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Presidential Rhetoric: 
Definition of a Field of Study*

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A President has three general areas of power available to him. He has constitutional and statutory power granted by the Constitution or conferred by law. He has political power as head of his party. And he has power with public opinion. For decades, scholars of the presidency concentrated their research primarily on the first two of these powers, though occasionally giving some attention to the last. Then, twenty-five years ago, Richard Neustadt published Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership. Its importance became immediately apparent. Scholars quickly recognized that Neustadt offered a new approach to the study of presidential power quite different from the descriptive and institutional studies that had dominated political science in the past. “Presidential power,” Neustadt stated, “is the power to persuade.”1 With this definition, he placed the locus of presidential power in the President-as-persuader instead of residing solely in the formal legal powers or the political powers of the office. Presidential Power soon became a benchmark inquiry into the presidency and took its proper place along side Corwin’s The President: Office and Powers and Rossiter’s The American Presidency in the bookcase of classics on the subject.2

For rhetoricians, Neustadt’s volume was a godsend, It began to locate the scholarly place of presidential rhetoric within the discipline of presidential studies. But Neustadt’s perspective on presidential power was more sharply focused by those writing in this area. They asked: How does a President persuade the public? In the early nineteen-seventies, such studies began to appear, thus giving the materials for an academic foundation to the fledgling field of presidential rhetoric. Some were written by rhetoricians; others by political scientists, historians, and journalists. In 1979, the Speech Communication Association of America established a Task Force on Presidential Communication to examine presidential rhetoric as a means through which “a chief executive executes the powers of his office. . . .”3 In 1980, Sidney Blumenthal published The Permanent Campaign in which he argued that persuasion is now central to governing, in fact, that campaign techniques are now merged with the methods of governing to run the presidency.4 A year later, two major books—David Chagall’s The New Kingmakers and Larry J. Sabato’s The Rise of Political Consultants—appeared attempting to examine the behind-the-scenes practitioners of public persuasion and their uses of modern communication technologies to transform traditional campaign politics.5

In 1981, Presidential Studies Quarterly published “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency” in which the authors contended that the very nature of the presidency has
undergone a significant transformation in function and emphasis from a constitutional, administrative office to an executive, rhetorical office. They attributed this change to three influences: (1) the modern doctrine of activist leadership in the presidency; (2) the advances in communication technologies; and (3) the modern presidential campaign. The "rhetorical presidency" added another dimension to rhetorical studies beyond the analysis and criticism of presidential speeches and campaigns to the influence—both theoretical and practical—of rhetoric on the nature and conduct of the office itself. With all this writing about presidential uses of public persuasion, it is time to define the field of presidential rhetoric in precise terms, summarize research that has already been conducted, and set the agenda for future research.

The discipline of presidential rhetoric is concerned with the study of presidential public persuasion as it affects the ability of a President to exercise the powers of the office. It is a study of "how Presidents gain, maintain, or lose public support." The raw materials for this study are the speeches of a President, press conferences, messages to Congress; in sum, the public statements by a President. But such studies must also include an analysis and understanding of the target constituencies a President addresses, his uses of television and the mass media, and a variety of other rhetorical weapons in his political arsenal that he uses to reach and persuade those in the public who either comprise his support or pose opposition to him. Furthermore, such studies must be placed in the over-all context of the policies and politics of the administration to see how the uses of rhetoric have influenced or directed that administration. Presidential rhetoric, then, is only one of the powers available to the President, but in a democracy it may well be the fundamental power upon which all others rest.

The topic of this essay is a description of the field of presidential rhetoric. I wish to proceed by summarizing the scholarship that has been done in rhetoric and communications and then by outlining what kinds of additional research needs to be done. The first part of this essay is a catalogue of the different kinds of research that has been published from 1960 to the present in the national and regional journals of speech and communications on the subject of contemporary presidential rhetoric. This survey is limited to this period because it coincides with the explosion of scholarly work in other academic fields on the presidency, because it coincides with the rise of television as the President's principal means for persuading the public (which has, indeed, altered significantly the relationship between the President and the public), and because the "rhetorical presidency" developed and became dominant during this time.

