

5-1-2013

# President Barack Obama and the Commencement of a New Perspective on Epideictic Speeches

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PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA AND THE *COMMENCEMENT* OF A NEW  
PERSPECTIVE ON EPIDEICTIC SPEECHES

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
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May 2013

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## THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

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entitled

President Barack Obama and the *Commencement* of a New Perspective on Epideictic Speeches

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ABSTRACT

**President Barack Obama and the *Commencement* of a New Perspective on  
Epideictic Speeches**

by

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Commencement speakers are typically expected to praise students for their achievements and motivate them for the path that is to come. When the commencement speaker is a President, however, the expectation is different. In times of rhetorical presidency, no presidential address is apolitical and this thesis investigated the functions of epideictic address in light of the rhetorical presidency doctrine. Close textual analysis of the three most controversial commencement speeches delivered by President Barack Obama revealed that the challenge of fulfilling the expectations of a commencement address, while also responding to rhetorical problems, required the President to adopt complex rhetorical strategies. The predominant strategies included humor, which was used in the process of minimizing controversies, strategic use of rhetorical *presence* when selecting the elements to be emphasized in the speech, and ideological identification. Furthermore, the President used strategies that would allow him to be the embodiment of the ideologies most closely related to the audience. By doing so, President Obama was able to create a sense of identification with his audience that invited them to subscribe to his perspective on the issues explored in his speeches. With those findings, this thesis proposes to refine the functions of presidential ceremonial rhetoric to a unique function.

In this refined segment of the genre, the speech should use the available means of persuasion towards a single purpose: display leadership through eloquence in order to enhance presidential *ethos*.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A very wise friend once told me that some individuals behave like kites. Those individuals, she says, are intellectuals, whose creative thoughts and inventive minds propel them to fly higher and higher. But kites, as we all know, can only keep a steady flight if someone leads them from the ground. About 20 months ago, I started a journey that led me to become one of those kites, and I would only be able to keep a steady flight if someone wise guided me. This master's degree offered me the chance of learning from one of the most brilliant minds I had the chance to know. Dr. Thomas R. Burkholder has supplied me with his vast knowledge about, well, everything. Since I started the program he has been the hand that guided me in the right direction, even when I veered a bit off course. His classes, his advice, even the conversations early in the morning were inspiring, enlightening, and exciting. Beyond his lessons, as a teacher and advisor, Dr. Burkholder provided exceptional support and dedication to this project with his unyielding support, feedback, and encouragement. I look up to him and I hope—from the bottom of my heart—that in a few years I can mirror Dr. Burkholder's teaching style and guide future kites. Thank you, Dr. Burkholder, for your patience when you knew I needed guidance, for your kind words when you knew I was going in the wrong direction, and for your understanding that operating in a foreign language can be challenging at times.

I also need to acknowledge that three individuals were fundamental for this thesis to exist. First my brother, Davi Ortega, who convinced me that I could achieve my dreams, even if that dream took me 9,000 miles away from home, and showed me that I was unaware of my own potential. Davi, I admire you and thank you for pushing me to go further. My mother, Lenise Ortega, and my father, Décio Ortega were my perennial

source of energy and strength. They believed in me, they held me strong when I felt weak, they heard me crying in challenging moments, and they were proud of me in the small and big victories. Even though they could not be physically present, I always knew they were there for me. Thank you, mom and dad, for your unconditional love. You are everything to me.

My biological family was absolutely necessary to give me emotional support, but in the time spent at UNLV, I developed a new family that secured my intellectual development. I would like to thank the faculty of the Department of Communication Studies for their unwavering disposition to help me grow and improve as an academic. Three faculty members were especially important: Dr. Donovan Conley, Dr. Tara McManus, and Dr. Lawrence Mullen—from the School of Journalism and Media Studies. As committee members, they gave me insightful comments and suggestions essential to the development of this project. I also must thank the time the Basic Course Director, William Belk, for the time he spent talking to me about my ideas, providing me books, texts, websites, not to mention the countless history lessons. Thank you all so much!

I thank my fellow graduate colleagues, for they were very important in the process of surviving such intense experience. I thank two ladies in special: Monika Bertaki and Monique Makhoulf. Monika's happiness was essential in helping me cope with the challenges of the first year in the program. She was always there for me, and I was lucky to have her giving me hints, teaching me how to grade endless piles of speeches, and making me laugh all the time. When she graduated, Monique became my new office-mate and her sweetness helped me cope with the challenges of finishing my second year in the program. Monique has taken care of me as if I was one of hers and I'm

forever thankful for her support. She is one of those brilliant minds, and the sky is no limit for her. I am certain that all the amazing things she has done for me will return twofold.

Last, but certainly not least, I thank those that helped me in the process of deciding to come here, moving to Las Vegas, and surviving in Las Vegas: Dr. Monica Zoppi Fontana, Suenny Furtado, Mariana Maekawa, Tatiana Neil, Thiago Pascoalino, and my Brazilian friends—the “Jungle-girls.” You inspired me, believed in me, dried my tears, and were by my side when I thought nobody else was. All of you, in one way or another, played an important part in helping me accomplish the colossal task of writing this thesis. God bless you all.

## DEDICATION

I was born in 1985, the year when the Brazilian military dictatorship that had lasted twenty years was finally overthrown. The ghost of censorship, however, haunted my nation for a few more years, and I am not sure it has faded away. The problem was not the organs of censorship, but its legacy. People became afraid to question, to think differently, to dare to be critical. Growing up in a country where political decisions were unquestioned for long and where the study of rhetoric had vanished completely became the impetus for my eternal thirst for understanding presidential rhetoric.

I feel blessed for this amazing experience, for the chance of studying among the great and learning from the best. Writing this thesis was exhausting and emotionally draining, but I couldn't be happier with my personal advancement. This thesis is dedicated for all of those who never had the chance of having a voice. Let no political regime, censorship, religious doctrine, or scholarship requirement silence the voice of those who think differently.

Rhetoric is the one element in human communication that cannot be overlooked, misunderstood, or undermined. May our scholarship never die in the hands of those who intend to control power. My thesis is dedicated to those that still live under military or dictatorial regimes. I truly hope that the advancement of our studies make a difference for those who are interested in the common good.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 2009, President Barack Obama delivered a commencement speech at the University of Notre Dame. Given the occasion, we would assume that the message would conform to our expectation of what Aristotle defined as epideictic oratory. Even though Aristotle never heard of “commencement speeches,” he proposed that the content of the ceremonial genre would be either praise or blame. Following the Aristotelian definition, a commencement speech, then, would mainly praise students for their achievement. But President Obama’s situation was much different because his speech would have to accomplish more than just praising students.

The University of Notre Dame, a traditional Catholic university, extended an invitation to President Obama, despite his pro-choice stance on abortion. The invitation, and especially its acceptance, generated controversy among students, faculty, members of the Notre Dame board of trustees, the media, and Catholic leaders because of the clashing values on abortion. The controversy spilled over into other conflicting ideas such as the “fairness” of offering an honorary degree to a person who did not share the same values as the Catholic Church. Political and religious concerns were raised and the local community engaged in an intense, sometimes even heated, debate.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging the controversy generated by his presence as commencement speaker, President Obama and his team prepared a speech that could fulfill the expectations for the occasion while also responding to the controversy. The “double duty” characterized in Obama’s commencement speech would go beyond Aristotle’s definition of ceremonial, or epideictic, speech.

The goal of this project was to study the rhetorical strategies used by President Obama in the process of fulfilling the expectations of a commencement address while also responding to rhetorical problems. Through this analysis it was my hope that by observing the President's rhetorical strategies I would be able to shed light into the studies of the epideictic genre. More specifically I wanted to observe if those strategies presented any distinctive aspect in regards to the function of commencement addresses in the Obama presidency.

This thesis analyzes Obama's most controversial commencement speeches from 2009 to 2012. The choice of that specific group of speeches is based on the assumption that the challenges posed by the controversies add salient elements in the rhetorical problems faced by the President while addressing the graduates. For this reason, this study focused on Obama's most controversial commencement speeches delivered at Arizona State University, the University of Notre Dame, and Barnard College. Based on the analysis of those speeches, this thesis proposes a refined version of the contemporary theory regarding the functions of the epideictic genre. More specifically, this thesis proposes a refinement for the theory of the functions of a very specific subgroup of the epideictic genre: presidential commencement addresses.

The first commencement speech delivered by President Obama was at Arizona State University on May 13, 2009, and it created national controversy because the institution decided not to award the President the traditional honorary degree given in this occasion. Officials from the university justified the decision saying that "his body of

work [was] yet to come”<sup>2</sup> and in an attempt to remediate the situation, renamed their most important financial aid program after the President.

A week later, the President delivered his second commencement speech at the University of Notre Dame, a situation that had generated even more controversy than the event in Arizona. As previously mentioned, the speech started huge debate about the President’s position on abortion, and the main theme in the local papers during the months preceding the event was the commencement speech to be delivered on May 17<sup>th</sup>. Disagreement was evident among students and leaders of the school, not to mention the community and political parties.

In May 2012, Obama delivered his most recent commencement speech at Barnard College. The presence of the President in the ceremony again generated controversy among students, not over issues such as abortion or Congressional gridlock, but rather over Obama’s choice to speak at Barnard College, instead of accepting insistent invitations from Columbia University, his alma mater.<sup>3</sup> The media speculated<sup>4</sup> that the President’s choice had been a strategic political move, since Obama had been courting female votes for the 2012 election and Barnard is “the most sought-after liberal arts college for women in the United States.”<sup>5</sup>

In general, preliminary analysis of Obama’s speeches revealed three remarkable aspects of presidential commencement speeches: they represent a space for “dialogue” with the intellectual community; they can shape or constitute political views and ideologies of young adults who are about to join the politically aware work-force; and they attract both local and national attention to the event for its “formal informality.” Commencement speeches represent unique occasions when presidents are able to address

the academic community directly. President Obama has an impressive archive of speeches in schools and universities, but the tone and message of commencement speeches change from those events in the sense that instead of focusing on the President's policies and deeds, the emphasis is typically on the achievement of such educational institutions, scholars, and students: a moment of recognition and identification that is consistent with traditional expectations for epideictic rhetoric.

The role of commencement speaker allows orators to address their ideas to the community, and in that sense the President is delivering his "personal" message instead of delivering a message from the state, his typical duty. For that reason, the formality of commencement speeches requires speakers to discard their typical robes, to wear, literally, a different kind of gown. That is the reason why I believe that the formality of commencement speeches somehow attenuates the formality projected in the presidential role; thus, speeches of that kind typically require an intriguing "personal" tone.

The relationship between commencement speeches and presidents sparked my interest in investigating the epideictic genre in depth. There is a certain paradox between the traditional conceptions of the epideictic genre and what scholars have called the rhetorical presidency. James W. Ceaser, Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette argued that modern presidents faced an institutional model that requires them to make constant appearances in order to lead through popular appeal.<sup>6</sup> The authors explain that "The pressure to 'say something' continues after the president has begun to govern. Presidents not only face the demand to explain what they have done and intend to do, but they also have come under increasing pressure to speak out on perceived crises and to minister to the moods and emotions of the populace."<sup>7</sup> For this reason, presidents remain

in a perennial campaign process, a campaign that extends throughout the period of governance: “So formative has the campaign become of our tastes for oratory and of our conception of leadership that presidential speech and governing have come more and more to imitate the model of the campaign. In a dramatic reversal, campaigns set the tone for governing rather than governing for campaigns.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, presidential discourse often seems at odds with traditional expectations for epideictic rhetoric.

If Presidents remain in endless campaign mode, even while governing, no presidential speech is “apolitical.” Therefore, Aristotle’s characterization of the epideictic audience as “those who merely decide on the orator’s skills,” or in the “observers,”<sup>9</sup> no longer seems adequate, even though the presidential commencement addresses are legitimately “ceremonial.”

Numerous other scholars have illuminated the functions of the epideictic genre. Among the vast literature published about ceremonial addresses, the following proved to be very important for this study.

### ***Literature review on the epideictic genre***

When watching a speech delivered by an American president, regular audience members are not likely to observe it from a rhetorical perspective; much less if they are watching their president speaking live, on graduation day, as their commencement speaker. The presence of the president seems to be an event in itself, and certainly we could say that whatever the president says will very likely be a speech of display: display of his public figure, but most importantly display of his ideas.

Speeches of display have been traditionally associated with the main characteristics of the epideictic genre. Richard Volkmann explains that with the arrival of

foreign sophists in Athens during fifth century before Christ, oratory was divided into two main groups: *pragmatikon*, dealing with practical matters and mostly used by Athenian citizens; and *epideiktikon*, a kind of oratory mainly used by the non-citizen who would only be able to speak in festivals, or through Athenians if they were logographers.<sup>10</sup> Richard Chase reinforced that idea stating that in Volkmann's study the term *epideiktikon* "does not at any time refer to such rhetorical functions of praising and blaming. The political status of the speaker with his characteristic approach to oratory was the basic criterion."<sup>11</sup>

Some time later, Aristotle wrote the *Rhetoric* dividing oratory in three main genres, "determined by the classes of listeners to speeches,"<sup>12</sup> because audience members, he claimed, were the ones to define the speech's goals. As previously mentioned, Aristotle wrote that the audience member should either judge or observe, and that depending on these functions of the audience members, the time frame and ends would vary accordingly.<sup>13</sup> With such elements in mind, Aristotle defined the three kinds of oratory: political (in which the audience decides about future things), forensic (the audience makes decisions about past events), and the ceremonial (also known as epideictic or oratory of display, typical of ceremonial occasions, in which the audience is mere observer). Although in Aristotle's context this description was sufficient to divide the different kinds of oratory, ceremonial speeches have changed significantly since the time of Aristotle.

Based on the Aristotelian classification of the three main rhetorical genres, epideictic speeches were restricted to three main characteristics: the content should consist of either praise or blame; its function required little or no deliberation from the

audience; and the time frame should be restricted to the present.<sup>14</sup> Since Aristotle's initial description of the epideictic genre, scholars have debated and proposed new definitions, generating a significant body of work that questions whether the epideictic genre should be limited by the content, function, or form of its speeches. Texts that would typically be classified as epideictic, such as commencement speeches, have defied the Aristotelian definitions because their content typically goes beyond praising or blaming, and although the audience is not requested to have immediate responses, the content of the message they hear might be one of the steps in a persuasive process, and could easily impact the audience's future deliberative decisions.

For example, Richard Chase questioned "The classical conception of epideictic" and concluded his search for the dominant classical understanding of the term "epideictic" saying:

Epideictic must remain, for all practical purposes, oratory that is dominated by either praise or blame. Present-day interpretation and usage that indiscriminately employs epideictic as a covering term for all non-deliberative and non-forensic oratory (whether or not it is characterized by praise or blame), or for a general oratory of display, is without adequate classical foundation.<sup>15</sup>

Many other scholars published different views of the genre; views that instead of claiming the inadequacy of the genre to certain speeches, offered a broader perception of epideictic. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca provided one of the best and most important revisions of Aristotle's rhetorical concepts. In 1969 they published the *New Rhetoric*, in which most of Aristotle's concepts were addressed through a

contemporary perspective. In regards to epideictic, the authors explained that the Aristotelian definition isolated the genre to the realm of matters related to literature and poetry, exempting it from any argumentational value. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca proposed to re-define the genre stating: “Our own view is that epideictic oratory forms a central part of the art of persuasion, and the lack of understanding shown toward it results from a false conception of the effects of argumentation.”<sup>16</sup> The authors explained that the process of obtaining adherence from the audience culminates when the action desired by the speaker/rhetor is finally performed. They argue that speakers set an objective for their speech and use the available means of persuasion to get the audience’s adherence. These objectives certainly vary depending on the speaker, however, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca indicate that it does not pertain to the realm of praising or blaming but to the realm of practical action. The authors also emphasize that although advancing such strategy resembles the means of deliberative speeches, the kinds of supporting material vary considerably from that kind of genre. Instead of using logical proofs, epideictic speakers should try “to establish a sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience, and to this end he uses the whole range of means available to the rhetorician for purposes of amplification and enhancement.”<sup>17</sup> In that sense, they remark the importance of epideictic speeches in obtaining adherence by acknowledging that “The taking of a decision stands halfway, so to speak, between a disposition to take action and the action itself, between pure speculation and effective action.”<sup>18</sup> Although Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s approach seems to depict the genre in a broader perspective, the definition of epideictic is still restrictive because it focused only on the role of the speaker. The audience, in that case, seems to serve as object of manipulation.

Christine Oravec, however, proposed that the Aristotelian definition is accurate, and argues that the problem lies on how Aristotle's concepts were translated and interpreted by the western culture. The author claimed that when Aristotle attributed the role of "observers" to the audience of epideictic speeches, he was not referring to our passive concept of observation; through analysis of other classical texts, she argued that the term actually referred to what we symbolize as "understanding," and says: "The function of judging others' discourse on practical matters [...] may be compared to the function of observation, described in the *Rhetoric* as a type of decision based on speculation concerning another's speeches of praise and blame."<sup>19</sup> She concluded her essay expanding the Aristotelian notion of the genre, claiming that speeches of praise or blame request an active role from the audience, in the sense that they are responsible for judging the speaker's skills.

Although Christine Oravec endorses the classicist approach on epideictic, in an expanded fashion, most scholars who published subsequently were more attracted with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's definition of the epideictic genre and Walter H. Beale was one of them. More important than Beale's theory of the "performative function" of epideictic was his review of the most frequent characteristics related to epideictic speeches in the academic realm. Beale rejects the definitions that delineate the genre evaluating style, function (such as praise and blame) and time (typically attributed to be related to the present). For Beale, the best definitions of the epideictic genre are those that "point to rhetorical situation or social function: these are, on the one hand, the notion of ceremonial or occasional discourse, and on the other, Perelman's stress on the function of reinforcing traditional values."<sup>20</sup>

Also departing from the ideas proposed by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, Celeste Michelle Condit<sup>21</sup> acknowledged the inadequacy of the current definitions of the epideictic genre. She addressed the issue with Aristotle's proposition, that the epideictic genre regards speeches of "praise and blame," endorsing Michael McGee's explanation of the topic.<sup>22</sup> McGee understood that all genres could have, to some extent, content of praise or blame, and proposed that if we were to classify epideictic speeches using this criterion it would be necessary to "measure" the "amount" of praise or blame. Acknowledging the lack of practicality of such approach, Condit rejected this notion and proposed that the definition of contemporary epideictic should regard three functional pairs, and one main type of content. The three main pairs of functions are paired because one regards the function served for the speaker and the other shows the function of the speech for the audience. Her definition assembles the characteristics determined in isolation by most of the other authors in terms of function. For the speaker, the epideictic speech should serve the functions of definition, shaping community, and display. For the audience, the genre accounts for speeches with the following functions: understanding, sharing community, and entertainment.

When pairing the function of definition and understanding, Condit explained that epideictic speeches are typical of moments in which some sort of event, person, or object is troubling for the community, and she posits that "the speaker will explain the troubling issue in terms of the audience's key values and beliefs," and that "through the resultant understanding the troubled event will be made less confusing and threatening, providing a sense of comfort for the audience."<sup>23</sup> Most importantly, Condit remarked the importance of commencement addresses saying that "the audience seeks an

understanding of the value of what has been completed and a hint at how they might judge what is to come. The commencement speaker has earned the right to define the meaning of the past experience and thereby to wield the power of emphasizing the values and meaning in the paths opened for the future.”<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, when Condit paired the functions of shaping and sharing community she adopts Kenneth Burke’s perception of human symbology and emphasized that because humans are creators, users, and misusers of symbols, communities have a general need to congregate through speech in order to share heritage and identity: “Communities of any size—nation to family—need to have explicit definitions of major shared experiences, because ‘to be a part of a community’ means in large part to identify oneself with the symbols, values, myths, or ‘heritage’ of that community.”<sup>25</sup> Her last pair of functions examined the display and entertaining functions of epideictic. Condit explained that because the speeches categorized in the epideictic genre are neither deliberative nor judicial, the rhetor had the chance of developing creative or stylistic texts. The audience, in this case, is entertained by the display of the speaker’s leadership since “the audience judges the fullness of the speaker’s eloquence, because audiences rightfully take eloquence as a sign of leadership. The person who knows truth, recognizes and wields beauty, and manages power stands a good chance of being a desirable leader for the community.”<sup>26</sup>

Finally, when defining the main type of content, Condit said that “The epideictic speech expresses and recreates [...] identity by expressing and restructuring the symbolic repertoire around special events, places, persons, or times.”<sup>27</sup> She explained that “the content of epideictic speeches tend to be relatively non-controversial and to focus on universal [...] values.”<sup>28</sup> Condit emphasized that there is a permanent assessment of

power in circumstances that require epideictic speeches. The choice of a particular speaker to define, shape, and share the events and values of a community relies on the inevitable attribution of power to that individual. Considering this aspect, the choice of a commencement speaker becomes even more meaningful since the community willingly chooses a leader not only to be their representative but also to “help discover what the event means to the community, and what the community will come to be in the face of the new event.”<sup>29</sup>

Fourteen years later, Gerard A. Hauser argued that the western tradition of rhetorical studies has neglected the relationship between epideictic speeches and political discussion, which for long undermined the potential of the genre. Instead, he proposed that “before citizens can imagine the possibility of a vibrant public realm, they require a vocabulary capable of expressing public issues and experiences of publicness, which are civic needs [...] that epideictic addresses.”<sup>30</sup> If there is display in epideictic genre, he claimed, it was subordinated to the concept of “community instruction,”<sup>31</sup> and in that sense, Hauser advanced the argument that one of the most important functions of the genre (besides all the other functions mentioned by Condit) is to educate the community in virtue, morality, and shared values, thus providing a common vocabulary for the discussions carried on in the public sphere. In that view, epideictic rhetoric is prerequisite for a good public dynamic because “a public illiterate in models of proper conduct and inarticulate in expressing the moral bases for its beliefs soon becomes moribund and relinquishes the discursive basis for its political actions to authority or force.”<sup>32</sup> To some extent, then, we can infer an intrinsic correlation between the maintenance of democratic values and the functions of epideictic speeches. The

epistemological discussion of the epideictic genre has certainly advanced with Hauser's argument, especially in what regards the political realm.

Parallel to these discussions of the genre, other scholars have published a new array of remarkable studies applying a broad perspective of epideictic to presidential or political speeches. Although these scholars are not aiming to change the definition of the genre, their studies certainly contribute to the academic discussion as we observe practical findings. The relevance of the genre in political discourse is undeniable: some argue it is through an educational function, others that the relevance is due to its persuasive function.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, what is most important in this discussion is that finally the Aristotelian tradition has been expanded to a perspective that acknowledges the political content in what previously had been claimed to be purely entertaining.

Advancing a theoretical perspective on the functions of commencement addresses in the presidential realm is quite challenging. In order to develop a sound argument, this project adopted the method of organic rhetorical criticism and the next part of this chapter provides further details regarding the methodological scheme used in this thesis.

### ***Method***

The first step in this project was to develop an organic descriptive analysis of Obama's commencement addresses delivered at Arizona State University, the University of Notre Dame, and Barnard College. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Thomas R. Burkholder explain that "an organic approach to criticism asks critics to consider a rhetorical act on its own terms, not to approach it with prejudgments and prior assumptions."<sup>34</sup> This first step will investigate closely the distinctive aspects of each text in terms of the seven elements of descriptive analysis proposed by Campbell and

Burkholder. The authors explain that the main goal of descriptive analysis is to answer two questions: “(1) What is the apparent purpose of the discourse, or what aim or goal does the rhetor seem to seek? (2) How does the discourse work to achieve the goal?”<sup>35</sup> In order to answer these questions the authors propose a systematized way to analyze texts emphasizing seven elements to be investigated: purpose, persona, audience, tone, structure, supporting materials, and other strategies.

