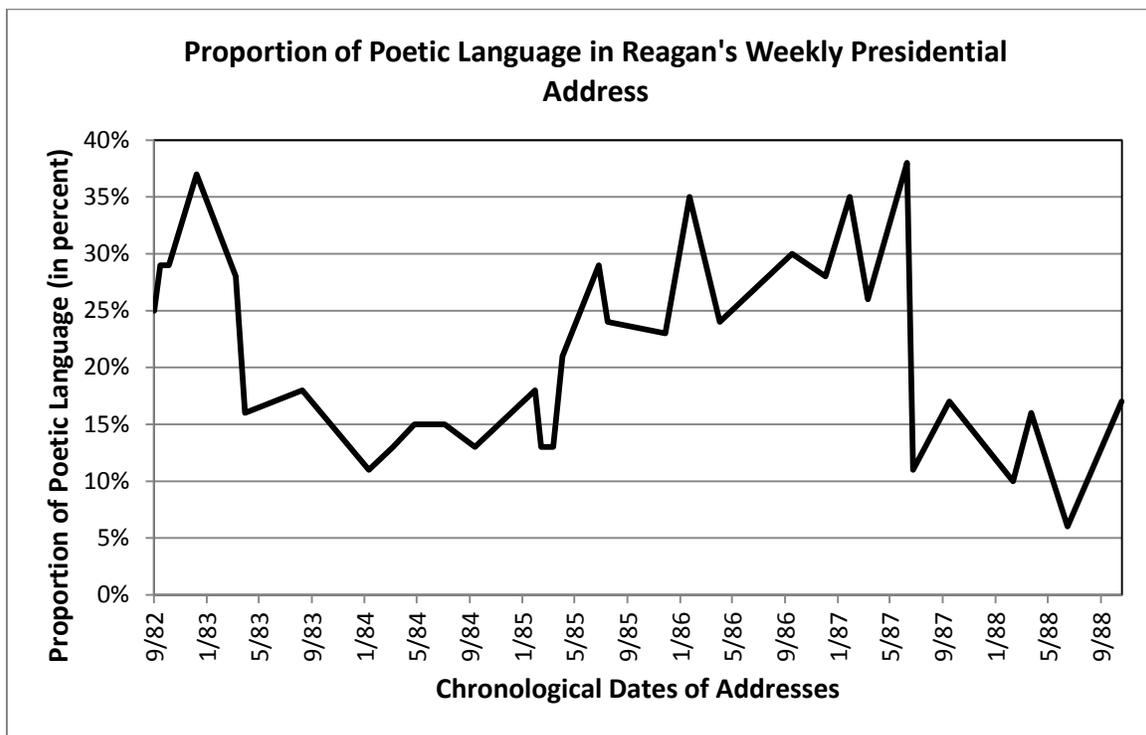


Table 5: Reagan’s Poetic Language Ratios

From this graph, a trend is noticeable. From September 1982 to March 1983, the poetic statement measure increases. From April 1983 to March 1985, that measure

decreases. Again in April 1985, the measure increases until July 1987. At that point it decreases for the remainder of the term.

My first observation about these results is that they might be correlated to the presidential election cycle. Reagan won his first election in November 1980. Assuming the trend that begins in September 1982 precedes that date, Reagan's use of poetic statements increased until March 1983. This is a little more than a year-and-a-half before his re-election in November 1984. During this time, Reagan's use of poetic statements decreases. It begins to increase shortly after he starts his second term, in April 1985. This increase continues until July 1987, a little less than a year-and-a-half before the presidential election in November 1988. Yet, from July 1987 to the election, the measure decreases again.

Based on these results, roughly a quarter of the president's weekly addresses were composed of poetic statements from 1982 until his departure in 1989. Separated into four-year periods, the results indicate that the average proportions of poetic statements in his weekly addresses for the first 2.5 years of each term were 29% and 25% respectively. The averages for the last 1.5 years of each term were 14% and 15% respectively. Clearly, the use of poetic statements was lower in the 1.5 years preceding each election than in the first portion of the term. The last year-and-a-half of a presidential term is often characterized by a high degree of campaigning. If Reagan and his speechwriters did indeed write their speeches with the aim to please and persuade the public, it would seem as if they believed the way to persuade the public during a presidential campaign is with

less rhetoric and more statements of fact and policy. Interestingly, this finding is opposite the dictum that politicians campaign in poetry and govern in prose.

Public Approval Ratings

I was curious about how these results related to public opinion polls. I compiled 136 approval and disapproval measures throughout Reagan’s presidency as reported by the Roper Center.¹⁴² I compared those results to the poetic language measure as calculated by my content analysis. The results are indicated below:

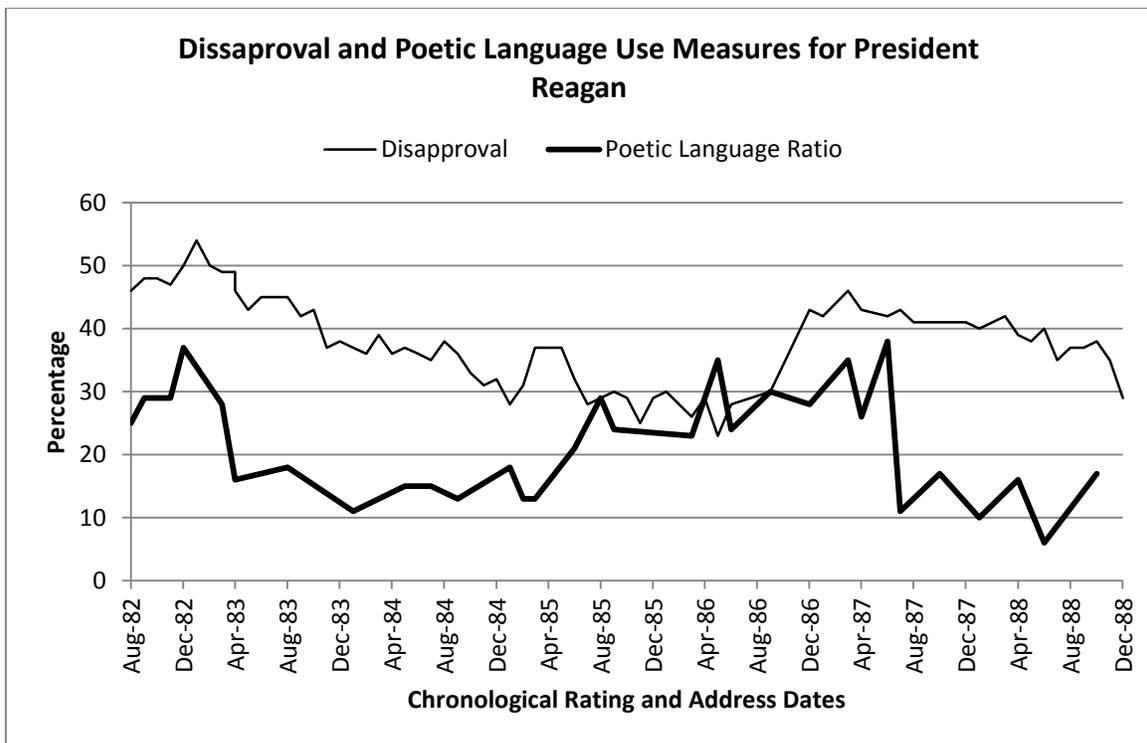


Table 6: Reagan’s Poetic Language Ratios and Disapproval Rate

¹⁴² The Roper Center, “Presidential Job Performance Ratings,” accessed 10 May 2013, [http://webapps.ropercenter.uconn.edu/CFIDE/roper/presidential/webroot/presidential_rating_detail.cfm?allRate=True&presidentName=Bush%20\(G.H.W.\)#.UaAmMbWyC5L](http://webapps.ropercenter.uconn.edu/CFIDE/roper/presidential/webroot/presidential_rating_detail.cfm?allRate=True&presidentName=Bush%20(G.H.W.)#.UaAmMbWyC5L).

One correlation is particularly interesting. It seems that the disapproval measure and poetic language ratio measure ebb and flow in a similar manner. They begin at .46 and .25 respectively. They each increase by .08 and .12 in January 1983, and decrease .26 and .20 by February 1985. They experience a static period until they increase by .15 and .11 in December 1986. At that point the poetic measure makes a steep incline and decline while the disapproval rate remains steady, although by the end of Reagan's presidency each dropped by .14 and .11 since December 1986.

While much could be speculated about these similar trends, it is difficult to argue for causality between the two measures. It is quite appropriate, however, to suggest that a correlation exists between increases and decreases in poetic language use and parallel increases and decreases in disapproval measures. Much of what the public knows about the president it knows because of his speeches. This was especially true in the 1980s, as access to other sources of information found on media like the internet was not yet available.

Public Opinion Questions

It would befit this argument to have public opinion data about presidential speeches in particular. Unfortunately, little data as such exists. Even so, I reviewed what was available to determine if any comparative trends might unfold. Using a collection of polling data accessed through the Roper Center's *I POLL* program, I identified any poll questions from 1981-1989 that specifically mentioned Reagan's speeches. I then culled those questions into three basic categories.

The first group of questions asked, “Did you watch, listen to, or read the President’s speech on _____?” Answer options were “Yes” and “No.” I considered these questions helpful because they identify how much of the population is affected in any way by presidential speech. Moreover, one would assume that this measure decreases over time as the public comes to know the president and his policy positions. The precise amount by which it decreases might be telling of how engaged the public feels with the president because of his speech. The results of these questions (N=11) are indicated below:

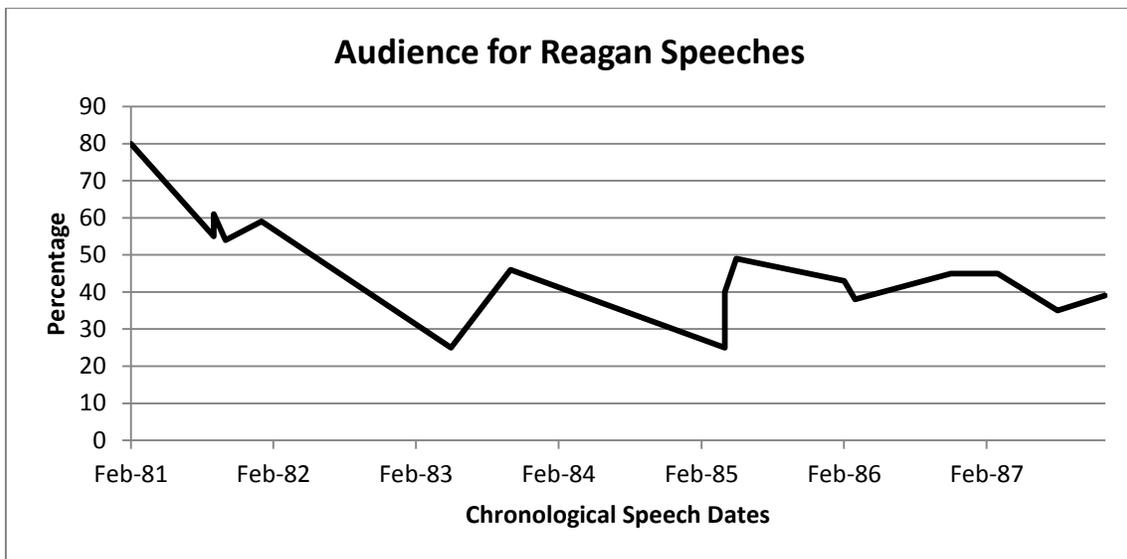


Table 7: Audience for Reagan Speeches

As indicated by the chart, the audience sharply declined upon Reagan’s arrival into the office. The two data spikes are in regard to questions about a speech on the Grenada invasion and a speech on tax reform, while the two dips were in reference to addresses on Latin America and the national budget. Moreover, the higher measures from 1985 reflect

polls on a State of the Union speech and his Iran-Contra speeches, all of which one would expect to have high viewership.

The next set of questions measured how his speeches influenced public opinion. The questions generally read, “After listening to the President’s speech on _____, how likely are you to support him? The answer choices were “More Likely,” Less Likely,” and “Not Affected /Has No Impact.” The results of these questions (N=6) are indicated below:

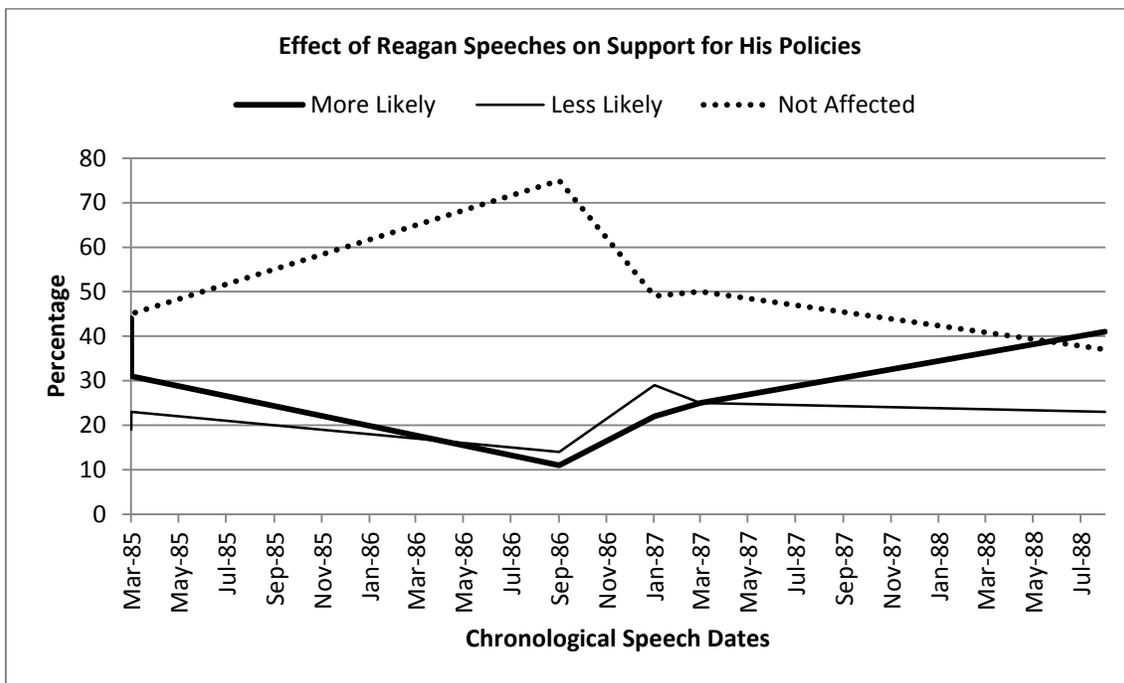


Table 8: Effect of Reagan Speeches on Public Policy Support

The obvious outlier from September 1986 is a question asking if a Reagan speech in support of a congressional candidate would affect one’s support for that candidate. Other than this question, the “More Likely” option averaged .33, “Less Likely” at .24, and the “Not Affected” measure averaged .44. With so few data points, it is difficult to draw any

conclusions between the ratio of rhetoric in Reagan’s speeches and the effect of his speeches on support for his policies.

The last measure is how the public rated his speeches. The questions generally read, “How would you rate President Reagan’s speech on _____?” The answer choices were “Favorable,” “Unfavorable,” and “Not Sure.” The results of this these questions (N=6) are presented below:

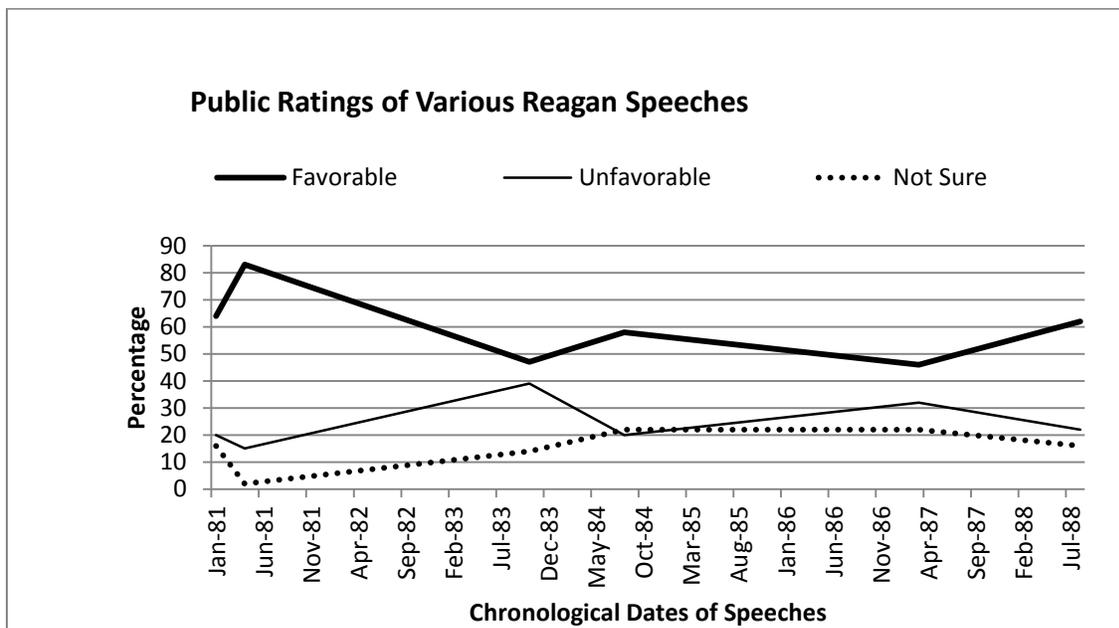


Table 9: Public Ratings of Reagan Speeches

Again, little inference can be drawn from such few data points, but it is helpful to know the general favorability of Reagan’s speeches across his presidency. The outlier from April 28, 1981 was an address to Congress on the economic recovery. Aside from that data point, the averages vary little over the eight years. They are: “Favorable” .55; “Unfavorable” .27; and “Not Sure” .18. These averages highlight some interesting

comparisons to the general public approval results. First, there is only a three-point difference between the measures of speech favorability and general favorability. However, his speeches are ten points less favorable than the general measure of public approval. Nearly one-fifth of the public is unsure about how to rate Reagan's speeches, whereas only one-tenth are unsure about him generally. This raises the question: what makes the public less approving and more unsure—each by 10%—about Reagan's speeches than about Reagan himself? Even when the measures are averaged including the high April 1981 data point, the speeches are still 8% behind the general measure. It may not seem significant, but in modern American politics, an 8% differential is a landslide.

The results of this study suggest two important conclusions. First, the adage that to be successful one must campaign in poetry and govern in prose was not the case in the Reagan presidency. During the year-and-a-half before both Reagan's re-election and Vice President George H. W. Bush's election, the proportion of poetic statements in the weekly address decreased between ten and fifteen percent. While one might argue the differential is not a significant one, it undeniably was a component of two successful campaigns. Second, a comparison of Reagan's proportion of poetic statements in the weekly addresses and his disapproval ratings illustrates similar trends. This project is ill-equipped to suggest the relationship is one of causation. However, it is surely an interesting correlation that yields speculation regarding Reagan's insight into what kind of language the public wanted to hear.

The question posed in this dissertation is: how do presidents and their speechwriters persuade the public in an era of increasing distaste with presidential speeches? The decrease in poetic statements prior to election season provides an answer to the dissertation question, albeit an unexpected one. The President and his speechwriters appealed to the public with speech differently at different points in the presidency. During campaign season, the President appealed to public opinion more than during its off-season. In light of the increased distaste for presidential speeches, Reagan and his speechwriters tried to persuade the public more responsively during campaigns. This finding explains how presidents and speechwriters persuade differently over time and in response to different events. Moreover, the job approval data indicate a parallel relationship with the poetic language use trend. Combined, they suggest these two factors are related. Finally, the polling questions indicate that over the course of the administration the audience for, effect of, and ratings of Reagan's speeches decreased. Although these measures were not influenced by the campaign, their decreasing numbers indicate a parallel relationship with poetic language use at least prior to Reagan's re-election campaign.

The content analysis was intended to serve as a measure of how the speechwriting process is reactive—in concert with the case study's examination of how the process is proactive. The content analysis illustrates how the process is reactive inasmuch as it reacts to how influential public opinion is at a given time. Although public opinion is always valuable to a president, it exerts much more influence (in the form of votes) when a president is campaigning rather than when a president is governing. Thus, in this

instance Reagan persuaded more responsively when the public's preferences determined the future of his presidency in the most direct way possible. These findings will be taken into consideration with the others in this chapter's conclusion.

SPEECHWRITER INTERVIEWS

In this section I review the results of my interviews with former Reagan speechwriters. This dissertation seeks to understand how presidents and speechwriters address the negotiation of producing speeches to communicate with a public that is skeptical of presidential speech. The interviews yielded some telling results about how Reagan and his speechwriters thought of the public, and its preferences and expectations for presidential speech.

Over the course of two months, I conducted audio-recorded phone interviews with the following Reagan speechwriters:

- 1) Aram Bakshian Jr. (January 23, 2013)
- 2) Joshua Gilder (January 24, 2013)
- 3) Clark Judge (January 30, 2013)
- 4) Mari Will (February 27, 2013)
- 5) Bentley Elliot (February 28, 2013)
- 6) Ken Khachigian (March 11, 2013)

These interviews ranged in length from 19:16 to 45:39 minutes with an average length of 28:09 minutes. Many participants were also asked follow-up questions via email after the phone interviews. The results were transcribed and edited for clarity.

From the results, I found four common perspectives that are the most applicable to the question at hand:

- 1) While Reagan and his speechwriters relied on an "intuitive" understanding of the public when drafting speeches, they primarily catered to Reagan's desired message.
- 2) Reagan's rhetorical style remained consistent over the course of the administration, and was not amended by the public's reaction towards it.
- 3) In order to bypass a hostile media and communicate directly with the public, crafting sound bites was the primary focus, while crafting the speech at length was secondary.
- 4) Even though he is revered as an eloquent speaker, Reagan preferred to not deliver "eloquent" speeches.

While there were a variety of interesting observations about this data, I argue that these four most clearly answer the question of this dissertation—how do presidents and speechwriters compose persuasive messages for a public that disdains presidential speech? In what follows, I review each theme and highlight examples extracted from the interviews.

1) Reagan and his speechwriters relied on intuition.

When introducing the case study at the outset of this chapter, I referred to Bakshian's claim that the President and his speechwriters did consider what they thought the public wanted to hear when drafting speeches, and that those considerations did in fact result in changes from draft to draft. While this is true, most of the interviews

reflected that any perspectives on what expectations or preferences the public might have had were secondary to a fidelity to Reagan's message.

Reagan's intuition helped to create his general rhetorical style, a style that guided the speech composition process. This intuition was primarily the result of the president's pre-existing expertise in public address. Clark Judge maintains, "He was President of the United States and he got there with the strength of his oratory. It's not like we were starting from scratch."¹⁴³ Reagan's rhetoric is indeed partially responsible for his political success. This rhetoric, as the speechwriters illustrate, was cultivated by years of interaction with the public.

Ken Khachigian recalls, "Especially after the late 50s and throughout the 60s and 70s he traveled the country giving speeches. . . . I mean no candidate . . . came close [to the amount of traveling Reagan did], but it's pretty rare for a president to have had that kind of contact with just average voters, and tens and tens and tens of thousands of them."¹⁴⁴ Khachigian continues that when determining how to connect with the public through speech, he and the president "just went by instinct and that instinct was confirmed by what I thought the President stood for and the kind of rhetoric that he liked. And it frankly worked pretty well. We both shared a pretty good sense of what the voters were looking for."¹⁴⁵ Judge echoes this sentiment, asserting "I know that the president

¹⁴³ Clark Judge, telephone interview with author, January 30, 2013.

¹⁴⁴ Ken Khachigian, telephone interview with author, March 11, 2013.

¹⁴⁵ Khachigian, telephone interview with author.

did have an eye towards how audiences responded as did I. As did we all."¹⁴⁶ This confirms that the President and speechwriters were aware—at least to some degree—that the public was “looking for” something particular in presidential address.

During his travels, Reagan had ample opportunity to hear the thoughts of ordinary citizens, and also to receive feedback on his oratory. Khachigian reveals that Reagan spent a great deal of time "talking to people—you know they'd come up to him afterwards and express their views or he'd get reactions on his speeches."¹⁴⁷ Regardless, as Khachigian adds, "he pretty much had his own idea of what moved America."¹⁴⁸ Whether these interactions reinforced convictions Reagan already held, exposed Reagan to the feelings of the country, or helped ferment a perspective that he knew would be attractive to the public, this period in Reagan's life developed his policy positions.

When asked how they estimated what the public desired from speeches, the writers most often first indicated they relied on intuition or previous experience. Additionally, many of them indicated specifically how they did or did not use public opinion polls.

First, one way polling was used was to determine what the public knew about a particular issue. As Bakshian explains, "the purpose of the polling was to find a sense of where the public was coming from at the time and what they knew or didn't know—any

¹⁴⁶ Judge, telephone interview with author.

¹⁴⁷ Khachigian, telephone interview with author.

¹⁴⁸ Khachigian, telephone interview with author.

misconceptions they might have or strong feelings either positive or negative."¹⁴⁹ Armed with this information, a president would be quite capable of crafting a message in direct response to public opinion. It gives a president the opportunity to educate and persuade simultaneously. This reflects a proactive use of polling to draft presidential messages. The polls sought out public preferences and composed the messages based on what the public wanted from presidential orations.

Another type of polling reflects a different kind of approach to public opinion, one that is more reactive to prior rhetoric. Judge mentions that, when determining what themes or phrases to continue using, "we looked at applause lines and polling results and all the rest."¹⁵⁰ This relates specifically to rhetoric that was already crafted, and was being considered for future use. Thus, it reflects an emphasis on the reactive element of speechwriting; that is, the writers reflected on the public reaction to past rhetoric in order to compose future oratory. In this case, the public's negative criticism for speech didn't engender rhetorical changes; rather, the public's positive feedback signaled to Reagan and his speechwriters what messages ought to be continuously used.

Additionally, polling was also used for the purpose of helping the speechwriters decide how to frame an issue. Bakshian clarifies this claim:

The nearest thing to affecting the actual content would be—and this would be sort of polemical—if for example if there are different names or phrases associated with a policy. Are there any that are sort of taboo or invoke a negative response

¹⁴⁹ Bakshian, telephone interview with author.

¹⁵⁰ Judge, telephone interview with author.

or is there a more positive way of describing the same policy? It just warns you what the bad way of saying something is as opposed to the good way.¹⁵¹

This information is a valuable approach to proactively addressing the problem of presidential rhetoric as political rhetoric so frequently relies on successfully framing an issue in ones favor. Surely, many political phrases have evolved in this vein. Polling is a worthwhile pursuit when determining the best way to define how an argument will unfold, and the Reagan administration took advantage of that data.

Conversely, some speechwriters indicated that they didn't use polling, and for various reasons. Khachigian concludes, "pollsters would send in stuff but basically I don't think that was important to [Reagan] and it wasn't important in terms of what I wanted to help him work with.....and so what we did was not poll driven."¹⁵² In fact, Khachigian recalls a time when using a poll to create presidential rhetoric was actually counterproductive:

This pollster sat down with me before I worked on a speech, sometime in the Fall of '82. Basically the poll said that we should stay the course and use those exact words—'stay the course.' Looking back, I think that's probably the worst thing we could have said because staying the course meant staying on the path you were on, which the voters perceived was not a good path at that point. So I think we used a poll that one time and I don't think it worked in the president's favor.¹⁵³

This is an instance in which a poll was more harmful than helpful. Using polling data to create rhetoric is a nuanced process since science and art often can be at odds. These

¹⁵¹ Bakshian, telephone interview with author.

¹⁵² Khachigian, telephone interview with author.

¹⁵³ Khachigian, telephone interview with author.

kinds of situations are likely the impetuses for speechwriters to rely more heavily on intuition than public opinion data.

Inevitably, there was one form of polling that Reagan trusted wholeheartedly: his own. Khachigian recalls the reactions Reagan would get to his speeches directly from the crowds he interacted with before he became president. "He was his own best pollster if you want to put it that way," Khachigian added. "That's the ultimate focus group. . . . I mean that was the best poll anyone could have."¹⁵⁴ Surely interacting in personal settings with thousands of people helped Reagan create a vision of America that influenced his presidential rhetoric.

Overall, it is clear that Reagan and his speechwriters did in fact have an ear to public opinion, and they determined what that opinion was largely on personal experience. When considering how to persuade the public, they valued Reagan's personal convictions more than any changing tides in public opinion.

2) Reagan's style didn't change in response to the public.

While Reagan surely paid attention to the public, he rarely if ever augmented his rhetorical style in response to it. Judge elaborates this point remarking, "It wasn't that we were saying 'does the public like our speeches?' We were saying 'does this connect?' Have we moved the public not with speeches as an art form but we were saying 'does it connect in terms of moving opinion do we see movement in the game in Washington?"

¹⁵⁴ Khachigian, telephone interview with author.

Are we connecting?'"¹⁵⁵ This suggests that public opinion was more valuable and worthy of consideration for reasons of expediency—as a way to get the President's policy agenda supported, than for reasons of satisfying the public. Bakshian echoes this point, concluding that while public opinion was considered, it generally didn't play a significant role. He notes, "It isn't going to dictate what you say and it doesn't make you change your policy unless the polling comes up with something really alarming and you would have known that already unless you were blind and deaf."¹⁵⁶

When asked if he could think of an instance in which knowing what the public wanted from public address changed the message or the rhetoric that was drafted, Khachigian answered with the following:

No. I can't think of an occasion. Again, that was probably the last thing I would have thought of was to sit down and go 'okay let's look at all the polls and see if that should determine what Reagan said' or 'should we see what people are thinking' or 'what's on their minds.' I mean basically he had his agenda and he had his ways of communicating, you wouldn't be able to, say, go to Reagan and tell him that 'the polls show this.' If it was contrary to what he wanted to do he would still do what he wanted to do because that was the way he operated.¹⁵⁷

The general consensus among the speechwriters was that the public's opinion mattered, but it was secondary to Reagan's opinion. They suggested that determining the public opinion was only important to a certain extent because at some point, it simply didn't matter if it inhibited what Reagan wanted to say.

¹⁵⁵ Judge, telephone interview with author.

