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The Presidential Function:
An American Public Performed Through the Rhetoric of Catastrophe

An Honors Thesis presented by
Maxwell Ly Coles Whisnant
to the Department of English
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
Honors in the Major Field

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Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the ways in which rhetoric is used as a tool within the American presidency. I also study how the concept of the heroic president and gender affect how US presidents communicate with the American people. I then examine the very story of the United States and how words can build publics and counterpublics while remaining distant from platitudes. Finally, I define the presidential function and the ways in which US presidents are able to use the power of definition to shift focus away from massive tragedies.

Contents

Introduction	5
Chapter 1: Performing Communication to the American People	8
President Kennedy: The Alienation of the Heroic President.....	10
President Trump: A Militarized Masculinity.....	18
Chapter 2: The Unfinished Presidency—An Incomplete Story	28
President Lincoln: The Construction of the Nation.....	33
President Obama: Performing Platitudes.....	37
Epilogue: The Function of the Author	44
President Roosevelt: Claiming Victimhood and Creating a Scapegoat.....	46
President Bush: Shifting the Focus of the American People.....	48
Bibliography	52

Introduction

President Obama's nickname was "No Drama Obama" because as presidents go, there were relatively few scandals in the Obama administration. Late night comedian Trevor Noah mocked critics of President Obama with a segment sarcastically titled "Obama's Tan Suit: The Worst Scandal in Presidential History." The video closes with a voice-over saying "the tan suit made him look un-presidential" with two images of Ronald Reagan wearing a tan suit. In my thesis, I examine presidential style through the lens of rhetoric. Instead, I explore presidential rhetoric, an aspect of American politics I believe is misunderstood and in need of further scrutiny. After all, US presidents come with the fancy honorific: the "leader of the free world" (Tierney 2017) there should be a common vocabulary to understand the presidency. In this paper, I observe what a president does or does not do when faced with a catastrophe. I define "catastrophe" as "An event producing a subversion of the order or system of things" (Oxford English Dictionary).

The best way to expand the foundation of knowledge in regards to US presidents is to study speeches immediately following a catastrophe. By choosing catastrophic events, I offer US presidents a type of intensity that is not available to them within non-catastrophic moments. Moments of catastrophe are not just disaster, but are instead watershed moments in a presidency. They help us examine and study the expectations for a president as they exercise the mandate given to them by the American people.

The presidents I chose offer this thesis its structure. In chapter one, I study President John Kennedy and President Donald Trump. I use gender theorist Judith Butler and literary critic Michael Warner to animate this chapter. Part one of this chapter focuses on President Kennedy and his role as a heroic president functioning within the public of a presidency. The decision-

making process of leaders comes into question in part two of this chapter. I study President Trump and the performance of gender with the help of Judith Butler.

Chapter two covers President Abraham Lincoln and President Barack Obama. This chapter is about the presidential power to define. What, then, are presidents to define other than policy? I argue in part one that US presidents are able to define a political reality, giving a president far more power and influence than they often get credit for. The reason that political definition is important is because that power ties directly into how a president is able to preserve a record of history, thus continuing the work of creating and even attempting to destroy publics. Performance theorist Diana Taylor structures President Obama's section of this chapter and her work allows me to view rhetoric and presidential speechmaking as a performance.

Finally, in the epilogue I study President Franklin Roosevelt and President George W. Bush. Titling this chapter an "epilogue" proves to be a stronger closing for this paper than an additional chapter because the purpose of an epilogue is to reflect on what has already happened. I use this chapter to tie some of the main concepts from the two previous chapters together while introducing author function, a concept I use Michel Foucault and Cleanth Brooks for. An amendment I make to the typical role of an epilogue is that I take the opportunity to explore the longevity of speech and the impact of presidential decision-making and speechmaking *after* a catastrophe and *after* a president responds. Not only does studying what happens after a speech provide a nice, tight conclusion, but I can also continue to develop the through-line of history I started to pull on in my second chapter.

There is a common understanding among Americans that dictates that a president must act and speak a certain way. Rhetoric continues to play an important role in public discourse despite its ancient history. It is an art that gives us a way to persuade and leave a lasting

impression on an audience. Politicians and leaders of all kinds wield their influence as a way to impact and affect their constituents, but none do so on a larger stage than Presidents of the United States. The American public not wanting a president in the spotlight constantly makes them relish it that much more. There are moments, like the coronavirus pandemic, when Americans are drawn to presidents and their words in response to catastrophe. Times of war, disease, or tragedy are when leadership is needed the most. My thesis explores the ways in which leadership through rhetoric is possible and far more powerful than is often thought.

Chapter 1: Performing Communication to the American People

What a US president says or does not say and what they do or do not do presents an attempt by that president to exact control over a catastrophic event such as the Cuban Missile Crisis or the coronavirus pandemic. In this chapter, I argue a president's communication to the American people is more complex than just the individual words they use. An American president's communication also derives meaning from their gestures, their physicality, their general material context, but also how they perform gender.

In part one, I use literary critic Michael Warner and presidential rhetoric specialist Mary Stuckey to show how a president's embodiment of the "heroic president" role increasingly alienates that president from the public for whom they are meant to function. I use Warner's definitions to propose that an individual person can be a public. The "heroic president" is elected to console, protect, govern, direct—all functions that separate the president from the public and make that president a solitary figure by nature. Scholars of rhetoric Jennifer Mercieca and Justin Vaughn argue that these expectations are because of a "distance between the presidency and most Americans that prevents them from actually knowing and understanding the office and

those who hold it” (Mercieca and Vaughn pg. 6). The high expectations we place upon our presidents might not be enumerated in the Constitution, but that they are instead “a function of our cultural tradition of glorifying presidential memories” (Mercieca and Vaughn 2014 pg. 5). The American people place the American president on a pedestal asking that president to take on multiple heroic roles such as “chief administrator, chief diplomat, chief legislator, chief magistrate, commander in chief, chief executive, ceremonial head of state, manager of the economy, party leader, and national leader” (Mercieca and Vaughn 2014 pg. 5). I suggest, then, that these are roles that no one else could perform and yet the American people expect these roles and more from their presidents, alienating the president from their people.

In part two, with the help of gender theorist Judith Butler, I show how gender affects the decision making of presidents. Judith Butler helps me to show the president’s physicality as well as the president’s performativity, a term I borrow from Butler. What is interesting about the gender performance of the heroic president is that each president would seem to have received the same script from the American public, yet the role they play is different. I argue that the American public creates their idea of the president and the president learns to function within the script that is written for them. The two US presidents discussed in this chapter, John F. Kennedy and Donald J. Trump, were forced to conform to the heroic and gendered expectations placed on them by the American public. Both men fit neatly into the idea that gender is constitutive of heroism. As such, Kennedy and Trump embody a performative fabrication of gender. According to Butler, a fabrication of gender means that the gendered body “suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler 173). In other words, gender is part of the script that US presidents use to communicate with the American people.

In both parts of this chapter, I argue that for a US president to most efficiently define a political and moral conscience during a catastrophe, their words need a context in which they can be placed. US presidents are the best equipped to provide that context because the American people expect their president, one individual, to be both the Chief of State and the Chief of Government. What the American people ask of their president is an awesome task that only 45 men have undertaken. As such, the American electorate grants its president a power not written down in any of the United States' founding documents: the power to define a context, giving US presidents a wide range of realities from which to choose.

As Presidents of the United States, John Kennedy and Donald Trump get to decide what groups of people are welcome and which groups are not. In other words, publics and counterpublics are recognized, a concept that Michael Warner writes about in his piece "Publics and Counterpublics." A public "exists by virtue of being addressed" (Warner 50). It "is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself" (Warner 50) and a counterpublic is the countervailing force that help a dominant public understand itself. *The public and a public* are often perceived as the same thing which Warner sees as a mistake since a public must "have some way of organizing itself as a body and of being addressed in discourse. And not just any way of defining the totality will do. It must be organized by something other than the state" (Warner 51).