The second step in the critical process will explore the broad and narrow contexts surrounding the speech to determine the impact that context had on the speaker and audience(s). The contextual analysis will identify competing forces that could either influence the audience’s perception of a certain message or the speaker’s choices when creating it. The goal of the second step is to try to understand the rhetorical act through a holistic perspective since the first step studies the texts intrinsically, and the second one extrinsically.

The third step will be to develop a theoretical perspective or framework, based on the prior review of literature, to guide analysis of the texts in light of the influence of their context. This step is essential in the process of developing complete rhetorical criticism because, among other things, good criticism “increases the reader’s understanding and appreciation of the discourses it criticizes. It goes beyond what is obvious to an intelligent person at the first reading”<sup>36</sup> and it also “contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the role of persuasive discourse in humane society.”<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, according to Campbell and Burkholder, “in most cases good criticism contributes to a general understanding of how human beings use symbols to influence each other.”<sup>38</sup>

Other scholars share similar perspectives on rhetorical criticism. For example, David Zarefsky remarked that this kind of study should not emphasize classification of the speech in accordance with the available theoretical perspectives. Instead, the main goal of rhetorical critical studies should be to analyze the effect of the text in audiences, or to explain “the processes by which speakers and audiences adapt to each other,”<sup>39</sup> investigating the impact of rhetorical choices in creating identification among members of society. Wayne Brockriede suggested that rhetorical criticism is more valuable to society when the critic is able to develop a sound argument that provides novel information to the field of rhetorical studies. Brockriede explains that “when a critic assumes the responsibility and risk of advancing a significant argument about his [sic] evaluation or explanation, he [sic] invites confrontation that may begin or continue a process enhancing an understanding of a rhetorical experience or of rhetoric. [...] The product of the process of confrontation by argument and counterargument is a more dependable understanding of rhetorical experiences and of rhetoric.”<sup>40</sup>

This project not only adds to the fields of rhetorical criticism and presidential rhetoric, but also to the studies of epideictic genre. It is an unprecedented study analyzing, through a chronological perspective, Obama’s rhetorical strategies in controversial commencement addresses, and advancing new insights for the studies of the epideictic genre. In order to accomplish those goals, this thesis is structured in a way that each chapter is dedicated to a single speech.

Chapter two provides rich details about the context of May 2009, when the President delivered his first presidential commencement address at Arizona State University. The chapter analyzes rhetorical problems such as the economic great

recession that the country was going through and its implications to Obama's *ethos*. It also approaches eminent threats to the President's credibility, competing persuasive forces, the challenge of delivering a commencement address to an audience potentially divided by their political views, and explains the controversy surrounding the speech. Furthermore the chapter provides detailed analysis of the rhetorical strategy adopted by President Obama in the process of responding to rhetorical problems while fulfilling the expectations of a commencement address. In that speech, the President provided the audience with a dichotomy in the American dream. He used a strategy of semantic association and his own *ethos* to legitimize the version of the American dream that seemed most consistent with his ideological views.

Chapter three is dedicated to the commencement address at the University of Notre Dame. Although this speech was delivered just a week after Obama's appearance at Arizona State, and thus some of the rhetorical problems overlap, the most significant problem Obama faced at Notre Dame was the local controversy regarding the clash between Obama's views on abortion and Notre Dame's Catholic values. The chapter also analyzes the rhetorical strategies that Obama used in the process of responding not only to rhetorical problems but also to interruptions during the speech. The President successfully fulfilled the expectations of a commencement address and using of a prophetic persona, responding to controversies and interruptions with nonverbal inflections, humor, and theological language.

Chapter four is dedicated to the commencement address at Barnard College. The context of the speech is quite complex because the speech was delivered in the heat of a presidential election. Amidst multiple competing persuasive forces, such as the political

campaign of Republican presidential candidates, media speculation regarding the President's choice to speak at Barnard, and local controversy, the President delivered a commencement address to an audience composed primarily by women. Responding to all the challenges posed by all those rhetorical problems, President Obama used a strategy that relied on the persona of a father in order to convey information that both fulfilled the expectations of a commencement address and campaigned for his reelection.

Finally, chapter five provides a review of the most important concepts developed in each chapter and connects the findings from each speech. In that chapter I also advance the expediency of revising the functions of the specific subgroup of speeches analyzed in this thesis, and develop the argument regarding the specific functions of modern presidential ceremonial rhetoric. I argue that the main function of ceremonial commencement addresses regards the display of leadership in order to enhance the president's ethos and campaign for the presidency. Furthermore, I address the limitations of the study and consider future directions for the study of the field.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed analysis regarding the controversy generated upon President Obama's invitation to speak at the University of Notre Dame is provided by Ronald Arnett, "Civic Rhetoric Meeting the Communal Interplay of the Provincial and the Cosmopolitan: Barack Obama's Notre Dame Speech," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14 (2011): 631-671.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Baker, "Work is Never Done, Obama Tells Class," *The New York Times*, May 13, 2009, accessed June 21, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/14/us/politics/14obama.html>

<sup>3</sup> Yasmin Gagne and Sammy Roth, "Obama highlights women's rights in commencement address," *Columbia Spectator*, May 14, 2012, accessed September 24, 2012, <http://www.columbiaspectator.com/2012/05/14/obama-highlights-womens-rights-commencement-address>

<sup>4</sup> See Mark Landler and John H. Cushman, "In Graduation Speech to Women, Obama Leaps Into Gender Gap," *The New York Times*, May 14, 2012, accessed June 21, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/15/us/politics/in-graduation-speech-to-women-obama-leaps-into-gender-gap.html>

<sup>5</sup> "Barnard College: About the College," accessed October 9, 2012, <http://barnard.edu/about/about-the-college>

<sup>6</sup> James W. Ceaser, Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette, "The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11 (1981): 158-171.

<sup>7</sup> Ceaser, Thurow, Tulis, and Bessette, "The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency," 161.

<sup>8</sup> Ceaser, Thurow, Tulis, and Bessette, "The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency," 167.

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- <sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, edited by Lee Honeycutt, (n.d.) accessed September 13, 2012, <http://rhetoric.eserver.org/aristotle/>, [1358b].
- <sup>10</sup> Richard Volkmann, *Die Rhetorik der Griechen und Römer* (Leipzig, 1885), p. 16.
- <sup>11</sup> J. Richard Chase, "The Classical Conception of Epideictic," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 47 (1961): 294.
- <sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, [1358a].
- <sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, [1358b]
- <sup>14</sup> According to Walter H. Beale, "Rhetorical Performative Discourse: A New Theory of Epideictic," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 11 (Fall 1978): 221-222.
- <sup>15</sup> Chase, "The Classical Conception of Epideictic," 300.
- <sup>16</sup> Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1969), 49.
- <sup>17</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, 51.
- <sup>18</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, 49.
- <sup>19</sup> Christine Oravec, "'Observation' in Aristotle's Theory of Epideictic," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 9 (1976): 166.
- <sup>20</sup> Beale, "Rhetorical Performative Discourse," 223.
- <sup>21</sup> Celeste Michelle Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar," *Communication Quarterly* 33 (1985): 284-299.
- <sup>22</sup> Michael C. McGee, *The Epideictic Element*, Unpublished manuscript, (University of Iowa, 1971).
- <sup>23</sup> Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic," 288.

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- <sup>24</sup> Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic," 288.
- <sup>25</sup> Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic," 289.
- <sup>26</sup> Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic," 290-291.
- <sup>27</sup> Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic," 292.
- <sup>28</sup> Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic," 292.
- <sup>29</sup> Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic," 289.
- <sup>30</sup> Gerard A. Hauser, "Aristotle on Epideictic: The Formation of Public Morality," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 29 (1999): 6.
- <sup>31</sup> Hauser, "Aristotle on Epideictic: The Formation of Public Morality," 17.
- <sup>32</sup> Hauser, "Aristotle on Epideictic: The Formation of Public Morality," 19-20.
- <sup>33</sup> See Bradford Vivian, "Neoliberal Epideictic: Rhetorical Form and Commemorative Politics on September 11, 2002," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006): 1-26; Sara C. VanderHaagen, "Renewing Tradition in Community: George W. Bush, Calvin College, and the Controversy over Identity," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 11 (2008): 535-568; Denise M. Bostdorff, "Epideictic Rhetoric in the Service of War: George W. Bush on Iraq and the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Victory over Japan," *Communication Monographs* 78 (2011): 296-323; Lois Agnew, "'The Day Belong to the Students: Expanding Epideictic's Civic Function,'" *Rhetoric Review* 27 (2008): 147-164; and Ronald C. Arnett, "Civic Rhetoric—Meeting the Communal Interplay of the Provincial and the Cosmopolitan: Barack Obama's Notre Dame Speech," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14 (2011): 633.
- <sup>34</sup> Karlyn Khors Campbell and Thomas R. Burkholder, *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997):18.

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<sup>35</sup> Campbell and Burkholder, *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Campbell and Burkholder, *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 74.

<sup>37</sup> Campbell and Burkholder, *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 74.

<sup>38</sup> Campbell and Burkholder, *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 74.

<sup>39</sup> David Zarefsky, "Reflections on Rhetorical Criticism," *Rhetoric Review* 25 (2006): 386.

<sup>40</sup> Wayne Brockriede, "Rhetorical Criticism as Argument," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60 (1974): 174.

## CHAPTER 2

### ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

On January 20, 2009, the first African-American president of the United States was inaugurated. On that day President Barack Obama took over the leadership of a country that was on a descending economic spiral. A combination of factors such as failure in governmental regulations of Wall Street transactions<sup>1</sup> and the risky conversion of mortgages into financial assets,<sup>2</sup> led the country to the period known as the “great recession.”<sup>3</sup> The great recession started in 2007 but its consequences were mostly felt by the end of 2008 and beginning of 2009.

In January of 2009 a total of 861,664 families had lost their homes to foreclosure, and the three states most affected by foreclosure were Nevada, Florida, and Arizona. In the state of Nevada, seven percent of the homes had received some kind of foreclosure filling in 2008. In Arizona, foreclosure fillings increased 203% since 2007 which represented 4.5% of all household. Home prices were falling steadily and homeowners owed more on their mortgages than their houses were worth.<sup>4</sup> Indebted Americans reduced their consumption levels and soon businesses felt the need to reduce their work force in order to contain their economic losses. Consequently, unemployment rates soon spiked to the highest levels Americans had seen since the end of World War II.<sup>5</sup> With the unemployment rate of 7.8%<sup>6</sup> Americans got more discouraged from spending, and businesses started collapsing across the country.<sup>7</sup>

Only 114 days after his inauguration, President Obama delivered his first presidential commencement address. Despite the attempt to contain the economic recession through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, in May of 2009 the

nation was struggling with a 9.4% unemployment rate, facing a pandemic threat of swine flu,<sup>8</sup> and apprehensive with the upcoming elimination or reduction of federal programs.<sup>9</sup> It was amidst all those issues, and many others, that President Obama accepted the invitation from Arizona State University (ASU) to speak at their 2009 graduation ceremony. The stakes were high for the President's commencement address especially because Arizona was one of the states most impacted by the great recession, and because Arizona was the home state of his political opponent in the 2008 election, Senator John McCain. The commencement address at ASU was a unique opportunity to enhance his credibility locally and nationally because through his message the President would be able to convey his goals and maintain the high job approval rating he had enjoyed until that point. But the great challenge in that task was to make sure that the speech would not become a "policy speech," deviating from the main expectation of most commencement addresses: motivating and praising students.

Although commencement speeches are typically expected to be "all about the students," some scholars question that expectation, saying that this sort of event provides space for public discussion within communities, especially if the speaker chosen adds controversy to the event. For example, Lois Agnew challenges the notion that "the day belongs to the students," saying that epideictic speeches possess "social power that can be realized when rhetors and audiences cooperatively create a vision that defines and celebrates the community values but leave open the possibility that those values can be creatively reinterpreted in response to new challenges."<sup>10</sup> Agnew also explained that the assumption that commencement speeches should provide "comfortable words" to the students "seems far removed from the profound mission of forming a vision for the

community contained in both classical and contemporary epideictic theories.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the expectation of a ceremony that “belongs to the students” seems even less likely when the commencement speaker is a President: the ceremony will not belong to the students; it will belong to the President.

This chapter argues that due to contextual exigencies and the pressure imposed on presidents by the rhetorical presidency doctrine, the expectations for commencement addresses are changed significantly. More specifically, analysis of the speech delivered at Arizona State University by President Barack Obama suggests that our understanding of the epideictic genre should be revised in light of the rhetorical presidency paradigm because the main goal of a commencement address is shifted when the speaker is a president. Instead of focusing on understanding and shaping a sense of community, modern presidential commencement addresses aim at displaying leadership and enhancing the *ethos* of the speaker. The other remaining functions of the epideictic genre serve as the structure used to achieve the goal of displaying leadership through eloquence.

This chapter is divided in three main parts. The first part discusses the context of the speech as well as the rhetorical problems that challenged the President’s *ethos*: the economic crisis, high unemployment rates, Congressional impasses, and the controversy regarding the fact that ASU decided not to award the President an honorary degree. The second part of this chapter discusses the rhetorical strategies most predominant in Obama’s speech while responding to those rhetorical problems and fulfilling the expectations of a commencement address. The analysis reveals that the President used the dichotomous notion of the American Dream to define the event and reinforce strategic

key values, and he employed strategic semantic association in order to promote ideological identification in the process of shaping a sense of community. Finally, the third part of the chapter concludes that through the dichotomous view of the American dream, President Obama interpellates the audience to comply with his ideological perspective. Those findings seem to suggest that our understanding of the epideictic genre should be altered in light of the influence of the rhetorical presidency. The main goal of a contemporary presidential epideictic address is the display of leadership through eloquence, and the remaining epideictic functions defined by Celeste Condit seem to solely provide structure for speakers to achieve their primary purpose: campaigning.

### ***Context of the commencement speech delivered at Arizona State University***

Understanding the complexity of a rhetorical situation requires a contextual investigation that analyzes not only the immediate scenario but also the events that preceded and followed the speech. James R. Andrews, Michael C. Leff, and Robert Terrill explain that a critic “must know the significant contextual factors that have the potential to influence the message,”<sup>12</sup> and to some extent reconstruct for the reader the scenario in which the speech was delivered. In a relatively similar train of thought, Karlyn Khors Campbell and Thomas R. Burkholder explain that in the process of contextualizing the speech, the critic must acknowledge the rhetorical problems that could represent “obstacles that prevent the rhetorical act from accomplishing its intended purpose immediately and easily.”<sup>13</sup> In the case of a presidential address, it is expedient to acknowledge obstacles that could prevent the President from improving his *ethos*.

Arizona State University is “the youngest and the largest of the roughly 150 public and private research-grade universities in the nation.”<sup>14</sup> Arizona is also the home

state of the President's opponent in the 2008 election, John McCain. Although the greatest portion of the state's citizens had voted for McCain, a substantial number of Arizona voters supported Obama. According to *The New York Times*, McCain won with fifty-three percent of the votes against forty-five percent who voted for Obama.<sup>15</sup>

Those numbers suggest that a relatively large number of Arizona voters, 45% of them, were reasonably well-disposed toward the speaker. However, it is important to consider Obama's challenge of addressing his first commencement speech, as a President, in the home state of his opponent. The President's message had to contain elements that would resonate with individuals from both ends of the ideological spectrum. This means that while delivering a speech to praise students and motivate them, the President still had to address the economic concerns that at the time were still so vivid. As mentioned, the country had been going through the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, and Americans from all states were still handling the practical consequences of it. In Arizona, the crisis hit the population mostly from the third quarter of 2007 until the end of 2009. According to an article published by the University of Arizona's Economic and Business Research Center, in 2009 the state:

(...) lost one in every nine jobs. Unemployment topped 9%, up from 3.5% only two years earlier. Population recorded the smallest numerical increase in 20 years (and the smallest percentage increase in at least 50 years). During 2009, personal income in current dollars declined - - the first time ever (data stretching back to 1950). State tax receipts, which are based on sales taxes and income taxes, fell by nearly one-third.<sup>16</sup>

The President had to turn those challenges into some sort of inspirational message in order to successfully fulfill the expectations of a commencement address. With President Obama's election, American society seemed eager to see radical changes in Washington. The first African-American president, and greatest advocate of hope and change, was expected to resolve critical issues facing the country. Most importantly, the public was desperate for fast and effective resolution of those economic problems, such as unemployment, but many other challenges were yet to be faced.

In 2009, Democrats enjoyed a majority in both the U. S. Senate and the House of Representatives. Despite of this Democrat majority, Congress was constantly facing situations of impasse due to strong Republican opposition to President Obama's policies. Although bills were approved in those five months of Obama's administration, resistance by Republican opposition made the process significantly slow. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican from Kentucky, used the filibuster tactic in order to delay legislation from passing.<sup>17</sup> The Senator's persuasive power represented significant threat to enacting Obama's policies.

Laura Litvan, a Bloomberg reporter, remarked that McConnell's authority "helped force Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to delay a vote on a spending bill. And he (...) persuaded Republicans to agree to filibuster any time Reid tries to block Republican amendments."<sup>18</sup> This kind of competing persuasive force made sure that on a number of occasions, the proposed solutions were denied, or if approved, they would be done without a single Republican vote.<sup>19</sup> An example of that was the \$787 billion stimulus package that was approved by the House of Representatives without a single

vote from Republicans. Furthermore, Litvan emphasized that the number one word said by Republican representatives of the house was “No.” And she explained:

Mitch McConnell, the most powerful Republican in the U.S. Senate, has so far had one word for President Barack Obama’s agenda: No.

Now, with his party being battered as rejectionist, the Kentucky lawmaker says he’s looking for something he can say yes to. The Senate minority leader, who has opposed every major Obama initiative since the President took office, says he sees the opportunity for agreement in areas such as foreign policy and overhauling Social Security.<sup>20</sup>

Later, that same Senator said on an interview with *National Journal* magazine: “the single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president.”<sup>21</sup> This statement symbolizes with precision the Republican attitude in regards to Obama’s presidency.

Writing in *U.S. News*, Peter Roff argued that these impasses challenged the President’s political image because the “perpetual gridlock despite near-historic majorities for the President’s party in both the House and Senate undermine[d] his ability to cast himself as a problem-solver.”<sup>22</sup> At that point, preserving his political image was critical because in November of the following year the election of a new Congress could change the political dynamic of both houses. If American voters perceived his governance—or the liberal political discourse in general—as undesirable or ineffective, the Democratic majorities in both houses could be threatened. Considering the delays in passing bills, and the struggles faced by the presidency while having a Democratic

majority, it is easy to infer that losing the majority could risk Obama's policies from passing and jeopardize future reelection. Therefore it was strategically imperative for the President to campaign for his presidency and also for his party in order to gain popular support.

In May of 2009, although he was still enjoying the "honeymoon" period of his administration, President Obama's job approval started to drop steadily. According to Gallup, on the day of his inauguration, President Obama's rate of approval was 68%. By May, when he delivered the speech in Arizona, Obama's job approval rate had already dropped to 62%.<sup>23</sup> Although that approval rating was still very high, Obama had to deliver a speech that satisfied the expectations of a commencement address while also campaigning to improve his *ethos* with the immediate and mediated audiences.

Another controversy regarding the President's invitation to speak at the ceremony added an extra challenge to the speech. Arizona State University officials declined to award an honorary degree to the President, claiming that he had not yet achieved enough in life. In most universities<sup>24</sup> the award is given based on one (or more) of the following purposes: to honor individuals who excel in their fields of study; to honor outstanding public service; to recognize individuals with significant achievements who could serve as examples for students; or to "elevate the University in the eyes of the world by honoring individuals who are widely known and highly regarded for achievements in their respective fields of endeavor."<sup>25</sup>

At Arizona State University, however, awarding honorary degrees are based on a single criterion: "Honorary degrees are an opportunity for universities to single out people who have made contributions to society."<sup>26</sup> As explained by Peter Baker, a *New*

*York Times* reporter, “The decision not to award an honorary degree to Mr. Obama was taken by many as a snub, especially after university officials explained that ‘his body of work is yet to come.’ Embarrassed university officials tried to contain the damage by renaming its most important financial aid program the President Barack Obama Scholars Program.”<sup>27</sup> The President agreed with the University’s position and connected his whole speech through phrases that rotated around the theme of “your body of work is yet to come.”

Understanding the constraints, and the elements that made the speech even more challenging, I turn now to an analysis of the strategies chosen by the President in the process of responding to the rhetorical problems that challenged his *ethos*, while at the same time fulfilling the expectations of a commencement address.

### ***Rhetorical Strategies***

As explained in Chapter 1, Celeste Condit identifies a functional triad for the epideictic speaker: define the troubling event through well-accepted key values; shape a sense of community in which the audience can share; and display leadership through eloquence.<sup>28</sup> President Obama, then, aimed to define the troubling event of graduating, unite the community in pursuit of common goals, and validate his presidency through the display of eloquence.

While one might dispute the idea that a graduation ceremony is a troubling event, it is important to emphasize that, as Condit remarks:

At commencements, for example, the audience seeks an understanding of the value of what has been completed and a hint at how they might judge what is to come. The commencement speaker has earned the right to

define the meaning of the past experience and thereby to wield the power of emphasizing the values and meaning in the paths opened for the future.<sup>29</sup>

Graduating in 2009 meant that the regular insecurities regarding the future were much aggravated due to the financial crisis that the country was going through; the country was immersed in a turbulent moment of insecurity, the economy was extremely unstable and unemployment rates had started to skyrocket. As mentioned previously, the state of Arizona had been severely impacted with the economic recession, especially in terms of job offers. Graduating in a community where unemployment had reached the nine percent rate was certainly a reason to be worried since students had accumulated student loans, and would face a stagnated job market.

Graduates did need understanding of what their graduation represented and President Obama provided it through a strategy that created a dichotomy between an approach to life that did not work, and one that actually did work. The definition of the “troubling event” orbits around the core theme of the speech: “that no matter how much you've done, or how successful you've been, there's always more to do, always more to learn, and always more to achieve.”<sup>30</sup> This theme explicitly responds to the controversy generated regarding the honorary degree. This is especially noticeable when he says:

Now, in all seriousness, I come here not to dispute the suggestion that I haven't yet achieved enough in my life. (Laughter.) First of all, Michelle concurs with that assessment. (Laughter.) She has a long list of things that I have not yet done waiting for me when I get home. But more

than that, I come to embrace the notion that I haven't done enough in my life; I heartily concur (...)<sup>31</sup>

In the excerpt above the President implies cooperativeness, because he does not disagree with the University's position in regards to the honorary award. By saying "I heartily concur" the President displayed some level of sincerity and willingness to subject himself to ASU rules. Later in this chapter, this excerpt will become much more significant in the process of creating ideological identification. For now, it is important to notice that through this symbolic phrase Obama puts aside the fact that he holds the highest title in American society. By displaying humbleness and the willingness to embrace the University's decisions, President Obama ingratiated himself both with the audience and the university officials. Assessing the University's decision as fair, and subjecting himself to the university rules, allows President Obama's *ethos* to be enhanced.

Obama also explained that despite their remarkable achievement, the graduates of 2009 would have to face a world in "times of extraordinary difficulty,"<sup>32</sup> devoting the first half of his speech to an explanation of the reasons why American society had reached that point. This explanation attributed the fault, at least in part, to Wall Street and what he calls "Washington" and Obama said: "The economy remains in the midst of a historic recession, the worst we've seen since the Great Depression; the result, in part, of greed and irresponsibility that rippled out from Wall Street and Washington, as we spent beyond our means and failed to make hard choices. (Applause.)"<sup>33</sup>

Although the President claimed that the times of extraordinary difficulty are resultant only "in part" to the greed and irresponsibility of Wall Street and Washington,

the remainder of his explanatory discourse confirms that the fault was actually “all” theirs. For example:

Now, ASU, I want to highlight -- I want to highlight two main problems with that old, tired, me-first approach. First, it distracts you from what's truly important, and may lead you to compromise your values and your principles and commitments. Think about it. It's in chasing titles and status -- in worrying about the next election rather than the national interest and the interests of those who you're supposed to represent -- that politicians so often lose their ways in Washington. (Applause.) They spend time thinking about polls, but not about principle. It was in pursuit of gaudy short-term profits, and the bonuses that came with them, that so many folks lost their way on Wall Street, engaging in extraordinary risks with other people's money.<sup>34</sup>

Obama exempts himself from the “guilt” of leading the country to the economic crisis and also attributes fault, once again, to “Washington” and “Wall Street.” It is important to note that in saying that politicians lose “their” ways in Washington, Obama clearly shows that his political persona does not belong to that group. Obama conveys that he is not responsible for the financial crash, and also shows ethical thinking and consciousness of his role both as a politician and president. Additionally, Obama touches on Republican opposition in Congress without ever mentioning the name of the party. For those who were aware of the constant denial of Obama’s policies and the gridlock in Congress, the message was very clear: politicians are more concerned with polls, and the next election, instead of thinking about principles and lifting the nation out of recession.