The second part of this essay asks: where do we go from here? I want to outline some topics for students of presidential persuasion in answer to the following two questions: what kind of research agenda is now needed, and how might we go about doing that research?

In his essay, "Studying the Presidency: Where and How Do We Go From Here?" Norman C. Thomas listed six areas of inquiry into the presidency that warrant continued attention. One of these is directly germane to the subject of this work:

A third domain that has scarcely been investigated is that of the president's relationships with public opinion, and how the latter informs and affects the former, and vice versa. John Mueller's study of presidential popularity over time is the
principal work in this area, but it relies on Gallup Poll data which does not probe the respondents' reasons for their assessments of the president. In studying the chief executive in a democratic society, the dynamics of the interaction between that individual and the public should be a subject of primary concern.9

Since Professor Thomas did not examine scholarship by rhetoricians in his essay, his conclusions need amendments, and this essay is intended to provide them. Nonetheless, his general thesis that presidential rhetoric, "a subject of primary concern," has scarcely been investigated rigorously is generally compatible with the conclusions of this essay. At this time, there is no full-dress treatment of the nature and scope of presidential rhetoric. Nor has a scholar produced a book-length study of the rhetoric of a contemporary president. Indeed, presidential rhetoric remains a field in which some basic spadework has been done, but one in which much more plowing and planting is needed. What, then, can one say about the current status of studies in presidential rhetoric?

**Four Categories of Research**

Contemporary studies in presidential rhetoric are primarily critical and fall into four categories: criticism of single speeches, criticism of rhetorical movements, development of genres of presidential speeches, and miscellaneous articles on various ancillary topics dealing with presidential rhetoric.

**Single speeches.** More than half the articles published by rhetorical critics during this period concern a single presidential speech. Two types draw major attention: inaugural addresses and "crisis" speeches. Over the course of history, the inaugural address has been transformed from an attempt "to show how the actions of the new administration would conform to Constitutional and republican principles" to an attempt "to articulate the unspoken desires of the people by holding out a vision for their fulfillment."10 Inaugural addresses are ceremonial addresses concerned with the rhetorical topics of public virtue and public vice ("Ask not what your country can do for you"—*public vice*; "ask what you can do for your country"—*public virtue*). They point to certain fundamental values a President espouses and believes the public should cultivate. But inaugural addresses are still ceremonial addresses in which policy concerns are secondary to values, desires, and visions of the future. They stand in relationship to policy speeches, especially State of the Union addresses, as the Declaration of Independence stands in relation to the Constitution.

By "crisis" speeches, scholars mean those in which a President declares a crisis or those speeches critics believe confronted or created crises. Such analyses have ranged from Johnson's Gulf of Tonkin speech through Nixon on Watergate to Carter's attempts to persuade the public that an energy crisis existed. President Nixon's November 3, 1969 speech on Vietnam incited no less than four separate critiques.11 Judging from these critical works, one would observe that rhetoricians are still bound to the "great speech" theory of political rhetoric though the emphasis has passed—due to television—from stylistic excellence to dramatic impact.

What conclusions can be drawn about this kind of research? First, the value of criticism of single speeches is both *intrinsic* and *extrinsic*. It is *intrinsic* in that such cri-
tiques ideally provide illumination into how a particular speech worked on intended audiences or failed to work. (It may be important to note here that the definition of “audiences” has changed with the advent of television. The “audience” for a presidential speech is not a group of people present for the speech—indeed, sometimes there is no physical audience present, as in the case of an address from the Oval Office. The “audiences” are target constituencies who see the speech on television and/or the media that reports the speech. Presidential speeches are fashioned, as most major political speeches are these days, to reach and influence these two “audiences,” and often media is the more important audience.)