These US presidents acknowledge publics and counterpublics by selecting whose voice is heard the most prominently. Mary Stuckey argues something similar, but Stuckey and I stop short of agreeing with Warner that a permanent aspect to one's identity does not in itself make one part of a public" (Warner 53). Instead, she writes in her 2004 book *Defining Americans, The Presidency and National Identity* that each stage in this process of becoming visible and the

process of becoming citizens is accompanied by specific presidential rhetoric, which remains consistent across time. Excluded groups or publics are first ignored and therefore made politically invisible by presidents as they are utterly absent from presidential speech. As publics become politically visible, by forcing themselves into the public eye, they are labeled as political problems and are subject to several possible sorts of presidential rhetoric. At the outset, they are frequently asked to be patient, as their inclusion is deferred. Presidents offer them some rhetorical legitimacy as a group but delay policy initiatives which ranges from the granting of citizenship to the franchise or other sorts of legal protections. Once a public's political presence has been legitimated, groups become open to rhetorical differentiation by the president, who divides group members into "good" and "bad" members. This differentiation lays out the terms for eventual inclusion in the polity and also delineates the nature of citizenship for that president. Finally, once groups have attained both political visibility and at least some measure of political legitimacy, as their members become absorbed into the larger polity, they are also included as "Americans" in presidential rhetoric, often retaining their ethnic or racial identities but on terms that stress their belonging to the polity rather than their exclusion from it. (Stuckey 5-6).

John F. Kennedy: The Alienation of the Heroic President

In order to best understand the way gender and presidents function within American politics, we must travel back to the Revolutionary War. Two seminal documents, The Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution emerge from a conflict built on the belief that one man with absolute, unquestioned power over a people is unsustainable. Even still, the Founding Fathers constructed a nation where the President of the United States, an office held by one person, is the highest office in the land. Despite the Founding Fathers' wishes to escape the rule of just one person, as evidenced by making the Congress the primary branch of

government in the Constitution, the past 245 years have included a President of the United States as the leader. As I argue in this chapter, catastrophes provide American presidents with distinct opportunities to fix themselves firmly within the mold of the heroic president.

John Kennedy, despite being the youngest president elected, was a near-perfect embodiment of the heroic president. A Purple Heart recipient for valor during World War II, Kennedy carried his popularity to the United States Senate in 1952, serving for just seven years before defeating Richard Nixon in the 1960 Presidential election. While in the White House, the Kennedy's, an already wealthy New England political family, became known as "Camelot." Evoking the fantastical and even magical history of King Arthur within the confines of "The People's House" (Axios 2014).

Outside of the White House, however, the looming specter in the shape of the Soviet Union provided Kennedy with a dominating foreign policy issue within his first term as President of the United States. The conflict with the Soviets reached a head in 1962 during what came to be known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Cuban Missile Crisis lasted for 13 days in October, 1962 and was the closest that the United States and the Soviet Union came to a nuclear conflict (*U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian*). During his attempts to deescalate the situation, Kennedy invoked The Monroe Doctrine. Written and delivered in 1823 by President James Monroe, The Monroe Doctrine established four basic points. The United States would not interfere in the internal affairs of or the wars between European powers; the United States recognized and would not interfere with existing colonies and dependencies in the Western Hemisphere; the Western Hemisphere was closed to future colonization; and any attempt by a European power to oppress or control any nation in the Western Hemisphere would be viewed as a hostile act against the United States (The Monroe Doctrine 1823).

Monroe's address to a joint session of Congress set the precedent for American neutrality in European affairs while also setting the stage for what would be American sovereignty in the western hemisphere. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy invoked the Monroe Doctrine by arguing the case that the Soviet Union, by sending missiles to Cuba, was a threat to American sovereignty. Both Monroe and Kennedy made clear that should a European power encroach upon American territory in hopes of expanding its influence, that action would be seen as "dangerous to our peace and safety" (Monroe Doctrine). Monroe argues that any attempt at expansion would directly affect the domestic affairs of the United States, therefore making outside influence a domestic issue.

President Kennedy delivered a solemn Oval Office address to the nation to highlight the seriousness with which he was following the movement of Soviet missiles. In a video of the speech, Kennedy is seated behind the Resolute Desk, hands neatly folded in front of him. The weary looking president begins by saying he is "obliged to share" the intelligence surrounding potential Soviet nuclear weapons being shipped to Cuba. Kennedy's use of the word "obliged" has Constitutional precedent. Article II, Section 3 of the Constitution states that a president "shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient" (Constitution of the United States, Article II, Sec. 3). Kennedy knows that in order to get a declaration of war, the Congress must be notified giving himself legal cover should the crisis escalate to an armed conflict.

In such a tense political climate, hearing the voice of the president deliver a message of strength and solitude with the American people is bound to bring comfort. Part of the function of a heroic president that Mercieca and Vaughn establish is to be the one, solitary figure that the

American people can turn to when they are uncertain of how their lives might be affected. Kennedy knows the role he must perform and even though Kennedy begins his speech with the message that he stands in solidarity with the American people, Kennedy quickly changes his tone. Throughout his speech, Kennedy uses the first-person eighteen times, each use tied to an action that his administration had taken. The middle section of his speech is even dedicated to seven steps he directed be taken immediately. Kennedy says, “Acting, therefore, in the defense of our own security and of the entire Western Hemisphere, and under the authority entrusted to me by the Constitution as endorsed by the Resolution of the Congress, I have directed that the following initial steps be taken immediately” (Kennedy 1962, pg. 3). In case his earlier allusion to the Constitution was unclear, Kennedy clearly recommits his allegiance to the Constitution, the Presidential Oath of Office, and by extension, the American people.

As President Kennedy spoke, however, political theater was brought to the forefront of politics as Kennedy was surrounded by cameras, teleprompters, and makeup artists. Oval Office addresses, typically reserved for the most solemn of messages, carry a certain gravitas that Rose Garden speeches, joint session of Congress addresses, or press briefings do not. The president must sit behind the confines of a desk with a camera staring them down. That calm, the stillness with which a president must address the country is unique to Oval Office addresses. But, “Sometimes the magnitude of the moment calls for the Oval, even if that’s not where a president does his best rhetorical work,” wrote Callum Borchers, a reporter with expertise in the intersection of politics and the media. I take this to mean that even if a president is more natural in a briefing, interview, or other kind of address, a moment can supersede the less formal address types. Borchers continues, citing a 2006 Harvard Kennedy School of Government study that shows a steady decline in presidential viewership since the late 1960s. After the first televised

debate in 1960, politics and television together were a relatively new phenomenon that Kennedy and his team used to their advantage.

By staging a presidential address, Kennedy created a public, a term used by Michael Warner in his book “Publics and Counterpublics.” Typically used in reference to dominant and subordinate groups, publics and counterpublics are at their simplest, distinct groups. During times of catastrophe, like the Cuban Missile Crisis, a president is called upon by the American people to find order within chaos. He is given the power to define and name the publics. In turn, however, counterpublics are created from the various, disparate groups that are not included within the main public. Kennedy’s main public is simply his audience. The American people. He creates other publics as well. Towards the end of his speech, Kennedy turns his attention to the people of Cuba in an attempt to garner favor with them. He says:

Finally, I want to say a few words to the captive people of Cuba, to whom this speech is being directly carried by special radio facilities. I speak to you as a friend, as one who knows of your deep attachment to your fatherland, as one who shares your aspirations for liberty and justice for all. And I have watched and the American people have watched with deep sorrow how your nationalist revolution was betrayed and how your fatherland fell under foreign domination. (Kennedy 1962)

What Kennedy does here is remarkable. Instead of continuing with the rhetoric directed at the Soviets which contained accusations of lies from the Soviet government, Kennedy makes himself out as a friend. An equal to the Cubans. Yet Kennedy is able to, at the same time, slip in the old American phrase “liberty and justice for all” within the same breath. Kennedy and the American people have watched while Cuba “fell under foreign domination.” Even here, Kennedy separates himself further from his audience, creating two additional publics: himself and the

American people. That short moment of recognition from Kennedy that he is apart from the people that elected him speaks to the power of the presidential function.

The separation between president and people Kennedy elucidates is indicative of the theater of American power. The theater of American power is that of perceived right to control other nations. Another way of thinking is that as US presidents model behaviors through word or action, the American people will follow their leader. Throughout Kennedy's speech, there are subtle nods to this perception of control. In the first line of the speech, Kennedy mentions the "closest surveillance of the Soviet military buildup on the island of Cuba" (Kennedy 1962). Kennedy justifies the surveillance and subsequent escalation of responses to Soviet missile movement by contextualizing the events as a national security issue in urgent need of a strong, proportionate response from the United States government.

Regardless of the circumstances, speeches in the Oval Office are intimate. The president has invited the American people into his home with the express purpose of delivering news that is in need of a solemn address. At the time of President Kennedy's Oval Office address, the only news he had to share was that of a possible attack. There was no attack that he had to respond to. His message was a preemptive warning to the Soviet Union laying out the potential for conflict should they escalate the conflict into violence. That is all fine, but he did so while naming international cities, conflating a potential international incident with a domestic lens. Kennedy continues the narrative that America is the steward of the world, unable to protect against a rogue Soviet attack. He says at the beginning of his speech "And having now confirmed and completed our evaluation of the evidence and our decision on a course of action, this Government feels obliged to report this new crisis to you in fullest detail" (Kennedy 1962). Again, the obligation the government has to share information provides a sense of false connectedness and closeness

between the American government and the American people, yet another instance of the presidential power to define.