Those who were thinking about making sure Obama would be a “one-term” president, were actually neglecting national interest.

Moreover, in this first half of the speech, President Obama explained that it was through individualism that the country reached its financial bottom. He “condemned” self-centered actions, implying that those who sought “get-rich-quick” schemes were the ones with a “poverty of ambition,” and consequently those who would engage in greedy or irresponsible deals. In contrast, the President “promoted” a search for a “bigger purpose,” or in other words, actions that were community-oriented. In that sense, Obama proposes a dichotomous notion of the students’ future reality: they would either follow the path of “greed and irresponsibility” or they would devote themselves to “bigger purposes.”<sup>35</sup>

In developing this dichotomous relationship, President Obama makes strategic use of language in associating words with negative connotation with the path of “greed and irresponsibility” while associating words with positive connotation, or typically well-accepted, with the path of “devotion to some bigger purpose:”

In contrast, the leaders we revere, the businesses and institutions that last -- they are not generally the result of a narrow pursuit of popularity or personal advancement, but of devotion to some bigger purpose -- the preservation of the Union or the determination to lift a country out of a depression; the creation of a quality product, a commitment to your customers, your workers, your shareholders and your community. A commitment to make sure that an institution like ASU is

inclusive and diverse and giving opportunity to all. That's a hallmark of real success. (Applause.)<sup>36</sup>

Those who chose the path of “devotion to some bigger purpose” would be the ones to preserve the Union and lift the country out of depression. But that would not be all; devotion to some bigger purpose was also associated with words such as “quality,” “commitment,” “determination,” “diversity,” “inclusive,” and “opportunity.” These values are likely well-accepted by the audience, regardless of their political background. Meanwhile, Obama’s depiction of the path of “greed and irresponsibility” were associated with words of negative semantic connotation such as “challenges,” “struggles,” “disrupted economy,” and “worries.” According to the President’s explanation, this group of individuals would seek “material possessions” through “ruthless competition” which would make them compromise their values, principles and commitments. And he added:

But the second problem with the old approach to success is that a relentless focus on the outward markers of success can lead to *complacency*. It can make you *lazy*. We too often let the external, the material things, serve as indicators that we're doing well, even though something inside us tells us that we're *not doing our best*; that we're *avoiding that which is hard*, but also necessary; that we're *shrinking from*, rather than rising to, *the challenges* of the age. (Emphasis added)<sup>37</sup>

Thus, in Obama’s view, the greedy approach to success could not get any more delegitimized. It can make people lazy, complacent, and cowardly. Later in the speech, the President also associates this approach to “reckless deals,” “get-rich-quick schemes,”

“shortcuts,” “living on credit,”<sup>38</sup> as reprobable self-centered actions using Bernie Madoff,<sup>39</sup> as a personification that this is an unsuccessful approach to life. On one side of Obama’s dichotomy is an approach to life that is self-centered, or individualistic, associated with all sorts of negative words, represented by Wall Street, politicians in Washington, Millard Fillmore (in contrast with Abraham Lincoln), and Bernie Madoff.

On the other side of Obama’s dichotomy, is the path of devotion to “some bigger purpose” which, as shown earlier, is typically associated with positive words such as “opportunity” (mentioned in three different parts of the speech), “quality,” “commitment,” “discipline,” “equality,” “freedom,” “hard work,” “smart ideas,” “wise investments,” “saving” money, and “innovating.” This approach to life is represented by “the leaders we revere,”<sup>40</sup> “business and institutions that last,”<sup>41</sup> and “Abraham Lincoln.”<sup>42</sup>

In a deeper analysis of this dichotomy, it seems apparent that it is through socially accepted values that Obama was able to convey a message deeply rooted in his liberal perspective. This dichotomous ideological perspective resembles the duality of the American dream, as explained by rhetorical scholar, Walter R. Fisher. In his analysis of the 1972 presidential election, Fisher argued that at that time, the election was more symbolic than simply voting for one candidate or the other. Rather, voting for Richard Nixon or for George McGovern represented identification with the candidate’s interpretation of the American dream.<sup>43</sup> Fisher claimed that each candidate had a different version of the same American dream: one that provided a materialistic perspective of the American dream, and another that provided a moralistic perspective of the dream.<sup>44</sup> As Fisher explained, both perspectives derive from the same myth and their functions “are to

provide meaning, identity, a comprehensive understandable image of the world, and to support the social order.”<sup>45</sup> The materialistic version of the American Dream, Fisher said:

. . . is grounded on the puritan work ethic and relates to the values of effort, persistence, “playing the game,” initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and success. It undergirds competition as the way of determining personal worth, the free enterprise system, and the notion of freedom, defined as the freedom from controls, regulations, or constraints that hinder the individual’s striving for ascendancy in the social economic hierarchy of society. (...) The materialistic myth does not require a regeneration or sacrifice of self; rather, it promises that if one employs one’s energies and talents to the fullest, one will reap the rewards of status, wealth, and power. The materialistic code assumes that one will pursue one’s self-interest, not deny it for the betterment of someone else.<sup>46</sup>

Fisher correlates this version of the myth with Nixon’s presidential campaign, and conceptualizes the moralistic perspective, or the approach chosen by McGovern, saying that:

The moralistic myth is well expressed in basic tenets of the Declaration of Independence: that “all men are created equal,” men “are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,” “among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” governments are instituted to secure these rights, and governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed.” These tenets naturally involve the values of tolerance, charity, compassion, and true regard for the dignity and worth

of each and every individual. In turn these values sustain the continuing endeavors to invest all public institutions with guarantees that all men will be treated equally and, in addition, serve to inspire cooperative efforts to benefit those who are less fortunate than others. Where the materialistic myth involves a concept of freedom that emphasizes the freedom *to do* as one pleases, the moralistic myth tends toward the idea of freedom that stresses the freedom *to be* as one conceives himself.<sup>47</sup>

Translating those concepts to the political context of 2009, the materialistic myth seems to be correlated with the conservative economic philosophy cultivated by most politicians of the Republican Party, whereas the moralistic myth seems to be embedded in the speeches, policies, and ideas from the liberal economic philosophy, therefore cultivated by most members of the Democratic Party. It is important to emphasize that this claim does not take into consideration the conventional meaning of materialism or moralism. Rather, those words are employed in this chapter taking into consideration Fisher's conceptualization of the myths. The translation of Fisher's interpretation of the myths into the political context of 2009 is better represented when analyzing the dichotomy proposed by Obama. As noted previously, Obama delegitimizes ideas commonly approved by conservatives when he disapproves the search for power, wealth, and status. He rejects ideas of self-reliance, individualism, competition and materialism saying:

(...) That's the message that's sent each and every day, or has been in our culture for far too long -- that through material possessions, through

a ruthless competition pursued only on your own behalf -- that's how you will measure success.

Now, you can take that road -- and it may work for some. But at this critical juncture in our nation's history, at this difficult time, let me suggest that such an approach won't get you where you want to go; (...)<sup>48</sup>

The passage above seems to respond almost word-by-word to Fisher's definition of the materialistic myth. Instead, Obama supports ideas commonly associated with liberal perspectives, or the moralistic myth, when he stimulates actions that would improve society in its collective aspect, such as the "preservation of the Union."<sup>49</sup>

One cannot be naïve in thinking that the President would simply engage in delegitimizing the materialistic version of the American dream without offering in return an alternative version of the dream. It is imperative to take into consideration that his audience was potentially divided among those who would identify with the materialistic myth (or conservative philosophy), and those who would identify with the moralistic myth (or liberal philosophy). Thus, while delegitimizing the materialistic myth, the President needed to provide compelling understanding through his ideological prism and make sure that the ideas conveyed in his speech would be absorbed by his audience in the form of a motivational address. In order to do so, the President appealed to generally accepted values to convey an ideologically biased message. This strategy of associating one version of the American Dream with words of positive connotation seems to function as a "vessel," where the acceptable values function as a vehicle to transport a potentially non-acceptable message.

It is also from his ideological prism that the President proceeded to shape community towards the path he found best. But before this analysis moves on to the “shaping community” portion of the speech, it is important to consider that when Condit defined the functional pairs of the epideictic genre, she was not defining *sine qua non* conditions for epideictic addresses. Rather, the process of understanding (or defining) the troubling event, shaping community, and display of leadership might overlap with one another, and in certain occasions, some of those elements might even be present in a particular speech.

As Condit puts it: “An epideictic speech will feature one or a combination of these functional pairs, but rarely will be completely devoid of any of the pairs.”<sup>50</sup> For instance, in the second half of the speech, President Obama changes the predominant verbal tense from past to present and future. In this section he clearly shapes community in light of the events, projecting the expectations of how 2009 graduates are expected to act after the event is over. But at the same time, the tone chosen by the President, as well as the attribution of power by the mere fact that ASU community had chosen him to define which path to follow, allows Obama to display leadership skills and improve his *ethos*, simultaneously fulfilling two functions of the epideictic genre.

As Condit explained: “In giving a speaker the right to shape the definition of the community, the audience gives the speaker the right to select certain values, stories, and persons from the shared heritage and to promote them over others.”<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, in giving the speaker the power to select and promote values, the community is subjected to a position of supposed “willingness” to accept the message delivered by the leader. In part, that might be one of the reasons why presidential commencement addresses foster

so much controversy, because—to some extent—the community is subjecting themselves to the views of the speaker. Still, in the process of giving meaning to ASU graduation and giving shape to “what the community will come to be in the face of the new event,”<sup>52</sup> Obama mixes the function of knitting community with characteristics typically observed in deliberative address.

According to the Aristotelian definition of the deliberative genre, a speech of that kind should predominantly focus on the future time frame, demonstrate the expediency or in expediency of a certain action, and exhort the audience to action. In this commencement address, however, President Obama implies that the “need” for action is already known by the audience, and “invites” the audience to think for themselves in regards to what action would be most expedient. Although the President “invites” the audience members to choose the best plan for the future, it is important to remind ourselves that one of the two options was delegitimized throughout the speech. The audience, thus, should feel compelled to “choose” the plan he supports. Not coincidentally, the President invites the audience to think about themes that resonate with his agenda (italicized here for easier visualization):

And as a nation, we'll need a fundamental change of perspective and attitude. It's clear that we need to build a new foundation -- a stronger foundation -- for our economy and our prosperity, rethinking *how we grow our economy, how we use energy, how we educate our children, how we care for our sick, how we treat our environment.*<sup>53</sup>

Following this excerpt the President provided details of his strategy to accomplish the goal of “building a new foundation.” But despite those deliberative traces, the speech still

preserves predominance of epideictic characteristics. A contemporary presidential speech is permeated with deliberative themes, and it certainly induces the audience to support the president's agenda. This affirmation is supported by evidence gathered when comparing a presidential commencement address, and a commencement address delivered by individuals who do not belong to the executive branch. For example, in analyzing a commencement addresses delivered at the 2005 graduation ceremony at Stanford University and at the 2011 graduation ceremony at Barnard College, I noticed that the content of the speeches were considerably different from the sort of content found in Obama's address in Arizona.

Steve Jobs, co-founder, CEO, and chairman of Apple Inc., delivered a commencement address to the class of 2005 at Stanford, while Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook Chief Operating Officer, delivered the speech to the class of 2011 at Barnard. Both technological leaders delivered speeches that fulfilled all the functions of an epideictic address: both displayed leadership, provided understanding through various narratives and stories; and shaped community. The content of their messages, however, was noticeably distinguished from the content observed in presidential commencement addresses. Steve Jobs structured his speech using three stories as the backbone of his main message, while Sheryl Sandberg structured her speech intertwining her personal experiences with data obtained from a number of studies. Jobs' speech contained absolutely no reference to the political realm, and although Sandberg's message was explicitly directed toward the goal of inspiring women to fight for gender equality, her message has no specific political content or reference to partisanship. This kind of

observation reinforces the assertion made in the first chapter that no presidential address is apolitical, not even in a graduation ceremony.

Obama proceeded to shape a sense of community that was consistent with the path that he carefully depicted in the first half of the speech: the path of dedication to some bigger purpose. So the language seen in the first half of the speech is recurrent:

And Class of 2009 that's why we're going to need your help. We need young people like you to step up. We need your daring, we need your enthusiasm and your energy, we need your imagination.

And let me be clear, when I say "young," I'm not just referring to the date of your birth certificate. I'm talking about an approach to life -- a *quality* of mind and *quality* of heart; a willingness to follow your *passions*, *regardless of whether they lead to fortune and fame*; a willingness to question conventional wisdom and rethink old dogmas; a *lack of regard for all the traditional markers of status and prestige* -- and a *commitment* instead to doing what's meaningful to you, what helps others, what makes a difference in this world. (Applause.) (Emphasis added)<sup>54</sup>

Indirectly, the President is creating a sense of ideological identification with the audience, that seems to advance his motto: it's time for change. But as I mentioned before, Obama's commencement address would only satisfy the rhetorical presidency paradigm if the campaign message was absorbed by the audience. This means that through various rhetorical strategies, the President was expected to make sure that the audience would not promptly reject his message or his political persona. With that in mind, Louis Althusser's definition of ideology becomes relevant to this project. Althusser

understood that ideology was, to some extent, a “consciousness” that one feels as to what is right, truthful, and ideal. Thus, when the process of ideological identification happens, a member of the audience recognizes the content of the speaker’s message as “right.”<sup>55</sup>

In the context of the speech under analysis, it is important to consider that all individuals who attended the commencement ceremony at ASU in May 2009 are inherently constituted by ideology, or those ideas that allow them to distinguish what sounds right, or wrong, truthful, or untruthful. In accordance with this ideology, each individual would feel more or less prone to recognizing either the materialistic or moralistic version of the American dream as what seems right. Therefore, in deciding whether to embrace the materialistic or moralistic myth of the American dream, individuals would chose to embrace one of the contemporary political philosophies: liberal (moralistic) or conservative (materialistic).

Thus, whatever message Obama delivered would be filtered through their ideological web of values, principles and beliefs, and only those who recognized that the message was directed towards them would effectively be identified with the message. Therefore, Obama had to walk a rhetorical tightrope because he was addressing a potential ideologically divided audience. The speaker could not just focus on conservative or liberal views. Thus, Obama had the challenge of appealing to both sides of the ideological spectrum while at the same time reinforcing his call for “change.”

In order to demonstrate the path of change and “dedication to some bigger purpose,” Obama offers the audience multiple historical examples:

That's the spirit that led a band of patriots not much older than most of you to take on an empire, to start this experiment in democracy we

call America. It's what drove young pioneers west, to Arizona and beyond; it's what drove young women to reach for the ballot; what inspired a 30 year-old escaped slave to run an underground railroad to freedom -- (applause) -- what inspired a young man named Cesar to go out and help farm workers; what inspired a 26 year-old preacher to lead a bus boycott for justice. It's what led firefighters and police officers in the prime of their lives up the stairs of those burning towers; and young people across this country to drop what they were doing and come to the aid of a flooded New Orleans. It's what led two guys in a garage -- named Hewlett and Packard -- to form a company that would change the way we live and work; what led scientists in laboratories, and novelists in coffee shops to labor in obscurity until they finally succeeded in changing the way we see the world.<sup>56</sup>

The examples would certainly resonate with any member of the audience. All possible sub-groups of the audience would feel that the message was directed toward them. For example, in general, all Americans would be inspired by the example of the settlers, but specific subgroups of the audience would also feel represented in the message: women would be inspired by the suffragists; African-Americans by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; Hispanics by Cesar Chavez; and so on. Every sentence of this passage includes individuals from all paths of life that were dedicated to “some bigger purpose.” With this strategy, Obama united the subjects into a community that would succeed in “changing the world.”

This analysis reveals that in Obama's commencement address at ASU, the ideology of interdependence is embedded in the president's speech and advanced through values with which the audience could feel identified. Audience members are compelled to identify themselves with the American Dream, thus the president's ideology of interdependence is advanced in the ceremonial address. Taking this assertion into consideration, two excerpts analyzed in this chapter become especially symbolic: when the president said that he embraced the decision of ASU officials not to give award him the Honorary Degree; and the excerpt when he implicitly refers to King, suffragists, and others.

When President Obama says "I come to embrace the notion that I haven't done enough in my life; I heartily concur; I come to affirm that one's title, even a title like President of the United States, says very little about how well one's life has been led,"<sup>57</sup> he subjects himself to the university's rules thus acknowledging that he is the mirror image of the audience members. Simultaneously, the president mirrors the characteristics of interdependence as an ideology because he strips himself from his title in order to embrace the moralistic notion that "all men will be treated equally."<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, this same excerpt also allows the President to improve his *ethos* by demonstrating goodwill. It is interesting to notice that the more the President's *ethos* is enhanced during the speech, the more individuals are likely to comply with the President's message, because their assessment of the President's *ethos* is at the same time their judgment of the righteousness of the President's message.

In the second excerpt, the President used multiple examples for the audience members to identify themselves with successful trajectories of remarkable individuals

who complied with the ideology of interdependence in American history. After evoking those who changed the course of history, the President concluded that:

That's the great American story: young people just like you, following their passions, determined to meet the times on their own terms. They weren't doing it for the money. Their titles weren't fancy -- ex-slave, minister, student, citizen. A whole bunch of them didn't get honorary degrees. (Laughter and applause.) But they changed the course of history -- and so can you ASU, so can you Class of 2009. (Applause.) So can you.<sup>59</sup>

With these final words, the President invited the audience to identify with the moralistic version of the American Dream (or interdependence) by implying that those who recognized themselves in it would eventually change the course of history.

### ***Implications of the findings to the epideictic genre***

In this chapter, the commencement address delivered by President Obama at Arizona State University served as a case study to expand the current theories of the epideictic genre. The analysis suggests that the rhetorical presidency altered the expectations of a presidential epideictic address. I pointed out the existence of deliberative traces in the commencement address delivered at ASU, and concluded that those traces were consistent with the requirements of the rhetorical presidency paradigm.

In attempt to enhance the President's *ethos*, the speech adopted a strategy that used generally accepted values to deliver a potential controversial message. The dichotomy between the approaches to life offered in Obama's speech symbolized the dual perception of the American Dream, and most likely the two most common ideological

ends of modern American politics: conservatism and liberalism. The President delegitimized the materialistic version of the dream, therefore delegitimizing –to some extent—conservatism, and legitimized the moralistic version of the dream, therefore legitimizing liberalism.

The most important finding of this chapter, however, resulted from the analysis of the strategic use of language. Semantic association with negative and positive words allowed Obama to circumvent rhetorical problems and to fulfill the expectations of a commencement address while also considering the demands of a rhetorical presidency. It was through ideological alignment that Obama was able to delegitimize opposition, and project to the audience that the “right” approach to life was the one that resonated with his agenda. This finding suggests that although President Obama defined the event and shaped a sense of community as explained by Condit, the predominant rhetorical function of the commencement address was to enhance the president’s ethos by the display of leadership.

Perhaps the notion provided by Agnew in the beginning of this chapter is a very utopic perspective on the importance of commencement addresses to public discussion. The opportunity for public discussion could only happen if a president was not one of the participants of the dialogue. In times of rhetorical presidencies, the dialogue becomes a “establishment” monologue disguised as an invitation to public discussion. The ideas supporting the President’s speech were long before discussed and arranged. The commencement address does not belong the students; it belongs to the President and his version of the American dream.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Sewel Chan, “Financial Crisis Was Avoidable, Inquiry Finds,” *The New York Times*, January 25, 2011, accessed August 6, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/26/business/economy/26inquiry.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Thomas, Keith Hennessey, and Douglas Holtz-Eakin, “What Caused The Financial Crisis?,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 27, 2011, accessed August 6, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704698004576104500524998280.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Isidore, “The Great Recession,” *CNNMoney.com*, March 25, 2013, accessed March 7, 2013, [http://money.cnn.com/2009/03/25/news/economy/depression\\_comparisons/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2009/03/25/news/economy/depression_comparisons/index.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Les Christie, “Foreclosures up a Record 81% in 2008,” *CNNMoney.com*, January 15, 2009, accessed March 7, 2013, [http://money.cnn.com/2009/01/15/real\\_estate/millions\\_in\\_foreclosure/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2009/01/15/real_estate/millions_in_foreclosure/index.htm).

<sup>5</sup> David Goldman, “Worst year for jobs since '45,” *CNNMoney.com*, January 9, 2009, accessed March 7, 2013, [http://money.cnn.com/2009/01/09/news/economy/jobs\\_december/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2009/01/09/news/economy/jobs_december/index.htm).

<sup>6</sup> This unemployment rate refers to January of 2009. Data obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey,” accessed March 7, 2013, <http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>.

<sup>7</sup> See Ben Rooney, “Fed: Economy Continues to Sour,” *CNNMoney.com*, January 14, 2009, accessed March 7, 2013, [http://money.cnn.com/2009/01/14/news/economy/beige\\_book/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2009/01/14/news/economy/beige_book/index.htm); and Chris Isidore, “Get ready for more pain ahead,” *CNNMoney.com*,

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January 9, 2009, accessed March 7, 2013, [http://money.cnn.com/2009/01/09/news/economy/pain\\_ahead/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2009/01/09/news/economy/pain_ahead/index.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Parija B. Kavilanz, “Don't wait around for new flu vaccine,” *CNNMoney.com*, April 30, 2009, accessed March 7, 2013, [http://money.cnn.com/2009/04/30/news/international/swineflu\\_vaccination/index.htm?postversion=2009043018](http://money.cnn.com/2009/04/30/news/international/swineflu_vaccination/index.htm?postversion=2009043018).

<sup>9</sup> Jeanne Sahadi, “Obama will slice budget by \$17 billion,” *CNNMoney.com*, May 6, 2009, accessed March 7, 2013, [http://money.cnn.com/2009/05/06/news/economy/obama\\_budget\\_cuts/index.htm?postversion=2009050620](http://money.cnn.com/2009/05/06/news/economy/obama_budget_cuts/index.htm?postversion=2009050620).

<sup>10</sup> Lois Agnew, “‘The Day Belong to the Students:’ Expanding Epideictic’s Civic Function,” *Rhetoric Review* 27 (2008): 153.

<sup>11</sup> Agnew, 155.

<sup>12</sup> James R. Andrews, Michael C. Leff, and Robert Terrill, *Reading Rhetorical Texts: An Introduction to Criticism*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998): 27.

<sup>13</sup> Karlyn Khors Campbell and Thomas R. Burkholder, *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997): 50.

<sup>14</sup> “President Obama Speak at ASU Commencement,” last modified on March 20, 2009, [https://asunews.asu.edu/20090320\\_obama](https://asunews.asu.edu/20090320_obama).

<sup>15</sup> “President Map,” *The New York Times*, last modified on November 29, 2012, <http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/results/president>.

<sup>16</sup> Marshall J. Vest, “Recession is Over: Let Recovery Begin!,” *The University of Arizona: Economic and Business Research Center*, March 1, 2010, accessed February 27, 2013, [http://azeconomy.eller.arizona.edu/AZE10Q1/Recession\\_Is\\_Over.aspx](http://azeconomy.eller.arizona.edu/AZE10Q1/Recession_Is_Over.aspx).