Criticism is \textit{extrinsic} in the sense that these critiques should provide the raw materials for an enriched knowledge of how a particular President used his persuasive powers to get done what he wanted done or for the development of theories about presidential rhetoric. Unfortunately, little has been done to meet the extrinsic purposes. The discipline of presidential rhetoric is new. Therefore, many of these essays were written not as scholarly contributions to the on-going study of the presidency, but as contributions to the broad field of rhetorical criticism. Can some unity of purpose be found that would point to a shared perspective appropriate to developing a significant critical methodology? I think so. If one were to draw upon the essays written about President Nixon’s November 3, 1969 speech on Vietnam, one would discover a series of critical questions pertinent to developing these methods:

1. How are rhetorical strategies developed and adapted to persuade a target constituency (or constituencies) of the validity of the President’s policy? And why were these chosen rather than others?

2. Is the speech internally consistent? If so, why? If not, why not?

3. Is the evidence cited by the President used truthfully, and is the rhetorical reality of the speech plausible?

4. What are the probable consequences of the speech on target constituencies that believe it, on adversaries who will oppose the President, on future policies, and on the development of our on-going political debates on the subject?

5. Why would supporters of the President believe the speech? Why would adversaries disbelieve it? And why would “waverers” be persuaded or not?

6. How does the speech fit into the political movement of which it is a part, or into the generic tradition from which it comes, or into the rhetorical biography of the President who gave it?

These questions, of course, point to the critic’s major responsibilities: to make significant contributions to a better understanding of how public arguments and presidential speeches affect the President, his policies, and the continuous political debates about our national agenda and the direction of public policy. To achieve these ends requires an intensive analysis of why people are persuaded or not persuaded by presidential speeches. And Gallup Poll information simply will not do as final evidence for such conclusions. New methods of analyzing audiences’ responses are needed.

A second conclusion about these studies of single speeches must mention what has been neglected. Though a number of essays have been written on inaugural ad-
dresses, not one single essay has been devoted to a modern state of the union address, the only speech mandated by the Constitution. With the great concentration on “crisis” speeches, particularly those on foreign crises, there has been a neglect of equally significant speeches on domestic “crises,” especially those concerned with economic issues. Nonetheless, these early studies of presidential speeches have forged the beginning of a disciplined study of one aspect of presidential rhetoric.

Movement studies. Studies of rhetorical movements to build constituencies, to get legislation passed, to defend against continuing opposition on basic issues—all these give a broader scope to the idea of presidential rhetoric because they stress the continuity of rhetorical efforts in an administration and because they place individual speeches in their proper political context. Scholars who have used this approach usually dwell on the chronological/rhetorical progression of a political idea or policy, or on the various uses of arguments a President employs in pressing a single theme. Such studies now include Johnson’s rhetorical development of the Great Society, Nixon and Agnew engaging in a rhetoric of polarization to expand their constituency, and Nixon defending against charges and rumors resulting from the Watergate investigations. These studies not only provide significant research in themselves; they also provide a valuable historical and political framework within which to analyze how presidents use rhetoric with other instruments of power to pursue policy and political goals. Such studies should be expanded into book-length form to give real substance to the field of presidential rhetoric.

Genre studies. Genre studies concentrate on comparisons of what different Presidents have said on similar occasions, on similar themes, or what they have said to similar audiences. Scholars who use this method depend heavily on their knowledge of past rhetorical activities to examine contemporary rhetorical efforts. Yet, such studies remain in an infant state. Jackson Harrell, B.L. Ware, and Wil A. Linkugel merged the use of the genre of apology with a movement approach to produce an insightful criticism of Nixon’s early defense against Watergate. But given the circumstances that produced Nixon’s rhetoric, we may hope that we shall not see this kind of speech or criticism again. For the most part, genre essays have been limited to “crisis” speeches attempting to isolate the lines of argument that define this genre. Cannot this approach be extended to inaugural addresses, State of the Union addresses, speeches on domestic crises, etc.? If so, what will be needed is a greater emphasis on comparative studies, a stronger historical knowledge of presidential speeches, and a surer grasp on what critics mean by genre.

