WHAT A PRESIDENT SAYS MATTERS:
AN ANALYSIS OF PRESIDENTIAL RESPONSES IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC CRISIS

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to examine four presidential responses to two prolonged examples of economic crisis in the United States. First is President Herbert relative to the stock market crash of 1929; Second, President Franklin Roosevelt after the onset of the Great Depression; Third, President George W. Bush with the financial crisis of 2008 due to the unstable stock market, turmoil on Wall Street and real estate troubles; Finally incumbent President Barack H. Obama and his current leadership during the economic recession. A brief contextual history will be provided for each, followed by analysis using a synthesis of the frameworks of Theodore Windt’s international crisis genre with the modification of three constraints identified by Denise Bostdorff and Donald O’Rourke. The analysis maintains that during times of crisis, Americans have increasingly turned to their president for discourse. His response is an important component of the identification, explanation and ultimately the resolution of any economic crisis.
Chapter I

Introduction

The word crisis brings to mind ideas of instability and exigent circumstances. Referring to a situation as a crisis indicates especially threatening conditions, alerting the public to a significant problem. Throughout history, America has faced innumerable crises; the stock market crash of 1929, the Cuban missile crisis, the Iran hostage crisis, the terrorist attack on September 11\textsuperscript{th}, 2001, and now the national financial crisis. During such times Americans have increasingly turned to their president for discourse. His response is an important component of the identification, explanation and ultimately the resolution of any crisis. This paper will explore the progression of four presidential responses during two of the most severe economic crises: First President Herbert Hoover’s rhetoric relative to the stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression, is compared to his successor President Franklin Delano Roosevelt who led the U.S. out of the depression. Then President George W. Bush’s response to the recent financial crisis of 2008 is compared with his successor, the current charismatic democrat President Barack H. Obama whom American citizens hope will guide them out of the recession. The role of presidential ethos is illuminated as a crucial element for a successful rhetorical response.

Studying the effects of presidential rhetoric on public opinion in times of economic despair is important for a number of reasons. As Dan Wood illuminates, economic issues are more important than other domestic policy topics. The Gallup polls indicate that people are extremely attentive to the economy (Wood, 2007, p. 14). Today in particular, the president is considered an authoritative source of information on the economy and his opinions are highly publicized by the media (Wood, 2007, p. 15). Presidential rhetoric plays an important role in our government, where the president functions as the spokesperson for American citizens. Just as American citizens look to the president in times of
international crises to offer reassurance and solutions, in times of economic calamity the nation also makes this demand. Although much research has been done on the rhetoric of presidents in times of crises, most of this research has focused on international affairs rather than domestic economic situations. This is an important area to consider, particularly given the current state of the financial market and its resemblance to the US market of the 1930’s. Historical precedent cannot be ignored. The goal is to further our understanding of presidential economic crisis rhetoric. By studying two major crises and the leadership choices of the four presidents guiding America during these periods of crisis, particular features of rhetoric may be illuminated as strengths or weaknesses in economic crisis rhetoric.

In Chapter Two, the literature review, will examine the scholarly work concerning presidential rhetoric, particularly in times of crisis. Chapter Three will move into a general discussion covering the unique genre of economic crisis rhetoric and the methodology to be used in this paper’s analysis. Chapter Four will look at President Herbert Hoover and his response to the onset of the depression. Analysis of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s words and actions as the succeeding President will make up Chapter Five. Chapter Six concerns the actions and addresses of President George W. Bush at the beginning of the financial turmoil America faced in the final year of his term. Chapter Seven is devoted to the current President Barack H. Obama’s rhetoric and response to the recession and lingering economic crisis. Chapter Eight will highlight the implications of this research and analysis. Finally Chapter Nine involves the summary and concluding thoughts.
Chapter II

Literature Review: The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency

Today the office of the American presidency is understood to be a position of leadership and executive power. It is “both an institution and a person” (Medhurst, 2007, p. 59). We expect our president to represent our country and we demand regular discourse from him. Popular presidents of the past are often quoted and some lines will remain immortalized. However, many people often forget that the modern presidency is far different than that of our ancestors, who rarely spoke directly to the public, if at all. According to Jeffrey Tulis (1987) the first Presidents were intended to use rhetoric to communicate directly with Congress and rarely to the masses. America’s founders “worried especially about the danger a powerful executive might pose to the system if power were derived from the role of the popular leader” (Tulis, 1987, p. 27). Tulis suggests that post-Woodrow Wilson, presidents began to speak more directly to the public (1987). Effectively all nineteenth-century communication was written, whereas the twentieth-century is characterized by oral speeches. Continually distinguishing between the “old” and the “new” presidency, Tulis (1987) claims the “rhetorical presidency makes change, in its widest sense, more possible,” yet explains issues in terms of the demands of persuasion (p. 178).

In Speaking to the People: The Rhetorical Presidency in Historical Perspective Richard Ellis further considers the evolution of the role of the American President. Ellis (1998), like Tulis, stresses that prior to the late nineteenth-century presidents “were to be seen and not heard” (p. 1). However, rather than Woodrow Wilson, President Roosevelt is credited by Ellis as being “the architect of the modern presidency” (1998, p. 110). Franklin D. Roosevelt insisted on speaking directly to the convention that had nominated him, which was an unprecedented act. After 1932 the presidential candidate’s speech during the convention became a showcase event.
Furthermore Roosevelt took advantage of the radio and the ability to speak directly to the people. Roosevelt governed to a new set of norms, and those norms, in turn, created a wholly new set of expectations within the mass public regarding presidential behavior (Ellis, 1998, p. 101).

In comparison Martin Medhurst (2007) in “Rhetorical leadership and the presidency: A situational taxonomy” maintains that the American presidency has always been a position of rhetorical leadership. He stresses that rhetoric as the original form of leadership dates back to the first democracies in Ancient Greece, looking to Aristotle and Cicero he notes that rhetorical leadership is dependent on the character of the speaker and their ability to demonstrate their character to the public. The American presidency, Medhurst finds to be a uniquely constrained institution. The president must face institutional restrictions including the U.S. Constitution and Congress, but also experiences personal constraints such as their own personal characteristics, governmental philosophy and relationships (Medhurst, 2007, p. 63). Medhurst proposes “rhetorical leadership is often the key to success or failure” during one’s presidency (2007, p. 72).

It is necessary to recognize both that the presidency has changed greatly from the past as has the apparent need or desire for our president to be an orator. The rise of the rhetorical presidency seems to be the result of “a modern doctrine of presidential leadership, the mass media, and modern presidential campaigns” (Ryan, 1988, p.2). Most popular presidents have the ability to speak well and have a particular charisma. In “The Evolution of the Modern Rhetorical Presidency: A Critical Response” Chad Murphy explores the evolution of presidential rhetoric, building on the study of Ryan Teten, using a sample of State of the Union addresses, over a period of 217 years (2008). Research shows that modern presidential discourse uses “more inclusive language,” words such as “we” and “our” and the addresses are much shorter because
they are presented live, whereas in the past the addresses were written for people to read (Murphy, 2008, p. 300). He suggests that the changing forms of mass media have further influenced the development of modern presidential rhetoric. President Franklin D. Roosevelt is again identified as bringing about the “a new era” in presidential rhetoric introducing the current tradition of live addresses, to both Congress and the American public (Murphy, 2008, p. 306).

James Druckman and Justin Holmes’ “Does presidential rhetoric matter? Priming and presidential approval” considers the impact of presidential rhetoric on their approval ratings today (2004). They find that a president’s rhetoric influences his public approval, affecting his policy-making success. Presidents tend to stress advantageous issues to ensure higher approval and assessment by the public. They evaluate the State of the Union address as “the once-a-year chance for the modern president to inspire and persuade the American people” (759).

For the purposes of this essay it is necessary to look beyond the general field of presidential rhetoric and consider the constraints of leader discourse in crisis situations. Paul Zernicke’s “Presidential Roles and Rhetoric” suggests that the office has a significant impact upon the political lives of Americans (1990). Contemporary presidents generally appeal to public support. This article investigates presidents’ articulation of presidential roles in public speeches and conferences hypothesizing that when confronted with a crisis or controversy, presidents tend to tell Americans about the presidential responsibilities to rally support. Zernike determines that “the president is the first benevolent symbol of the American government to Americans” (1990, p. 213). The rhetorical presidency is more crucial as a result of televised public addresses, which can have a tremendous impact on approval ratings. Zernicke proposes presidents’ want their success in office to be viewed as personal triumphs, but the failures to be evaluated as a whole including their administration and the pressures or restrictions of the presidency.
Donald Cushman in “Political Communication: A Generic Rhetorical Criticism” explores the more general field of presidential rhetoric, but also acknowledges the importance of circumstantial discourse (1989). He concentrates on presidential rhetoric during elections and political decision-making crises. Such crises generally pertain to foreign affairs or military action. Cushman proposes that strong justification and rationalization are necessary in presidential rhetoric in order to be effective in crises situations. Likewise Karen Taylor (2007), a crisis communication researcher, finds in “Telling the story, hearing the Story: Narrative co-construction and Crisis Research” that “invitational rhetoric”, which “uses language to express a desire to understand the other, admits the inadequacy of language to express such an understanding, and indicates a willingness to learn from the other in order to build new relationships, new structures, and new metaphors” is a crucial component in crisis rhetoric (p. 1). Relative to invitational rhetoric, the construction of meaning is a joint effort in crisis discourse making evaluation of both the speaker and the audience equally important.

Theodore Windt (1986) in, “The Presidency and Speeches on International Crises: Repeating the Rhetorical Past” more specifically evaluates the category of international crisis genre. He proposes that presidential speeches, which despite unique critical situations, share similar lines of argument. These political crises are mainly rhetorical. The president makes a public announcement to the people that calls for their full support and illustrates the need for decisive action. It is “the President’s perception of the situation and the rhetoric he uses to describe it that mark an event as a crisis” (Windt, 1986, p. 126). The president can assume immense public support for his course of action in such situations because the American public sees the president as the “personification of the country” (Windt, 1986, p. 126). Generally international crisis genre speeches first require the announcement of the new situation, or
deemed crisis, then the establishment of the free world versus Communist, i.e. good versus evil and finally the call for support from the public. The purpose of a crisis genre is to instill fear so that discussion of alternative policy is restricted.

Some question the effect of presidential rhetoric, such as Jeffrey Cohen and John Hamman who consider the role of presidential rhetoric in domestic situations, focusing on how it influences the public’s view of the economy (2003). In “The polls: Can presidential rhetoric affect the public’s economic perceptions?” they find that the success of a speech rests “largely in how the public perceives the president,” a common theme scholars have noted throughout the years (Cohen & Hammans, 2003, p. 411). Cohen and Haman say economic speeches in particular are used to “restore” presidential image “by showing themselves taking action and being on top of the situation” (411).

In Bonnie Dow’s “The Function of Epideictic and Deliberative Strategies in Presidential Crisis Rhetoric” she proposes that two types of exigencies for crisis rhetoric must be acknowledged: “epideictic and deliberative” (1989). Epideictic rhetoric fulfills the need for “communal understanding,” whereas deliberative discourse strives for “policy approval” (Dow, 1989, p. 294). She suggests that the study of crisis rhetoric must be specific to the type of exigency, finding that previous analysis, particularly Windt’s, is too narrow in scope. She defines crisis events as “those situations in which the president responds to events already seen as serious, even critical” (Dow, 1989, p. 296). Since the American public is generally the primary audience for crisis discourse, we determine the meaning of the rhetoric.

Amos Kiewe (1994) in The modern presidency and crisis rhetoric distinguishes crisis rhetoric from traditional presidential rhetoric because of the perceptions of urgency, and the expectations of the public for strong presidential leadership and discourse. Crisis situations
function in either positive or harmful ways for an American president. They can provide a chance for a president to mold a powerful self-image, or they can threaten a president’s overall public approval, depending upon whether the president speaks about and resolves the crisis (Kiewe, 1994, xviii). “Crises may not be a president’s best moments, but they are defining ones for an administration” (Amos Kiewe, 1994, p. x).

Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha (1995) also evaluates presidential leadership relative to the economy, advocating presidential leadership of the economy as vital to overall presidential success in “Presidential signaling in a market economy”. His presidential signaling theory speculates, “the market anticipates the president’s future actions based on his publically stated signals on the economy” (Eshbaugh-Soha, 1995, p. 719). Signals are “bits of information” or “cues,” which the public uses to make dependable decisions on complicated issues without having comprehensive understanding (Eshbaugh-Soha, 1995, p. 720). Presidents must reassure consumers in times of economic conflict.

In “Presidential Rhetoric and Economic Leadership” Dan Wood (2004) turns a critical eye to past presidential discourse relative to our economy discovery of similar trends. Using the Public Papers of the presidents he codes the frequency and relative optimism of presidential comments on the economy, revealing that presidents in the United States have “increasingly assumed the role of rhetorical leader” in regards to the economy (Wood, 2004, p. 604). This may be attributed to its importance for public approval and reelection. Presidents seem to realize that they are held accountable for the current state of the United States economy (2004, p. 604). Generally he finds that the president’s comments concerning the economy do match the actual conditions.
Davis Houck takes a more specific look at the rhetoric of President Herbert Hoover during the 1929 stock market crash in his article “Rhetoric as currency: Herbert Hoover and the 1929 stock market crash” (2000). Houck asserts that rather than a permanent fall into the Great Depression, President Hoover shaped a campaign of confidence, “essential to economic recovery and stability” (Houck, 2000, p. 156). President Hoover, Houck finds, believed that “confidence in the future would insure economic prosperity in the present; an ‘immaterial’ collective state of mind held together a fragile material reality” (Houck, 2000, p. 156). Presidential rhetoric could serve to “soothe the country’s collective state of mind” (Houck, 2000, p. 156). Herbert Hoover entered the office the presidency with hope and promise, strong credentials and was looked at as the president “most familiar with scientific economics” (Houck, 2000, p. 160). Yet despite his experience and knowledge, President Hoover lacked great presence and speaking ability. President Herbert Hoover failed to give the rhetorical leadership necessary in light of the economic calamity facing America. His first acknowledgement of the issue was by means of a written press release two weeks after the crash. President Hoover’s short-term success was dependant on the press, since he was unwilling to speak publicly to address the “panic-stricken nation” (Houck, 2000, p. 171). Presidential assurance on a mass scale is vital in a time of such calamity, “rhetoric is currency” (Houck, 2000, p. 175).

In comparison, Denise Bostdorff and Donald O’Rourke explore successful crisis rhetoric in “The presidency and the promotion of domestic crisis: John Kennedy's management of the 1962 steel crisis” (1997). Their research shows four central rhetorical characteristics: management, polarization, value dissociation, and symbolic action. They argue that domestic crisis promotion is a certain form of “going public” in which the president petitions for public support to resolve an issue that he recognizes as a crisis (Bostdorff and O’Rourke, 1997, p. 345).
Furthermore the historical precedence is crucial to understanding modern crisis presidential rhetoric. They suggest that a president must use language that establishes a sense of urgency. Bostdorff and O’Rourke identify three significant constraints on domestic crisis rhetoric. First, policy implementation is more difficult to accomplish in domestic situations often opening up debate between Democrats and Republicans, which limits the president’s ability to manage the crisis and necessitates persuasive rhetoric. Second, unlike foreign crises, there is no identifiable tangible enemy to unite against. Finally presidents have trouble controlling the information available to the public.

Undeniably the media plays a role in how presidential rhetoric affects the public. Eric Bucy examines how a political leader’s televised behavior evokes emotional and evaluative responses in viewers in his article “Emotion, presidential communication and traumatic news” (2003). He considers the context of the World Trade Center attacks on September 11th and the rhetoric of President George W. Bush. Bucy recommends that leaders confronted with an apprehensive public “in the midst of a crisis should remain mindful of the importance of their self-presentation and take strides to appear commanding and in control through appearances that are high in potency and that inspire confidence” (2003, p. 92).

More recently ‘T Hart, Tindall and Brown in “Crisis leadership of the Bush presidency” identify three crucial crisis leadership task domains: sense making, decision making, and meaning making. They explore the response of President George W. Bush to Hurricane Katrina and the attack on September 11th (2009). Sense making involves seeing a clear picture of the events, the impact and significance. Mobilizing, facilitating and possibly adjusting the government’s preexisting emergency response system is part of the decision making task. Finally meaning making requires “taming collective stress by authoritatively explaining the crisis, its
implications and the government’s responses to the community” (‘T Hart et. al, 2009, p. 474).

They additionally highlight the important role of “advisory configuration,” or the informal and formal advisors who provide the leader with essential information, advice and support during crises (2009, p. 479).

A survey of existing scholarship on the evolution of the American presidency into one of rhetorical emphasis, focusing specifically on the economy and crises indicates a strong interest, but still much ambiguity concerning this unique genre of economic crisis discourse. The language American presidents choose, the images they portray and strategies they imply influence the public’s view of them and their country. In times of economic calamity in particular the rhetorical choices of our presidents become crucial. Many scholars have argued that the president serves as an important public spokesman for American citizens in times of crisis. As the pervasive economic despair the stock market crash of 1929 necessitated particular discourse and action from the charismatic President Franklin Roosevelt, the fall of the stock market and recession now demand rhetoric from President Barack Obama.
Chapter III

General Discussion: Standards for Successful Presidential Economic Crisis Rhetoric

There is yet to be a perfect outline for the most effective presidential economic crisis rhetoric. For this analysis, a synthesis of the rhetorical features of Theodore Windt’s international crisis genre with the domestic crisis theories of Denise Bostdorff and Donald O’Rourke will be used to explore the responses of Presidents Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt, George W. Bush and Barack H. Obama to unique economic crises in America. As previously discussed, Theodore Windt (1986) evaluates the genre of international crises, proposing that presidential international crisis speeches, despite unique critical situations, share similar lines of argument.

The present analysis suggests that presidents should follow comparable lines of argument in light of economic calamities despite particular constraints, which occur in cases of domestic crises. Windt believes that first the president must make a public announcement that declares the situation a crisis, calling for the full support of the public while illustrating the need for decisive action. The same can be said for an economic crisis. It is “the President’s perception of the situation and the rhetoric he uses to describe it [which] mark an event as a crisis” (Windt, 1986, p. 126). Successful speeches begin with an affirmation of the president’s command over the facts of the state of affairs and the recognition of “new facts,” which render the situation to be a crisis (Windt, 1986, p. 126).

After announcing such an international crisis situation, the president must next give a narration of the “new facts,” usually employing angel/devil terms to create the sense of good versus bad, such as the free world versus Communism (Windt, 1986, p. 127). This second line of argument is not always applicable to economic crisis genre because the “enemy” is often
internal. As Bostodorff and O’Rourke propose unlike with foreign crises, there is not always identifiable or tangible enemy in economic crisis situations. However, this analysis demonstrates that the rhetorical identification of those at fault by the President is crucial. This essay argues that instead of polarizing the enemy, rightful blame should be placed, but the focus of the President’s rhetoric should be the language that unifies the American public in the goal of resolution of the crisis.

Moreover in explaining the crisis and providing the country with “new facts” another domestic constraint must be acknowledged. Bostdorff and O’Rourke note that presidents have trouble controlling the information available to the public. In comparison to the past, we do not have to rely so heavily on the information the President offers us; rather we can turn to the Internet, radio, newspapers, and source upon source for information and commentary. In international crises American citizens are much more reliant on the president for information and his authority on the situation. They agree with his course of action, accepting that he knows the facts and is acting in the United States’ best interest. In contrast, in domestic economic situations Americans have their own opinions and far more information available to them, whether the president wishes so, or not.

The third and final feature Windt proposes for International crises genre is the president’s announcement of a course of action, which asks for complete public support. The discourse focuses on the ethical context of the situation at hand, “the mark of character and honor for the American people” that must act together (Windt, 1986, p. 128). Bostdorff and O’Rourke suggest that policy implementation is more difficult to accomplish in domestic situations. This is because there is more room for debate and often there are more checks and balances to get a policy approved. The president is speaking to American citizens, but also appealing to a divided
Congress. His ability to manage the crisis is limited and necessitates persuasive rhetoric. This essay proposes, in economic crisis rhetoric the President must concentrate the discourse on a course of action that will reestablish order and stability in the economic system, calling for public support, more so than simply an abstract ethical principle.

In summary, this essay evaluates four American presidents on three features of presidential crisis rhetoric, including: going public with urgent language use, sharing new information and explanation, and naming a course of action, which often requires unifying countered parties and asking for public support. To better illuminate the successes and the weaknesses of each response it must be asked whether they fulfilled the three identified criteria, and if so, what other factors contributed. Here is where the three constraints identified by Bostdorff and O’Rourke will function. Ultimately this paper finds that certain lines of argument that must be present in successful economic crisis rhetoric, but most importantly a president’s ethos--their public approval and their own attitude towards the situation--plays a tremendous role in their success. Confident and unified presidential rhetoric serves a vital function in preserving America’s capitalist system: to persuade and to restore confidence in the American people.

Representative artifacts will be used to evaluate the rhetoric of Presidents Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt, George W. Bush and Barack Obama in light of similar economic calamities. In each case the President’s initial response, the most immediate discourse is of strongest interest. The preliminary response of the president during a domestic economic crisis is especially important because in a critical economic situation the president must respond with urgency. The first addresses are most telling of how the president perceives the circumstance. Moreover in the case of the current recession, President Obama has not been in office for a full term, so comparisons must be restricted to early efforts in legislation and discourse. Both President Roosevelt and President Obama are succeeding
Presidents in prolonged times of economic crisis, and thus the second attempt to resolve the crises at hand. Presidents Herbert Hoover and George W. Bush for a number of reasons failed in their efforts to revive the nation’s struggling economy. Thus Roosevelt and Obama are challenged to redefine the crisis and determine the appropriate solution. Whereas time has revealed President Franklin D. Roosevelt as successful, it will be many years before a true critique of President Obama can be made.
Chapter IV

President Herbert Hoover: A Rhetoric of Silence

Historical Context: Herbert Hoover and the Great Depression

The Presidency of Herbert Hoover is characterized by the crash of the stock market in 1929 and the resulting Great Depression. Martin Fausold, author of *The Presidency of Herbert C. Hoover*, suggests that the source of the crash was “the Wall Street fever,” which began in 1925 when the Federal Reserve allowed an increase in the money supply, lowering the discount rate from 4 to 3.5 percent and buying government securities (1985, p. 68). Approximately two million Americans had invested in the market by President Hoover’s inauguration (Fausold, 1985, p. 69). The rising sales of common stock led to dramatic decreases in both the government securities and bond markets, threatening the overall economy (Fausold, 1985, p. 71). By June of 1929 there was growing unemployment and bank failures. The high September 1929 value of common stocks of 469.5 fell to 247.6 in October and down to 220.1 in November (Fausold, 1985, p. 73). Dan Houck shares the startling statistic in *Rhetoric as Currency: Hoover, Roosevelt and the Great Depression*, that on Black Tuesday an estimated $15 billion was lost (2001, p. 28). By the end of President Hoover’s term, one in every three industrial workers was unemployed and total personal savings dropped from $4.2 billion to a net deficit of $900 million (Houck, 2001, p. 7). Consumers did not spend, despite the lowest prices in decades, nor did businesses invest in capital despite extremely low rates of interest (Houck, 2001, p. 8). Capitalism as a viable economic system came into question.

