

THE EVOLUTION OF PRESIDENTIAL CRISIS RHETORIC:

Communicating To a Country in Turmoil

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Abstract

The crisis rhetoric of American presidents over the last 150 years has been remarkably consistent in many ways. Crisis speeches generally make use of the same themes, such as patriotism and nationalism, and even follow similar patterns of organization. The content is usually focused on explaining the events, the actions that have been taken in response to them, and the future actions the president plans to take. Despite these similarities, however, there are clear ways in which crisis rhetoric has changed over the course of American history.

The first and most tangible difference is a decrease in complexity. This is not unique to crisis rhetoric, but it is a strong trend and crisis speech seems particularly susceptible to it.

The second difference is the portrayal of power. Though the executive branch has gained power over time, presidents increasingly have downplayed their power during times of crisis. Earlier presidents place more emphasis on themselves and their views. Later presidents lessen the distance between themselves and their constituents by speaking more as “one of us.”

Key contributing factors to these differences include the scope of the audience, the speed of communication, the method of communication, and an evolving understanding of speechwriting.

Please note the two appendices at the back of this capstone. Appendix A provides a brief description of the characteristics of good speechwriting. Appendix B contains the full text of the key speeches quoted in this document.

Introduction

When Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office on March 4, 1861, he began his administration amid utter chaos. Seven states had already seceded and the “United” States was more of an oxymoron than an accurate description. Five and a half short weeks before America’s bloodiest conflict began, Lincoln euphemistically addressed his constituents as “my countrymen,” or “my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen.” He told them that they were “not enemies, but friends.”

“We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”¹

One day after unprovoked attacks claimed more than 2,400 lives in Pearl Harbor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt asked Congress, in an address that was also broadcast all over the country, to declare war. He spoke of his conviction that the United States would come off conqueror. “With confidence in our armed forces, with the unbounding determination of our people, we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God.”²

¹ Abraham Lincoln, “First Inaugural Address,” *American Rhetoric*, speech originally given in 1861:

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/abrahamlincolninauguraladdress.htm>

² Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Pearl Harbor Address to the Nation,”

AmericanRhetoric.com, speech originally given in 1941:

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fdrpearlharbor.htm>.

And hours after Americans watched in horror as the Twin Towers fell, George W. Bush told a country reeling from shock that “terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America.”³

These three events represent some of the most crucial moments in American history, with enormously far-reaching consequences. In each case, the president was left with the challenge of giving meaning to the crisis and of helping the country to navigate challenging circumstances. Lincoln specifically acknowledged the enormity of what he was facing as he left his home in Illinois to begin his tenure as president. As he prepared to leave Springfield, he told his friends and others who had gathered to hear him speak, “I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington.”⁴

In looking at the way that presidents respond to different moments of crisis, many of these speeches feel remarkably similar in theme and in tone. These similarities are addressed later. Despite what they may have in common, however, I was left to wonder how these speeches have actually changed over the course of American history. I found that presidential crisis rhetoric has changed in two primary ways: it has decreased noticeably in complexity, and the presentation of power has been increasingly downplayed over time.

³ George W. Bush, “9/11 Address to the Nation,” *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 2001:
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911addresstothetation.htm>.

⁴ Don Fehrenbacher, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: Selected Speeches and Writings* (New York: Library of America Paperback Classics, 1992), “Farewell Address at Springfield, Illinois,” 277.

Methodology

Research for this capstone began with a careful selection and reading of various crisis speeches from many different American presidents. I disregarded crises that were more or less of a president's own making. For example, the Watergate scandal and the Lewinsky affair are not within the scope of this analysis. These self-made or public relations crises are excluded here because they represent an entirely different set of characteristics and challenges than major national crises.

For the purposes of this capstone, the definition of "presidential crisis rhetoric" is a public speech given by the president of the United States regarding or in response to a major, shocking event that affects national security, widespread civil unrest, or similar pervasive turmoil.

There are three speeches chosen as primary case examples. They are Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Pearl Harbor address, and George W. Bush's remarks on the evening of the September 11 attacks. These three speeches were selected because of their importance and how they are distributed through US history. In addition to these, I have quoted from several other speeches: Woodrow Wilson's War Address to Congress in 1917, Lyndon B. Johnson's "We Shall Overcome" speech, John F. Kennedy's Cuban Missile Crisis address, Barack Obama's first inaugural address, and Jimmy Carter's Crisis of Confidence speech. These speeches were selected because they are typical of crisis rhetoric, and they fill in historical gaps with the other speeches that are analyzed

here. I also selected brief excerpts from non-crisis speeches from Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Franklin D. Roosevelt in order to compare crisis versus non-crisis rhetoric from the same speaker.

Aside from the speeches themselves, I primarily looked at current literature on presidential rhetoric and biographies and memoirs (both of presidents and of their speechwriters) as well as looking at historical context of these events for important background information.

Overview of crisis rhetoric

Presidential crisis rhetoric has remained remarkably consistent over the last 150 years. Many of the same major themes and ideas are repeated again and again in the speeches that I looked at. These themes and ideas are elaborated on later. The continuity in rhetoric is consistent with what several scholars have argued previously. Hinckley, for example, finds strong similarities to the way that symbols are used in presidential rhetoric.⁵ And one study of values in presidential speech found very little variance “as a consequence of the individual, the party, or the times.”⁶ In other words, what presidents say has not changed as much as we sometimes think it has.

⁵ Elvin T. Lim, “Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric: An Analysis of Rhetoric from George Washington to Bill Clinton,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2002): 329.

⁶ Craig Allen Smith and Kathy B. Smith, “Presidential Values and Public Priorities: Recurrent Patterns in Addresses to the Nation, 1963-1984,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 15, no. 4 (1985): 749.

Although this consistency matches my findings regarding the general uniformity of crisis rhetoric, there are studies and scholars that emphasize the rhetorical changes over time. Interestingly, one writer says that “most of the scholars emphasizing rhetorical disjuncture are political scientists coming from the theory-centered rhetorical presidency school of scholarship, and most of those emphasizing continuity are scholars of rhetoric and communication coming from the presidential rhetoric school of scholarship.”⁷

In looking at similarities across crisis speeches over the last 150 years, several general themes and ideas are frequently repeated—most notably the ever-present ideas of patriotism and nationalism.

In his first inaugural address, Barack Obama spoke of Americans who had sacrificed for their country and who had gone before us. To a country at the beginning of the worst economic recession since the Great Depression, he said,

“They saw America as bigger than the sum of our individual ambitions; greater than all the differences of birth or wealth or faction. This is the journey we continue today. We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth.”⁸

Consider also the nationalism in the closing of Woodrow Wilson’s war message to Congress as the country prepared to enter World War I.

⁷ Elvin T. Lim, “Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric,” 329.

⁸ Barack Obama, “First Presidential Inaugural Address,” *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 2009: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamainauguraladdress.htm>.

“To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.”⁹

On the night of the September 11 attacks, Bush called us “a great people” and “a great nation.”¹⁰

Other examples could be pulled from nearly every political speech in history—and certainly every crisis speech.

Similarly, there are constant statements of confidence in the ability of the United States to overcome the challenge. Think of Roosevelt speaking of his “confidence” in the Armed Forces and his conviction that the United States would “gain the inevitable triumph.”¹¹ Bush spoke in similar language, confidently

⁹ Woodrow Wilson, “War Message,” *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 1917: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/wilsonwarmessage.htm>.

¹⁰ George W. Bush, “9/11 Address to the Nation,” *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 2001: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911addresstothetation.htm>.

¹¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Pearl Harbor Address to the Nation,” *American Rhetoric*, speech originally given in 1941: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fdrpearlharbor.htm>.

promising that terrorism could not overpower us.¹² Perhaps Lyndon B. Johnson said it in the clearest and most straightforward way: “We shall overcome.”¹³

These appeals can help to build unity and goodwill (no one ever lost an election because they talked about the strength of the United States), so while they are consistently present, they are especially useful in times of high partisanship and in times of crisis.

