

Diminish Expectations Until Realistic: The Evolution of the President's Weekly Address

A rhetorical analysis by August Dombrow

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Any discussion of rhetoric's role in the 21st century must begin with an important acknowledgement – namely, the evolving role of format and the rhetor's relationship with various media. For the purposes of this exercise, I have chosen to examine the weekly address of the new administration, a tradition which, as recently as five weeks ago, was still broadcast on the arguably archaic FM/AM frequencies of radio. Expanding upon his campaign credentials, President Obama continues to utilize the Internet, now streaming the weekly address in a video format.

This new medium provides a unique opportunity to reevaluate our President's message in additional realms of rhetoric previously inaccessible on radio. Now, instead of a disembodied voice drifting across invisible wavelengths, the President invades our homes as a statuesque bust once each Saturday to have a heart-to-heart with his constituents. This fresh perspective – this increased intimacy – offers students of public speaking additional criteria by which to judge our novice Commander and Chief, most obviously appearance and its impact on the overall delivery.

Seizing this opportunity, I subjected myself to repeated viewings of the weekly statements, listening to his message and reading the transcripts, evaluating him on each facet, all while considering the content of his message within the context of the current events surrounding the speeches. Perhaps not surprisingly, this tactic has yielded a coherent (though slightly redundant) narrative that unfolds over each of the four parts. It is a tale of suspense and drama, of villains and heroes, and of broken relationships and reconciliation.

And it all ends with a cliffhanger that will leave the audience clamoring for the next episode.

Over the course of my exposure, several themes revealed themselves (read: bludgeoned me in the brain via repetition). Noteworthy among these are the themes of Participation, Expectation, and the emergence of a new phenomenon – Unprecedented. Chronologically, the experience progressed something like this:

January 24, 2009 – Week #1

Fresh off the campaign trail, the inaugural weekly address elaborates on the stark realism of that other inaugural address, quickly establishing a picture of dire circumstances followed immediately by his clarion call. Within the first line, the new President evokes images of “an unprecedented crisis that calls for unprecedented action,” introducing what will be a prevalent theme throughout the coming weeks. In spite of the impending doom threatening the nation, our leader maintains a calm demeanor, delivering his lines in a crisp cadence that exudes confidence rather than indifference. Within the first minute, I share his confidence. Promises of bi-partisanship (unprecedented, of course) and inclusion of the American people sweeten the deal. I’m still not sure how exactly the American Recovery and Reinvestment Plan is supposed to work, but it sounds good. So this is the power of rhetoric, eh?

January 31, 2009 – Week #2

This week’s address reads right out of the Aristotle playbook:

- “Make no mistake, these are not just numbers. Behind every statistic there is a story.” Pathos.
- Presidential bearing? American flag hovering over the right shoulder? Ethos.
- Lots of quantifiable problems coupled with proposed solutions? Logos.

While this analysis may oversimplify the content of the address, his delivery effectively intertwines the three, working simultaneously to exploit viewers' emotions while appearing to appeal to reason. Specific statistics regarding our shrinking economy ("4 percent from October to December") quantify his "bad news" about our "struggle through unprecedented economic turmoil." The term crisis will appear twelve times in less than twenty minutes of talking, usually accompanied by recited unemployment figures. I recall Plato's reservations: do these weekly performances amount to anything more than drama?

February 07, 2009 – Week #3

The pattern continues: bad news first, this time with "yet another round of alarming unemployment figures – the worst in more than 30 years," followed by glimmers of hope reminiscent of his stump speeches. His promises of bipartisanship, however, has begun to crack under the pressure of Republican resistance to the ARRP, and his strategy of Unprecedent takes on a different tone – it is one of disassociation:

"Legislation of such magnitude deserves the scrutiny that it's received over the last month, and it will receive more in the days to come. But we can't afford to make perfect the enemy of the absolutely necessary...Let's be clear: We can't expect relief from the tired old theories that, in eight short years, doubled the national debt, threw our economy into a tailspin, and led us into this mess in the first place."

The abrupt shift in tone is a bit unsettling...

February 14, 2009 – Week #4

That all-too-familiar bust of President Obama. The all-too-familiar flag, still clinging to that right shoulder. The all-too-familiar recipe:

Mom's Old Fashioned Weekly Address

1 pt crisis

1 pt unprecedented action

1 pt urgency

300 million "fundamentally decent" Americans

dash of hope

Diminish expectations until realistic. Stir all ingredients in large container. 70% chance of success.

The finger-pointing of last week's address has vanished, replaced by a President's gratitude for the "Members of Congress who came together in common purpose" to pass the ARRP. And that was the easy part.

Conclusion

President Obama has style. Frequent alliteration and literary flourish combine for a pleasing affect on the ears. Additionally, he refrains from erudite language and legal parlance without diluting the message to the point of insulting the intelligence of the audience, a remarkable balance considering the breadth of potential viewers. By signing off with a succinct Thank You (three out of four weeks), the President makes it personal in a subtle manner. Combined with constant references to accountability and oversight, the message suggests a greater level of inclusion in the new administration. The address itself operates as a one-way channel, but this language hints at genuine discourse between government and citizens, which should encourage more attentive listening. Such tactics foster participation.

Unfortunately, the language surrounding the epic American Recovery and Reinvestment Plan at times sounds like plausible deniability. Dressed up in eloquence, these passages can be especially deceptive, calling to mind Socrates'

warnings of pandering and dishonesty. There is no discourse, only a search for compromise. No pursuit of truth, just a common ground between contestants and their constituents in a struggle for political supremacy.

While available on the White House website, the format is remarkably familiar as that of video hosting web-service YouTube. Of course, this only fits in with the previously mentioned themes of Unprecedance, abandoning the traditions of past administrations in favor of contemporary innovations. But perhaps this is essential to understanding the persistence of rhetoric: renovation. As long as the effective rhetor adapts his message to the medium of the day, he will remain relevant.

Inspiration. Fear-mongering. Education.

I suspect the products of rhetoric have changed little over the past two millennia. Content may change. Context changes. But the skilled rhetor will always find a place amongst the shifting interests and clashing ideals of any era.