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INTRODUCING EMOTION:

The Use of Emotion and Character in Presidential Speeches

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THIS PAPER EXPLORES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRUTH AND EMOTION IN RHETORIC WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON THE OPENING MOMENTS OF THREE SPEECHES BY AMERICAN PRESIDENTS. THE FIRST CRUCIAL MOMENTS OF A SPEECH ARE PRIME OPPORTUNITIES TO APPEAL TO THE EMOTIONS OF THE AUDIENCE, A PRACTICE WHICH IS ARGUABLY OF DUBIOUS VERACITY. TO COUNTER THIS SUPPOSED FALLACY, THIS PAPER EXPLORES THREE SPEECHES WHERE EMOTION IS USED TRUTHFULLY AND EFFECTIVELY. GIVEN THESE RESULTS, THE USE OF EMOTION IN PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC IS SEEN TO BE NOT ONLY PERMISSIBLE, BUT NECESSARY TO INFLUENCING ONE'S AUDIENCE.

INTRODUCTION

During the crucial opening moments of speeches to the American people, American Presidents often use emotion in an attempt to influence their audience's views. Without a convincing and intriguing introduction, rhetoricians are likely to fail in their later attempts to persuade their audience. But the appeal to emotion is often considered a logical fallacy because of the supposed inconsistency of emotion in judgments of truth. In order to judge the relationship of these emotional introductions to truth, three introductions to presidential speeches are defined according to three emotion-based argumentative tactics identified by Douglas Walton in *The Place of Emotion in Argument*. The tactics are the *argumentum ad populum*, *argumentum ad baculum*, and *argumentum ad hominem*. Speeches by Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson, John F. Kennedy, and George W. Bush serve as examples of these arguments in political rhetoric. Each speech enhances its appeal to emotion through the use of allusion to character, a tactic treated by Alan Brinton in his article, "Character in Ithotic Argument." Brinton's three examples relate to Seneca's works, but they also shed light on these cases, in slightly different forms. An examination of these three introductions demonstrates that the opening moments of the presidents' speeches are based on logical, yet emotionally-charged, arguments. Although usually suspect in the field of rhetoric, both Walton and Brinton support the claim that emotion can be used effectively and truthfully in political discourse.

The speeches below offer views of the president playing the roles of unifier, commander-in-chief, and politician. Although the admiration and trust held by the American people for their president has without doubt declined in the past decades, there is still an expectation that political lead-

ers will speak truthfully to their audiences. This paper considers only the beginning of each of these speeches to consider the way in which an appeal to emotion at the beginning of a speech is meant to immediately impact the audience and prime them for greater persuasion. This paper will focus especially on the importance of the introduction in American political rhetoric and the unique relationship between the president and his fellow citizens.

Walton describes the *argumentum ad populum* as an "appeal to popular sentiment or opinion" in argumentation.ⁱ This appeal presupposes that the audience of the speech has some widely held beliefs which the speaker can safely assume hold universal appeal. But Walton identifies a number of reasons why many logicians immediately discredit the *argumentum ad populum* as fallacious. Most significantly, they maintain that the appeal to emotion automatically makes the argument invalid and assumes a universal audience where one does not exist.ⁱⁱ Walton states that neither of these reasons is sufficient to discount the truth of some arguments based on popular appeals. Most basic to Walton's argument against the discrediting of the *ad populum* is the mistaken presumption that "appeals to popular emotions are in a separate category from logical reasoning."ⁱⁱⁱ Rather, as will be seen in the beginning of Lyndon Johnson's speech "We Shall Overcome," the appeal to popular sentiment can draw truthful conclusions.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON

Speaking during the tumultuous Civil Rights Era, President Lyndon Johnson appeals to the universal themes of "the dignity of man" and the "destiny of democracy" in his argument for greater equality for African Americans. Although these themes are expressed in phrases with positive connotations, President Johnson's opening remarks