Miscellaneous research. Textual accuracy, speech preparation, quantitative research, arguments over the ethics of using speech-writers and consultants—all these and a multitude of other subjects comprise what should be called miscellaneous contributions to specific analyses of various aspects of presidential rhetoric. Many of these are valuable in-and-of-themselves, but their primary contributions to the field lie in the background information they provide for the analysis and evaluation of how Presidents use rhetoric to exercise power.
Research on the Rhetoric of Recent Presidents

If we look at the same research from a different angle, we see how much remains to be done. The gaps in our research about how individual presidents used their rhetorical powers is at times staggering.

Let us begin with John F. Kennedy, whose rhetorical prowess has been so celebrated and so little analyzed. Hardly anything has been published in professional journals about Kennedy’s rhetoric, except for various articles about his campaign speeches and his inaugural address. In fact, scholars have produced about as much scholarship about President Ford as President Kennedy. There is no study by a rhetorician of how Kennedy justified or excused the Bay of Pigs disaster, or how he treated the Berlin crisis, or how he dealt with the civil rights revolution during his administration. This is astonishing. Even as Kennedy’s rhetoric set the themes used or abused by subsequent administrations, it has been subjected to precious little scholarly inquiry.14

Due primarily to the work by David Zarefsky, Lyndon Johnson’s rhetoric has been more scrutinized than one would have imagined. Scholars have examined the rhetorical foundations of the Great Society, affirmative action, and various aspects of his public handling of Vietnam. Still, analyses of Johnson’s blunders during the Dominican Republic intervention, his responses to protest, his attempts to press the war and still maintain his constituencies—all these and a goodly number of other topics (not the least of which is a thorough examination of what President Johnson believed informing the public should play in the exercise of presidential power) remain fertile ground for future critical plowing.

More articles have been written about Richard Nixon than any other recent President. Probably that is because his rhetoric is so psychologically fascinating and his politics so transparent. A full third, however, of published studies deal with Nixon’s campaign rhetoric. The others are devoted principally to Vietnam or Watergate in one way or another. Nothing has been written in an intensive manner about how this staunch anti-communist rhetorically “opened the door” to China, or negotiated the SALT I agreement and made it palatable to his conservative constituencies. Indeed, there is nothing in professional rhetoric and communications journals about either of his trips to China or the U.S.S.R. Equally important, little has been written about Nixon’s domestic policy rhetoric—his law ‘n order speeches, his attempts to pacify his southern constituencies by opposing busing and de facto segregation, or his speeches on economic issues and environmental concerns. The Nixon administration was the first administration to have a fully developed approach to presidential rhetoric, to the use of media to enhance presidential speeches, to the recognition of television as the central “check” on presidential rhetorical power. Such meticulous attention to the rhetorical presidency during Nixon’s tenure merits equally meticulous scholarly attention.

What can one say about President Ford’s rhetoric? After William Safire’s regrettable remark that Ford is the only President in the twentieth century who never uttered a memorable phrase, one is surprised to learn that anything has been written about his rhetoric. But Hermann Stelzner’s essay on the WIN campaign and Dan F. Hahn’s examination of the rhetoric surrounding the Mayaguez incident as well as the 1982 panel of the Speech Communication Association meeting devoted to Ford’s
pardon of Nixon provide more scholarly materials than one would anticipate about this unanticipated, and in some circles, underestimated and undervalued President.

Only a few studies have been published about the rhetoric of President Carter and President Reagan. Part of the reason for the paucity of work about the former is that Carter was rhetorically inept; part of the reason for so few studies about the latter is that Reagan has been so rhetorically dazzling and also that his administration is so contemporary that scholars do not believe they have sufficient distance to judge his efforts.15

But from this brief description of what has been published by scholars in rhetoric, one can see that considerable work remains to be done. What remains, then, as an agenda for research into presidential rhetoric?