President Hoover’s discourse during this economic period is valuable for understanding what makes successful rhetorical efforts to facilitate economic recovery. Apparently, he believed that public confidence was vital to economic recovery (Houck, 2001, p. 9). Analysis of Hoover’s
response to the deepening Great Depression reveals the significance of rhetorical strategies for strong presidential leadership during times of economic crisis. Although Herbert Hoover has a strong engineering background, good Quaker values and an allegiance to Progressivism, by nature President Hoover is not the most ideal president for dealing with an economic recession and the fear spreading through the United States after the crash of 1929 (Houck, 2001, p. 24). Not only did he dislike large crowds, he often chose to communicate through “surrogate speakers” or written statements (Houck, 2001, p. 26). With the fall of the stock market and the onset of the Great Depression, a more visible and vocal role was necessary from the president, a role President Hoover was both hesitant and reluctant to fulfill. He did assume responsibility for the economic recovery and decided that “inspiration and exhortation,” not institutional change and congressional action would be most effective (Houck, 2001, p. 28). As Dan Wood notes in The Politics of Economic Leadership, “the evolution of presidential responsibility for the economy began with the Great Depression” (2007, p. 6). This crisis illuminates that the role of central government is to promote a united and powerful national economy. Although he seems to suggest a rhetorical solution to this economic slump, President Hoover ignores the “calls for rhetorical leadership,” waiting until November 5th, 1929, to make his first off-the-record and indirect statement about the fall of the stock market (Houck, 2001, p. 29). His first public discourse concerning the crash is a written press release on November 15th, 1929, more than two weeks after the crash. In his address he shares, “my own experience has been that words are not of great importance during times of economic disturbance. It is action that counts” (Houck, 2001, p. 32). President Hoover fails to see the importance of Presidential rhetoric in fostering the public confidence he deemed necessary for economic recovery.
The audience President Hoover must address, as broad as it sounds, is the American public. He needs to soothe the fears of Americans invested in the stock market who lost most of their savings and the thousands of workers whose occupational status is threatened. President Hoover needs to speak to concerned workers, business leaders, and Congress, the true facilitators of government action. Even other countries seek discourse from President Hoover. The global economy is also experiencing troubles in the financial market. As a leading nation, other countries look to the United States for indications of economic conditions.

Despite his hesitancy to speak publicly about the crash, President Hoover serves to recognize that it could mean the onset of a depression (Houck, 2001, p. 32). He commits himself to investigating the situation and finding solutions. The president calls upon leaders of the nation’s railroads, labor organizations, construction industry and major industries, as well as the nation’s governors and mayors, for economic-stabilization conferences at the Cabinet Room in the White House (Fausold, 1985, p. 75). President Hoover believes that the depth of the depression was unknown, that it would last for some time, that two or three million would be unemployed as a result, that liquidation of inflated values and prices was necessary and that the depression was the result of WWI, and felt globally (Fausold, 1985, p. 76). The rhetorical choices he makes, or those he refrains from making, suggest that President Hoover, despite his strong economic background and genuine concern for America’s welfare, was not capable of meeting the challenge facing the presidency during the years following the crash of 1929.

**Analysis of President Hoover**

The artifacts explored include President Hoover’s press conferences during the first month following the crash on October 29, 1929, specifically his statements on from October 29th, November 1st, 5th, 8th and 15th will be assessed. Additionally this analysis considers his
State of the Union address on December 3, 1929 because enough time had passed for the real effects of the market to have settled.

Presidential rhetoric in lengthy times of economic calamity must be sustained. President Hoover’s discourse concerning the crisis of the crash of 1929 is quite limited so these chosen artifacts are a strong representation of his rhetorical response. In light of the revised Windt framework, modified by Bostdorff and O’Rourke’s constraints, to create a specific economic crisis genre rhetoric, this paper maintains that President Hoover fails to inform the public, the first proponent. He also fails to provide new information and facts, to downplay the severity of the crisis. Finally President Hoover does not propose or implement a successful plan failing to calm the fears of Americans.

**President Hoover fails to announce the crisis.**

President Hoover deals with the crash of 1929 and the Great Depression in a very curious manner. He fails to fulfill the first feature of presidential economic crisis rhetoric: going public and communicating the urgency of the situation. On October 29, 1929, the date of the crash, President Hoover actually admits in a press conference at four p.m., “I am sorry, but this is one of those days when I haven’t anything that I can very well discuss” (Hoover, 1929, October 29). Even several days later, President Hoover begins, “I have very little of general public interest at this time” continuing to announce the appointment of G. Aaron Youngquist to the Department of Justice, then ending with “Other than that I have no startling news” (1929, November 1). The president is completely understating the crisis at hand. He makes no mention of the economy in any form. Hoover’s “initial response to these early calls for rhetorical leadership was to ignore them” (Houck, 2001, p. 29). He actually does not address the economic crisis until November 5, 1929, a full week after the crash. In this press conference he opens,
I haven’t anything of any news here to announce. I thought perhaps you might like that I discuss the business situation with you just a little, but not from the point of view of publication at all—simply for your own information. I see no particular reasons for making any statements about it, either directly, or indirectly (1929, November 5).

Neither his language, nor his choice to wait to discuss the economy indicates any sense of urgency. Contrary to the first essential element of crisis rhetoric, President Hoover never truly establishes that there is a crisis situation. Although at the end of his address he does say, “we have gone through a crisis in the stock market” he weakens the use of the word crisis, by continuing “but for the first time in history the crisis has been isolated to the stock market itself” (1929, November 5). Considering the tremendous drop in stock prices and the immediate panic this is puzzling. President Hoover seems to imply that he sees this crash as almost a normal economic cycle and of no real concern.

**President Hoover fails to explain the crisis nor identify the “enemy.”**

According to crisis rhetoric based on Windt’s framework President Hoover should next announce new facts and provide information, as an explanation for the American public, but again he does not provide the rhetorical leadership necessary. While President Hoover does rationally give an explanation of the financial state in his press conference on November 5th eventually comparing this crisis to the crash to the crash of 1907-08, he also says there is a “reverse phenomenon” this time (Hoover, 1929, November 5). Rather than instilling urgency, he states, “the financial world is functioning entirely normally and rather more easily than it was two weeks ago, because interest rates are less and there is more capital available.” He ascribes over-speculation as the source of the economic depression. He further attributes the panic and the issues at hand as “purely psychological” (Hoover, 1929, November 5). He tells Americans, “Any
lack of confidence in the economic future and the basic strength of business in the United States is simply foolish” (Hoover, 1929, November 15). Words from President Hoover, which should be recognizing the reality at hand, continue to reduce the magnitude of the circumstances. President Hoover’s attitude may be best summed up by his own words in his press conference on November 15th:

My own personal experience, however, has been that words are of no great importance in times of economic disturbance. It is action that counts. The action of the Federal Reserve Board in establishing credit stability, ample capital, the confidence of the administration in undertaking tax reduction, with the cooperation of both political parties, speaks a good deal stronger than any number of statements (Hoover, 1929, November 15).

Although President Hoover makes a valid point, action is critical in times of economic crisis; he undermines the importance of his role as a strong rhetorical leader. He fails to recognize the need for persuasive speech.

One of the chief Bostdorff and O’Rourke constraints is that presidents have trouble controlling the information available to the public, which plays an important role in the failure of President Hoover’s rhetoric. President Hoover’s reluctance to speak publicly is a huge issue. American citizens needed to be reassured. Hoover neither likes speaking publicly nor trusts the press. Yet the press becomes the chief source of his opinions because he is so hesitant to speak directly to the people making his silence more problematic. Prior to Hoover’s campaign for reelection in 1932, he gives six speeches, with only one directly addressing the nation’s economic recovery (Houck, 2001, p. 72). Without discourse a president cannot rally support. President Hoover could have reached out to the American people, but instead allows the press and other White House officials to do his job unsuccessfully for him.
Moreover, part of the presentation of new facts and explanation of the crisis situation according to Windt’s framework involves addressing the enemy. President Hoover does not identify an enemy as the Windt rhetorical model suggests. He does not give American citizens a tangible group on which to place blame. He barely speaks at all. Even though Bostdorff and O’Rourke’s second constraint acknowledges that unlike foreign crises, in domestic crises there is not always an obvious tangible enemy to unite against, the successful president will define an unpatriotic domestic group to blame for the problem at hand. President Hoover, as we have seen, wrongly attributes the chaotic financial state of the economy to psychological factors and over-speculation. Perhaps the scariest part of the Great Depression was that the United States slipped into the unknown. President Hoover’s “confidence in the economy did not square with the restlessness that was being felt by keen observers inside and outside the administration (Fausold, 1985, p. 97). People, including most likely President Hoover himself, did not know how bad things would get, how long it would last, or how to spur recovery. There was a sense of hopelessness and insecurity about the lack of control over the situation.

President Hoover fails to identify a course of action and rally public support.

The third crucial element of crisis rhetoric according to Windt requires the president to announce a course of action, calling for complete public support, unifying opposing parties within Congress. Again, President Hoover is unsuccessful. On November 15th, President Hoover does share with the public that he has been organizing conferences with important business leaders and public officials. He also announces that he is going to plan a “small preliminary conference” involving several industries and governmental departments to “develop definite steps” (Hoover, 1929, November 15). It appears that President Hoover is concerned about the economy, but is mistaken in treating the crisis as chiefly a challenge of restoring confidence. He
believes it unnecessary to take any dramatic action or speak candidly with the American people about how he and his administration view the situation and are dealing with it. By 1931 many banks do not have sufficient liquidity to survive. Research indicates that the Federal Reserve System did not give the economy the necessary liquidity and credit (Fausold, 1985, p. 151). Moreover, his reluctance to speak publicly about the financial state of the market makes it almost impossible to impart his campaign for economic confidence. Just as his addresses are brief and scarce after the crash, Hoover speaks “very little during the winter and spring of 1930” (Houck, 2001, p. 39).

Again Windt’s framework is more complicated by Bostdorff and O’Rourke’s third constraint that policy implementation is more difficult to accomplish in domestic situations, which limits President Hoover’s ability to manage the crisis. However, in President Hoover’s case he does not take much legislative action initially. He attributes the economic crisis to psychological causes, saying that Americans simply need confidence or faith in the system for it to rebound. The president pressures his administration to keep their expenditures at a minimum so that government deficits would remain low (Fausold, 1985, p. 98). He chooses to ignore the “radical solutions” proposed by people both in and out of Congress (Fausold, 1985, p. 99). He “considered Congress’s role in the depression to be that of a spectator, not a provider of solutions” (Fausold, 1985, p. 148). President Hoover eventually does propose many legislative solutions for economic recovery from the Great Depression. The initiatives included the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, the Glass-Steak Act, various bills expanding credit, revenue bills, the Emergency Relief and Construction Act, and the National Credit Corporation (Houck, 2001, p. 86). His biggest problem was that too frequently his “policy innovations were followed by presidential silence” (Houck, 2001, p. 86). President Hoover relied too greatly on
substitute spokespersons, his administration, and the press [newspapers] he despised to communicate his ideas (Houck, 2001, p. 87).

When evaluating the rhetoric of president Hoover it appears that his theory of economic confidence was a failure. Perhaps, “one of the greatest ironies of Hoover’s presidency is that despite his personal emphasis on persuasion, belief and faith, he often shied away from employing the rhetoric that might shape them” (Houck, 2001, p. 85). Hoover stresses action, diminishing the power of words, which effectively devalues his own stance. President Hoover is a smart and concerned leader, but lacks the qualities to be a successful rhetorical president. By 1932 the president seemed to have lost his strongest supporters (Fausold, 1985, p. 98).