¹⁵⁶ Bakshian, telephone interview with author.

¹⁵⁷ Khachigian, telephone interview with author.

It is quite clear that the speechwriters didn't think Reagan's approach to communicating with the public changed in connection with public opinion. Speechwriter Joshua Gilder suggests that gauging public opinion wasn't helpful for Reagan because he wanted to steer the audience away from the status quo. Gilder explains this claim below:

The Reagan White House had a very sophisticated understanding of the value of polls and the danger of polls to mislead. Polls can only poll for existing attitudes. What we were trying to do was take the country in a direction that it had not been taken in. We were trying to govern by principles that were more in line with the traditions of our country, the values of American people. But we had to explain all of that. We had to make all of that clear.¹⁵⁸

This statement is reflective of the differences between John Stuart Mill's two types of political leadership. While all presidents use speeches as a form of leadership, that leadership can follow either a "delegate" or "trustee" model. Mill explained that "a delegate is a representative who listens to his constituents, records their views and then regurgitates their opinions in whatever legislative body he is a part of. In contrast, a trustee listens to his constituents' ideas, takes them into consideration and then formulates an opinion of his own and acts upon that opinion."¹⁵⁹ Gilder's statement suggests that Reagan placed more value in the "trustee" model. In creating speech, the model presidents follow manifests as they negotiate their personal convictions and the preferences of the electorate.

Finally, it seems the speechwriters placed a high premium on rhetorical consistency. Gilder says, "I don't think there's ever been a more consistent president in

¹⁵⁸ Joshua Gilder, telephone interview with author, January 24, 2013.

¹⁵⁹ John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (New York: Serenity Publishers, 2008), 36.

terms of his policy and or his speeches in American history” and “I don’t think Reagan changed from 1964 until he died.”¹⁶⁰ Further, Elliot says that in communicating with the public through speech, “He had the same kind of approach at the end that he had at the beginning.”¹⁶¹ To the extent that each of these statements were intended to reflect Reagan in a positive light, it seems staying true to Reagan’s ideology in his speeches was of the utmost importance.

3) Reagan and his speechwriters focused on sound bites.

Perhaps one reason Reagan was hesitant or unable to adjust his rhetorical style in response to public opinion is because of the administrations’ relationship with a hostile media. According to nearly all of the speechwriters interviewed, the media defined a great deal of what Reagan’s rhetoric was and could be. The news media of the 1980s was unique because the decade witnessed important transitions in technology. The nascent stages of the 24-hour news cycle and cable news developed under the watch of the Reagan administration, and few news sources provided entire presidential speech texts or broadcasts. As Judge recalls, “When we were at the White House, we were basically dealing with the three broadcast networks and a handful of newspapers. That was the media for us.”¹⁶² Moreover, few opportunities to connect directly with the people were available during the 1980s. As speechwriter Mari Will explains, “the media . . . was (sic) the primary avenue we had then. It was limited to media opportunities and the ability to

¹⁶⁰ Gilder, telephone interview with author.

¹⁶¹ Elliot, telephone interview with author.

¹⁶² Judge, telephone interview with author.

go directly to the people was mostly through the media then."¹⁶³ As a result of the media, Will explains, "a lot of the emphasis was just on being able to get our messages to them, not trying to change the message in order to attract them."¹⁶⁴ Therefore, the media was a significant component of the presidential address drafting process.

The problem caused by sparse media outlets was compounded by the fact that, according to the speechwriters, the media didn't think well of the administration. Judge frankly explains, "It wasn't a friendly media,"¹⁶⁵ and Will confirms that "people forget that the media was generally hostile to Reagan then."¹⁶⁶ Because of this hostility, the media—according to the speechwriters—had a tendency to discredit Reagan's speeches. Will recalls, "There was a posture to Reagan and often to stories about his speeches. They would be arguing with one policy or another, trying to claim that it was wrong or misguided."¹⁶⁷

Because the media was one of the sole outlets for communication with the public, the Presidency relied on them to serve as an intermediary. This fact significantly influenced how the speechwriters crafted the presidential messages. Primarily, they focused a great deal of energy on making the messages especially simple. Will explains, "we had to allow the members of the mainstream media to carry our messages. So it

¹⁶³ Mari Will, telephone interview with author, February 27, 2013.

¹⁶⁴ Will, telephone interview with author.

¹⁶⁵ Judge, telephone interview with author.

¹⁶⁶ Will, telephone interview with author.

¹⁶⁷ Will, telephone interview with author.

would be like sending light through a prism. The message would be refracted in ways that would make it more complicated on the receiving end. So it was necessary to be as clear as possible in order to maximize the understanding on the other side."¹⁶⁸

As a result of this process, sound bites became a valuable component of Reagan's speeches. Judge explains how the relationship with the media directly resulted in an emphasis on sound bites. He states, "getting our message through them required a lot of writing things in a way that they would feel compelled to quote and report on it. So sound bites became important."¹⁶⁹ Will recalls another way the hostile relationship influenced their messages: "[they] had to be clear. But clear statements aren't always newsworthy so they had to go another step beyond; they had to make them flashy. So you use language formulations that would be so provocative that they couldn't resist reporting that Reagan had said it. And in that you would find the way to do that would be to get better and better at writing sound bites."¹⁷⁰

The production of sound bites was also one way the speechwriters could exercise some power over what the media was compelled to report. Will explains that in drafting a message, "you would have sound bites throughout the speech, but only enough to limit the words they could choose so you could be sure that your main message carried, so there wasn't some whole menu of things they could choose to be lifted rather than the

¹⁶⁸ Will, telephone interview with author.

¹⁶⁹ Judge, telephone interview with author.

¹⁷⁰ Will, telephone interview with author.

main one."¹⁷¹ In fact, Will jokes that the tension between the speechwriters and the media was so palpable, it spawned a playful game:

[The speechwriters] were so purposed about it that they played a game about it. The game was to cause the media to, what I'd say, 'write it down' in quotes whether they wanted to or not. . . . I used to play a game with myself and a couple of my friends where we would try to write the speech and be able to predict the three top quotes and also to be able to get a sound bite that would be recognized within the first three paragraphs of any story.¹⁷²"

It is quite clear that Reagan's speechwriters considered the media a necessary evil. Will imagines, "you can just see us pushing ourselves to not use the media, but to somewhat do that to force our ideas and our language through."¹⁷³ From these anecdotes it becomes clear that the media was a powerful force in the composition of Reagan's addresses.

Despite the fact that Reagan's speechwriters were seemingly forced into using sound bites as a primary means of communicating with the public, they recall sound bites and eloquent phrases with fondness. Will argues that their use was a testament to the intellectual capability of the public:

My theory was . . . people were, even back in the 80s, were very sophisticated at being able to filter out journalists' point[s] of view. They would immediately go to the sound bites or the quotes and the language that was in quotes. And if they agreed with the language that was in quotes, then they could disregard all the other negative things that were said about it in stories. We were trying to get the American people to resonate with his language. First, you had to get it quoted in

¹⁷¹ Will, telephone interview with author.

¹⁷² Will, telephone interview with author.

¹⁷³ Will, telephone interview with author.

order to do so, particularly big ideas about what things, what ideas, what values the American people generally had.¹⁷⁴

Judge also reveres the value of sound bites and laments their absence in more current presidential rhetoric. He states that one criticism of the presidents after Reagan, "one thing you often hear, is there aren't as many memorable phrases. Now some of that is [because] we set a very high bar for memorable phrases. [We had] lots and lots of them."¹⁷⁵

It is clear that, even though the media severely limited the types of language the speechwriters could employ in Reagan's speeches, they reminisce about the language favorably. Their experiences with the media highlight a significant component of presidential speech. The media are indeed gatekeepers for the information disseminated from the White House to the public. With the advent of 21st century technologies, that gate is less imposing than it was thirty years ago. This act undoubtedly has significant implications for the question addressed in this project, as I shall discuss later.

4) Reagan avoided eloquent language.

The speechwriters revealed that while Reagan is well-known for his eloquence, he considered the substance behind the rhetoric more valuable. Elliot echoes a sentiment that is well documented in public opinion. He contends, "I think Reagan kind of raised [speech] to an art form and made it a signature of his. It's kind of like he made the

¹⁷⁴ Will, telephone interview with author.

¹⁷⁵ Judge, telephone interview with author.

brand.”¹⁷⁶ This posture is an odd one considering it’s quite contrary to what Reagan considered the purpose of his presidential address to be. When asked why Reagan has this reputation in public life, Khachigian admitted, “That’s interesting because Reagan didn’t think of himself as eloquent. In fact he liked to down play the more florid oratorical flourishes in his speech. He didn’t like to be bombastic.”¹⁷⁷ This contradiction is compounded by the case study results documented earlier in this chapter which indicated how acutely the use of poetic language increased over the course of the speech’s evolution, particularly in the draft that Reagan himself composed.

One important consideration in understanding Reagan’s position towards eloquence is the relationship between policy and prose. Bakshian explains that in composing a speech, style wasn’t a beginning point—policy was: “You consider the public not from the point of how are we going to pander to the public. He started from the point of view of policy objectives.”¹⁷⁸ He continues:

A good speech is not going to be effective without style and a really great speech is not going to be effective unless that style is based on very strong substance. When Reagan says ‘Tear down this wall,’ there’s a stylistic piece of rhetoric that you have to consider, but also behind it is a strong policy. Same with Roosevelt, ‘The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.’ You have this style, phraseology, memorable phraseology, but it was based on what he was going to do for the country. So, I think they go hand in hand.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Elliot, telephone interview with author.

¹⁷⁷ Khachigian, telephone interview with author.

¹⁷⁸ Bakshian, telephone interview with author.

¹⁷⁹ Khachigian, telephone interview with author.

Bakshian explains that the public was a point of consideration when creating eloquent language, and that this kind of language was always tempered with policy language—that they shared a symbiotic relationship.

This data indicates that the Reagan administration believed any eloquent language had to be supported by substance. In explaining what constituted that substance, some answers are very telling. For example, Khachigian reveals his conception of substance:

Reagan had a gift. Not only his personal gift—the way he looked and the way he sounded when he spoke and the words he used—but also because he also had core principles and strong beliefs and an ideology, and he used the style to communicate that. So he had a gift of educating people and using illustrations to support strong policy decisions.¹⁸⁰

In this case, Khachigian refers to the substance of Reagan’s speeches as composed of “principles” “beliefs” and “ideology”—these constituted or influenced policy decisions.

Similarly, Gilder explains that the substance he and the other writers employed was more illustrative than expository:

They wanted a clear explanation from the president of what he was about. They wanted basic transparency. They also wanted to understand the purpose. You know, they didn’t want a bunch of what politicians would give them which was a lot of numbers, just read facts. They wanted a sort of deeper understanding of how these connect to their basic values and a vision for America. And that’s what we had to give them every time no matter what we were talking about, so they understood why we were doing what we were doing.¹⁸¹

Gilder emphasized that this substance and the rhetoric it accompanied worked hand-in-hand. He asserts, “I never felt that what we were doing was just rhetoric in the sense that

¹⁸⁰ Khachigian, telephone interview with author.

¹⁸¹ Gilder, telephone interview with author.

it's used incorrectly now. The rhetoric was designed to deeply reflect the policy."¹⁸² It seems that for the Reagan speechwriters, policy wasn't limited to individual pieces of legislation. It included the ideological foundation that influenced those facts and laws.

The point illustrated here is that there seems to be a disconnect between what Reagan wanted his rhetoric to be and what it actually was. While the speechwriters claim that eloquence wasn't a concern for him, his speeches emphasized it. What is clear, however, is that Reagan and his speechwriters believed substance and style were most effective when used in concert with one another. Yet the way substance was defined focused on ideology as much as the policies that the ideology informed.

These interviews of speechwriters reveal a great deal about the speechwriting operation in the Reagan White House, and how thoughts of the public influenced their messages. The speechwriters highlighted that while Reagan operated on an assumed perspective the public had, his communication style wasn't affected by any changing public preferences. Additionally, they explained why the media played such a pivotal role in disseminating public messages and why Reagan preferred these messages to be substance-oriented.

The speechwriters' responses help answer my dissertation question: how do presidents and speechwriters compose persuasive speeches when the public disdains them? First, the interviews indicated two claims: that Reagan and his speechwriters relied on their intuition first and public opinion second in creating messages, and that Reagan's rhetoric rarely if ever changed based on public opinion. In light of the

¹⁸² Gilder, telephone interview with author.

increased distaste for presidential speeches, Reagan and his speechwriters tried to persuade the public by amplifying whatever the public liked about his rhetoric. It seems that public opinion was taken into account in a broad sense, but Reagan's speechwriters felt the President's rhetoric was best served by a fidelity to his intuition. The speechwriters did make changes to the rhetoric in response to positive feedback, such as applause lines or other indications that the public liked a particular message. They did not, however, actively seek out negative feedback. Rather than address the public distaste for presidential speeches, it seems Reagan and his speechwriters amplified whatever resulted in a positive response.

Second, the interviews indicated two other claims: that Reagan's rhetoric often featured sound bites and that the reputation Reagan received for being an eloquent speaker was not an intended one. These two claims are related because the form of a sound bite is often one that requires a particular kind of phrasing—it needs to be clever, ostentatious, and memorable. These descriptors are also used for language characterized as "eloquent." In creating sound bites, the speechwriters used eloquent words, but not for the explicit purpose of being eloquent. In light of the increased distaste for presidential speeches, Reagan and his speechwriters tried to persuade the public by inadvertently using eloquent language. The interviews reveal that the purpose of using sound bites was to bypass a hostile media and speak directly to the public. In doing so, that communication was inherently eloquent. Despite any indication that Reagan and his speechwriters may have been aware that the public disdained eloquent presidential speech, they were forced to use that kind of language in an effort to communicate with

the public. These findings will be considered alongside the case study and content analysis, each informing the others.

CONCLUSION

This project aims to answer the question: how do presidents and their speechwriters craft persuasive speeches for an audience that is increasingly disenchanted with presidential speech? In answering this question in relation to Reagan's presidency, I conducted three studies.

The first—a case study of Reagan's July 1981 speech on tax legislation—found that Reagan and his speechwriters proactively attempted to ingratiate the public in three ways: first, they emphasized the urgency of the situation, expanded the scope of those affected, and made the message more engaging in order to make the speech more resonant and worth the audience's attention; second, they addressed Congress in a hostile but indirect manner, similar to the way in which the general public criticizes Congress; and third, they increasingly chose to use metaphors rather than explicit facts in order to convey messages, making the language more affective.

In the second study, I conducted a longitudinal content analysis of 36 weekly addresses. I analyzed the proportions of rhetorical or poetic language in these speeches, and compared the ratios over time. This study yielded two major results: first, the frequency with which Reagan's speeches had a high proportion of rhetorical statements decreased during the year-and-a-half prior to both the 1984 and 1988 elections; second, the trend of the proportion of poetic language in the speeches closely matches the trend of Reagan's disapproval ratings over time.

In the final study I conducted interviews with six of Reagan's speechwriters. From this wealth of data, I identified four major themes: first, Reagan had an eye towards public opinion about his speeches, but his speeches were primarily guided by his and his speechwriters' intuition; second, although Reagan considered the public's perceptions about his speeches, it did not affect his rhetorical style; third; the media and its attitude towards Reagan's rhetorical presidency largely defined the content and style of his speeches; and last, although he has a reputation for being eloquent, Reagan preferred to avoid poetic language.

These results contribute to the development of a theory of executive rhetoric which will be outlined thoroughly in Chapter Five. Key findings include Reagan's attempt to make his speech's exigence more severe and staged in direct opposition to Congress; the influence of election season on the trend of Reagan's poetic language; and, Reagan's preference to avoid eloquent language. In the next chapter, I review the results of my studies on the Bush presidency.

Chapter Three: George H. W. Bush

The 41st president of the United States, George H. W. Bush, was sworn into office on January 20, 1989, after serving eight years as Ronald Reagan's Vice President. Bush is largely remembered as a foreign policy president. His notable successes include spearheading the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) negotiations, and a controversial invasion of Panama to end drug trafficking. President Bush is perhaps best remembered for the 1990 Persian Gulf War, in which United Nations troops successfully forced Iraqi forces to withdraw from Kuwait. This completion of Operation Desert Storm resulted in an 89% presidential approval rate—the second highest in American history.¹⁸³ On the domestic front, Bush influenced passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act and a reauthorization of the Clean Air Act. He served only one term, losing re-election in 1992 to William Jefferson Clinton by nearly six million votes.

Compared to his foreign policy record, Bush's rhetorical accomplishments are less celebrated. Bush's corpus of presidential speeches is significantly smaller and less notable than Reagan's. He infrequently used rhetoric as a source of presidential power and preferred to present legislation in news conferences to the press corps instead of in speeches to the public. Perhaps the most cited contribution to his rhetorical legacy, "Read my lips: no new taxes," is actually a campaign pledge from his nomination acceptance speech at the 1988 Republican National Committee Convention. Hence, President Bush is a less frequent subject of study for scholars of presidential rhetoric.

¹⁸³ The Roper Center, "Presidential Job Performance Ratings."

This dissertation seeks to understand how different presidents attempt to use oratory to persuade a public that is increasingly disenchanted with presidential speech. Bush's presidency marks an intriguing point in the institution's history, especially in regard to my projects' question. The Bush White House was preceded by an administration that used the office's bully pulpit function more thoroughly than any before it. In a marked deviation from Reagan, Bush limited his use of rhetoric. His public addresses were sharply focused on policy and far less ceremonial in nature.

One could argue that, in present day, Bush enjoys a less venerable legacy than Reagan—partly because of Reagan's exceptional rhetoric. While this may be true, it must be noted that the average public approval of each president during their respective administrations was eight percent higher for Bush. I do not presume to suggest that the relationship between Bush's speech and his approval numbers is causal. However, the correlation does prompt one to consider if and how they might be related. How did President Bush and his speechwriters ingratiate the public with oratory during a period of growing dissatisfaction with presidential speech?

This chapter investigates Bush's presidency using three studies. The first is a rhetorical analysis of Bush's June 12, 1991, "Remarks on the Administration's Domestic Policy." In this case study, I analyze the linguistic edits from one draft to the next to illuminate the proactive changes Bush and his speechwriters made in order to persuade the public. The second study is a longitudinal content analysis of Bush's eighteen weekly presidential radio addresses. This analysis demonstrates how changes in Bush's rhetorical style reflect the ways in which Bush and his speechwriters reacted to public

opinion about his speeches. The third study is a collection of interviews with five Bush speechwriters. Their contributions support the arguments made in the case study and content analysis, and provide pointed insight on how Bush and his speechwriters addressed a public that is increasingly frustrated with presidential speech. The findings of these studies contribute to a thorough answer of this dissertation's question and the development of a theory of executive rhetoric, both of which will be explicated further in Chapter Five.

CASE STUDY

The following is a rhetorical analysis of Bush's June 12, 1991 speech, "Remarks on the Administration's Domestic Policy."¹⁸⁴ I chose to analyze this speech for a number of reasons, all of which fit the criteria for speech selection outlined in Chapter One. First, the speech was important to the administration and was given a great deal of attention within the White House, but was not edited by outside bureaucracies. As indicated in Chapter One, speeches reviewed by executive departments like the Departments of Treasury or Defense often muddy the original language and intent of presidential speeches, making it more difficult for rhetoricians to accurately analyze them. The June speech was initially conceived as a major press event, but ultimately received limited media coverage; it was written about for days in major newspapers, but was not carried live on television that evening. The speech is "legislative" as considered by Aristotelian standards, and contains a unique blend of both policy and ideology. Moreover, I was able

¹⁸⁴ President George H. W. Bush, "Remarks on the Administration's Domestic Policy," delivered on June 12, 1991. Accessed from *The American Presidency Project*, University of California, Santa Barbara, on 8 April 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=19687&st=domestic&st1=>.

to interview the speech's primary writer, David Demarest. Finally, the George H. W. Bush in College Station, Texas retains many drafts of and background papers about this speech. In total, I consulted 29 documents for this analysis, including memos, outlines, and newspaper clippings concerning the impetus, topic, and organization of the speech. There are nine distinct versions of the speech, and each draft has multiple copies with edits and suggestions from different speechwriters.¹⁸⁵

In *Speaking of Freedom*, an edited anthology of his speeches, President Bush recalls this speech's purpose:

By setting up a legislative road block, the Democrat leadership was seeking to gain an advantage on the domestic front—where they thought the main battle in the next presidential campaign would be fought. Of course, I did not like being boxed in by Congress in this way. More important, I did not agree for a minute with the basic notion that it is through the Congress that progress is made in America. It was time to reframe the issue—and challenge the idea that national progress and legislative progress are one and the same.¹⁸⁶

In preparation for this speech, Demarest sent the President a memo on May 22, 1991 that presented the speech's potential benefits: “This can be a powerful moment in your presidency. With the proper promotion, audience, and message, this event presents an excellent opportunity to frame your vision for the nation.” The speech—throughout all drafts—is generally organized as the May 22 memo suggests it ought to be: “It will present the case for transforming America by engaging the three most dynamic forces for positive change: the free market, the government, and the ethic of service.” The speech

¹⁸⁵ Speech Drafts, “Domestic Challenges Facing America” 6/21/91[OA 6034], folders [1] and [2], White House Office of Speechwriting: Speech Drafts Files, George H. W. Bush Library.

¹⁸⁶ George H. W. Bush, *Speaking of Freedom: The Collected Speeches* (Scribner: New York, 2009), 199.

was intended to, as the memo states, “define for the media and the public a rhetorical trademark for the Bush national vision.”¹⁸⁷

The first three drafts were composed on June 5, 6, and 7, respectively. These were prepared by Demarest and policy advisor Greg Petersmeyer. The fourth draft, titled “Draft A” was delivered to President Bush for review on the evening of June 7. This draft’s cover sheet indicates that Demarest and Petersmeyer scheduled a meeting for June 10 at 11:45 A.M. to discuss this draft with the President. Drafts Five and Six (titled “Draft B” and “Draft D”) were composed on June 10 and June 11 respectively. There are many copies of these two drafts with edits and notes from other speechwriters. Draft Five’s cover sheet indicates that it was sent to the speechwriting staff on June 10, and requested that edits to be returned on June 11 by 10 A.M. Draft Six, sent to the speechwriting staff on June 11 requested that edits be returned by 3 P.M. that same afternoon. Draft Seven (titled “Draft E”) and Draft Eight (titled “Draft F”) are not dated, but were prepared sometime after 3 P.M. on June 11 and before 8 P.M. on June 12—at which time the speech was delivered.

In reviewing the nine speech drafts, three trajectories became apparent. They signal considerations that Bush and his speechwriters made about the public’s preferences and expectations for presidential speech. First, the speech increasingly became truer to the traditional Aristotelian legislative form, giving the audience a stronger sense of expediency. Second, it increasingly became more reliant on specific

¹⁸⁷ Memo to the President, “Domestic Challenges Facing America” 6/21/91[OA 6034], folder [1], White House Office of Speechwriting: Speech Drafts Files, George H. W. Bush Library.

policy examples and less reliant on ideological abstraction to communicate its message, making the substance of the speech more tangible and the audience more satisfied with the speech. Third, the speech became less focused on Bush as an individual and more focused on the President as an institutional representative, making the speech less subject to opinionated conjecture and the audience more supportive and patriotic. In what follows, I provide examples of these trends. I argue that each was a result of an active, motivated attempt on behalf of President Bush and his speechwriters to persuade an audience disaffected by speech. These trends reflect what Bush and his speechwriters considered effective ways to address or overcome the public's distaste for presidential address.

Moving Towards a Legislative Speech

The first trend I observed in the draft changes was that the message increasingly treated Congress less like an inevitable component of the problem, and more like the sole impetus for the speech. In earlier drafts, the speech seems to be an ideological outline of Bush's vision for the country. As the drafts progress, however, the Congress' recent inaction is identified as the motivation behind the speech and increasingly frames the speech's purpose and message. In short, the speech transforms from a desultory illustration of Bush's perfect union into a purposed and necessary response to Congress' legislative failures. In doing so, the speech provides the public with recourse—a productive sense that they can solve problems without Congress. I argue that this move is one towards a more precise version of Aristotle's deliberative (or legislative, or

political) speech—speech that argues the expedience of a particular course of action.¹⁸⁸ In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle claimed that the political orator “aims at establishing the expediency or the harmfulness of a proposed course of action; if he urges its acceptance, he does so on the ground that it will do good; if he urges its rejection, he does so on the ground that it will do harm.”¹⁸⁹ The treatise defines expediency as a kind of “utility”: “the political or deliberative orator’s aim is utility: deliberation seeks to determine not ends but the means to ends, i.e. what it is most useful to do.”¹⁹⁰ Utility, Aristotle suggests, is “a good thing,” defined “as that which ought to be chosen for its own sake; or as that for the sake of which we choose something else; or as that which is sought after by all things, or by all things that have sensation or reason. . . .”¹⁹¹ To make a speech sound expedient a speaker will frame his or her argument in a way that makes his or her proposed course of action seem the most utilitarian—useful, sensible, and of sound judgment. I argue that throughout the evolution of Bush’s speech, he and his speechwriters edit the language from one draft to the next in part to convey a stronger sense of expediency. This message evolves most clearly in three passages.

¹⁸⁸ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*.

¹⁸⁹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, [1358b].

¹⁹⁰ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, [1362a].

¹⁹¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, [1362a].

Bush's Problem with Congress

The first set of examples comes from a passage that explains why Congress is the motivation behind Bush's speech. This passage is found at the end of Draft One, on page eight of nine:

Ninety-eight days ago, in an address to a Joint Session of Congress, I asked the Congress to tackle the pressing problems in our own backyard with the same energy we had in tackling the crisis in the Gulf. Having served in Congress, I know how tough it can be to enact a piece of legislation. So I asked that they pass just two laws in a hundred days—a comprehensive anti-crime bill, and a transportation bill. Neither will be on my desk by Friday, and that is unacceptable.¹⁹²

This paragraph is situated at the end of the speech. The draft is organized in such a way that this passage is presented as yet another piece of information that supports Bush's claim—that the free market and community service are just as legitimate agents of change as the Congress is. Congress' inaction is merely one more example the speech utilizes to argue its position.

In Draft Two, two significant changes occur. First, this section is moved to the first page.¹⁹³ Congress' inaction is now understood as the impetus for this speech occasion. This is an important change because it communicates to the audience a precise reason for the speech. Otherwise, the occasion could be interpreted as an arbitrary opportunity to discuss an issue the President finds important. This change makes the speech sound more expedient—its purpose is to communicate a course of action in *response to a situation*. Second, the line in which the President references his time as a

¹⁹² George H. W. Bush Library, Draft One, 8.

¹⁹³ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Two, 1.

member of Congress is removed.¹⁹⁴ With that statement, Bush had conceded that the problem with Congress was an institutional one, suggesting that even when Bush himself was in Congress, inaction was inevitable. Deleting this line prevents the audience from imagining Bush as a congressional representative, and thus precludes the audience from associating him with any culpability in Congress' recent failures. Removing the line also minimizes the justification for any legitimate institutional reasons the Congress might have for its inaction on the two bills. Institutional problems are more deeply-rooted and harder to solve. By removing the suggestion that the institution itself is at fault, the speech is better able to argue that the problem has a solution, and that Bush's proposed course of action is the most expedient.

The conclusion about Congress' inaction that was presented in Draft One—"that [it] is unacceptable"—is replaced in Draft Three with "that tells us something profound."¹⁹⁵ By calling Congress' inaction "unacceptable," Draft One seems to scold the legislative body, to *blame* it for its failures. Aristotle identifies "praise and *blame*" as the subject of epideictic speech.¹⁹⁶ Moreover, epideictic speech is past-oriented, while legislative speech is future-oriented.¹⁹⁷ In Chapter One, I contended that one frustration the public has with presidential speech is the presence of epideictic strategies in legislative speech. This is one such example. Bush and his speechwriters must have

¹⁹⁴ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Two, 1.

¹⁹⁵ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Three, 1.

¹⁹⁶ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, [1358b].

¹⁹⁷ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, [1358b].

been aware of this frustration to some extent, as Draft One evolves into Draft three by replacing “that it is unacceptable” with “that tells us something profound.” In making this change, the draft veers from making a claim that would befit an epideictic speech. Rather, it claims that Congress’ inaction has serious implications. This new language is oriented with the future, not the past. Congress ought not to be blamed for its inability to pass specific legislation; however, the ramifications of Congress’ *inaction* ought to move the country *to action*. Bush’s speech outlines exactly what that action should be. This approach is more expedient than the language in Draft One because it avoids admonition in favor of a more productive conversation about what to do next. The language in Draft Three favors utility over blame. The speech becomes less concerned with censuring Congress and more concerned with initiating self-reflection and change.

Another important change is made in Draft Five. It adds, “though I spelled out all my domestic priorities, I specifically asked that they pass . . .” two bills.¹⁹⁸ Draft Seven expands upon this explanation, noting “I spelled out my domestic priorities—setting out an ambitious agenda founded upon enhancing economic growth, investing in our future, and increasing opportunity for all Americans. I sent the Congress literally hundreds of recommendations for legislative change.”¹⁹⁹ This detailed addition of Bush’s domestic agenda helps clarify that the president was quite clear about his both his policy agenda and his expectations of Congress from the beginning of his term. During my interview with Demarest, he explained that prior to this speech the President’s’ staff felt that,

¹⁹⁸ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Five, 1.

¹⁹⁹ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Seven, 2.

because his presidency was so foreign policy focused, Bush hadn't clearly stated his domestic priorities as emphatically as he could have.²⁰⁰ Admitting that failure, of course, would have been politically harmful. The changes to Draft Five inoculated the public or any of the president's critics from claiming this message was a political ploy, that it was the first time he clearly outlined a domestic agenda. Hence, the change was *politically expedient*. This agenda also causes the speech to sound less like an arbitrary outline of Bush's ideological values and more like a *legislatively expedient* response to Congress. In fact, these three items on the president's legislative agenda—economic growth, investing in the future, and increasing opportunity—align loosely with the three sources of change in the current speech—free market, government, and communities. This makes for an even stronger case that the President's domestic agenda has been transparent all along and that the components of the current speech have long been the clearly identifiable hallmarks of his domestic agenda.