Another major aspect of crisis speech that should be noted is that it is often less rhetorical or literary in nature. It usually does not feel as eloquent or grandiose as other rhetoric. In his famous essay *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell argues that “in our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing.”¹⁴ While I would not go quite so far, it is true that very rarely does crisis produce truly exceptional writing. Compare, for example, John F. Kennedy’s remarkable inaugural speech (which is widely considered by presidential scholars to be among the best inaugurals in American history) with his Cuban Missile Crisis speech, which is so stiff and technical that it is barely readable today—especially by Kennedy’s exceptionally high standards. To illustrate this, compare the following brief extracts, the first taken from the beginning of his Cuban Missile Crisis speech.

“This government, as promised, has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet military buildup on the island of Cuba.

¹² George W. Bush, “9/11 Address to the Nation,” *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 2001:

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911addresstothetation.htm>.

¹³ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress on Voting Legislation: We Shall Overcome,” *AmericanRhetoric.com*, original speech given in 1965:

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/lbjweshallovercome.htm>.

¹⁴ George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language* (1946).

http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit/.

Within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island.”¹⁵

Even Ted Sorensen, who wrote the speech, admits that it was “not the best speech of JFK’s presidency,” adding that it still “surely was his most important.”¹⁶

And now from the beginning of Kennedy’s first inaugural:

“We observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom—symbolizing an end, as well as a beginning—signifying, renewal, as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago.”¹⁷

Note the big-picture feel of the excerpt from his inaugural versus the immediacy and technicality of the missile crisis speech.

Similarly, we can compare Lincoln’s two inaugural addresses. The first, given as the country began its descent into the most devastating war in our history, has exceptional moments. But his second inaugural, accepted by presidential scholars to be the best inaugural address given by any American president, far exceeds it in literary value, eloquence, and timelessness. It was given in a much calmer national environment, as the war was clearly drawing to an end and Americans prepared for

¹⁵ John F. Kennedy, “Cuban Missile Crisis Address to the Nation,” *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 1962:

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkcubanmissilecrisis.html>.

¹⁶ Ted Sorensen, *Counselor* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 298.

¹⁷ John F. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address,” *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 1961: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkinaugural.htm>

the work of healing the country's wounds. The full text of Lincoln's first inaugural is in Appendix B. As a comparison, I will quote from his second.

“Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”¹⁸

Multiple scholars and even poets have spoken of the eloquent and poetic nature of this speech, and several have even demonstrated how large portions of the speech can be divided into meter: “Fondly do we hope/fervently do we pray/that this mighty scourge of war/may speedily pass away.”¹⁹

In his first inaugural (a crisis speech), Lincoln gave a detailed legal analysis of slavery and secession. In his second inaugural (a non-crisis speech), he was literally speaking in verse.

Although Bush's remarks over the days and weeks following the September 11 attacks improved, his address to the nation that night was what some of his own staff described as “unequal to the moment...not enough resolve”; some White House

¹⁸ Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address,” *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 1865:
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/abrahamlincolnsecondinauguraladdress.htm>

¹⁹ Garry Wills, *Lincoln At Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1992), 155

staff even nicknamed it “the Awful Oval Address.”²⁰ Even his quoting of scripture, which should have been the most powerful moment of the speech, falls flat when viewing it today. He looked somewhat dazed, and it almost seemed as if this was the first time he had seen the speech—which isn’t too far off from reality.

One scholar of presidential rhetoric says that we “err in applying modern standards of literary quality to what was neither modern nor literary.”²¹ We can consider this especially true of crisis rhetoric. Large sections of it may fall flat to later readers, but it meets a crucial need at the time. Whether or not it *excels* in meeting that need is more or less irrelevant during such times of chaos and turmoil.

In a similar vein, another way that crisis rhetoric has stayed the same is that it primarily focuses on what I will describe as nuts and bolts. People often remember crisis speeches as being extraordinary rhetorical masterpieces, and it’s true that most of them have at least one or two fairly exceptional lines. But the vast majority of the content in these speeches is centered on logistics and explanations, most of which feel more like a parenthesis to readers today—the kind of information we may skim or completely ignore—but which were critical at the time. Consequently, crisis rhetoric can tend not to age as well as other speeches, because it is very specific to its time.

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Pearl Harbor speech is an excellent example of this. Everyone remembers the famous, “December 7, 1941—a day that will live in

²⁰ Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts: Presidents and Their Speechwriters from FDR to George W. Bush* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2008), 460.

²¹ Ted Widmer, “So Help Me God: What all fifty-four inaugural addresses, taken as one long book, tell us about American history,” *The American Scholar* 74, no. 1 (2005): 36.

infamy...” but very few would remember or recognize what comes next. The vast majority of the speech is dedicated to explaining exactly why this attack qualified as an unprovoked act of war and why Congress should, therefore, declare a state of war. This was the goal of the speech and it worked well. Congress *did* declare war; there was a near unanimous vote within 33 minutes of his speech. (Out of 489 members of Congress, only one voted against the resolution.)²² But the details of the event and the purpose for the speech did not lend itself to consistently stirring rhetoric. There is a section, for example, where Roosevelt slowly and simply goes through every location that the Japanese had attacked the day before. This is also further evidence that most of the speech is relatively obscure: most people do not know that the Japanese attacked multiple locations that day. “Yesterday, the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya,” he told Congress, and then went on:

“Last night, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong. Last night, Japanese forces attacked Guam. Last night, Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands. Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island. And this morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island.”²³

This monotonous recitation is hardly enthralling to today’s listeners, but was essential in accomplishing the purpose of the speech. And, to audiences at the time, this would *absolutely* have been riveting.

²² Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2007), 539.

²³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Pearl Harbor Address to the Nation,” *American Rhetoric*, speech originally given in 1941:
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fdrpearlharbor.htm>

Even in Lincoln's first inaugural, which has some of the most stirring rhetoric of any of the speeches that I looked at, much of the speech is spent detailing his views on the constitutional and legal questions surrounding slavery and secession. Out of a speech that was more than 3500 words, the only part most readers today would be likely to recognize is the last paragraph (less than 75 words), which contains the most stunning language of any crisis speech I studied, and which is quoted in full in the introduction.

Likewise, George W. Bush's address to the nation on the night of September 11, 2001 consisted primarily of a description of the actions he had taken and what Americans could expect over the following days. He explained that rescue efforts were underway and that he had "implemented the country's emergency response plans."²⁴ He thanked Congress and leaders of other nations, and he promised that American businesses and the government would be open as usual the next day.²⁵ Other speeches he gave over the following days and weeks were more literary and emotional in nature, but on the night of the tragedy, he was clearly struggling to come to terms with the events, just as the entire nation was. In fact, more than anything he said, I was most struck with how shell-shocked Bush appeared. This is hardly surprising, given the terrifying chaos of that day, and it spoke much more loudly to me than any of his words.

In summary, crisis rhetoric has many surprising consistencies throughout American history. It maintains a businesslike tone, focusing on the details,

²⁴ George W. Bush, "9/11 Address to the Nation," *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 2001:
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911addresstothetation.htm>.

²⁵ Ibid.

technicalities, and nuts and bolts of the situation. It also does not reach the same rhetorical heights as non-crisis rhetoric, despite using many of the same themes such as unity, patriotism, and nationalism.

Decreased Complexity

While the consistencies of crisis rhetoric are important and remarkable, there are clear ways that it has changed over time. Decreasing complexity is one of these changes that has had an enormous impact on presidential rhetoric.

The decrease in complexity is a well-established rhetorical trend. Political speech and crisis rhetoric are no exceptions. One scholar of rhetoric, Elvin T. Lim, frames this as informality, saying that “predictably, presidential rhetoric has also become more informal” over time.²⁶

One standard way of judging complexity based on grade level is through the Flesch-Kincaid readability statistics. This is a simple algorithm that is automatically included in programs such as Microsoft Word. It places text at a particular grade level based on sentence length and word length. The following table shows a selection of crisis speeches, the year they were given, and the grade level according to the Flesch-Kincaid scale.