It is evident that President Hoover is unable to fulfill the role of a rhetorical president. In such a time America wants a strong voice to soothe their fears and explain what steps must and are being taken to restore the economy. A combination of personal constraints and little historical precedent for the President to take on such a dynamic role ensures Hoover’s failure. He does not announce the crisis to the public with urgency, share new facts identifying an enemy, or propose a plan of action. After President Hoover America desired change and action. The people demanded a voice and Franklin Roosevelt readily assumed the role.
Chapter V

President Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rhetoric of Strength

Historical Context: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Great Depression

With 22,800,000 to 15,750,00 in the popular vote and 472-59 majority in the Electoral College, the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt marks the end of a decade of Republican presidencies and the beginning of twenty years of Democratic dominance (Ritchie, 2007). President Roosevelt’s first term is characterized by the profound depression following the stock market crash of 1929. By the end of President Hoover’s term, only two out of three industrial workers were employed and personal savings dropped dramatically (Houck, 2001, p. 7). Consumers still did not spend, businesses still did not invest, despite the low rates of interest (Houck, 2001, p. 8). Capitalism as a viable economic system remained questionable.

When President Roosevelt is inaugurated March 4, 1933, according to the Department of Labor, unemployment is at a high of 24.9 percent and inflation is high (Houck, 2001, p. 8). He delivers one of his most memorable lines, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance” (Roosevelt, 1933, March 4). As his candid rhetoric demonstrates President Roosevelt immediately recognizes the need to reassure the American public. The greatest concern at this time is still the banking crisis. According to Roosevelt the “government had to put people back to work in the same way it would prepare for war” (Ritchie, 2007, p.175). President Roosevelt is a symbol of hope for anxious people. Roosevelt makes tremendous use of the technology of the time, introducing Fireside Chats and motion picture newsreels portray segments of his major speeches, giving “visual dynamism” to his delivery (Ryan, 1988, p.1).
A Harvard graduate with a law degree from Columbia University, President Roosevelt is an ambitious man. Following President Theodore Roosevelt, his cousin, whom he strongly admired, Franklin D. Roosevelt entered public service by means of politics, however as a Democrat. Despite contracting polio in 1921, which left him paralyzed, he was adamant about making carefully choreographed public appearances and addresses, full of courage and strength. Historians characterize Roosevelt's presidential efforts as “relief, recovery and reform” (Ryan, 1988). Relief for the millions of unemployed, recovery to bring the economy back to normal and reform to change fundamentals in the failed system, particularly with the financial and banking systems (Ryan, 1988).

One of the most exigent audiences President Franklin Roosevelt must address is panicked Americans invested in the stock market who lost most of their savings as well as the thousands of workers whose occupational status is threatened. President Roosevelt also needs to speak to business leaders and Congress, the true facilitators of government action. When the goal is to pass legislation, Congress becomes the chief audience, as they possess the power to pass a law (Medhurst, 2007, p. 76). Moreover the rest of world awaits discourse from President Roosevelt. The global economy is also experiencing stress in the financial market. As a leading nation, other countries look to America for indication of economic conditions.

Analysis of President Roosevelt

To evaluate the rhetoric President Franklin D. Roosevelt a select number of artifacts will be used. His first inaugural address will receive the greatest emphasis, since it is the first oral discourse that truly defines his goals and perceptions as the new President. Second his message to Congress on March 9, 1933 concerning the resumption of banking because it addresses Congress as a separate audience, as well as a focuses on action and legislation. The next artifact
is his first fireside chat on March 12, 1933 where he addresses the American people on the issue of banking. Then President Roosevelt’s message to Congress March 21, 1933 on Unemployment Relief, which considers his persuasive rhetoric in regards to promoting legislation. Finally his later fireside chat on May 7, 1933 is analyzed to see how the rhetoric prevails several months into his term. As with President Hoover, analysis of President Roosevelt’s rhetoric will involve the application of the major tenets based on Windt, with the modification of the Bostdorff and O’Rourkes constraints. In stark comparison to Hoover, Roosevelt fulfils each feature of the economic crisis rhetoric with tremendous success.

**Roosevelt announces the crisis.**

From the beginning President Roosevelt establishes himself as a talented orator and true to Windt’s (1986) first line of argument President Roosevelt “goes public” announcing the situation at hand and communicating the urgency of the crisis. In his inaugural speech on March 4, 1933, President Roosevelt successfully reaches out to Americans, soothing fears and establishing himself as the true leader during the depression. He calls the next days, “critical days” recognizing that this is the “time to speak the truth, the whole truth” (Roosevelt, 1933, March 4). Brief phrases, such as “we must act and act quickly” establish the exigent circumstances (Roosevelt, 1933, March 4). Roosevelt claims, “Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment” telling American citizens “the Nation asks for action, and action now” (1933, March 4). His use of imperative language implies a sense of command. In his inaugural speech he only uses the word “crisis” once in his closing, but uses the word emergency four times, expressing his perception of the situation as critical.
Roosevelt explains the crisis, identifying an “enemy.”

Roosevelt also easily fulfils Windt’s second line of argument, which emphasizes the need for the President to provide Americans with “new facts” to explain the situation (1986). In President Franklin Roosevelt’s case he must redefine the economic crisis, which began during Herbert Hoover’s term. In a message to Congress President Roosevelt declares:

For three long years the Federal Government has been on the road towards bankruptcy. For the fiscal year 1931 the deficit was 462,000,000. For the fiscal year 1932 it was $2,472,000,000. For the fiscal year 1933 it will probably exceed $1,200,000,000 (1933, March 10).

Here President Roosevelt is offering more facts indicating the severity of the circumstances. He does not try to hide the magnitude of the crisis at hand.

One of the constraints proposed by Bostdorff and O’Rourke is that the President often has trouble explaining the crisis and persuading the American public because so much information is available to the public in domestic situations. In contrast with international crises, a domestic economic crisis is something the people witness firsthand and can form opinions more easily without the guidance of the President. This constraint may be less applicable in President Roosevelt’s case concerning the passing of the New Deal. There is no past precedent--no president ever faced such a crushing economic depression. Moreover, before the 1930’s access to media information is more limited. Instead the public receives their information chiefly from the newspapers, and also for the first time through the radio. However, rather than a hindrance, President Roosevelt uses the radio to his advantage to reach out to the American public and speak to them frequently and directly. His language is more conversational than any previous president. In his first fireside chat he speaks to the American people about banking. The audience
of this first of many fireside chats is estimated at about 60 million people (Ritchie, 2007, p.176). He begins, “I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking....I want to tell you what has been done in the last few days, why it was done, and what the next steps are going to be” (Roosevelt, 1933, March 12). He explains the crisis in simple terms. President Roosevelt clarifies how the banking systems work, why a lack of confidence caused a rush of requests for more currency withdrawals than the banks could handle. Also, that only the banks, which the government found stable, would be reopened and that together, the government and people could restore the unstable financial system. A letter from an Oklahoma woman maintained, “in your ten minute radio talk Sunday night you said more than Mr. Hoover did in four years” (Ritchie, 2007, p.176). One of the strengths of President Roosevelt’s rhetoric is its clear explanation of his policy decisions. As Windt’s framework suggests, President Roosevelt continually updates and clarifies the economic conditions for the general public. Rather than being a source of counter-information, President Roosevelt uses the media and radio in particular to garner public support.

Evaluation of his later fireside chat on May 7, 1933 continues consistent lines of argument that provide the public with explanation of the crisis and facts about the plan to address the current problems. He addresses the people:

On A Sunday night a week after my Inauguration I used the radio to tell you about the banking crisis and the measures we were taking to meet it. I think that in that way I made clear to the country various facts that might otherwise have been misunderstood and in general provided a means of understanding which did much to restore confidence. Tonight, eight weeks later, I come for the second time to give you my report; in the same spirit and
by the same means to tell you about what we have been doing and what we are planning to do (Roosevelt, 1933, May 7).

He explains the foreclosing mortgages, calling loans and credit refusals, proclaiming that, “the country was dying by inches” (Roosevelt, 1933, May 7). The exigency of the situation and the facts are each prominent in his discourse, as Windt’s first two elements suggest is necessary.

Next President Franklin D. Roosevelt explains the continual plan of action:

First, we are giving the opportunity of employment to one-quarter of a million of the unemployed…. Next, the Congress is about to pass legislation that will greatly ease the mortgage distress among the farmers and the home owners of the Nation, by providing for the easing of the burden of debt now bearing so heavily upon millions of our people…Our next step in seeking immediate relief is a grant of half a billion dollars to help the States, counties and municipalities in their duty to care for those who need direct and immediate relief (1933, May 7).

In his radio talk President Roosevelt explains initiatives he has put into action, why they are important and what still needs to be done. His proposal is stated clearly. Likewise he continues to be forthright and optimistic in his tone:

Today we have reason to believe that things are a little better than they were two months ago. Industry has picked up, railroads are carrying more freight, farm prices are better, but I am not going to indulge in issuing proclamations of over-enthusiastic assurance. We cannot ballyhoo ourselves back to prosperity. I am going to be honest at all times with the people of the country (Roosevelt, 1933, May 7).
Moreover, he concludes by reminding Americans of the overarching goals of the legislation and of his administration’s efforts to bring economic relief. President Roosevelt makes more calls for support:

We are working toward a definite goal, which is to prevent the return of conditions which came very close to destroying what we call modern civilization….The future of the world demands it and we have each of us pledged ourselves to the best joint efforts to this end….In the present spirit of mutual confidence and mutual encouragement we go forward (1933, May 7).

As evidenced by later discourse the main line of argument proposed by Windt continues. The President still notes the serious tone to the economic state, shares and explains the crisis, while offering further solutions, which serve to rally support. At this point in time, the message does not polarize the source of the problem. Instead President Roosevelt’s rhetoric is still focused on the resolution of the economic problems and unification of the American people during this tremendously difficult time.

Windt maintains that the sharing of new facts and understanding of the crisis also involves the dichotomy of good and evil --highlighting a specific enemy to unite against (1986). This is not as easy a task in domestic crises because there is a hesitancy to alienate an in internal group. However, President Roosevelt readily identifies an enemy in his inaugural speech, identifying the “practices of the unscrupulous money changers” as the theoretical enemy, hailing them as stubborn and incompetent (1933, March 4). In this case the moneychangers President Roosevelt is referring to are the businessmen of Wall Street. They “stand indicted in court of public opinion” and “know only the rules of a generation of self-seekers. They have no vision and when there is no vision the people perish” (Roosevelt, 1933, March 4).
Bostdorff and O’Rourke anticipate that in domestic crises it is more difficult to establish an enemy for the American public to unite against. However, President Roosevelt illuminates an “enemy” with ease. He first points to Wall Street in his inaugural address, as aforementioned, but later uses war rhetoric to conjure a tangible enemy, the economic conditions. President Franklin Roosevelt tells America, “I shall ask the Congress for the remaining instrument to meet the crisis--broad Executive power to wage war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were invaded by a foreign foe” (1933, March 4). President Roosevelt’s rhetorical choices make it possible for Americans to unite against a more abstract opponent, by referring to the fiscal calamity as a war, thus drawing attention away from pointing fingers at fellow Americans.

Although he points a finger at Wall Street, President Roosevelt continues to use inclusive language, telling America, “if I read the temper of our people correctly, we now realize as we have never realized before our interdependence on each other; that we cannot merely take, but we must give as well” (1933, March 4). Windt stresses the President’s need to unify the opposing parties. President Roosevelt does this with ease:

    The larger purposes will bind us all as a sacred obligation with a unity of duty hitherto evoked only in this time of armed strife. With this pledge I take, I assume unhesitatingly the leadership of this great army of people dedicated to a disciplined attack upon our common problems (1933, March 4).

Interestingly, almost as if he were giving a speech on international crisis, Roosevelt uses war language and metaphors. He persuades Americans to unite and accept not only his command over the crisis, but also defines their own patriotic duty. His language is all encompassing, using word suggesting unison, such as “our…common…us…warm courage of national unity”
President Roosevelt identifies a course of action and rallies public support.