A Research Agenda for Presidential Rhetoric

If this assessment of current research is anywhere close to the mark, where do we go from here? What should be the agenda for research and how might one go about addressing that agenda in a scholarly fashion? There are, I believe, six areas that need to be addressed within the discipline of presidential rhetoric, six areas of theory and criticism that if properly pursued should yield a fruitful harvest of knowledge about the contemporary presidency. These six are certainly not exhaustive, but they seem important issues for intellectual inquiry.

First, what is the nature of presidential rhetoric and what place does it play in the modern presidency? A number of studies have been written about the rhetoric of various presidents, but few mesh in concrete ways to develop theories about what presidential rhetoric is. There have been a number of essays that have indirectly addressed this problem, but no one has actually tried to bind these together into a comprehensive theory. In neglecting theory, rhetoricians are not alone. Professor Thomas noted that among political scientists there is an “absence of a comprehensive theoretical framework” for studying the presidency “that reduces or even negates the value of most past and current research.”16 Such a theoretical framework is also needed for the rhetoric of Presidents lest our work be reduced or negated in value.

To paraphrase F. Scott Fitzgerald, the presidency is very different from other political offices. But what do those differences mean to the uses of rhetoric by a President? We know that on some occasions (primarily those involving foreign crises) the President can speak with a national voice and have the public rally behind him as they will rally behind no other public official. But what do we know beyond that?

In inquiring into the nature of presidential rhetoric, we should also be asking how should a President persuade? Implicit in the scholarly criticism of presidential speeches are standards each critic uses to praise or blame a President for what he has said or did not say. But only rarely have these implicit standards been explored within the community of scholars. Development of standards of analysis and evaluation become particularly important as critics examine the rhetorical activities of Presidents in office when partisan concerns may interfere with critical detachment. In other words, what standards can be used to evaluate a speech by a sitting President? These and a variety of other questions require much more work in the theory of presidential
rhetoric. And if theoretical research into the nature of presidential rhetoric is to proceed in an orderly manner, then inquiries must be made not only into how presidential rhetoric functions in a democratic society, but also how it should function to further democratic processes.

Second, what is the nature of presidential ethos? If presidential rhetoric is different in important respects from other forms of political discourse, one reason for those differences must reside in the nature of the office and the expectations placed on the person who occupies it. What characteristics are attributed to the office? What expectations are aroused from the person in that office? Thomas Cronin has initiated research in this area with his study of the “textbook presidency.” His study, responses to it, as well as Barber’s examination of the “climate of expectations,” need to be incorporated into any theory about the nature of presidential ethos.17

In this connection, we need also to develop rhetorical biographies of Presidents and potential presidential candidates. In conducting this kind of research, one leans heavily on Professor Barber’s concept of political style:

These themes [character and world view] come together strongly in early adulthood, when the person moves from contemplation to responsible action and adopts a style. In most biographical accounts this period stands out in stark clarity—the time of emergence, the time a young man found himself. I call it his first independent political success. It was then moved beyond the detailed guidance of his family; then his self-esteem was dramatically boosted; then he came forth as a person to be reckoned with by other people. The way he did that is profoundly important to him. Typically he grasps that style and hangs onto it. Much later, coming into the Presidency, something in him remembers this earlier victory and reemphasizes the style that made it happen.18

In this connection, rhetoricians might be asking: Are there persistent and typical rhetorical devices that a President uses that form his predictable rhetorical methods? Furthermore, are there persistent and typical rhetorical methods that a political figure developed during his pre-presidential career that are so distinctive and a part of his over-all political style that a critic can predict he will rely on them when he becomes President? Developing such rhetorical biographies may make understanding the public presidency more cogent.