²⁶ Elvin T. Lim, “Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric,” 333.

Table: Crisis Rhetoric Complexity

President	Message/Speech	Year	Grade level
Abraham Lincoln	First inaugural	1861	12.0
Woodrow Wilson	War message to Congress	1917	12.0
Franklin D. Roosevelt	First inaugural	1933	9.8
Franklin D. Roosevelt	Pearl Harbor address	1941	11.6
John F. Kennedy	Cuban Missile Crisis	1962	12.0
Lyndon B. Johnson	We Shall Overcome	1965	8.2
Jimmy Carter	Crisis of Confidence	1979	9.0
Ronald Reagan	Challenger Disaster	1986	5.7
George W. Bush	9/11 address to the nation	2001	8.9
George W. Bush	Columbia shuttle tragedy	2003	5.6
Barack Obama	First inaugural	2009	8.3

Note that Reagan's Challenger speech is nearly the same complexity as Bush's Columbia speech nearly twenty years later, even though Reagan's remarks were specifically directed at the nation's children, while Bush's remarks were directed to the nation at large.

In 2012, one study found that the grade level at which members of Congress speak had fallen a full grade level since 2005; it still came in higher than the crisis speeches in table 1, however, at a tenth grade level.²⁷

Interestingly and more recently, the speech patterns of leading Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump were analyzed and found to rest at around a third or fourth grade level, depending on the event. At one of the early debates, his responses were fourth grade. In other campaign situations, such as a news

²⁷ Tamara Keith, "Sophomoric? Members of Congress Talk Like 10th-graders, Analysis Shows," *NPR* (2012): <http://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2012/05/21/153024432/sophomoric-members-of-congress-talk-like-10th-graders-analysis-shows>.

conference, it was even lower, coming in at a third grade level. (Other Republican candidates scored between a fifth and ninth grade level.)²⁸

The correlation is not a perfect one, but it is clear. (And even stronger, strangely, when the two shuttle crises are removed.) Although this is a small and non-randomized sample, it represents various well-known crisis speeches from many of the most pivotal events in American history.

It should also be noted that the increasing simplicity of crisis rhetoric is not necessarily a bad thing. Elvin T. Lim bemoans what he terms the “anti-intellectual presidency” and the “relentless qualitative decline”²⁹ of presidential speech, but I would argue this is an unnecessarily pessimistic view. The increasing simplicity reflects, at least in part, a growing understanding of what makes a good speech to begin with. It is one of the key factors in good speechwriting. For more on this, see Appendix A.

Part of the reason contemporary speeches feel different to us is that many early speeches were actually written much more like op-eds or essays. They were designed to be read, in other words, and not to be heard. But with a growing understanding of rhetoric, writers have learned to help politicians communicate in a way that more closely resembles everyday speech patterns instead of traditional

²⁸ Jack Shafer, “Donald Trump Talks Like a Third-Grader,” *Politico* (2015): <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/donald-trump-talks-like-a-third-grader-121340>.

²⁹ Elvin T. Lim, *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

writing patterns. Aristotle understood this when he said that “the style of written prose is not that of spoken oratory.”³⁰ He further elaborates that

“it was because poets seemed to win fame through their fine language when their thoughts were simple enough, that the language of oratorical prose at first took a poetical color...even now most uneducated people think that poetical language makes the finest discourses. That is not true: the language of prose is distinct from that of poetry.”³¹

He also says that we can

“see how the inappropriateness of such poetical language imports absurdity and tastelessness into speeches, as well as the obscurity that comes from all this verbosity—for when the sense is plain, you only obscure and spoil its clearness by piling up words.”³²

To summarize Aristotle’s own verbosity: complicated words and flowery language do not make a good speech. They just make it harder to understand.

This is why Lincoln’s first inaugural feels more formal, slightly unnatural, and somewhat difficult to read aloud, whereas something like Obama’s first inaugural feels much more natural. One can simply pick at random any short paragraph of each of the two speeches and compare them in order to illustrate how this is the case. Compare, for example, the closing lines of Lincoln’s first inaugural (quoted in

³⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics and Rhetoric* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005), 459.

³¹ Aristotle, *Poetics and Rhetoric*, 401.

³² Aristotle. *Poetics and Rhetoric*, 413.

full at the beginning of this document with the following excerpt from Obama's first inaugural:

"Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends—honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism—these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history."³³

The excerpt from Obama's speech is easier to read out loud. There are clearer breaks for where the speaker can breathe, and the sentence structures are shorter and simpler than in Lincoln's address.

Not only does simplicity feel more natural and easier to follow, but it also allows the president to reach more people than ever—both inside and outside of the United States. The population and electorate has grown and diversified in incredible ways, and simplification is one way that the presidency has adapted to that.

The way that complexity is measured also deserves some attention here. While the readability statistics spoken of are useful and consistent measurements, it should be noted that average word length and average sentence length are not perfect measures of complexity. And while the algorithm does provide important information, it should not be taken as definitive.

³³ Barack Obama, "First Presidential Inaugural Address," *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 2009: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamainauguraladdress.htm>.

It is still ironic, however, that, as the country's education level and educational standards have improved, the complexity with which presidents speak continues to decrease. Education was not compulsory in the United States until the mid-1800s and receiving a college degree at the time was an anomaly—even among the wealthiest Americans. Today, the number of Americans completing high school and college has risen steadily. With this obvious improvement in the education of Americans, one might expect that politicians would speak on a higher level—or at least to an average understanding. This is not the case.

Primary factors contributing to the decrease in complexity include the scope of the audience and the speed in which they consume information.

Scope of audience

The scope of the audience has had an enormous impact on the way presidents communicate. Think of how Lincoln's audience in 1861 was different than Bush's in 2001. First of all, the electorate has expanded and changed. Only white men were eligible to vote when Lincoln took office, and this would have been whom he was primarily addressing. In 2001, the United States had large minority populations and universal (or near-universal) suffrage. Not only that, but Bush, or more accurately his speechwriters, must have been conscious of the fact that his audience was not only American. He was addressing people of every socioeconomic background, education level, religion, and ethnicity all over the world.

These demographic changes are not the only factors that have influenced the scope of the audience. The growth of broadcast media (radio and television) has also helped to expand the reach of presidential rhetoric. Even putting aside the demographic changes, compare the hundreds or thousands that Lincoln was really addressing as he spoke on Inauguration Day with the millions that significant presidential addresses can reach live today—and the millions more they can reach after the speech is over.

One book on speechwriting that was written in 1949 has a section on adjusting a speech for radio or television, rightly pointing out that these mediums have a broader reach—what the author describes as “universal.”³⁴ The author then goes on to encourage speakers to use simple language and organization, reminding them that on radio or television, they are not able to watch their listeners and gauge whether their audience understands them.³⁵

The book also correctly points out that the audience for television and radio broadcasts is likely to be distracted while listening; simplicity is even more important, then, so that even people who are half-listening can get the essential points of your message.

³⁴ Alan H. Monroe, *Principles and Types of Speech* (New York: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1949), 545.

³⁵ Alan H. Monroe. *Principles and Types of Speech*, 562.

Speed

The speed of the news cycle has also tremendously affected the way that presidents communicate. At no time is this more obvious than during crises, which are highly reactive in nature and which require a timely response. Examples of this are ever-present, but I would point out a comparison between our three primary case studies once again.

The first southern state to secede did so two and a half months before Lincoln's inauguration. Roosevelt addressed Congress (and the country) the day following the Pearl Harbor attacks. Compare that to the mere hours that Bush and his speechwriters had after the attacks on the morning of September 11, 2001. It's also interesting to add that President Obama gave remarks on the passing of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia (a major event in any administration) within a few hours of the news breaking—and that was on a Saturday.