John Kennedy is guilty of redefinition and hypocrisy too. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy delivered an Oval Office Address that described in detail the threat that the Soviet Union posed to the United States. He argued that should the Soviets place missiles in Cuba, an attack on cities surrounding the United States is imminent. Not once during his speech did he mention the Bay of Pigs fiasco which saw covertly financed and trained Cuban exiles attempt a failed coup against Fidel Castro's leadership (Voss 2011). As Castro grew concerned of continued threats to his power, he sought protection from the Soviet Union. Yet Kennedy says "Neither the United States of America nor the world community of nations can tolerate deliberate deception and offensive threats on the part of any nation, large or small" (Kennedy 1962). An attempt to overthrow a government, no matter how hostile that government might appear is an inherently offensive threat. The Bay of Pigs was a deliberate deception, in which Cuban nationals were trained and supplied by the United States government.

Another instance of hypocrisy is when Kennedy attempts to make the United States out as an almost pacifist nation. He says:

The 1930's taught us a clear lesson: aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged, ultimately leads to war. This nation is opposed to war. We are also true to our word. Our unswerving objective, therefore, must be to prevent the use of these missiles against this or any other country, and to secure their withdrawal or elimination from the Western Hemisphere. (Kennedy 1962).

Invoking the pre-World War II mentality of unchecked aggression brings about *Déjà vu* as unchecked aggression is what led to Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s and 40s (*National World*

War II Memorial). That Kennedy said “This nation is opposed to war” struck me as an interesting claim in that the very birth of the United States is bathed in the blood of a war fought for independence from a ruler who ruled from across the Atlantic Ocean. Even in spite of the United States’ isolationism (Cole 32) during World War II, the United States had fought in multiple wars in a short period of time. One of those wars was the American Civil War.

The most egregious claim made in the paragraph above is that the United States’ top priority is “to prevent the use of these missiles against this or any other country, and to secure their withdrawal or elimination from the Western Hemisphere” (Kennedy 1962). According to national security writer Benjamin Schwarz, the United States at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis had “a vastly more powerful U.S. nuclear arsenal of 203 ICBMs, 1,306 long-range bombers with 3,104 nuclear warheads, and 144 SLBMs—all told, about nine times as many nuclear weapons as the U.S.S.R.” (Schwarz 2013). The United States, with a massive tactical and military advantage, had no reason to fear the Soviet arms. In just this short paragraph, Kennedy utilizes the “we” narrative. He groups himself and the American people into one entity, deflecting any potential for blame should the Crisis escalate further onto the American people. The power of definition allows Kennedy to align himself with the American people and to distance himself from them when he sees fit.

President Kennedy shows in this single address how powerful the presidency can be. In 18 minutes, he is able to switch roles between commander in chief, consoler in chief, head of state, and friend of the American and Cuban people. Given the novelty of television and politics when Kennedy was president, having a president speak from their home was remarkably intimate, akin to Franklin Roosevelt’s “Fireside Chats.” The ability of a president to switch their proverbial “hat” multiple times within a speech as serious as the one Kennedy delivered speaks

to the power that a president has because the American electorate formulated that role for their presidents.

President Trump: A Militarized Masculinity

On January 6, 2021 the President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, used his platform to spread misinformation on the 2020 Presidential election and to renege on his commitment to a peaceful transfer of power. Trump's words led to violence at the United States Capitol not seen since the War of 1812 when the British burned the still-under-construction Capitol building. The president's words earned him universal condemnation from the Democratic Members of Congress, near-universal support among Republicans, and a history-making second impeachment. One month after Trump became the only president in history to be impeached twice, then Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell delivered his most scathing remarks on the Insurrection at the Capitol:

There is no question that President Trump is practically and morally responsible for provoking the events of that day. The people who stormed this building believed they were acting on the wishes and instructions of their President. And their having that belief was a foreseeable consequence of the growing crescendo of false statements, conspiracy theories, and reckless hyperbole which the defeated President kept shouting into the largest megaphone on planet Earth. (McConnell 2021)

The crux of McConnell's argument centered around the argument that President Trump had an undeniable role in both the delegitimization of the 2020 Election as well as the violence at the US Capitol. Despite McConnell's strong words, laying blame at the feet of the president was anything but undeniable as 10 Republican Members of the House voted to impeach the president

and 7 Senators voted to convict the president. Even McConnell himself voted to acquit the president.

In all three of McConnell's statements after the insurrection, he focused on the president's words. McConnell reverted back to the age-old assumption that the words of a US president matter, an argument made by Vanderbilt Professor of Communications Studies Vanessa Beasley. She writes that we must consider that presidents "can veto, nominate, declare war, agree to peace, issue executive orders, define the state of the union, and pardon" (Beasley 2021) which are all powers of the heroic president laid out by Jennifer Mercieca and Justin Vaughn in their book *The Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations: Establishing the Obama Presidency*.

That words matter is a sentiment shared by every Congressional Democrat who voted to impeach or convict the former president as well as the House impeachment managers who were led by Congressman Jamie Raskin. The impeachment managers sent a letter to President Trump that read:

Two days ago, you filed an Answer in which you denied many factual allegations set forth in the article of impeachment. You have thus attempted to put critical facts at issue notwithstanding the clear and overwhelming evidence of your constitutional offense. In light of your disputing these factual allegations, I write to invite you to provide testimony under oath, either before or during the Senate impeachment trial, concerning your conduct on January 6, 2021. We would propose that you provide your testimony (of course including cross-examination) as early as Monday, February 8, 2021, and not later than Thursday, February 11, 2021. (Raskin 2021)

The premise of the managers' letter was to set the record straight by allowing Trump to tell his side of the story, again. The impeachment managers essentially rejected the president's "Answer

in which [he] denied many factual allegations set forth in the article of impeachment” (Raskin 2021). In other words, the president’s efforts to define the context of the insurrection were deemed inadmissible by Members of Congress who were elected to represent their congressional districts. The process of impeachment embedded into the US Constitution, just like a US president’s term which starts with the Oath of Office that is worded specifically within the Constitution. The impeachment managers then invited the president to testify “under oath” (Raskin 2021) which would force the president to answer question pertaining to his alleged involvement in the insurrection at the US Capitol.

Understanding the impeachment case against Donald Trump from the opposing party’s view is easy, but it is the few Republican Members of Congress who voted against party lines who interest me because even though they cite the Constitution as well, the predominant case for impeachment was that of morality. The most high-profile example came from Liz Cheney of Wyoming, the third most powerful Republican in the House of Representatives. Her remarks came during a call with Republicans where she called the impeachment vote one of “conscience.” In a public statement released by her office, Cheney cited the President as the person who “assembled the mob, and lit the flame of this attack” (Cheney 2021). Most interestingly, Cheney described Donald Trump’s role as the greatest betrayal “by a President of the United States of his office and his oath to the Constitution” (Cheney 2021).

As a staunch conservative, Cheney invoking the Constitution is hardly surprising and neither is her elevation of the Constitution to a document of moral importance. An article written by two professors of law at Columbia Law School and a postdoctoral fellow at Columbia Law School argues that “To an unprecedented extent, Republican and Democratic members of Congress no longer speak the same constitutional language” (Pozen et al. 2019). Their research

found that conservatives are more likely to cite language “dating back to the ratification of the original Constitution in the late 1700s” and that liberals “Terms from or about the Reconstruction Amendments of 1865–70” (Pozen et al. 2019). By invoking the Oath of Office in the same way that Jamie Raskin and the rest of the impeachment managers did, Liz Cheney closed the Constitutional gap between Democrats and Republicans while also constituting a permission structure for other House Republicans to vote in favor of impeachment.

Cheney heightens the importance of morality within politics while citing the Constitution as a public that her colleagues in the House of Representatives all are members of. She destroyed our right to be our own public, making the case that publics include more than just the individual and that the public of the United States must remain strong and unified. I argue within this chapter that although she makes a compelling argument for publics existing only for groups of people, Donald Trump has the ability to rise above that idea because he is able to draw followers in by convincing them that he understands them and that they are all in the fight together. He convinces his supporters by shaping the context in which he speaks to fit the narrative he wishes to tell, creating faux publics in his wake.