A final edit in Draft Eight uses comedic relief to soften the criticism of Congress while at the same time emphasizing their failure: "I thought a hundred days was pretty reasonable. I wasn't asking the Congress to deliver a hot pizza in less than thirty minutes. That would be truly revolutionary. I only asked for two pieces of legislation in a hundred days. It is now clear that neither will be on my desk by Friday. I am disappointed—but frankly I'm not surprised."²⁰¹ This humor attempts to make Congress' inaction seem absurd, comparable to pizza delivery. As will be indicated later in this

²⁰⁰ David Demarest, telephone interview with author, March 23, 2013.

²⁰¹ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Eight, 2.

chapter, Bush's speechwriters revealed that the President seldom allowed jokes to be placed in his speeches. Hence, this inclusion may have strengthened the claim that Congress' inaction is absurd by the fact that its absurdity warranted a president, who seldom jokes, to do so. In this case, the use of humor wasn't used primarily for entertainment, but to emphasize a point. In using humor to make Congress' failures seem more egregious, the speech makes Bush's solution to the problem seem even more necessary and deserving of the audience's attention. Thus, Bush's humor makes the speech more expedient.

The Public's Problem with Congress

The second set of examples demonstrates how the drafts presume to convey the public's opinion about Congress' inaction. In Draft One, the speech explains, "The American people don't understand why it would take a hundred days to enact a bill to fight crime. They don't understand why the Congress complicates issues that aren't that complicated."²⁰² By noting that Congress' inaction is something the American people don't understand, the speech removes nuance from the situation: when it comes to fighting crime, passing this legislation is absolutely the right thing to do, and the Congress has failed the American people. Moreover, the language frames the situation in a way that makes it seem as if Congress is complicating the issue of whether or not to prevent crime. The draft stages the situation in a way that would invite Congress to admit that their inaction is due to politicking, something that would undoubtedly disappoint the American people. Bush's proposal for solving problems circumvents the

²⁰² George H. W. Bush Library, Draft One, 8.

complications of politics and appears to be more expedient than Congress: there is an absolute right and an absolute wrong and the Congress has failed. Further, noting that Congress complicated passing the transportation and crime bills forgoes the argument that creating the legislation itself is also a nuanced process. It frames the issue in a binary way, implying that Congress has no excuse in disappointing not the president, but the American people.

With Draft Three, the Congress' failures become more egregious. Draft One claimed that the reason the crime bill was not yet passed was because Congress was complicating the matter—"Congress complicates issues that aren't that complicated."²⁰³ Instead, Draft Three claims the American people "don't understand the complication, the paralysis, the inaction" of Congress.²⁰⁴ In the change from Draft One to Three, Congress not only complicates matters, it is now paralyzed and inactive. In Draft One, Congress—although complicating the bill—was at least paying the bill attention. With Draft Three, however, Congress is simply not doing anything at all—they're paralyzed, inactive. These adjectives give the sense that Congress is immobile. The "paralysis" in particular conjures associations of health and disease and makes Congress seem inert and lifeless. Surely with their legislative body in such an unhealthy state, the American people must turn to other options to secure the common welfare. Such options are outlined in Bush's speech, and they are more expedient courses of action than relying on Congress to restore its own health.

²⁰³ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft One, 8.

²⁰⁴ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Three, 1.

Drafts Five and Six add clarity and a stronger rationale to this passage. Earlier in the speech, Bush mentions that he sent two bills to Congress, a crime bill and a transportation bill. In Drafts One through Four, the speech notes that the public questions why a crime bill—only a crime bill—can’t be passed in one hundred days. Draft Five adds to this message, “or why a highway bill can’t pass in a hundred days.”²⁰⁵ Including the second bill in America’s hypothetical line of inquiry makes the response more directed to Congress’ particular legislative actions—or inactions—in question. This adds more clarity to the speech’s purpose and a stronger justification for the expedience of Bush’s argument.

Draft Six adds distinct rationales for the pieces of legislation mentioned, explaining that “Most Americans believe fear of crime and violence threatens our most basic freedoms—denies us opportunity. They also believe we must invest in our future—provide an infrastructure for those who come after us.”²⁰⁶ This perspective details specific reasons the policies in question ought to be legislated. The draft refrains from using rhetorical flourish to make the language more eloquent, but rather uses a clear and basic line of reasoning to explain why the American people want these pieces of legislation passed by the Congress. This explanation accounts for exactly why Congress ought to act on behalf of their constituents, making the argument more expedient.

²⁰⁵ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Five, 1.

²⁰⁶ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Six, 1.

The President's Relationship with Congress

The evolution of a third passage distinctly illustrates how the speech becomes more legislative. This set of examples demonstrates how the President distances himself from Congress in order to make his course of action seem more expedient. Draft One begins to establish that, while the information Bush presents does not bode well for Congress' reputation, his aim is not—as an epideictic speech would be—to blame Congress. Following Bush's explanation that the Congress had 100 days to pass two pieces of legislation, Draft One explains, "I don't mention this to bash the Congress. I don't mention this to run down Government."²⁰⁷ Draft Two follows this trend away from epideictic blame. The draft contends, "Rather than bickering with Congress tonight about legislation, I want to talk about America's future on a more profound level."²⁰⁸ This profound level is one on which problems can be solved, a challenge thus far not met by the Congress. The draft spatiality moves beyond blaming or bickering, and towards a deliberative level that suggests, from Bush's perspective, Congress can be left behind altogether.

Changes in Drafts Three and Five illustrate how the speech avoids implicating the President himself in Congress' failures. An addition to Draft Three reads, "If politicians would just listen to the people, they would begin to understand what America is trying to tell us."²⁰⁹ The draft intends to refer to Congressional members by referencing

²⁰⁷ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft One, 8.

²⁰⁸ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Two, 1.

²⁰⁹ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Three, 2.

“politicians,” but it makes an oversight in not recognizing that “politicians” might also refer to President Bush. As it stands, the language suggests that Bush isn’t listening to the country. Draft Five fixes the error, noting that “When we politicians listen to the people, we understand very clearly what the people are trying to tell us.”²¹⁰ This line more accurately conveys the sentiment of Bush’s thought—that while Bush listens to the people and understands what they want, Congress apparently does not. The draft refrains from chastising Congress for ignoring the public and instead suggests what Congress can do to regain the trust of the American people. The change from Draft Three to Five avoids blaming Congress and focuses on future actions, making the speech more expedient.

With Draft Seven, the speech includes a particular example to support Bush’s claim that his proposed course of action is expedient. It contends, “But I can say this as partial consolation: America’s problem-solving does not begin or end with the Congress. If we waited for Congressional approval to act decisively against aggression in the Persian Gulf, we would still be waiting. We didn’t wait, and now Kuwait is free.”²¹¹ The speech claims that the American victory and resulting patriotism would not be omnipresent had the Congress been the sole deciding agent in the option to support Kuwait. This addition compels the audience to agree in order to avoid any cognitive dissonance about the national pride they feel because of the war’s conclusion. The mention of Kuwait suggests that had Bush not acted on his good judgment to circumvent

²¹⁰ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Five, 2.

²¹¹ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Seven, 2.

Congress, Kuwait would now be under Iraqi rule. The goal of any deliberative speech is to argue for a solution to a problem. An expedient response is one that has utility, is prudent, and profitable. Congress was a road block to Kuwait's freedom and to America's victory. The speech argues that Bush's response in Kuwait was expedient, and so too must be his solution to the problem at hand: to solve America's problems, the road block must be removed.

The conclusion to this passage is added in Draft Seven. It admits, "The Congress can refer our proposals to its hundreds of committees, tie itself up with debate, and produce complicated, unworkable legislation."²¹² The draft continues, "Yes, it would help if Congress would do what we ask and need. But we cannot let its inaction discourage or deter us from meeting our responsibilities."²¹³ Congress' purpose is to help solve the country's problems by passing legislation. This conclusion communicates that problems still exist, and are in need of solutions. When Congress fails to comply with its sole responsibility, it loses institutional legitimacy. If Congress continues to falter, it would be imprudent for America to continue relying on the institution to carry out its constitutionally defined duties. With these additions to Draft Seven, it seems the most expedient course of action is to continue seeking solutions to our problems without Congress' help, using the agents of change Bush outlines in his speech.

All of the examples provided in this section illustrate the ways in which Bush and his writers edited this speech to seem more expedient. The three passages discussed—

²¹² George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Seven, 3.

²¹³ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Seven, 10.

those detailing Bush's problem with Congress, the public's problem with Congress, and the President's relationship with Congress—evolve to become more faithful examples of the Aristotelian legislative form. The examples increasingly avoid blaming Congress and focusing on the past, as these are characteristics of epideictic speech. Rather, they increasingly focus on the future and use language that is useful, productive, and propitious. I argue Bush and his speechwriters made these draft changes because, as documented in Chapter One, the public has a preference for presidential speech that is problem-solution oriented, rather than arbitrary ideological diatribes.

Increasing the Presence of Policy

The second trend I observed is that over the course of the speech's creation, the drafts increasingly identify specific policies. They also increasingly provide context for and explanations of those policies. I argue that Bush and his speechwriters focused more intently on policy from draft to draft in a motivated attempt to appeal to the public's appetite for substantive support for policy discussions. The public's appetite for substance suggests that they maintain a particular attitude towards policy language. Burke argues that "any verbal act" is "symbolic action," and that "the symbolic act is the *dancing of an attitude*."²¹⁴ This dance is composed of language that has both semantic and poetic meaning. The differences between the two are summarized in Burke's statement that semantic meaning "would try to *cut away*, to *abstract*, all emotional factors that complicate the objective clarity of meaning. [Poetic meaning] would try to

²¹⁴ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 9.

derive its vision from the maximum *heaping up* of all these emotional factors . . .”²¹⁵

Semantic and poetic meaning are not opposites. Rather, they are two parts of a whole, two components of one attitude. I argue that the attitude of presidential speech that the public favors can be defined by a higher saturation of the semantic over the poetic.

Judge, who before writing for Reagan wrote speeches for then Vice President Bush, noted in our interview that the public gets frustrated with presidential speech when they don't recognize that a speech is substantive. He suggests that this disappointment, "I think, comes from the president not speaking in a way that people recognize as substantive. It doesn't necessarily mean that the speeches are not substantive, but it is a trick writing so that people not only hear substance but recognize that they hear substance."²¹⁶ In the examples that follow, I illustrate how the language in Bush's speech evolves in a manner that emphasizes semantic meaning. I contend it does so in order to help the audience recognize the very substance that they crave.

A first example from Draft One points out an individual in the audience. This identification is used to personify the success of an education program. It reads, "Here today is Mrs. Lauren Floyd. She teaches preschoolers in a marvelous government program called Head Start."²¹⁷ In Draft Five, the speech adds a mention that "this Administration expanded" the Head Start program.²¹⁸ The inclusion of the Head Start policy and the

²¹⁵ Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 128.

²¹⁶ Judge, telephone interview with author.

²¹⁷ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft One, 6.

²¹⁸ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Five, 7.

mention that Bush expanded the program signal to the audience that certain programs succeeded because of the principles being argued for in this speech. Rather than simply stating that his administration is implementing programs that are beneficial for the country's social welfare, Bush notes a specific policy and the actions his administration have taken to support that policy. By using more semantic language to describe the policy, the speech becomes less abstract and gives the audience concrete examples that support Bush's argument.

A second example illustrates how the speech increasingly identifies the details of certain legislation. Draft One recalls "In Prospect Gardens, St. Louis, Jack Kemp and I stood with Mrs. Ramona Younger to break the mold about how we look at public housing. There, people have a stake in their community because the tenants became the owners."²¹⁹ Draft Two expands upon this information and edits the description to convey the exact purpose of the program. The draft identifies this policy as the HOPE initiative, and explains it "will make tenants in dilapidated housing projects into homeowners bursting with pride and dignity."²²⁰ While the first draft noted that tenants become owners, the second draft provided a clearer, more specific picture for what the purpose of the policy exactly is. It uses semantic language to convey not simply that tenants become owners, but *what ownership will achieve*—it will contribute to the health of the community by making its members feel empowered.

²¹⁹ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft One, 7.

²²⁰ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Two, 6.

A third example shows how Bush and his speechwriters used policy examples to persuade the audience—not with ephemeral feelings, but with tangible goods. Draft Three reads, “The Americans with Disabilities Act has brought a new pride to our nation’s disabled.”²²¹ In Draft Five this is edited to reflect that the bill has resulted in “new opportunities to our nation’s disabled.” Replacing one’s pride with the opportunities one is granted through this legislation gives the policy more clarity and substance; the ADA doesn’t give the disabled an emotion, but real opportunity for growth and betterment. This change in semantic language communicates a precise message, one that more successfully matches the public’s appetite for substance.

Along with the edits that make the policies more detailed, the drafts also incorporate policy references with increasing frequency from one draft to the next. I argue that the sheer increase in the number of policy references contributes substance to the speech, a kind of substance for which the public is hungry. In Draft Two, these references to policy are inserted:

- “Our crime bill will help to make neighborhoods safe. Our enterprise zone proposal will stimulate the creation of jobs and the accumulation of wealth in the inner city. Our proposals to reform the welfare system will make it easier for the truly needy to obtain services, while making those who can be self-sufficient.”²²²
- “Our child care bill will help make child care opportunities available to those the market has not yet reached.”²²³

In Draft Five, these policies are added:

²²¹ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Three, 7.

²²² George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Two, 6.

²²³ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Two, 6.

- “And if we get the kind of civil rights bill that I sent to the Congress, we will take a dramatic step against discrimination in the workplace.”²²⁴
- “We fought for a Clean Air Act that puts the free market in the service of the environment—and we succeeded.”²²⁵

I mention these instances to argue that not only do edits of existing material suggest a motivated direction for the speech, but also that the sheer inclusion of new policy data can indicate a similar direction. What makes these mentions particularly strategic is that they are accompanied by clear descriptions of their goals or achievements. They are all described with a high proportion of semantic language, and their inclusion in the speech makes Bush’s remarks sound more substantive.

This section documented the evolution of policy language in Bush's speech. With the examples provided, I illustrated how the changing word choices indicated an increase in both the number of policies mentioned, as well as contextual information or rationale that makes the speech sound more substantive. These changes indicate a favorable attitude towards semantic language, an attitude that the public similarly has towards presidential speech. For this reason, I argue that Bush and his speechwriters created a speech that more accurately provided the audience with the type of information they wanted to hear in a presidential address: substantive, detailed policy.

²²⁴ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Five, 8.

²²⁵ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Five, 7.

Portraying Bush's Persona

President Bush had a reputation among his speechwriters for eliminating any hubristic references to himself or stories about his past. Largely this was because speaking about his past—especially his combat years—conjured emotions that he didn't want displayed in public, emotions that he felt made him look weak or vulnerable. Bush took care to portray himself in a particular way.

Fittingly, this characteristic shines through in the draft evolution of this speech. In what follows, I illustrate how the speech focused on his persona as President, not as an individual. I argue that as a result, Bush and his speechwriters attempted to limit the way the public envisioned Bush. I contend they did so in order to more closely associate him with the presidential institution and minimize his agency as an individual in order to enhance his leadership capability and limit opposition to the speech. Two examples illustrate this point.

The first documents how Bush deleted references to his past. Here is a passage from Draft One:

I grew up blessed with a loving family and a lot of breaks. I grew up believing that the American Dream was literally around every corner—it was a job, a family, and a chance to change the world. I believed that all you had to do to succeed was believe in yourself, work hard, treat others with respect, and have faith in I'll try to follow those principles each day, but now I think there's a little more to the American Dream—and for our country, a lot more to achieving it.

For many years *I* have crisscrossed this nation. As President, part of my job—an exciting part—is getting out of Washington D.C. and into America's heartland—meeting and talking with many of you. Small towns, big cities, neighborhoods

and playgrounds, schools, factories, farms—those are the places where you find out what’s good and right about our country—and what’s going wrong, too.”²²⁶

In Drafts Two, Three, and Four, minor edits are made. These culminate in the version seen in Draft Five:

For many years *I* have crisscrossed this nation. A President, part of my job—an exciting part—is getting out and talking with the people. Small towns, big cities, schools, neighborhoods and playgrounds, factories, farms, and fields—those are the places where you find out what’s good and right about our country—and what’s going wrong, too.

I grew up blessed with a loving family, a host of friends, and a lot of breaks. The American Dream was a family, a career, and a chance to make the world a better place—and *I* believed it was literally around every corner. All you had to do was believe in yourself, work hard, respect others, and have faith in God. Those principles are indeed enduring.²²⁷

As noted by the italics, three first-person references were deleted between the first and fifth drafts. Draft Five is the first draft composed after President Bush met with Demarest on June 11. The differences likely reflect changes that Bush himself made. In fact, in Draft Six the passage about his childhood is deleted entirely. I argue that, while this paragraph was deleted, the paragraph about his time as President remains because it focuses on Bush not as an individual, but as President. It illustrates how his experiences as president, not as an average American, have influenced his belief system. This belief system influenced the perspective Bush is arguing for in the present speech. Bush’s belief system is associated with the presidential institution in order to make the system seem like a more qualified option for the country. As will be indicated by the interviews

²²⁶ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Five, 2 (Italics added).

²²⁷ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Five, 2 (Italics added).

with Bush's speechwriters discussed later in this chapter, Bush often refrained from self-references. In this speech, he did so in an attempt to minimize the vision the audience had of him as an average individual, and maximize the vision they had of him as a representative of the presidential institution. As a personification of the presidency itself, Bush and his belief system are endowed with more authority and legitimacy.

In a second example, the purpose of the speech increasingly frames Bush as a leader rather than a fellow American. Draft Three states that the purpose of the speech is that "I want to talk about the challenges ahead, and ask all Americans to lead the way." Drafts Four, Five, and Six narrow this purpose: "Tonight I am asking all Americans to lead the way." Draft Seven takes an entirely different approach, stating, "So tonight, I want to put in perspective this breakdown of our legislative system." The final iteration in Draft Eight claims, "Tonight I would like to put this all in some perspective. I haven't asked you here to sit through a litany of programs and policies. Rather I'd like to do something different, and describe to you how I personally see the shared strength and promise of America."²²⁸ From Draft Three to Draft Eight, the purpose of the speech increasingly takes focus off of the public as agents of change and places that responsibility on President Bush. With this strategy, Bush and his writers frame the speech as a personal manifesto of sorts. Interestingly, Draft Eight states that the purpose of the speech is to describe what Bush "personally" thinks are America's strengths. Although Bush states he won't list "programs and policies," the audience comes to find during the speech that everything Bush "personally see[s]" as the "promise

²²⁸ George H. W. Bush Library, Draft Eight, 2.

of America" is linked to a policy or program. Hence, Bush's agency is associated not with a personal vision as any individual would have, but rather a vision that is uniquely presidential. It is defined not by his personal experiences as an individual, but by his agency as a world leader.

These examples contribute to the creation of President Bush's persona in this speech. The drafts increasingly emphasize Bush's present as President over his past as an average individual. They also define his persona as President as a leader with an uncompromising attachment to policy. In taking these steps, the speech distances the president from his identity as a fellow citizen and recasts Bush as a representative of the executive institution. This gives his argument more legitimacy and strengthens the aura of his leadership.

This case study reviewed the ways in which Bush's June 1991 speech evolved to become potentially more persuasive. The address increasingly becomes more expedient, more substantive, and more focused on Bush's presidential persona. This dissertation was conceived in response to the increasing distaste the public has for presidential speech. It asks: how do presidents and their speechwriters compose speeches intended to persuade an audience that is disillusioned by presidential speech itself? This case study reveals what Bush and his writers thought the public would need to hear—in light of this distaste—in order to be convinced of Bush's argument.

First, Bush and his writers increasingly made the speech more expedient—a primary quality of the Aristotelian deliberative form. The original purpose of the speech—as indicated by Bush and his speechwriters—was both to lay out the president's

domestic agenda and to combat the Democrats' chokehold on the domestic platform before the upcoming election. I argue that Bush and his writers framed the speech as they did because the original purpose for the speech was one that the public might find distasteful. In light of the public's increased distaste for presidential speeches, perhaps Bush and his speechwriters made the speech problem-solution oriented. They recast the speech as a response to Congressional inaction and used it as an opportunity to convey their message.

Second, the president and his speechwriters increasingly used policy language and details to make the speech sound more substantive. The idea of the speech itself was an ideological outline of the ways in which Bush felt the country ought to advance, by using the free market, government, and communities. Yet, throughout the draft evolution, the speech became less ideological and more grounded in concrete policy examples and details. The speech had to be overt about using substantive language and couldn't rely solely on Bush's ideology. It does not rely on the public to assume that Bush's ideology is supported or informed by policy. Rather, it explicitly identifies policy, explains policy, and rationalizes policy, in order to persuade the public. In view of the public's increased distaste for presidential speeches, it seems reasonable to infer that Bush and his speechwriters made sure the public noticed substantive policy language.

Third, Bush and his writers created a presidential persona that emphasized Bush's experience and perspective as president. Throughout the speech, the drafts increasingly removed references to Bush's past and emphasized his present. Moreover, the speech increasingly institutionalizes Bush's persona so that the president becomes less of an

ordinary citizen and more of a faceless representation of the presidency, its purpose, and its concerns. If in fact there is increased distaste for presidential speeches, Bush and his speechwriters may have crafted an address to be delivered not by Bush as an individual office-holder, but by the office itself. The speech ingratiates the public not to the man but to the office. This strategy minimizes the likelihood that the public will disagree or criticize the message out of reverence for the institutional grandeur of the presidency. These three conclusions will be taken into consideration with the content analysis and speechwriter interviews to help answer the dissertation question.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

This dissertation's goal is to understand how speechwriters craft persuasive messages for an audience that has distaste for presidential speech. The case study presented in this chapter represented an analysis of how President Bush and his speechwriters *proactively* made changes from one draft to the next in anticipation of what the public's preferences for presidential speech would be *on that particular occasion*. It is important, too, for the purposes of this project to consider what linguistic trends evolved *over the course of the administration*. This perspective would focus on the *reactive* attempts of the President and his speechwriters to persuade the public, reactive in the sense that future changes were made in response to public opinions about past speeches. In order to gauge what these trends might look like, I conducted a content analysis of eighteen weekly presidential radio addresses delivered by President Bush between November 1990 and November 1992. This analysis identified the ratio of poetic language in each address over time using the method and procedure outlined in Chapter

One. These results help me gain a more comprehensive perspective on how presidents and their speechwriters respond to public opinion about presidential speech.

Chapter One argued that weekly presidential addresses are the most consistent genre of presidential speech. In the modern presidency, they are delivered every Saturday with only the rarest exceptions. This trend began with Reagan, who delivered 335 of them. President Clinton, who will be discussed in the next chapter, delivered 406. President Bush delivered only eighteen. Speechwriter David Demarest sheds some light on this anomaly:

First, I think that the platform (the weekly presidential radio address) had lost a bit of its appeal/newsworthiness/cachet over the years. When it started (I believe during the first Reagan Administration) it was quite novel, and was carried on many, many radio networks. I believe over time carriage had declined significantly.

Secondly, it was a significant time commitment in terms of preparation, and scheduling, for something with a declining impact.

Thirdly, and quite importantly, President Bush was very adept at the give and take aspect of media relations. It was a true strength of his, so he met frequently with reporters, not only one on one, but with quite frequent visits to the White House Press Room—you can check on this, but I think he did so far more frequently than [Reagan]. From the standpoint of messaging, we found that to be quite effective, as opposed to the one-way nature of a radio address. His visits to the [White House] Press Room was also a departure from his predecessor's practice who's media profile preference was more oriented to the more formal but far less frequent East Room press conferences.

In a way, [Bush] was a bit ahead of his time in that regard if you think about how media today is so much more interactive than it was back then.²²⁹

²²⁹ Demarest, telephone interview with author.

Demarest's notes help us understand why Bush delivered so few weekly addresses as compared to Reagan and Clinton. Nonetheless, this project uses the weekly address as a comparison variable because the format is the most consistent of all presidential speech genres. The content analyses for both Reagan and Clinton operate with 36 speeches, twice as many as Bush. Considering their terms were twice as long, I argue that the results are as representative as possible, both within the Bush administration and across all three presidencies.

Poetic Language Use Ratio

Utilizing the method and procedure outlined in Chapter One, I gathered weekly address drafts that fit my criteria for use. I surveyed each sentence for use of poetic language, and calculated the results. Upon completion, I found that the ratio of poetic statements in each speech ranged from .11 to .24, with an average of .16. Some examples of Bush's poetic statements include:

- "I've seen the hideous face of war and counted the costs of conflict in friends lost." January 5, 1991
- "America has always accepted the challenge, paid the price, and passed the test." March 2, 1991
- "Gradually, they have begun to transform government from the guardian of individual liberty into a weed that chokes off freedom and strangles initiative."
- June 22, 1991
- "The battle has been joined, and it's your future that we're fighting for." March 28, 1992
- "Some want us to respond to these challenges as if they were a bad dream, just hide under the covers and hope it goes away." April 25, 1992
- "And that's like taking out a car loan and never buying a car." June 6, 1992

- “This amendment will bring us back to shore.” June 6, 1992
- “Ours is a nation that has shed the blood of war and cried the tears of depression.” November 7, 1992

After completing the analyses, I plotted the results of each in the chart below:

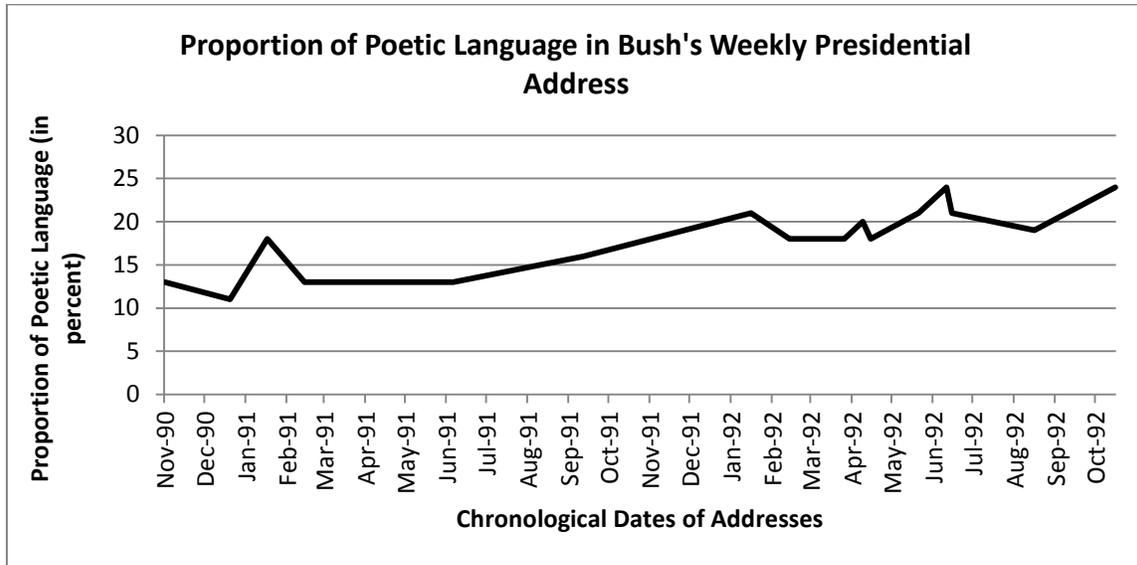


Table 10: Bush’s Poetic Language Ratios

The measures start in November 1990 at .13, increase to .18 in February 1991, steadily increase to .21 in February 1992, and conclude in November 1992 at .24. In June 1992, the ratio reaches its highest measure at .24. The average ratio from the first measure in November 1990 to the July 1991 address is .14, whereas the average ratio from July 1991 to the final address in November 1992 is .21. An average increase of .7 is significant, particularly when considering that this increase accounts for 34% of the range across all measures. This suggests that between July 1991 and November 1992,

something caused the proportion of poetic language use in Bush's weekly presidential addresses to increase.

It should be noted that the period from July 1991 to November 1992 constituted Bush's re-election campaign. The trend I have observed seems to follow the edict that one campaigns in poetry and governs in prose. However, in November 1992 this advice proved to be more harm than help, as Bush was defeated. As will be discussed at length later in this chapter, Bush's speechwriters tended to push the president to use poetic language in his speeches. Especially in the case of presidential campaigns, it seems intuitive that candidates would communicate with the public as they see most fit for winning an election. Or, quite simply, candidates would not communicate with the public in a way that they believe might jeopardize their election. While Bush campaigned for his second term, the poetic ratio of his weekly addresses increased. It would seem, then, that Bush and his speechwriters would not have increased the amount of poetic language in his weekly addresses unless they thought it would be advantageous to the election.

Public Approval Ratings

After considering these results, I consulted Bush's public approval numbers to see if any correlations could be identified.²³⁰ Those data are indicated in the chart below:

²³⁰ The Roper Center, "Presidential Job Performance Ratings."

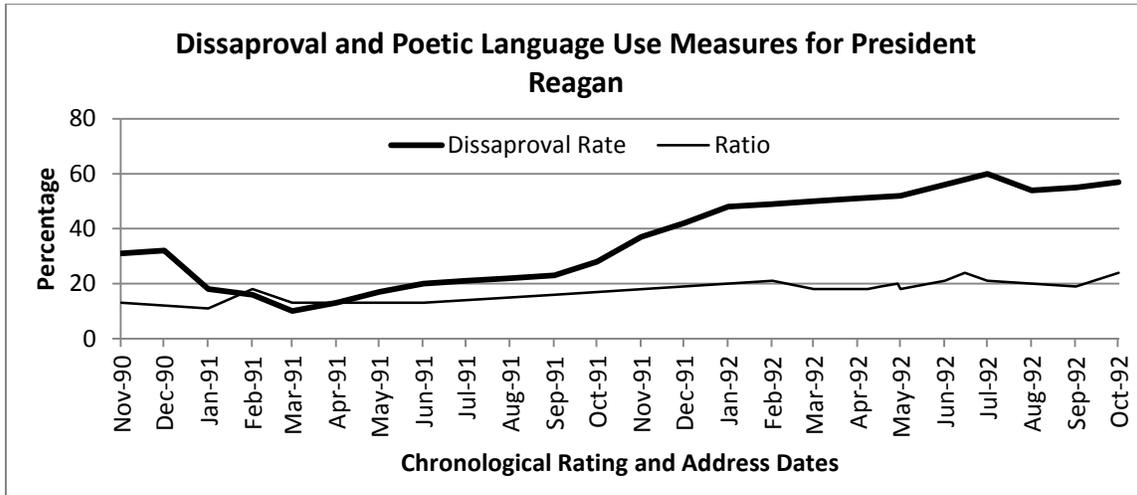


Table 11: Bush’s Poetic Language Ratios and Disapproval Rate

I found that the ratio of poetic statements appears to match Bush’s disapproval rating. From July 1991 to November 1992, both the public disapproval measure and poetic language ratio hit all-time highs, with averages of 35% and .17, respectively. It is also noteworthy that between July 1991 and June 1992, both measures steadily increase—the disapproval measure from 14% to 55% and the poetic ratio from .14 to 21. These measures indicate that as the ratio of poetic language in Bush’s weekly presidential addresses increased, so too did public disapproval numbers. Of course, I do not claim that these results imply causation. I only aim to highlight the correlation between increasing and decreasing approval measures, and increasing and decreasing poetic language ratio measures. While this finding doesn't directly answer my dissertation question, it does provide added support for my argument that the public is increasingly disaffected by poetic language in presidential speech.