Upon identifying the source of the economic crisis, chiefly Wall Street, we see that President Roosevelt changes the tone of his rhetoric, fulfilling the third line of argument identified by Windt. He suggests a course of action and asks for public support, making the Americans part of his army in his war on the economic crisis. He tells the public that there will be an end the conduct of banking and business, which is too often callous and selfish. He highlights, “our greatest primary task is to put people to work” (Roosevelt, 1933, March 4). Throughout his inaugural address, President Roosevelt is passionately received by applause after almost every statement. The war metaphors carry on throughout the inaugural address. He declares, the government will help, “treating the task as we would treat the emergency of war” (Roosevelt, 1933, March 4). He actually refers to his plan as “the lines of attack” and declares, “we must move as a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline” (Roosevelt, 1933, March 4). The war language is powerful because it reaffirms the urgency of the situation, but also “skillfully plays on the emotional evocations of militaristic language in order to declare a figurative war on a serious economic condition” (Ryan, 1988, p. 82). He asks the public to join his army. He emphasizes the need for “two safeguards against the return of evils of the old order:” the first being “strict supervision of all banking and credits and investments, so that there will be an end to speculation with other people’s money; and [second] there must be provision for an adequate, but sound currency” (Roosevelt, 1933, March 4).

Several days after his inauguration President Roosevelt further clarifies his plan of action, claiming, “I am not speaking to you in general terms. I am pointing to a definite road” (1933,
March 10). He asks Congress for new legislation, which lays down broad principles “for the granting of pensions and other veteran benefits, and giving to the executive the authority to prescribe the administrative details” (Roosevelt, 1933, March 10).

Within the third line of argument, where the President calls for public support, he must also stress the ethical context of the situation (Windt, 1986). In the later half of Roosevelt’s inaugural speech he speaks of the days ahead, which will involve “clear consciousness of seeking old and precious moral values” (1933, March 4). Likewise President Roosevelt refers to “the policy of the good neighbor” and “the American spirit of the pioneer,” evoking an emotional response from the public (Roosevelt, 1933, March 4). As evidenced earlier, President Roosevelt compares the economic crisis to a war, which makes the crisis more tangible, but also impresses upon the public the need to come together in this dark situation and to trust the plan of their leader.

Bostdorff and O’Rourke suggest that policy implementation in internal crises is more difficult to accomplish, considering the dual audiences of the American public and Congress; likewise the division in Congress. The President does not possess the power to put any legislation into practice, without the approval of Congress. President Roosevelt bypasses this issue by identifying the crisis as war, therefore stirring up patriotism. Moreover, on several occasions President Roosevelt addresses congress specifically stating, “I shall presently urge upon a new Congress in special session, detailed measures for their fulfillment” (1933, March 4). It is evident that President Roosevelt understands he is speaking to multiple audiences. However, President Roosevelt makes clear in his inaugural speech that he intends to move forward with or without the full support of Congress:
But it may be that an unprecedented demand and need for undelayed action may call for temporary departure from that normal balance of public procedure. I am prepared under my constitutional duty to recommend the measures that a stricken nation in the midst of a stricken world may require...in the event that the Congress shall fail to take one of these two courses, and in the event that the national emergency is still critical, I shall not evade the clear course of duty that will then confront me. I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis—broad Executive power (1933, March 4).

At the end of this piece of his speech, President Roosevelt received his most overwhelming applause. President Roosevelt communicates his willingness to be authoritative if and when necessary. This statement reaffirms his use of military metaphors, that establish him as our leader in this state of emergency.

In regards to the particular action and legislation he is able to accomplish using such strategies, President Roosevelt proclaims “a banking moratorium” calling Congress in a special session on March 9, 1933. In his message to Congress regarding the resumption of banking, his tone is different than his inaugural speech. His persuasion is still candid and eloquent, “I cannot too strongly urge upon Congress the clear necessity for immediate action…the members of the new Congress will realize, I am confident, the grave responsibility which lies upon me and them” (Roosevelt, 1933, March 9). On March 21, 1933 President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s message to Congress stresses “that it is essential to our recovery program that measures be immediately enacted aimed at unemployment relief.” His legislation proposals entail “the enrollment of workers now by the Federal Government…grants to States for relief work…and a broad public works labor-creating program” (Roosevelt, 1933, March 21). Congress complies. Importantly “New Deal Liberalism” seems to ensure economic security for American Citizens of
all classes and “a tolerance for ethnic and cultural variety” (Ritchie, 2007, p. 186). His relief legislation includes his famed Civilian Conservation Corps, which put 3 million urban youth to work, the Public Works Administration and the Civil Works Administration, which employs more than 4.2 million people putting billions of dollars into the economy building roads and schools that still exist (Kuttner, 2008). The first one hundred days of his term are infamous in the programs and agencies Roosevelt is able to initiate. Beyond employment President Roosevelt seeks to restore the banking system by means of the “bank holiday,” and the Federal Securities Act, which separates banks from stock brokerages and creates federal deposit insurances for bank accounts (Ritchie, 2007, p.177). President Roosevelt also recruits adept young lawyers to draft a new law, which required corporate honesty in issuing stock. More legislation geared towards establishing confidence in the financial markets includes the creation of the Securities and Exchange Commission, “as a watchdog over the financial markets, with the authority to issue rules and punish transgressors” (Ritchie, 2007, p.178). He also takes the United States off the gold standard. Such initiatives change the stock markets from private sectors to public institutions, which restores confidence in the markets. Undeniably, the Democratic majority in Congress benefits President Roosevelt.

President Roosevelt speaks confidently when addressing Congress, but also speaks with clear respect using inclusive language such as “if you give me authority to proceed,” “we can,” and “I ask” (1933, March 21). However, President Roosevelt does not spend time with beautiful phrases or rely heavily on metaphors and imagery, getting right to the point informing the Congress, “Our first task is to reopen all sound banks…” (1933, March 9). As a persuasive orator President Roosevelt is able to balance the task of appealing to Congress and the American
public. Whether addressing the audiences simultaneously or separately, President Roosevelt effectively communicates his perceptions and desired outcomes.

President Roosevelt demonstrates tremendous success in office by being a dynamic rhetorical leader. As a president would in a time of war, he takes control and the measures necessary to restore the economy and project a strong united America. Rhetorically he speaks often and directly to the people and Congress fulfilling each step of the economic crisis framework, bypassing the constraints of Bostdorff and O’Rourke. He successfully announces the crisis with urgency, explains the crisis identifying an “enemy,” and is able to speak about a course of action to resolve the economic chaos. In fulfilling the lines of argument, in spite of the constraints Bostdorff and O’Rourke believe to complicate domestic crisis rhetoric, President Roosevelt illuminates the power of personal ethos.

The next presidential analysis brings us into the twenty-first century. About seventy-five years following the stock market crash of 1929, America finds itself in a similar economic crisis. President George W. Bush is in the final year of his second term when the alarm begins.
Chapter VI

President George W. Bush: Rhetoric of Incompetence

Historical Context: George W. Bush and the Recession

The economic calamity America faces in 2008, with the turmoil on Wall Street and the housing market catastrophe, is the most similar economic disaster we have experienced to the Great Depression.¹ Henry’s article “Buffett to congress: Bail out economy or face ‘meltdown’” communicates that America is facing “a threat relative to a fiscal meltdown,” which could have catastrophic effects for all Americans (2008). The essence of the predicament is poor real estate loans that have resulted in record foreclosures after the housing bubble burst, which led home prices to decline. For the last months of 2008, both the banking world and Wall Street have been restructured by an unprecedented series of collapses and mergers. The Dow Jones lost about 450 points on September 16th, the most catastrophic day for United States markets since 2001. Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch, some of the biggest names on Wall Street no longer exist. In those months the Federal Reserve has made tremendous loans to banks, businesses, mutual funds and foreign central banks attempting to enhance liquidity in the financial markets and prevent the collapse of the United States’ economy. The economy is likely going to need many months, even years, to fully recover and for the housing market situation to stabilize. The federal government’s aggressive action to stabilize the economy is in part a response to historical precedent – learning from the mistakes of the Great Depression. David Goldman suggests in his article “Bernanke: economic weakness to continue” that the federal government make two critical mistakes in the 1930s: sustaining exceedingly rigid monetary policy and letting the financial system collapse. These are not mistakes America will repeat.

¹ Although the press makes comparisons to the Great Depression era, economists affirm that the recession entered in 2008 is by no means as devastating and such comparisons are dramatic.
George W. Bush, the president of the United States at the onset of the crisis, is faced with the challenge of responding to this chaotic financial time in America. President Bush’s presidential leadership up until this point has been characterized by the attacks on the World Trade Center twin towers on September 11, 2001, his fight against terrorism and the war against Iraq. Scholar Dan Wood describes President’s Bush’s response to adverse economic conditions following the events of 9/11 as “hyper-sensitive” (2007, p. 106). During the subsequent years, while America experienced moments of economic recession, President Bush spoke with high negativity about the economy. He tried to stimulate the economy through tax cuts, putting money directly into the hands of American citizens (Wood, 2007, p. 107).

Interestingly President Bush’s rhetoric appears to resonate strongest with the American people immediately after September 11th, 2001, where he enjoys his highest public approval. The Gallup Poll indicates that American public opinion in the days following the September 11 attacks, was extremely high; Presidential job approval rose faster than any analogous "rally" event in Gallup polling history, from 51% in the weekend just prior to September 11, to 86% September 14-15. Over nine out of ten Americans approved of how President Bush handled the aftermath of the terrorist attacks (Gallup Poll, September 17, 2001). Even in 2004 President Bush enjoys high popularity. Nearly one in four Americans named George W. Bush, without prompting, as the most admired man for 2004 according to the Dec. 17-19 CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll. For four years he has topped the Gallup annual survey for the most admired man of the year (Gallup Poll, December 29, 2004). But since 2004, Americans have grown weary of George Bush and his obsession with the financially draining war in Iraq. He no longer has the unyielding support of the nation. In Gallup's final 2008 pre-election poll, only 25% of Americans approved of President Bush’s leadership. Following the election his approval increased to 28%, and the December 2008 polling shows Bush with a 29% job approval rating.
December 3, 2008). This is a tremendous fall from 86% after the terrorist attack, where patriotism awards him tremendous support from the public during a terrible crisis.

The response of President George W. Bush to the alarming economic upheaval faced in 2008, like President Hoover, is directed towards millions of American citizens, who are fearful, and wondering “what now?” The American public can be broken down into specific categories. One audience is American taxpayers, particularly the middle class, who will inevitably bear the brunt of any bailout plan formulated. The credit market is at great risk because if financial institutions stop lending money then all Americans will struggle to sell their house, keep their jobs, and get loans (Henry, 2008). A second audience is the financial institutions at greatest risk: Wall Street, the banking executives and companies, and traders who face the greatest threat of collapse and may deserve the most blame for this fiscal crisis. A third audience more unique for President George W. Bush is Washington, the democratic and republican parties in Congress, who are also faced with the challenge to find and approve an appropriate solution. President George Bush is clearly speaking to them as a type of mediator. However, his effectiveness as a mediator is weak because he is a lame duck president. Barack Obama has officially been elected and Americans have already turned to him for discourse.

**Analysis of George W. Bush**

With regards to President George W. Bush this paper will evaluate his most immediate responses to the financial crisis of 2008, including his first televised public addresses from September 18th and 19th, his radio address from the 20th, and his address the nation on the 24th. Later addresses made by President Bush discussing the economy in press conferences on October 17th and November 13th, when he addresses the economy from the Federal Hall National Memorial in New York will be evaluated. The chosen artifacts for President Bush are his earliest statements as well as several statements from over a month after the crisis begins. The later addresses demonstrate how and if
President Bush’s rhetoric metamorphoses, after the initial shock. For this analysis the revised Windt framework, modified by Bostdorff and O’Rourke’s constraints is applied. President Bush informs the public, provides new information and facts, but President Bush does not identify an enemy, or completely fulfill the final tenet, implementation of a successful plan.