“. . . the opening moments of the presidents' speeches are based on logical, yet emotionally-charged, arguments.”

are meant to suggest a lack of equality. That is, by suggesting “dignity” and “democracy” he is really referring to the injustice and inequality in America, triggering in his audience an emotional response of shame and regret. While it could be argued that the appeal to emotion in this argument makes it immediately erroneous, the issues of race and discrimination are more adequately discussed by a “mutual interaction of thinking and feeling in ethical decision making.”^{iv} Indeed it would be nearly impossible to discuss the racial inequalities in America at this time without infusing some elements of emotion into one’s argument. Topics such as human dignity do not lend themselves to discussions based solely on facts and data. As President Johnson implores his people to look to Selma, Alabama as an example of the undeniable prejudice in America, the truth of his argument is not threatened by its use of emotions. The topic of Johnson’s speech suggests, however, that the larger audience is not a universally coherent group. The divisions within America at this time need to be discussed in relation to the second criticism of *ad populum* arguments, that they make a unified audience out of a limited group.

President Johnson states that in order for racial inequality to be erased in America, “members of both parties, Americans of all religions, and of all colors, from every sec-



tion of this country, [must support] that cause.” The American populace is a large and varied group, with different viewpoints and values, which could call into question the use of the *ad populum*, challenging the existence of a unified opinion to which to appeal. But Walton states that it is more important that “the audience to whom the argument is directed accepts these premises enthusiastically” than that the premises are universally valid.^v It is certainly

easier to speak to people who already agree with the speaker’s position. In this case, however, it can be assumed that at least the majority of the population agreed in principle with the goals of achieving “dignity” and “democracy.” This practical approach offers the speaker more flexibility in his approach while still being able to maintain a level of relative truth. Although this is not a perfect and undeniable truth, relative truth can be acceptable in complicated cases. The people who President Johnson most needs to convince are those who hold racial prejudices. These same people would contest the notions of dignity and democracy being inclusive of African Americans and thus call into doubt the ve-

racity of the argument. Walton again offers important insight in stating that one must be a “rational respondent” in the audience to qualify as an important judge of an argument.^{vi} The argument could be made here that those who believe that African Americans are not worthy of equal treatment are themselves not rational. This may be using

historical hindsight, but it must be considered that in this case the possibility of having a universal audience in America is not plausible. While it is important for the president to convince those who do not agree with him, it is more practical to try and convince those who do not hold radical views. Indeed the message of the speech is to rally support behind the president's racially unifying policies in the hope that an American consensus may be forged. So while the president's *ad populum* argument is based on some important presumptions, these assumptions are both reasonable and necessary to the continuation of the discussion.

Having established the necessity of emotion in President Johnson's introduction, it is possible to examine how the president expands upon his original appeal to emotion through the first of Brinton's appeal to character. Following his universal appeal to extinguish the flames of inequality in America, President Johnson refers to the "unending search for freedom" which has roots in places like Lexington, Concord, and Appomattox. Much like the events in Selma, Alabama which spurred the president's remarks, the Battle of Appomattox is one symbol of the struggle to secure the freedom of African Americans. Many years after the end of the Civil War, African Americans during the 1960s were still unequal citizens. One of the three appeals to authority comes in the form of what Brinton calls "the exemplar."^{vii} Described as a "reference to actual historical examples," the audience is encouraged to remember the importance of this event, and the people who died to establish a precedent of racial equality.^{viii} President Johnson's earlier exhortation to realize the "destiny of democracy" is supported by the sacrifice and principles that led the soldiers of the North to fight against the injustice of slavery in the South. By using this exemplar, President Johnson's abstract appeal to emotion is given a more tangible representation by referencing America's history. As Brinton suggests, the exemplar suggests the virtuous actions which should be emulated by the audience.^{ix} In this sense, the exemplar provides factual evidence to support what was previously an almost entirely emotional appeal.