In just two short paragraphs, Liz Cheney placed the burden of formation back on the words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, and not on Trump. By attempting to take away the presidential power of definition, Cheney challenges her colleagues to live up to the notion that good governance depends on the publics and counterpublics defined by the leaders elected by and for the people.

Trump, however, reverts to an “us vs. them” strategy in order to create his publics, a strategy he has used since he announced his candidacy for president in 2015. In that 2015 address, he used stereotypes to describe Mexicans and immigrants, stating that:

They're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you.

They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” (Trump 2015)

In this scenario, the “us” is the United States and the “them” is immigrants traveling up through Mexico. He perpetuates this bifurcated dynamic in order to, on his own terms, redefine the political landscape as one containing many dangers to “us.”

Trump's dividing of the American people did not stop after he won the presidency. In March 2020, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) declared the coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic. The President of the United States then delivered an Oval Office address where he went through a list of action items his administration was taking. He calls the United States' response team “the best anywhere in the world” and states that “The European Union failed to take the same precautions” (Trump 2020). From the outset of his speech, the president, like Kennedy, is creating his public. The United States versus everyone else.

Among the new guidelines the Trump administration laid out was a 30-day travel ban from Europe that did not include the United Kingdom. The reason for this being an attempt to stop the spread of the coronavirus, something the administration was already calling a “foreign virus” (Trump 2020). By labeling COVID-19 as “foreign,” Trump adds yet another layer of separation between the United States and the rest of the world. He is arguing, through a show of national strength, that the virus could never affect America under his watch. Trump calls his team's handling of COVID-19:

The most aggressive and comprehensive effort to confront a foreign virus in modern history. I am confident that by counting and continuing to take these tough measures, we

will significantly reduce the threat to our citizens, and we will ultimately and expeditiously defeat this virus. (Trump 2020)

Throughout Trump's address were words indicating strength, fortitude, or speed which British philosopher of language J.L. Austin would argue contain a "truth value." Austin wrote a 1962 book called *How to Do Things with Words* in which he argued that statements rarely contain these truth values. Austin's argument is in contrast to positivism which holds that information is based off of experience and therefore empiricism. Without a truth value, utterances can take on their own meaning, therefore becoming an utterance "that serves to inform" (Austin 6). To each person that makes a statement, there will be a truth value to said statement. That truth is formed by experiences instilled within a person, leading them to perceive the world in myriad ways. This type of utterance is what Austin calls "constative utterances" (Austin 6).

Being aware of potential long-term impact on the political consciousness of the world or American populace matters because a president's words are forever, literally. By law, every speech, press briefing, or even Thanksgiving turkey pardon will forever be archived, as dictated under the Presidential Records Act of 1978. By law, rhetoric is cumulative and is unbound by time making the US presidency a job for the heroic president who is willing to be precise.

Donald Trump's mixed messaging in response to the coronavirus pandemic demonstrates a disconnect between Trump's perception of a heroic president and the need to be exacting. After spending nine minutes asking for the cooperation of the American people, he changed his tune shortly thereafter and downplayed the seriousness of the virus through the 2020 Presidential Election. Trump, on multiple occasions, made claims that the coronavirus would simply "disappear" or "go away" (Paz 2020). His language matters. His words matter because he is the president and that position carries influence, regardless of political party.

What the president told his audience in this moment is that one of his greatest fears is being seen as effeminate based off of his perception of femininity. Gender theorist Judith Butler argues, and Austin would agree, that bodily coherence exists from actions and desires which, in turn, assist us in society in forming basic notions of gender. Austin would agree because both thinkers are arguing against a truth value, something that Butler sees in how social performances have determined the way society has created and now views gender. Butler writes:

But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. (Butler 175)

Rather than describe an entity or idea that embodies just anatomical sex, gender identity, or gender performance, Butler meditates on the intersection and co-functionality of all three dimensions. In regards to Trump, he parodies a masculinity from which he references societal clues and his own personal interpretations. To borrow Butler's terminology, his anatomical sex is male, his gender identity is male, but his gender performance is female. Trump's first two dimensions of gender identity are straight forward enough as he clearly views himself as masculine and as a dominating figure as evidenced by leaving his suit jacket unbuttoned so as to appear physically larger.

Trump's performance of gender, however, is where Butler's strengths shine through. Trump believes that masculinity and femininity are contradictions. That belief lives within him

and is one person, but the perception of masculinity and femininity being contradictions lives within him. When reading Butler, that gender is a construct society has constituted and that women take on the role of providing comfort, and security is central. Coincidentally, all of those traits make up what a president should be like. That a president must comfort and defend while being a hero is the dissonance that Butler references because American society has gendered what it means to be a heroic president because America has only ever seen a man be President of the United States.

And yet, Donald Trump claims life in the lane of the victim. It is part of his identity. Whether that is his first impeachment which he called a “witch hunt,” or in countless numbers of his campaign rallies where he railed against the mainstream media. He is able to inhabit both the body of a victim and that of the most powerful man in the world, yet another example of dissonance. I argue, then, that Trump’s gender performance is imposed on Butler’s writing, especially when she writes in a conditional writing style that helps work around perceived contradictions. The Brennan Center for Justice, a non-partisan think-tank compiled a list of some of the president’s Tweets regarding the judicial system to highlight “a troubling pattern of attacking judges and the courts for rulings he disagrees with” (Brennan Center 2017). That Trump views himself as the victim and powerful is not a contradiction at all, but it is instead demonstrative of his assumed entitlement to preferential treatment and is constitutive of his identity, not contrary.

The question of whether an individual person can be a public or not still remains. Towards the end of the Trump presidency, protests filled the streets of Washington, DC outside of his home. He had temporary fences erected that reached far beyond the permanent fencing, literally insulating himself from any outside attacks. As protests continued while he lived within

his fortress, the DC National Guard fumigated the streets with tear gas so that he could pose in front of a church for photos. Ironically, all the fencing and all of the tear gas could not keep out the virus that he for so long downplayed as a “foreign invader” or “Chinese Virus.” In all, Donald Trump could not protect the one person he had always sworn to protect, himself.

Upon Trump’s return to the White House after returning from Walter Reed, he immediately began projecting strength. What Trump does not say matters just as much. After a bout with COVID-19, the President of the United States emerged from Marine One after leaving Walter Reed Medical Center and he said more in his silences than anything he actually said with his words. Instead, Trump broke with his usual style of leaving his suit jacket unbuttoned, breaking with a well-documented style staple of buttoning only the top-most button on a two-button suit. Curiously, legend has it that King Edward VII had such the appetite that buttoning both buttons was impossible and to avoid embarrassing him, his aides followed his lead of buttoning once and the custom stuck. Usually, the former president uses his body to be an imposing and intimidating figure. He takes up lots of space on the stage when he speaks, using his arms and hands frequently to punctuate points. But here, in a moment where any notion of perceived weakness would be deathly to him as the coronavirus, he decided to button his jacket and close himself off. Typically, the way to wear a suit is to button the jacket when standing, but Trump rarely ever did so. Suits are meant to be buttoned in order to slim down the person wearing them. Trump’s buttoning of his suit demonstrates a show of health and virility, both signs of his notion of masculinity.

Presidential rhetoric is more than just what a president says. Presidential rhetoric is what a president says, but it is also what he doesn’t say. After having ascended the White House steps to the South Lawn balcony, the president stood in front of the cameras waiting below him. He

removed his mask, buttoned his jacket, and then proceeded to wave and salute Marine One. No words were spoken. He is the most protected person in the world and the president's advisers, staff, and doctors should never have allowed him to get the virus, let alone allow him to leave after having been hospitalized for well-short of the recommended 14 days. His mask would have remained on and he would have walked straight into the White House. Instead, Donald Trump filmed himself saluting Marine One and played that with action-movie music playing over the video.

His silence said everything and it started with him removing his mask. He is a COVID-19 patient and immediately upon release from the hospital he puts staffers, Marines, and his family at risk of more exposure. All he wanted was a photo-op and to demonstrate strength, virility, and vitality. By centering his audience's focus on Marine One and the American flags behind him, he forced us to notice the proud and bold American life he envisions. And yet, he did so without speaking a word.