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<sup>17</sup> Laura Litvan, “Republicans’ McConnell Seeks to Say Yes to Obama on Something,” *Bloomberg*, March 11, 2009, accessed January 8, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=washingtonstory&sid=a9yGBjyI4dQ#>.

<sup>18</sup> Litvan, “Republicans’ McConnell Seeks to Say Yes to Obama on Something.”

<sup>19</sup> Ryan Grim, “Stimulus Package Passes with Zero Republican Support,” *The Huffington Post*, February 28, 2009, accessed January 8, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/01/28/obama-im-confident-stimul\\_n\\_161654.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/01/28/obama-im-confident-stimul_n_161654.html).

<sup>20</sup> Litvan, “Republicans’ McConnell Seeks to Say Yes to Obama on Something.”

<sup>21</sup> Michael A. Memoli, “Mitch McConnell's Remarks on 2012 Draw White House Ire,” *The Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 2010, accessed January 7, 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/oct/27/news/la-pn-obama-mcconnell-20101027>.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Roff, “Gridlock and Indecision Spur Polling Shift from Obama to Republicans,” *U.S. News*, November 12, 2009, accessed February 27, 2013, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/peter-roff/2009/11/12/gridlock-and-indecision-spur-polling-shift-from-obama-to-republicans>.

<sup>23</sup> “Gallup Daily: Obama Job Approval,” last modified January 9, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/113980/gallup-daily-obama-job-approval.aspx>

<sup>24</sup> This claim is made after investigation of the honorary nomination process of the following universities: University of Southern California (<http://www.usc.edu/admin/provostoffice/honorarydegrees/overview.html>); State University of New York ([http://www.suny.edu/sunypp/documents.cfm?doc\\_id=150](http://www.suny.edu/sunypp/documents.cfm?doc_id=150)); Indiana University ([http://www.iu.edu/~ceremony/medals/honorary\\_degrees.shtml](http://www.iu.edu/~ceremony/medals/honorary_degrees.shtml)); University of Maryland (<http://www.usmh.usmd.edu/regents/bylaws/SectionIII/III300.html>); University of

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Nevada Las Vegas (<http://www.unlv.edu/assets/provost/policies-forms/honorary-degrees-procedure.pdf>); Pennsylvania State University (<http://www.psu.edu/ur/poole/honorary.html>).

<sup>25</sup> “State University of New York: Documents” accessed March 3, 2013, [http://www.suny.edu/sunypp/documents.cfm?doc\\_id=150](http://www.suny.edu/sunypp/documents.cfm?doc_id=150).

<sup>26</sup> “Arizona State University: University Commencement,” accessed March 3, 2013, <https://graduation.asu.edu/honorary>.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Baker, “Work is Never Done, Obama Tells Class,” *The New York Times*, May 13, 2009. Accessed June 21, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/14/us/politics/14obama.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Celeste Michelle Condit, “The Functions of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar,” *Communication Quarterly* 33 (1985): 284-299.

<sup>29</sup> Condit, 288.

<sup>30</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks By The President At Arizona State University Commencement,” May 13, 2009, accessed May 25, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/video/President-Obama-Arizona-State-Commencement/#transcript>, para. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Obama, para. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Obama, para. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Obama, para. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Obama, para. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Obama, para. 12.

<sup>36</sup> Obama, para. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Obama, para. 14.

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<sup>38</sup> Obama, para. 18.

<sup>39</sup> Bernie Madoff was a businessman who committed “the largest, longest and most widespread Ponzi on the case, see: Diana B. Henriques, “Madoff Is Sentenced to 150 Years for Ponzi Scheme,” *The New York Times*, June 29, 2009, accessed August 8, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/30/business/30madoff.html?\\_r=1&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/30/business/30madoff.html?_r=1&hp).

<sup>40</sup> Obama, para. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Obama, para. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Obama, para. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Walter R. Fisher, “Reaffirmation and Subversion of the American Dream,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 160-167.

<sup>44</sup> It is important to notice that although Fisher uses the words “materialism” and “moralism,” his theory of the myths of the American Dream do not imply the conventional association to consumerism, or morality. The denomination adopted by Fisher must be understood precisely as he conceptualizes those terms. The chapter provides those definitions in the subsequent pages and eventually incorporates those terms to the analysis.

<sup>45</sup> Fisher, 161.

<sup>46</sup> Fisher, 161.

<sup>47</sup> Fisher, 161-162.

<sup>48</sup> Obama, paragraphs 9-10.

<sup>49</sup> Obama, para. 12.

<sup>50</sup> Condit, 288.

<sup>51</sup> Condit, 289.

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<sup>52</sup> Condit, 289.

<sup>53</sup> Obama, para. 21.

<sup>54</sup> Obama, paragraphs 22-23.

<sup>55</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press: 1972), 174.

<sup>56</sup> Obama, para. 24

<sup>57</sup> Obama, para. 4.

<sup>58</sup> Fisher, 161.

<sup>59</sup> Obama, para. 25.

## CHAPTER 3

### UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

*“We’re fine, everybody. We’re following Brennan’s adage that we don’t do things easily. (Laughter.) We’re not going to shy away from things that are uncomfortable sometimes. (Applause.)”<sup>1</sup>*

With these words, President Barack Obama responded to the first disruptive shout during the commencement address he delivered at the University of Notre Dame only five days after the speech at Arizona State University. The immediate context had shifted drastically during those five days, and the President’s response to the new set of challenges that arose from that circumstance also changed accordingly.

On May 17, 2009, President Obama delivered the commencement address at the University of Notre Dame. The controversy surrounding the President’s selection to speak at the graduation ceremony symbolizes a moment in which the multiple opinions in the public arena had to be taken into consideration.<sup>2</sup> The controversy regarding the President’s choice to be the commencement speaker was not restricted to the graduates, or even to the Notre Dame community; Catholic community and locals from the South Bend area also got involved in the debate. Some of those groups and individuals were in favor of choosing Obama to be the commencement speaker, while others were against due to their disagreement with the President’s position on key issues such as abortion. Compared to this controversy, the rhetorical problems the President encountered at Arizona State University seem minimal.

As mentioned in Chapter One, President Obama's opinion on abortion clashed intensely with the Catholic tradition of Notre Dame. For this reason, part of the local community strongly supported the university's choice of Obama to be the commencement speaker, while another part strongly opposed it. As a result, a series of protests from students and members of the local Catholic community brought attention to the event. Even when the President finally delivered his speech, the environment was still much heated by the dissatisfaction of those who opposed the choice of commencement speaker. On this occasion, Obama was not just speaking to a potential ideologically divided audience, as he did in Arizona State University; he was speaking to a community divided in terms of their disposition towards the speaker. In addition to this immediate challenge, the rhetorical problems detailed in the previous chapter—such as the eminence of midterm election, gridlock in Congress, economic recession, and high unemployment rates—were recurrent, requiring the President to use complex rhetorical strategies in order to overcome all those challenges while addressing the commencement address at Notre Dame.

In order to analyze this particular rhetorical situation in depth, this chapter is divided in three sections: the first examines the context of the speech, providing details regarding the local controversy, and reviewing the rhetorical problems faced in the broad context of the speech; the second focuses on the multiple disruptions from the audience and Obama's responses to those disruptions; and a final section examines the rhetorical strategies, both verbal and non-verbal, that Obama used in order to accomplish all the expectations of that commencement address. This last section explains that the prophetic

tradition is used, associated with non-verbal elements such as volume of voice, in order to minimize the impact of the local controversy, and respond to interruptions.

### ***Context of the commencement speech delivered at the University of Notre Dame***

Many of the rhetorical problems Obama faced at Arizona State University were also at issue when he spoke five days later at the University of Notre Dame. As mentioned in chapter two, Republican opposition in Congress led to impasses and challenged the President's image of "problem-solver."<sup>3</sup> This threat to the President's *ethos* generated concerns in regards to the outcome of the midterm election. It was crucial for Obama to keep Democratic majorities in both houses in order to make the process of passing bills a more executable process. The idea of "getting things done" was crucial for the viability of his future reelection campaign. Thus, responding to this rhetorical challenge while enhancing his *ethos* was expedient. When delivering his commencement address at Notre Dame, Obama still faced the issues with his falling approval rates, and the increasing pressure to "say something" in order to "minister the moods and emotions of the populace"<sup>4</sup> were all present once again. In addition, this time the President was delivering the speech to an audience that had gone through intense debates regarding his presence as the commencement speaker.

Ronald C. Arnett analyzed print media coverage of the debate regarding Obama's speech from March 22 to May 17 in the *South Bend Tribune*, *The Observer*, and *Today's Catholic*, representing respectively the South Bend community, the Notre Dame community, and the Catholic community. His analysis reveals valuable details about the context in which the speech took place and explains the reaction of the community from

the day the University announced that Obama would be “the sixth presidential speaker to give an address at Notre Dame”<sup>5</sup> until the day of the speech. This chapter uses some of the publications he analyzed in his research in the process of composing the immediate context.

After March 22, the day *The Observer* announced that President Obama would be the commencement speaker, a wave of protests started to take place in the community. The controversy started on March 23, when *The Observer* reported the opinion both of students who supported the President’s speech, and of those who did not: The Notre Dame Right to Life Club denounced the choice of the speaker, while the Notre Dame College Democrats celebrated it.<sup>6</sup> But the controversy grew out of the boundaries of Notre Dame, and reached the Catholic community. On that same day, the Cardinal Newman Society, a group “dedicated to renewing and strengthening Catholic identity at America’s 224 Catholic college and universities”<sup>7</sup> created the [www.NotreDameScandal.com](http://www.NotreDameScandal.com) website. The website hosted an online petition intended to be delivered to Reverend John I. Jenkins, the University President, reading: “It is an outrage and a scandal that ‘Our Lady’s University,’ one of the premier Catholic universities in the United States, would bestow such an honor on President Obama given his clear support for policies and laws that directly contradict fundamental Catholic teachings on life and marriage.”<sup>8</sup> The organization was protesting against the university’s choice of Obama as commencement speaker, because by honoring him the University of Notre Dame would violate the United States Conference of Catholic Bishop's (USCCB) 2004 statement which stipulated that “The Catholic community and Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They

should not be given awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions.”<sup>9</sup>

Father Jenkins responded to the controversy, asserting that Notre Dame’s invitation was in accordance with the USCCB because the honorary degree conferred to the President was not intending to “condone or endorse his position on specific issues regarding life.”<sup>10</sup> Jenkins explained that “Presidents from both parties have come to Notre Dame for decades to speak to graduates about our nation and our world. They’ve given important addresses on international affairs, human rights, service, and we’re delighted that President Obama is continuing that tradition.”<sup>11</sup> And the Father also added that President Obama was “an inspiring leader who [had] taken leadership of the country facing many challenges: two wars, a really troubled economy, he has issues with health care, immigration, education reform, and he has addressed those with intelligence, courage and honesty.” Furthermore, Jenkins claimed: “it’s a special feature for us that we will hear from the first African American president here at Notre Dame, a person who has spoken eloquently and powerfully about race. (...) Racial prejudice is a deep wound in America and President Obama has been a healer, so we honor him for those reasons.”<sup>12</sup>

The Catholic community, however, was still not satisfied with Father Jenkins’ justification, and continued to maintain that President Obama’s honorary degree was in disagreement with the USCCB. Bishop John M. D’Arcy, the representative of the Fort Wayne-South Bend Catholic Diocese, announced on March 25 that he would not attend the commencement ceremony.<sup>13</sup> Intense public discussion was carried on between D’Arcy and Jenkins, the first affirming that a Catholic university should not honor an individual whose values were not in accordance with Catholic Church,<sup>14</sup> and the second

affirming that the invitation did not endorse the President's position on issues regarding life.<sup>15</sup> The controversy obviously grew from the ongoing, national pro-choice versus pro-life debate, but eventually other nuances of controversy began to emerge, including Obama's support for stem cell research, the President's political affiliation, and even charges that the opposition was based on racism rather than the abortion issue.<sup>16</sup>

Rallies were held, websites were created, petitions were signed, and publications reported daily on public discussion regarding the university's choice of Obama to be the commencement speaker. Students, faculty members, boards, political parties, and even the Catholic community were all divided and no agreement seemed to be reached in the debate. On May 1, the *South Bend Tribune* reported that Mary Ann Glendon, a Harvard law professor had declined the Notre Dame's Laetare award,<sup>17</sup> presented annually to an American Catholic layperson in recognition of "outstanding service to the church and society. It is considered the oldest and most prestigious award for American Catholics."<sup>18</sup> Glendon was to receive this medal because of her exceptional dedication to the Catholic community; the professor had served as an U.S. ambassador to the Vatican from 2007 until 2009. She was the first person to accept the medal, and later decline it.<sup>19</sup> Also, it would be the first time since 1883 that the medal would not be given, and she justified her decision saying that she "did not oppose Obama as a speaker; her opposition came from Notre Dame offering an honorary degree to a person at odds with basic precepts of the Church."<sup>20</sup>

Despite the intense debates and protests, Obama had been mostly supported during that period. *The Observer* stated that "73 to 74 percent of the letters to the editor were in favor of Obama"<sup>21</sup> and that "there was far more support for Obama than

opposition as ‘the College Democrats, The N.A.A.C.P., the Black Students Association, La Alianza, the First Class Steppers, and the Hispanic alumni group MEChA ha[d] given their support to the petition drive’<sup>22</sup> that was organized in order to express support to the University’s invitation of President Obama to be the commencement speaker.<sup>23</sup>

This certainly did not mean that all group members were in unison; for instance, the local Democratic Party released a statement saying that they did not have a uniform position about abortion.<sup>24</sup> Still, in general, as noticed by Jack Colwell at the *South Bend Tribune*, “97 percent of seniors, the graduates, supported having Obama”<sup>25</sup> and he suggested that “abortion was not the only issue; the worst phone calls to Notre Dame were racial in nature.”<sup>26</sup> The controversy, then, was mostly among those who were not graduating, and because the themes led people to such extreme positions, the debate became extremely heated.

Those turbulent moments, however, were not unusual at Notre Dame. Jenn Metz wrote for *The Observer* saying that Obama would be the ninth president “to receive an honorary degree from Notre Dame and [reminded] the readers that controversy [was] not new to such moments at Notre Dame.”<sup>27</sup> From 1844 until the first decade of the twentieth century, commencement speakers at Notre Dame were predominately religious figures, such as bishops and priests. After 1910, however, Notre Dame started a tradition of inviting politicians, such as governors, senators, to be their commencement speakers, but it was only in 1960 that a President of the United States would deliver a commencement address at that institution.<sup>28</sup>

It all started with President Dwight D. Eisenhower, using the occasion to convey his political stance on social welfare: “We do not want governmental programs which,

advanced, often falsely, in the guise of promoting the general welfare destroy in the individual those priceless qualities of self-dependence, self-confidence, and a readiness to risk his judgment against the trends of the crowd.”<sup>29</sup> Although no report was found that Eisenhower’s speech generated controversy, it is important to notice that the content was considerably political and that his message was far removed from the common expectations of a commencement address.

President Jimmy Carter delivered a commencement address in 1977 announcing that the government would shift the focus from anti-communist endeavors to supporting human rights.<sup>30</sup> It is important to notice that when Carter delivered his address at Notre Dame, he had just publically supported the Supreme Court Ruling (Roe vs. Wade) and there is no report of anything similar to the controversy regarding Obama’s address.<sup>31</sup>

Ronald Reagan, in 1981, delivered a commencement address that focused on the idea of a “smaller government,” and transcending Communism.<sup>32</sup> That was his first public appearance since an assassination attempt in March 1981. Nevertheless, Reagan’s invitation to be the commencement speaker generated great controversy, growing from what some perceived as the clash between the values “on social justice in Catholic moral teaching”<sup>33</sup> and Reagan’s policies. Some Notre Dame students protested against Reagan’s speech while others supported him.

In 1992, President George H. W. Bush spoke to the Notre Dame graduates despite their concerns regarding the speaker. This time, the controversy regarded the fact that Bush was not only President but that he was also seeking reelection. Some feared that the speech could become overly political. Eventually, according to Jenn Metz, the speech only referred to “family values and community service.”<sup>34</sup>

Nine years later, his son, President George W. Bush also delivered a commencement address at the University of Notre Dame. As expected, the speech was not exempt from the traditional controversy regarding the clash between the President and the University's Catholic values. The President was criticized due to "his stance on capital punishment, labor, the environment and the military"<sup>35</sup> which seemed to be at odds with Catholic moral values. Eventually, the President delivered his commencement address and focused the speech on reporting the country's commitment to Notre Dame. The President also emphasized that as a Catholic university, Notre Dame "carries forward a great tradition of social teaching. It calls on all of us, Catholic and non-Catholic, to honor family, to protect life in all its stages, to serve and uplift the poor. This university is more than a community of scholars, it is a community of conscience."<sup>36</sup>

Thus, with the exception of Dwight Eisenhower and Jimmy Carter, all four American presidents were received with controversy, protest, and debate regarding their political personas, policies, and partisanship. Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama seem to have used the Notre Dame occasion for political purposes, which is consistent with the practices of the rhetorical presidency. As mentioned in the first chapter, the rhetorical presidency paradigm recognizes that modern presidents remain in a perpetual campaign process; therefore, commencement addresses should also expect the President to deliver a political message in the ceremonial occasion.<sup>37</sup>

It is important to notice that on May 13, the Notre Dame President, Father Jenkins, released a note confirming President Obama's address and used Father Theodore

Hesburgh's metaphor, characterizing Notre Dame "both a lighthouse and a crossroads."<sup>38</sup>

He explained that:

As a lighthouse, we strive to stand apart and be different, illuminating issues with the moral and spiritual wisdom of the Catholic tradition. Yet, we must also be a crossroads through which pass people of many different perspectives, backgrounds, faiths and cultures. At this crossroads, we must be a place where people of good will are received with charity, are able to speak, be heard, and engage in responsible and reasoned dialogue.<sup>39</sup>

As a result, the ceremony was carried out as planned, despite the controversy due to Obama's presence. An alternative ceremony was held by about 20 graduate students who were not comfortable with the commencement speaker.

### ***Rhetorical interruptions***

After Father Jenkins' introductory speech, President Obama was received with an impressively long standing ovation. The video recording<sup>40</sup> of the event reveals that Obama began the speech and about three minutes later, a member of the audience shouted: "Abortion is murder! Stop killing children!"<sup>41</sup> The President tried to continue his speech, but the audience booed the protester prompting Obama to say: "It's ok! We're fine, everybody." But about half of the students graduating stood up and clapping hands chanted: "We are ND! We are ND!"<sup>42</sup> and "Yes, we can! Yes, we can!"<sup>43</sup>

The President then looked at Brennan Bollman, the graduating Valedictorian who delivered her speech minutes before the President delivered his, and pointing at her said: "We're following Brennan's adage that we don't do things easily. (Laughter.) We're not

going to shy away from things that are uncomfortable sometimes. (Applause.)”<sup>44</sup> The protesters were then quiet for four more minutes, but attempted to disrupt the speech again when President Obama said: “Your generation must decide how to save God’s creation from a changing climate that threatens to destroy it. Your generation must seek peace at a time when there are those who will stop at nothing to do us harm, and when weapons in the hands of a few can destroy the many.”<sup>45</sup> On the video, the protester(s) shouts were incomprehensible but the audience was again distracted from the speaker and both the audience and the speaker looked toward the shouter(s).

As the second disruption began, the President did not pause but instead looked directly at the protestors and with a stern facial expression added: “And we must find a way to reconcile our ever-shrinking world with its ever-growing diversity -- diversity of thought, diversity of culture, and diversity of belief.”<sup>46</sup> The voices of the protesters faded and Obama continued, focusing on defining the troubling event of graduating in 2009.

As mentioned in the first chapter, Celeste Condit explains that ceremonial, or epideictic, speeches are sought when the community is going through a troubling or confusing event.<sup>47</sup> President Obama, thus, was elected by the community to define the event of graduating in 2009 “in terms of the audience’s key values and beliefs.”<sup>48</sup>

Using a strategy similar to the one used in ASU, the President once again attempted to delegitimize the materialistic perspective. There were no further interruptions until Obama said:

(...) And yet, one of the vexing things for those of us interested in promoting greater understanding and cooperation among people is the discovery that even bringing together persons of good will, bringing

together men and women of principle and purpose -- even accomplishing that can be difficult.

The soldier and the lawyer may both love this country with equal passion, and yet reach very different conclusions on the specific steps needed to protect us from harm. The gay activist and the evangelical pastor may both deplore the ravages of HIV/AIDS, but find themselves unable to bridge the cultural divide that might unite their efforts. Those who speak out against stem cell research may be rooted in an admirable conviction about the sacredness of life, but so are the parents of a child with juvenile diabetes who are convinced that their son's or daughter's hardships can be relieved. (Applause.)

The question, then -- the question then is how do we work through these conflicts?<sup>49</sup>

The video recording of the speech reveals that at least some of the graduates did not seem at all pleased by the passage above, but most importantly, protesting voices were again heard as soon as the crowd finished applauding the President. Looking at the protesters, President Obama, again with stern facial expression, said: "How does each of us remain firm in our principles, and fight for what we consider right, without, as Father John said, demonetizing [*sic*] those with just as strongly held convictions on the other side?"<sup>50</sup>

After those three disruptions, the audience became significantly less disruptive. The President provided a lengthy response to the controversy regarding abortion and his invitation to be the commencement speaker saying: "And I want to join him and Father

John in saying how inspired I am by the maturity and responsibility with which this class has approached the debate surrounding today's ceremony. You are an example of what Notre Dame is about."<sup>51</sup> The audience replied to these statements with a lengthy standing ovation.

That ovation suggests that Obama's verbal and nonverbal strategies during the speech seemed to be successful, at least with the majority of the audience. The President used strategies of ingratiation, showing appreciation for the audience during most of the speech, but most importantly, in a moment of controversy the President was able to overcome the situation by combining his words with his actions. As a modern president, Obama was expected to let protesters express themselves freely. At the same time, the President had to fulfill the expectations of the epideictic genre through strategies that would improve his *ethos* and display leadership. For this reason, the situation in Notre Dame was delicate and challenging.

When the protester(s) first disrupted the speech, the President attempted to continue speaking but was forced to pause because of the graduates' reaction towards the protesting individual(s). The second and third disruptions did not lead the President to a full pause because he raised the volume of his voice and, keeping a serious expression, continued speaking looking at both the graduates and the protester(s). Associated with that, the content of his message requested "fair mindedness," addressed the controversial issues, and ingratiated the audience constantly. Another important element in displaying leadership and improving his *ethos* was the predisposition towards the speaker by the majority of the graduates. Because most graduates favored Obama's selection as

commencement speaker, he could count on their support and their positive reaction to his message.

### *Analyzing rhetorical strategies*

President Obama had the challenge of fulfilling the functions of an epideictic address while also responding to disruptions, controversies, and external rhetorical problems such as the gridlock in Congress. The circumstances in which Obama found himself were complex, and the strategies he employed in effort to overcome those circumstances were just as complex. When defining what the commencement meant for the Notre Dame graduates, his message was similar to what he had said at Arizona State, but the strategy was rather different. For example, the President said:

You, however, are not getting off that easy. You have a different deal. Your class has come of age at a moment of great consequence for our nation and for the world -- a rare inflection point in history where the size and scope of the challenges before us require that we remake our world to renew its promise; that we align our deepest values and commitments to the demands of a new age. It's a privilege and a responsibility afforded to few generations -- and a task that you're now called to fulfill.

This generation, your generation is the one that must find a path back to prosperity and decide how we respond to a global economy that left millions behind even before the most recent crisis hit -- an economy where greed and short-term thinking were too often rewarded at the

expense of fairness, and diligence, and an honest day's work.  
(Applause.)<sup>52</sup>

In this passage president Obama refers to the economic crisis, and still blames greed as the catalyst for the country to reach one of the worst economic crises in America. The strategy to express this, however, seems much more subtle in identifying individuals or associations to be blamed than it had been at Arizona State. The focus at Notre Dame was to convey the same kind of information utilizing the most compelling approach. Considering the religious background of the institution and the controversy regarding the clash between the President's views and those of the Catholic Church, Obama used an approach that highlighted his own faith, at times assuming an almost prophetic role and relying on biblical language.