When information about events from all over the country and all over the world is available in real time, the thought of a president waiting a day or more to address the country after a major national event is practically unthinkable. This is especially true when the event could be considered a crisis. It is practically impossible to imagine President Bush waiting a day or two to address the country after the September 11 attacks. And the speed of the news cycle has only increased over the last fifteen years. As quickly as Americans heard of the attacks on the morning of September 11, social media sites like Twitter help news travel even

faster now. Instead of taking hours for news to reach people, it is available in real time.

This creates a challenge for presidents and their speechwriters. While the speed of the news cycle has increased, the speed of speechwriting hasn't. Bush and his speechwriters only had hours to do what Roosevelt had 24 hours to accomplish, and what took Lincoln 2 ½ months. An excellent illustration of the difference a little extra time can make is Roosevelt's Pearl Harbor speech. When he originally dictated the speech to his secretary, the opening line read, "December 7, 1941—a day that will live in world history." It was only upon later reviewing the speech after his secretary had typed it up that he crossed out "world history" and wrote "infamy."³⁶ This famous line—one of the most famous in American presidential rhetoric—would not have existed without the extra time Roosevelt had to review and edit his speech.

Power in Crisis Rhetoric

The second way crisis rhetoric has changed is the way that presidents portray their own power. There are multiple studies and theories that show how the power of the presidency has increased over time. Many historical facts demonstrate this idea. Recent presidents have been known to dispatch the military to certain locations—in effect declaring war—without a declaration from Congress.

³⁶ "FDR and the Stuff of His War" (*New York Times*, 2006): <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/03/arts/design/03fdr.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

This is not something that would have even been a possibility for earlier presidents. This is why it is interesting that crisis rhetoric reflects the opposite.

Speeches from earlier presidents tend to give the impression that the speakers are *more* powerful, while later presidents downplay their own power. Interestingly, earlier presidents speak in similar ways to the patterns that studies have shown to be linked with lower-power individuals. One scholar who has studied language use extensively told NPR that it is easy to tell “who among two people has power in a relationship, and their relative social status”; all you have to do, he says, is “listen to the relative use of the word ‘I.’”³⁷ Those with less power in a relationship use “I” much more frequently, while those with more power in a relationship are more likely to use “you.”

The way that presidents use “I” or speak about their position is an important aspect to how they portray their own power. Although the way that early presidents use these pronouns is consistent with low-power speakers, using “I” in a speech gives a different impression than in an everyday conversation. Speeches that emphasize “I” often create the image of a much more powerful individual, compared to language focusing on “we.”

My three primary speeches are, again, good examples of this. Lincoln’s speech is primarily about his own views, and what he would or would not allow. He uses language like “I do not intend” or “I hold that.” Perhaps the clearest illustration comes in the middle of his speech. “I therefore consider that in view of the

³⁷ Alix Spiegel. “Our Use Of Little Words Can, Uh, Reveal Hidden Interests (*NPR*, 2014): <http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2014/09/01/344043763/our-use-of-little-words-can-uh-reveal-hidden-interests>.

Constitution and the laws the Union is unbroken, and to the extent of my ability, I shall take care, as the Constitution itself expressly enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States.”³⁸ This may follow the speaking patterns of lower-power individuals, but the impression that it gives is very different.

This section, which is consistent with the majority of the rest of his speech, is essentially a statement that Lincoln intends to fully utilize the powers that his office has given him. Lincoln takes as a given that he will have the power to do what he is describing. This does not sound particularly remarkable or out of the ordinary, but compare this with Roosevelt and Bush.

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Pearl Harbor speech emphasizes the power of the United States, but not of the presidency. In fact, the entire purpose of his speech was to address Congress and request that they formally declare a state of war, so the very context of his speech is an illustration of the limited power of the presidency. He speaks very little of himself and we get the sense that he feels his position is one of proxy. He is speaking *for* the American people. Near the end of his address, he says “I believe that I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost, but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us.”³⁹ Lincoln portrayed himself as a defender of the Constitution and of the people’s will.

³⁸ Abraham Lincoln, “First Inaugural Address,” *American Rhetoric*, speech originally given in 1861:

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/abrahamlincolninauguraladdress.htm>

³⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Pearl Harbor Address to the Nation,” *American Rhetoric*, speech originally given in 1941:

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fdrpearlharbor.htm>

Roosevelt, however, places himself more as an interpreter. A defender connotes active strength, whereas interpreter feels more passive and unassuming. It is a subtle difference, but an interesting one—especially when one considers that these are the two presidents who did more than perhaps any other to expand the reach and power of the presidency.

One little-known fact is that Franklin D. Roosevelt's Pearl Harbor speech was not the first address from the White House after the attacks. Only a few hours after the attacks, Eleanor Roosevelt actually addressed the nation. She regularly participated in a weekly radio broadcast which, as it happened, was scheduled for that day. Her language is very similar to her husband's, unsurprisingly, but as First Lady rather than President, she does come across as more of an everyday citizen than Franklin. She told the country that the President and his Cabinet were meeting and preparing for action. In fact, she helped pave the way for her husband's request for a declaration of war. "We the people are already prepared for action," she said.

"For months now the knowledge that something of this kind might happen has been hanging over our heads and yet it seemed impossible to believe, impossible to drop the everyday things of life and feel that there was only one thing which was important—preparation to meet an enemy no matter where he struck. That is all over now and there is no more uncertainty. We know what we have to face and we know that we are ready to face it."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt, "Pan American Coffee Bureau (ER's regular weekly radio broadcast)," *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project*:

Note that there is no separation or distance of the speaker from the audience as Eleanor speaks.

Roosevelt's first inaugural (also a crisis speech) is interesting, as well, as it is situated in between Lincoln's and Bush's speeches in this regard. At the beginning, he says, "So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." However, later in the speech, he says, "With this pledge taken, I assume unhesitatingly the leadership of this great army of our people dedicated to a disciplined attack upon our common problems."⁴¹ And when he talks about the need for action, he says, "We must act. We must act quickly."⁴² The difference from the first quote to the other two quotes is striking and largely reflects the tone and patterns of the speech as a whole. The first part of the speech is more rhetorical, more literary; the second part is the nuts and bolts, the plan, and the get-it-done section. Neither Lincoln's first inaugural nor Bush's 9/11 speech contain this mix of high-power and low-power speech.

In George W. Bush's speech, the emphasis is on our strength as a country. The specific actions that he says he has already taken almost give the impression that he is more of a manager than a president. More than Lincoln or Roosevelt, he spoke as if he were one of us—stating that "our" way of life came under attack, that "none of us" would forget that day, and that he spoke "on behalf" of the American people—not "for" them.

<https://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teaching/q-and-a/q21-pearl-harbor-address.cfm>

⁴¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "First Inaugural Address," *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 1933:

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fdrfirstinaugural.html>

⁴² Ibid.

The difference in how presidents frame their power is even reflected in what I will call the presidents' "asks". This is not relevant to Roosevelt's address, but Lincoln and Bush both close their speeches with a request to the American people. Lincoln's ask is essentially that Americans remember their shared identity—as he is sure they will. This is more a statement of confidence than anything. Bush, on the other hand, asks for the country to pray for those who had been affected by the terrorist attacks. Lincoln is essentially saying, "let's all get along, like I know we will," while Bush is saying, "please pray." Even in the ask, then, which would logically show the least power in the speech, Lincoln comes across as stronger.

President Woodrow Wilson's war message in 1917, as another example, is quite similar to Lincoln's first inaugural in this regard. Wilson actually starts his speech by reminding Congress that *he* had called them into session—effectively reminding them of the formal power he held—and makes statements such as "I had thought it would suffice" or "I was for a little while unable to believe..." At one point, he says, "I shall take the liberty of suggesting."⁴³ On the whole, much of his speech gives an impression that we may somewhat facetiously rephrase in everyday slang as "This is what I think, but whatever you want to do is okay."