**President Bush announces the crisis with urgency.**

President George W. Bush fulfils the first feature of economic crisis response rhetoric, going public, responding to the crisis with urgency and constant discourse, responding immediately with a press conference on September 18th, just two days after the market’s most dramatic drop. He states, “The American people are concerned about the situation in our financial markets and our economy, and I share their concerns” (Bush, 2008, September 18). This conforms to the ideal way to define economic crisis situations as suggested by Windt. His language communicates that he recognizes the situation as important and that he is going to take the responsibility to respond to the present crisis. Domestic crisis promotion is a certain form of “going public” in which the president petitions for public support to resolve an issue that he recognizes as a crisis (Bostdorff and O’Rourke, 1997, p. 345). President Bush continues to share that he has cancelled his travel plans, so that he can remain in Washington to monitor the challenges confronting the United States economy. This indicates true exigency; the situation at hand is a real crisis. President Bush gives five addresses over the course of only nine days; he speaks to the public again on September 20th, 22nd, 25th, and 27th. He declares, “our entire economy is in danger” (Bush, 2008, September 27). Yet despite his frequent addresses to the public, there are no real positive implications. His rhetoric seems to have little influence on the market, which continues to drop.
President Bush explains the crisis, but does not identify an “enemy.”

After announcing the crisis situation and noting the exigency of the situation the president must next give a narration of the “new facts,” or explanation of the crisis at hand, which President Bush does rhetorically. In his second press conference on September 19th, President Bush explains the economic crisis. He calls it “a pivotal moment for America’s economy” clarifying that problems, which originated in the credit markets because of subprime mortgages have put our financial market at risk (Bush, 2008, September 19). The problem is that there is no longer confidence in the system, which “has frozen many financial transactions including loans to consumers and to businesses seeking to expand and create jobs” (Bush, 2008, September 19). President Bush uses the terms “solve,” “come together,” “restore confidence,” and “support” throughout his addresses (Bush, 2008, September 19th, 20th, 24th). He informs America, “the Federal Reserve is acting to restore confidence” (Bush, 2008, September 19). The terms are ones of reassurance, but the effect of his speech is limited. The markets continue to drop and people are still seeking explanation and resolution.

As identified by Bostdorff and O’Rourke, presidents have trouble controlling the information available to the public, which complicates this process of sharing new facts and explaining the crisis to the American people (1997, p. 346). Today the media in particular ensures there is little censorship possible for the President, in the sense of controlling the available information to the public. There are so many sources of information for Americans on the economy. People are able to form their own opinions about what is best for the nation. During a crisis the president must “act as commander in chief” and “assume the very public role of concerned and capable spokesperson for the nation” (Bucy, 2003, p. 78). This is a role President Bush was successful at when the terrorist attacks of September 11th occurred. Over the years however, his portrayal in the media has steadily declined. Both the public and the media find President George W. Bush to be an ineffective and poor leader. President Bush is
not viewed as particularly intelligent or capable, he is not looked to for explanation. People instead want to hear form business experts, such as Warren Buffet.

Furthermore, as part of the explanation of the facts and crisis situation Windt’s second framework factor proposes that an enemy must be identified. In the case of President Bush this never occurs. Again, Bostdorff and O’Rourke’s constraint that an internal enemy is much harder to identify comes into play. President Bush successfully uses angel devil terms to identify an enemy in the September 11th crisis, but when it comes to the financial crisis he does not demonize any particular group. This weakens his economic crisis rhetoric because it is clear to everyone, the government and Americans, that there are certain industries more so than individuals at fault. Although it is not favorable to create internal conflict, those at fault should be addressed when explaining the crisis.

**President Bush fails to identify a course of action and rally public support.**

Bush additionally struggles with the third and final feature, the president’s announcement of a course of action, which asks for complete public support. President Bush needs to unify Democrats and Republicans in a reaching a solution. He serves as a figurehead and mediator. However, his own party cannot agree with how to resolve this situation. In economic crisis rhetoric the President must concentrate the discourse on a course of action that will lead to a positive outcome and reestablish order and stability in the economic system. In his radio address on September 20th President Bush declares that the Securities and Exchange Commission has issued new rules, which suspend short selling on stocks. He further informs Americans that the federal government has “injected much needed liquidity into our financial system” (Bush, 2008, September 20). President George W. Bush claims that, “America’s economy is facing unprecedented challenges, and we are responding with unprecedented action” (2008, September 20). He shares that the federal government is acting to stabilize financial institutions and “restore confidence” in America’s financial system (2008, September 15). He proposes
a $700 billion dollar plan in his address on September 22nd, which will purchase troubled assets from various financial institutions.

Although controversy exists in approving this course of action, it appears that President Bush has a reasonable understanding of the economic crisis and that his administration is taking the necessary steps to find a resolution. Again, as Bostdorff and O’Rourke illuminate: the president has to use persuasion and the power of his office to appeal to Congress and the people (1997, p. 345). The president has little power of his own to initiate any real change. President Bush does try and take such aforementioned initiatives, even announcing, “I'm going to host a Summit on Financial Markets and the World Economy with leaders from developed and developing nations that account for nearly 90 percent of the world economy” (Bush, 2008, November 13). He acknowledges the need to tackle the issue of mediation in his statement on September 22nd, “Americans are watching to see if the Democrats and Republicans, the Congress and the White House, can come together to solve this problem.” Yet because the election of 2008 has already occurred, most American’s have turned to incumbent President Barack Obama for his opinions and solutions.

President Bush appears to have addressed each of the elements of economic crisis rhetoric except for the identification of an enemy and carrying out of the plan he announces. Yet his discourse fails to restore confidence in the United States financial system. President Bush’s inability to successfully ease the anxieties of American citizens may be attributed further to unique constraints, internal as with Hoover, but also external. The economic chaos creates the need for a strong rhetorical stance from the president and despite Bush exhibiting the features essential to successful crisis promotion his discourse is ineffective for a number of reasons. First, President Bush’s term is coming to an end, a lame duck period, which casts doubt that any of the policies he enacts will survive into the new administration. Second, by this point in his presidency many believe him to be an incapable leader
with poor ethos. Many people blame President Bush for the downward trend of the economy because he is spending billions on the war against Iraq. Jeffrey Cohen and John Hamman stress that the success of presidential rhetoric regarding the economy rests “largely in how the public perceives the president,” a common theme scholars have noted throughout the years (2003, p. 411). President Bush is perceived by a large majority of Americans as an embarrassment. In light of his mistakes and poor decisions regarding Iraq, the country does not have faith in President George W. Bush, nor do they view him as having any power to produce change. He has little support from American citizens, as evidenced by Gallup ratings.

With the financial pandemic of 2008 still eminent, Americans seek a new leader, one who can bring confidence back to the economy and restore positive morale. As in the 1930’s people desire change. A fresh voice is necessary and the election of democratic, progressive, African American President Obama is the direct response.
Chapter VII

President Barack H. Obama: Rhetoric of Hope

**Historical Context: Obama and the Recession**

With 66,882,230 to 58,343,671 in the popular vote and 365-173 majority in the Electoral College, like FDR, incumbent Democratic President Obama enters his first presidential term during a time of immense economic uncertainty. The essence of the financial crisis is poor real estate loans that led to record foreclosures after the housing bubble burst, which caused home prices to decline. *Newsweek* reported, when “subprime mortgages--loans to weaker borrowers--began to default in larger numbers, so did the bonds into which they had been packaged. Rattled investors revolted; they stopped buying other securities” (Samuelson, 2007). By July 2008, house foreclosures totaled 272,171, a fifty-five percent increase from the year earlier (Kuttner, 2008, p. 128). Over a course of several months in 2007, both the banking world and Wall Street were restructured by an unprecedented series of collapses and mergers. The Dow Jones lost about 450 points on September 16th, the most catastrophic day on United States markets since 2001. In November *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the Dow Jones dropped another 360.92 points (Browning, 2007). Over the initial months of the crisis, during President George W. Bush’s term, the Federal Reserve made extraordinary loans to banks, businesses, mutual funds and foreign central banks attempting to enhance liquidity in the financial markets and prevent the collapse of the United States’ economy. On October 3, 2008 former President Bush signed a bill approving a bailout. The federal government’s aggressive action to stabilize the economy is in part a response to historical precedent –learning from the mistakes of the Great Depression. However, despite more vigorous government involvement, by November the budget deficit reaches a record of $237.2 billion.
In January of 2007 Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke warns, back, “we are experiencing what seems likely to be the calm before the storm,” when roughly seventy-eight million Baby Boomers will start to be eligible for Social Security in 2008 (Geewax, 2007). By early November the word “recession” begins to surface in newspapers across the nation (Herbert 2007). President Obama immediately addresses the economy, signing into law a $787 billion economic stimulus plan in mid-February 2009, which he calls “the beginning of the end.” Ben S. Bernanke is reappointed as the chairman of the Federal Reserve by President Obama in late August to help combat the economic despair. Still America’s economy is unstable.

The response of President Barack Obama, like President Roosevelt, is directed first towards millions of concerned American citizens. Consumer spending is typically the engine of economic growth, but an air of apprehension smothers America -- currently facing “the largest pullback in consumer spending in decades, perhaps as much as $200 billion” (Mandel, 2007). The Wall Street Journal reports in November an unemployment rate at a high of 10.2 percent and climbing (Hilsenrath 2009). After March 2008, the word crisis is replaced, America instead enters a steady recession. On December 1st, the National Bureau of Economic Research announces that the U.S. has been in a recession since December 2007, “making official what most Americans have already believed” (Isidore, 2008).

The primary audience for President Obama, the American public, can be distinguished by specific categories. First, the financial institutions at greatest risk: Wall Street, the banking executives and companies, and traders who face the greatest threat of collapse and who may deserve the most blame for this fiscal crisis. Most attribute the economic crisis to “too much deregulation--too much private sector mischief, too little government counterweight” (Kuttner, 2008, p. 21). A second audience is the American taxpayers, particularly the middle class, who
will inevitably bear the brunt of any bailout plan formulated. The credit market is at great risk because if financial institutions stop lending money then all Americans will struggle to sell their houses to keep their jobs, and to get loans (Henry, 2008). A third audience for President Obama is Washington, the democratic and republican parties in Congress, who are also faced with the challenge to find and approve an appropriate solution. President Obama is clearly speaking to them as a type of mediator. Finally, the president must address the world, which awaits Obama’s plan for crisis resolution.

Analysis of Obama

The discourse of incumbent President Barack Obama will also be limited to a select number of artifacts and legislation regarding the economy. His inaugural speech will be stressed in addition to his weekly address on January 24, 2009, his remarks on the economy on January 28, 2009, his weekly addresses on January 31, 2009, February 7, 2009 and February 14, 2009. Finally analysis will consider a later address on April 14, 2009 concerning the economy, made at Georgetown University, in order to compare comments made several months into his term, versus the first few weeks of the crisis. The analysis will be limited to the first major instances of rhetoric, which serve to define the crisis as perceived by President Obama and his administration. As with Presidents Hoover, Roosevelt, and Bush the revised Windt framework, modified by Bostdorff and O’Rourke’s constraints is applied. President Obama informs the public, provides new information and facts, points to an enemy, and proposes and implements a plan.