James Darsey explained that the prophetic tradition is better understood if the speaker is taken as a carrier of a divine message. He also remarked that in the Old Testament, prophets "addressed a people whose vision had been clouded by the material benefits of a settled and agrarian lifestyle (...)"<sup>53</sup> and "it was the prophet's task to reassert the terms of the covenant to a people who had fallen away, to restore a sense of duty and virtue amidst the decay of venality."<sup>54</sup> Darsey also points out that "the defective vision of the people is often expressed in the metaphors of drunkenness and slumber, thus imitating the moral failings behind it (...)"<sup>55</sup> and in that sense it was expected that prophets would be the ones to correct this "intoxication of the world."<sup>56</sup>

My observation regarding Obama's use of the prophetic tone is certainly not new. David A. Frank argued that President Obama adopted the prophetic tradition in his speech "A More Perfect Union."<sup>57</sup> In that case, Frank claims that the President embraced

the prophetic tradition typical of the civil rights movement, as expressed by Martin Luther King, Jr. This strategy may be one of Obama's rhetorical trademarks because, as Frank explains, "In both political and theological matters, Obama articulates a universalism of consilience; namely, that political and theological perspectives can 'jump together' toward shared principles, while retaining their particular and specific values."<sup>58</sup> Echoing the strategy chosen to deliver his "A More Perfect Union," President Obama, utilizes the prophetic tradition to overcome divisiveness and campaign to his political persona.

At Notre Dame, Obama focused on translating his message into a more religiously appealing message. Instead of enunciating his motto "it's time for change," he asserted that it was time "we remake our world to renew its promise."<sup>59</sup> Moreover, he reinforced a theological perspective by also saying:

Your generation must decide how to save God's creation from a changing climate that threatens to destroy it. Your generation must seek peace at a time when there are those who will stop at nothing to do us harm, and when weapons in the hands of a few can destroy the many. And we must find a way to reconcile our ever-shrinking world with its ever-growing diversity -- diversity of thought, diversity of culture, and diversity of belief.

In short, we must find a way to live together as one human family.

(Applause.)<sup>60</sup>

At Arizona State, the President stated that "It's clear that we need to build a new foundation (...), rethinking how we (...) treat our environment."<sup>61</sup> At Notre Dame the

environment became “God’s creation.” The strategy resembles the prophetic tradition as explained by Darsey. The theological language seems to bestow Obama with the power of awakening society from the excessive intoxication from the materialistic perspective of the American Dream to a united moral human family.

While further defining what commencement should mean for the graduates, President Obama attempts to shape a sense of community employing the prophetic tradition. First he cited Martin Luther King, Jr., and referred to the difficulty of “recognizing that our fates are tied up, as Dr. King said, in a ‘single garment of destiny.’”<sup>62</sup> It is symbolic that Obama’s first quote in the speech is from King. Although King was not Catholic, the President certainly benefits from aligning his beliefs with King’s. Most importantly, Obama creates a sense of identification with the audience when he includes himself in the Christian group saying:

(...) part of the problem, of course, lies in the imperfections of man -- our selfishness, our pride, our stubbornness, our acquisitiveness, our insecurities, our egos; all the cruelties large and small that those of us in the Christian tradition understand to be rooted in original sin. We too often seek advantage over others. We cling to outworn prejudice and fear those who are unfamiliar. Too many of us view life only through the lens of immediate self-interest and crass materialism; in which the world is necessarily a zero-sum game. The strong too often dominate the weak, and too many of those with wealth and with power find all manner of justification for their own privilege in the face of poverty and injustice.  
(...) <sup>63</sup>

The phrase “those of us in the Christian tradition” is significant in the sense that Obama includes himself in the same tradition as his audience. Assuming the role of a leader of that community, Obama blames the imperfections on original sin, and explains that as a result the materialistic approach has dominated the world. He shapes a sense of community through shared Christian values and stories, such as “the original sin,” “it was through this service that I was brought to Christ,”<sup>64</sup> “our highest calling,”<sup>65</sup> “the Golden rule,”<sup>66</sup> and the most important metaphor of the night: Notre Dame as a lighthouse and a crossroad.<sup>67</sup> I say that because that metaphor endorsed his appreciation of the local leaders while also provided authoritative evidence to reach the intended conclusion. The metaphor, as mentioned in the context portion of this chapter, belonged to Father Hesburgh and the President of the university had used it a week before in the last publication regarding the controversy. Obama explained:

(...) Fair-minded words. It’s a way of life that has always been the Notre Dame tradition. (Applause.) Father Hesburgh has long spoken of this institution as both a lighthouse and a crossroads. A lighthouse that stands apart, shining with the wisdom of the Catholic tradition, while the crossroads is where "differences of culture and religion and conviction can co-exist with friendship, civility, hospitality, and especially love." And I want to join him and Father John in saying how inspired I am by the maturity and responsibility with which this class has approached the debate surrounding today’s ceremony. You are an example of what Notre Dame is about. (Applause.)<sup>68</sup>

Through this metaphor, President Obama makes his case that Notre Dame, having the role of both a lighthouse and a crossroads, was expected to be fair-minded, and that although no agreement would be reached on the controversy regarding abortion, there was still the chance of mature dialogue. Furthermore, the President used the metaphor later in the speech in order to shape the future course for the community of graduates:

And in this world of competing claims about what is right and what is true, have confidence in the values with which you've been raised and educated. Be unafraid to speak your mind when those values are at stake. Hold firm to your faith and allow it to guide you on your journey. In other words, stand as a lighthouse.

But remember, too, that you can be a crossroads. Remember, too, that the ultimate irony of faith is that it necessarily admits doubt. It's the belief in things not seen. It's beyond our capacity as human beings to know with certainty what God has planned for us or what He asks of us. And those of us who believe must trust that His wisdom is greater than our own.<sup>69</sup>

The metaphor, once again, served to create identification between the President and the Notre Dame community while also endorsing the concept of fair-mindedness. The religious tone of the speech provides authority for the speaker, and increases the likelihood of the message's acceptance. The prophetic tradition, in this case, allows Obama to align his political persona with the wisdom and charisma of the university's leaders, therefore allowing him to project a conciliatory image.

Furthermore, Obama's ceremonial address would only be complete if he fulfilled the third rhetorical function of an epideictic address. In that sense, the President was expected to display leadership through eloquence. Taking into consideration the nature of the rhetorical presidency, the speech is expected to improve the President's ethos, therefore maintaining the perpetual campaign that is the rhetorical presidency. Thus it seems logical that the President would build his speech using strategies that would first attempt to eliminate aspects that could damage his ethos.

The controversies, then, needed to be addressed in such way that displayed leadership, maintained consistency with his previous statements, while also creating the sense of conciliation expected by the prophetic tradition. As Frank remarks, President Obama uses rhetoric of conciliation as a tactic in speeches embedded in the prophetic tradition. In the particular occasion under analysis, Obama was also expected to share a sense of community through accepted values, stories, and experiences. Thus, the speech had to consider the common values in a Catholic community, and certainly the idea of conciliatory discourse was likely to be welcome.

With that in mind, it is easy to identify how Obama responded to all controversies of that period either through humor or through a theological approach. For example, he commented on the fact that, unlike Arizona State, Notre Dame had granted him an honorary degree:

And I also want to thank you for the honorary degree that I received. I know it has not been without controversy. I don't know if you're aware of this, but these honorary degrees are apparently pretty hard to come by. (Laughter.) So far I'm only 1 for 2 as President. (Laughter

and applause.) Father Hesburgh is 150 for 150. (Laughter and applause.) I guess that's better. (Laughter.) So, Father Ted, after the ceremony, maybe you can give me some pointers to boost my average.<sup>70</sup>

Through humor, Obama was able to alleviate the tension regarding both of his first commencement addresses. Obama was also able to ingratiate himself with the Notre Dame community by referring to the local leaders as superior to himself.

Another example of Obama's use of humor came in his response to the first audience interruption discussed earlier. At that point he said: "We're following Brennan's adage that we don't do things easily. (Laughter.) We're not going to shy away from things that are uncomfortable sometimes. (Applause.)"<sup>71</sup> This passage is probably the most remarkable demonstration of the struggle in the process of conciliating the expectations of the epideictic genre with the tone chosen for the speech. The President was expected to display solid leadership when responding to disturbances and controversies, but his rhetorical choices could not contradict the expectations of a commencement address delivered at a Catholic community.

When analyzing the excerpt above, first it is important to notice the President's word choice in responding to the protesters. The choice of the pronoun "we" generates ambiguity in the sentence, because one cannot assert with certainty if it refers to a "we" that encompasses Obama and the audience, or a "we" that signifies the presidency in its entirety. This ambiguity allows him to project a sense that he is not alone, and that either the audience supports him, or that he is not alone in his presidency.

The content of the message also reveals ambiguity. First the President affirms in present tense that he, or perhaps the audience, would not do things easily, and

corroborates with that statement saying he, or the audience, would not shy away from uncomfortable things. Both sentences demonstrate solid leadership, braveness, courage, and obstination. Those characteristics seem highly desirable for leaders, especially national leaders. However, the final word of his sentence shows reluctance: “sometimes.” The word, to some extent invalidates the meaning of the previous sentences because it reflects hesitation on affirming what “we” won’t do. When watching the video, it is evident that the word “sometimes” comes right after the President glances in the direction of the protesters. For this reason, I have come to the conclusion that the word was used in order to attenuate the tone of his statements for the protester(s); it seems like an attempt not to indispose himself with those who thought differently. His rhetorical choices had to remain consistent throughout the entire speech, and if the speech advocated consilience or fair-mindedness, then his response to the interruption had to match the tone of the remainder of the speech. In order to accomplish that, the President mixes humor with the prophetic tradition.

After this moment of tension, the President proceeded with the humor typical of the introduction of his commencement addresses. Later, the President provided definition through the strategies previously mentioned, and then responded to the abortion controversy by saying: “(...) How does each of us remain firm in our principles, and fight for what we consider right, without, as Father John said, demonetizing [*sic*] those with just as strongly held convictions on the other side?”<sup>72</sup> By quoting Father John, President Obama seemed to borrow some of his authority before developing the most controversial main point of his speech.

Obama provided the personal testimony of a pro-life Christian doctor, who sent him an e-mail during his senate campaign:

What bothered the doctor was an entry that my campaign staff had posted on my website -- an entry that said I would fight "right-wing ideologues who want to take away a woman's right to choose." The doctor said he had assumed I was a reasonable person, he supported my policy initiatives to help the poor and to lift up our educational system, but that if I truly believed that every pro-life individual was simply an ideologue who wanted to inflict suffering on women, then I was not very reasonable. He wrote, "I do not ask at this point that you oppose abortion, only that you speak about this issue in fair-minded words." Fair-minded words.

After I read the doctor's letter, I wrote back to him and I thanked him. And I didn't change my underlying position, but I did tell my staff to change the words on my website. And I said a prayer that night that I might extend the same presumption of good faith to others that the doctor had extended to me. Because when we do that -- when we open up our hearts and our minds to those who may not think precisely like we do or believe precisely what we believe -- that's when we discover at least the possibility of common ground.<sup>73</sup>

In this excerpt, the President reinforced the concept of "fair minded words," added to his religious image, and introduced the concept that would allow him to

reconcile with the Catholic community in regards to the abortion theme. And the President said:

That's when we begin to say, "Maybe we won't agree on abortion, but we can still agree that this heart-wrenching decision for any woman is not made casually, it has both moral and spiritual dimensions."

So let us work together to reduce the number of women seeking abortions, let's reduce unintended pregnancies. (Applause.) Let's make adoption more available. (Applause.) Let's provide care and support for women who do carry their children to term. (Applause.) Let's honor the conscience of those who disagree with abortion, and draft a sensible conscience clause, and make sure that all of our health care policies are grounded not only in sound science, but also in clear ethics, as well as respect for the equality of women." Those are things we can do. (Applause.)

Now, understand -- understand, Class of 2009, I do not suggest that the debate surrounding abortion can or should go away. Because no matter how much we may want to fudge it -- indeed, while we know that the views of most Americans on the subject are complex and even contradictory -- the fact is that at some level, the views of the two camps are irreconcilable. Each side will continue to make its case to the public with passion and conviction. But surely we can do so without reducing those with differing views to caricature.

Open hearts. Open minds. Fair-minded words. It's a way of life that has always been the Notre Dame tradition. (Applause.)<sup>74</sup>

With these words, President Obama was able to reach a common ground with his Catholic audience on such a controversial theme. The President responded to the controversy, responded to the protester(s), while at the same time keeping himself consistent with previous statements. The ingenuity of this fragment allows the President to solidify his presidency, improve his ethos, and overcome rhetorical problems. Obama recognized his position and remarked policies that could attend to the points of view both of those who were pro-choice and those who were pro-life. Furthermore, the President reinforced his past experiences dealing with Catholic communities, in an effort to strengthen the bond with the Notre Dame community.

Since some had suggested that the controversy regarding his speech concerned racial matters, the President also responded to it by saying:

(...) And when that happens -- when people set aside their differences, even for a moment, to work in common effort toward a common goal; when they struggle together, and sacrifice together, and learn from one another -- then all things are possible.

After all, I stand here today, as President and as an African American, on the 55th anniversary of the day that the Supreme Court handed down the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Now, *Brown* was of course the first major step in dismantling the "separate but equal" doctrine, but it would take a number of years and a nationwide movement to fully realize the dream of civil rights for all of God's children. There

were freedom rides and lunch counters and Billy clubs, and there was also a Civil Rights Commission appointed by President Eisenhower. It was the 12 resolutions recommended by this commission that would ultimately become law in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>75</sup>

Without a direct remarkable reference to any potential controversy regarding his heritage, President Obama was able to enhance his ethos, once again, through a prophetic tradition of consilience.

When addressing the divided audience at Notre Dame, President Obama attempted to conciliate with the protester(s) while trying to bond with Catholic community by projecting a prophetic figure. Meanwhile, the President also had to handle external threats to his *ethos* such as the impasses in Congress, strong Republican opposition, and skyrocketing unemployment, among other consequences of the great recession. The context at that point was extremely challenging and the President had to respond to all those concerns while also fulfilling the expectations of a commencement address.

As Frank suggested, the President's mixed heritage, and I add, the President's past experiences, allowed him to transit freely in realms typically divided such as religious and racial issues. The controversy regarding the university's invitation of Obama to be the commencement speaker was addressed, despite the protests, through a combination of rhetorical strategies that gave form to a remarkable speech. Through the prophetic tradition, the President was able to relate to the audience's key values and beliefs, thus creating identification with the audience. Also, by using the metaphor of the lighthouse and crossroads, the President was able to relate to the Notre Dame

tradition and past experiences in the process of shaping a sense of community between his persona and the audience. The President appealed mostly to the Christian ideology in order to enhance his *ethos* and comply with the rhetorical presidency doctrine.

When handling confrontation, the President combined humor, words that attempted to decrease tension, and non-verbal cues—such as change in facial expression and the volume of his voice—in order to balance the exigencies of keeping himself consistent with the prophetic persona that he had adopted in his speech and displaying the desirable characteristics of a leader.

Finally, when responding to external rhetorical problems, such as the impasses in Congress and the devastating consequences of the economic recession, the President embedded the content in the speech using theological terms and biblical explanations. Most of those issues were not treated in detail in the speech, as in a strategy to alleviate the already tense rhetorical situation. In that sense, President Obama used appropriate strategies to enhance his *ethos*, respond to interruptions and controversies, and fulfill the expectations of the epideictic genre. By minimizing potential threats to his *ethos*, and adopting a rhetorical strategy that allowed him to establish ideological identification with the audience, the President was able to fulfill the function of epideictic that seemed most relevant for him: the display of leadership through eloquence.

One more chapter was written in the history book of the University of Notre Dame, and the sixth president to address their graduates delivered a speech less remarkable by his policies but considerably memorable for the prolific use of rhetorical strategies.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Commencement Address at the University of Notre Dame,” May 17, 2009, accessed May 25, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/video/President-Obama-Notre-Dame-Commencement#transcript>, para. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald C. Arnett, “Civic Rhetoric—Meeting the Communal Interplay of the Provincial and the Cosmopolitan: Barack Obama’s Notre Dame Speech,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14 (2011): 631-671.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Roff, “Gridlock and Indecision Spur Polling Shift from Obama to Republicans,” *U.S. News*, November 12, 2009, accessed February 27, 2013, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/peter-roff/2009/11/12/gridlock-and-indecision-spur-polling-shift-from-obama-to-republicans>.

<sup>4</sup> James W. Ceaser, Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette, “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11 (1981): 161.

<sup>5</sup> Arnett, 637.

<sup>6</sup> Arnett, 637.

<sup>7</sup> Arnett, 638.

<sup>8</sup> Jenn Metz, “Jenkins: Obama ‘Honored’ University by Accepting,” *The Observer*, March, 23, 2009, accessed February 25, 2013, <http://www.ndsmcobserver.com/2.2754/jenkins-obama-honored-university-by-accepting-1.255642>.

<sup>9</sup> Metz, “Jenkins: Obama ‘Honored’ University by Accepting.”

<sup>10</sup> Metz, “Jenkins: Obama ‘Honored’ University by Accepting.”

<sup>11</sup> Metz, “Jenkins: Obama ‘Honored’ University by Accepting.”

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<sup>12</sup> Metz, “Jenkins: Obama ‘Honored’ University by Accepting.”

<sup>13</sup> Arnett, 639.

<sup>14</sup> Arnett, 639.

<sup>15</sup> Arnett, 638.

<sup>16</sup> Arnett, 639 - 641.

<sup>17</sup> Arnett, 644.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Fosmoe, “ND’s Laetare Medal Won’t Be Awarded,” *South Bend Tribune*, May 01, 2009, accessed February 27, 2013, [http://articles.southbendtribune.com/2009-05-01/news/26753696\\_1\\_catholic-honor-honorary-degree-notre-dame-s-laetare-medal](http://articles.southbendtribune.com/2009-05-01/news/26753696_1_catholic-honor-honorary-degree-notre-dame-s-laetare-medal).

<sup>19</sup> “Glendon Declines Notre Dame’s Laetare Medal,” *Today’s Catholic*, May 3, 2009, accessed February 27, 2013, <http://www.todayscatholicnews.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf-archives/2009/18May3,2009.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Arnett, 645.

<sup>21</sup> Arnett, 645.

<sup>22</sup> Arnett, 641.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Singer, “Group Starts Petition in Support of Obama,” *The Observer*, April 7, 2009, accessed February 27, 2013, <http://www.ndsmcobserver.com/2.2754/group-starts-petition-in-support-of-obama-1.255315#.US7xezCG3O4>.

<sup>24</sup> Arnett, 646.

<sup>25</sup> Arnett, 648.

<sup>26</sup> Arnett, 648.

<sup>27</sup> Arnett, 645.

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<sup>28</sup> “University of Notre Dame: Archives,” University of Notre Dame, accessed January 28, 2013, <http://archives.nd.edu/research/facts/commencement.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Jenn Metz, “The Obama Controversy in Perspective,” *The Observer*, May 10, 2009, accessed January 31, 2013, <http://www.ndsmcobserver.com/2.2758/the-obama-controversy-in-perspective-1.254927#.UQ2YFqVEHO4>.

<sup>30</sup> See “University of Notre Dame - Address at Commencement Exercises at the University,” The American Presidency Project, accessed January 28, 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7552#axzz1XkJgCgHM>.

<sup>31</sup> Arnett, 646.

<sup>32</sup> Metz, “The Obama Controversy in Perspective,” paragraph 5.

<sup>33</sup> Metz, “The Obama Controversy in Perspective,” paragraph 5.

<sup>34</sup> Metz, “The Obama Controversy in Perspective,” paragraph 6.

<sup>35</sup> Metz, “The Obama Controversy in Perspective,” paragraph 7.

<sup>36</sup> Metz, “The Obama Controversy in Perspective,” paragraph 7.

<sup>37</sup> See James W. Ceaser, Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette, “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11 (1981): 158-171.

<sup>38</sup> Arnett, 647.

<sup>39</sup> Arnett, 647-648.

<sup>40</sup> The video recording of the speech is available at: “Commencement 2009: President Barack Obama’s Commencement Address at Notre Dame,” You Tube, accessed January 28, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9SjUgrvreg>.

<sup>41</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 8.

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- <sup>43</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 9.
- <sup>44</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 10.
- <sup>45</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 16.
- <sup>46</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 16.
- <sup>47</sup> See Celeste Michelle Condit, “The Functions of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar,” *Communication Quarterly* 33 (1985): 288.
- <sup>48</sup> Condit, 288.
- <sup>49</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” paragraphs 21-23.
- <sup>50</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 23.
- <sup>51</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 31.
- <sup>52</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” paragraphs 14 – 15.
- <sup>53</sup> James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*, (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 18.
- <sup>54</sup> James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*, 18.
- <sup>55</sup> James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*, 18.
- <sup>56</sup> James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*, 19.
- <sup>57</sup> See David A. Frank, “The Prophetic Voice and the Face of the Other in Barack Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” Address, March 18, 2008,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 12 (2009): 167-194.
- <sup>58</sup> Frank, 176.
- <sup>59</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 14.
- <sup>60</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 16.

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<sup>61</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks By The President At Arizona State University Commencement,” May 13, 2009, accessed May 25, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/video/President-Obama-Arizona-State-Commencement/#transcript>, para. 21.

<sup>62</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 20.

<sup>63</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” paragraphs 20-21.

<sup>64</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 35.

<sup>65</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 37.

<sup>66</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 42.

<sup>67</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 31.

<sup>68</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 31.

<sup>69</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 39-40.

<sup>70</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 10.

<sup>72</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” para. 23.

<sup>73</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” paragraphs 25-27.

<sup>74</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” paragraphs 28-31.

<sup>75</sup> Obama, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame,” paragraphs 44-45.

CHAPTER 4  
BARNARD COLLEGE

Three years after the speeches at the University of Notre Dame and Arizona State University, President Barack Obama delivered the last commencement address of his first term. This time, on May 14, 2012, he spoke at Barnard College, “the most sought-after liberal arts college for women in the United States.”<sup>1</sup> The choice of speaking at that particular university was strategic if we take into consideration the context of May 2012.