Eventually, the president does say something and he uses his platform to thank the staff at Walter Reed as well as to lay out his personal philosophy of leadership. In a video that his now permanently banned Twitter account Tweeted out, Trump implores his supporters to not let the virus "dominate you" and he also told them "don't be afraid of it" (Trump 2020). At this point, the United States had struggled with the containment of the coronavirus as the total number of COVID-19 cases reached 7 million, about 20 per cent of the world's total cases (Ehley 2020) in late September, just days before the president was hospitalized. Then, Trump delved into what his perception of a leader is. He said:

We have the greatest country in the world. We're going back. We're going back to work. We're gonna be out front. As your leader I had to do that. I knew there's danger to it, but

I had to do it. I stood out front. I led. Nobody that's a leader would not do what I did. And, I know there's a risk, there's a danger, but that's OK. And now I'm better, and maybe I'm immune. I don't know. But don't let it dominate your lives. Get out there. Be careful. (Trump 2020)

The series of “we” statements from the president indicates unity, but only amongst his supporters. Nearly seven months into the pandemic had exhausted the American public and divided the country along party lines. A Pew Research poll conducted in July of 2020 found that about a third of Republicans and conservative leaning independents believe the conspiracy that “powerful people intentionally planned the COVID-19 outbreak is probably or definitely true, compared with 18% of Democrats and Democratic leaners” (Schaeffer 2020). As Trump explains his leadership style, it is clear that he believes in the gendered expectations of the heroic president. The old adages that a “captain goes down with his ship” or that a general “fights from the front lines” are on Trump’s mind. He uses language like “dominate” and “fight” in order to better encompass the toughness he wishes to make apparent. Such conflict-oriented rhetoric belies a militarized masculinity within Trump that feeds into his performance of both the presidency and his warped perception of masculinity.

Chapter 2: The Unfinished Presidency—An Incomplete Story

The President of the United States is clothed in immense power which stems not just from the Constitution of the United States, but from the electorate as well. Throughout the history of the United States, only five presidents have won the Electoral College vote but have also lost the popular vote which indicates at least a slim mandate with which the president can then govern. Presidents of the United States can then use that mandate, given to them by voters,

to utilize powers not written into the Constitution. David Zarefsky, Professor Emeritus at Northwestern University wrote a 2004 paper entitled “Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition” in which he argues that a president, by using powers not enumerated by the Constitution, has the power to define a “political reality” (Zarefsky p. 611). A president is able to define political reality not by forcing a view upon his audience, but rather by giving a name to a situation. To name a situation is to “shape the context in which events or proposals are viewed by the public” (Zarefsky 611). The power to define, Zarefsky writes, is not a new phenomenon, reaching all the way back to George Washington’s time in office.

I argue, then, that a president’s time in office places insufficient and artificial boundaries on the impact that a president can have. Enter Trish Loughran, Associate Professor of English at the University of Illinois. Loughran’s research focuses on the United States and the “profoundly unfinished nature of the republic” (Loughran xvii). I use Loughran’s research to prove that like the United States, an unfinished product itself, a presidency is unfinished too. Loughran’s research of the perpetual movement and changing of a nation and a nation’s history is critical to my own research because that longevity allows for the kind of long-form analysis of presidential speechmaking. To analyze presidential speechmaking and its role in shaping history, Loughran’s work must be considered.

Part of the reason why US presidents are unfinished products is because the very document they swear an oath to, the US Constitution, “could no longer be contained in loosely and locally organized print economies” (Loughran xx). Loughran states that a nation will never be complete and that because of this failure by the United States Constitution to fully unite the new nation, regional differences in the 19th century were exacerbated and led the United States into civil war. Instead, the full context surrounding historic events must be taken into account to

preserve an accurate record of history. To demonstrate, Loughran makes note of the motion that the print *The Progress of the Century: The Lightning Steam Press, the Electric Telegraph, the Locomotive, [and] the Steamboat* portrays and how the motion resembles that of a clock. Loughran argues that to view history like a clock is to ignore “the specific origins of the technologies celebrated here” (Loughran 3).

To preserve an accurate record of history, we must first examine how print culture works as an exclusionary and unequal force. Loughran writes of how necessary writing and printing was to people like Ben Franklin, but how unnecessary it was to rural communities, outside of the “coastal urban loop that dominates this country’s official history” (Loughran 23). With language proving to be inequal in not just its impact but its importance, I almost question the validity of my thesis which centers on why presidential rhetoric matters despite excluding so many. Instead, Loughran’s work only strengthens the research of this chapter. In this chapter, US presidents pass on the inequalities of language by creating publics, a rhetorical tool discussed in the previous chapter which is used by US presidents in order to categorize their audience.

Loughran’s work shows the limitations of rhetoric, which she defines early in her book by describing the fragmented production and sales of Thomas Paine’s pamphlet advocating for independence from Great Britain, *Common Sense*. Loughran’s awareness that republican forms of representation cannot show a complete story is to be noted because it works in conjunction with the rarely uniform production of *Common Sense*. Loughran argues that one pamphlet or one person cannot fully account for the “unknown histories of other parts” (Loughran 50). To acknowledge the widespread popularity of *Common Sense* may be accurate, but that is to oversimplify a sense of unity. Important to note is that production of *Common Sense* was less prolific in the South. Because Paine’s pamphlet was not as widespread as is often mistaken,

Common Sense can be most accurately seen as a tool for revolution in specific regions of the new nation rather than a great unifier.

Presidential rhetoric matters because there will always be a group of people that is excluded from the national image the president is creating. Like *Common Sense*, presidential rhetoric can look as inclusive as possible, but presidents still participate in erasing history today. The absence is difficult to analyze and measure, but it is one of the many factors that goes into speechmaking: what or who is left out. Even today, as Loughran writes, “contemporary social history has labored to reintegrate such figures into the scene of revolution, the myth of *Common Sense* silently reenacts their casual erasure” (Loughran 57).

Presidential behavior is mapped out and there is a large cache of information that can be drawn on when analyzing specific elements of the presidency, particularly presidential speechmaking. By that logic, the president’s job is to speak to the nation as a whole and update them on whatever policy, announcement, or crisis they need to talk about. Without fail, every major news outlet will carry the address so they don’t fall behind in the ratings. Presidential addresses are highly choreographed which makes me question whether or not what the president says even matters or if it is the location, the space, that does the work for them.

In the face of great uncertainty, whether that is a civil war or racial strife, Americans look to their president for reassurance and comfort. Performance theorist Diana Taylor addresses what kind of choreography US presidents use to be a stabilizing force. At the same time, the common conception is that all Americans should feel as if the president is a person they can look to for comfort, regardless of demographic background. By taking a step back, as Loughran suggests, and examining the long history of the United States in its full context, presidential speechmaking

as both an inclusionary and exclusionary force comes into focus and both can then be viewed as character traits stitched into the fabric of the United States.

President Abraham Lincoln and President Barack Obama, despite belonging to two different generations, both grappled with the impact of racism and racial violence during their presidencies. As President Lincoln struggled to pull together the threads of a nation tearing at the seams during the Civil War, President Obama fought many of the same battles that Lincoln did when it came to racial division. He did so as this nation's first African American president, bringing with him a lived experience no other president could.

Just because a president has the power to define the circumstances or the response to a catastrophe does not mean they should exercise that power. Especially during wars and battles that rip apart nations, a president's words matter because they have the power to oversimplify complex arguments without fear of condemnation when the opposite should be true. Zarefsky describes a similar concept when he talks about "condensation symbols" (Zarefsky p. 612) which is a word or phrase that condenses "a host of different meanings and connotations that otherwise might diverge" (Zarefsky pp. 612-13). Think "Make America Great Again" or "Hope" or "Amazing Grace." Such phrases allow presumably divergent groups to discover similarities in their beliefs and then arrive at the same conclusion.

Precise speechmaking encompasses more than just the reading of the speech and captures speech as a performance. Diana Taylor, a performance theorist, wrote a 2007 essay "Remapping Genre through Performance: From 'American' to 'Hemispheric' Studies." She introduces a new way to understand American history through movement and gesture in addition to language and rhetoric. Taylor's framing, which I will borrow for the sake of this chapter, centers on two "manifestations of the repertoire" (Diana Taylor 1417) which she calls "performatives" and

“animatives” (Taylor 1417). Simply, and as Taylor describes, a performative is language with an action tied to it and animatives are what Taylor defines as the “less structured interactions among individuals” (Taylor 1417). More specifically, and related more so to political speechmaking, is the idea that performatives describe and change the social reality they are describing.

In regards to Presidents of the United States, the kind of leadership that performatives and animatives supplement is both adaptive and transformative leadership. Ronald Heifetz, a Harvard lecturer whose work specializes in leadership, argues that adaptive leaders ask tough questions of their audience while also maintaining a safe distance, allowing them to assign the power to the public (Heifetz 130). In what might seem like a contrast, the transformative leader embraces the role of heroic president and also pushes for change within the audience. The two are not so different and in certain instances, like a civil war or in response to a racially motivated attack, they must be used in conjunction.