Although most in the audience had no personal involvement in the Civil War, they all knew what occurred and what was at stake. By drawing the connection between the 1860s and the 1960s the president hopes that the shame of America's continuing inequalities will be intensified. Rhetorically speaking, the argument is based less on strict emotional appeal, being supported by this reference to the past.

JOHN F. KENNEDY

The *argumentum ad baculum* is defined by Walton as an "appeal to threat of force or to fear ... in a critical discussion."^x Walton spends considerable time discussing this definition and whether or not an *ad baculum* argument must include a threat or if fear alone can define the *ad baculum*.^{xi} Walton also states that the "context of the dialogue" determines whether the *ad baculum* will be deemed valid or fallacious.^{xii} For the purposes of this discussion, the situational definition proves more enlightening to the discussion of the truthfulness of his claims. It would be inappropriate for a direct threat to be made in a speech. It would be more appropriate to carefully use threat or fear in an argument in what Walton describes as a "negotiation dialogue."^{xiii} In the case of a negotiation, there is a greater expectation on the part of both parties that threats *may* be used should resolution of a conflict reach an impasse. The following speech by President John F. Kennedy is an interesting variation on the typical negotiation dialogue between a speaker and an opponent. Rather than a threat of force against his or her opponent, the third party of Communist Russia serves as the threat to both speaker and audience. Nevertheless, this is an *ad baculum* argument because of the fear the president's argument is meant to arouse in his audience. An examination of President Kennedy's "The Berlin Crisis" will then serve as an example of the use of the emotions aroused by fear in an argument.

Domestically and internationally, the perceived threat of communism had created a climate of fear in post-World War II America. Fears were realized when, in 1961, Soviet Russia contested America's claim to parts of the city of

Berlin, which had been divided at the end of World War II. In this time of crisis President Kennedy spoke to the American people about the threat facing them and the need to meet this crisis with fortitude. To begin his speech, President Kennedy referenced the “grim warnings about the future of the world” offered by Russian Premier Khrushchev weeks earlier. Although the American people would not be directly harmed by this action, there is an implied threat that if the Soviets forced the Americans out of Berlin, they could emerge anywhere. In this case the threat could do harm to both members of the dialogue; both parties in this speech could be harmed by the same source. It is apparent that the emotions aroused in both parties as a result of this speech are fear and uncertainty. But does this use of emotion constitute a logical fallacy? This question may be better answered by examining the larger purpose of the speech.

Later in his speech, President Kennedy asks Congress for more money and support for the Armed Forces to help the people of Berlin. But the president also states that the American people must be aware of “new threats in Berlin or elsewhere” because “[Americans] cannot afford not to meet this challenge.” President Kennedy’s aims in this speech are more wide-reaching than simply freeing the oppressed people of Berlin. As a means for asking for more money and supplies to fight this threat, the president evidences his appeal



to fear with an event occurring at the moment. Although the president hopes to use this incident as a means for building up the military, there was at least some semblance of a threat to American interests to warrant this reaction. So while historians have and will argue about the actual threat of communism, in this case it can be said that the argument *ad baculum* was based upon evidence. The appeal

to fear in this case was a truthful representation of the situation facing the United States at the time. His argument appeals to the emotions of the American people, and President Kennedy uses techniques to rhetorically exploit these emotions.

President Kennedy completes his *ad baculum* argument by becoming the savior of the American people, the suppressor of their fears. By speaking “frankly” and “openly” about the situation, the situation does not seem so grave. To conclude his introduction, President Kennedy uses an allusion to the past to shore up his *ad baculum* argument and appeal to fear. Exploiting the division between security and anxiety, the president references the victory of the Allied powers over Nazi Germany which led to the partitioning of Berlin. Here we find another example of an appeal to character and authority as defined by Brinton. This reference to Nazi Germany may be defined as a mix of an “exemplar” and a “spectator.”^{xiv} The spectator is defined by Brinton as an example which forces the members of the audience to ask themselves: what