The President had launched his 2012 reelection campaign on April 4, 2011, through a video that invited supporters to get involved in the campaign.<sup>2</sup> About a year later, in April of 2012, polls conducted by *CBS News*, *Fox News* and *The New York Times* revealed that both President Obama and presumptive Republican presidential nominee, Mitt Romney, “received support from 46% of registered voters.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, at that point, voters were divided and at least in theory, both presidential candidates would have to focus on the remaining eight percent to decide the election. On May 5, 2012, President Obama delivered his first campaign speeches at Ohio State University in Columbus and at the Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. In those rallies, President Obama launched the campaign slogan “moving forward” and also reinforced his 2008 motto of hope and change: “If people ask what this campaign is about, you tell them it's still about hope, it's still about change.”<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, Republican presidential primary candidates not only attacked each other, but also attacked the President. Republican candidate Rick Santorum, for example, called Obama a snob, saying that Obama’s plan to get Americans to go to college was just a way to remake America “in his image.”<sup>5</sup> Michele Bachman, another candidate,

would attack the President saying that “Obama [was] allowing terror suspect groups to write the FBI’s terror training manual.”<sup>6</sup> Governor Mitt Romney frequently mentioned in speeches that Obama’s presidency was not working, blaming the President for the slow progress in decreasing unemployment rates and for the high price of gasoline. The most common topoi of the 2012 Republican campaign was that the President had not achieved much in the previous four years, and society was bombarded with negative ads challenging the President’s *ethos*.<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned in chapter two, one of the most critical aspects in the context of the speeches delivered in May of 2009 was the threat of losing the democratic majority in both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives in the midterm elections. If the result of midterm elections in 2010 resulted in at least one of the houses with a Republican majority, then gridlock would be certain. That is precisely what happened. Republicans won a majority in the House of Representatives while the Senate kept a Democrat majority.<sup>8</sup> Gridlock in Congress had started by the end of 2009 but the new composition of the House of Representatives after November of 2010 amplified the struggle in reaching agreement between Democrats and Republicans. As a consequence, Donna Cassata and Joan Lowry explain, “Congress (...) followed one of its least productive years with a just handful of measures, among them aid for trade-displaced workers and patent reform. These bills hardly compare to the welfare overhaul, hike in the minimum wage and expanded access to health care that (...) Bill Clinton, and a Republican Congress accomplished in 1996.”<sup>9</sup>

These events threatened Obama’s reelection and supported the Republicans’ claim that he had accomplished little in his first term. Although the economy had shown

some early signs of recovery, the country was still struggling to overcome the recession. National unemployment rate had decreased from 9.4 percent in May of 2009 to 8.2 percent in May of 2012,<sup>10</sup> but it was still considered very high, especially in the eyes of foreign investors.<sup>11</sup>

As earlier chapters explained, the assumptions of the rhetorical presidency mean that every presidential speech is an occasion to campaign either directly or indirectly. In an election year, however, the expectation of campaign speeches is higher, thus creating a delicate situation for presidential candidates. As mentioned in chapter three, presidents campaigning for reelection might create great controversy when invited to speak in a commencement address. For example, when President George H. W. Bush was announced as the commencement speaker at the University of Notre Dame in the spring of 1992, graduates created controversy due to the fact that the President was seeking reelection.<sup>12</sup> This kind of publicity was certainly undesirable, thus the choice of where to speak had to be carefully deliberated. Furthermore, when he spoke at Barnard, Obama again had the challenge of maintaining the characteristics of a commencement address while prospecting votes.

This chapter analyzes the strategies employed by President Obama in the commencement address at Barnard College. In order to do so, the chapter is divided in three main parts. The first part provides further details regarding the context and the rhetorical problems that President Obama encountered while preparing to deliver that speech. The President would have to handle another local controversy—this time regarding his decision to speak at Barnard rather than at Columbia, his *alma mater*—and respond to political controversies such as his limited accomplishments during his first

term, mandatory preventive care services to women, and same-sex marriage. The second part of this chapter analyzes the rhetorical strategies chosen by the President in order to overcome those rhetorical problems and achieve his campaigning goals while delivering a speech with the characteristics of a ceremonial address. Finally, the third part of the chapter explores how those findings impact the definition of the epideictic genre.

### ***Context of the commencement speech delivered at the Barnard College***

Although the economy had improved at least slightly since 2009, the United States had still not recovered from the great recession. However, appearing before students, like the Barnard graduates, seemed to reenergize Obama. As Peter Baker, from *The New York Times*, noticed: “For a president facing a tough re-election and a stubborn economy, there is no better amen corner, no more invigorating audience, than on campus. For a few exuberant moments, it can feel like 2008 all over again, when the youth vote actually showed up and helped propel an unlikely outsider to the White House.”<sup>13</sup>

During the three years that preceded the speech at Barnard, one of President Obama’s most remarkable deeds was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act (the first bill he signed into law), expanding workers’ rights for equal payment for equal work.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act—also known as Obamacare—had been signed into law in March of 2010.<sup>15</sup> This law was quite controversial because it required all Americans to have health insurance coverage, which some believed was an unconstitutional measure.

More controversial than that was Obama’s mandate requesting health insurers to provide preventive care services to women, such as birth control, issued on January 20, 2012.<sup>16</sup> Because religious institutions would also be required to provide contraceptives, a

heated debated started. According to Richard Wolf and Cathy Lynn Grossman, Republicans attacked the measure as “an unambiguous attack on religious freedom” causing great turmoil in the media.<sup>17</sup> Newt Gingrich, one of the Republican candidates at the time, remarked that the President’s extremism saying that he had “voted in favor of legalizing infanticide, (...) as a state senator, (...) to protect doctors who killed babies.”<sup>18</sup> Even after the President tried to accommodate religious institutions by requiring insurance companies to cover birth control expenses in those cases, criticism was still recurrent. Rick Santorum decried the President’s mandate saying: “You don't need insurance for these types of relatively small expenditures. This is simply someone trying to impose their values on somebody else, with the arm of the government doing so. That should offend everybody, people of faith and no faith that the government could get on a roll that is that aggressive.”<sup>19</sup>

In attempt to find a middle ground on the issue, Republicans created a panel at the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee on February 16. The goal of the panel was to discuss from the religious standpoint how the mandate violated religious freedom. Democrats had appointed two witnesses: Barry Lynn—executive director of the Americans United for Separation of Church and State—and Sandra Fluke—a Georgetown law student. The chairman of the panel, Darrell Issa, accepted Lynn as a witness but not Fluke saying she lacked expertise in matters of religious freedom. Issa also remarked that Democrats were only allowed to have one witness. At 4:18 p.m. of the day prior to the hearing, Democrats stated that they would prefer their witness to be Sandra Fluke instead of Barry Lynn, but Issa refused to accept the change. Three hours

later, Democrat Congressman Elijah Cummings sent a letter to Issa remarking the absence of women on the panel.<sup>20</sup>

The lack of women in the panel and the rejection of Sandra Fluke's participation generated great turmoil and women voiced their dissatisfaction. A week later, on February 23, Sandra Fluke delivered her speech to a Democratic hearing in Congress.<sup>21</sup> Five days later, Rush Limbaugh, a well-known conservative commentator, referred to Sandra Fluke saying in his radio show:

Can you imagine if you were her parents how proud...you would be? (...) Your daughter ... testifies she's having so much sex she can't afford her own birth control pills and she wants President Obama to provide them, or the Pope. (...) What does it say about the college co-ed Susan Fluke [sic] who goes before a congressional committee and essentially says that she must be paid to have sex -- what does that make her? It makes her a slut, right? It makes her a prostitute. She wants to be paid to have sex. She's having so much sex she can't afford the contraception. She wants you and me and the taxpayers to pay her to have sex.<sup>22</sup>

This insulting comment and other subsequent infamous remarks by Mr. Limbaugh fomented general commotion among women. President Obama telephoned Sandra Fluke “to tell her that her parents should be proud of her for speaking out for women.”<sup>23</sup> On the day following the President's phone call, Debora L. Spar—President of Barnard College—announced that the President had chosen to speak at the 2012 Barnard graduation.<sup>24</sup> According to Tamar Lewin from *The New York Times*, “An Obama

administration official confirmed on Friday that the White House had called Barnard to offer the President as the commencement speaker.”<sup>25</sup> As a result, President Spar sent an email to the Barnard community saying that Jill Abramson, who had already been announced as the commencement speaker for the class of 2012, would be “happy to speak at Barnard at a later date.”<sup>26</sup> Taking into consideration all those elements, it becomes quite clear for us that President Obama had the purpose of campaigning through Barnard’s graduation ceremony, especially in response to what Democrats were calling a “war on women,”<sup>27</sup> typified by Limbaugh’s attack on Fluke.

Insurance coverage for women’s preventive health care was not the only issue Obama faced. On May 6, 2012, Vice-President Joe Biden gave an interview on “Meet the Press,” produced by NBC. When asked about his position regarding same-sex marriage by the host of the show, Biden responded:

I am vice president of the United States of America. (...) The president sets the policy. I am absolutely comfortable with the fact that men marrying men, women marrying women, and heterosexual men and women marrying another are entitled to the same exact rights, all the civil rights, all the civil liberties. And quite frankly, I don't see much of a distinction -- beyond that.<sup>28</sup>

Because Obama had long avoided discussing the issue, Biden’s comments raised questions about the President’s position on same-sex marriage.

Biden’s remarks received wide media coverage and a statement from Obama was expedient. In an interview on ABC’s “Good Morning America” four days later, Obama confirmed his support of same-sex marriage and remarked: “I had already made a

decision that we were going to probably take this position before the election and before the convention,” and affirmed that the vice-president “probably got out a little bit over his skis, but out of generosity of spirit.”<sup>29</sup>

As Jessica Yellin, *CNN* chief White House correspondent, remarked, when “Asked about whether his new position [was] a calculated move in an election year, Obama said it would ‘be hard to argue that somehow this is something that I’d be doing for political advantage. Because frankly, you know, the politics -- it’s not clear how they cut.’”<sup>30</sup> However, according to Michael Barbaro, journalist from *The New York Times*:

Mr. Obama face[d] growing calls from gay and lesbian voters and a formidable array of wealthy gay donors to support same-sex marriage and make it a part of the Democratic Party’s platform at its convention. Many of his supporters believe that he privately backs it but is unwilling to say so before a general election that may be decided in states like Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia, where such a position could provoke a backlash.<sup>31</sup>

These reports remind us of the urgency and dangers that President Obama faced in stating a position in regards to same-sex marriage.

Republicans quickly seized on both the health care and the marriage issue. For example, two days after the President confirmed his position on same-sex marriage, Mitt Romney delivered a commencement speech at Liberty University in which he said: “(...) Marriage is a relationship between one man and one woman.”<sup>32</sup> He also referred to the passage of Obama’s health care bill saying that “The protection of religious freedom has also become a matter of debate. (...) Perhaps religious conscience upsets the designs of

those who feel that the highest wisdom and authority comes from government.”<sup>33</sup> Those competing persuasive forces, like Romney, added to Obama’s rhetorical problem at Barnard.

As with the commencement address at Notre Dame, Obama also faced a local controversy when he spoke at Barnard. Some saw his decision to speak at Barnard as a slight to his own *alma mater*, Columbia University. Both located in New York City, Barnard College and Columbia have a strong partnership and although “Barnard is legally separate and financially independent from the University,” their students are able to take classes in both institutions and even share residence halls.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, some Columbia students reacted vehemently to the President’s decision to speak at their “sibling” institution. Beyond the media speculation whether the President’s choice to speak at a female-oriented institution was a political move,<sup>35</sup> the controversy surrounded mostly the name-calling between students from Columbia and Barnard generated by the announcement that the President had preferred to speak at Barnard instead of Columbia.<sup>36</sup>

On March 3, 2012 at 10:15 am, the email sent by President Deborah L. Spar to the Barnard community was published at *BWOG*, the “24/7 blog incarnation of *The Blue and White*, Columbia University’s monthly undergraduate magazine.”<sup>37</sup> In the email, Spar announced:

I have exciting news to report. Each year, President Obama selects a small number of schools at which to deliver commencement addresses. This year, the President has chosen Barnard College and will address you, our senior class, on May 14th. This is a great honor and a testament to

your collective intelligence and accomplishment. It will be a thrill for all of us to welcome President Obama and hear his words.<sup>38</sup>

Only three minutes later, the first of 885 comments was posted in response to the announcement. The comments began with Barnard students saying they would prefer to have the First Lady Michelle Obama as commencement speaker, then evolved to a heated debate whether Columbia or Barnard was more rigorous, eventually escalating to the point of obscenity. Accusations of misogyny, claims stating that Barnard students were those who got rejected by Columbia, evolved to death threats, and name-calling.

Many of the exchanges were X-rated, to say the least. Columbia students attacked Barnard students posting phrases like: “shut up woman and let the man explain how you are so liberated now;” “Eat a big fat CRIMSON dick you fucking piece of shit;” “Just a political ploy because of the significance of woman's rights in the upcoming election. Don't get your panties in a bunch;” “Let Barnard get this one thing to be proud of their school. (...) It's the only thing so throw them a bone;” “Stop thinking Barnard is so special because Obama is coming. You're a political instrument;” “Girls should be good housewives and take care of children, food, and dishes.”<sup>39</sup> Some of the comments appealed to extreme offensive language saying: “as retribution for their insolence, not only should we revoke Obamas [*sic*] degree and in place give him an honorary Barnyard diploma, but the Barnyard animals must be expelled from the Columbia pen;”<sup>40</sup> the same author replying to a Barnard student's response to that first message said:

Typical Barnyard student assuming that I am sexist solely on the grounds that I criticize Barnyard. It's feminazi's like you that give us women a bad name. (...) I have absolutely nothing but respect for

Columbia women as I AM ONE. (...) Try using your Daddy's hard-earned cash in a respectable way if you want to be an ACTUAL role model for Women. That's why I study Math and Chemistry rather than Home Economics. Unlike Barnyard financial leeches, I have NO intention of pursuing an [*sic*] Mrs. Degree. I came here to make myself successful, not try to plead at the knees of a Columbia boy to marry her.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, Columbia students remarked:

We're pissed because Barnyard gutter-snipes DO NOT DESERVE the Columbia name. While you guys were perfecting your depthroating techniques and experimenting with scissoring and anal play, we were learning Calculus (usually by sophomore year of High School). Trust me, if you actually deserved to go to Columbia and put in the work it required, you would understand our resentment.<sup>42</sup>

Barnard students replied with comments that ranged from emotionally hurt by the shocking language to ironic. For example, Barnard students said: "Everywhere I go, I am beaming with Barnard pride. Fuck a blue and white pussy. I have a strong, beautiful Barnard vagina;"<sup>43</sup> "Call me a cum dumpster, a ho, a dike, or dick-obsessed all you want! When you wake up tomorrow morning, I will still attend your classes, eat your food, and continue to win at life."<sup>44</sup> Barnard Students also replied calling Columbia Students misogynistic pigs, racists, sexists.

As Richard Pérez-Peña from *The New York Times* explained, Obama's decision to speak at Barnard's Commencement ceremony generated a debate that could be summed in the following themes: "Either Barnard College is academically inferior to Columbia, or

those who say so are misguided or misogynist; either Mr. Obama has snubbed Columbia, or this is great news and everyone in Morningside Heights should revel in it.”<sup>45</sup> Aside from the vulgarity, students from both Columbia and Barnard pointed out that the President’s decision to speak at Barnard was political. Most students were indifferent to the political issues and focused instead on the choice of Barnard over Columbia

Facing those rhetorical challenges, President Obama was in charge of fulfilling the expectations of a commencement address while at the same time responding to the attacks made by Republican presidential primary candidates, of somehow defusing the conflict between Barnard and Columbia, and of advancing his own campaign.

### *Analysis of the rhetorical strategies*

Obama delivered the Barnard commencement address on Mother’s Day to an audience composed primarily by women. It thus seems logical that he would appeal to motherhood and femininity as strategic rhetorical choices. He did, but in a way that highlighted his own role as a father.

As expected, after the usual acknowledgements President Obama paid special homage to the mothers present in the event saying: “To all the moms who are here today, you could not ask for a better Mother’s Day gift than to see all of these folks graduate. (Applause.) I have to say, though, whenever I come to these things, I start thinking about Malia and Sasha graduating, and I start tearing up and -- (laughter) -- it's terrible. I don't know how you guys are holding it together.”<sup>46</sup> It is important to notice that by mentioning mothers and his emotions, Obama brought to life emotional elements regarding family while reinforcing a persona of loving father.

Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca explain that this kind of strategy refers to what they call rhetorical *presence*. They assert that by “the very fact of selecting certain elements and presenting them to the audience, their importance and pertinency to the discussion are implied.”<sup>47</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca affirm that “The thing that is present to the consciousness assumes (...) an importance that the theory and practice of argumentation must take into consideration. It is not enough indeed that a thing should exist for a person to feel its presence.”<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the authors explain, “one of the preoccupations of a speaker is to make present, by verbal magic alone, what is actually absent but what he [*sic*] considers important to his [*sic*] argument or, by making them more present, to enhance the value of some of the elements of which one has actually been made conscious.”<sup>49</sup>

President Obama brought to the audience’s consciousness the concept of “motherhood” by highlighting mothers and daughters in the audience. This strategy of *presence*, as described by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, allowed Obama to use mothers and daughters as symbols. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca assert that the advantage of using symbols is that they are typically “more concrete, more manageable,”<sup>50</sup> rather than the relationships symbolized. The advantage in using such approach, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca explain, is that it is possible “to exhibit in a concentrated form toward the symbol an attitude toward the thing symbolized (...).”<sup>51</sup> In that sense, the President uses the mothers and daughters in the audience as symbols representing the relationship of motherhood. In doing so, the President was able to “exhibit in concentrated form (...) the attitude” toward the emotions of being a parent. Certainly this was only one of the elements that made the relationship of motherhood

more salient to the audience. In addition to that, as it is explained later in this chapter, Obama uses himself to highlight the presence of motherhood by showing that he was the product of two admirable women.

The fact that the President deliberately chose to make “present” the emotions of relationships related to the concept of motherhood cannot be overlooked for it unveils the core strategy of the speech. Why would motherhood be a good strategy for Obama, who is a male speaker? Because the idea of motherhood at least implies the *presence* of a father, thus opening the way for Obama to assume that persona. In that process President Obama fills the void in the relationship of motherhood. Throughout the speech, Obama intertwined the father persona with concepts of motherhood, projecting himself as the product of a supportive and caring mother: the successful son, dedicated husband, and loving father. If at Notre Dame, Obama embodied the prophetic tradition, at Barnard he embodied the persona of father. The concepts of motherhood and fatherhood are recurrent in the speech, and in that sense the President uses the concept of *presence* by taking on the persona of father. For the Barnard audience, the President’s persona, portraying the image of a desirable father and husband, provides a needed counterpart to motherhood and, perhaps, enhances his *ethos* as both a commencement speaker and as a presidential candidate.

Obama addressed the controversy caused by his decision to speak at Barnard College instead of Columbia with humor:

I will begin by telling a hard truth: I’m a Columbia college graduate. (Laughter and applause.) I know there can be a little bit of a sibling rivalry here. (Laughter.) But I’m honored nevertheless to be your

commencement speaker today -- although I've got to say, you set a pretty high bar given the past three years. (Applause.) Hillary Clinton -- (applause) -- Meryl Streep -- (applause) -- Sheryl Sandberg -- these are not easy acts to follow. (Applause.)

But I will point out Hillary is doing an extraordinary job as one of the finest Secretaries of State America has ever had. (Applause.) We gave Meryl the Presidential Medal of Arts and Humanities. (Applause.) Sheryl is not just a good friend; she's also one of our economic advisers. So it's like the old saying goes -- keep your friends close, and your Barnard commencement speakers even closer. (Applause.)”<sup>52</sup>

The President gave the impression that he was going to say something unpleasant—the “hard truth.” Thus, confessing his relationship with Columbia likely came as a pleasant surprise and the students laughed and applauded the President because the contrast between his “hard truth” and the fact that he is a Columbia college graduate minimizes the importance of the issue. Obama acknowledges the rivalry between Columbia and Barnard, and by emphasizing his relationship with previous commencement speaker he dismisses rivalry through a humorous perspective.

By altering the familiar saying “keep your friends close, and your enemies closer” to “keep your friends close, and your Barnard commencement speakers even closer” Obama was actually exchanging the word “enemy” with “Barnard commencement speaker.” This exchange of terms seemed to symbolize, through a friendly tone, that enemies—or rivals—could also have a fruitful relationship. In this excerpt, Obama assumes his relationship with Columbia and symbolizes the rivalry between the two

colleges through his own friendly rivalry with previous Barnard commencement speakers. The passage is artistic because of the strategic substitution of words while also referring to the traumatic events preceding his speech in a humorous tone. By dismissing the seriousness of the issue, Obama ameliorated the lingering negative effects of the “name calling” between students from Columbia and Barnard.

Following that passage, President Obama developed what Celeste Michelle Condit calls “definition/understanding” function of epideictic address. As mentioned in chapter one, Condit identified three functions of ceremonial speeches for the speaker and three for the audience: for the speaker, ceremonial speeches should serve as an occasion to provide definition to the troubling event, shape a sense of community, and display leadership through eloquence; for the audience, on the other hand, epideictic speeches should help them to understand the troubling event, share in that sense of community, and recognize (or reject) leadership.<sup>53</sup> Obama took the opportunity to define the event of Barnard’s graduation in terms of contemporary issues in order to help their graduates to understand the significance of the event for them. In doing that, Obama addresses key issues not only for the graduates but also for his campaign. It seems that his greatest challenge was to fulfill epideictic expectations for commencement addresses while at the same time answering Republican attacks and furthering his own campaign.

In order to do so, President Obama first established identification between himself and the Barnard graduates by comparing the challenges he faced when he graduated from Columbia with the challenges they faced, saying: “But for all the differences, the Class of 1983 actually had a lot in common with all of you. For we, too, were heading out into a world at a moment when our country was still recovering from a particularly severe

economic recession. It was a time of change. It was a time of uncertainty. It was a time of passionate political debates.”<sup>54</sup> In this passage Obama not only established identification with the Barnard audience but also explains that downturns had happened before in the American economy—specifically during Ronald Reagan’s administration—thus deflecting Republican attacks on his own economic policies.

Later, President Obama acknowledged the differences between his uncertainties as a graduate in 1983 and the uncertainties that those young women would face after graduating in 2012 saying: “Of course, as young women, you’re also going to grapple with some unique challenges, like whether you’ll be able to earn equal pay for equal work; whether you’ll be able to balance the demands of your job and your family; whether you’ll be able to fully control decisions about your own health.”<sup>55</sup> This is a remarkable example of Obama’s definition of the situation in terms of uncertainties and challenges that his presidency had offered significant and memorable efforts to resolve.

The question regarding equal pay for equal work referred to the first bill that the President signed into law: the Lilly Ledbetter Act. The fact that president had addressed the issue for which Ledbetter had fought for many years<sup>56</sup> suggests a sense of urgency in prioritizing that bill over other pieces of legislation. Furthermore, when President Obama cites the challenge of “whether you’ll be able to fully control decisions about your own health,” he’s referring to what mainstream media had been calling the “war on women,” exemplified by Limbaugh’s attacks on Sandra Fluke and that eventually extended to Republican efforts to regulate issues such as abortion and contraception coverage. Without question, audience members would correlate the challenge of controlling “your own body” with Obama’s controversial mandate regarding preventive care services to

women, a topic that was very fresh in the audience's mind. This excerpt provides an example in which President Obama not only "defines" the situation so that the graduates can "understand" it, but he also addresses key campaign issues.

President Obama also mentioned the economic crisis, high unemployment rates, and gender-related issues such as equal payment, emphasizing that "(...) while opportunities for women have grown exponentially over the last 30 years, (...) in many ways you have it even tougher than we did. This recession has been more brutal, the job losses steeper. Politics seems nastier. Congress more gridlocked than ever. Some folks in the financial world have not exactly been model corporate citizens."<sup>57</sup> Discussion of these issues echoes his speeches at Arizona State and Notre Dame but the strategy changed considerably. At Barnard the President no longer pointed at "Wall Street" and "Washington" as the ones at fault for the economic recession. As a matter of fact, since he is the incumbent president, this time there is no particular institution to be blamed for the slow recovery of the country. Although the President referred to "some folks in the financial world," which could be understood as an indirect reference to "Wall Street," it is important to notice that unlike his previous commencement addresses, the President does not suggest agency. Thus it cannot be affirmed with certainty "who" or "what" is "responsible" for the recession.

The President then announced the goal of the speech, which in general echoed the earlier speeches at Arizona State and Notre Dame. His goal was to tell graduates not to believe the mainstream sensationalist media message that "change isn't possible; that you can't make a difference; that you won't be able to close that gap between life as it is and life as you want it to be."<sup>58</sup> At Notre Dame, President Obama urged the graduates to

fulfill the call to remake the world and renew the world's promise, projecting a prophetic tone. At Barnard the President projected certainty saying: "See, the question is not whether things will get better -- they always do. The question is not whether we've got the solutions to our challenges -- we've had them within our grasp for quite some time"<sup>59</sup> With that passage, President Obama reinforced his confidence, as presidential candidate, for he was aware of ways to "make things get better."