Note how this is different from Roosevelt asking Congress to declare war. Wilson makes sure to remind them that this was *his* decision to call them into session. Roosevelt uses no such language. He simply focuses on the purpose of his address.

⁴³ Woodrow Wilson, "War Message," *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 1917: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/wilsonwarmessage.htm>

Note that earlier presidents still may speak as if they were “one of us,” but they do not do so as clearly or prominently.

Continuing with Wilson’s speech, for example, we see that he puts himself into his audience’s shoes and speaks more of “we,” especially after the first part of his speech. His closing paragraph, which was quoted earlier in this paper, illustrates this. A previous section of his speech reads as follows:

“We enter this war only where we are clearly forced into it because there are no other means of defending our rights. It will be all the easier for us to conduct ourselves as belligerents in a high spirit of right and fairness because we act without animus...”⁴⁴

The emphasis on “I” over “we” is not to say that earlier presidents were self-aggrandizing or arrogant. On the contrary, Wilson shows remarkable restraint (or humility, for lack of a better word) as he explains why, in his opinion, Congress should declare war. And there’s a fascinating section in Lincoln’s first inaugural where he explains that he will simply try to uphold the laws. “Doing this I deem to be only a simple duty on my part, and I shall perform it so far as practicable unless my *rightful masters*, the American people, shall withhold the requisite means or in some authoritative manner direct the contrary.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Woodrow Wilson, “War Message,” *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 1917: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/wilsonwarmessage.htm>

⁴⁵ Emphasis added. Abraham Lincoln, “First Inaugural Address,” *American Rhetoric*, speech originally given in 1861: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/abrahamlincolninauguraladdress.htm>

The political commentator Chris Matthews seems to have partially noticed this trend. One scholar quotes him as saying that when Reagan spoke, he established himself “not as an aloof head of government but as the man next door. Where his predecessors identified themselves with the attainment of government power, Reagan posed as a visiting citizen.”⁴⁶ Rhetorical trends only back this statement in part. Reagan did position himself as an average citizen—something that he did very well (perhaps better than most of the presidents that precede or follow him)—but he was not a trailblazer in doing so, in the way that Matthews seems to suggest. He was simply part of a larger historical trend.

One scholar describes a similar finding, although he frames it differently; Lim found that presidential speech has become “more compassionate and more emotive,” suggesting “a transformation of the president-public relationship from one of authority to one of comradeship.”⁴⁷

One analysis of presidential rhetoric in 1990 hints at a similar finding. It splits speeches into three types (inaugural addresses, economic addresses, and foreign policy addresses) and then looks at the “actors” or subjects in these speeches. The analysis is limited to presidents from Truman to Reagan, but it counts the percentage of subject references. In inaugural addresses and economic addresses, there is no particular correlation. But there is a general downward trend in the frequency of the word “I” in foreign policy addresses, which (of the categories this analysis uses) is the nearest in structure, organization, and content to crisis

⁴⁶ Elvin T. Lim, *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency*, 43.

⁴⁷ Elvin T. Lim, “Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric,” 341.

rhetoric.⁴⁸ Over time, the frequency also switches. From Truman to Reagan, the first several presidents use “I” more frequently than “we,” but it then switches and the greatest frequency becomes “we.”⁴⁹

The balance between these pronouns is difficult to achieve.

“Of necessity the executive voice must strike a delicate balance between the elevated senatorial style and the trivializing populism of Crockett. It must have a distinct personality must be contained. Its speaker must manage to be both apart and included, must be at once particular and universal, challenges that do not necessarily confront congressmen or senators.”⁵⁰

Lyndon B. Johnson’s famous “we shall overcome” speech is somewhat unique with this trend in mind. It can be considered a much more proactive speech than most crisis rhetoric (which is by nature reactive) and so he had to devote more time to trying to persuade his audience that this was a serious problem. This affects the way that he frames his own power. At the beginning of the speech, Johnson says, “I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy. *I urge* every member of both parties, Americans of all religions and of all colors, from every section of this country, to join me in that cause.”⁵¹ The relative weakness of the verb “urge” in this scenario may be attributed not only to the trend of downplaying

⁴⁸ Barbara Hinckley, *The Symbolic Presidency* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 40.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Wayne Fields, *Union of Words: A History of Presidential Eloquence* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 15.

⁵¹ Emphasis added. Lyndon B. Johnson, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress on Voting Legislation: We Shall Overcome,” *AmericanRhetoric.com*, original speech given in 1965:

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/lbjweshallovercome.htm>

power, but also to the nature of this particular crisis. When the country has just been attacked on its own soil, as in the case of Roosevelt and Bush, or when major violence is imminent, as in the case of Lincoln, it takes very little persuasion (if any at all) to convince your audience that there is a problem, or to convince them of exactly what that problem is. This is quite different from Johnson trying to convince the American people that they needed to act on civil rights. He was facing an entirely different set of challenges with his speech. His purpose was not to reassure and calm but to inspire and move to action. Despite the different set of circumstances Johnson was facing, however, his speech still follows this pattern on the whole.

Of all the speeches surveyed in this analysis, the major outlier to this pattern is Jimmy Carter's Crisis of Confidence speech. It is a poor speech by most standards, although better than others that he gave as president, and it's especially weak when looking at how power is portrayed. Consider this section:

"I know, of course, being President, that government actions and legislation can be very important. That's why I've worked hard to put my campaign promises into law, and I have to admit, with just mixed success. But after listening to the American people, I have been reminded again that all the legislation in the world can't fix what's wrong with America."⁵²

⁵² Jimmy Carter, "Energy and the National Goals: A Crisis of Confidence," *AmericanRhetoric.com*, speech originally given in 1979: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jimmycartercrisisofconfidence.htm>.

Even aside from the deep cynicism (which is hardly inspiring or effective if you are lecturing your listeners for not being happy with you, as he does in this speech), Carter is undermining his own power—at a time when Americans already had fairly negative feelings about the government and about Carter’s leadership. Being willing to take the blame for something is admirable, but even though he admits he has only had mixed success, he refuses to accept responsibility for the failures of his administration. On the whole, this speech’s portrayal of power is much weaker than we would expect from the established trend, and it is an example of when using “I” does not portray greater power.

However, while the speech does not follow the trend, it is debatable whether it should be counted as crisis rhetoric to begin with. I have included it for three reasons. First, to provide greater historical coverage in the speeches that I analyzed. (Without this speech, there would be a larger historical gap than is ideal between Lyndon B. Johnson and Ronald Reagan.) Second, because Carter clearly felt that this qualified as a crisis, even though it comes across as slightly ridiculous to listeners today. And third, it is one of very few examples of failed crisis rhetoric, providing a fascinating case study and comparison. The most important lesson from this address as a failed speech is this: crisis rhetoric only works when there is an actual crisis. Presidents cannot successfully manufacture a crisis simply because they want to make a point.

Power in America and a History of Speechwriting

It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons that presidents have increasingly downplayed their power over time. It is possible that it may in part be attributed to the changing nature of the crises that the country has faced. It could be that later presidents simply had less need to articulate their authority. After all, a well-established authority does not need to spend as much time reinforcing their power.

One thing that can be ruled out, however, is a changing appetite for power. Americans have always been deeply mistrustful of power, and that certainly has not changed. This mistrust of power was central to the beginning of the American Revolution; many of the country institutions have also been shaped by Americans' wariness of a strong central government. It also played a role in the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement, and continues to shape politics and national dialogue to this day. One of the key elements of the Republican platform is that strong governments are not healthy for its citizens and that they cannot be trusted. And Americans' deep mistrust of power is possibly one reason that we do not have the same kind of communal goods and services that many western European countries have—such as universal healthcare, paid family leave, or free higher education.