Third, are there distinctive rhetorical periods during an administration that predictably present particular rhetorical opportunities and hazards to a President? In their research into the relationship between the White House and the media, Grossman and Kumar developed several different phases that these relations predictably pass through during a presidential administration.19 The same is probably true with rhetorical relations. Richard Beal, one of President Reagan’s advisers, stated: “The whole issue of running the Presidency in the modern age is control of the agenda.”20 If so, how does a President control it at different times over the course of four years? Kathleen Farrell and I roughed out four general periods for the first term of an administration:

(1) The rhetoric phase during the first nine months when the President can be rhetorically pre-eminent over Congress if he does not make major mistakes.
(2) The partisan phase of the second year when the opposition party begins demanding results from presidential policies of the previous year, and culminating in the off-term elections which serve as a symbolic referendum on the direction of the administration.

(3) The window phase of the third year when incumbents are not pressured by running for re-election in Congress, but are influenced by the results of the off-term elections, a time when the President can present new initiatives before the presidential campaign gets underway.

(4) The campaign agenda phase of the fourth year when issues are developed and discussed primarily as campaign issues rather than as legislative issues to be negotiated with Congress.21

These phases are hardly definitive, and much more research needs to be conducted, especially about recent administrations.

Fourth, how and to what extent do the presidency and media, especially television, influence political discussion and agenda-setting of national issues? Technological advances in media have dramatically altered the rhetoric used by Presidents as well as the rhetorical context of political discussions:

The media and the modern presidency feed on each other. The media has found in the presidency a focal point on which to concentrate its peculiarly simplistic and dramatic interpretation of events; and the presidency has found a vehicle in the media that allows it to win public attention and with that attention the reality, but more often the pretense, of enhanced power. What this two-sided relationship signifies is a change in the rhetorical context in which the President now operates, the implications of which extend beyond the question of how much power the President has to the issue of how he attempts to govern. Constitutional government, which was established in contradistinction to government by assembly, now has become a kind of government by assembly, with TV "speaking" to the President and the President responding to the demands and moods that it creates.22

The technological media era of politics has created a new “checks and balances”—one never dreamed of by the Founding Fathers. Congress now serves principally as a legislative check on the presidency, and media news—primarily television—functions as a rhetorical check on presidential pronouncements. Regardless of whether we think this relationship is proper or improper, valuable or dangerous, this rhetorical relationship is the new reality of checks and balances in American government. Once this new reality was recognized, critics began taking sides. Some contended that media greatly damaged traditional politics through the distorted and simplistic presentation of issues, which may well be true; others described the President’s access to television as severely damaging to the balances between the executive and legislative branches, which may be equally true.23 Recently, however, the direction is changing to studies of how media and politics influence one another to create the reality—or unreality, as some prefer—in which decisions are made.24 But further studies are needed, espe-
cially intensive case studies that concern themselves exclusively with the President’s rhetoric and media’s responses, to determine the content and contours of this new reality and the respective influences of the presidency and media upon one another.

Fifth, what are the rhetorical differences between campaigning and governing? This has become an agitating issue among journalists and scholars. Sidney Blumenthal observed: “The permanent campaign is the political ideology of our age. It combines image-making with strategic calculation. Under the permanent campaign governing is turned into a perpetual campaign. Moreover, it remakes government into an instrument designed to sustain an elected official’s public popularity. It is the engineering of consent with a vengeance.”25 Inherent in these observations, which are shared by a number of scholars, is the implicit belief that once a President enters office, popular persuasion should be set aside, or at least demoted in importance. Among those who write about the presidency there resides the notion that a campaign is necessarily partisan and persuasive, but once in office, they seem to believe, a President should become a statesman and rise above such things. Apparently, what is acceptable practice on the campaign trail is unacceptable in the Oval Office.

The mistake these writers commit is in not recognizing that presidential power indeed rests on persuasion, but that persuasion in campaigning is quite different from persuading when governing, though some techniques may overlap. This area of research has hardly been touched by scholars. Therefore, as a starting point, let me suggest some major distinctions between campaigning and governing:

(1) The metaphor for campaigning is war; the metaphor for governing is negotiation.26

(2) Campaigning aims at absolute victory over one’s enemy with a specified period of time; governing aims at solving problems through compromise and thus passing legislation in which there are no final victories.