Public Opinion Questions

Much of what the public knows about the president—and much of what they use to determine their approval of a president—comes from his speeches. Unfortunately, very little public opinion data about Bush's individual speeches exists. In a search for the terms "president speech" and "president address" in The Roper Center's *iPOLL* databank, 273 public opinion questions were asked about Bush during his terms using those keywords.²³¹ Of these, few were pertinent to the present study. Eleven questions asked participants to indicate whether they watched or listened to Bush speeches between February 1989 and February 1992. The results are displayed below:

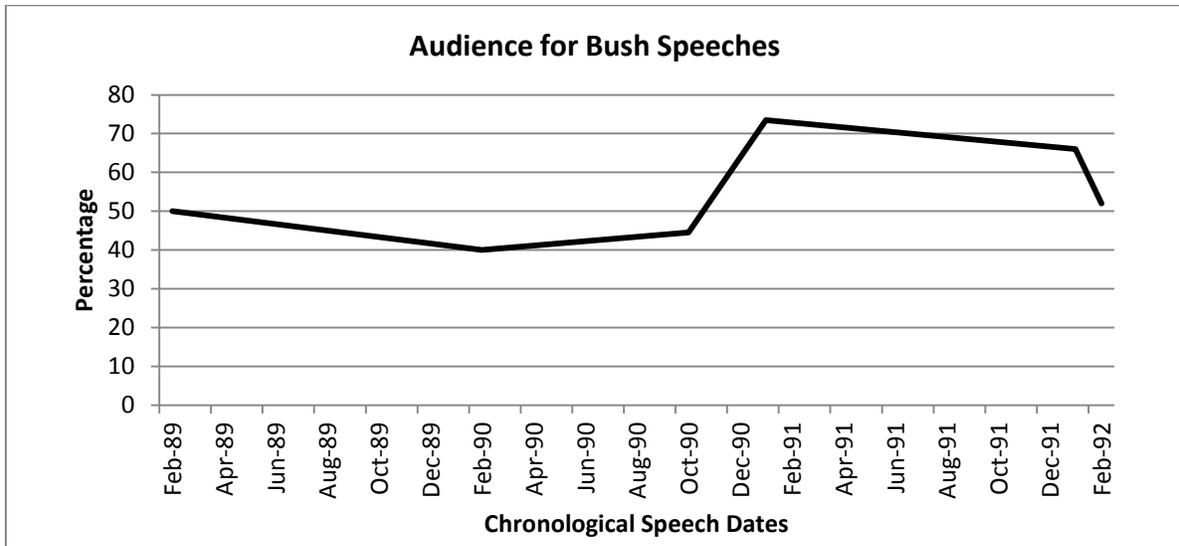


Table 12: Audience for Bush Speeches

In addition, four questions asked participants to indicate if a Bush speech had influenced their opinion on an issue. Those questions are listed below:

²³¹ The Roper Center, "iPOLL."

- 1) Did Bush's speech make you more or less likely to vote for him? (August 1988): 36% More Likely
- 2) Do agree or disagree that Bush's speech proved he can be a real leader and take charge? (August 1988): 59% Agree
- 3) Did Bush's speech help convince you to support his plan? (October 1990): 21% Yes
- 4) After hearing Bush's speech are you confident in his ability? (January 1992): 56% Yes

A final set of questions asked respondents to rate Bush's speeches. These five items include:

- 1) How would you rate the President's speech? (February 1989): 67% Excellent or Pretty Good
- 2) How would you rate the President's speech? (February 1990): 53% Excellent or Pretty Good
- 3) Did the President explain his position well in his speech? (January 1991): 81% Yes
- 4) How would you grade Bush's speech? (January 1992): 10% A, 27% B, 31% C, 13% D, 8% F
- 5) Did the President Address issues that concern you in his speech? (January 1992): 71% Yes

Unfortunately, no generalizable conclusions can be gleaned from these results. For whatever reason, public opinion questions about presidential speech were significantly less common during Bush's term than in Reagan's and, as will be seen in Chapter Four, even less common than compared to President Clinton. Presidential speech is a vital component of public approval. It is curious, then, why so few questions are asked of the

public about how exactly presidential speech did or did not influence them. This concern will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Five.

To summarize, my content analysis yielded three important conclusions. First, few public opinion questions about the president's speech were asked of the public during Bush's term. Second, the ratio of poetic language in Bush's weekly addresses was parallel to his disapproval measures during the same time period. Third, and in answer to my dissertation question, the ratio of poetic statements in Bush's weekly addresses generally increased over the course of his administration, with a significant increase taking place over the last eighteen months of his term.

In light of the public's increased distaste for presidential speeches, Bush and his speechwriters appealed more to the public before campaign season than during campaign season. This seems counterintuitive since a candidate usually wants to take as many legitimate measures as possible to appeal to the public during a campaign. Upon consideration of this fact, I'm reminded that speechwriting during a period of campaigning is overseen and influenced by a larger number of people than during a period of governance. Perhaps the adage that one campaigns in poetry and governs in prose influenced the Bush re-election campaign strategy, and, in doing so, Bush abandoned the low ratio of poetry language that the public seemed to approve. Again, in light of the fact that Bush did not win re-election, this observation seems quite plausible. This argument will be considered in conjunction with the case study and the insights Bush's speechwriters provide.

SPEECHWRITER INTERVIEWS

The case study and content analysis presented in this chapter illustrate the ways in which Bush and his speechwriters addressed the public's frustrations with speech. I argue that Bush and his speechwriters used particular language when attempting to persuade audiences that are increasingly disillusioned with presidential speech. In order to more accurately assess how the Bush administration acted in response to the public's preferences for presidential speech, I interviewed five former Bush speechwriters via telephone and email. Their names and interview dates are listed below:

- 1) Mary Kate Cary (January 28, 2013)
- 2) Mark Davis (February 19, 2013)
- 3) David Demarest (March 23, 2013)
- 4) Curt Smith (January 19, 2013)
- 5) William Muir (January 18, 2013)

These interviews ranged in length from 25:30 to 54:13 minutes with an average length of 33:30 minutes. Some participants were also asked follow-up questions via email after the phone interviews. The results were transcribed and edited for clarity.

From these interviews, I identified four themes that help to clarify the results I found in my case study and content analysis. The four themes that emerged are:

- 1) Policy took precedence over rhetoric.
- 2) Bush was fluent in rhetorical techniques, and used them most comfortably in foreign policy speeches.
- 3) Bush felt speeches that aim to entertain devalue the presidency.

- 4) Public opinion influenced speeches only to the extent that it influenced the general message.

These themes contribute valuable insights for better understanding the case study and content analysis presented earlier in this chapter. I argue that, taken into consideration alongside the previous studies, these interviews help to formulate a more comprehensive answer to the question asked in this dissertation. In what follows, I document the speechwriters' responses pertaining to each theme.

- 1) **Policy took precedence over rhetoric.**

The first trend I culled from my interviews with speechwriters is that in the Bush White House the creation of a policy was more newsworthy than a speech announcing that policy. Earlier in this chapter, I cited Demarest's explanation for the scarcity of Bush's weekly presidential addresses. He indicated that Bush often preferred to talk about policies in a press conference setting rather than in a pre-drafted speech. Cary confirms this recollection, suggesting that, "in general I don't think he'll be remembered as the great communicator. He was much better one on one, much better in press conferences. . . . He just didn't really enjoy giving speeches. It wasn't something he spent a whole lot of time on in his view of what a president should do."²³² From this insight, I speculate that when Bush or his advisors felt a speech was necessary or helpful, the format and style of that speech was likely as similar to a press conference as possible.

²³² Mary Kate Cary, telephone interview with author, January 28, 2013.

This format and style would likely preclude a great deal of poetry and affective rhetoric in favor of substantive policy details and clear, unadulterated language choices.

As is indicated by Muir, Bush did not recognize or find worthwhile the effect of rhetoric in presidential politics. Muir supposes, “he did not appreciate, I think, how people were driven by ideas. He was a kinesthetic person so words and ideas were not as meaningful to him as actions and policies. Speeches were just not the foremost thing on his mind.”²³³ The debate over presidential words as presidential deeds is one often engaged in by communication and political science scholars alike.²³⁴ It is a debate unlikely to reach stasis, and both perspectives have valid positions. Muir’s supposition is still supported today by leading political science scholars. Nevertheless, the belief that policy was more “meaningful” than words absolutely influenced what Bush felt the public desired and expected from presidential speech.

This approach to public address was largely to the dismay of many Bush writers. Not only did Bush’s perspective on speech limit the breadth of what they could produce, but often their products—no matter how closely they followed Bush’s guidelines—were unused. Davis recalls how even speeches that the writers believed would respond perfectly to a rhetorical moment were sometimes overshadowed by Bush’s lack of deference to the entire communication mechanism of the White House. Davis explains:

When I worked for George H. W. Bush, he would often undermine his own speeches. We would put news in his speeches and go to a great deal of trouble to have a speech that would support the message of the day on television. But he

²³³ William Muir, telephone interview with author, January 18, 2013.

²³⁴ Hart, *The Sound of Leadership*; Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*.

found it irresistible to drop news and would often go in the back of the plane where the press is and make the announcement there. And that worked out nine times out of ten. That kind of impromptu vernacular direct approach was something that people wanted. And it kind of really began there.²³⁵

The “it” Davis refers to is how the speechwriters developed Bush’s presidential voice.

As Davis indicates, Bush’s approach to rhetoric was based on what “people wanted.”

This quote suggests that Bush was quite adept at gauging public opinion about presidential speech. And, at least to some extent, Bush crafted his approach to public address based on public opinion.

While Bush’s writers were tasked with adhering to the president’s preferences for speeches, they were also responsible for making sure the speeches were appropriate for the medium by which they would be delivered. As Davis explains, this negotiation was a challenge:

He would inject a lot of vernacular and unscripted comments and personal recognition in the audiences. I think he worked against himself in that respect and I was disappointed that he did that in many speeches because I felt that he didn’t realize the extent to which—as President—people really wanted to hear him speak. They wanted a speech from the President. They didn’t want to hear him just talk. And I think his desire to recognize his personal friends in the audience and start a speech by recognizing people for seven minutes—while it was charming—it would kill a speech for television because the networks could never confirm whether to cover a speech. It just pulled the energy out of his talks because by the end of his talk he was already halfway through his allotted time.²³⁶

²³⁵ Mark Davis, telephone interview with author, February 19, 2013.

²³⁶ Davis, telephone interview with author.

The speechwriters worked hard to convince Bush of the value of speeches. Even when in crowds, Bush was apparently unable to hide his disdain for speeches. The speechwriters sensed that the audiences recognized it, too. Davis recalls:

I guess I could feel—when I would sit in an audience in Dallas, Los Angeles—the disappointment that people would feel when the President didn’t draw himself into a speech, but just instead just kind of showed up. And I was never very effective in the average speeches—not the important ones—of convincing the President to really shape up. He thought it was all bullshit and he thought that the audience shared his view. He was just going to stand up here and talk for a while and get this done. And he didn’t realize that people had a real hunger. This is a big deal to them. They’ve taken up half their day to go through security. They really wanted to hear the President speak. And he never really quite appreciated that they didn’t share his kind of view towards these talks.²³⁷

These challenges reveal a great deal about how Bush and his speechwriters worked in concert to produce messages, but also about how Bush’s goals and motivations may have differed from those of his speechwriters.

These anecdotes illuminate how Bush’s speechwriting preferences reflected what he understood of the public’s speech preferences. They also indicate that Bush did not understand the importance of both the White House communications office and the general media in transmitting the President’s speeches to the public. It seems that while he had a keen eye towards what the public’s desires were, his lack of knowledge about or deference to media operations inside and outside the White House effectively prevented him from meeting those desires.

²³⁷ Davis, telephone interview with author.

2) **Bush used rhetoric most often in foreign policy speech.**

The second trend that emerged is that, while Bush had an appreciation for basic rhetorical techniques, he was quite reticent to use speech as a mechanism of persuasion. From the speechwriters' responses, I learned that Bush had quite distinct and vocal opinions about what rhetorical devices he favored, what ought to be used sparingly, and what was altogether inappropriate. Generally, Bush's opinion towards rhetoric was influenced a great deal by President Reagan, but not in a favorable way. Demarest recalls:

One thing he didn't like was what he called flowery language and he really didn't like high level rhetoric. And that was a frustration to not only the speechwriters but it played out in all of the comparisons that were made between him and Ronald Reagan. That Reagan had this reputation well deserved of being able to deliver a wonderful speech. And his speechwriters wrote to allow that to happen by using and crafting rhetoric in a way that was a little loftier.²³⁸

Bush did not approve of that language. Davis echoes this sentiment, noting "he had a personal disdain for what he called rhetoric not in the Aristotelian way, but in the more pompous sense of bloviating. He saw presidential speeches as a bit pompous."²³⁹

The writers did point out, however, that "there were only a few times when President Bush would allow [speechwriters to use "lofty" language] and usually it was when talking about military issues or foreign policy issues."²⁴⁰ Davis echoes this point and highlights how much more involved Bush was in the speechwriting process for

²³⁸ Demarest, telephone interview with author.

²³⁹ Davis, telephone interview with author.

²⁴⁰ Demarest, telephone interview with author.

foreign policy speeches. He notes, “It didn’t take me long to realize that the best speeches to write for him were foreign policy speeches. So I threw myself into those. He would send me notes. He would add in things. He would call me and tell me to add things.”²⁴¹ It is interesting that Bush felt more comfortable using elevated language to explain foreign policy than domestic policy. The speechwriters made it clear that Bush felt most comfortable delivering speeches about foreign policy because it was a topic with which he was more familiar. This suggests that Bush felt most comfortable using poetic language when he was discussing a topic about which he knew a great deal. This is particularly perplexing because politicians are often criticized for using poetic language to fill the gaps when speaking on subjects with which they aren’t familiar. For President Bush, “rhetoric” was used in an entirely different manner.

Although Bush was eager to use poetic language in foreign policy speeches, Demarest notes that, “on the domestic front it was much more difficult. I would get back many speeches that would say ‘too flowery, get to the point,’—those sorts of phrases.”²⁴² Davis recalls that often times Bush didn’t even want to attend these speech events: “If it was a speech to business leaders in L.A. or the newspaper association in Washington, frankly he didn’t care that much.”²⁴³ This observation, coupled with those about foreign policy speeches, leads me to speculate that Bush was eager to use poetic language when he was impassioned about a topic.

²⁴¹ Davis, telephone interview with author.

²⁴² Demarest, telephone interview with author.

²⁴³ Davis, telephone interview with author.

When it came to particular rhetorical techniques, the speechwriters noted that Bush preferred a certain style. Davis remembers, “He did like alliteration. He liked starting sentences off with the same words. He understood the magic of threes.”²⁴⁴

Demarest added:

He [had] this way of using fractured syntax and talking in really clipped phrases. He didn’t like classical figures of speech. You wouldn’t see a lot of antistrophes and epistrophes. Occasionally you’d see an anaphors or alliteration—the more basic speech devices. But when it came to doing ‘ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,’ you didn’t see a lot of that in Bush’s speech. And imagery was something that, I think, if we had pushed imagery too much he would start looking at that as too flowery.²⁴⁵

Another strategy Bush disliked was self-reference. Davis notes “he wasn’t too self-referential unless it was self-deprecating humor. He didn’t like to sound like he was bragging, which I think goes back to his upbringing. He was taught that you don’t talk about yourself. . . . He resisted in speeches talking about himself.”²⁴⁶ Demarest also recalled that Bush “always used to say his mother always told him not to be a braggadocio.”²⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, many of the writers were frustrated because they felt self-references could be a great tool of leadership for President Bush. Demarest recalled that he “would have not arguments but brief conversations with [Bush] about, ‘You know, Mr. President, it is alright to use your background and your history to illustrate a

²⁴⁴ Davis, telephone interview with author.

²⁴⁵ Demarest, telephone interview with author.

²⁴⁶ Davis, telephone interview with author.

²⁴⁷ Demarest, telephone interview with author.

particular point.”²⁴⁸ Davis apparently was one of those frustrated writers: “I think it was a disability for a politician on the big speeches.”²⁴⁹ In fact, Davis recalled a specific instance that he believed could have been an opportune moment for rhetorical leadership:

He would balk at anything he thought was too theatrical. My boss, Chriss Winston, and I came up with a phrase in the Gulf War. We were talking about seeing the parent go off to war dressed in combat fatigues and seeing them get on the plane and some Americans will say to that person, ‘Mom, we love you.’ And that was their way of saying so many people going to war now are women. And he just thought that was too gimmicky. And I could see his point, but a lot of politicians would go there. He just wouldn’t go there. He wouldn’t do things he thought were too gimmicky or too cute.²⁵⁰

The writers agreed that Bush’s approach to rhetoric was problematic. However, they were confident that when it was important to him and to his presidency, Bush took command of his public address. Davis notes, “He was very undisciplined when it came to public speaking. He was very natural and that helped him at some points but it also hurt him. But, when he wanted to, when he had to pull himself together to really knock it outta the park, he could do it.”²⁵¹

The speechwriters indicated that Bush had a complicated perspective on using rhetorical flourish. He abstained out of fear of being compared to President Reagan, but typically used more poetic language when talking about foreign affairs. Bush had preferences for particular rhetorical devices, but typically avoided "flowery"

²⁴⁸ Demarest, telephone interview with author.

²⁴⁹ Davis, telephone interview with author.

²⁵⁰ Davis, telephone interview with author.

²⁵¹ Davis, telephone interview with author.

language. Bush had a natural tendency to avoid self-reference and, to the dismay of his writers, that tendency precluded him from some truly great leadership opportunities.

3) Bush felt entertaining speeches devalued the presidency.

A third trend gleaned from the speechwriter interviews is that Bush refrained from using speeches to entertain because he felt it devalued the office of the president. Cary described the President as “a very funny guy, but when we would put jokes in the speeches he would say ‘the American people did not elect a stand-up comic’ and would take the jokes out of the speeches.”²⁵² In fact, Smith recalled that writing jokes was difficult because most jokes are predicated on current events in pop culture—events to which Bush paid little attention. Smith notes, “There would be a pop culture reference in the speech drafts that I would send the president. If he didn’t know it he would cut it.”²⁵³ Cary’s and Smith’s recollections suggest that Bush pursued his rhetorical presidency with a vision in mind of what kind of rhetoric the public wanted: rhetoric that sought to inform rather than entertain, and rhetoric that was based on something less fleeting than contemporary pop culture. It also indicates that, to some extent, Bush’s speechwriters attempted to provide him with material that differed from the President’s perspective on what the public would find useful or appealing in his speeches.

Demarest notes that the President’s perspective on entertainment in politics was seemingly unique for the political climate at the end of the 20th century. He illustrates the

²⁵² Cary, telephone interview with author.

²⁵³ Curt Smith, telephone interview with author, January 19, 2013.

difference between Bush and other politicians using an example from the 1992 presidential campaign:

If you remember some of the tactics that were used in Campaign '92: Clinton did late night talk shows—we didn't. I mean, you remember when he went on Arsenio and played his saxophone—that was a forerunner of this kind of 'you've got to be everywhere on media' [sentiment]. And to me, it starts to get to the point of total emphasis, no emphasis. So, Bush really resisted doing some of those things, believing it was beneath the dignity of the office. That philosophy kind of became an anachronism.²⁵⁴

This example clearly conveys the esteem Bush placed in the presidential institution. It also points to changes that were taking place in presidential politics that, I argue, contribute to the public's increasing frustration with presidential speech.

These responses indicate that President Bush placed a high value on being able to determine what the public wanted from presidential speech. Moreover, Bush seemed not to waiver in his commitment about what he felt presidential rhetoric ought to be, even when provided with material by his speechwriters that challenged his opinion.

4) Public opinion influenced a speech's general message.

The fourth trend emerging from the interviews is that public opinion both implicitly and explicitly influenced speeches. Public opinion didn't influence the president or speechwriters to change language during the process of writing. Rather, public opinion influenced the general tone of the speech during its conceptual stages. Some language was continuously used because audiences responded well to it, and some language was crafted to fix the damage influenced by prior language.

²⁵⁴ Demarest, telephone interview with author.

Davis recalls that public opinion data came to Bush's speechwriters in a variety of ways. He notes he learned about the public's opinion "by talking to friends and relatives, people in the wider world who, to me, were representative [of the country]. So, I'd canvass them and get their reactions."²⁵⁵ Echoing this sort of implicit understanding of public opinion, Muir notes, "I don't think it happened very explicitly. . . . All of us were political animals and you could not—you wouldn't work in the White House if you weren't sort of following what public opinion was. So we were quite sensitive to what was going on in terms of how current events and speeches were affecting public opinion."²⁵⁶ Bush's speechwriters were also aware of how important the media was in both influencing and reporting public opinion about the President's speeches. Says Davis, "A lot of the times, unfortunately, the press was extremely hostile to President Bush and they would talk down a lot of his speeches that I thought were pretty good."²⁵⁷ In addition to friends, family, and the media, the speechwriters consulted public opinion polling data. Smith recalls: "In four years, our administration quite frequently would hold meetings and receive polling data about how the president was doing in his speeches and in terms of his appeal or persona. But we were never asked to—not once, in fact—write a speech or change a speech because of polling data."²⁵⁸ Smith made it clear, though, that once public opinion suggested certain techniques were successful, the writers

²⁵⁵ Davis, telephone interview with author.

²⁵⁶ Muir, telephone interview with author.

²⁵⁷ Davis, telephone interview with author.

²⁵⁸ Smith, telephone interview with author.

continued to use them. This fact, as Smith indicates, was bitter-sweet. He explained that “the writing of speeches, I found, after a while is not too rewarding because you’re constantly recycling yourself. If a speech line works you can guarantee it will be used again and again.”²⁵⁹

Public opinion data not only was used preemptively, but language changes also came about as a response to language that previously had caused political damage. Demarest remembered a story about how speechwriters changed Bush’s rhetoric in direct response to the public’s reaction to his speeches. During the midterm elections in 1990, Bush campaigned for fellow Republican candidates. Meanwhile, the Congressional support the President had for the Gulf War was largely from Democrats, while Republicans were reticent to support the mission. Demarest remembers:

I don’t know how many events he did for Republican candidates, but there were a lot. He’d do a speech that said something to the effect of, ‘I need more republicans in Congress so that we can pull the reign in on federal spending,’ and so forth. And so, the first part of the speech would be to encourage people to throw out the Democrats and then the last part of the speech he’d say something like, ‘Politics stops at the water’s edge, and I want to thank my Democrat friends who have stood firmly with us in the Gulf on our position regarding the Gulf situation. So people are sitting there like, ‘Well are the democrats the good guys or the bad guys?’ You could just watch his numbers decline because there was no clarity about what was going on.²⁶⁰

In this case, the public’s distaste for Bush’s speeches was because they communicated conflicting stances. In response, the speechwriters had to draft language that explained how both of Bush’s seemingly opposing positions simultaneously could be true. This

²⁵⁹ Smith, telephone interview with author.

²⁶⁰ Demarest, telephone interview with author.

example is particularly helpful for my project because it illustrates an instance in which the public was made aware of conflicting policy stances because of presidential speech. In turn, the public demanded clarity in future speeches and the speechwriters had to deliver. While this instance signals that a president merely responded to a particular critique, it provides evidence for the claim that presidents and their speechwriters do keep an ear to the public's opinions about speech.

The interviews I conducted with former Bush speechwriters yielded four important observations. The speechwriters indicated that in the Bush White House policy took preference over rhetoric, Bush was reticent to use rhetorical flourish especially in domestic policy speeches, Bush believed speeches shouldn't aim to entertain, and public opinion both preemptively and reactively influenced speeches.

These conclusions offer insight into how presidents and their speechwriters persuade using speech when the public is disillusioned with presidential speech? In light of the public's increased distaste for presidential speech, Bush and his speechwriters tried to persuade the public by minimizing the populist role of the modern presidency. Bush's approach to the rhetorical presidency was one that reverts back to traditional conceptions of the institution as it was constitutionally defined. Bush focused on foreign policy—an homage to the "commander in chief" role of the executive. He fastened his attention to policy and prevented the modern inclusion of entertainment in the presidency to detract from his responsibilities. President Bush believed that public opinion reflected his view about presidential rhetoric, and general changes to his speech, both preemptive and reactive, were made in response to the public's perception of his rhetorical presidency.

These insights, combined with the case study and content analysis results, shed light on how Bush and his speechwriters addressed the public's disenchantment with speech.

CONCLUSION

I embarked on this project to answer the question: how do presidents and their speechwriters address the public's frustrations with speech? To answer this question, I conducted three studies regarding George H. W. Bush's presidency.

The first was a case study of Bush's June 1991 speech on his domestic agenda. This study found that Bush and his speechwriters made changes from draft to draft that illustrate three motives: (1) they made the speech sound more expedient; (2) they increased the presence of policy in the speech; and (3) they increasingly made Bush's persona one that was less of an individual citizen and more of a representative of the presidential institution. In making these changes, I argue, Bush and his speechwriters attempted to minimize criticism by making the speech problem-solution oriented, by emphasizing substantive policy language, and by conflating Bush with the presidential institution itself.

The second study was a longitudinal content analysis of eighteen weekly presidential radio addresses. I analyzed the proportion of poetic language in each speech and documented the trend of the measures over time. The results indicated that Bush's disapproval ratings and the poetic language ratio measures followed a similar trajectory. I also found that the ratio measures increased significantly during Bush's re-election campaign. These results suggest stronger support for my central claim that the public is disenchanting with presidential speech. They also indicate that Bush perhaps maintained

less direct control of his message during the campaign than during his period of governance.

The final study documented interviews with five former Bush speechwriters. These interviews yielded four conclusions: (1) policy mattered more to Bush than did rhetoric; (2) Bush sparingly used rhetorical flourish, save for foreign policy speeches; (3) Bush believed presidential rhetoric ought not be used to entertain the public; and (4) public opinion influenced Bush's message both preemptively and reactively.

While the results outlined here will be taken up more thoroughly in Chapter Five, it is helpful to make note of one significant finding. To persuade a disenchanted public, Bush may have attempted to minimize the populist role of the modern rhetorical presidency. It seems policy and the presidential office were upheld with the highest esteem, forsaking many of the modern evolutions of the institution. In the next chapter, I report the findings from my research on the Clinton administration.

Chapter Four: Clinton

William Jefferson Clinton was inaugurated on January 20, 1993 and served eight years as the 42nd U.S. President. His tenure saw a number of notable accomplishments and was also mired in considerable controversy. Clinton's economic policies resulted in a \$360 billion payoff on the national debt. Under his leadership, the country saw its lowest unemployment rate (four percent) in thirty years. The President signed into law the Family and Medical Leave Act, allowing 20 million Americans to take extended time off from work to care for family without risking termination. Clinton also ushered in a record 115-month economic expansion; from 1993 to 2002, the economy grew at an annual average of four percent. In December 1998, Clinton was brought under impeachment charges of perjury and obstruction of justice after lying about his affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. The Clinton's were also embroiled in the "Whitewater Scandal" in which the First Family was suspected of improper handling of real estate investments. Despite the scandal that plagued the end of Clinton's presidency, he remains one of the most popular presidents of the 20th century.²⁶¹

President Clinton is also remembered as an exceptional public speaker. The single most defining characteristic of his rhetorical style is the sheer length of his speeches; it was not uncommon for public remarks to run close to and even over an hour long. A second characteristic of Clinton's rhetoric is his ability to clarify convoluted

²⁶¹ The Roper Center, "Presidential Job Performance Ratings."

public policy. Just as Reagan was coined “the Great Communicator,” Clinton was dubbed, “the Great Explainer.” Among his most revered speeches are the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial Address and 1993 Memphis Church of God in Christ Convocation. His 1996 re-nomination speech is also frequently referenced for its symbolic allusion to a “bridge to the 21st century,” a theme that influenced many of the policy initiatives in his second term.

Clinton’s presidency marks a particular point in the evolution of the presidency. Chapter One referenced a study which indicates that between 1987 and 2001, a numeric measure of partisan difference hovered between nine and eleven percent. In 2002, this measure increased to fourteen percent, and again to eighteen percent in 2012. Over twenty-five years, the strength of American partisanship nearly doubled.²⁶²

This research influenced my decision to analyze the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations for this dissertation. These presidencies took place in a time period during which public opinion data was regularly collected, and partisanship was not yet a defining factor in the public’s judgment of presidential speech. Of course, it is expected that the public’s partisanship would serve as a filter through which they appraise presidential speech. However, the data from Pew indicates the increasing degree to which partisanship sharpened after 2001. Clinton’s presidency ended just as the “hyper-partisan” era of American politics began.

²⁶² Pew Research Center, “Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years.”

In this chapter, I reveal how President Clinton and his speechwriters crafted oratory to appeal to a public disenchanted with speech. To answer my dissertation question, I conducted three studies of the Clinton presidency. The first was a case study of Clinton's July 19, 1995 speech on Affirmative Action reform. In it, I traced the linguistic changes made from draft to draft that illustrate proactive attempts to persuade the public. The second study was a content analysis of thirty-six weekly radio addresses to identify any trends in poetic language use that emerged over the course of Clinton's presidency. These results indicate how Clinton's rhetorical strategies may have changed over time in response to public opinion of his past speeches. Finally, I conducted interviews with five former Clinton speechwriters. Their answers were used to clarify the results of the case study and content analysis. The results of these three studies contribute to an answer to my dissertation question that will be thoroughly developed and explicated in Chapter Five.