The trend of downplaying power does not seem to be particularly related to political ideology, either. It is also worth pointing out that socioeconomic background could have an impact on the extent to which presidents feel they need to articulate their authority. Lincoln was one of the very few presidents we have had from a lower- or working-class background. It is logical, therefore, that he would have felt the need to emphasize the formal power he held more than the majority of presidents who have grown up in very privileged circumstances. While

this may be a factor in Lincoln's speech in particular, it cannot be attributed as the reason for this trend. After all, George Washington used many of the same speaking patterns as Lincoln, such as using "I" frequently, and he was as near to American nobility or royalty as anyone has come.

A brief discussion on the role of speechwriters is appropriate at this point. One could suggest that perhaps the growing role of speechwriters has contributed to the way that presidents have increasingly downplayed their power. (After all, when someone is writing a speech on your behalf, it seems logical that they would naturally use "we" more than "I.") And while that may be the case to some small degree, there are a few reasons that attributing the trend to speechwriters is not quite accurate.

First, while the role of speechwriters has undeniably changed and grown, it is far from a new phenomenon. Second, the trend of increasingly downplaying power is relatively consistent over history, while the role of the speechwriter has been dramatically expanded and formalized only in the last 50 years.

John F. Kennedy's relationship with his speechwriter, Ted Sorensen, for example, is well-documented. In his memoir, *Counselor*, Sorensen speaks of how closely the two worked together, to the point that by the time the speech was finished, he couldn't even really pinpoint who had written what. They knew each other so well and

"I had worked with him on so many speeches...that I knew what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it on virtually every topic, and probably could not determine then—and certainly cannot

now—which words in a final draft had originally been his and which were mine...In fact, Kennedy did deeply believe everything I helped write for him, because my writing came from my knowledge of his beliefs.”⁵³

Franklin D. Roosevelt had several different advisors who functioned as speechwriters—a small group of insiders that he called his privy council, and that one *New York Times* journalist nicknamed “FDR’s brains trust.”⁵⁴

President Warren G. Harding, who served from 1921-1923, had a “literary executive secretary,” named Judson Welliver who helped to write for him; and while Peggy Noonan (speechwriter and Special Assistant to President Reagan) calls him the first presidential speechwriter,⁵⁵ the truth is the history of writing on behalf of the president goes back much further than this.

Lincoln was mostly responsible for his own inaugural, but even he received some help from William Seward, who served as his Secretary of State.⁵⁶ It was Seward who suggested what became the end of Lincoln’s speech. The language that the Secretary submitted is as follows:

“I close. We are not, we must not be aliens or enemies but fellow countrymen and brethren...The mystic chords which proceeding from so many battlefields and so many patriot graves pass through all the hearts and all the hearths in this broad continent of ours

⁵³ Ted Sorensen, *Counselor*, 132.

⁵⁴ Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2007), 263.

⁵⁵ Peggy Noonan, *What I Saw At the Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1990), 91.

⁵⁶ Ted Sorensen, *Counselor*, 136.

will yet again harmonize in their ancient music when breathed upon by the guardian angel of the nation.”⁵⁷

This is what became the last paragraph (and, it so happens, the strongest section) of Lincoln’s speech, quoted in full at the beginning of this document. According to at least one scholar, this was “the only significant portion of any essay that Lincoln ever had or would compose that he had not written entirely himself.”⁵⁸

Andrew Jackson had a member of his so-called “kitchen cabinet” named Amos Kendall who functioned much like a speechwriter during his administration; one Jackson critic is quoted as saying that Kendall was “the President’s thinking machine, and his writing machine, ay, and his lying machine.”⁵⁹

Going further back still, the Kennedy/Sorensen relationship is nearly identical to the way historians describe how Alexander Hamilton and George Washington collaborated on his Farewell Address. Hamilton was by that point already “a seasoned ghostwriter” and as a result of their close collaboration, “their two voices blended admirably together. The result was a literary miracle.”⁶⁰ Historian Ron Chernow goes on to say that “it is difficult to disentangle the contributions of Washington and Hamilton because their ideas overlapped on many issues.”⁶¹ Even further back, James Madison drafted a similar address for Washington four years earlier, when the president was undecided whether he

⁵⁷ David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 284.

⁵⁸ Fred Kaplan, *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 326.

⁵⁹ Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts*, 1-2.

⁶⁰ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 506.

⁶¹ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, 506.

would seek a second term.⁶² This means that the United States had a documented practice of speechwriting before we even had a contested election.

This is not to say, of course, that the role of speechwriter has been static over the last 200 plus years. It has only been in the more recent past that the role and title has been formalized, standardized, and expanded. Since the 1920s, only one president (Calvin Coolidge) has foregone having a speechwriter.⁶³ (Perhaps it is no coincidence that his nickname was “Silent Cal.”) It now goes without saying that the president has staff that writes his speeches for him. And more recent presidents don’t simply have a speechwriter, but entire dedicated speechwriting teams. The practice of speechwriting has grown so much, in fact, that many other politicians and important public figures, not just presidents, have speechwriters.

Conclusion

The face of the United States has changed significantly since George Washington took office, and so has the voice. While principles of great rhetoric remain what they always have been, the way they are applied has shifted.

Presidents have consistently decreased the complexity of their speech over the last 150 years, allowing them to appeal to a growing and increasingly diverse audience. There are a number of important reasons for this. The speed of the news cycle means that presidents and speechwriters have very little time to prepare

⁶² Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts*, 1.

⁶³ Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts*, 3.

remarks. Addresses are also now viewed more frequently than they are read. This has only become the case fairly recently. Washington's Farewell Address, for example, was never intended to be read out loud. It was meant to be printed; instead of worrying about the details of delivery, Hamilton and Washington worked together to decide on the "optimal time and place for publication."⁶⁴

Even when presidents gave spoken addresses, such as at their inauguration, they were undoubtedly conscious of the fact that their print audience would be much larger than their live audience. Because of that, politicians and their writers have shifted the way they communicate to work better audibly rather than on the page, and they have done so successfully.

Presidents have also changed in the way they portray their own power, increasingly downplaying it over time. Earlier residents of the White House focus on themselves in their speeches—their views, their actions, etc. This changes over time rather dramatically to a heavy emphasis on a collective identity and collective experience. In other words, using "we" instead of "I." This demonstrates a direct negative correlation with the actual power of the presidency, which has greatly increased over the last 150 years.

Despite the many ways that crisis rhetoric has been consistent over the course of American history, the decrease in complexity and the downplaying of power are important ways that it has changed. These and other changes are likely to persist in an increasingly digital age and as the role of the president continues to evolve.

⁶⁴ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, 507.

Times of crisis present unique challenges to presidents, as well as unique opportunities. By focusing on simplicity and providing appropriate details, presidents can produce a successful speech at those times when it matters the most—even when rhetorical power or literary beauty is lacking.

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Appendix A: A Summary of Good Speechwriting

The question of what makes a good speech is a subjective one in some regards, but there are several key elements that experts from Aristotle onwards agree on. I have taken what I have found to be the most crucial of these elements in order to provide a brief summary and establish a shared understanding of good speechwriting.

The first key factor is simplicity. Speeches or addresses that are excessively wordy or that tend towards a disproportionately large use of long words are difficult for audiences to follow audibly. Read that last sentence out loud. Now read this out loud: Wordiness and too many long words make speeches difficult to follow. The first sentence is not easy to read out loud, and it is not any easier to listen to. It *sounds* audibly like a textbook. The second feels much more natural and conversational.

A second key factor is imagery. Good speeches and good speechwriters paint pictures with words. One reason that the "I have a dream" speech is so powerful is

because every word in it contributes to the image of a world without racism. Dr. King was painting a picture for his listeners of what that world would look like.

A third key factor in good speechwriting is storytelling. Even short anecdotes can make a speech more memorable. This concept is well-known to marketing professionals, who have implemented it into some of the most successful advertising campaigns in the country. Statistics about the economic impact of education are largely forgettable, but sharing the real world experience of someone who overcame poverty because of their schooling is powerful and memorable.