President Obama announces the crisis.
From the beginning President Barack Obama establishes the economic crisis. Despite the enormous crowds estimated at over 1.8 million, President Obama appears poised and confident at his inaugural speech on January 20, 2009. He immediately addresses the economic crisis at hand, going public with urgent language, fulfilling the first of three necessary elements of crisis rhetoric as proposed by Theodore Windt (1986). The president recognizes that he takes his oath, “amidst gathering clouds and raging storms” (2009, January 20). President Obama directly uses the word crisis three times, stressing, “our economy is badly weakened” (2009, January 20). President Obama affirms, “the state of our economy calls for action, bold and swift” assuring Americans, “And we will act, not only to create new jobs, but to lay a new foundation for growth” (2009, January 20). In his first discourse as president it is clear that President Obama perceives the situation to be serious and expresses this to not only Americans, but to the rest of the world, affirming “for the world has changed, and we must change with it” (2009, January). President Obama’s concern is evident:

The bad news is well known to Americans across our country as we continue to struggle through unprecedented economic turmoil. Yesterday we learned that our economy shrank by nearly 4 percent from October through December. That decline was the largest in over a quarter century, and it underscores the seriousness of the economic crisis that my administration found when we took office. Already the slowdown has cost us tens of thousands of jobs in January alone. And the picture is likely to get worse before it gets better (2009, January 31).

Although the President does not try to hide the seriousness of this economic crisis, he counters the bleak facts, with his commitment to solve this problem through a legislative program.
I promise you that every day that I go to work in the Oval Office I carry with me your stories, and my administration is dedicated to alleviating your struggles and advancing your dreams. You are calling for action. Now is the time for those of us in Washington to live up to our responsibilities (2009, January 31).

He maintains that, “we are moving forward with a sense of urgency equal to the challenge” (Obama, 2009, January 31).

**President Obama explains and the crisis and identifies an “enemy.”**

The second element of Windt’s theory proposes the need to not only give the audience “new facts” and an explanation of the crisis at hand, but to also unify the countered parties (1986). President Obama clarifies that our weakened economy is, “a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age. Homes have been lost, jobs shed, businesses shuttered” (2009, January 20). He informs America, “we’ve now lost more than 3.6 million jobs since this recession began” acknowledging that the United States is “in the midst of our greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression”(Obama, 2009, February 7).

When examining the rhetoric of President Obama, Bostdorff and O’Rourke suggest that the President could encounter difficulties in mustering public support and passing legislation because of pervasive media, which can contradict the new facts and the explanation the President offers. Today President Obama not only has print media, television and the radio, but the added advantages and disadvantages of the Internet, as means of communication, or possible source of contradiction. Consider even the number of newspapers today, which offer information and commentary on President Obama’s leadership and the efforts of his administration. Fortunately for Obama, the television and camera seems to love him. Likewise, he possesses a powerful
presence and pleasant commanding voice. President Obama also seeks to utilize the media of his time in new ways. During his campaign he took advantage of the Internet, communicating via blogs, social networking sites (my.barackobama.com), weekly campaign emails, text message updates and even an iPhone application (Wagner, 2008). In a technology-oriented time, President Obama demonstrates his compelling communication skills are far-reaching. Generation X and Y, are some of Obama’s strongest supporters, since he represents a change from the typical politician. At this point and time, President Obama is still popular, but polls show some Americans are losing faith in his policies. In fact, in 2009 the December Gallup poll reports only a 47% approval rating for President Obama in comparison to 64% in February (Gallup, C.N.N., U.S.A., 2009). Moreover, Public Policy Poll found that 50% of America would prefer President Obama over President Bush, but 44% would prefer President Bush in the White House. The invasive nature of today’s media may hinder President Obama’s ability to lead. The Internet alone offers blogs, message boards, web pages and countless means to offer counter information and commentary. Everyone and anyone can share their view. Americans have many sources to turn to for both information and opinion. There is clearly division over spending billions to help homeowners who are facing foreclosure on mortgages they cannot afford, as well as the $787 billion dollar stimulus plan passed.

Part of this second element in crisis rhetoric in explaining and clarify the economic crisis also involves identifying an enemy. President Obama does not put specific blame on Wall Street or the banking systems, but he does generally allude to the source of the economic crisis as being a select few. He declares, “the nation cannot prosper long when it favors only the prosperous” and “this crisis has reminded us that without a watchful eye, the market can spin out of control” (Obama, 2009, January 20). In a later message President Barack Obama directly states, “part of
what led our economy to this perilous moment was a sense of irresponsibility that prevailed from Wall Street to Washington” (2009, January 28). While he does not undermine the obstacles America faces in this period of crisis declaring, “the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time,” President Obama does reassure Americans, “but know this America: they will be met” (2009, January 20). His overall tone is one of calm assurance. He uses unifying language, “on this day we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord” and draws greatly on historical precedent reminding Americans “our minds are no less innovative...our capacity remains undiminished” (Obama, 2009, January 20). President Obama encourages America “Starting today we must pick ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America” (2009, January 20). His words are empowering and pragmatic. Yet, President Obama does caution, “our economic recovery will take years, not months” (2009, January 31).

Bostdorff and O’Rourke anticipate that in domestic crises it is more difficult to establish an enemy for the American public. Yet this does not appear to be an issue for President Obama. During this time of crisis it is well understood that Wall Street is mostly to blame, but the President also as aforementioned places responsibility on Washington as well. The American people feel that blame is deservedly placed and that there needs to be consequences for such greedy irresponsibility. President Obama affirms “Wall Street cannot resume taking risks, without the regard for consequences, and expect that next time American taxpayers will be there to break their fall” (Lochhead, 2009, September 15). In fact President Obama has even encouraged Wall Street to self-correct their behavior and to not simply wait for the coming regulatory action from Washington (Lochhead, 2009, September 15). According to The New
Wall Street, for better or worse, is continuing layoffs, which have driven up New York City’s unemployment rate to over ten percent (McGeehan, 2009, September 18).

President Obama announces a course of action.

The final tenet of Windt’s model suggests that crisis rhetoric must propose a course of action, which requires the President to appeal for public support, often transcending to a higher moral principle. Initially, President Obama does not address a specific plan of action, but instead uses more general allusions to restoring science, finding new energy sources, and transforming schools. However President Obama offers more clearly his proposed solutions for economic recovery in his first weekly address on January 24, 2009, proclaiming:

I’ve proposed an American recovery and reinvestment plan, to immediately jumpstart job creation as well as long-term economic growth….I hope to sign it into law in less than a month. It’s a plan that will save or create 3 or 4 million jobs, over the next four years…this is not just short-term effects…. (2009, January 24).

He further informs Americans of his plans to modernize our schools, become more energy efficient and lower health care costs. In appealing for public support President Obama confides:

I know that some are skeptical about the size and scale of this recovery plan. I understand that skepticism….But if we act now and act boldly, if we start rewarding hard work and responsibility once more, if we act as citizens and not partisans and begin again the work of remaking America, then I have faith that we will emerge from this trying time even stronger and more prosperous than we were before (2009, January 24).

President Obama speaks to Americans with a tone of optimism. In his inaugural speech he deems this “a new era of responsibility” asking U. S. citizens to seize their duties, imploring the nation, returning to the storm metaphor, “with hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents,
and endure what storms may come. Let it be said by our children’s children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end” (2009, January 20).

The difficulty of putting policy into legislation, because of the task of appealing to the dual audiences, the people and Congress is another constraint identified by Bostdorff and O’Rourke, which is clearly illustrated by President Obama’s rhetoric. President Obama initially seeks to maintain a positive relationship with Congress, stating, “Congress is a coequal branch of government. We're not trying to jam anything down people's throats” as he lobbied for approval of the second installment of his $819 billion financial industry bailout. Obama professes to America, “I will continue working with both parties so that the strongest possible bill gets to my desk” (2009, January 31). Yet, thus far legislation passed during President Barack Obama’s first year demonstrates only Democratic approval. Early legislation of the Obama administration includes: the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, which makes it easier for people to have the salary they deserve, despite their gender, race, or age and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 on February 13, 2009, which Obama claims “is a major milestone on our road to recovery”(2009, February 14). Obama’s reconciled $787 billion stimulus bill passed the House and Senate on February 13, in a strong partisan vote, however, no republicans in the House supported it, and only three republicans in Senate voted in favor (Burke, 2009). The President has dramatically scaled back his appeals to congressional republicans. The stimulus plan still causes great controversy. It initiated the creation of 3.5 million jobs, long-term infrastructure investments and gave a tax cut to ninety-five percent of working Americans. Other major legislation includes: the Treasury Secretary Geithner’s bank bailout plan, which was not completed until March 23, the funding bill for the remainder of the fiscal year 2009 and President Obama’s own budget proposal for the fiscal year of 2010, which is reconciled to $3.4
trillion and passed without a single Republican vote on April 24 (Burke, 2009). The President in this term has signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the "Making Home Affordable" home refinancing plan, launched a $15 billion plan to boost lending to small businesses, led G-20 Summit that produced a $1.1 trillion deal to combat the global financial crisis, the Fraud Enforcement and Recovery Act, the Helping Families Save Their Homes Act, and the Credit Card Accountability, Responsibility, and Disclosure (CARD) Act to protect Americans from unfair and deceptive credit card practices. The Democratic majority within Congress fuels the progress of President Obama’s presidency. Legislation is being passed without overwhelming difficulty; however, it is generally highly controversial.

The first month of discourse alone, reveals much about the tone of President Obama’s presidency. And in an address made three months into his term, the President continues to follow the same lines of argument in his speeches, only with more emphasis placed on explanation of the course of action. Windt includes a stronger call for the public’s support and patience in seeing progress. The President begins, “in just under three months, we've responded to an extraordinary set of economic challenges with extraordinary action -- action that's been unprecedented both in terms of its scale and its speed” (2009, April 14). His language still highlights the exigent nature of the economic conditions, as Windt finds crucial, but the speech quickly moves from a focus on defining the circumstances to explanation of policy implementation. President Obama acknowledges, “I know that some have accused us of taking on too much at once. Others believe we haven't done enough” continuing:

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2 Another stimulus bill is underway at this point in April of 2010, which the analysis does not address.
So today, I want to step back for a moment and explain our strategy as clearly as I can. This is going to be prose, and not poetry. I want to talk about what we've done, why we've done it, and what we have left to do. I want to update you on the progress we've made, but I also want to be honest about the pitfalls that may still lie ahead (Obama, 2009, April 14).

Here President Obama sounds much like President Roosevelt, trying to be clear and seemingly truthful in explaining the crisis, the initiatives made thus far and the direction of the future. In a tone similar to President Roosevelt’s fireside chats, President Obama begins to speak directly to the public using uncomplicated language to clarify the state of the economy:

Now, to understand how we get there, we first need to understand how we got here. Recessions are not uncommon. Markets and economies naturally ebb and flow, as we've seen many times in our history. But this recession is different. This recession was not caused by a normal downturn in the business cycle. It was caused by a perfect storm of irresponsibility and poor decision-making that stretched from Wall Street to Washington to Main Street. As has been widely reported, it started in the housing market….(Obama, 2009, April 14).

President Obama further addresses concerns about cutbacks and consumer spending communicating:

if every family in America, if every business in America cuts back all at once, then no one is spending any money, which means there are no customers, which means there are more layoffs, which means the economy gets even worse. That's why the government has to step in and temporarily boost spending in order to stimulate demand. That's exactly what we're doing right now (Obama, 2009, April 14).
President Obama offers justification for the aggressive actions taken by the federal government, as well as attempts to demonstrate his command over the seemingly impossible circumstances.

As Windt deems necessary, President Obama asks for public support through the speech and continually reminds his audience of the overarching goal and purpose proclaiming, “I want every American to know that each action we take and each policy we pursue is driven by a larger vision of America's future” (2009, April 14). Likewise he stresses that he is building a foundation in order to “make sure such a crisis never happens again” (Obama, 2009, April 14). President Barack Obama confidently professes, “There is no doubt that times are still tough. By no means are we out of the woods just yet. But from where we stand, for the very first time, we're beginning to see glimmers of hope” (2009, April 14). His rhetoric four months into his term still follows the shape of the basic framework suggested by Windt, while maintaining a spirit of hopefulness that the actions taken thus far will prove successful as the future unfolds.