CASE STUDY

The first study conducted was a rhetorical analysis of Clinton's July 19, 1995 "Address on Affirmative Action," delivered at the National Archives in Washington D.C.²⁶³ In this speech, Clinton outlines the reasons for Affirmative Action's existence, argues why it ought not to be repealed, and provides a new set of guidelines that Affirmative Action programs will be required to follow. I chose to analyze this speech for a number of reasons, the parameters of which are set forth in Chapter One. First, it is

²⁶³President William J. Clinton, "Address on Affirmative Action," delivered on July 19, 1995. Accessed from The Miller Center, University of Virginia on 5 May 2013. <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4594>

a legislative speech, as defined by Aristotle's characterization in his *Rhetoric*.²⁶⁴ Second, the speech does not belong to a popular genre of presidential speech like inaugurals or states of the union. This provides stronger assurance that the majority of the speech's language was crafted by Clinton and his speechwriters, rather than by an amalgam of governmental bureaucracies. Third, I was able to interview Carolyn Curiel, the primary speechwriter of this address. Finally, the William J. Clinton Presidential Archive in Little Rock, Arkansas retains seven drafts of this speech.²⁶⁵ This ensured that I had a sufficient amount of data from which to draw conclusions.

In our interview, Curiel explained that Clinton wanted to see a draft of this particular speech months before the administration had even decided the President would deliver it. She recalled:

There were many, many, many meetings starting . . . late in '94 leading into '95 about whether a speech should even occur. I was of the opinion, 'yes.' There were some, and I won't say who, who believed, 'no.' And some people said, 'Well, Bill Bradley is speaking on this.' So I said, 'Who cares? Bill Bradley is not President.' Eventually what happened is, I asked, 'What is the policy—are we for or against it?' And I knew where I thought [the speech] should go. And I was told, 'Write the speech and we'll see.'²⁶⁶

Curiel wrote 23 versions of a draft that was delivered to Communications Director Don Baer and other administration officials on April 13, 1995.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*.

²⁶⁵ Speech Drafts, "Address on Affirmative Action," 6/19/95 [OA 10138] folders [1], [2], and [3]. White House Office of Speechwriting: Speech Draft Files, William J. Clinton Library.

²⁶⁶ Ambassador Carolyn Curiel, telephone interview with author, February 27, 2013.

²⁶⁷ Carolyn Curiel, "Memo: Affirmative Action Speech" 4/13/95 [OA 10138], folder [3], White House Office of Speechwriting: Speech Draft Files, William J. Clinton Library.

In early July, Curiel was told the speech would take place on July 19th. She does not recall what prompted Clinton’s decision to deliver the speech—only that at some point, “people realized that it was going to happen.”²⁶⁸ She composed a new version of the speech on Wednesday, July 12 at 2 p.m. As the April draft was composed months prior to the speech occasion, and because it is more akin to a draft of talking points than a formal address, I chose not to include it in my primary analysis. The July 12 document will be referred to as Draft One.

On the morning of July 13, after Draft One was composed, Curiel was told the speech would take place at the National Archives. The setting served as a metaphor on which the speech would be based. Curiel reported:

The national archives were set as the scene. I knew about the archives because I had ghostwritten a piece for the President for *Parade Magazine* about when he had gone to Washington [D.C.] with Boys’ State. . . . The building became a symbol for what we stand for. The documents the building holds—the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights—became emblematic of what this speech needed to convey. That was all incorporated at the very top of the speech. That was in the last few drafts because once the archive was set, up to that point it was a lot of tinkering with how [Clinton’s] personal history would get in. But, once I knew what the setting was, it all followed. It just started really flowing.²⁶⁹

The draft composed on Thursday, July 13 was the first written with knowledge of the speech site. This document was delivered to the President and has handwritten edits made by Clinton himself. It will be referred to as Draft Two. The remaining drafts are labeled as follows:

²⁶⁸ Curiel, telephone interview with author.

²⁶⁹ Curiel, telephone interview with author.

- Draft Three: dated Friday, July 14 at 11 a.m.
- Draft Four: dated Saturday, July 15 at 12 p.m.
- Draft Five: dated Monday, July 17 at 2 p.m.
- Draft Six: dated Monday, July 17
- Draft Seven: dated Tuesday, July 18 at 3 p.m.

The speech was delivered the following day, Wednesday, July 19.

After reviewing these drafts, I found three trends in their linguistic evolution. First, the drafts increasingly reference great American leaders. Second, the drafts more precisely identify the purpose of and the motivation behind the speech. Third, the drafts maximize the benefits of Affirmative Action to the nation, and minimize its tendency to elicit contention among individuals. I suggest the drafts undergo these changes in an attempt to make the speech more persuasive to an audience increasingly disenchanted with presidential speech.

References to American Leaders

The first trend I noticed in the case analysis was that the drafts increasingly referenced great American leaders of the past. Not only are these men specifically named, the drafts detail who they were, what they accomplished, what ideals they believed in, and what they contributed to the nation. I contend the drafts increasingly reference these leaders to suggest that Clinton is another in the lineage of great American heroes. The accomplishments these men achieved and the ideals that motivated them are meant to seem similar to Clinton's own goals and motivations. In doing so, the drafts frame the address as yet another speech that will comprise our national narrative, making

the audience less likely to discount Clinton's words. The audience refrains from criticizing the speech because they are compelled to consider the address with esteem similar to that with which they consider these monumental leaders and speeches of the past. Two sets of examples support this claim.

JFK, MLK, and the Founders

In a first set of examples, the draft increasingly associates Clinton with President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The first draft sets the stage for these associations, placing all three men in Washington D.C. over three important, consecutive months in the summer of 1963. In June of 1963, Kennedy ordered the Alabama National Guard to escort three African American students into the University of Alabama. Draft One recalls Kennedy's remarks at the time of the integration: "Every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated, as one would wish his children to be treated."²⁷⁰ Clinton's speech echoes Kennedy's sentiment, noting that all Americans "are entitled to enjoy the basic freedoms and privileges of being American."²⁷¹ The speech then recalls when, in July of 1963, an adolescent Clinton visited the nation's capital with Boys' State. The draft claims that Clinton was one of only three boys in the group who disagreed with segregation. Lastly, in August of 1963, King delivered his infamous "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. According to Clinton's speech, King "told the nation he had a dream of

²⁷⁰ William J. Clinton Library, Draft One, 1.

²⁷¹ William J. Clinton Library, Draft One, 1.

equality, freedom and justice.”²⁷² One frustration the public has with presidential speech is that it is frequently on the topic of arbitrary and inconsequential matters. By placing Kennedy, King, and Clinton in a similar spatial and temporal context, this speech subtly compels the audience to associate the words of these men with one another. This association makes Clinton’s speech seem more salient, honorable, and worthy of the audience’s consideration. By making this association, Clinton and his speechwriters proactively attempt to hinder the public’s distaste for speech.

Draft Two quotes Kennedy further, recalling that the 35th President claimed integration was an issue “as old as the scriptures and as clear as the American constitution.”²⁷³ In citing this particular quote, the draft prefaces the rationale of Clinton’s speech; the bases upon which Clinton’s speech argues for Affirmative Action are religion and democracy. By suggesting that Clinton’s speech is premised upon the same ideals as Kennedy’s speech, Draft Two brings the two leaders and their respective policy concerns in concert with one another. This prompts the audience to further associate Clinton’s Affirmative Action speech with Kennedy’s integration speech. This association works to ingratiate the audience and prevent them from feeling or voicing any distaste with Clinton’s speech based on their frustrations with presidential address. Because of the association, such distaste would naturally extend to Kennedy’s monumental words, and the audience is arguably less likely to detest Kennedy’s rhetoric out of reverence for their historic significance.

²⁷² William J. Clinton Library, Draft One, 2.

²⁷³ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Two, 3.

The next edit not only draws the association from Kennedy and King forward to Clinton, but it also draws an association in reverse: from Clinton in the 1990s, through Kennedy and King in the 1960s, and back 200 years to the nation's Founders. In an extended insert, Draft Two conveys:

President Kennedy and Dr. King, each in his own way in that time, expanded on the words of our Founders. They looked at America and saw a need to raise the valley to create common ground for all our people. That summer they defined the terms of an American dialogue about freedom, opportunity and citizenship. It's a dialogue that we must continue to have today, in ways that are civil, with the goals of healing our humanity and building on the words of those who have moved us forward.²⁷⁴

This national dialogue took place in July of 1776 among the Founders who gave life to American democracy. It was "expanded on" by Kennedy and King in June and August of 1963, the two months that flank Clinton's childhood July visit to Washington D.C. And now, in July 1995, this dialogue is one "we must continue to have today." This addition placates a disillusioned public in two ways. First, it further associates Clinton with great leaders. Not only does it reiteratively associate Clinton with Kennedy and King, but with the nation's Founders as well. The draft allocates to Clinton a trace of the same legacy that the Founders, Kennedy, and King all enjoy in the national consciousness. Second, this addition compels the audience to believe that July is a national time for change, that Clinton's speech isn't an arbitrary declamation but a significant and important moment in our unfolding history.

²⁷⁴ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Two, 3.

This trend is deepened by Draft Three’s addition that, “Today, it is our turn to be agents of renewal for our time.”²⁷⁵ Draft Four implores the country to work alongside Clinton as “we build on the work of those who have gone so nobly before us.”²⁷⁶ Draft Five changes this language to those who “so nobly led us this far.”²⁷⁷ The draft chooses not merely to point out that the Founders and Kennedy and King led the forces for change in the past, but hints that they somehow bestowed upon Clinton the responsibility of continuing forward. “Today” the country stands at a critical precipice and its citizens are called upon by Clinton to be “agents of renewal.” Just as the Founders called upon colonial Americans to abandon England, and Kennedy called upon the South to end segregation, and King called upon the black community to stand up to racial injustice, Clinton now asks the country to support Affirmative Action in order to advance the nation’s best interests.

A final example that invokes the memory of the Founders, Kennedy, and King comes at the conclusion of Draft Three. In a previous iteration, Draft Two read, “I believe that what makes us American is our ability to seek out and find our common purpose and higher ground. And I believe with all my heart, that for that first time in our history, we are about to discover the full exponential strength of our national community.”²⁷⁸ Draft Three adds three sentences between these two: in reference to

²⁷⁵ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Three, 3.

²⁷⁶ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Four, 5.

²⁷⁷ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Five, 5.

²⁷⁸ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Two, 5.

finding common purpose, “That’s what the Founders did. That’s what John Kennedy and Martin Luther King did. I believe with all my heart that we can do it again.”²⁷⁹ The subtext of this reference is that in order to “do it again”—to finish the work our predecessors began—the country needs Clinton’s leadership. The country needs to heed the words of Clinton’s speech and value its message.

Past Presidents

A second set of examples also document how the speech associates Clinton with past leaders. In these instances, the drafts associate Clinton with 19th century President Abraham Lincoln, and 21st century presidents Richard M. Nixon, Lyndon B. Johnson, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Harry S. Truman.

First, I argue that Lincoln is invoked to communicate Clinton’s intention to continue the “the Great Emancipator’s” commitment to racial equality. While Abolition and Affirmative Action are both policies that directly affect African Americans, I argue that the important association between Clinton and Lincoln is not one between their respective policies but between their words. Lincoln’s rhetorical legacy in relation to racial equality is the Emancipation Proclamation. And while I do not intend to suggest that Clinton—by using this strategy—presumes to compare his speech to Lincoln’s, the mere association between their rhetorical legacies precludes the audience from forming an otherwise scorned opinion about Clinton’s words. Draft Four contends that Affirmative Action is necessary because it attempts to fix the problems of the past,

²⁷⁹ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Three, 19.

problems that are bound to affect the future in a negative way. The draft reminds, “As Lincoln said, ‘We cannot escape our history.’”²⁸⁰ Draft Five of Clinton’s speech appends this reference: “I would add: Neither can we run from our future.”²⁸¹ This supplement reads as if Clinton’s opinion is a natural extension of Lincoln’s—that Lincoln’s statement was unfinished and Clinton has completed it. Draft Seven takes an additional step in this direction, including an allusion to Lincoln’s legacy. It reads, “I did not become President to stand by and see us retreat at this critical moment. We must not, we will not become the first generation of Americans since the end of Reconstruction to narrow instead of widen the reach and meaning of the documents in these archives.”²⁸² I contend this mention of Reconstruction is intended to conjure in the audience’s mind a recollection of the Civil War, and the President who saw its conclusion: President Lincoln. President Clinton is Lincoln’s successor and is charged with carrying forth the unfinished Reconstruction that Lincoln birthed. These draft edits suggest Clinton’s leadership is the contemporary adaptation of Lincoln’s, and that Clinton is bequeathed with the responsibility of continuing what Lincoln began. This leads the audience to associate Clinton’s own legacy with Lincoln’s and to trust and value Clinton’s words, his leadership, and his policy choices.

Moreover, the draft references past presidents and their work for equality to justify the importance of a speech on the topic of Affirmative Action. Draft Four simply

²⁸⁰ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Four, 13.

²⁸¹ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Five, 13.

²⁸² William J. Clinton Library, Draft Seven, 15.

states, “Like Presidents Johnson and Nixon, who led the way . . . I believe in Affirmative Action.”²⁸³ Draft Five provides more detail noting, “Since President Nixon, we have used goals and timetables to prevent discrimination and to prod businesses to set higher expectations for themselves.”²⁸⁴ This works to convince the audience that Clinton’s words are not arbitrary, that the problems requiring programs like Affirmative Action have long existed. Draft Five references other presidents who acted on issues of racial equality for the betterment of the nation, “Like Presidents of both parties dating back to President Truman, who integrated the armed forces, and Eisenhower, who sent Federal troops to integrate Central High School in Little Rock.”²⁸⁵ These examples recall important moments in national history that required presidential leadership. The present, then, is a national moment requiring Clinton’s leadership. Just as Truman’s and Eisenhower’s controversial actions contributed to a more perfect union, the plan announced in Clinton’s speech is a similar, though controversial, step towards progress. I argue that affiliating Clinton’s work with that of past presidents averts any inclination the public may have to discount Clinton’s words. Documenting the accomplishments of past presidents on racial equality gives Clinton’s cause more credibility, and makes his speech seem like a necessary national conversation.

The examples in this section documented how associations between Clinton and other American leaders worked to convince the public that Clinton’s speech was an

²⁸³ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Four, 12.

²⁸⁴ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Five, 15.

²⁸⁵ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Five, 12.

important moment in national history, akin to pivotal moments of the past. I demonstrated how the speech drew parallels between Clinton and the Founders, Kennedy, King, Lincoln, Nixon, Truman, Eisenhower, and Johnson. By associating Clinton's work towards a better nation with the monumental measures taken by past leaders, the speech's message is resoundingly more poignant, and prevents the audience from disregarding Clinton's rhetorical leadership as capricious or unimportant.

Responding to a Situation

The second trend I found while analyzing the drafts is that the speech increasingly responded to a particular problem. One frustration the public has with presidential discourse is that it seems to be arbitrary and frivolous. By framing the speech as a purposed and prudent response to a situation, Clinton and his speechwriters avoid that frustration. Two sets of examples illustrate this point. The first conveys how from one draft to the next the purpose of the speech is more clearly portrayed as a response to a program review Clinton ordered. The second documents the role of the *Adarand v. Peña* Supreme Court case in prompting the speech occasion. I argue that these examples convey how Clinton and his speechwriters attempted to portray the speech as a timely response to current events in order to address the public's distaste with presidential address.

After reviewing the drafts, I consulted outside documents and my interview with Curiel to determine if any evidence might support my argument. In fact, my conclusion was overwhelmingly supported. As indicated in my interview with Curiel, there was much debate among the President's advisors in late 1994 about whether the president

should deliver a speech on Affirmative Action. The Supreme Court heard arguments on the Adarand case on January 17, 1995. On March 7, the President ordered a review of the federal government's affirmative action programs.²⁸⁶ Curiel was directed to draft a speech in late March 1995, and submitted one to key staff on April 13. Curiel was told the speech was planned for July 19 and wrote a new draft (the document referred to as Draft One in this dissertation) on July 12—the same date on which the Adarand case was decided. The review the president requested on March 7 was submitted to him on July 19—the same date on which the speech took place.²⁸⁷

Based on this information, it appears that President Clinton and perhaps some of his staff had an interest in delivering an Affirmative Action speech prior to knowing the results of the review Clinton requested, and also prior to knowing what decision the Court would hand down on the Adarand case. Had the results of the review and the Court's decision been different, it is possible that Clinton would still have delivered an Affirmative Action speech. I argue that the evolution of these speech drafts indicate that Clinton and his speechwriters wanted the speech to be interpreted as a reaction to the review and the Court's decision, not as a speech on a topic that the president long wanted to address. This choice reflects what I believe is a recognition of the public's distaste of presidential speeches as opportunities for a president to speak on any topic he wishes. It is a recognition, rather, of the public's preference for speeches that are timely, relevant,

²⁸⁶ National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), "Affirmative Action Review: Report to the President," Published July 19, 1995. Accessed 10 May 2013. <http://clinton2.nara.gov/WH/EOP/OP/html/aa/aa01.html>

²⁸⁷ NARA, "Affirmative Action Review."

and responsive. The linguistic evolution of the speech drafts shows an adaptation to this preference.

Purpose of the Speech

The first set of examples reflects the changes made from draft to draft that clarify the purpose of the speech. The organization of the message increasingly frames the speech's purpose as a response to the review of federal Affirmative Action policies that Clinton ordered four months prior. Draft One reads:

Affirmative Action is not an entitlement. It is not a never-ending process. It is a temporary tool. We still need affirmative action. And that's why we must mend it, not end it. And that is what we are doing.

To that end, I am committed to seeing that any program under affirmative action meet three strict principles to ensure fairness...

The draft outlines these principles. It continues:

With these goals in mind, some weeks ago I ordered a review of our affirmative action programs. And, I should note these programs are being further scrutinized at the order of the Justice Department, to make sure they are in compliance with the Supreme Court's order that they be narrowly tailored.²⁸⁸

The draft then outlines the results of the review. Draft One is organized in a manner that suggests Clinton is establishing three principles for Affirmative Action to follow because the program is necessary but must be "mended." It also reads as if Clinton ordered a review with his three principles in mind. In this draft, Affirmative Action's necessity prompted the three principles which, in turn, prompted the review. The review was not

²⁸⁸ William J. Clinton Library, Draft One, 11.

the cause of Clinton's new principles. Rather, these principles are the product of his personal opinions about Affirmative Action and its necessity.

In Draft Four, the chronological order of these thoughts changes. After it notes that Affirmative Action must be mended not ended, the draft reads:

I ordered a review of our programs several months ago because I wanted to make sure our programs are working the right way. This examination will not be the last.

We must make affirmative action consistent with our highest ideals of personal responsibility and merit. . . . So today, I am directing all our agencies to monitor our affirmative action programs to make sure each one meets these four strict standards for fairness...²⁸⁹

The draft outlines these four standards and then documents what the review found. In this version, the review is introduced first; it is a means of ensuring Affirmative Action is working correctly. Then, the four standards are presented—not in response to the results of the review, but in response to our national ideals of “responsibility and merit.” The results of the program are an after-thought, and do not influence or inform the four standards set forth.

Draft Six presents the same information that was conveyed in Drafts One and Four, but organizes the sequence of events in a more methodical, logical, and responsive way. This section of Draft Six begins with the similar notation that Affirmative Action ought to be mended. It then proposes:

For that reason, I ordered a review of affirmative action several months ago. This review concluded that affirmative action remains an essential tool for expanding economic and educational opportunity.

²⁸⁹ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Four, 15.

Next, the draft details the results of the review. These results are followed by:

Affirmative action must be made consistent with our highest ideals of personal responsibility and merit. . . Based on our review, today, I am directing federal agencies to apply four standards of fairness to all our affirmative action programs:...

Draft Six also outlines the four standards.

This draft is organized such that the need for Affirmative Action reform clearly *prompted* Clinton to order the review. It first recalls Clinton's order for the review, then conveys the review's results, and concludes by outlining the four standards to be applied. This penultimate draft is the first to clearly communicate that the four standards are being employed *in response to the findings in the review*. In prior drafts, the four standards seem to be presented arbitrarily, as if they are not at all influenced or informed by the review. This presentation of the four standards and the rationale behind them is chronologically sound. I argue that this version makes the speech occasion more legitimate. It is a clear departure from the prior drafts, which present this information in an incoherent sequence. The final draft's organization conveys that the speech is an appropriate and timely explanation of the review, its results, and its implications.

Response to Adarand

The second set of examples detail the changes from draft to draft that discuss the Adarand Supreme Court case. The drafts increasingly showcase Adarand as a core impetus for the speech and emphasize Affirmative Action's solvency as argued for by the case's decision. I suggest the drafts evolve in this way to give the impression that the

²⁹⁰ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Six, 13.

speech is responding to a particular Court decision, rather than simply being an opportunity for the President to discuss a social issue he values—something that might be viewed as another example of why the public has a distaste for speech.

Draft One outlines three initial steps Clinton argues we must take towards Affirmative Action reform. The first and second are to weed out fraud and abuse, and to help enrich impoverished communities. The third is that, “we have to make sure that we comply with the Adarand decision. And, in particular, that means limiting these programs to those regions and business sectors where the serious problems of discrimination remain.”²⁹¹ Draft Two adds, “I’ve directed the Attorney General and the agencies to move forward with this expeditiously.”²⁹² This language remains throughout all drafts.

In Draft Four the speech references a 1989 Supreme Court decision on Affirmative Action. *The City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson* prompted stricter guidelines for Affirmative Action policies at the state and local level. The Adarand decision was quite similar, but extended these stricter guidelines to the federal level. Of the Adarand decision’s new guidelines, an addition to Draft Four reads, “I feel confident that the test will be met in many cases, as it has been met by state and local governments operating under the same kind of constraints ordered by the Court’s Croson decision 6 years ago.”²⁹³ This language is problematic because it suggests the news of the Adarand decision is not entirely critical. Adarand’s implications are rather insignificant because

²⁹¹ William J. Clinton Library, Draft One, 14.

²⁹² William J. Clinton Library, Draft Two, 14.

²⁹³ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Four, 18.

the decision's requirements are already in effect at a state and local level and have not been an impediment. The draft reads as if the Adarand decision is not so consequential, certainly not so much so as to require a presidential address. The Court's decision is merely an extension of a state law that has been in place for six years to the federal level. This language does not bode well for a president facing an audience frustrated with the constant and trivial nature of modern presidential address.

The language in Draft Five presents the role of Croson in a much more advantageous way. It reads, "Remember, the Adarand decision did not dismantle [Affirmative Action], but it did raise higher the bar for eligibility. Several years ago, when the Supreme Court ordered state and local governments to meet the same tests, many programs survived."²⁹⁴ The reference here to the Croson case is subtle, choosing not even to name the case in specific. By doing so, the draft makes the Adarand case more prodigious rather than redundant. I suggest this technique allows the speech to more easily convince the public that Clinton's message is pertinent and warranted. The Draft Five language also frames the relationship between the two cases in a way that makes Affirmative Action sound more legitimate. The standards set six years prior—the same standards that will be set now—did not decimate Affirmative Action programs. It would follow, then, that the program's resilience can be attributed to its success.

As demonstrated earlier, the central purpose of the speech is found when the drafts outline four new standards that will be applied to Affirmative Action programs in response to the review Clinton ordered. The penultimate iteration of this purpose in Draft

²⁹⁴ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Five, 18.

Six reads, “Today, I am directing federal agencies to apply four standards of fairness to all our affirmative action programs.”²⁹⁵ In Draft Seven, Adarand is incorporated into the speech’s purpose. That purpose is now to announce that, “Today, I am directing all our agencies to comply with the Supreme Court’s Adarand decision, and also to apply four standards of fairness to all our affirmative action programs . . .”²⁹⁶ By including mention of Adarand in the central purpose of the speech, the draft features the importance of that decision in prompting the President to speak. I contend that this is a response to audiences frustrated with presidential speeches because of their seemingly arbitrary and trivial nature. Giving such prominence to the Court’s decision as to include it in the speech’s stated purpose communicates to the audience that the address is a timely and appropriate response to a major judicial decision, rather than a speech on a topic about which the President feels the whim to speak.

This section documented a second trajectory of Clinton’s speech drafts: they increasingly frame the speech as a response to a specific occasion. I contend that the speech is increasingly framed this way because of two messages. First, the purpose of the speech is increasingly clarified to be a response to Clinton’s requested review of federal Affirmative Action programs. Second, the speech more acutely focuses on the role of the recent Adarand decision in prompting Clinton to address the nation on Affirmative Action. In light of these changes, I argue that the speech responds to the

²⁹⁵ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Six, 15.

²⁹⁶ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Seven, 21.

public by conveying the necessity of the speech. This may retard the perception of the arbitrary and trivial nature of presidential speech that the public distastes.

Eschewing Politics

The third trend I found in the evolution of these speech drafts is that the speech increasingly addresses a problem that is not political, but is politicized. The drafts progressively frame Affirmative Action not as a contentious political token, but as an important issue that has economic and social repercussions for the country and all its citizens. This frame, I argue, is more amenable to an audience frustrated with presidential speech because it documents real, tangible effects as opposed to political imaginaries. Three examples illustrate this point.

The first example comes from a change between Drafts Three and Four. In discussing the contentious nature of a program like Affirmative Action, the former reads, “But let us accept this true fact: The enemy is not another American. The enemy is anyone who would poison our atmosphere by encouraging us to blame each other.”²⁹⁷ Draft Four is edited to read that, instead, “the enemy [is] not our fellow Americans. . . . the enemy is the poisoned atmosphere in which we are encouraged to look at each other that way.”²⁹⁸ Two significant edits are made here. The first is the identification of the suspected enemy: it is not “another American” but “our fellow Americans.” The change speaks to the frustration the public has with contentious political discourse that seeks to divide rather than unite. By considering the enemy “our

²⁹⁷ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Three, 6.

²⁹⁸ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Four, 6.

fellow Americans,” the draft conveys that this speech values cooperation over national infighting. This inhibits any disenchantment the public would experience in response to the speech’s initial language. The second edit in this example transforms the enemy of Affirmative Action from individuals and into a political climate. The enemy is not “anyone would poison our atmosphere,” but the “poisoned atmosphere” itself. Renaming the enemy enables the President to more easily persuade those initially opposed to Affirmative Action by absolving them of their faults and allowing them to blame the contentious American political environment instead of themselves. This language appeals to audiences disaffected with presidential speech’s tendency to serve as a partisan megaphone: this draft unites the public in support of the presidency as an institution, not in support of the president as a leader of a political party or ideology.

A second example illustrates how the speech takes a more productive and realistic approach to confronting dissent on the issue of Affirmative Action. Draft Five announces, “At a time when we need to come together, some people are hard at work, drawing sharp lines through our national community. But if we are to renew our nation, if we are to build on our progress, we must each take responsibility to drown out these voices of division with an American chorus of unity.”²⁹⁹ This statement suggests that the way to move beyond discordant views is to muffle whichever perspective presents a barrier to Affirmative Action’s success. Draft Six, however, embraces these differences. The draft reads, “We cannot survive and succeed as a society if we are suspicious, fearful, and divided over who gets what. I respect those who disagree with

²⁹⁹ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Five, 14.

my views on affirmative action. But at least let both sides argue the case on the merits. . . . This politics of grievance and resentment appeals to frustration and anger, but will not bring any genuine economic improvement.” This draft shifts from a strategy of silencing opposition to respectfully acknowledging it. The draft makes an important caveat, though: the only voices to opposition that will be taken seriously are those based on logic and merit. Those voices playing political games and appealing to emotion may continue to speak, but they will do so in a way that is invaluable, defective, and counterproductive. This change is appealing to the audience because it moves above political acrimony and towards real national progress. It embraces different opinions rather than stifling them, and exhibits a real commitment to achieving the best version of Affirmative Action possible by listening to multiple perspectives.

A final example illustrates how the speech increasingly moves beyond the pettiness and absurdity of politics—certainly one of the reasons for the public’s distaste for speech—towards a more truthful appraisal of the situation. Draft Six presents what Clinton believes is one reason resistance against Affirmative Action has manifested. The draft reports that the opportunity created by “new technologies, instant communications, and an explosion of global commerce” has provided the country with “enormous opportunity. But it has also brought a new kind of anxiety for the middle class . . . When an economy is evolving and adapting, as ours is, the growing pains invite a blame game.”³⁰⁰ This discomfort with change, the draft infers, is a culprit of dissention over

³⁰⁰ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Six, 5.

Affirmative Action. Citizens left befuddled by a rapidly changing world have taken to using the measure as a scapegoat to help them purge their insecurities and find confidence. Draft Seven moves away from this tactic, instead choosing simply to provide an account of the situation as it is. The draft reads that these “sweeping changes which create enormous opportunity” generated “a new kind of anxiety for the great middle class that somehow what has always been true, that we are going up or going down together, is no longer true.”³⁰¹ Rather than highlight the blame that resulted from anxiety, the speech seeks to delegitimize the very anxiety itself. Doing so naturally eliminates the need for any blame to be placed, which in turn minimizes opposition to Affirmative Action. This tactic is strategic because it frames the speech as an honest portrayal of the situation, instead of political rhetoric as usual. Rather than accept the premise of the opposition’s argument—that the anxiety which invites blame is valid—the speech blatantly rejects that premise. This prevents Clinton from having to discuss politics in his speech; rather, he undercuts the utility of politics in favor of a rational and objective survey of the situation.

To summarize, the third section of my case study reported how Clinton’s speech increasingly framed Affirmative Action as an issue that affects us all, rather than a program that benefits a few. This strategy frames the speech as an important discussion about the reality of economic and social equality, instead of a defense of a single piece of legislation. I believe this was a tactic used to placate an audience that is frustrated by the rhetorical presidency’s tendency to overextend the bully pulpit’s reach and speak

³⁰¹ William J. Clinton Library, Draft Seven, 5.

frequently on political matters. Rather, this speech sought to circumvent politics and advocate for an opportunity to better the general welfare.