Of all the many tips and tricks that speechwriters and other writers offer, most of them can be boiled down to these three factors: simplicity, imagery, and storytelling. These principles of good writing have changed very little over the last several hundred years.

Appendix B: Full Text of Three Key Speeches

Abraham Lincoln: First Inaugural

In compliance with a custom as old as the Government itself, I appear before you to address you briefly and to take in your presence the oath prescribed by the Constitution of the United States to be taken by the President before he enters on the execution of this office."

I do not consider it necessary at present for me to discuss those matters of administration about which there is no special anxiety or excitement.

Apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern States that by the accession of a Republican Administration their property and their peace and personal security are to be endangered. There has never been any reasonable cause for such apprehension. Indeed, the most ample evidence to the contrary has all the while existed and been open to their inspection. It is found in nearly all the published speeches of him who now addresses you. I do but quote from one of those speeches when I declare that--

I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.

Those who nominated and elected me did so with full knowledge that I had made this and many similar declarations and had never recanted them; and more than this, they placed in the platform for my acceptance, and as a law to themselves and to me, the clear and emphatic resolution which I now read:

Resolved, That the maintenance inviolate of the rights of the States, and especially the right of each State to order and control its own domestic institutions according to its own judgment exclusively, is essential to that balance of power on which the perfection and endurance of our political fabric depend; and we denounce the lawless invasion by armed force of the soil of any State or Territory, no matter what pretext, as among the gravest of crimes.

I now reiterate these sentiments, and in doing so I only press upon the public attention the most conclusive evidence of which the case is susceptible that the property, peace, and security of no section are to be in any wise endangered by the now incoming Administration. I add, too, that all the protection which, consistently with the Constitution and the laws, can be given will be cheerfully given to all the States when lawfully demanded, for whatever cause--as cheerfully to one section as to another.

There is much controversy about the delivering up of fugitives from service or labor. The clause I now read is as plainly written in the Constitution as any other of its provisions:

No person held to service or labor in one State, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall in consequence of any law or regulation therein be discharged from such service or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due.

It is scarcely questioned that this provision was intended by those who made it for the reclaiming of what we call fugitive slaves; and the intention of the lawgiver is the law. All members of Congress swear their support to the whole Constitution--to this provision as much as to any other. To the proposition, then, that slaves whose cases come within the terms of this clause "shall be delivered up" their oaths are unanimous. Now, if they would make the effort in good temper, could they not with nearly equal unanimity frame and pass a law by means of which to keep good that unanimous oath?

There is some difference of opinion whether this clause should be enforced by national or by State authority, but surely that difference is not a very material one. If the slave is to be surrendered, it can be of but little consequence to him or to others by which authority it is done. And should anyone in any case be content that his oath shall go unkept on a merely unsubstantial controversy as to how it shall be kept?

Again: In any law upon this subject ought not all the safeguards of liberty known in civilized and humane jurisprudence to be introduced, so that a free man be not in any case surrendered as a slave? And might it not be well at the same time to provide by law for the

enforcement of that clause in the Constitution which guarantees that "the citizens of each State shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of citizens in the several States"?

I take the official oath to-day with no mental reservations and with no purpose to construe the Constitution or laws by any hypercritical rules; and while I do not choose now to specify particular acts of Congress as proper to be enforced, I do suggest that it will be much safer for all, both in official and private stations, to conform to and abide by all those acts which stand unrepealed than to violate any of them trusting to find impunity in having them held to be unconstitutional.

It is seventy-two years since the first inauguration of a President under our National Constitution. During that period fifteen different and greatly distinguished citizens have in succession administered the executive branch of the Government. They have conducted it through many perils, and generally with great success. Yet, with all this scope of precedent, I now enter upon the same task for the brief constitutional term of four years under great and peculiar difficulty. A disruption of the Federal Union, heretofore only menaced, is now formidably attempted.

I hold that in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination. Continue to execute all the express provisions of our National Constitution, and the Union will endure forever, it being impossible to destroy it except by some action not provided for in the instrument itself.

Again: If the United States be not a government proper, but an association of States in the nature of contract merely, can it, as a contract, be peaceably unmade by less than all the parties who made it? One party to a contract may violate it--break it, so to speak--but does it not require all to lawfully rescind it?

Descending from these general principles, we find the proposition that in legal contemplation the Union is perpetual confirmed by the history of the Union itself. The Union is much older than the Constitution. It was formed, in fact, by the Articles of Association in 1774. It was matured and continued by the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It was further matured, and the faith of all the then thirteen States expressly plighted and engaged that it should be perpetual, by the Articles of Confederation in 1778. And finally, in 1787, one of the declared objects for ordaining and establishing the Constitution was "to form a more perfect Union."

But if destruction of the Union by one or by a part only of the States be lawfully possible, the Union is less perfect than before the Constitution, having lost the vital element of perpetuity.

It follows from these views that no State upon its own mere motion can lawfully get out of the Union; that resolves and ordinances to that effect are legally void, and that acts of violence within any State or States against the authority of the United States are insurrectionary or revolutionary, according to circumstances.

I therefore consider that in view of the Constitution and the laws the Union is unbroken, and to the extent of my ability, I shall take care, as the Constitution itself expressly enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States. Doing this I deem to be only a simple duty on my part, and I shall perform it so far as practicable unless my rightful masters, the American people, shall withhold the requisite means or in some authoritative manner direct the contrary. I trust this will not be regarded as a menace, but only as the declared purpose of the Union that it will constitutionally defend and maintain itself.

In doing this there needs to be no bloodshed or violence, and there shall be none unless it be forced upon the national authority. The power confided to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the Government and to collect the duties and imposts; but beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion, no using of force against or among the people anywhere. Where hostility to the United States in any interior locality shall be so great and universal as to prevent competent resident citizens from holding the Federal offices, there will be no attempt to force obnoxious strangers among the people for that object. While the strict legal right may exist in the Government to enforce the exercise of these offices, the attempt to do so would be so irritating and so nearly impracticable withal that I deem it better to forego for the time the uses of such offices.

The mails, unless repelled, will continue to be furnished in all parts of the Union. So far as possible the people everywhere shall have that sense of perfect security which is most favorable to calm thought and reflection. The course here indicated will be followed unless current events and experience shall show a modification or change to be proper, and in every case and exigency my best discretion will be exercised, according to circumstances actually existing and with a view and a hope of a peaceful solution of the national troubles and the restoration of fraternal sympathies and affections.

That there are persons in one section or another who seek to destroy the Union at all events and are glad of any pretext to do it I will neither affirm nor deny; but if there be such, I need address no word to them. To those, however, who really love the Union may I not speak?

Before entering upon so grave a matter as the destruction of our national fabric, with all its benefits, its memories, and its hopes, would it not be wise to ascertain precisely why we do it? Will you hazard so desperate a step while there is any possibility that any portion of the ills you fly from have no real existence? Will you, while the certain ills you fly to are greater than all the real ones you fly from, will you risk the commission of so fearful a mistake?

All profess to be content in the Union if all constitutional rights can be maintained. Is it true, then, that any right plainly written in the Constitution has been denied? I think not. Happily, the human mind is so constituted that no party can reach to the audacity of doing this. Think, if you can, of a single instance in which a plainly written provision of the Constitution has ever been denied. If by the mere force of numbers a majority should deprive a minority of any clearly written constitutional right, it might in a moral point of view justify revolution; certainly would if such right were a vital one. But such is not our case. All the vital rights of minorities and of individuals are so plainly assured to them by

affirmations and negations, guaranties and prohibitions, in the Constitution that controversies never arise concerning them. But no organic law can ever be framed with a provision specifically applicable to every question which may occur in practical administration. No foresight can anticipate nor any document of reasonable length contain express provisions for all possible questions. Shall fugitives from labor be surrendered by national or by State authority? The Constitution does not expressly say. May Congress prohibit slavery in the Territories? The Constitution does not expressly say. Must Congress protect slavery in the Territories? The Constitution does not expressly say.