would this person do in this situation or what would I do if this person were watching? In this context the exemplar reminds the audience of the courage and sacrifice required to win that war and the spectator asks them what those who sacrificed for that war would do in this situation. Many in the audience had fresh memories of either fighting in the war or living during war time and would have easily drawn the parallels between this new dilemma and WWII. This is another reversal in language in President Kennedy's introduction. After the strength conveyed in the second paragraph, the president again resumes his somber-toned allusion to a time of victory achieved through great hardship. By constantly shifting the emotions he is appealing to, President Kennedy further exploits the alarm created in the first lines of his speech and garners more leverage to convince his audience of his proposals later in the speech. This allusion to WWII is the final piece of the *ad baculum* because it references a threat that had already been faced and defeated. But this allusion also implies that without similar sacrifices the new enemy, unlike the old one, may be victorious.

It is apparent that the *ad baculum* argument must be carefully used. Clearly the United States was facing a threat and the president wished to inform his people. But the repeated appeal to fear is cause for reasonable suspicion of the truthfulness of his argument. As Walton suggests, the *ad baculum* argument may be used as "scaremongering."^{xv} It is difficult to believe that many Americans at the time viewed the President's remarks as such given the larger situation. Instead, it should be remarked that the president met this situation with appropriate concern and persuasive rhetorical techniques. The leaders of the Soviet Union were listening to the president's speech and were themselves targets of the president's attack. In this sense, the speech could function on two levels according to Walton's division of the *ad baculum*.^{xvi} On the level already discussed, the president's use of fear was indirectly targeted towards the American populace in order to stir an awareness of the situation and support Kennedy's cause, what Walton describes as a "non-threat."^{xvii} On the other hand, if viewed

as being directed towards the Soviet Union, this speech could be viewed as an indirect threat, because it is not specifically addressed to the Soviet Union.^{xviii} While the president knew the Soviet leaders would be listening, it was the support of his constituency, the American nation, that was most important to him. They serve as the primary audience of his *ad baculum* argument.

GEORGE W. BUSH

In the final emotion-based argument, the *argumentum ad hominem*, President George W. Bush contends that his opponent in the 2004 Presidential Election, Senator John Kerry, has dubious credibility for the position of president because of his inability to establish consistent policy positions. According to the subdivision of the *ad hominem* arguments by Walton, this argument by President Bush should be classified as a circumstantial *ad hominem* or the "questioning of an arguer's position by citing a presumptive inconsistency within that position."^{xix} In fact, President Bush's attack is a textbook case of this type of argument, one that many raised against Senator Kerry during the election. At the beginning of his opening statement, President Bush (referring to Kerry) states he "can see why people think he changes positions a lot, because he does." The president uses as evidence in his introduction Senator Kerry's record with regard to the War in Iraq: he supported the war before it occurred, but condemned it when popular sentiment changed and his opponent Howard Dean spoke out against it. President Bush is implying, and later explicitly states, that because of such uncertainty, Senator Kerry's ability to lead the country in a time of war is dubious. President Bush does not concentrate on his own policies directly, but does this indirectly by pointing to the matters which Senator Kerry has changed positions on and he has continued to support. The strength of this argument relies on the audience's belief that what the president has done has been beneficial, but most important is that Bush defends the consistency of his own actions. In his introduction, President Bush sets himself up against Senator Kerry as a man of deep-seated beliefs, worthy of a second term as president. Undecided voters are left wondering about the

character of Senator Kerry in opposition to the president who has not wavered from his position despite controversy. By placing this attack at the beginning of the debate the president is able to point out this character flaw throughout the debate. The *ad hominem* in the introduction of the debate can serve as the theme of the debate, to which the president may continually return. Although the argument is backed up with examples by President Bush, it is primarily an appeal to the abstract, emotional characteristics Senator Kerry exemplifies.