This section reviewed the results of a case study I conducted on President Clinton's July 1995 address on Affirmative Action reform. My goal was to determine how Clinton and his speechwriters used speech to appeal to a public disenchanted with presidential address. The analysis yielded three results: 1) Clinton and his writers invoked great American leaders to associate his speech with their legacies; 2) Clinton and his writers framed the speech as a necessary and timely response to current events; and 3) Clinton and his writers claimed the speech was a call for the expansion of economic and social advancement for everyone, not as expansion of equality for some. I argue that the speech was crafted using these three strategies in order to respond to frustrations the public has with presidential address. Perhaps the most important conclusion is that Clinton and his speechwriters sought to overcome the public's disenchantment with speech by focusing speech language on the legislative functions of the presidency. The speech invokes great American leaders for their legislative victories in spite of a contentious public. It is framed as a legislative response to an executive review and a judicial decision. The speech's language concentrated on the large-scale impact of the policy rather than the individual implications of equal treatment. By crafting language that emphasized the legislative duties of the president, I contend that Clinton and his speechwriters presented a version of this speech that was best equipped to combat the increasing frustration the public has towards presidential speech.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

In the previous section, emphasis was placed on how Clinton *proactively* appealed to an audience that is disenchanted with presidential address. In order to more thoroughly answer my dissertation question, however, it is necessary to consider what *reactive* changes Clinton made to his speeches to encourage the public. To do so, I conducted a content analysis of thirty-six weekly radio addresses to identify any changing trends across Clinton's tenure. This content analysis followed the method and procedure outlined in Chapter One.

Poetic Language Use Ratio

The proportion of poetic language in Clinton's radio addresses ranged from .02 to .09 with an average of ($M=.05$) per speech. Some examples are listed here:

- “These Americans won the cold war. We must not leave them out in the cold.” March 13, 1993
- “People don't want 4 more years or 4 more months or 4 more days of politicians telling them what they want to hear while all our problems get worse.” June 19, 1993
- “I want to reward responsibility, not punish it; to increase opportunity, not shrink it; to strengthen our families, not weaken them.” October 7, 1995
- “The American job engine is in high gear.” March 9, 1996
- “...law enforcement will have new told to crack down, track down, and shut down terrorists.” April 20, 1996

Upon completion of the content analysis, I analyzed the data. The results, which are plotted in the chart below, uncover several trends.

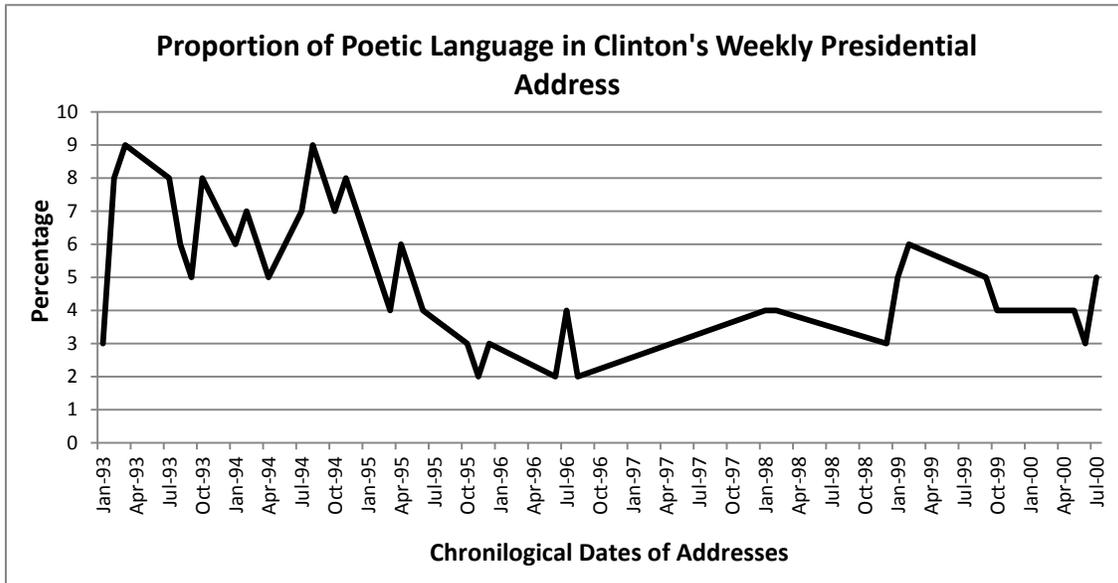


Table 13: Clinton’s Poetic Language Ratios

The first noticeable trend is that the ratio was much higher during the first third of Clinton’s presidency. For the first thirty-two months of the administration, the ratio average is .06; the second third is .03; the final third is .04. One could argue that a variety of factors caused this. While this research is not capable of speculating on causation, I do find it reasonable to contend that this trend suggests some sort of self-awareness on the part of Clinton and his speechwriters. This data, I argue, is strong enough to indicate that there was at least a subtle conscious effort to amend the content or linguistic style of Clinton’s speeches to be less poetic as the administration matured. There is a clear distinction between the first third and second third of his administration, and I believe one would be hard-pressed to argue this distinction is merely due to chance.

A second factor that I considered was the change in poetic language between campaign seasons. The ratio does begin to taper off around January 1995, only a few months prior to the beginning of the 1996 campaign season. However, that ratio does not return to its primary position around .06 once that campaign season concludes. It does again increase to .04, but this accounts for only a portion of the position it initially held. I argue that in politics—just as in any other communicative environment—language strategies are typically maintained if they prove successful. My data underscore that, if indeed reducing the ratio of poetic language use in Clinton’s weekend addresses was a purposed effort, this effort was recognized as one that ought to be sustained.

Public Approval Ratings

I consulted public opinion data to determine if this trend matched public approval or disapproval rates. The chart below documents the ratio measures alongside Clinton’s disapproval ratings as reported by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research:³⁰²

³⁰² The Roper Center, “Presidential Job Performance Ratings.”

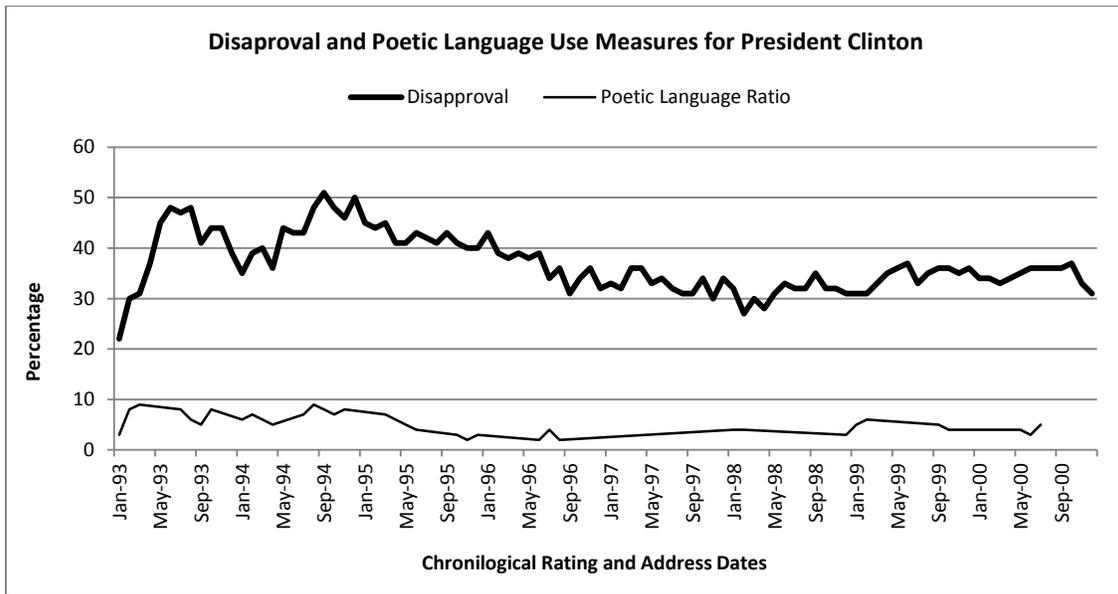


Table 14: Clinton’s Poetic Language Ratios and Disapproval Rate

There appears to be a pattern. In the first third of Clinton’s tenure, both measures display elevated disapproval rates and poetic language measures. Both measures also decrease during the second third of the administration, and stabilize during the final third. While this data does not imply causation, the correlation between these two trends does indicate a clear association.

Public Opinion Questions

I also consulted a collection of public opinion questions asked about President Clinton’s speeches. As indicated in Chapter One, I gathered questions from The Roper Center’s *iPOLL* database that referenced the President and his public “speech” or “address” to determine if any public opinion shifts occurred.³⁰³ Of seventy-eight questions asked about Clinton’s speeches or addresses, nine asked participants to gauge

³⁰³ The Roper Center, “*iPOLL* Databank.”

to what degree presidential addresses influenced their opinion about an issue on which Clinton spoke, or influenced their opinion about Clinton himself. The results are indicated below:

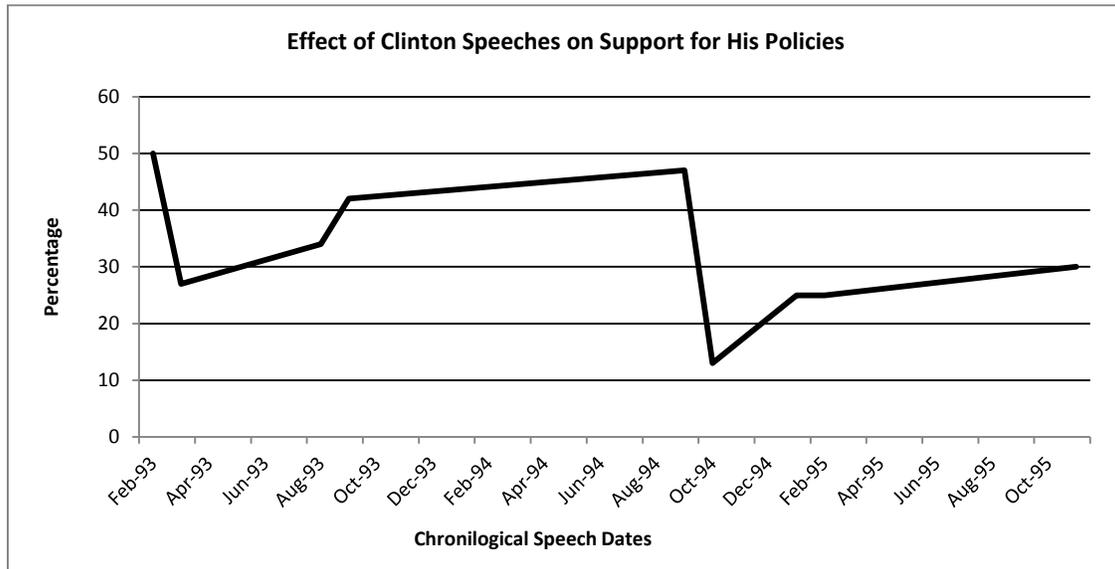


Table 15: Effect of Clinton Speeches on Public Policy Support

It is noteworthy that the last of these questions was asked in late 1995, less than halfway through Clinton's tenure. Even so, it is clear that the influence of Clinton's speech on the public seems to be stronger during the first eighteen months of his presidency.

Unfortunately, the entirety of this data only documents the first third of his presidency and precludes any valuable comparison between it and the poetic language measure.

Additionally, I found that forty-eight *iPOLL* questions asked if a participant watched, listened to, or heard about a Clinton speech. Many of these questions were asked from multiple sources in reference to the same speech; for example, Gallup and Newsweek both asked participants to answer in response to a speech on February 17,

1993. These answers were averaged, resulting in a total of sixteen data points. The results are below:

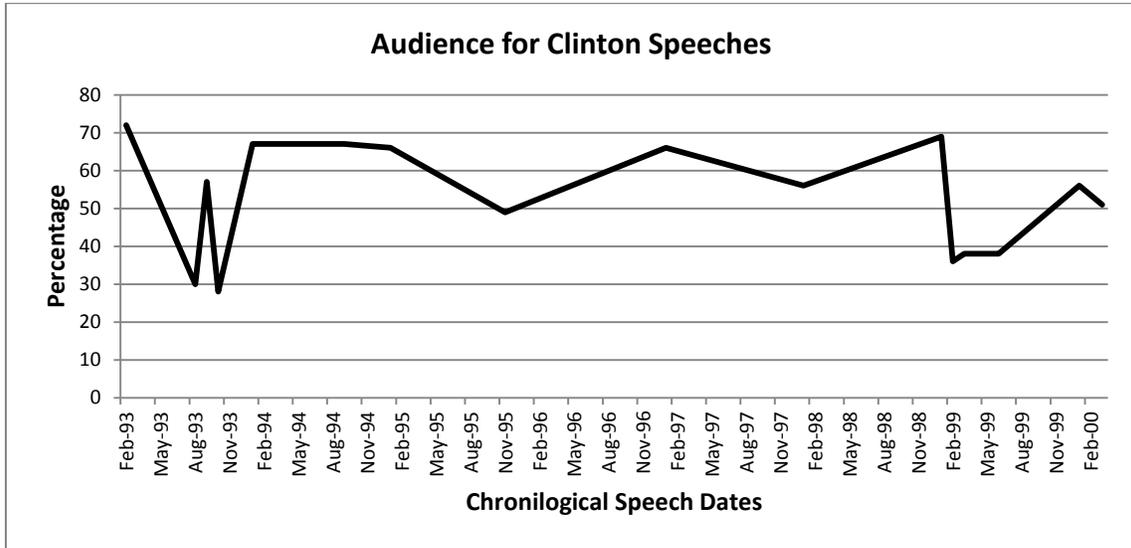


Table 16: Audience for Clinton Speeches

The first speech referenced in a public opinion question is Clinton’s February 1993 economic address. This receives a high reported audience at 72%. The measures subsequently dip towards 30% with a brief interval of 57%. After resurfacing to its initial levels after the President’s January 1994 State of the Union, the measure stabilizes for the duration of the administration with a brief drop during the last year. I took note of this trend and considered how it might relate to the results of the content analysis. After reversing the poetic language ratio and disapproval rate in order to chart the *absence* of poetic language and *approval* rate, I found a similar trend among all three measures.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁴ The Roper Center, “Presidential Job Performance Ratings.”

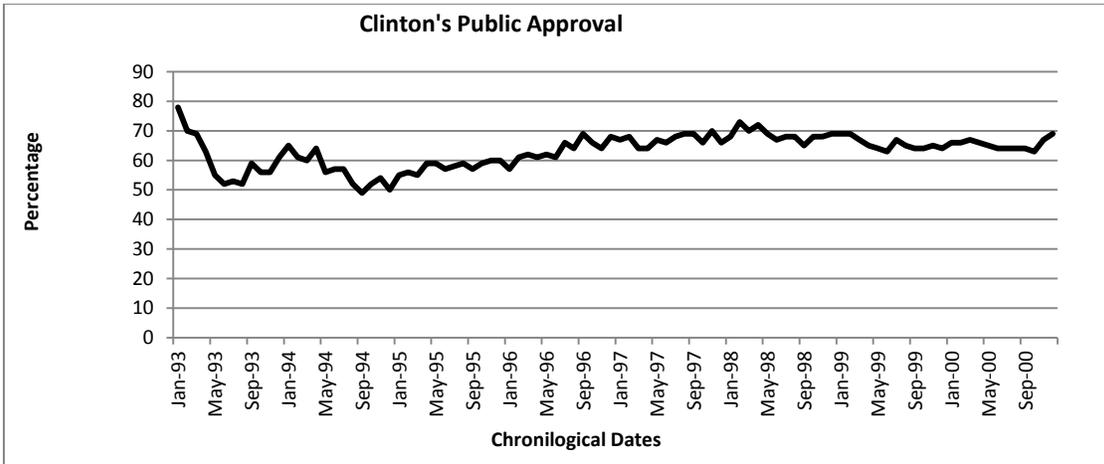


Table 17: Clinton's Public Approval

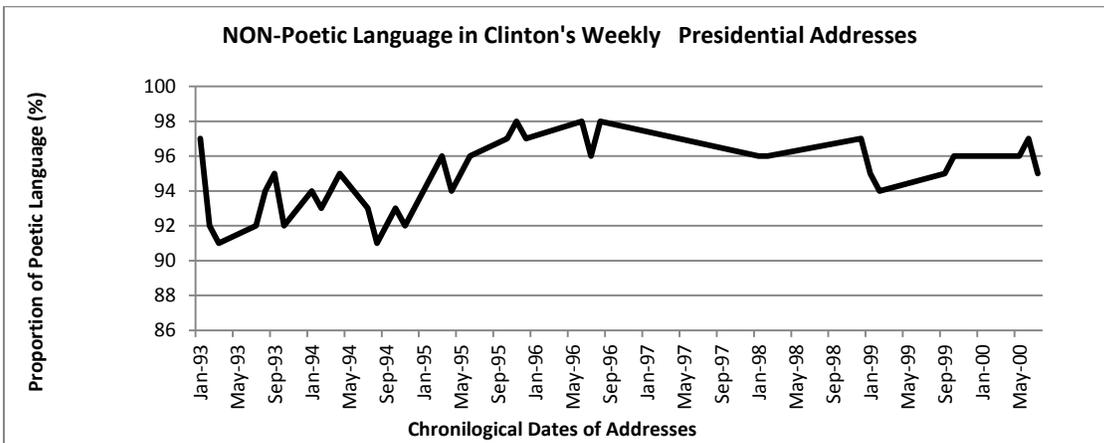


Table 18: Clinton's Non-Poetic Language

In reference to Clinton's approval rate, his speech audience, and his non-poetic language use, it seems all measures decreased during the first thirty-two months of his term, increased during the second thirty-two months, and stabilized for the remainder of the term with a slight drop at the end. These results indicate that not only is Clinton's poetic language ratio correlated to his public disapproval rating, but it is also correlated to the

absence of his speech audience. This would suggest that the decreased ratio of poetic language use in Clinton's weekly addresses may have been the result of a concerted effort to attract a larger audience.

The results of my content analysis prompt a number of considerations about the linguistic evolution of Clinton's weekly addresses. One consideration broached by Clinton's speechwriters—and confirmed by my research on presidential speechwriting—is that Clinton's familiarity with presidential speech may have affected his messages over time. Speechwriter Heather Hurlburt contended, "It may be that at the beginning of the administration he read seventy percent [of what we wrote in advance] and riffed thirty [percent], but I would have to say that by 2000, it was more like reading thirty and riffing seventy."³⁰⁵ Additionally, author Robert Schlesinger claims, "[Clinton's] speeches in early 1995 were episodic struggles for control of the administration's rhetorical direction."³⁰⁶ Gelderman noted that Clinton claims he wrote his own speeches before being elected president. Gelderman also states that the speechwriters were poorly organized until communications director Don Baer was hired to "try to establish some kind of orderly process in speechwriting."³⁰⁷ However, "By 1996 it appeared that President Clinton had achieved a remarkable turnaround. . . through speechmaking reinvention."³⁰⁸ This sequence of events informs the results of the content analysis. The

³⁰⁵ Heather Hurlburt, telephone interview with author, January 22, 2013.

³⁰⁶ Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts*, 425.

³⁰⁷ Gelderman, *The President's Words*, 169.

³⁰⁸ Gelderman, *The President's Words*, 175.

first third of Clinton's presidency may have operated under confused pretenses about the role of speech in the presidency. The middle of his presidency witnessed more care and organization in producing rhetoric and gauging public opinion. In Clinton's last few years, he was more experienced and comfortable, thus delivering rhetoric more reflective of his desired linguistic style. This consideration speaks to the many influences on a president's rhetoric and how speechwriting and public opinion mutually influence one another. The trend of Clinton's poetic language use, while surely influenced by a number of factors, was likely a manifestation of his inexperience and the disorganization of the White House speechwriting operation.

My content analysis revealed that the ratio of poetic language use in Clinton's weekly addresses was highest in the first thirty-two months of his presidency, lowest in the second thirty-two months, and stabilized for the duration of his tenure in the White House. Analysis of his public approval ratings also found that this trend is similar to the pattern of his disapproval rates over eight years. I consulted public opinion questions about Clinton's speech and found that the size of his audience, his approval rating, and the absence of poetic language were all clearly correlated. I speculated that these trends can be considered alongside the narratives provided by his speechwriters and scholars of his presidency that trace Clinton's challenges in producing public address. These results indicate that a central component of Clinton's ability to better gauge public opinion and adjust his rhetoric accordingly was a better organization of his speechwriting team. Over time Clinton appealed to a disenchanted public by using a decreased level of poetic language—even though this strategy was initially encumbered by the administration's

infancy and inexperience. These results will be considered along with the case study and interviews to answer my dissertation's question.

SPEECHWRITER INTERVIEWS

This section explores the interviews I conducted with five Clinton speechwriters. The results inform the conclusions reached by my case study and content analysis, and shed light on how Clinton and his writers appealed to a public disenchanted with speech. While each study conducted in this chapter contributes a valuable perspective, I contend that taken together, all three studies constitute a more accurate and informed answer to my dissertation question. For this study, I conducted recorded telephone interviews with five former Clinton speechwriters:

- 1) Heather Hurlburt (January 22, 2013)
- 2) David Kusnet (January 24, 2013)
- 3) John Pollack (January 28, 2013)
- 4) Jeff Sheshol (January 31, 2013)
- 5) Carolyn Curiel (February 27, 2013)

Interviews ranged from 21:17 minutes to 27:13 minutes, with an average time of 24:20 minutes. I also asked several of the writers follow up questions via email. The results were transcribed and edited for clarity.

From these interviews, I observed three themes that bolster the results of my case study and content analysis:

- 1) The Clinton administration believed the power of speech was limited.

- 2) The changing linguistic and media landscapes of the 1990s influenced the administration's approach to presidential address.
- 3) The administration turned to polling and first-hand experience to inform their speech strategies.
- 4) Clinton and his speechwriters used intelligent and participatory speeches to persuade a disenchanted public.

In what follows, I explore these themes and provide examples extracted from the interviews to illuminate them. These themes indicate how Clinton and his speechwriters attempted to persuade a public critical of presidential speech.

1) For the Clinton administration, the power of speech was limited.

My interviews document that in the Clinton White House speeches were considered to have limited power. Hart notes that in the modern presidency, “public speech no longer attends to the processes of governance—it *is* governance.”³⁰⁹

Moreover, Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson suggest—so prominently that the phrase titled their work—that presidential speeches are “deeds done in words.”³¹⁰ These works argue that speech retains a great deal of power and that presidential words can and do supplant action. This assumption has undergirded research on presidential address for nearly thirty years. However, the Clinton speechwriters suggest that this position was not one assumed in their administration. Rather, speeches were viewed solely as a tool for communicating an action or a policy stance. The purpose of presidential address was not

³⁰⁹ Hart, *The Sound of Leadership*, 14.

³¹⁰ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

to deliver highfalutin oratory that substituted presidential leadership, but to relay components of the President's policy agenda. The Clinton administration very much opposed the idea that action and speeches were one and the same.

Speechwriter John Pollack observed that in the Clinton White House, speechwriting wasn't "just about high rhetoric. I think people sometimes have an idea that presidential speechwriting is about noble lines engraved in marble. The most minute fraction of presidential speeches are engraved in marble."³¹¹ While anyone well versed in presidential address would undoubtedly agree, this statement provides insight into the approach Clinton's speechwriters took to their craft: They considered writing a practical art, concerned more with immediate consequences than presidential legacy. Clinton's speechwriters wrote speeches to help the President legislate, not to enshrine his words in national history.

In Clinton's White House, speeches were one among many tools of leadership. Curiel explained that, while some presidents have expected rhetoric to take the place of action, Clinton did not. Curiel insisted, "you can't govern by bullfishin'. . . . It doesn't happen. Either you take a leadership role or you do not. And in my view the Clinton White House offered leadership in addition to just rhetoric. [Speeches are] a piece of a larger picture. There was a lot of front end work done by many parts of the administration. There was a lot of leg work to deliver on policy promises that occurred in speeches."³¹² In this administration, public address merely conveyed a firm policy

³¹¹ John Pollack, telephone interview with author, January 28, 2013.

³¹² Curiel, telephone interview with author.

position. That position was created and informed by a great deal of effort prior to the speech. Moreover, whatever message was disclosed in the speech required follow-through afterwards. A Clinton speech was simply the product of thought and a promise of action.

While Clinton's speechwriters undoubtedly valued the work that they did, they also recognized the limits of presidential speeches in making a presidency successful. Hurlburt reflected:

Speech is also capable of undermining a relationship with the public. It's one of the biggest tools as president and at the same time it can be frustratingly limited because even though you're the president, you're one voice in a marketplace of voices. And at any one time you can be effective on any one thing but as president, you have so many things you could be using the bully pulpit for. And so you usually can't sort decide to spend all of your time just changing the public's opinion about your speeches. In principle you can be extremely effective; in practice it's dangerous to overestimate how effective speech is.³¹³

President Clinton and his speechwriters created and maintained an atmosphere in which speech was valued, but was recognized for its limitations. Its intended use was to announce and describe a policy, not to stand alone as a form of action itself. He and his writers understood that, although the presidency may be the most famous office in the world, speech has to be used in moderation. Presidential speech is only a commodity to the extent that it is used sparingly; if the president speaks about everything, then he speaks about nothing. Moreover, Hurlburt ostensibly claims that, while mollifying the public's opinion about presidential speech was important, it was "not the administration's

³¹³ Hurlburt, telephone interview with author.

highest priority.”³¹⁴ It would have been nonsensical for Clinton and his speechwriters to consider mollifying the public with speech a high priority. They believed presidential speech had limited power. Convincing the public to hold Clinton’s speeches in high regard would not yield a particularly high return on such an investment.

2) **The 1990s’ linguistic and media landscapes influenced speech.**

My interviews also highlighted how much the cultural landscape of the 1990s affected the way Clinton and his writers appealed to a disillusioned public. Specifically, the devolving nobility of the English language engendered new expectations for political leaders to speak more colloquially. In addition, the news media experienced an unprecedented expansion into cable news during Clinton’s presidency. This significantly influenced how Clinton’s speechwriters composed speeches and the techniques they used to appease disheartened audiences.

The speechwriters noted that the 1990s saw a steady shift in the way the public wanted to be addressed by their president. Hurlburt recalled, “I think in a way the transition from [George] H.W. Bush to Bill Clinton marked an interesting moment in the democratization of American politics. You had this real contrast [in terms of] the extent to which we no longer wanted our politicians to seem more patrician than us. And we had to keep that in mind in our rhetoric.”³¹⁵ Hurlburt claims that this was a trend that began in the 1990s, but has continued to present day: “I think the needle has tilted even further away from the beauty of language than it had in the 1990s. I felt like the needle

³¹⁴ Hurlburt, telephone interview with author.

³¹⁵ Hurlburt, telephone interview with author.

moved over the eight years of his two terms and that we've moved further and further as a culture toward expecting our leaders to talk to us the way we talk to each other."³¹⁶ Clinton and his speechwriters took care, as Kusnet suggests, to communicate with the public in adherence to the "condition of the American language."³¹⁷ This shift has been addressed by political communication scholars who argue that the move is indeed characterized by a bridging gap between proletariat and aristocracy. Elvin Lim found that over 200 years and especially in the last 50 years, "presidential rhetoric has become more anti-intellectual, more abstract, more assertive, more democratic, and more conversational."³¹⁸ Clinton's speechwriters recognized this shift and at least to some degree embraced it while composing presidential addresses.

Another shift the speechwriters considered in their compositions was the rapidly changing media environment. Shesol recalled, "the media universe in which Bill Clinton operated in was pretty dramatically different from the one that Reagan operated in even though you're only talking about a distance of ten years or less. Things were changing that fast."³¹⁹ Shesol refers here to an exceptional boom of cable media outlets in the 1990s, with audiences increasingly turning to CNN, FOX, and MSNBC for coverage of presidential speeches instead of local network affiliates. This coverage assured that presidential speeches received more attention. While confident a speech would be

³¹⁶ Hurlburt, telephone interview with author.

³¹⁷ David Kusnet, telephone interview with author, January 24, 2013.

³¹⁸ Lim, "Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric."

³¹⁹ Jeff Sheshol, telephone interview with author, January 31, 2013.

reported on, the speechwriters still had to anticipate which sections of the address actually would be broadcasted. Because of this complication, the President and his writers were careful in crafting the messages Clinton delivered to the public. Hurlburt explains, “Most people, most of the time, don’t see a speech. They only see what’s reported about it. So I think a really important thing to think about is how a speech is constructed. You’re trying to figure out how you can push the message you want through the media to your intended audience.”³²⁰ As a result, Hurlburt observes, “A really big area where you would maybe have more changes than anything else was trying to create the paragraph that the media would pick up. Knowing that most people would read a speech, the intensity of trying to figure out and craft perfectly the one paragraph you knew the media would report was just an enormously intense activity. People would just go crazy rewriting.”³²¹ This recollection speaks to the care with which Clinton and his speechwriters crafted the precise language that the public would hear. Hurlburt’s comment confirms that the President and the writers used speeches as opportunities to communicate with the public in a strategic and calculated manner.

Because of the sheer increase in size, scope, and saturation of news media, the speechwriters lamented the expectation that presidents speak so frequently. This expectation, they assured, was not one created by the public but by the media. Shesol explained that when an issue affects the President, the media seeks testimony from

³²⁰ Hurlburt, telephone interview with author.

³²¹ Hurlburt, telephone interview with author.

sometimes less than relevant voices to comment or speculate. This, he suggests, is problematic:

When an issue is happening and you don't hear from the president, what you hear in that vacuum are a million other voices saying things that are not necessarily that helpful from the White House's perspective. So it becomes important for the president to have said something and something kind of new every day. And that pressure has been felt for a long time. Reagan too felt it to a certain extent but not nearly to the extent that Clinton did.³²²

This complication requires speechwriters constantly to produce new material. Moreover, it makes presidential speech potentially less consequential. It also renders presidential rhetoric less prestigious because speech must respond to issues that are sometimes frivolous or trivial. Shesol admits that the modern media cycle is, "like a rhetorical arms race in a way. It's very difficult for presidents to find a way of not just delivering commentary on everything all the time, but to stay focused on their message and their priorities."³²³

3) Polling and first-hand experience informed speech strategy.