From questions of this class spring all our constitutional controversies, and we divide upon them into majorities and minorities. If the minority will not acquiesce, the majority must, or the Government must cease. There is no other alternative, for continuing the Government is acquiescence on one side or the other. If a minority in such case will secede rather than acquiesce, they make a precedent which in turn will divide and ruin them, for a minority of their own will secede from them whenever a majority refuses to be controlled by such minority. For instance, why may not any portion of a new confederacy a year or two hence arbitrarily secede again, precisely as portions of the present Union now claim to secede from it? All who cherish disunion sentiments are now being educated to the exact temper of doing this.

Is there such perfect identity of interests among the States to compose a new union as to produce harmony only and prevent renewed secession?

Plainly the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy. A majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people. Whoever rejects it does of necessity fly to anarchy or to despotism. Unanimity is impossible. The rule of a minority, as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy or despotism in some form is all that is left.

I do not forget the position assumed by some that constitutional questions are to be decided by the Supreme Court, nor do I deny that such decisions must be binding in any case upon the parties to a suit as to the object of that suit, while they are also entitled to very high respect and consideration in all parallel cases by all other departments of the Government. And while it is obviously possible that such decision may be erroneous in any given case, still the evil effect following it, being limited to that particular case, with the chance that it may be overruled and never become a precedent for other cases, can better be borne than could the evils of a different practice. At the same time, the candid citizen must confess that if the policy of the Government upon vital questions affecting the whole people is to be irrevocably fixed by decisions of the Supreme Court, the instant they are made in ordinary litigation between parties in personal actions the people will have ceased to be their own rulers, having to that extent practically resigned their Government into the hands of that eminent tribunal. Nor is there in this view any assault upon the court or the judges. It is a duty from which they may not shrink to decide cases properly brought before them, and it is no fault of theirs if others seek to turn their decisions to political purposes.

One section of our country believes slavery is right and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is wrong and ought not to be extended. This is the only substantial dispute. The fugitive- slave clause of the Constitution and the law for the suppression of the foreign

slave trade are each as well enforced, perhaps, as any law can ever be in a community where the moral sense of the people imperfectly supports the law itself. The great body of the people abide by the dry legal obligation in both cases, and a few break over in each. This, I think, can not be perfectly cured, and it would be worse in both cases after the separation of the sections than before. The foreign slave trade, now imperfectly suppressed, would be ultimately revived without restriction in one section, while fugitive slaves, now only partially surrendered, would not be surrendered at all by the other.

Physically speaking, we can not separate. We can not remove our respective sections from each other nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced and go out of the presence and beyond the reach of each other, but the different parts of our country can not do this. They can not but remain face to face, and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them. Is it possible, then, to make that intercourse more advantageous or more satisfactory after separation than before? Can aliens make treaties easier than friends can make laws? Can treaties be more faithfully enforced between aliens than laws can among friends? Suppose you go to war, you can not fight always; and when, after much loss on both sides and no gain on either, you cease fighting, the identical old questions, as to terms of intercourse, are again upon you.

This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing Government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it. I can not be ignorant of the fact that many worthy and patriotic citizens are desirous of having the National Constitution amended. While I make no recommendation of amendments, I fully recognize the rightful authority of the people over the whole subject, to be exercised in either of the modes prescribed in the instrument itself; and I should, under existing circumstances, favor rather than oppose a fair opportunity being afforded the people to act upon it. I will venture to add that to me the convention mode seems preferable, in that it allows amendments to originate with the people themselves, instead of only permitting them to take or reject propositions originated by others, not especially chosen for the purpose, and which might not be precisely such as they would wish to either accept or refuse. I understand a proposed amendment to the Constitution--which amendment, however, I have not seen--has passed Congress, to the effect that the Federal Government shall never interfere with the domestic institutions of the States, including that of persons held to service. To avoid misconstruction of what I have said, I depart from my purpose not to speak of particular amendments so far as to say that, holding such a provision to now be implied constitutional law, I have no objection to its being made express and irrevocable.

The Chief Magistrate derives all his authority from the people, and they have referred none upon him to fix terms for the separation of the States. The people themselves can do this if also they choose, but the Executive as such has nothing to do with it. His duty is to administer the present Government as it came to his hands and to transmit it unimpaired by him to his successor.

Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world? In our present differences, is either party without faith of being in the right? If the Almighty Ruler of Nations, with His eternal truth and justice, be on your side of the North, or on yours of the South, that truth and that justice will surely prevail by the judgment of this great tribunal of the American people.

By the frame of the Government under which we live this same people have wisely given their public servants but little power for mischief, and have with equal wisdom provided for the return of that little to their own hands at very short intervals. While the people retain their virtue and vigilance no Administration by any extreme of wickedness or folly can very seriously injure the Government in the short space of four years.

My countrymen, one and all, think calmly and well upon this whole subject. Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time. If there be an object to hurry any of you in hot haste to a step which you would never take deliberately, that object will be frustrated by taking time; but no good object can be frustrated by it. Such of you as are now dissatisfied still have the old Constitution unimpaired, and, on the sensitive point, the laws of your own framing under it; while the new Administration will have no immediate power, if it would, to change either. If it were admitted that you who are dissatisfied hold the right side in the dispute, there still is no single good reason for precipitate action. Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him who has never yet forsaken this favored land are still competent to adjust in the best way all our present difficulty.

In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the Government, while I shall have the most solemn one to "preserve, protect, and defend it."

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

Franklin D. Roosevelt: Pearl Harbor Address

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Senate, and of the House of Representatives:

Yesterday, December 7th, 1941 -- a date which will live in infamy -- the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its government and its emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific.

Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing in the American island of Oahu, the Japanese ambassador to the United States and his colleague delivered to our Secretary of State a formal reply to a recent American message. And while this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or of armed attack.

It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time, the Japanese government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.

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

Yesterday, the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked Guam.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.

Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island.

And this morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

Japan has, therefore, undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area. The facts of yesterday and today speak for themselves. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation.

As Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy, I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense. But always will our whole nation remember the character of the onslaught against us.

No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.

I believe that I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost, but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us.

Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger.

With confidence in our armed forces, with the unbounding determination of our people, we will gain the inevitable triumph -- so help us God.

I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7th, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese empire.

George W. Bush: 9/11 Address to the Nation

Good evening.

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

A great people has been moved to defend a great nation. Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve. America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining. Today, our nation saw evil -- the very worst of human nature -- and we responded with the best of America. With the daring of our rescue workers, with the caring for strangers and neighbors who came to give blood and help in any way they could.

Immediately following the first attack, I implemented our government's emergency response plans. Our military is powerful, and it's prepared. Our emergency teams are working in New York City and Washington D.C. to help with local rescue efforts. Our first priority is to get help to those who have been injured, and to take every precaution to protect our citizens at home and around the world from further attacks. The functions of our government continue without interruption. Federal agencies in Washington which had to be evacuated today are reopening for essential personnel tonight and will be open for business tomorrow. Our financial institutions remain strong, and the American economy will be open for business as well.

The search is underway for those who were behind these evil acts. I have directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them to justice. We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.

I appreciate so very much the members of Congress who have joined me in strongly condemning these attacks. And on behalf of the American people, I thank the many world leaders who have called to offer their condolences and assistance. America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world, and we stand together to win the war against terrorism.

Tonight, I ask for your prayers for all those who grieve, for the children whose worlds have been shattered, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened. And I pray they will be comforted by a Power greater than any of us, spoken through the ages in Psalm 23:

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for you are with me.

This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace. America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time. None of us will ever forget this day, yet we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world.

Thank you. Good night. And God bless America.