President Lincoln: The Construction of the Nation

Before Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” the United States was not the unified and strong One Nation that the Founding Fathers envisioned. Lincoln himself knew that and he played his role of the heroic president beautifully. Afterall, Lincoln was an actor who knew Shakespeare and who “knew a good deal about rhythmic delivery and meaningful inflection” (Garry Wills 2012). So, Lincoln delivered the address he wanted to and just as an aide did, he took pride in “an important occasion put to good use” (Wills 2012). As Churchill put it almost “four score and seven years” (Lincoln 1863) later, Lincoln did not waste his crisis. Instead, Lincoln’s use of performatives helps him redefine not just the United States Constitution but history as well.

Lincoln composes a speech of just 272 words, and he wastes none of them. The rhythm he builds is slow and insistent, slowly marching along with his audience. He writes “We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live” (Lincoln 1863). The repetition of the pronoun “we” in the first few sentences turn the words into more poem than speech. Like in poems, the sentences that Lincoln crafted are simply lines within stanzas that move in lockstep with the previous stanza. By methodically pulling together the necessary steps, Lincoln’s language reimagines the original birth of America alongside the rebirth of the United States once the war is done.

To build or produce is the central theme of Lincoln’s address. He restructures and reframes the way in which his audience understood two seminal documents in United States history: The Declaration of the United States and the United States Constitution. Lincoln uses words and phrases like “brought forth,” “conceived,” and “birth” to convey a sense of progress that already happened and what progress is to come.

Lincoln’s reimagination of the birth of the nation is powerful because he was able to define the moral vision of the nation that differed from the Constitution. Using the Declaration of Independence as a call to a higher ideal, Lincoln “put its central proposition, equality, in a newly favored position as a principle of the Constitution” (Wills 2012). Northwestern professor emeritus Garry Wills calls it “one of the most daring acts of open-air sleight of hand ever witnessed by the unsuspecting” (Wills 2012) which of course it is. Lincoln’s claim that equality is a founding principle of the United States is that “daring act of open-air sleight of hand” (Wills 2012) simply because that ignores the very existence of slavery throughout the birth of the nation and that slavery was the predominant reason behind the Civil War in the first place.

On his quest to redeem the United States, Lincoln constructs his speech sequentially which mirrors the formation of the United States in that specific moments are “bound to the preceding and the following by some resumptive element” (Wills 2012). This is a rhetorical structure that makes Lincoln’s goal of unifying a country fractured by civil war around a single proposition of equality originally laid out in one of his people’s founding documents. In doing so, Lincoln did his job too well and his precision was too finely tuned. Instead of just pulling the country back together while in the midst of civil war, Lincoln’s redefinition of the United States’ history ignores slavery altogether and gives rise to “an authoritative expression of the American spirit” (Wills 2012). This expression lays the groundwork for the formation of one people, yes, but it also nationalism that lives on still today.

In Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, the president uses language that honors both the living and the dead, but he does so by giving the nation a new purpose, born out of nearly fifty thousand dead soldiers and a divided country. Lincoln’s speech is filled with language that is full of conditions, full of unfinished business, full of death. If read in a vacuum, the first half of the speech feels as if it is lacking something. Maybe that something is respect for the dead whose living comrades were “crudely posting the names of the Union dead with sketchy information on boards, not stopping to figure out what units the Confederate bodies had belonged to” (Wills 2012). Even still, Lincoln writes of the birth of the United States, describing what he believes the founding fathers intended for their new nation while also maintaining that our duty as descendants to the forefathers is to carry on that legacy and not let our nation, that rose from revolution, crumble to pieces.

Lincoln’s address not only reaffirms his belief that we must carry on the legacy of the founding fathers, but he restates the Constitution, allowing for his audience, the United States, to

start anew. He affirms his belief that continuing to make progress is critical to the livelihood of the United States by saying, “that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom” (Lincoln 1863). By wiping away past faults and arguing that “we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground” (Lincoln 1863), Lincoln redefines what values the United States will, from that point onward, stand for. We cannot do so because, like the battlefield before them that is stained with blood (Wills 2012), our nation’s origin is just as stained. Lincoln then continues by arguing that the duty falls to all of us, from that point onward, to ensure that a nation engulfed in “a great civil war” can emerge as one nation instead of fractions. Lincoln places the burden of hallowing the ground not on “The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract” (Lincoln 1863) but on not only his contemporaries, but also all Americans who follow.

We must, as Lincoln writes, be “dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced” (Lincoln 1863). Furthering the comparison between soldiers, civilians, and the founding fathers are the very last words that Lincoln spoke. “That this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth” (Lincoln 1863). Lincoln imagines an entirely new nation emerging from the Civil War because of the sacrifice these soldiers made. He argues that the only way for that to happen is if we continue their work so that “these dead shall not have died in vain” (Lincoln 1863). Accepting the Declaration of Independence’s directive to form a more perfect union after Lincoln reconstructed the conception of the United States is remarkable. Lincoln put his people’s ingenuity and very identity to the test, showing them how to rebuild a nation.

President Obama: Performing Platitudes

President Barack Obama's career outside of the presidency focused on the idea that great change is a process, not brought about by passivity. He learned this from a young age as he was raised by his grandparents in Hawaii after his mother sent him off because she was "concerned for his education" (Nelson 2019). Upon reflecting on his life as a young man, Obama states "I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant" (Nelson 2019). So, he left Hawaii and attended Occidental College in Los Angeles for two years before completing his studies at Columbia University in New York City. After graduating in 1983 with a political science degree, Obama took a job as a community organizer, a profession built on relationship-building from the grassroots up. There, he saw working-class communities and communities of color struggling, giving Obama "his first deep immersion into the African American community he had longed to both understand and belong to" (Nelson 2019). Fast-forward just over a decade and the former President of the Harvard Law Review is eyeing a run for U.S. Senate. Obama set himself apart from big-name Democrats of the early 2000s, Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, John Edwards and the like, due to his anti-Iraq War stance eventually earning him political favor as the war grew unpopular over time.

President Obama forgets neither history nor the power of song. After the 2015 shooting in Charleston, South Carolina in which nine African Americans were killed, President Obama delivered the eulogy for Reverend Clementa Pinckney, the pastor of Mother Emmanuel Church who was killed in the attack. In his speech, Obama took his audience on a lesson in history and explained the extensive history of the Black church. American Methodist Episcopal churches sprung up after the Civil War, providing refuge, both spiritual and physical. Mother Emmanuel,

more specifically, “was founded by African Americans seeking liberty” (Obama 2017) and remained a sacred place of history in Charleston even as Mother Emmanuel Church was burned down early in its history.

Mother Emmanuel, more specifically, “was founded by African Americans seeking liberty” (Obama 2015) and remained a sacred place of history in Charleston even as Mother Emmanuel Church was burned down early in its history. His eulogy memorialized Reverend Clementa Pinckney with receiving the bulk of notoriety and praise. Reverend Pinckney, was ordained at the age of 18 and then at 23 he became the youngest elected Black member of the South Carolina legislature (Sack 2015). A physical embodiment of Church and State, Reverend Pinckney was killed in American Methodist Episcopal, his sanctuary. Mourners gathered at the College of Charleston to honor Reverend Pinckney and the eight other worshippers murdered by hate during a Bible study.

President Obama’s subtle nods to the history of slavery and the Civil Rights movement highlight the ways in which President Obama is able to define American history. Obama’s eulogy begins with “Giving all praise and honor to God” and then a reading from the Book of Hebrews before calling Rev. Pinckney “anointed.” A man chosen by God to spread His word. Within Obama’s praise lies his habit of telling a story and creating or preserving an archive. Afterall, the first 13 paragraphs methodically maneuvering through Pinckney’s life story. From the outset of his remarks, we know that Obama will heavily lean on the history of Black churches and Black spirituality as a part of history, beginning the eulogy with a benediction “Giving all praise and honor to God” (Obama 2015). He says that Reverend Pinckney was “Anointed. He was the progeny of a long line of the faithful -- a family of preachers who spread God’s word, a family of protesters who sowed change to expand voting rights and desegregate the South”

(Obama 2017). That Reverend Pinckney was “anointed” indicates his God-given right to lead, plucked from a long line of preachers, dedicated to God, but also to leaders within the community. By grounding his speech in the life of Clementa Pinckney, Obama is then able to quickly tie in Pinckney’s family and then the African American community by showing his audience the impact that generations of preachers had on the Church as well as the Civil Rights movement.