My observations earlier—that Clinton and his speechwriters perceived speech to be limited and that Clinton's speech was influenced by the 1990s culture—indicated that the President and his writers addressed public opinion about presidential speech in a particular way. In order to correctly gauge exactly what that public opinion was, they relied on polls and first-hand experiences.

The speechwriters indicated that Clinton and his writing staff habitually worked to be abreast of public opinion about his speeches. Shesol recalls, "I think there was a

³²² Shesol, telephone interview with author.

³²³ Shesol, telephone interview with author.

sort of dialogue that was happening, [that] speeches need to be responsive [to the] public. And we were always aware of the audience and focused on the audience.”³²⁴ Kusnet notes this was a foremost concern for the President: “that was always on his mind—how the immediate audience and also the larger audience would respond and understand what he was saying.”³²⁵ Hurlbert indicates that gauging public opinion was a constant struggle. She recalls that depending on public opinion, a strategy could call for the President to either stay consistent or change his speech techniques. In the White House, Hurlbert conveys, “you’re always thinking about the public perception of our speeches and how we either want to fall into that public perception or not fall into it.”³²⁶

Knowing what the public’s opinion was, Shesol explained, was integral for determining how to write a speech. He recalls that speechwriters always took care to decide “what anecdotes, what data, what sort of personal history, what national history, what framework you need in order to make a speech as effective as possible. How are we going to recast this a little bit in a way that we can both satisfy this audience and deliver our argument?”³²⁷ The speechwriters indicated that that attempting to make an audience enjoy and appreciate a speech was never paramount to the speech’s argument. Rather, the writers would gauge public opinion to determine what attitude the audience had towards different language, persuasion techniques, and public address strategies.

³²⁴ Shesol, telephone interview with author.

³²⁵ Kusnet, telephone interview with author.

³²⁶ Hurlbert, telephone interview with author.

³²⁷ Shesol, telephone interview with author.

One way the administration sought public opinion about Clinton's speeches was through polls. Polls were used proactively and reactively. For example, Shesol explains that some polling was used to uncover how audiences responded to potential speech language: "We would from time to time use polls to help us understand how to more effectively frame an issue at the outset. You knew what it was you were trying to get done and you wanted to have as sophisticated a sense as you could, as accurate a sense as you could, of what arguments resonated and what arguments didn't."³²⁸ Additionally, the writers consulted polling to determine what attitudes the public had on past speeches. Pollack recalled that often the media would report on these polls to help direct their coverage. He noted that, "[the media] would report on what the people said they liked and didn't like, or what they thought about the speech and its goals or its purpose." Unfortunately, sometimes the media would distort the results of these polls. Kusnet observed that even though the media commonly criticized the length of Clinton's speeches, the public opinion polls indicated that length wasn't a factor if the length meant the speech was substantive. The writers concluded that despite its nuances, polling was a valuable asset when attempting to overcome the public's disregard for presidential speech.

In addition to polling, the writers utilized their first-hand experiences with family, friends, speech audiences, and even media and entertainment. Hurlburt explained that she had a sense of what the public wanted or didn't want from presidential speech because, "as a speechwriter, whenever you weren't writing you were supposed to be sort

³²⁸ Shesol, telephone interview with author.

of immersing yourself in what was going on around us, both at a pop culture level and at a higher cultural level.”³²⁹ This awareness prevented the writers from focusing too much on an inside the beltway mentality. It was a job requirement that informed the content and style of Clinton’s speeches. Hurlburt indicated specific ways in which she and the other writers would be exposed to this perspective:

You brought in the door a lot of awareness because you knew what you were reading and you knew what your neighbors were saying to you and what the Sunday shows said: making jokes about his speaking style or this or that. As a speechwriter, you most of the time got to go with him to hear what you had written or his rewrite of what you had written when it was delivered. So you could see how it was received and also follow what did and didn’t get picked up in the media.³³⁰

This exploration of public attitudes on a personal basis allowed the speechwriters to more precisely tap into the national consciousness and determine ways in which the administration could overcome the public’s disenchantment with presidential speech.

4) Clinton’s speeches were intelligent and participatory.

Clinton and his speechwriters composed public addresses with the perspective that speeches have limited power. They wrote these speeches during a period in which linguistic and media cultures were changing. They valued public opinion, and used polling and first-hand experience to gauge it. All of these observations lead to a final conclusion that explains how Clinton and his speechwriters attempted to use speech to persuade an audience that was disenchanted with speech: they wrote speeches that were intelligent and participatory.

³²⁹ Hurlburt, telephone interview with author.

³³⁰ Hurlburt, telephone interview with author.

Pollack recalled that Clinton and his speechwriters forged this strategy in response to the public's disdain for "scare politics." He contends, "[Clinton] treats people as if they are intelligent. He never goes after the messenger; he goes after the message. That's very rare in politics. I think that capacity to appeal to people's intelligence and their spirit of possibility is a much harder task than appealing to someone's fear or cynicism."³³¹ In this respect, it seems Clinton and his writers placed intelligence and fear in a dichotomy, assuming that they are opposites. Therefore, their strategy to appeal to the public was not to scare but to empower, and not to insult but to educate.

What Clinton and his writers considered "intelligent speech" did not employ an overly pedantic level of discourse. Rather, their strategy was to compose speech with cohesive, clear, and well-explained messages. Pollack asserted, "President Clinton was an especially effective explainer. He was able to boil down complicated issues in a way that people could understand. He could boil them down without dumbing them down and that's hard to do."³³² Kusnet echoes this sentiment, declaring that Clinton's speeches were not composed with the intent of being memorable. He explained, "Clinton's strength as a speaker isn't as an orator, although he can be a good orator when the situation demands. But his strength is as an explainer of things. He can take really complicated things and put them in plain English and explain to people what it means in

³³¹ Pollack, telephone interview with author.

³³² Pollack, telephone interview with author.

their own lives.”³³³ This suggests that the aim of Clinton’s rhetoric was to be expository. It was to demonstrate an immediate idea or a conflict to an immediate public, not to contribute to the great corpus of American oratory for generations to come—something that arguably might reinforce the public’s disdain for speech.

The speechwriters alleged that Clinton’s rhetoric was a kind for which the public hungered. Kusnet remarked of the public, “They want the kind of substance Clinton offers.” He explains that, indeed, “there is an appetite for elevated language. . . . That’s what I think, in different ways, Ronald Reagan to the right of center and Barack Obama to the left of center have been so good at.”³³⁴ However, Kusnet warns that a key problem with this “high-flying rhetoric” is that presidents overuse it. “Elevated language” can only constitute a small amount of presidential speech before the audience becomes disenchanted. Kusnet states that the public gets frustrated with presidential speech when presidents attempt to “use it all the time for everything. This kind of speech, I think, if you’re doing that you don’t want to go on for as great of a length as Clinton goes on talking about policy. I think it’s better to do it briefly.”³³⁵

In addition to crafting “intelligent” language, Clinton and his speechwriters appealed to the public by making his speeches participatory. Because Clinton preferred to deliver speeches with careful, extended explanations, they were often quite long. Pollack concedes, “If you’re trying to explain something that’s complicated in five

³³³ Kusnet, telephone interview with author.

³³⁴ Kusnet, telephone interview with author.

³³⁵ Kusnet, telephone interview with author.

minutes, you're limited. Part of the reason he took that long is because he really wanted to discuss something in depth."³³⁶ As explained earlier, this desire was cultivated in part by understanding what the public liked and disliked about presidential speech. Recalling an interview with White House press secretary Mike McCurry, Schlesinger reported in his book that the administration had polls done that "showed that people liked substance, even if it took time."³³⁷

Another consideration that was identified earlier—the changing cultures of the American language and media—directly impacted the rationale for Clinton's strategy. Pollack recalled the media's culpability in anti-intellectualizing the public. He lamented, "Listeners are impatient today and aren't always willing to engage for an extended period. And part of the reason is because of television and media. But you need to be a great communicator to hold someone's attention for that long when it's not a conversation but a speech."³³⁸ Pollack intimated that this new culture created real implications that Clinton's speechwriters had to take into account.

In order to reconcile the public's devolving linguistic preferences with a commitment to intelligent speech, Clinton favored participatory speeches. According to Pollack this technique included "rhetorical questions, humor, applause lines, anything that gave the audience a chance to engage."³³⁹ By asking the audience to engage in the

³³⁶ Pollack, telephone interview with author.

³³⁷ Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts*, 438.

³³⁸ Pollack, telephone interview with author.

³³⁹ Pollack, telephone interview with author.

speech, Clinton “mostly gave them a chance to engage their minds.”³⁴⁰ This strategy effectively turned speech occasions into opportunities for participatory democracy in which the audience itself took part in writing the speech. The speechwriters reported that the audiences appreciated this technique and responded well to it. Clinton’s speeches, the writers argued, were “fresh, and [audiences] liked that.”

The interviews I conducted with former Clinton speechwriters yielded four conclusions: 1) Clinton and his speechwriters considered speech a limited tool of leadership; 2) the changes to language and media during Clinton’s terms influenced his approach to public speech; 3) Clinton and his writers considered polling and first-hand experiences when deciding how to placate disillusioned audiences; and 4) they responded to these audiences with intelligent and participatory speeches. All of these findings contribute to a broader conclusion: Clinton and his writers appealed to the public with a very practical approach. They recognized that, while speech is important, it can only be responsible for so much. They believed that, while culture changes presidential expectations, meeting those expectations isn’t always the right choice. They trusted that, while public opinion matters, both scientific and personal perspectives are equally valuable. Finally, they maintained that, while a president needs to appeal to the public, he can find ways to do so that do not compromise the nation’s democratic health. These conclusions will be considered more thoroughly in conjunction with the other studies from this chapter.

³⁴⁰ Pollack, telephone interview with author.

CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the rhetorical dimensions of Clinton's presidency by reporting the results of three studies. The first, a case study of Clinton's July 1995 Affirmative Action reform speech, concluded that Clinton and his speechwriters appealed to a disillusioned public by focusing on the president's legislative duties. Clinton included references to past presidents to illustrate how his office can achieve great social change like his predecessors have; his speech was framed as a particular response to a particular problem; and, the address minimized political impacts in favor of widespread ones. The second study, a content analysis of thirty-six weekly presidential addresses, found a notable trend in the evolution of Clinton's poetic language use, one that may have been influenced by the organization of speechwriting in the administration. While poetic language measures—as well as low approval measures—constituted the beginning of Clinton's administration, these measures leveled out by the end of Clinton's eight years in office. The third study, a collection of interviews with Clinton's speechwriters, suggested that the President and his writers approached public address with practical and low expectations for what speech can accomplish. Clinton placed great emphasis on using speech as a democratic, participatory, and intelligent exercise.

These conclusions will be further addressed in Chapter Five. However, it is worthwhile to note that a common finding among these three studies is Clinton's approach to adjustment. It seems that he not only adjusted his personal approach to the office, but adjusted the office's approach to the public as well. In the following chapter, I

consider the theory that might be developed in answer to this dissertation's question.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

For over two hundred years, presidential address has shaped our national identity. The words presidents say define American history. These words carved out spaces for citizenship and advocated for civil liberties. They helped us celebrate achievements and mourn loss. They told us who we are, where we should go, what we should do. These powerful words have contributed to significant changes, the effects of which we experience—sometimes unwittingly—every day.

But in recent history, the words presidents say seem to have lost their power—a power that resides not in the words themselves, but in the willingness of the American people to give them their power. The people, it seems, are no longer as eager to do so. Over the last thirty years, the reverence with which the public talks about presidential speech has dissipated. Chapter One presented a variety of evidence to support this claim: anecdotal evidence in the form of personal experiences; excerpts from newspaper stories; poll questions; and data showing a decrease in public ratings of presidential speeches from 1980 to 2000. In Chapter One I also identified five common frustrations the public has with presidential speech: that it is arbitrary, exclusive, personal, stylistic, or trivial. Moreover, my content analysis results indicated that the poetic language use of these presidents decreased: Reagan at 21%, Bush at 16%, and Clinton at 5%. It seems that a public who once welcomed and valued presidential oratory has found reason to be disenchanted with and apathetic to words they find empty and meaningless. And to scholars of American rhetoric, a public wary of presidential words is cause for inquiry.

So, who is to blame? Surely, our presidents are not solely at fault. A great many factors have contributed to the public's frustration with presidential words. Communication and political science have studied these factors for the better part of a century. The ever-expanding influence of media—from radio to television to the Internet—contributed to shortened attention spans and a decreasing fluency in the English language. National events like Watergate and the Vietnam War made the public suspicious of presidential utterance. An increasingly overwhelming access to information—both public and private—has forced a citizenry preoccupied with their busy lives to be less dedicated to and interested in politics. These factors and more influence what the public thinks about presidential rhetoric. And, indeed, what they think has rendered presidential words less and less consequential.

The presidency is seemingly obligated to respond to public criticism and cultural dynamics. As a result, the presidential institution has evolved a great deal in a short time. Because of the near-constant presence of news media, the presidency is always in the national spotlight. Because of the increasingly important role America plays in an international theatre, the president has become a world leader. Because of the increasing focus of time and effort on presidential campaigns, the presidential term for governing is effectively only two-and-a-half years. These influences challenge the scope, the responsibilities, and the overall nature of the office. And, presidents have responded accordingly.

I contend that the public's increasing disenchantment with presidential rhetoric is one such influence, and that presidential rhetoric has changed as a result. But, changed

how? Changed in what ways? Changed using what techniques or strategies? Changed into what? In an effort to address these considerations, my dissertation asks: How have presidents and their speechwriters responded to the public's growing distaste with presidential speech?

To answer this question, I investigated three presidencies. Chapters Two, Three, and Four of this dissertation concerned, respectively, the presidencies of Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and William J. Clinton. In each chapter, I employed a rhetorical analysis of one presidential speech as case study, a content analysis of a collection of weekly presidential radio addresses, and interviews with former presidential speechwriters. The case studies and content analyses served as investigations into what *proactive* and *reactive* strategies these presidents and their speechwriters used to address the public's growing disillusion with presidential speech. The interviews helped clarify and substantiate my findings, ensuring my conclusions were as accurate as possible.

In this chapter, I unpack the results of Chapters Two, Three, and Four, and advance an answer to my dissertation question: how do presidents and their speechwriters appeal to a public disenchanted with presidential speech? First, I present my answer in the form of a proposed rhetorical theory: a theory of executive rhetoric. I draw examples from my research to illustrate how Reagan, Bush, and Clinton employed executive rhetoric to combat the public's growing disaffection with speech. I then trace how the development of this theory is informed by existing rhetorical theories, and how my proposed theory expands those constructs to contribute to the study of presidential

rhetoric and political communication. I conclude this chapter with implications and suggestions for future research.

EXECUTIVE RHETORIC: A PROPOSED THEORY

I argue that in order to address the public's disenchantment with presidential speech, presidents have increasingly turned to what might be termed "executive rhetoric." In relation to the presidency, this rhetoric places an emphasis on the presidential *office* rather than the *individual* occupying that office. It also shifts the notion of rhetorical accountability from the person to the office. In doing so, this rhetoric attempts to decrease expectations of the individual in office and expand the scope of the office itself. Executive rhetoric differs from presidential rhetoric because the latter is the product of an individual, while the former is the product of an institution. I contend that the American public is less likely to hold an institution in contempt than an individual. As a result, executive rhetoric might be considered more legitimate and consequential than rhetoric from an individual.

This proposed theory emerges from an examination of my research data. Each presidency examined and each study conducted revealed nuance and distinctive features. However, when compared, one common strategy surfaced. For all three presidents, speech placed emphasis on the presidential institution rather than on the office-holder. This technique, I argue, was the main strategy these presidents and their speechwriters used to address the public's disenchantment with presidential speech. Examples that support this claim will be provided momentarily.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that such a strategy is a new phenomenon. Presidents have long relied on the institution itself to validate their rhetoric, and communication scholarship is replete with instances explaining how they have done so. However, modern presidents have used this strategy to such an extent that it is no longer simply a technique or strategy; arguably, it can be systematized into a comprehensive, generic theory of rhetoric.

This theory can be employed in forums other than the presidency and politics, and later in this chapter I shall identify possible forums as sites of future research. But first, it is necessary to outline the central precepts of this theory. I present these precepts alongside some key findings from my research to illustrate how they operated in specific situations. Combined, these precepts help build what I deem a theory of “executive rhetoric.”

Precepts of Executive Rhetoric

In order to clarify what constitutes executive rhetoric, I identify four precepts that operationalize the theory. It is important to note that by using the term “executive,” I do not intend to circumscribe this rhetorical genre to only the executive branch of government. Later in this chapter, I identify institutions other than government in which executive rhetoric might be employed. But for now, it is helpful to consider how the executive branch operates in relation to the other branches of American government, as one component of a larger institution. It competes—via checks and balances—with the other components (the legislature and judiciary) for power, authority, and legitimacy. I

argue that executive rhetoric can be employed by one component of an institution in order to expand or increase the scope of its power, authority, and legitimacy.

The four precepts below are the central conceptual components of a theory of executive rhetoric. Examples from my research substantiate the development of each.

1) Executive rhetoric favors pragmatism over ritual.

Scholars have posited that the modern American president serves in two distinct capacities: as both a head of state and a head of government.³⁴¹ In these dual roles, a president is simultaneously a symbolic leader and a governmental leader—a distinction similar to that between a king and a prime minister. While one attends to the office’s constitutional duties, the other serves as a national figurehead, leader, healer, and embodiment of the American creed. Naturally, the language used to convey these roles is similarly distinct. Traditionally, the president’s symbolic leadership is reflected with abstract, symbolic, value-laden prose. In contrast, governmental language is wrought with policy descriptions, legalese, statistics and specific detail. In Aristotelian terms, the symbolic typically relies on *pathos* and epideictic language, and the pragmatic relies on *logos* and deliberative language. I contend that the distinction between presidential rhetoric and executive rhetoric lies in the language presidents use to reflect each role. Presidential rhetoric often reflects both roles—the governmental *and* symbolic. However, I conceive of executive rhetoric as language that strongly—almost entirely—emphasizes the pragmatic, governmental role over the symbolic or ritualistic. By

³⁴¹ Michael Nelson, “Speeches, Speechwriters, and the American Presidency,” in (Michael Nelson and Russell L. Riley, eds.) *The President’s Words: Speeches and Speechwriting in the Modern White House* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 1-26.

emphasizing his pragmatic role over his symbolic role, a president draws more attention to his office than himself. He can employ executive rhetoric to emphasize immediate changes unique to his administration. Presidential rhetoric, in contrast, would emphasize the commonplace rituals in which he and all other presidents engage.

My research provides evidence of this precept, thus documenting presidents employing executive rhetoric. Each president emphasized his pragmatic role over his ritualistic role in order to appeal to a public disenchanted with speech that is abstract, impractical, or non-specific. Reagan, Bush, and Clinton produced speech with practical, specific, and tangible language by, generally, focusing on the power of their office rather than their temporary positions as office-holders, and by, specifically, emphasizing pragmatics over ritual.

In my content analysis of Reagan's weekly radio addresses, I found that measures for poetic language use were lower during presidential campaign seasons. American presidential campaigns have increasingly focused on policy platforms—agendas that the candidates would like to enact should they be elected. Elections are highly ritualistic and as such tend to use more symbolic, poetic language. However, the results of my content analysis indicate that Reagan used less poetic language during his campaigns than during periods of governance. This would suggest that Reagan believed the public wanted to hear more substantive, policy-focused rhetoric than symbolic, poetic rhetoric during this period of heightened ritual. Although my data does not suggest causation, I do point out the correlation between Reagan's low poetic language use during his campaign and his re-election. If my data were used to infer a relationship between the public's language

preferences, Reagan's language use, and the results of the election, it would indicate that the public responded favorably to Reagan's use of executive rhetoric during his re-election campaign.

Moreover, my interviews with Reagan's speechwriters suggest that Reagan valued policy more than eloquence when writing speeches. Reagan avoided "more florid oratorical flourishes" in favor of "the point of view of policy objectives."³⁴² I contend that this distinction mirrors that between ritual and pragmatics, between presidential and executive rhetoric. The responses given by the President's writers echoed that when faced with a choice between pragmatic and ritualistic language, Reagan preferred to employ rhetoric that appealed to his role as a governmental leader than as a symbolic leader.

My interviews with Bush's speechwriters yielded two conclusions also reflective of this precept. The first is that, similar to Reagan, Bush was quite averse to using bombastic rhetoric. He believed that engaging in policy discussions was a better use of time than delivering a scripted narrative about a policy. The second is that Bush believed speeches that seek to entertain an audience devalue the presidency. The President believed "the American people did not elect a stand-up comic" and opted to avoid strategies that other politicians used—strategies like Clinton's saxophone performance on a late-night talk show.³⁴³ Bush insisted that presidents ought to focus more on pragmatic

³⁴² Khachigian, telephone interview with author.

³⁴³ Demarest, telephone interview with author.

policy discussions than on fulfilling any ritualistic expectations to be a symbolic leader of the people.

Another example comes from the results of my case analysis of Clinton's Affirmative Action speech. I found that, when appealing to a public increasingly disenchanted with speech, the President used language that was less political and more realistic. Clinton's rhetoric avoided using grandiose prose and overwrought metaphors or frames that are repeatedly used to honor party loyalty. Instead, the President preferred to present issues in a simple and dignified manner. The speech stated subjective truths about the country's present situation instead of using abstract and emotive language to rally supporters. This approach, I suspect, was a fresh and pragmatic approach to political talk, and provided real answers in place of worn out, ritualistic party allegiance. By using executive rhetoric, and by focusing on his official presidential duty rather than his personal party membership, Clinton appealed to a public frustrated with empty, inconsequential presidential rhetoric.

Additionally, my interviews with Clinton's writers illustrate how Clinton used intelligent and participatory speeches to engage audiences. His speeches presented nuanced policy information in a clear and practical way. The President made speeches that encouraged deliberative democracy by imploring his audiences to participate in a cooperative speech act. He used speeches to educate the public about policy, not to elicit public veneration of his leadership position. These strategies reflect a concern not with a presidential adherence to speech as ritual, but speech as expository. Clinton's rhetoric challenged the public to think more intently about complicated topics. It did not, in

contrast, reference or emphasize the distinction or glory of his personal legacy. He used executive rhetoric to focus on the presidential office's duty to educate the public rather than his personal agenda to create a positive reputation for himself. This strategy, I argue, appeals to audiences frustrated with presidential speech's modern tendency to be empty and lacking intellectual substance.

To summarize, these examples illustrate how Reagan, Bush, and Clinton appealed to the first precept of executive rhetoric: an appeal to pragmatics over ritual. All three presidents used speech to emphasize the practical and pragmatic responsibilities of their office, not to serve as a ceremonial occasion through which the president could seek adoration and reverence from the public. To appeal to a public disenchanted with speech that is abstract, impractical, and non-specific, these presidents employed executive rhetoric to emphasize pragmatism over ritual. In turn, their speeches were framed as having tangible, practical, and specific implications.

2) Executive rhetoric expands the scope of authority.

The second precept of executive rhetoric addresses a president's institutional desire to expand the office's constitutionally enumerated powers. Article II, Sections 2 and 3 of the Constitution list specific presidential powers and duties: military command, cabinet secretary appointments, pardons, treaties and other appointments with Senate consent, state of the union, adjourning Congress, receiving foreign dignitaries, officer commissions, and execution of the law. A final, recently contentious responsibility, is

making recommendations to Congress.³⁴⁴ While this clause indicates that the president can take an indirect role in shaping legislation, many constitutional scholars have argued that the 20th century presidency has eclipsed the Congress in legislative power, and some challenge the constitutional fidelity of this development.

There is no practical reason for a president to use rhetoric in order to persuade the public that his actions are justified if those actions are constitutionally within the boundaries of the office. The pleas presidents have typically made in regard to constitutionally proscribed actions are more often to justify their chosen course of action, not the legality of the action itself. Modern presidents, however, increasingly use rhetoric to expand the constitutional boundaries of their oversight and leadership. The primary boundary modern presidents have pushed is in relation to the “making recommendations to Congress” clause of the Constitution. And this boundary is being pushed into the realm of authority traditionally occupied by the Congress: that of advocating the merits of legislation. When a president discursively expands the scope of his rhetoric to include legislative affairs, he invites the public to consider whether his new authority is legitimate. I argue that presidents use presidential rhetoric to speak about matters that do not challenge the constitutionally defined scope of the office. In contrast, presidents use executive rhetoric when discussing matters over which they have no constitutional authority.

A central concern that executive rhetoric addresses is the president’s ever-increasing role in advocating for legislation—something that has more constitutional

³⁴⁴ Articles 2 and 3, Section II, The Constitution of the United States of America.

fidelity to the legislative branch. My research illustrates how presidents used this precept of executive rhetoric to appeal to a public disenchanted with speech that is redundant. I contend that the public is increasingly frustrated with speech that is used to persuade the public to support presidential actions that require no public support to be legitimate. This kind of speech—presidential rhetoric—seeks only public approval for a course of action. Executive rhetoric, rather, seeks the public’s approval of a president’s attempts to be a legislator-in-chief as well as a commander-in-chief.

In my case study of Reagan’s tax legislation speech, I discovered that executive rhetoric increasingly framed the President’s role in creating, influencing, and implementing legislation central to the success of that legislation. It framed the relationship between the presidency and the Congress as one in which the Congress seemingly needed to answer to the president and account for any disagreement between the two institutions. The speech communicated a sense that the presidency wields a great deal of influence over legislation and has a legitimate voice in any legislative decisions. By using executive rhetoric to frame the President’s role in Congressional actions, the speech discursively at least expanded the constitutionally proscribed presidential office to include oversight on domestic legislation.

In my interviews with Bush’s speechwriters, I found that of all presidential addresses foreign policy speech was the genre most commonly replete with poetic language. The writers recalled that while Bush usually cared very little about the rhetoric used in domestic policy speech, the President was quite involved in creating the discourse used to discuss foreign policy. The president has constitutionally approved oversight on

foreign policy. Thus, my theory would confirm that Bush did not need to use executive rhetoric to discuss foreign policy because that authority already was constitutionally granted. When composing foreign policy speeches, Bush did not have to rely on the scope-expanding characteristic of *executive* rhetoric. Instead, he had the freedom to employ language that is more characteristic of *presidential* rhetoric. This language, by nature, is more poetic, abstract, and eloquent. Bush did, however, employ executive rhetoric in his domestic policy address. In it he claimed that, because Congress failed to pass two essential pieces of legislation, the body yielded its legitimacy and could no longer be trusted to protect the best interests of Americans. Conveniently, Bush's domestic agenda outlined three ways Congressional responsibilities could otherwise be met. The President used executive rhetoric to establish that his domestic agenda could supplant Congress' authority. Bush discursively expanded his scope of constitutional power to usurp the responsibilities typically vouchsafed to Congress.

My case study of Clinton's Affirmative Action speech uncovered how the executive rhetoric employed increasingly framed the speech as a report of the President's study on federal Affirmative Action programs. The speech is careful to explain that Clinton asked for this investigation to take place, and that the resulting report is the basis of Clinton's proposed Affirmative Action policy. As this policy is one that can only be implemented by Congress, and only the judiciary can affirm the program's constitutionality, the legitimacy of Clinton's authority on the matter is limited. This speech employs executive rhetoric to expand the scope of the President's authority by suggesting that his executive review of Affirmative Action is sufficient evidence enough

to warrant the policy's implementation. It attempts to suggest to the audience that legislative programs like affirmative action can be considered, deliberated, and governed under the auspices of the presidency. The speech hardly mentions Congressional action on the matter and instead suggests that public approval of Clinton's measure is reason enough for the policy to be law. By using executive rhetoric to expand the authority vested in the presidency, Clinton supplants Congress' sole purpose of deliberating legislation with his own office's purpose.

These examples illustrate how Reagan, Bush, and Clinton employed executive rhetoric to increase the constitutional authority of the office. Each rhetorically attempted to expand the scope of presidential oversight in order to placate audiences frustrated with the tendency of presidential rhetoric to gain public approval for presidential actions that need no such approval to be enacted. Executive rhetoric, rather, seeks public approval to help make the expansion of presidential oversight more legitimate. In doing so, executive rhetoric features the office of the presidency and its constitutional duties and obligations rather than each occupant's personal agenda.

3) Executive rhetoric is more responsive than proactive.

A third constituent of executive rhetoric is its tendency to be more response-driven. With respect to the presidency, this characteristic is largely the result of the office's expanding scope and its modern authority over legislation. Aristotle tells us that the rhetoric appropriate to legislation is deliberative rhetoric, the goal of which is

expediency.³⁴⁵ Expediency is the advocacy of one course of action over another. And, the various courses of action that are deliberated are initially presented in response to an exigence: “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be.”³⁴⁶ Executive rhetoric, I contend, is always employed in response to an exigence; it is reactive, not proactive. Presidential rhetoric—in contrast—would enable the president to be more proactive with speech. It can seek to be an exigence in and of itself.

My research illustrates how all three presidents used this precept of executive rhetoric to appeal to a public disenchanted with speech that is arbitrary or preemptive. The public seems to be frustrated with presidential speech that addresses no particular problem, that is performed on the whims of the president. Executive rhetoric can be employed to frame a speech as if it were a response to an exigence. Such language compels an audience to consider a speech more consequential and purposed. The examples presented below document such instances.

In my case study of Reagan’s tax legislation speech, the language exhibited a clear reference to the urgency of the exigence at hand. The rhetoric emphasized the nearing date of the Congressional vote and the gravity of the vote’s implications. It communicated that, although the speech scheduled for that evening was originally to discuss Social Security, the impending vote was so consequential that it warranted a completely new speech. The evolution of the drafts document that in the beginning

³⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*.

³⁴⁶ Lloyd Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 5.

stages of the speech's creation the urgency of the exigence was quite low compared to the final draft. By examining the changes made from one draft to the next, I observed a distinct change in the language that was used to describe the exigence and the urgency of it. Reagan and his speechwriters strategically framed the speech using language that made the strongest case possible for the urgency of the situation. That urgency, in turn, made Reagan's "response" appear all the more important, relevant, and necessary. The President's speech employed executive rhetoric in order to frame its message as an integral response from the White House, not an inconsequential musing on a topic about which Reagan felt the whim to speak.