The President laid out, then, the supposed solutions to American challenges saying:

We know, for example, that this country would be better off if more Americans were able to get the kind of education that you've received here at Barnard -- (applause) -- if more people could get the specific skills and training that employers are looking for today.

We know that we'd all be better off if we invest in science and technology that sparks new businesses and medical breakthroughs; if we developed more clean energy so we could use less foreign oil and reduce the carbon pollution that's threatening our planet. (Applause.)

We know that we're better off when there are rules that stop big banks from making bad bets with other people's money and -- (applause) - - when insurance companies aren't allowed to drop your coverage when you need it most or charge women differently from men. (Applause.) Indeed, we know we are better off when women are treated fairly and equally in every aspect of American life -- whether it's the salary you earn or the health decisions you make. (Applause.)

We know these things to be true. We know that our challenges are eminently solvable. The question is whether together, we can muster the will -- in our own lives, in our common institutions, in our politics -- to bring about the changes we need.<sup>60</sup>

Throughout this long passage, President Obama essentially rehearsed his political agenda in the 2012 campaign. He identified his standpoint on education, his support on investing in science and technology, his advocacy toward the use of clean energy and consequential decrease on oil dependence, and his disapproval of carbon pollution. Obama also reminded the audience of his deeds: measures to regulate business transactions in financial institutions, the Affordable Health Care Act, the Lilly Ledbetter law, and requiring health insurance coverage for preventive care services for women. It is also important to notice that the President explored these solutions as if they were generally accepted facts, statements that were beyond discussion because ultimately “we know these things to be true.” His agenda, thus, was unquestionable.

Another important facet of this excerpt is that in the process of helping graduates to “understand” the situation, he also shapes a sense of community evoking the urgency of working “together” to make the necessary changes to solve challenges. In the same excerpt, President Obama seems to fulfill all three functions of epideictic discourse identified by Condit; he clearly defines the situation to help the graduates understand the circumstances they face, he shapes a sense of community in which the graduate can share, and he displays leadership in the process of advancing his political agenda.

Obama tied his assumptions about those things “we know to be true” to the country’s destiny and empowered the graduates by showing them that their destiny was

ted to the nation's destiny saying: "After decades of slow, steady, extraordinary progress, you are now poised to make this the century where women shape not only their own destiny but the destiny of this nation and of this world. But how far your leadership takes this country, how far it takes this world -- well, that will be up to you. You've got to want it."<sup>61</sup> The graduate's future and the nation's future were tied together, but since both graduates and the nation were going through a turbulent moment, the person to shape the path to be taken by the community needed to be sufficiently qualified to do so. The person to define the future of the nation should certainly be the national leader: the president. But the person to define the future of Barnard graduates seemed to require an additional layer of authority, and Obama fulfilled this need using his persona of father.

Thus, Obama reinforced his credentials by saying: "And as someone who wants that future -- that better future -- for you, and for Malia and Sasha, as somebody who's had the good fortune of being the husband and the father and the son of some strong, remarkable women, allow me to offer just a few pieces of advice. That's obligatory. (Laughter.) Bear with me."<sup>62</sup> That was the moment when his role as the counterpart of motherhood, or his father persona, became more explicit. In order to enhance his *ethos*, Obama appealed to his leadership not as a statesman but as a father.

Obama developed his main points, or pieces of advice, using key values and beliefs to provide understanding of the "troubling" event while also shaping a sense of community. In those main points Obama provided three pieces of advice to the graduates assuming the *persona* of father, son, and husband of powerful women: "fight for your seat at the table;"<sup>63</sup> "Never underestimate the power of your example;"<sup>64</sup> and "Persevere."<sup>65</sup>

In that process, Obama selected the key values of determination (represented by “the will (...) to bring about the changes we need”<sup>66</sup>), political and social engagement (represented by “don’t just sit back and watch”<sup>67</sup>), role modeling (represented by “never underestimate the power of your example”<sup>68</sup>), and perseverance. In other portions of the speech, Obama also reinforced the ideas of commitment, hope, civil rights, and fairness as part of the American dream. It is important to emphasize that president Obama did not make direct references to those values; they had to be inferred. Obama preferred to focus on few direct references to values but more clear constitutive strategies that defined women in general, and Barnard graduates more specifically, as powerful. The President shaped the community saying: “Because as tough as things have been, I am convinced you are tougher;”<sup>69</sup> “I’ve seen a generation eager, impatient even, to step into the rushing waters of history and change its course;”<sup>70</sup> “And that defiant, can-do spirit is what runs through the veins of American history. It’s the lifeblood of all our progress. And it is that spirit which we need your generation to embrace and rekindle right now;”<sup>71</sup> “we are dynamic, not static.”<sup>72</sup> In all those instances, President Obama defines American women as tough, dynamic and willing to change the *status quo*. In doing so, he aligned his persona with his depiction of Barnard graduates, creating identification and a shared sense of community.

Most importantly, as the President shaped community, he reinforced a communal desire for “changing” and “moving forward;” themes that resonated with his campaign slogan. These references can be better exemplified in the following excerpts (bolded for easier visualization): “Every day you receive a steady stream of sensationalism and scandal and stories with a message that suggest **change** isn’t possible; that you can’t

make a difference; that you won't be able to close that gap between life as it is and life as you want it to be. (...) My job today is to tell you don't believe it,"<sup>73</sup> "I've seen a generation eager, impatient even, to step into the rushing waters of history and **change** its course;"<sup>74</sup> and while explaining that the Constitution was a document with initial flaws, Obama reinforced that "It allowed for protest, and movements, and the dissemination of new ideas that would repeatedly, decade after decade, **change** the world -- a constant **forward** movement that continues to this day,"<sup>75</sup> and he also defined Americans as a people who are "(...) dynamic, not static. We look **forward**, not back."<sup>76</sup> Obama explained that it was up to the graduates to make sure change would happen saying that "It's up to you to stand up and to be heard, to write and to lobby, to march, to organize, to vote,"<sup>77</sup> and also by saying "Don't wait for the person next to you to be the first to speak up for what's right. Because maybe, just maybe, they're waiting on you."<sup>78</sup>

Obama also provided examples of women that were responsible for change, and who allowed the country to "move forward" such as Democrat Senator Barbara Mikulski and Republican Senator Olympia Snowe, who together made sure that federally-funded research on diseases would not focus only on their effects on men. Mikulski and Snowe might have served as a demonstration that the women in the Senate were able to transcend partisanship and reach a significant achievement in the area of health research. Alluding to Mikulski and Snowe symbolizes rising above gridlock while also reinforcing a sense that women could really "get more done" in Congress, as the President mentioned earlier in the speech. On a similar note, the President also mentions the alliance between two Democrat members of the House of Representatives –Patsy Mink and Edith Green—who together passed Title IX in 1972.<sup>79</sup> Obama also remarks the importance of Lilly

Ledbetter who “had the courage to step up and say, you know what, this isn’t right, women weren’t being treated fairly”<sup>80</sup> and eventually led Congress to implement the notion of equal pay for equal work.

Additionally, Obama provided examples of powerful women that inspired change through their own examples in society. He cites Hilda Solis, the Secretary of Labor during his first term, as a symbolic reference for young Latinas saying: “think about what that means to a young Latina girl when she sees a Cabinet secretary that looks like her.”<sup>81</sup> Although the President does not mention her name, he cites Hillary Clinton—his Secretary of State—by saying “Think about what it means to a young girl in Iowa when she sees a presidential candidate who looks like her.”<sup>82</sup> In a similar strategy, Obama alludes to Susan Rice—his U.N. ambassador— by saying “Think about what it means to a young girl walking in Harlem right down the street when she sees a U.N. ambassador who looks like her.”<sup>83</sup>

The combination of all those examples alluding to women who advance the cause of equality for females, serve as strategic elements for the President to fulfill the epideictic function of definition through key values while also furthering the President’s reelection campaign. In the process of highlighting women who achieved and became role models in American society, the President shares a sense of community with the audience. The tone of the speech, and the careful choice of examples that became “present” in the minds of the audience, resonate with Barnard’s mission: “the advancement of women.”<sup>84</sup> In the process of displaying identification with the College’s key values, Obama is able to enhance his *ethos*.

Since the graduates' destiny was tied to the destiny of the country, it became expedient to display leadership and enhance his *ethos* through a series of stories. First he told a story about the years after he graduated from Columbia, a reality to which Barnard graduates would soon be able to relate, in which he started working in a community on the South Side of Chicago that "had been plagued by gang violence."<sup>85</sup> Obama explained that with the help of volunteers they tried to mobilize community leaders to discuss the problem of gangs. His first meeting was not successful because nobody appeared. As a result, the volunteers who worked with him felt discouraged and manifested their willingness to quit. But Obama persuaded them to persist by pointing at some boys playing in the street and saying: "Before you quit, answer one question. What will happen to those boys if you quit? Who will fight for them if we don't? Who will give them a fair shot if we leave?"<sup>86</sup> In this passage, the President strategically assumes his "father" persona by being concerned with the future of young boys. At the same time, the President reinforces characteristics that are desirable in a president such as his persistence and inspirational abilities.

Portraying himself as an inspiring, perseverant leader was not enough to enhance his *ethos*, so Obama displayed humbleness by giving the credit for his persistent characteristic to the powerful women in his life, the son and grandson of strong women, a dedicated husband, and a loving father. President Obama cited his mother as a symbol of strong woman, a person who struggled to reach her goals, educate him, and also a person who helped women in need:

And my mom ended up dedicating herself to helping women around the world access the money they needed to start their own

businesses -- she was an early pioneer in microfinance. And that meant, though, that she was gone a lot, and she had her own struggles trying to figure out balancing motherhood and a career. And when she was gone, my grandmother stepped up to take care of me.<sup>87</sup>

Explaining his mother's struggles in balancing career and motherhood, while reinforcing her professional achievements was an important strategy. Most working women who were watching the speech would feel that Obama's message was directed to them. The speech would seem "right," thus making those subjects more likely to accept the message conveyed. In addition, Obama explains that when his mother was "gone," his grandmother took over the responsibility of educating him and that her persistence also influenced him in becoming a successful person:

She only had a high school education. She got a job at a local bank. She hit the glass ceiling, and watched men she once trained promoted up the ladder ahead of her. But she didn't quit. Rather than grow hard or angry each time she got passed over, she kept doing her job as best as she knew how, and ultimately ended up being vice president at the bank. She didn't quit.<sup>88</sup>

Obama cited his wife, Michelle and reinforced his portrayal of dedicated husband and loving father saying:

And later on, I met a woman who was assigned to advise me on my first summer job at a law firm. And she gave me such good advice that I married her. (Laughter.) And Michelle and I gave everything we had to balance our careers and a young family. But let's face it, no matter

how enlightened I must have thought myself to be, it often fell more on her shoulders when I was traveling, when I was away. I know that when she was with our girls, she'd feel guilty that she wasn't giving enough time to her work, and when she was at her work, she'd feel guilty she wasn't giving enough time to our girls. And both of us wished we had some superpower that would let us be in two places at once. But we persisted. We made that marriage work.

And the reason Michelle had the strength to juggle everything, and put up with me and eventually the public spotlight, was because she, too, came from a family of folks who didn't quit (...)<sup>89</sup>

In this excerpt, the President first ingratiated himself with female audiences by acknowledging the challenge of any working woman: the balance between career and family. Not only did President Obama acknowledge the challenge but he also appreciated the extra effort that many women have in responding to kids needs in the absence of their fathers by acknowledging "let's face it, (...) it often fell more on her shoulders when I was traveling." But the President noted that he also struggled with the process of balancing career and family and concluded the excerpt with a positive tone showing his and Michelle's dedication in the process of keeping their marriage. By associating his character to strong women who participated actively in his education and life, Obama transferred their qualities to his *persona*. He improved his *ethos* by associating himself with people he endorsed and embodied qualities highly desirable by most females, which certainly enhanced his *ethos* among female voters.

Finally it is important to notice the President's treatment of controversies and rhetorical problems. In this speech the President was handling the controversies regarding the vice-president's comment on same-sex marriage, the policy on mandatory birth control by health insurers, the local controversy regarding his choice to speak at Barnard instead of Columbia, gridlock in Congress, and what his political opponents characterized as his limited accomplishments during his presidency. In responding to the last three—the local controversy, gridlock in Congress and his accomplishments—the President briefly acknowledged them, and usually indirectly.

He dismissed the controversy regarding Columbia through humor, and treated the other two metaphorically. Through his enthymemes the audience was expected to fill the in the blanks with their own knowledge in regards to those issues. Instead of focusing on his lack of accomplishments, he preferred to indirectly mention his most remarkable accomplishments throughout the speech, and confirmed his standpoint by reinforcing that those were the right things to be done: “we know these things to be true.” The President briefly mentioned gridlock in Congress: he said that Congress was more gridlocked than ever, and that Congress would get a lot more done if Barnard graduates were there. But the other two controversies also deserved some response and the President did so as he reached the conclusion of his speech:

But whenever you feel that creeping cynicism, whenever you hear those voices say you can't make a difference, whenever somebody tells you to set your sights lower -- the trajectory of this country should give you hope. Previous generations should give you hope. What young generations have done before should give you hope. Young folks who

marched and mobilized and stood up and sat in, from Seneca Falls to Selma to Stonewall, didn't just do it for themselves; they did it for other people. (Applause.)

That's how we achieved women's rights. That's how we achieved voting rights. That's how we achieved workers' rights. That's how we achieved gay rights. (Applause.) That's how we've made this Union more perfect. (Applause.)

And if you're willing to do your part now, if you're willing to reach up and close that gap between what America is and what America should be, I want you to know that I will be right there with you. (Applause.) If you are ready to fight for that brilliant, radically simple idea of America that no matter who you are or what you look like, no matter who you love or what God you worship, you can still pursue your own happiness, I will join you every step of the way. (Applause.)<sup>90</sup>

Obama addressed the competing persuasive voices, such as the negative ads that had been circulating as a result of Republican primaries, by reinforcing that the “creeping cynicism” should be ignored because the path of change was a certainty proved by American history. The references to Seneca Falls, Selma, and Stonewall allowed the President to touch on the struggles for civil rights and brought to the consciousness of the audience the *presence* of the fights for women's rights, worker's rights, and gay rights. Thus, when referring to the women's rights and gay rights, and the last paragraph of the passage above, the President reinforces his position in regards to the controversies of birth control and same-sex marriage. He concludes, then, exploring the idea that if the

audience supported those premises, and were willing to close the gap between what America was and what America should be, not only the Union would be more perfect, but he would also join them “every step of the way.”

### ***Implications of the findings to the epideictic genre***

Certainly during a presidential campaign, candidates have numerous occasions to express their values, but the most appropriate occasions to elaborate on values are ceremonial or epideictic ones.

As mentioned, Condit explained that speeches categorized under the label of “ceremonial,” or epideictic, shared common functional pairs. For the speaker, Condit identified three recurrent functions: to provide understanding of the troubling event, shape a sense of community in which the audience is invited to share, and display leadership through eloquence. Taking into consideration the paradigm of the rhetorical presidency, presidents are inevitably expected to maintain a perpetual campaign process. For this reason, the functions of “definition” and “shaping community” will be ideologically tailored because those functions, according to Condit, are developed according to the audience’s values and beliefs.<sup>91</sup> Condit explains that the function of definition relies on the audience’s values and beliefs in an effort to make the troubling event less confusing. At the same time, the function of shaping community also requires the speaker to choose values to promote a sense of common identity, and she explains: “In giving a speaker the right to shape the definition of the community, the audience gives the speaker the right to select values, stories, and persons from the shared heritage and to promote them over others.”<sup>92</sup>

Thus, when defining the values to be used in an epideictic speech, the President is at the same time campaigning for the presidency in terms of ideological perceptions that would resonate with the audience's beliefs and key values. The choices of key values anchoring the speeches are essential to strengthen commitment with the audience while at the same time reinforcing presidential values.

When rhetorical scholar Gerard Hauser reviewed Aristotle's theory of epideictic in light of the ancient Greek culture, he determined that ceremonial addresses had the function of educating society in terms of civic virtue and that, in order to do so, the audience should be educated in regards to the key values of that community. In that sense Hauser claims that: "In addition to teaching, a rhetoric that commemorates noble deeds can inculcate a common vocabulary of excellence among its witnesses"<sup>93</sup> and he adds that "Political actors cannot unite out of common interest without first recognizing shared bonds of community that transcend individual differences."<sup>94</sup> This means that "before citizens can imagine the possibility of a vibrant public realm, they require a vocabulary capable of expressing public issues and experiences of publicness, which are civic needs (...) that epideictic addresses."<sup>95</sup> Certainly, the strategic choices of those values with which presidential candidates base their speeches is a critical process, because those will only make sense if the audience is in agreement. Therefore, the strategic choice of those values to be inculcated in the audience's minds, or vocabularies—as Hauser proposes—seem to be a delicate choice because while shaping community and defining the event the speaker must choose values that will resonate with the audience's values and ideologies.

If successfully employed, this ideological identification allows the speaker to achieve the third function of epideictic: leadership recognition. In terms of the rhetorical presidency doctrine, and considering the context of presidential campaign, choosing the right values seems critical. As seen in the analysis of this speech, President Obama's ability to use strategies to fulfill his both goals is what constitutes his real artistry.

In his commencement address at Barnard, Obama did not make direct references to his campaign, although he was clearly aware that the speech was a part of that campaign. Still, to some extent, President Obama was able to enhance his *ethos* by a series of strategies that were mostly a matter of persona. By portraying himself as the counterpart of motherhood throughout the speech, president Obama enhanced his *ethos* in epitomizing the desirable aspects of a male leader: a strong, perseverant, humble and dedicated leader who is willing to fight for the betterment of the Union through egalitarianism.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Epstein and Glenn Thrush, “President Obama Launches Reelection Campaign with Video,” *Politico*, April 4, 2011, accessed August 21, 2012, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0411/52457.html>. The video is available at the link <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SgxsxhxoRU>.

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<sup>4</sup> Jessica Yellin, Paul Steinhauser and Adam Aigner-Treworgy, “Obama Outlines Case for Re-election at First Official Campaign Rally,” *CNN*, May 5, 2012, accessed July 4, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/05/politics/obama-campaign-rally>.

<sup>5</sup> Alana Horowitz, “Rick Santorum: Obama Is 'A Snob,’” *The Huffington Post*, February 25, 2012, accessed March 20, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/25/rick-santorum-obama-snob-college\\_n\\_1301854.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/25/rick-santorum-obama-snob-college_n_1301854.html).

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<sup>8</sup> “US Elections 2010: Congress Splits Between Parties,” *BBC*, November 3, 2010, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-11671935>.

<sup>9</sup> Donna Cassata and Joan Lowry, “Gridlock Stymies Goals in Congress: Lawmakers Focus on Modest Bills,” *The Washington Times*, March 25, 2010, accessed March 11, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/mar/25/gridlock-stymies-goals-in-congress/>.

<sup>10</sup> Data obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey,” accessed March 10, 2013, <http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>.

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<sup>19</sup> Sam Stein, “Rick Santorum: Contraception Shouldn't Be Covered By Insurance At All,” *The Huffington Post*, February 10, 2012, accessed March 19, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/10/rick-santorum-contraception\\_n\\_1269008.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/10/rick-santorum-contraception_n_1269008.html).

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<sup>22</sup> Jack Mirkinson, "Rush Limbaugh: Sandra Fluke, Woman Denied Right To Speak At Contraception Hearing, A 'Slut.'"

<sup>23</sup> Dean Schabner and Matt Negrin, "Rush Limbaugh Apologizes for Calling Sandra Fluke a 'Slut,'" *ABCNews.com*, March 3, 2012, accessed March 19, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/rush-limbaugh-apologizes-calling-sandra-fluke-slut/story?id=15841687>.

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<sup>27</sup> As noted by Tamar Lewin in “Obama Will Speak at Commencement at Barnard College,” the expression “war on women” referred to the Democrat perception upon Republican’s opposition to the requirement of contraception coverage in the new health care law.

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<sup>30</sup> Jessica Yellin, “Biden Apologizes to Obama for Marriage Controversy,” paragraph 13.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Barbaro, “A Scramble as Biden Backs Same-Sex Marriage,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 2012, accessed October 20, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/07/us/politics/biden-expresses-support-for-same-sex-marriages.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/07/us/politics/biden-expresses-support-for-same-sex-marriages.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0), paragraph 11.

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<sup>37</sup> “BWOG: About us,” accessed March 19, 2013, <http://bwog.com/about/>.

<sup>38</sup> “BREAKING: Obama to Speak at Barnard’s Commencement,” *The Bwog*, March 3, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> All those phrases were obtained from the comment section of the article “BREAKING: Obama to Speak at Barnard’s Commencement,” *The Bwog*, March 3, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> See comment section of the article “BREAKING: Obama to Speak at Barnard’s Commencement,” *The Bwog*, March 3, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> See comment section of the article “BREAKING: Obama to Speak at Barnard’s Commencement,” *The Bwog*, March 3, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> See comment section of the article “BREAKING: Obama to Speak at Barnard’s Commencement,” *The Bwog*, March 3, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> See comment section of the article “BREAKING: Obama to Speak at Barnard’s Commencement,” *The Bwog*, March 3, 2012.

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<sup>44</sup> See comment section of the article “BREAKING: Obama to Speak at Barnard’s Commencement,” *The Bwog*, March 3, 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Pérez-Peña, “After Barnard Gets Obama for Speech, Tensions With Columbia Bubble Up,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2012, accessed March 20, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/nyregion/with-obama-to-speak-at-barnard-strong-emotions-at-columbia.html?\\_r=3&emc=eta1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/nyregion/with-obama-to-speak-at-barnard-strong-emotions-at-columbia.html?_r=3&emc=eta1&).

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<sup>47</sup> Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1969), 116.

<sup>48</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, p. 117.

<sup>49</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, p. 117.

<sup>50</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, p. 334.

<sup>51</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, p. 334.

<sup>52</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 5-6.

<sup>53</sup> Celeste Michelle Condit, “The Functions of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar,” *Communication Quarterly* 33 (1985): 288.

<sup>54</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 10.

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<sup>55</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 11.

<sup>56</sup> “Lilly Ledbetter,” accessed March 20, 2013, <http://www.lillyledbetter.com/about.html>

<sup>57</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 13.

<sup>58</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 14.

<sup>59</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 17.

<sup>60</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 17-20.

<sup>61</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 22-23.

<sup>62</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 23.

<sup>63</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 24.

<sup>64</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 33.

<sup>65</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 39.

<sup>66</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 20.

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<sup>67</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,”  
para. 31.

<sup>68</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,”  
para. 33.

<sup>69</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,”  
para.15

<sup>70</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,”  
para. 15.

<sup>71</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,”  
para. 16.

<sup>72</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,”  
para. 27.

<sup>73</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,”  
para. 14-15.

<sup>74</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,”  
para. 15.

<sup>75</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,”  
para. 26.

<sup>76</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,”  
para. 27.

<sup>77</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,”  
para. 31.

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<sup>78</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 32.

<sup>79</sup> Title XI was a measure that allowed American females to compete in exchange for educational scholarships.

<sup>80</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 30.

<sup>81</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 35.

<sup>82</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 35.

<sup>83</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 35.

<sup>84</sup> As noted at Barnard’s website. See: “Barnard College: About the College,” accessed March 20, 2013, <http://barnard.edu/about/columbia-partnership>.

<sup>85</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 42.

<sup>86</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 43.

<sup>87</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 47.

<sup>88</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 48.

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<sup>89</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 50-51.

<sup>90</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony,” para. 53-55.

<sup>91</sup> Condit, “The Functions of Epideictic,” 288.

<sup>92</sup> Condit, “The Functions of Epideictic,” 289.

<sup>93</sup> Gerard A. Hauser, “Aristotle on Epideictic: The Formation of Public Morality,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 29 (1999): 19.

<sup>94</sup> Hauser, “Aristotle on Epideictic,” 19.