President Obama’s words, embraces the largest swath of people and rejects the smallest number too. That is because his audience is massive. He is speaking not just to the people at the service for Clementa Pinckney, but to all who have worshipped in Mother Emmanuel Church, Charleston, South Carolina, the United States, and the world. He is speaking to all of those publics. Most importantly, he is speaking to history itself. By focusing on the history of the Black Church, Obama makes his audience everyone touched by Mother Emmanuel Church over the years as well as anyone who will step foot in the church from then on.

President Obama is acutely aware of how history archives the words of a president and that he has the power, then, to influence the shape of history. By placing himself within his own presidency, which was historical in its own right, Obama uses a rhetorical framework that points to the presidency being circular and never-ending more so than an arc with definitive beginning and end points. Jennifer Mercieca and Justin Vaughn argue that President Obama adds pressure to himself because he “overtly recognized the ‘crossroads of history,’ the ‘moment,’ the ‘extraordinary times,’ indeed, the ‘tremendous burden’ of his presidency” (Mercieca and Vaughn 2014). His presidency, marked by some simply for this moment in time, had the potential to shape world history. According to Mercieca and Vaughn, the high expectations we place upon our presidents might not be in the Constitution, but that they are instead “a function of our

cultural tradition of glorifying presidential memories” (Mercieca and Vaughn 2014). President Obama must then live up to those expectations in order to be seen as a great president. This analysis does not do justice to President Obama’s ability to reframe his own work as president. The way that Mercieca and Vaughn describe the heroic president is one that swoops in every once in a while, to fix everything and then leaves. Instead, a real hero remains on the ground with the people in need and then stays with them to cultivate relationships.

President Obama tackles the issue of passivity in his White House press briefing a day after nine worshippers were killed while attending Bible study. In his opening remarks he says, “And to say our thoughts and prayers are with them and their families, and their community doesn’t say enough to convey the heartache and the sadness and the anger that we feel.” The message of “thoughts and prayers” is a platitude, or the inability to consecrate a reality with authority. In certain cases, consecration is not what the situation calls for as Obama recognized in his press conference briefing. Obama demonstrates his awareness of the various roles thrust upon him by the American people, acknowledging that “thoughts and prayers” are not enough to console.

Recently, the platitude thoughts and prayers has come under more intense scrutiny with much of that criticism stemming from the fact that substantive change, in response to moments like the Charleston shooting, is rarely seen in conjunction with the trite messaging. And the absence of change is the issue with platitudes and why President Obama dismissing one of the most often used is so important. Especially coming from him, a president who is criticized for not showing his emotions enough (John 2014) which, to some people, would have been the comfort they needed. To issue simply “thoughts and prayers” or to say “we don’t have all the facts,” which he says later in his address, is to allow for the people reading, listening, or

watching to escape. Platitudes provide a soft cushioning for the difficult-to-talk-about topics that make for uncomfortable conversations over the dinner table and they erase the tragic event that preceded the empty message. But for President Obama to publicly express anger and sadness is as stark a message as any that he intends to galvanize the country into a response that was more than just platitudes.

President Obama uses history as a guidebook in order for him to make his case to the American people that he is a leader equipped and unafraid to be vulnerable, removing the burden of the heroic president from his shoulders. He does this by formulating an argument on race that focuses not on the divisiveness, but rather on what brings people together. And what brings people together is faith, or so Obama argues. A faith rooted in the belief that “You don’t have to be of high station to be a good man” (Obama 2015).

But to have faith, action is required and US presidents must be examples of faith. The words of the president are an insufficient way of looking at the rhetorical presidency and that there is more to it than simply a person who stands up and reads well. America is a performance, just like rhetoric and the presidency are. That performance is made up of different lives woven together by the strands of history with our president as the weaver. A performance is more than just the words, or performatives, written on a page, however.

In its very essence, speechmaking as a performance is narrow and must be expanded to include a president’s actions as well as their inactions, their words as well as their silences. By focusing his argument upon the notion that divine grace being unconditional, Obama showed his audience that he was not there to lecture them nor even to lead them. In fact, he was in dialogue with his audience, which is uncharacteristically passive. He defers to his audience for guidance rather than leaning into his usual routine of being a president critiqued for being distant. That

Obama made the “decision to sing ‘Amazing Grace’ at the end of his eulogy for the Rev. Clementa Pinckney” (Peter Baker 2015) hardly matters despite appearing to be Obama reverting to old habits. Obama was able to animate his speech in a way not possible without first leaning into divine grace, as given by God, being unconditional. In yet another moment stemming from racial violence, Obama abandons his traditional animatives and he opts for singing. He opts for a medium which is highly vulnerable in and of itself and he models transformation through song. The transformation, however, is not the audience’s which is part of the cache of information on presidential speech. Instead, President Obama himself transforms after having been moved by the audience to break away from his own status quo of cool aloofness.

Epilogue: The Function of the Author

Until this point, the two previous chapters highlighted what it means to be the President of the United States. The heroic president was the framework of chapter one. In chapter two, I used performatives to animate the power of presidential definition in relation to history. Upon first glance, these two chapters appear disparate and without through-lines connecting them. However, this final chapter ties together the two worlds of chapters one and two while adding in author function. To accomplish this interconnectedness, I use Cleanth Brooks who is a professor and literary critic.

Here are some articles of faith I can subscribe to:

The presidency is a living document that changes with each new chapter.

Catastrophe can be a turning point that sustains the notion of what it means to be American.

From catastrophe grows political and legal cover for presidents as they attempt to unify the American people.

The format of these statements is borrowed from Brooks' 1951 essay titled "The Formalist Critics." I use Brooks' assertion that "A literary work is a document and as a document can be analysed in terms of the forces that have produced it, or it may be manipulated as a force in its own right. It mirrors the past, it may influence the future" (Brooks 3). Instead, I argue in this chapter that the US presidency is the literary work that Brooks describes, mirroring the past as it influences a future. I argue that the presidency can then be "analysed in terms of the forces that have produced it, or it may be manipulated as a force in its own right" (Brooks 3) which indicates the ability of the presidency to evolve as a tool.

Within the framing of this project, the presidency is one of the tools left to the disposal of citizens in the United States as well as Presidents of the United States. For example, thinker Michel Foucault points out that an author's job is to "characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society" (Foucault 305). As I argued in a previous chapter, what Foucault is describing aligns with the presidential power of definition proposed by David Zarefsky. Within the boundaries of my research, the function of a president is to, as political scientist David Zarefsky states, "characterize a social reality" (Zarefsky 611), I push the power of definition further by arguing that to define is to author and that to author is to absorb and assume a function.

To assume a function is to complete a complex operation that can "construct the rational entity we call an author" (Foucault 307). Rational entity refers to the construction of an author through "transhistorical constants" (307) which refers to an entity's ability to hold throughout human history, not just by way of the structure of society. In other words, Presidents of the United States and their words are transhistorical constants, a function of work that despite evolving, remains a constant force at the top of global politics. The United States electorate has

placed a function onto a president. Function, which here means a role a president is supposed to play, demonstrates the power that an individual has in altering public perception of the presidency.

The perception of the President of the United States I alter is one full of contradictions. My first two chapters focused on the individuality of the presidency and the power of unification that US presidents have. I finally arrive at a chapter of false collectivity, a phrase that contains two words seemingly opposed to one another. I study the attack on Pearl Harbor and the September 11th attacks and I argue that Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and George W. Bush put on a façade of unity in the wake of two of the largest attacks on American soil by foreign entities. Even though false collectivity has two words that I would not associate together, the catastrophes in this chapter give presidents political and even legal cover, especially when they use unification as a rhetorical technique, allowing for false collectivity to be born.

President Roosevelt: Claiming Victimhood and Creating a Scapegoat

The difference between a statement and a claim is that a statement requires no evidence. A claim, however, must lead to the presentation of evidence to back up the statement. Most importantly, a claim is a statement that any reasonable person could dispute. The overarching claim that President Roosevelt makes in his “Date of Infamy” speech is that the United States must declare war on imperial Japan because of the imminent threat the Japanese pose to American sovereignty.

Roosevelt mentions and directs the attention of his audience to this threat to American ideals multiple times throughout his address. His claims struck me as especially alarming because of the United States’ history of conflating colonialism with the spread of democracy. He

accomplishes this by pitting the United States against Japan and all others who would dare oppose America's help in achieving a democracy. By playing on the intimate nature of his fireside chats, Roosevelt created a community that included only American citizens.