Additionally, my analysis of Bush's domestic agenda address showed that the drafts increasingly identified Congress' inaction on legislation as the speech's impetus. My interviews with Bush's speechwriters and Bush's own recollections of this speech indicate that the occasion for this address was, at least in part, motivated by the impending election and the anxiety that Democrats would control the domestic agenda debate during the campaign. From one draft to the next, however, the address becomes noticeably more response-driven: it frames the speech as a response to Congress' failure to pass transportation and public safety legislation. This failure becomes a convenient occasion for Bush to advance his own domestic agenda. The President employs executive rhetoric to frame the speech as a response necessitated by the White House in response to another branch's inaction. In the absence of this rhetoric, I contend, the public might likely be disenchanted by the President's speech, viewing it as a political maneuver taken by an incumbent to protect his chances at re-election. By framing the

speech as a response to Congress, Bush may have prevented this accusation by appealing to the audience's preference for presidential address that is purposeful and important.

Similarly, the case study of Clinton illustrates how his Affirmative Action speech was increasingly framed as a response to a recent judicial decision. My research on the timeline of the speech's creation reveals that Clinton seemingly voiced an interest in speaking about Affirmative Action prior to learning the Supreme Court's decision. Because of the public's distaste with speech that seems to be arbitrary or capricious, Clinton may have framed his speech as a response to the Court's decision, offering an outline of what steps now ought to be taken. By using executive rhetoric, the President featured the speech as an exchange between the White House and the judiciary, rather than an opportune moment for Clinton to discuss a policy he valued.

The previous examples document the ways in which Reagan, Bush, and Clinton constructed their speeches as timely and appropriate rhetorical responses to specific exigencies. This responsive approach, it could be argued, quells the public's anxiety about the tendency of presidential speech to be arbitrary, mercurial diatribes on any topic of a president's choosing. This is because executive rhetoric is a calculated, purposed response to an exigence, one that necessitates commentary by the president. By using executive rhetoric, a president is better equipped to persuade an audience that any given speech is relevant and essential.

4) Executive rhetoric values expediency over legacy.

A president's individual history influences his presidency in a number of ways. Scholars have documented how childhood events impact presidential leadership styles,

some even going so far as to predict the styles of future presidents based on adolescent experiences.³⁴⁷ Among other things, a president's perspective on rhetoric is influenced by his past. Much of what a president says will be influenced by his unique perspective and persona; and, much of what a president says will influence the public's perspective on that persona. This persona will—in part—constitute that leader's presidential legacy. Presidents use a number of discursive strategies to create their legacy: they tell personal narratives; they use language that they believe will make their speeches relevant and memorable in years to come; they weave themselves into the fabric of history so that their importance is inextricable. This kind of language is appropriate and even expected in presidential rhetoric. In contrast, executive rhetoric is employed to represent the perspective of the office more so than the individual office-holder. Executive rhetoric pertains only to the present and near future. The presidential steps taken in this temporal context define the office's legacy—what the institution accomplished. Presidential rhetoric pertains to a president's distant past or distant future and employs language intended to define a single office-holder's legacy.

My three studies illustrate how presidents used this precept of executive rhetoric to appeal to a public disenchanted with speech that presidents use for personal rather than national reasons. Presidential rhetoric is intended to enhance a president's reputation, while executive rhetoric is intended to enhance the nation's well-being.

³⁴⁷ James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House* (New York: Pearson, 2008).

In my analysis of Reagan’s tax legislation speech, I found that the drafts increasingly used colloquial language in place of more formal prose. This language included idioms like “play Russian roulette” and “gain the upper hand” in place of more generic language like “take chances” and “succeed.”³⁴⁸ A beloved cliché among political speechwriters is that pop culture has no shelf life. This indicates the tendency of speeches that use time- and content-dependent references to be left out of the history books. When presidents and their speechwriters compose an address that they hope will span generations, they use lofty, ethereal, and grand language. That prose is strategically ambiguous, capable of resonating with different people, in different times, and in relation to different situations. The meanings of the phrases Reagan used here are intelligible only in certain periods of time, by certain people, and in a certain topical context. As such, they are used to induce a particular response in a particular people at a particular time. By using these phrases, Reagan—at least to some extent—conceded this speech’s place among those that would likely define his rhetorical legacy.

Executive rhetoric favors immediate and expedient results over long-term implications. Reagan used language designed to elicit a certain reaction from his audience in relation to a present circumstance, not language designed to contribute to his long-lasting rhetorical legacy. I argue that this language was chosen because it was the most affective iteration of a thought—the purpose of which was to elicit an expedient response to an exigence. Presidential rhetoric, in contrast, may be used to help define an individual president’s legacy. The language comprising such rhetoric often seeks to

³⁴⁸ Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 2; Ronald Reagan Library, Draft Three, 10.

remain intelligible and relevant over time. Had Reagan sought to use this speech as a contribution to his rhetorical legacy, I contend that the language would have used less colloquialisms and idioms in place of more formal, grandiose prose.

In a similar way, Bush's domestic agenda speech increasingly featured a persona of Bush that emphasized his presidency instead of his past. The language increasingly referenced his accomplishments and history as President, and often deleted references to his upbringing. It focused on personal characteristics that were relevant to his role as commander-in-chief, not anecdotes merely for the sake of a good narrative. From my interviews with Bush's speechwriters, I learned that this disposition was a well-known and commonly-used strategy. They noted that all of the President's writers were aware of the public's desire to hear a speech not from George H. W. Bush, but "a speech from the President."³⁴⁹ These observations reveal that Bush and his writers were aware of the public's distaste for personal narrative and their preference for immediate, consequential rhetoric. By employing executive rhetoric, one might argue that Bush and his writers sought to emphasize his present accomplishments as President, and minimize talk of his personal past. This strategy communicates to the audience that Bush is more concerned with his institutional role and obligations to political expediency than with creating an image that will imbue his legacy.

Finally, my interviews with Clinton's speechwriters document that the unique climate of the 1990s influenced their strategies for crafting speeches that addressed issues

³⁴⁹ Davis, telephone interview with author.

in a way that resonated with audiences. Clinton employed executive rhetoric in two respects: First, the public of that decade voiced a preference for more informal language. Hurlburt explained that sometime during the transition between Bush and Clinton, the public voiced that they “no longer wanted our politicians to seem more patrician than us.”³⁵⁰ In order to maintain legitimacy and the ability to influence change, Clinton and his speechwriters had to communicate with the public with an adherence to the present “condition of the American language.”³⁵¹ By doing so, Clinton conceded many chances for speeches that would define his rhetorical legacy. Instead, these speeches used language that the immediate audience would find compelling.

Second, the news media of that decade demanded speeches that constantly provided them with broadcast material. The President and his writers worked to craft Clinton’s language in a way that met the public’s and media’s expectations without compromising his presidential integrity. Hurlburt recalls that Clinton’s writers would spend most of their time working on the section of a speech that they anticipated the media would broadcast. Instead of concentrating their energy on making the entire speech memorable, they honed one paragraph—the paragraph that they believed would exert the most rhetorical influence. In doing so, Clinton displayed a desire to use speech to meet immediate demands for political expedience with little regard to how his rhetorical legacy might be restricted.

³⁵⁰ Hurlburt, telephone interview with author.

³⁵¹ Kusnet, telephone interview with author.

The foregoing examples underscore instances in which Reagan, Bush, and Clinton limited the personal narrative in their speeches. By doing so, these presidents may have combated the public's frustration with presidential rhetoric and its tendency to rely too heavily on an individual president's personal history to define presidential leadership. The executive rhetoric employed in these examples emphasized the presidential institution, not the presidential office-holders. By using this rhetoric, the presidents framed their speeches as tools of political expediency rather than strategies for creating a celebrated legacy.

To summarize, this section outlined the four precepts of what I have coined "executive rhetoric." Each precept is informed by the results of my dissertation. Combined, they begin to formulate a theory of executive rhetoric that I believe was used by Reagan, Bush, and Clinton to combat the public's increasing disenchantment with presidential speech. The public, I have argued, is frustrated with presidential rhetoric because it is largely symbolic and inconsequential. By emphasizing the presidential office instead of the office-holder, presidents can expand the scope of their rhetoric. This expansion will, in turn, widen the president's realm of authority outside those presidential duties that are explicitly defined in the Constitution. Executive rhetoric, however, is not only applicable to the presidency. In my discussion of future research, I propose potential arenas in which executive rhetoric might be employed. My conception of this theory anticipates that, in any situation in which executive rhetoric is employed, one or more of the four precepts outlined here will likely be illustrated.

CONTRIBUTION TO RHETORICAL THEORY

The results of my dissertation informed the four precepts outlined above. Those precepts, in turn, comprise what I call a theory of executive rhetoric. This theory takes on added significance when used to assess prior scholarship. Below I address three areas of study that are informed by a theory of executive rhetoric. These areas, while thoughtfully developed in the literature, are enriched by a theory of executive rhetoric. They are: the rhetorical presidency, the unitary executive, and the bully pulpit.

The Rhetorical Presidency

Public address has become increasingly central to the presidency over the last century. While rhetoricians have concentrated their research on the functions of presidential rhetoric, political science scholars have opined over the troublesome nature of presidential speech in light of the office's constitutional design. This argument was first presented by Ceasar, Thurow, Tulis, and Bessette who noted that the Founding Fathers designed the Constitution in a way that would prevent the executive branch from becoming "overwrought by constant appeals to national rabble."³⁵² Tulis extended this argument claiming that serious challenges to democracy arise when presidents deliver "inspirational" rhetoric more frequently than "policy stand rhetoric."³⁵³

My dissertation contributes in two ways to this literature. First, my research suggests the public is indeed frustrated with "inspirational" presidential rhetoric and that—at least in the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations—presidents seem to be

³⁵² Ceasar, Thurow, Tulis, and Bessette, "The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency," 159.

³⁵³ Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 138.

employing a sophisticated rhetorical genre to combat the public's frustration. Thus, it would seem that the modern citizenry places more value on policy rhetoric than inspirational rhetoric; what is noteworthy about my research is that it shows how presidents now feel compelled to meet that preference. This observation might ease the anxiety of Tulis and his contemporaries.

My dissertation also indicates that the primary way presidents combat the public's disenchantment with presidential speech is through the use of executive rhetoric. Executive rhetoric shifts the notions of rhetorical accountability from a presidential office-holder to the presidential office itself. The presidency—as constitutionally designed—maintains little power. Part of the public's disenchantment with presidential speech is that it is inconsequential because of the office's limited scope of power. In order to combat the public's disenchantment with presidential speech, presidents can employ executive rhetoric to expand, at least discursively, the scope of presidential oversight. By using rhetoric to suggest the president has authority in a particular arena, a president's power and his rhetoric may become more legitimate. This strategy challenges the traditionally circumscribed area of presidential authority, expanding presidential oversight primarily into the legislature and perhaps even into the judiciary. If true, this expansion undoubtedly will make those scholars concerned about the presidency's constitutional fidelity more anxious about the use of public speech in the modern presidency.

The Unitary Executive

In 2010, Vanessa Beasley addressed a dichotomy between the rhetorical presidency and the unitary executive—a term that describes the increasing scope of presidential power.³⁵⁴ Presidents attempt to persuade the public, Beasley argues, in order to create support for their policy agendas. She contends that, recently, persuasion has become less important to presidents because they can instead leverage the expanding powers of the presidency to justify their actions. Why take pains to persuade the public, Beasley proposes, when this new kind of presidency—this “unitary executive”—already endows the presidency with the very power that public approval would yield?

Beasley’s argument, while compelling, seems to consider the expansion of presidential power only in relation to foreign policy. As an example she uses George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq, arguing that Bush didn’t seek to persuade the public of his rationale for invasion because he did not have to: the expanding powers of the presidency were the only justification Bush needed. Yet, the area in which presidential power is most unquestionably wielded is foreign policy. The president is constitutionally responsible for military command and relationships with foreign dignitaries. So, while presidents are less reliant on speech because of the increasing foreign policy powers of the presidency, what of the office’s increasing domestic policy powers?

Arguably, the president’s constitutional domain over domestic policy is less so than over foreign policy. So, while Beasley might be accurate in claiming that modern

³⁵⁴ Vanessa B. Beasley, "The Rhetorical Presidency Meets the Unitary Executive: Implications for Presidential Rhetoric on Public Policy," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 13 (2010): 7-35.

presidents do not need to gain public support through speech in relation to foreign policy matters, my research suggests that, in relation to domestic matters, presidents rely heavily on persuasion. This particular kind of persuasion, I contend, is executive rhetoric. In responding to Beasley's dichotomy I argue that, while presidential rhetoric may not be useful to a unitary executive, executive rhetoric and the unitary executive work in concert to expand presidential power.

Beasley's argument describes the decreasing efficiency of presidential speech. This is troublesome for communication scholars because we recognize and celebrate the value and effect of speech. By assigning the words presidents speak to two different categories, as my dissertation does, the value of speech is preserved. Even though, as Beasley suggests, presidential rhetoric is of decreasing value, we ought not—forgive the cliché—throw out the baby with the bath water. My research indicates that not all presidential speech is presidential rhetoric. Rather, it suggests that some presidential speech—because of its strategies and goals—is better understood as executive rhetoric. Beasley presents a compelling case for why the power of presidential rhetoric is minimized in the face of the unitary executive. But executive rhetoric is a strong and valuable asset to the unitary executive. Practically, by distinguishing executive rhetoric from presidential rhetoric, we embolden speech's utility and preclude it from being considered inefficient. Theoretically, this distinction makes future inquiries into the relationship between presidential speech and presidential power more precise because it clarifies and specifies unique forms of rhetoric.

The Bully Pulpit

Theodore Roosevelt coined the term “bully pulpit” to refer to the unique position of the presidency in which he can publicly advocate a policy platform.³⁵⁵

Communication and political science scholars have argued that presidential power is “the power to persuade.”³⁵⁶ While some contend that the influence of presidential speech on a policy agenda is palpable, others have argued that speech’s empirical effects are weak.

Take for example the continuing exchange between Hart and Edwards on the subject. Edwards asserts that history can attest to the weak power of speech when one considers how past speech influenced or did not influence policy outcomes.³⁵⁷ In response, Hart notes that, while Edwards’ evidence is compelling, there are surely rhetorical effects that mediate the relationship between speech and policy. Hart cites some of these effects: speech can “change people’s presuppositions,” “relocate sources of authority,” “change the arc of time,” “shift the locus of controversy,” “alter political metrics,” and many, many more.³⁵⁸ Hart presents these mediating effects to suggest that while one can empirically measure the effect of a single speech on a single piece of legislation, the changes that take place in-between are much less clear and, perhaps, much more interesting.

³⁵⁵ Gelderman, *All the President’s Words*, 3.

³⁵⁶ Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

³⁵⁷ Edwards, *On Deaf Ears*.

³⁵⁸ Roderick P. Hart, “Thinking Harder About Presidential Discourse: The Question of Efficacy,” in Jim A. Aune and Martin J. Medhurst (eds.), *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 238-248.

How might a theory of executive rhetoric contribute to this conversation? One effect of rhetoric might be not to persuade the public to approve a piece of legislation, but to persuade the public that the president's oversight of that legislation is itself legitimate. Rather than using presidential rhetoric to compel the public to support the president's policy agenda, a president can use executive rhetoric to compel the public to support the legitimacy of the president even having a policy agenda. To be sure, there are some instances in which the public will have conceded to the presidency an instance of legitimate oversight, in which case the president need not employ executive rhetoric, choosing presidential rhetoric instead. However, the expanding nature of the presidency suggests that its occupants will keep testing the office's constitutional limits. And it is in these instances in which executive rhetoric will help influence the public's approval of newly-tested arenas of legitimate presidential oversight.

While political scientists more often consider speech and effect a one-dimensional relationship, rhetoricians (like Hart) are quick to note that the theoretical value of speech is not always best determined by immediate effects, but intermediate effects. Executive rhetoric can, itself, be considered one of Hart's intermediate effects. A theory of executive rhetoric implies a number of important effects that, while not immediate, significantly influence the presidency and its power. Consider this example: Suppose a president consistently uses executive rhetoric to urge legislative actions. And, each time he uses that rhetoric, the legislative action fails. After a president repeatedly uses rhetoric to pass legislation and repeatedly fails, an effect-centered perspective would undoubtedly conclude that the rhetoric was ineffective. However, the mitigating effect—the slow,

steady, inconspicuous expansion of presidential power into legislative affairs—would suddenly materialize and cause concern. Such an intermediate effect, I argue, should not render political speech “ineffective.” In fact, in this hypothetical case, the implications are arguably even more significant than those of the immediate effects. Executive rhetoric, then, can be considered support for and an expansion of Hart’s caution that efficacy may not be the most fruitful evaluative criteria for either rhetoricians or political scientists to employ.

To summarize, each of these areas of study is informed by my theory of executive rhetoric. Clarifying the difference between presidential rhetoric and executive rhetoric contributes to a better understanding of the rhetorical dimensions of the presidency. A nuanced and complicated office, the presidency is a source of rhetoric that will continuously change and require fresh inquiry to help explain the implications of those changes. Speech that employs executive rhetoric can make newly expanded arenas of presidential oversight seem more legitimate, an observation for which implications abound.

My dissertation asked: How do presidents and their speechwriters address the public’s growing disenchantment with presidential speech? Results demonstrate that presidents employ what I call executive rhetoric to calm the public’s frustration with presidential speech. The public increasingly considers presidential speech to be empty, inconsequential, and purely symbolic. By using executive rhetoric, the presidents examined in my research were able to expand the scope of their presidential authority. Areas of authority that were previously immune to presidential oversight became subject

to it. This move effectively made speeches that were once empty, inconsequential, and purely symbolic now substantive, appear wrought with real implications, and tangible.

I approached my research with the guidance of an arsenal of rhetorical scholarship. This scholarship included research on the rhetorical presidency, the unitary executive, and the bully pulpit. Upon completion of the three studies, I found that the answers to my dissertation question contribute to the development of these existing theories. While this study constitutes only the first step in the development of a theory of “executive rhetoric,” my hope is that it will continue to better inform rhetorical investigations of politics, political speech, and perhaps communication artifacts beyond the scope of traditional rhetorical theory.

IMPLICATIONS

The theory of executive rhetoric outlined in this chapter at least partially answers my dissertation’s question: How do presidents and their speechwriters combat the public’s growing disaffection with presidential speech? The four precepts presented here constitute the theoretical basis for executive rhetoric. Moreover, they reflect some individual findings from my research that were consistent across the presidencies examined.

In this final section, I explore implications of these findings. What do they contribute to knowledge about the rhetorical presidency specifically, and rhetorical studies generally? Of note is that my dissertation has both practical and theoretical implications. Politics is a zero-sum game. Campaigns, and elections, and pieces of legislation all produce winners and losers. Knowing what strategies have worked in the

past, how the scene has changed, who the voters are and what they want are all integral components of knowledge that a politician or strategist must master in order to be successful. But even more helpful than knowing that a strategy works is understanding how and why it works. Theoretical insight can guide a politician or strategist to understand the most intrinsic components of a successful strategy. Having a mastery of the theoretical underpinnings of a strategy, and understanding how and why it works, will always prove more beneficial than not.

One practical implication of my research concerns the adeptness with which modern speechwriters are able to gauge trends in the public's preferences for speech. Political strategy is many things: it is dirty, it is complicated, it is unfair, and it is not for the faint of heart. But strategists know that the single most important thing about politics is that it is predictable. It is predictable because, although a thousand factors may inform a strategy, there is only one factor that decides an outcome: the public. To know the public—all its preferences, its dreams, its fears—is to win.

One of the most important components to successful politicking is public speech. And, in that regard, strategists and politicians would do well to understand the public and its preferences. At a presidential level, one of the public's frustrations is with speech that is empty, inconsequential, and trivial. To determine how they ought to combat this frustration, presidents and their strategists—particularly their speechwriters—must consider when this frustration arose, what consequences it poses, and how presidents have addressed it thus far.

Political strategists are typically well-versed in this kind of information. They know what strategies presidents, their campaigns, and their administrations have used—either because those strategies are transparent, because they are made public, or because that information has been shared in the upper echelon circles of Washington insiders.

Yet, contemporary speechwriters may be less well-versed. The professional speechwriting operation in the White House has become increasingly compartmentalized—a phenomenon well documented by historians and scholars alike.³⁵⁹ While each administration chooses speechwriters with different criteria in mind, one common proficiency is good writing. A problem arises when presidents seek out speechwriters who have a mastery of writing first, and a mastery of history second. General strategists can employ only so much oversight on speechwriters and trust them to be equipped with the kind of sophisticated political knowledge that makes for a successful speech.

Speechwriters ought to approach their literary craft with an in-depth understanding of history. It is not so important as to know which speeches worked and what literary techniques were employed; it is essential that speechwriters know what contextual factors and historical developments made those techniques successful. And, as the context of American democracy is dynamic, speechwriters ought to have a firm grasp on how the country has changed and what public expectations are.

Most importantly, speechwriters ought to have the foresight to anticipate how the public is changing and how presidential speech should react. Presidents ought to be wary

³⁵⁹ Gelderman, *All the President's Words*.

of hiring speechwriters who excel in literary talent. Instead, perhaps presidents ought to hire proficient writers who excel in political strategy and history. These writers, I argue, will be the most effective at employing executive rhetoric to quell the public's frustrations about presidential speech. Having a speechwriter with literary talent might present a president with many opportunities to use presidential rhetoric. However, the public is disenchanted with that rhetoric. By understanding how executive rhetoric works, what it consists of, and what it is capable of accomplishing, speechwriters are better equipped to serve their presidents and to serve the preferences of the citizenry. My dissertation provides guidance for addressing the public's frustrations and documents the individual techniques presidents used in specific situations.

Not only does my dissertation outline individual techniques that presidents and their speechwriters used to address the public's disenchantment with presidential speech, it also organizes these strategies into a comprehensive theory. Presidents and their speechwriters have used the technique of appealing to their office for decades. While this technique may once have been just an occasional strategy, it has become increasingly common and identifiable. It would be a disservice to rhetorical theory, then, to preclude it from theoretical development.

What kind of theoretical implications, then, might my research suggest? Executive rhetoric, I argue, is different from presidential rhetoric. Because its focus is on institutional obligations rather than personal ones, executive rhetoric demands more expedient results than does presidential rhetoric. In my research, I discovered that presidents have tried to overcome the public's disenchantment with speech by forsaking

their rhetorical legacies in favor of immediate effects. And, yet, rhetoric has always been concerned with immediate effects. But, presidential rhetoric—as compared to executive rhetoric—seems to be more concerned with the creation of a legacy.

This difference between legacy and expedience can be likened to the difference between literature and rhetoric. Herbert Wichelns advances the claim that it is unfair to critique rhetoric with the same standards one would apply to literature precisely because literature is intended to be affective across time; the purpose of rhetoric, however, is to effect affect in a single moment.³⁶⁰ Presidential rhetoric, I contend, consists of those speeches presidents write with the goal of creating a personal legacy. That goal may be primary, or secondary, or even the last in a long line of anticipated consequences. But, it is a goal of presidential rhetoric. It is not a goal of executive rhetoric. The goal of executive rhetoric is immediate change. Perhaps with this dichotomy of presidential and executive rhetoric, scholars may begin to reflect on criticism and determine whether rhetorical strategies were not rhetorical at all, but literary. When a president employs grandiose language, appeals to emotion, metaphor, and the like, is he doing so to elicit an immediate response from the audience? Or does he employ those things to make his speech memorable for ages to come? Surely, critics are not equipped to answer those questions purely by speculation. Critics, then, ought to employ outside sources for investigation, sources like the interviews I conducted with speechwriters, or presidential memoirs. These texts will surely provide more insight on whether a speech was

³⁶⁰ Herbert A. Wichelns, “The Literary Criticism of Oratory,” in Carl R. Burghardt (ed.) *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism* (Strata College: Strata Publishing, 2005), 3-27.

composed with short or long-term goals in mind. If a rhetorician makes an educated claim that the purpose of a speech was to benefit presidential legacy and not expedience, should that speech be critiqued rhetorically or with literary standards? Is that speech rhetoric? I hope my research helps guide answers to these questions.

FUTURE QUESTIONS

My dissertation serves as a foundation upon which future research on executive rhetoric can be built. The scope of such research will undoubtedly vary, both within rhetorical studies and outside our immediate discipline. There are four paths of inquiry (questions) that I believe might be broached as the next step in the evolution of this theory.

First, scholars could determine how and why presidents prior to Reagan used executive rhetoric. Presidents haven't always felt such extreme pressure to respond to public opinion as they do today. As discussed in Chapter One, recent advances in technology have made public opinion polling data more readily available to presidents, the media, and the public. Prior to the 1980s, this data was less developed and less available. I contend that, if the public were disenchanted with presidential speech prior to Reagan, scholars today would have less abundant and less sophisticated polling available to support that claim. Moreover, presidents before Reagan were similarly less aware of such opinions. As a result, those presidents likely consulted public opinion less frequently to inform their speeches.

Scholars indicate that the expansion of the presidency began in the mid-twentieth century.³⁶¹ This means that presidents prior to Reagan likely employed executive rhetoric. However, I contend that they did not do so in order to appease a public disenchanted with presidential speech—at least not to the extent of Reagan and his successors. Scholars could research the presidential uses of executive speech prior to Reagan. Such research would be equipped to expand upon the theory in unique and valuable ways.

Second, should presidents govern in response to or despite public opinion about their speeches? Should presidents even consider the public's opinion about public address? For practical reasons, the answer is yes: presidents would not be electable if they were to disregard the public's opinions about speech, or—for that matter—about anything. But what of the ethical answer to this question? John Stuart Mills distinguishes between the trustee and delegate forms of governing: Whereas a delegate defers to his or her constituency in light of new questions, a trustee is entrusted by his or her constituency to answer those questions as he or she sees fit.³⁶² While Mills proposed these forms in response to questions of policy, the same forms can be applied to the public's preference for speech.

The public's preference for presidential speech is influenced by a number of factors. Take for example the factor posed in Chapter Four by Clinton's speechwriters, that Clinton and his speechwriters had to consider the public's new found preference for

³⁶¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency* (New York: Mariner, 1973); Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, *Presidential Power: Unchecked and Unbalanced* (New York: Norton, 2007).

³⁶² Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*.

patrician language. Some scholars contend that by playing to the public's preferences for more patrician speech, presidents are contributing to an anti-intellectualization of the American people. Acquiescing to the public's preferences can be considered a move towards the delegate form of governing, whereas a dismissal of this preference would be more in tune with the trustee form. Does the president have any ethical obligation to preserving American intellect with his speech? Does the modern public prefer a delegate form of presidential governing?

Third, how might executive rhetoric operate outside of politics? There are a number of institutions that function in a similar manner as our three-branched government: corporations, non-profits, universities, churches, and more. Each of these institutions exists with a similar structure of multiple authority figures competing for power. My findings might be particularly fruitful in organizational communication, since a necessary component of the executive rhetoric theory is the expansion of power in a position that is defined and distinct in relation to other positions within an organization. Executive rhetoric places emphasis on an office over an individual. So, naturally, that office will likely exist in concert with other offices.

To illustrate how one of these institutions might employ executive rhetoric, let me offer a brief example. One common subject of study in organizational communication is the mission statement. These statements are strategically ambiguous, enabling leaders to use the language to accept or reject potential actions. Different branches of authority in a corporation or non-profit might use this statement as justification for usurping more authority, for impinging on the domain of another branch. For example, an authority

figure in public relations might use the mission statement to tackle responsibilities once overseen by an authority figure in product development, in the name of better serving their mission statement. In this situation, the statement serves as a kind of pliable constitution by which the organization runs. Each of the four precepts of executive rhetoric might apply to the language this authority figure employs in order to expand his or her scope of authority.

Finally, this project ultimately sought to understand how rhetoric might respond to problems of its own creation. My findings reveal that presidents can deploy one genre of rhetoric as a response to the problems caused by a different kind of rhetoric. Scholars often feel compelled to study speech as a one-dimensional model: rhetorical studies frequently are characterized by the effects or significance of speech, and quantitative inquiries characterized by empirical, causal relationships of speech. One area of future inquiry would ask rhetoricians to consider how speech responds to speech, how speech as meta-communication is or is not capable of addressing its own shortcomings. Rhetoricians sometimes ask: “If rhetoric is everything, what is it not?” If the path taken in my dissertation is fruitful, perhaps this question can be answered more pragmatically by considering what rhetoric is capable and incapable of doing, rather than what rhetoric is and is not.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I began this dissertation by asking: How do presidents and their speechwriters address the public’s growing disenchantment with presidential speech? In order to answer this question, I conducted three studies relating to Presidents Reagan, Bush, and

Clinton: a case-study analysis of a single speech, a content analysis of weekly radio addresses, and interviews with former speechwriters. The results of each chapter yielded unique and nuanced conclusions. However, when combined one commonality emerged: a reference or reverence to the presidential office over the office-holder. Upon further exploration of my results, I compiled four precepts that all substantiated a theory that I call “executive rhetoric.” By using executive rhetoric, the presidents I studied sought to overcome the public’s disenchantment with presidential speech’s tendency to be empty and inconsequential by emphasizing their office over their person in order to make their speech substantive and consequential.

For as long as I can remember, I’ve been fascinated with presidential speeches and their composition. Unfortunately, as time goes by the public seems to be less and less fascinated. It is incumbent upon rhetorical scholars to determine why, and more importantly, how presidents can retard that disinterest. My dissertation represents a first effort to do so. Presidential rhetoric is an integral component of communication research. If the public continues to delegitimize presidential rhetoric at such an alarming rate, it does not bode well for the reputation of public address. While presidential speech may have its quirks and disappointments and hidden agendas, it is still central to what being American means. Presidential address is one of few artifacts that can capture the heartbeat of a nation in a single moment, and convince that heart to keep beating, to beat faster. As a favorite fictional character of mine once avowed, the world can move or not based on the words a president says. Hopefully, in years to come the public will still

want to listen. And, in a modest way, I hope my research and its application will contribute to that goal.

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