(3) In a campaign the enemy is singular, visible, and constant; in governing, there are no enemies in this sense. The representative or senator who may oppose you on one issue may be the very one whose support you need on another issue. Therefore, the treatment of adversaries in governing must be more genteel than in campaigning.

(4) In a campaign one must demand loyalty from one’s supporters; in governing, supporters may have divided loyalties among their own beliefs, their own party, and their own constituencies, and one must determine which to appeal in order to gain support from them.

(5) In a campaign one forces an either/or choice and frames issues that way; in governing, there are more alternatives and the goal often is compromise.

(6) Finally, a campaign involves confrontation or at least the appearance of confrontation politics; governing seeks accommodation.

If these distinctions between the two political arts are valid, then it follows that the rhetoric constructed to achieve the aims of each will be different also. A campaign rhetoric will be one of either/or choices, a war-like rhetoric seeking defeat of the enemy and victory for the candidate. A governing rhetoric, at least theoretically, will be one
of decorum stressing accommodation and compromise while still retaining partisan or ideological commitments. But if Blumenthal is correct that campaigning techniques have now merged with those of governing, research is needed to prove this and further studies will be needed to see what this merger means to the politics of the presidency.

Sixth, what is the nature of contemporary political language and how does the creation of new words and phrases affect our perceptions of issues, politicians, and political discussion? Language is the essential currency of the rhetorical exchange. “The use of words,” Madison wrote in the thirty-seventh Federalist Paper

is to express ideas. Perspicuity, therefore, requires not only that the ideas should be distinctly formed, but that they should be expressed by words distinctly and exclusively appropriate to them. But no language is so copious as to supply words and phrases for every complex idea, or so correct as not to include many equivocally denoting different ideas. Hence it must happen that however accurately objects may be discriminated in themselves, and however accurately the discrimination may be considered, the definition of them may be rendered inaccurate by the inaccuracy of the terms in which it is delivered.27

The study of political rhetoric is fundamentally a study of political language, of its uses and abuses, of its impact on those who speak and those who hear. For, in democratic politics, words establish the compact between the governor and the governed, a secular trust not taken lightly. In this age of media politics and the rhetorical presidency, the concerted and disciplined study of language—and therefore of political arguments which do not exist until dressed in language—must be a priority study of students of presidential rhetoric.

Madison pointed to a central point about political language: it is both expressive and impressive, both stable and fluid. We need to inquire in a scholarly fashion not only into the precision with which words are used by Presidents, but also into how those very words effect those who use them and those who hear them. Murray Edelman has begun conspicuous investigations into these questions, but his research needs to be aided by others. Furthermore, media’s modifications of political language through compressed reporting, their introduction of influential new political terms into our public vocabulary (“credibility gap”; and “gender gap” come to mind) that become buzzwords for White House responses and academic surveys, and other mediating activities on language by journalists demand the sensitivity to language that Madison early recognized was important in our democratic system.

The old truism that “to name something is to possess it” bears significant scholarly weight today for anyone who would embark on the study of presidential rhetoric. After all, it is always with words that we begin any study of anything human. And perhaps, by beginning to understand the dynamics of contemporary political language, we may be beginning to understand the central dynamics of the democratic process itself.

Conclusion

Presidential rhetoric is a new discipline of study within the field of rhetoric and within presidential scholarship. Scholars in this discipline are concerned with how
public language and public arguments influence the exercise of presidential power. The principal goals of these studies are descriptive and critical works that help in understanding the contemporary American presidency and prescriptive studies of how the rhetorical presidency functions and should function.

In this essay, I have sought to describe the state of the discipline and to outline six areas of inquiry that mandate critical attention. Perhaps, Lyndon Johnson best summarized much of what this essay and my work in presidential rhetoric is all about, when he asked:

How does a public leader find just the right word or the right way to say no more and no less than he means to say—bearing in mind that anything he says may topple governments and may involve the lives of innocent men?