<sup>95</sup> Hauser, “Aristotle on Epideictic,” 6.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have been a journey through President Obama's commencement addresses at Arizona State University, the University of Notre Dame, and Barnard College. This thesis was ignited by the desire to research the epideictic genre in a very specific subcategory: presidential commencement addresses. Despite the fact that it is limited to three speeches by a single president, the research has revealed that Aristotle's assumption—that ceremonial address should exclusively entail praising or blaming—is an incomplete characterization of contemporary epideictic address, and especially of commencement addresses delivered by Presidents of the United States. Celeste Condit's encompassing theory on the epideictic genre was very useful in the process of revising the boundaries of the genre, and this thesis advances a refinement of Condit's theory in regards to presidential rhetoric. Presidential commencement addresses appear to focus in one main function: the display of leadership through eloquence. But considering the rhetorical presidency paradigm, this assertion may seem tautological, and it is important to address that concern in detail.

Since the rhetorical presidency paradigm recognizes the trend of perpetual campaigns in modern presidencies, and the notion that "speaking is governing," it seems obvious that the main function of epideictic—for presidents—would be the display of leadership. What is unique about the refinement of epideictic's function in light of the rhetorical presidency is the challenge of displaying leadership through strategies that do not overshadow the expectations of a commencement address.

This chapter explains the connection between all the elements discussed in the previous chapters and provides an analysis of the implications of the findings to the study of presidential commencement addresses, explains the limitations of this study, and proposes future directions for the study of epideictic rhetoric. Assembling all those elements requires some systematic pattern and for this reason, before developing a thorough conclusion, this chapter provides an overview of what was explored by previous chapters.

### ***Review***

Chapter two explained that the commencement address delivered at Arizona State University faced multiple challenges. In addition to speaking in a quite troubling economic period of American history, President Obama also faced the challenges of speaking in John McCain's home state, and dealing with the local controversy regarding the honorary degree that the university had denied him. At the same time, the President faced the upcoming midterm elections and the threat of a gridlocked Congress. The commencement address at ASU was illuminated by the theories of the American Dream's dichotomy developed by Walter Fisher.

Fisher's dichotomy of the American dream refers to the 1972 presidential election, in which Richard Nixon represented what Fisher called the "materialistic" myth of the American Dream, while George McGovern represented the "moralistic" myth of the American Dream.<sup>1</sup> The first myth, or version of the American Dream, entailed focus on self-reliance and the belief that wealth, power, and status were proportional to the individual's personal worth. This version of the dream also poses that through the free enterprise system and less governmental regulation each individual would strive for their

own social economic ascendancy.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the “moralistic” version of the dream entailed a focus on the idea that “all men are created equal,” and that since men “are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,” it is the government’s role to “secure these rights” through regulations and control. Additionally, this version of the American dream emphasizes that the individual’s personal worth should not be associated with wealth, status, and power; rather, it involves dignity, tolerance, compassion, and charity—in which those who have more help those who have less.<sup>3</sup>

In the commencement address at Arizona State University, Obama adopted a strategy that provided two possible paths for the student’s future. In depicting those paths, President Obama made use of semantic association allowing him to legitimize the path of devotion to a bigger purpose, or the path of interdependence, and delegitimize the path of greed and irresponsibility, or self-centeredness. This strategic use of language was key in the process of creating a sense of identification between the speaker and the audience. With this kind of device, the audience was invited to comply with the President’s “moralistic” ideological view of the American Dream. In this process, President Obama refuted potential rhetorical threats to his *ethos*, by blaming the economic situation of the country on “Wall Street” and “Washington.” Through those strategies, and the use of humor to minimize controversies, the President was able to both fulfill the expectations of commencement addresses and respond to rhetorical problems.

In chapter three, the controversial commencement address delivered at the University of Notre Dame served as a case study illuminated by the theory of the prophetic tradition. In addition to the rhetorical problems present in May of 2009, such as the great recession and high unemployment rates, at Notre Dame Obama also faced the

heated controversy regarding the choice of commencement speaker. The President's opinion on abortion and stem-cell research clashed with Notre Dame's Catholic values, and some opposed awarding Obama with an honorary degree. Many in the Notre Dame community felt that awarding the President the honorary degree violated the United States Conference of Catholic Bishop's (USCCB) 2004 statement which stipulated that "The Catholic community and Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They should not be given awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions."<sup>4</sup>

In order to overcome those rhetorical problems, President Obama embodied the prophetic tradition, by using theological language and a prophetic persona. At Arizona State, Obama embodied the ideology of interdependence in order to persuade individuals to become subjects of the moralistic version of the American Dream. At Notre Dame, however, although President Obama conveyed a message with similar content as in the address delivered at ASU, his rhetorical strategies resorted to values that would be acceptable to the audience. For this reason, since Obama was delivering the commencement address to a Catholic community, the President preferred to adopt the strategy of the prophetic tradition. Through this strategy, using theological language, biblical passages, and citing religious personalities—such as Martin Luther King, and religious leaders of the Notre Dame community—multiple times, the President enhanced his *ethos*.

The process of *ethos* enhancement generates a symbiotic relationship because the more the *ethos* of the speaker is enhanced, the more the audience wants to participate in the speaker's narrative, and the more they become subjected to the speaker's narrative,

the more they enhance the speaker's *ethos*. In other words, by enhancing the speaker's *ethos*, the speaker's ideology becomes more attractive and compelling to the audience, and by subjecting to it, the audience feeds on the process of *ethos* enhancement even more.

In chapter four, the commencement address delivered at Barnard College was illuminated by the rhetorical concept of *presence* in the President's embodiment of a father *persona*. The speech was delivered in a presidential election year amidst attacks on Obama's political persona and policies from Republican presidential candidates. In addition, the President's mandate of preventive healthcare services for women caused turmoil both in the political and religious arena, generating a series of subsequent events that brought attention to the theme of women's rights. Obama's offer to speak at Barnard stirred speculation over his choice to speak at that particular institution and local controversy between Columbia and Barnard students. With the media spotlights turned to President Obama, the challenge of campaigning while fulfilling the expectations of a commencement address was significant. Obama needed a complex rhetorical strategy to be able to deflect political attacks, enhance his *ethos*, and campaign for women's votes. Through his father persona President Obama was able to enhance his *ethos* of successful son, loving father and dedicated husband. This strategy allowed him to deliver a message that persuaded women to subject themselves to his political agenda, since he was not only a desirable counterpart of motherhood, but also a defender of women's rights.

Despite their different contexts, audiences, rhetorical strategies, and outcomes, recurrent elements in those three speeches proved deserving of further analysis. Certainly all of them belong to the same rhetorical genre, but more important than that was the fact

that all those speeches fulfilled expectations for commencement addresses and at the same time addressed specific rhetorical problems in a way that enhanced Obama's ethos. Additionally, it was noticed that in all three speeches the search for ideological identification was a key element. Through the embodiment of the ideology of interdependence, the prophetic tradition, or the father persona, President Barack Obama tried to persuade the audience to embrace his ideological perspective in the political arena.

Furthermore, a constant concern with the rhetorical repercussion of those speeches became apparent when analyzing the strategies used by the President in the treatment of the controversies surrounding those events. Most of the strategies used would amplify or address in detail the rhetorical problems of the particular occasion. Controversies were typically dismissed through humor, ignored, or responded to through metaphorical references. The exception for that tendency occurred whenever controversy was physically present during the speech—such as on the day of the speech at Notre Dame when hecklers and posters made the controversy still vivid. At Notre Dame, the President did not have the option of ignoring the controversy, and for this reason, the whole speech seemed to seek common ground in the debate on abortion. In all those circumstances—both those in which he would treat the controversy in detail and those in which he would dismiss the controversy—the rhetorical figure of *presence* served in the process of defining what should be mentioned or obscured in the speech. The President did not bring controversies to the audiences' minds because every element of his speeches had been carefully planned to achieve *presence*. The same principle of *presence* that the President used to bring certain elements to the consciousness of the

audience was the principle that led him to avoid controversies. In response to those, the President preferred to use humor, metaphorical representations, or enthymemes in which the audience “filled in the blanks” with their own knowledge in regards to the controversy. Those that were unaware of controversies, most likely, wouldn’t acknowledge its existence as a result of the speech.

### *Analysis of the findings*

Taking into consideration the sheer number of invitations that the President receives to speak at commencement ceremonies—let alone those that he “offers” himself to be the speaker—it becomes evident that the choice of “where” and “to whom” the President speaks is carefully deliberated. The process with which the choice of universities is made is still quite unclear, but based on this analysis it seems likely that those choices are made for political reasons, thus making this research much more relevant in the studies of presidential rhetoric.

In 2013, for example, the Obama Administration announced that the President will speak at Ohio State University’s commencement ceremony. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the President launched his first campaign rally at that university and eventually Ohio turned out to be a decisive state in the 2012 presidential election. Obama not only won the majority of the votes in Ohio, but the state actually represented the greatest number of electoral votes among all the so called “swing states.” It is undeniable that presidential commencement addresses have been used strategically in the advancement of the Obama administration’s campaign.

As remarked in the first chapter of this thesis, Presidential commencement addresses should be viewed through new lenses, especially if we consider the potential

rhetorical effect of those speeches. Wearing the commencement robe and stripped of his “official” role allows the President to speak in a much more personal, almost conversational, tone. This kind of tone allows the President to highlight the most strategic characteristics of his political persona for each specific occasion. Additionally, the “formal informality” of commencement addresses allows the President to establish some sort of intimacy with an audience. On such occasions, the process of ideological identification seems to become more likely to happen than in speeches that the President delivers in campaign rallies. It is a matter of audience and expectations. In campaign rallies, the purpose of the speech is quite upfront and the audience, typically composed by his supporters, has the expectation of listening to a speech oriented to the President’s political agenda. In commencement addresses however, the expectations are much different. A captive audience expects the President to praise the graduates for their achievements and provide understanding to the implications of the event.

President Obama’s speeches used complex strategies to portray himself as the embodiment of the most acceptable values, or most desirable persona, to those specific audiences. As noted in the first chapter, obtaining adherence and support from graduates is also extremely relevant. Those individuals have just become politically active and are about to start participating in society’s socio-economic deliberations either through vote or through political engagement. In order to create a sense of identification with that audience, the President highlighted strategic values and promised that he would be able to secure, to those who agreed with his perspectives, that everything would be “all right.”

For example, in the commencement address at Arizona State, Obama concluded his speech by reinforcing the promise that if the audience members subscribed

themselves to his moralistic version of the American dream not only they would become better individuals, but the country would also improve.<sup>5</sup> In the speech at Notre Dame, the President seemed to focus on finding common ground with the Catholic community despite their clashing positions on topics such as abortion and stem-cell research while also enhancing his *ethos* as a religious person. But since he had adopted a prophetic persona in that speech, President Obama did not offer graduates any promises or guarantees because through the prophetic persona he is not entitled to do so. In that speech, Obama said he was “interested in promoting greater understanding and cooperation among people;”<sup>6</sup> the typical role of a prophet as explained by James Darsey.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the President advanced the same sort of ideological perspective that he advanced in the speech at Arizona State University: the ideology of interdependence and collective work. Although the President did not personally provide any sort of guarantees that if the audience subscribe to the ideology “everything will be all right” he did refer to God’s providence. The commencement address at Barnard was designed to ingratiate the President with women in order to gain their political support. In that process, President Obama guaranteed that he would be by their side.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the idiosyncrasies of each speech, it is the similarities between them that support my main argument. With the development of the rhetorical presidency paradigm, a new array of exigencies shaped the rhetorical strategies used by presidents in commencement addresses. Since citizens have become accustomed to the idea that “speaking is governing,” presidents are, to some extent, forced to comply with the demands implied by the paradigm. This thesis proposes that due to those exigencies, the main function of a presidential commencement address is to enhance the President’s

*ethos*. In order to do so, the President must choose values upon which the speech will be built. It is in light of those values that President Obama provided a definition of the troubling event to the audience, and it was also in light of those values that the President shaped a sense of community in which the audience could share.

Hence, with all those elements in mind, I propose that the encompassing theory of the epideictic genre, delineated by Celeste M. Condit,<sup>9</sup> should be refined in light of the rhetorical presidency. According to Condit, the epideictic speaker should fulfill at least one of the following three functional pairs: providing definition regarding the troubling event, shaping a sense of community, and displaying leadership through eloquence. The function of definition aimed at explaining the “troubling issue in terms of the audience’s key values and belief,” and that “through the resultant understanding the troubled event will be made less confusing and threatening, providing a sense of comfort for the audience.”<sup>10</sup> The function of shaping community is expected to constitute the community in such a way that they can share their heritage and identity.<sup>11</sup> And lastly, the function of displaying of leadership through eloquence was an opportunity for speakers to enhance their *ethos* because in those occasions “the audience judges the fullness of the speaker’s eloquence, because audiences rightfully take eloquence as a sign of leadership. The person who knows truth, recognizes and wields beauty, and manages power stands a good chance of being a desirable leader for the community.”<sup>12</sup>

This analysis revealed that although President Obama fulfilled all three functions in all the speeches analyzed in this thesis, one of the functions seemed to prevail among the others. Taking into consideration the process of ideological identification, the speeches primarily served the function of displaying leadership through eloquence, while

the other two functions were used as a structural guide to fulfill the general expectations of a commencement address. In all three speeches the President started by providing definition and understanding of the troubling event of graduating in terms of key values, followed by a process of shaping community through examples, stories, and narratives using acceptable values to share the sense of community with the audience. The President always concluded by providing direction for the future of the graduates and reinforced that he would be by their side if they complied with his advice.

Thus, if the epideictic genre is composed by the three functional pairs defined by Condit, the subgroup of presidential commencement addresses is composed of a single function supported by structural elements that allow the President to fulfill the expectations of a ceremonial address. The function of presidential commencement addresses is to enhance their ethos through the display of leadership, therefore campaigning for their presidency. But this theory also has limitations that must be addressed in this thesis.

### ***Limitations and future directions***

One of the potential limitations that must be addressed is the challenge of generalizing the findings of this study to the broad range of presidential rhetoric. Of course, a thorough investigation of other president's commencement addresses would test the conclusions of this analysis, but that is beyond the scope of this study. However, taking into consideration the rhetorical presidency doctrine in which modern presidents must function, it is hard to deny the trend of American Presidents speaking in as many occasions and on as many topics as possible, obviously including university commencements.

The rhetorical presidency recognizes the trend that modern presidents to campaign at all times, and this thesis showed that ceremonial speeches are no exception to that rule, at least in the age of Obama. Although this thesis has only analyzed in depth the speeches from a single president, the findings remain representative when we take into consideration commencement speeches from other presidents. History provides us ample evidence that other presidents also used commencement addresses to convey political—or perhaps campaign—messages.

For example, in 1940 President Franklin Roosevelt spoke at the graduation ceremony of the University of Virginia and the content of his commencement address argued against the conservative idea of American isolationism. John F. Kennedy was the commencement speaker for the class of 1962 at Yale University and his speech focused on replying to the rhetorical problem of criticism regarding the “size” of his government, and justifying some of his policies. Two years later, President Lyndon B. Johnson spoke at Howard University’s commencement ceremony and used the occasion to enhance his ethos by celebrating the victories related to civil rights in America. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Jimmy Carter also spoke at Notre Dame’s graduation ceremony in 1977 and used the occasion to advance his ideological view on American foreign policy. Ronald Reagan also spoke at Notre Dame’s ceremony in 1981 and his message focused on the expediency of a “smaller” government. George H. W. Bush, also used his opportunity to deliver a commencement address at Texas A&M University in 1989 to highlight his policies in regards to the relationship between America and the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup>

Numerous other examples could be provided to support the argument that commencement addresses have been used by presidents to advance political themes. The

challenge lays in supporting the notion that presidential commencement addresses focus on the function of displaying leadership in order to persuade the audience to subscribe to the President's ideological view on specific issues. This specific notion requires more investigation, which I would recommend for future research.

The complexity of handling notions such as ideologies also becomes part of the limitations of this study. Although I made my case and provided plenty of evidence to support my argument, one might challenge my specific labeling strategies. For example, instead of using the name "ideology of interdependence" I could have chosen "ideology of collectivism" or "liberal ideology." In this thesis I tried to label the ideologies in ways that would eliminate as many chances of error as possible, but it is perfectly possible that other labels could be better applied to those specific instances. In addition to the challenge of labeling the ideologies, it is also very hard to affirm with certainty whether or not the speech successfully persuaded the audience to subscribe to a certain ideology. I cannot presume that just because the President was reelected, the women at Barnard were successfully persuaded, or even that they voted for him. Assessing the effectiveness of those speeches in political terms is beyond the scope of this study.

I conclude this thesis with confidence that I have added another piece of information to the scholarship of rhetorical studies. This thesis has contributed both with the studies of presidential rhetoric and with the studies of the epideictic genre. Subsequent studies should test these conclusions through analysis of other presidential commencement addresses.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Walter R. Fisher, "Reaffirmation and Subversion of the American Dream," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 160-167.

<sup>2</sup> Fisher, 161.

<sup>3</sup> Fisher, 161-162.

<sup>4</sup> Jenn Metz, "Jenkins: Obama 'Honored' University by Accepting," *The Observer*, March, 23, 2009, accessed February 25, 2013, <http://www.ndsmcobserver.com/2.2754/jenkins-obama-honored-university-by-accepting-1.255642>.

<sup>5</sup> See Barack Obama, "Remarks By The President At Arizona State University Commencement," May 13, 2009, accessed May 25, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/video/President-Obama-Arizona-State-Commencement/#transcript>, paragraph 34.

<sup>6</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in Commencement Address at the University of Notre Dame," paragraphs 21.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 3, page 72.

<sup>8</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Barnard College Commencement Ceremony," May 14, 2012, *The White House*, accessed May 25, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/14/remarks-president-barnard-college-commencement-ceremony>, paragraphs 53-55.

<sup>9</sup> Celeste Michelle Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar," *Communication Quarterly* 33 (1985): 284-299.

<sup>10</sup> Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic," 288.

<sup>11</sup> Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic," 289.

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<sup>12</sup> Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic," 290-291.

<sup>13</sup> For further details see Carah Ong, "The Politics of Presidential Commencement Addresses: Not Just for Grads," *The Miller Center*, May 15, 2012, accessed March 28, 2013, <http://millercenter.org/blog/presidential-commencement-addresses>. See also Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Stab in the Back Speech," *The Miller Center*, June 10, 1940, accessed March 28, 2013, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3317>; John F. Kennedy, "Commencement Address at Yale University," *The American Presidency Project*, June 11, 1962, accessed March 28, 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29661>; Lyndon B. Johnson, "Commencement Address at Howard University: 'To Fulfill These Rights,'" *The American Presidency Project*, June 4, 1965, accessed March 28, 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27021>; Jimmy Carter, "University Of Notre Dame - Address at Commencement Exercises at the University," *The American Presidency Project*, May 22, 1977, accessed March 28, 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7552>; Ronald Reagan, "Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame," *The American Presidency Project*, May 17, 1981, accessed March 28, 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=43825>; George H. W. Bush, "Commencement Address at Texas A&M University," *The Miller Center*, May 12, 1989, accessed March 28, 2013, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3421>.

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## **Curriculum Vitae**

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## **EDUCATION**

### **Georgia State University**

Atlanta, GA – U.S.

Ph.D., Communication (admitted to the 2013 program)

### **UNLV - University of Nevada, Las Vegas**

Las Vegas, NV – U.S.

M.A., Communication Studies, May 2013

### **ESAMC – Escola Superior de Administração, Marketing e Comunicação**

Campinas, SP – Brazil

M.B.A., Human Resources Management, October 2010

### **UNICAMP - State University of Campinas**

Campinas, SP – Brazil

B.A., Linguistics, February 2007

## **LANGUAGES**

Portuguese: Native

Spanish: Advanced

English: Advanced

German: Intermediate

Latin & Ancient Greek: Intermediate reading skills

## **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES**

UNLV – since August 2011

### ***Graduate Teaching Assistant – Oral Communication instructor (COM 101)***

- Lessons in Public Speaking
- Discussion of theoretical concepts and techniques for discourse development
- Discussions about ethical public speaking
- Development of speaking strategies
- Grading and critiquing speeches.

**Brazilian Rhetoric Society** – from October 2010 to December 2012.

***Member of the board and co-founder***

- Organizing events, promoting elections, and structuring the society

**Guest Lecturer** – August 23, 2012

“The architecture of rhetoric: from classical to contemporary history.” At Centro Universitário Newton Paiva, Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

**UNLV Speech Contest Organization Committee** – Fall 2011; Spring 2012; Fall 2012; Spring 2013.

***Organizer***

- Served in the organization defining judges and contestants of each section during the preliminary round
- Provided technical support to contestants and judges
- Organized prizes
- Scrutinized the punctuation of each contestant in order to determine finalists.

**Berlitz Brazil - Campinas** - from July/2010 to December/2010.

***English and Portuguese Instructor***

- English and Portuguese lessons to students of different ages and levels;
- Business English and Portuguese to executives;
- Lessons about negotiation strategies in foreign languages.

**Avalia – Qualidade Educacional Ltda** - 2010.

***Essay Evaluator***

- Evaluation of essays in Portuguese.

**CNA –Spanish and English School**

***Pedagogical Coordinator*** [from July/2008 to March/2010]

***English Teacher*** [from March/2007 to March/2010.]

- Recruitment and development of English and Spanish Teachers;
- Conduct intake interviews with prospective clients;
- Provide oral placement tests;
- Schedule activities and develop tasks at the school;
- Provide development programs to employees;
- English Teacher to students of different levels and ages;
- Business English to executives.

**IBM / Omni Traduções e Serviços Lingüísticos** - from April/2004 to October/2004

***Translation Verification Tester (TVT)***

- Software localization at IBM. This process verified the quality of the translation made from English to Portuguese in IBM software before the product was launched to the global market.

## **PUBLICATION**

ORTEGA, Milene Ribeiro. **A retórica no discurso político:** o recurso da *presença* no discurso de Roberto Jefferson durante a CPMI dos Correios. In: I Coloquio Nacional de Retórica ‘Retórica y Política’ / I Jornadas Latinoamericanas de Investigación en Estudios Retóricos. Buenos Aires – Argentina: March, 2010.

## **CONFERENCE PRESENTATION (Competitively selected)**

“A retórica no discurso político: o recurso da *presença* no discurso de Roberto Jefferson durante a CPMI dos Correios.” I Coloquio Nacional de Retórica ‘Retórica y Política’ / I Jornadas Latinoamericanas de Investigación en Estudios Retóricos, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2010.

**Translated title:** Rhetoric in political speech: The resource of *presence* in Roberto Jefferson’s discourse during the post office CPMI.

“A *presença* e o argumento no discurso político.” I Congresso Brasileiro de Retórica, Ouro Preto, Brazil. 2010.

**Translated title:** *Presence* and argument in political discourse.

“*Consustancialidade* nos campanhas presidenciais de Lula e Dilma.” II Congresso Brasileiro de Retórica, Belo Horizonte, Brazil. 2012.

**Translated title:** *Consustanciality* in Lula’s and Dilma’s presidential campaigns.

“United Sides: Constitutive Rhetoric and President Barack Obama’s November 22, 2011 Speech.” 2013 Western States Communication Association Convention, Reno, NV. 2013.

## **AWARDS**

**UNICAMP - FAPESP** - from May/2005 to February/2006

### ***Scholarship – Technical Training***

- Technical support to text technology development in the Project "Corpus Histórico Anotado do Português Tycho Brahe" (<http://www.ime.usp.br/~tycho/corpus>).

- Transcription of original printed texts and its adaptations to digital media, through XML notation.

**UNLV Departmental Award: NCA Membership – 2012**

**UNLV Departmental Award: Outstanding Teaching Assistant - 2013**

**UNLV Departmental Award: Outstanding Graduate Student - 2013**

-These are departmental prizes in recognition of my academic accomplishments. The NCA Membership is awarded to only one graduate student per year. The awards for outstanding achievements are granted to a single individual, reflecting the overall accomplishments and performance during the entire program.