Immediately following the crisis and months after, President Obama fulfils the tenets of our crisis rhetoric framework based on Windt. President Obama announces the crisis with urgency, explains the crisis using new facts, illuminates an enemy and finally proposes a course of action, which materializes through legislation. He appears to be successfully speaking to American Citizens and Congress, as President Roosevelt did. Now, only time will demonstrate the end results.
Chapter VIII

Implications

The word crisis expressed in Chinese is represented by the combination of two characters: danger and opportunity. In this light a crisis does indeed illuminate the possibility for a leader, for a president to be transformative. When comparing the Great Depression of the 1930’s to the economic crisis and deepening recession of past several years there are clear similarities. Both are times of tremendous economic mayhem where the stock market has retreated, unemployment is high, the banking industry on the verge of collapse and the American people in a state of panic. Likewise at the onset of both, the incumbent Republican President is unable to bring about positive change. President Roosevelt and President Obama, both Democrats, are elected with the hope of change and in the spirit of optimism. Both great orators, the American people turn to them for comfort, but most importantly, for a solution.

Despite the many parallels found between the Great Depression Era and now, distinctions must be acknowledged before reaching conclusions. First the economic crisis today is not as severe as the depression during the 1930’s. When looking critically at the depression period and the role of Presidents Hoover and Roosevelt in turning the economy around, it is clear they face truly unparalleled conditions with no major historical precedent to consider. President Roosevelt, in particular, needs to determine how to move forward, while explaining the crisis to Americans, maintaining optimism and offering relief. In comparison, Presidents Bush and Obama face the challenge to provide public definition to what the American people are experiencing “as largely private struggles [personal finances affected], and to restore a sense of collective possibility” (Kuttner, 2008, p. 36). Likewise, although comparisons may be made to the ambitious agenda set out on by President Obama to President Roosevelt, President Roosevelt’s initial focus is chiefly
the economic crisis, whereas Obama chooses to embrace a broader range of policy reforms all at once, such as universal healthcare. Another circumstance unique to today is the information inundation of the mass media and more broadly educated American people.

Despite the disparities, the stronger similarities during these economic crisis periods make the analysis by comparison valuable. Two of the presidents evaluated clearly failed in their attempts to reestablish order in the economy and guide America out of the economic chaos. The first being: President Hoover. His main problem is that he ignored the situation, refusing to recognize it as a crisis. Even though he personally acknowledges to his staff and in memoirs that the crash could mean a depression and works to prevent it, his policy relies on psychology and limited rhetoric. President Hoover “abandoned the practice of delivering messages directly to Congress and returned to the written form” (Murphy, 2008, p. 306). He does not give Americans the voice of reassurance or sufficient help from the Federal Reserve and federal government. Oddly, President Hoover possesses a much stronger ethos than President Bush, and is recognized as a brilliant and organized person (Houck, 2001). His success as the Secretary of Commerce and strong economic background should have ensured his triumph during the depression. Much of his failure must be attributed to his false assumptions about what would have been best for economic recovery and his lack of strong direct rhetoric to the American people.

Moreover, evaluation of President Hoover must consider the expectations and standards for the presidents in 1929. We have the luxury of looking back on President Hoover’s discourse and seeing the long-term effects, but we cannot apply current standards to critique him fairly. The modern presidency is now characterized by public rhetoric and the expectation that presidents speak directly and frequently to the American people. During President Hoover’s term this role is not as concretely established. Without the historical precedent, his own discomfort with public speaking, and with his reliance on
print rather than utilizing the mass communicative power of the radio, President Hoover was unable to properly respond to America’s needs. Many scholars have been quick to judge President Herbert Hoover as a poor and ineffective president, giving overwhelming credit to President Roosevelt for America’s economic recovery. However, President Hoover is owed respect for his contributions in laying out ideas for the New Deal and economic policy, and his genuine struggle to determine the best manner to bring America out of the depression. Despite his rhetorical and inspirational failures, President Hoover provided foundational work for the subsequent White House administration.

The second president who clearly fails in his attempt to guide America out of the soon to be recession is former President Bush. The question for President Bush may not be what should he have done, but really why couldn’t he be effective? He took the right action by speaking often and candidly to Americans, but appears to have no positive ethos. His past poor decisions with Iraq limit his ability to inspire trust in Americans. Without the belief of the American people, President Bush cannot be a successful leader or comforter. Likewise, when his term is essentially over, there is little action he can take. President Bush may not be an ideal leader, but he is also a victim of poor circumstances as a lame duck president.

Furthermore the role of the contemporary media must be considered. Today media coverage is pervasive. Television and the Internet were nonexistent during President Hoover’s term. “On television, the reaction shots often add important nonverbal emotional cues, informing the viewer” (Bucy, 2003, p. 82). Televised news “evokes a presidential reaction and primes the viewing audience to expect leader communication that matches—in content, delivery, and tone—the gravity of the situation” (Bucy, 2003, p. 82). President Bush looks strong, confident, compassionate, and resolute during his addresses after the terrorist attacks on September 11th. In comparison, President Bush appears tired and lost during his economic addresses, particularly when he speaks on September 24, 2008. He looks uncomfortable, but
speaks with a relatively appropriate tone. Still, he fails to arouse real hope and reassurance in the public. Again, this can be attributed to his lower ethos at this point in his presidency because his term is technically already over.

Thus, the failures of Presidents Hoover and Bush illuminate important factors for presidents during times of economic crisis. The analysis of President Hoover demonstrates the need to frequently speak to the public and explain the situation and actions being taken to alleviate the issue at hand. Likewise President Hoover communicates the problem of internal constraints, that his fear of public speaking is a tremendous disadvantage. He did not portray confidence or present himself as a man of action that could be trusted.

Likewise the analysis of President Bush reveals that even fulfilling the necessary features of crisis rhetoric may not be enough. He speaks to the people often, but struggles because he has no resonance with the American people. His lack of personal ethos does not inspire trust in his capabilities. Moreover he is a victim of bad timing. The economic crisis begins in the last months of his term, when he has little power.

In contrast, the analysis of President Roosevelt offers the chance to understand successful efforts to reestablish order in the economy. Consideration of the specific rhetoric of President Roosevelt during the first months of his presidency reveals that he sought to unify the people for the challenges ahead of them. Not only does President Roosevelt readily identify and “scapegoat” bankers and brokers for the depression, he also employs military metaphors to evoke a sense of responsibility and unity in Americans, while clearly establishing his role as a leader (Ryan, 1988, p. 85). Prior to President Roosevelt the “depression was not just an economic condition; it was a national state of mind” (Kuttner, 2008, p. 43). President Roosevelt demonstrates a take-charge attitude and is willing to experiment with many different options in
his desire to stimulate economic recovery. His success is verified by the actual accomplishments of his programs and economic revival as evidenced by history. Specifically, however, President Roosevelt also makes use of radio, the mass media means of his time, and uses rhetoric to shape the temperament of the American people. Radio allows him to intimately communicate with the public. He eases fears and restored confidence by maintaining direct positive communication and establishing programs that brought relief.

Analysis using the framework of Windt’s crisis rhetoric shows that President Roosevelt rhetorically accomplished the necessary lines of argument. His willingness to speak to the public and holds regular press conferences truly benefited his public approval. President Roosevelt continuously communicates his desire to be a trustworthy and capable leader. Despite his own uncertainties concerning the future, he never let Americans worry that better days were not on the horizon. Likewise the three constraints identified by Bostdorff and O’Rourke illustrate President Roosevelt did benefit by taking a strong hand in legislation and the democratic majority. He carefully sculpts his image for the public, not even allowing the press to photograph him in a way that emphasizes his physical handicap. President Roosevelt does what Presidents Hoover and Bush could not.

Finally, assessment of the nature of President Obama rhetorical influence on the American people and the passage of legislative initiatives may be premature. However, this analysis demonstrates that he is fulfilling the necessary lines of crisis rhetoric based on the framework of Theodore Windt. Like Roosevelt, President Obama has a strong charismatic presence. To a nation familiar with the less competent, often fragmented speeches of former President George W. Bush, the energy and confidence of President Obama is refreshing. He speaks to the public and Congress regularly continuing to project an air of hope and confidence
in his administrations initiatives. The constraints of Bostdorff and O’Rourke illuminate that like
President Roosevelt, Obama is strongly benefited by the democratic majority in Congress. The
constraints further demonstrate the unique role of the media in a president’s communication and
public perception. President Obama is dealing with a much more educated public in the twenty-
first century and has more means to speak to Americans. During a tech savvy time, Obama
reaches out making the most of the Internet.

The analysis indicates that President Obama, like President Roosevelt is a captivating
communicator, which is desirable during times of crisis. Both maximize the media available and
express an air of confidence. However, President Obama, is taking on a great many more issues.
In addition to the efforts to stimulate economic recovery and reform, he is highly concerned with
healthcare. While his rhetoric is gripping, America’s fears can only truly be calmed by actual
results. Although he is an excellent public speaker and consistently addresses Americans on the
economy, only time will truly show the effects of his presidency, specifically his rhetorical role.

The ideas proposed in this paper stress the powerful role the president has as an orator. The
failures of President Hoover and President Bush occur for different reasons. President Hoover does not
speak and Bush lacks ethos. The success of President Roosevelt shows how the combination of strong
ethos and fulfilling the three key features of crisis rhetoric lead to positive outcomes. Evidently the
president’s ethos is essential, yet real results and time ensure the most objective evaluation. President
Obama’s rhetoric in particular will require a long-term analysis. Future research is necessary to verify
this position. Research should aim to focus on the unique genre of economic crisis, considering the
actual effect of the president’s rhetoric on reestablishing confidence in the market. Much remains to
consider relative to the complex category of presidential response to economic crisis, since it appears
there are deviations from general or international crisis genre.
While it is difficult to say whether or not the president’s rhetoric in times of economic crisis really has any true effect on the market or situation, it appears certain that there are expectations for the president to fulfill as a rhetorical leader. The American public expects the president to be in command of the situation, to speak to them and keep them informed, and to initiate action for the resolution. Key features in responding to economic crises appear to be: going public and establishing urgency, sharing new information, and announcing a course of action, which unifies the country and calls for public support. There are specific constraints on economic crisis rhetoric, which must be accounted for in evaluating a president’s influence.

Presidential rhetoric plays an important role in comforting and guiding Americans in times of economic crisis. The demands on the president are considerable. In the midst of crisis, both the press corps and anxious citizenry await “an appropriate and reassuring leadership response” (Bucy, 2003, p. 77-78). Confidence in the financial system is a crucial factor in encouraging economic recovery, a factor Presidents Hoover, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Carter and Bush have all stressed in times of economic crisis; but more important is the character and actions of the president. The public must have confidence in the president in order for his discourse to be effective. Since economic welfare is of such crucial importance to Americans, now more than ever “the president is the premier economic and political actor in the U.S. system” “what the president says about the economy should matter” (Wood, 2004, p. 605).

Although President Hoover and President Bush may not be exemplar models of presidential economic crisis discourse, an analysis of their unique responses to extreme economic turmoil proves useful for illuminating what strategies presidents in the future might employ. Additionally the reaction
to their responses communicates the importance of strong ethos for the president, as well as the progressively more complicated relationship between the president and the media. More technological advances and the passing of time seem to alter the expectations and type of presidential response necessary in economic crises.

The juxtaposition of Presidents Hoover and Bush, of Presidents Roosevelt and Obama highlights the first months of presidency as crucial for passing legislation and establishing one’s character for the public. Likewise the analysis suggests economic crisis rhetoric holds many parallels to international crisis genre, requiring the President to take a commanding stance. The American system of government involves many checks and balances, but the President clearly can and should serve as more than a figurehead. Confidence in the president is crucial and develops when the people are educated by their President and given continual explanation and reassurance of the progress and initiatives undertaken. However, the people must first believe in the integrity and command of their President. Only when the American people believe in the character of their president, does he possess the powerful ability to persuade and initiate change.
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