How does that leader speak the right phrase, in the right way, under the right conditions, to suit the accuracies and contingencies of the moment when he is discussing questions of policy, so that he does not stir a thousand misinterpretations and leave the wrong connotation or impression?

How does he reach the immediate audience and how does he communicate with the millions of others who are out there listening from afar?28

"The President," Johnson concluded, "often ponders these questions and searches for the right course."29 So should we all, especially those of us who labor in the vineyard of presidential rhetoric and presidential studies.

* This essay is a revision of a paper first presented at the Temple University Conference on Political Discourse, March, 1983 and published in the Central States Speech Journal (Spring, 1984). I appreciate the permission granted by the editor of CSSJ, Bruce Gronbeck, to publish this revised version in Presidential Studies Quarterly.

Notes


2. Neustadt’s influence on the conception of presidential power has borne fruit in the number of scholarly articles about presidential rhetoric being published in rhetoric journals and particularly in Presidential Studies Quarterly as well as such recent volumes as George C. Edwards III’s The Public Presidency. The Pursuit of Popular Support (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983).


8. In the bibliography attached to this essay I have cited only essays about the uses of rhetoric by incumbents. It is interesting to note that more than half the essays published in professional speech journals about presidential rhetoric dealt with campaigning rhetoric.


12. For the 1976 presidential campaign, President Ford’s political consultants sought to put this in perspective: “[F]or the general election, Presidential campaign events are not significant in terms of their impact on the people who attend. These people are mainly important as backdrops for the television viewer. During the general election, all Presidential travel must be planned for its impact on those who learn about it through the media.” President Ford’s Campaign Handbook, unpublished manuscript, pp. 32–33. Emphasis in the original.

13. Campbell and Jamieson have already done this work on inaugurals, and currently the three of us are engaged in working on a volume devoted to studying various genres of presidential rhetoric.


15. If John Kennedy’s 1960 campaign was a textbook campaign, the first five years of Reagan present a graduate school text of how to run the rhetorical presidency. The methods used by this administration will be studied intensively by every serious scholar of the presidency as a landmark case study of the uses of rhetoric in pursuing political goals.


18. Barber, p. 10


25. The Permanent Campaign, p. 23.
26. “Political campaigning is warfare without hardware. War and politics are related in techniques and goals. Both involve a collision of organizations seeking absolute victory; both are fought by the tactics of applied weaponry; and both are won by the grand strategy best combining factors of time plus the ability to win confrontations—surmounting hostile pressure while imposing decision upon the enemy.” Herbert M. Baus and William B. Ross, Politics Battle Plan (New York: Macmillan Co., 1986) p. 2. The authors are political consultants who have worked for a number of candidates, including Richard M. Nixon.
29. Ibid.

Selected Bibliography

In my anthology, Presidential Rhetoric: 1961 to the Present, I collected what I considered the most important presidential speeches during that period. In Essays in Presidential Rhetoric, Beth Ingold and I brought together what we believed were the most pertinent critical studies bearing on presidential rhetoric, and we refer the serious reader to those essays.

This bibliography is a compilation of works from speech and communications journals as well as Presidential Studies Quarterly, which has assumed the leadership from communications journals in publishing essays in this area of study. This bibliography does not include any critical essays about campaign rhetoric for the presidency. But it may be interesting to note that about half the professional articles in rhetoric and communications journals that deal with the contemporary presidency concern themselves with campaign rhetoric rather than the rhetoric of governing.

The following abbreviations are used in this bibliography: QJS (Quarterly Journal of Speech), CM (Communication Monographs), CQ (Communication Quarterly), WJSC (Western Journal of Speech Communication), CSSJ (Central States Speech Journal), SSSCJ (Southern Speech Communication Journal), SG (Speaker and Gavel). PSQ refers to Presidential Studies Quarterly. [Normally this acronym refers to Political Science Quarterly].


Genre studies: See Windt on “Crisis” rhetoric, Campbell and Jamieson on inaugural addresses, Harrell, Ware, and Linkugel on the apology genre.