The urgency with which Roosevelt spoke makes his address to Congress in which Roosevelt requests a formal declaration of war against Japan feels more like a news bulletin than is befitting of the address. Roosevelt addresses the nation just one day after the attack for two main reasons. He wants to demonstrate how presidential he is, as defined by him, and he wants Congress to declare war on Japan. By getting the information out to the American public quickly and decisively, Roosevelt shows how urgent a response from the American military must be while also giving him the ability to make unfounded and incomplete claims with the presumption of objectivity that is assumed of a journalist.

In a number of instances, Roosevelt mentions that he is addressing the nation just one day after the attacks on Pearl Harbor, Malaya, Hong Kong, Guam, Philippine Islands, Wake Island, and Midway Island which emphasizes the rapid pace that Roosevelt is moving, mimicking a news cycle. Roosevelt also says, "The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our Nation" (Roosevelt 1941). I see the "very life and safety of our Nation" not just as the literal lives of Americans, but as Roosevelt recognizing an opportunity to further the idea of American superiority at home and abroad. As such, Roosevelt tricks the American people into seeing value only in the "very life and safety of our Nation." He sees an attack on all of the above locations as a direct attack on the United States and its ideals. In each of the islands he mentions, there is significant American influence in the creation of a democratic state.

Most importantly, Roosevelt still invokes his legal and Constitutional powers. He calls on Congress to declare war, a significant step, which lends this situation more gravity and seriousness. Roosevelt recognizes that he cannot unilaterally “declare war,” but he demonstrates his knowledge of some aspects of presidential definition by citing the Commander-in-Chief clause in the Constitution to direct American forces in as decisive a way as he can. He says, “As Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense.”

By using the Constitution, Roosevelt solidifies himself within the bounds of legality while also subtly revealing his true intentions which are to demonstrate a focus on the US military. Roosevelt says

The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian Islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. I regret to tell you that very many American lives have been lost. In addition American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu. (Roosevelt 1941)

By focusing first on the loss to American naval and military forces, Roosevelt sets his priorities. Despite returning to the fact that “very many American lives have been lost,” that sentiment comes right before yet another mention of American ships. Roosevelt’s focus on strategic and militaristic targets rather than human lives allows the president to define the notion of what it means to be an American. That notion is one centered around militarism, not of human impact.

In the past, the United States has used its military to interfere in the affairs of other countries with little regard for actually working with them. The Bay of Pigs, under President Kennedy, is an example of such interference. Roosevelt calls Japan, an island country, a threat to America and, by extension, democracy, inverting the power dynamic between the two countries.

He even goes so far as to call the attacks “an onslaught against us.” Roosevelt quickly labels Japan as a “grave danger” to the United States. He does this by correctly identifying Japan as an imperial nation with one leader, the Emperor.

Roosevelt also calls back to the Oath of Office that he and every president before him and since him has spoken. He remarks “With confidence in our armed forces with the unbounding determination of our people we will gain the inevitable triumph so help us God.” The final line of the Oath of Office ends with “so help me God.” Roosevelt intentionally continues the notion that we, the United States, are in this together and that extends to the highest office in our country. By changing the wording to “so help us God,” Roosevelt is playing on the notion that everyone can have an impact on what he hopes will be the upcoming war.

Roosevelt made the conscious decision to not just emphasize the physical distance between the United States and Japan, but also, and most importantly, the political differences. The Japanese Emperor had near complete political control then and the title of “emperor” is higher than “king” in the monarchical order. Roosevelt showed that even with the checks and balances in place in the United States, we could act and respond to the attacks in a timely manner. Roosevelt laid out the argument that because he believed “Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago,” the United States could respond within days too.

Roosevelt goes even further in describing the attack, likening it to a foreign invasion. He says “No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory” (Roosevelt 1941). Such a massive military operation needed planning on the part of the Japanese, but Roosevelt also suggests that America is the one being bullied into submission. He also suggests that the attack is

an invasion which serves as a precursor to the relocation and internment of 112,000 people of Japanese ancestry which began only two months after the attack at Pearl Harbor (National Archives 2020). The relocation camps were in response to “rash of fear about national security” (National Archives 2020).

President Bush: Shifting the Focus of the American People

Emma Lazarus’ “The New Colossus” To a certain extent, her poem is a sonnet, or love poem, to immigrants. Lazarus’ New Colossus welcomes immigrants with her torch which is a beacon to all those exiled or lost. But Lazarus also calls immigrants “wretched refuse” (Line 12). In the poem that is set in bronze at the base of the Statue of Liberty, Emma Lazarus recognizes that individuals not born in the United States will never fully be welcome because they cannot be. They are instead discarded scraps from places lower than the United States. And if they aren’t welcome in a place worse than the United States, then there is no reason to fully accept them here. Essentially, they will never be truly welcome in the United States even though we promote a message of welcoming and maternal love.

The message of welcoming within George Bush’s Oval Office address exists as a façade. Bush calls America “the brightest beacon of freedom and opportunity in the world.” Not only does this claim ignore the accomplishments of other countries that offer freedom and opportunity, but it continues the narrative of American superiority. He argues that the only reason the United States was attacked was because we offer those things. President Bush said this, “No one will keep that light from shining” (Bush 2001) meaning that democracy is the light that America brings to the world stage and that America will continue on.

In just over four minutes, President Bush delivered an address to the nation that eased the minds of millions across the country and the world. His message being one of solidarity and steel. America will not yield to the terrorists who not only attacked our buildings and hijacked our planes, but who attacked a way of life. Bush did so within the first two paragraphs. He said:

Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts. The victims were in airplanes or in their offices: secretaries, business men and women, military and federal workers, moms and dads, friends and neighbors. Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror. The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge -- huge structures collapsing have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger. These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed. Our country is strong. (Bush 2001)

Not only will “our way of life” remain unchanged, but our people will also remain strong in will. Bush offered measured reassurance that while “disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger” are the dominant emotions running through the minds of the American people, “evil, despicable acts of terror” will not prevail. Bush’s words served a solemn but defiant message that was meant to display how united the United States was. However, I point to the empathy that President Bush displays by listing the sadness, anger, and disbelief he claims as the emotions of a nation in shock. In just the first paragraph, Bush creates a public that is the United States of America. He does so by embracing his assumed role as Consoler-in-Chief, grabbing authority from the beginning of his speech.

An important take away from President Bush’s address was with how immediately the economy reopened along with the government. The priority has now shifted from the immediate

responders going in to rescue potential survivors and is now on the financial well-being of the country. Bush says, “The functions of our government continue without interruption. Federal agencies in Washington which had to be evacuated today are reopening for essential personnel tonight and will be open for business tomorrow. Our financial institutions remain strong, and the American economy will be open for business as well” (Bush 2001). To reopen for business as usual for one of the world’s leading economies within a day of the worst attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor demonstrates strength, but also a willingness from Bush to showcase a priority for his administration, hollowing his message.

President Bush’s message was hollow. He spoke at great length about the strength of America and how first responders, the people who donated blood, and the hospital workers are indicative of America’s neighborliness. He called for “justice and peace” (Bush 2001) while describing America as still able to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world” (Bush 2001). I challenge that notion. President Bush mentioned how the people who died in the attacks were neighbors, teachers, moms, dads, and other occupations. He makes no mention of their humanity. But in the days that followed the attacks and as information regarding who carried them out, the Muslim community was turned against and Islamophobia became far more common (Gallup 2021). Even future President of the United States Donald Trump falsely claimed that he saw Muslims cheering in the streets after the attacks (Kessler 2015).

If President Bush wants to talk about how Americans care for one another, then he is incorrect in stating that Americans care for all Americans. As the President continues with his address, he says that “These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and into retreat, but they have failed.” By implying that the retaliation against the Muslim community is proportional, President Bush failed in his attempt to fully unify the nation. In the

aftermath of the September 11th attacks, invasions of personal privacy through the Patriot Act, invasions of other countries, and invasions of neighborhoods across the country became commonplace. Bush takes a hardline by refusing to distinguish between the “terrorists” and “those who harbor them.” This allows President Bush to ask the Congress to impose these new regulations on American’s freedoms.

Even the President of the United States, after a tragedy no less, can make an attack about taking away American freedom. Bush said “America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining” (Bush 2001). He did so before his administration announced a series of measures that would take away the freedoms of Americans, with some Americans suffering more than others. The president also invokes the Bible, ignoring the separation between church and state. He does this and then days later backlash against the Muslim community begins and continues for weeks and even still today.

Presidents Roosevelt and Bush defined a political reality through the scapegoating of various communities and by changing the center of attention off of the tragedy that just unfolded before the American people. Both men live within the function of the American presidency outlined by the American people, flexing their muscles and attempting to bend the constraints to their will.

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