President Bush's reference to Senator Kerry's record to call into doubt his character is another use of one of Brinton's appeals to authority. In this case, the president is appealing to a very straightforward "citation" of his opponent's voting record.^{xx} The citation is described by Brinton "as a form of ihotic argument [which] involves the direct or indirect quotation of a source with the intention that identification of the opinion or attitude expressed with the source will influence hearers or readers toward acceptance."^{xxi}

It is clear from the discussion above that President Bush's quotation is an indirect one which references changes in Senator Kerry's beliefs on a number of issues. This example relies on the premise that the American populace is suspicious of politicians who do not keep their word and are unsure of what they support. Through this example, the president hopes to show that the senator is unfit to be pres-

ident. In making this argument the president insists that he represents the opposite of the values which he claims Senator Kerry has exhibited in his "wishy-washy" voting record. As a means of rhetorical strategy, this argument both condemns one's opponent and extols the virtue of the speaker. This is a dual nature which has not been seen in any of the previous arguments and is an important device for speakers to use.



Although the *ad hominem* has a reputation for being fallacious, and nothing more than an attack on one's character, it should be considered relevant and important criticism in a critical discussion. According to Walton, this importance is primarily derived from the personalization which occurs when an *ad hominem* is used because it concentrates its attack on the character of one's opponent.^{xxii} But rather than considering this personalization as a negative aspect of discussion, Walton goes so far as to say that this is "the most important single benefit of a successful critical discussion."^{xxiii} While it is clear that raising character issues is important to debate, it is

also important to recognize that there is the possibility that such arguments can be used excessively and insultingly. In such cases, the *ad hominem* loses its effectiveness with the audience, which is also able to recognize the subtlety and importance of the argument when used well. The overuse or abuse of the *ad hominem* can be more injurious to the speaker than the intended target of criticism. When used

in President Bush's opening remarks during the debate, however, the *ad hominem* immediately imprints a negative image of Senator Kerry's character upon the audience. Whether or not he directly addresses this again is not as important as the fact that it remains in the back of the audience's mind throughout the rest of the debate. This is then an exceedingly effective method to use during a debate because it figures greatly into the later discussions without having to be mentioned.

CONCLUSION

From this discussion it is apparent that the opening lines of presidential speeches are often filled with rhetorical strategies that are primarily based on emotions. This discussion has focused on three introductions, three arguments based on emotion, and three appeals to character. In light of each of these sources the richness and complexity of introductions to rhetoric is undeniable. Without a convincing and appealing introduction, a speaker's ability to influence an audience later in the speech is greatly inhibited. The importance of emotion, as discussed through Walton's presentation of the emotion-based arguments, has shown that, practically speaking, emotions are sometimes the most accurate judges of truth available. Similarly, Brinton's article offers three appeals to character which have been shown to enhance arguments based on emotion. The *argumentum ad populum*, *argumentum ad baculum*, and *argumentum ad hominem* must be used with appropriate decorum to the situation to be persuasive. Should these arguments extend beyond the boundaries of decency in a civilized forum, such as the president's podium, the audience may be unconvinced and the fallacious argument will harm the speaker instead of his opponent. Emotion must not be discarded by logicians as inherently fallacious; however, it must also be used cautiously by rhetoricians in order to secure influence over an audience without infringing upon the veracity of one's assertions.

ENDNOTES

- i. Walton, (65)
- ii. Walton, (66)

- iii. Walton, (67)
- iv. Walton, (67)
- v. Walton, (70)
- vi. Walton, (69)
- vii. Brinton, (252)
- viii. Brinton, (252)
- ix. Brinton, (253)
- x. Walton, (145)
- xi. Walton, (152)
- xii. Walton, (144)
- xiii. Walton, (144)
- xiv. Brinton, (252-254)
- xv. Walton, (174)
- xvi. Walton, (180)
- xvii. Walton, (180)
- xviii. Walton, (181)
- xix. Walton, (202)
- xx. Brinton, (251)
- xxi. Brinton, (251)
- xxii. Walton, (192)
- xxiii. Walton, (192)

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