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President Barack Obama Responds to Gun Violence: A Rhetoric of Transformation.

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PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA RESPONDS TO GUN VIOLENCE:

A RHETORIC OF TRANSFORMATION

By

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Abstract

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA RESPONDS TO GUN VIOLENCE:
A RHETORIC OF TRANSFORMATION

by

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Over the course of his presidency Barack Obama responded to 15 incidents of gun violence. Moments of tragedy serve as one of the greatest tests of presidential leadership as they require the chief executive to articulate a definition of tragedy that enables citizens both to understand and to work through the experience. It is through the act of definition that presidents increase their rhetorical power, thereby allowing them to advocate or advance specific policy proposals. This thesis examines seven of President Obama’s memorial speeches: Fort Hood, TX (2009); Tucson, AZ (2011); Newtown, CT (2012); Washington, D.C. Navy Yard (2013); Fort Hood, TX (2014); Charleston, SC (2015); and Orlando, FL (2016). Faced with a divided government and an increasingly polarized political scene, President Obama turned toward the American people to resolve the issue of gun violence. A close reading of the texts reveals that he constructed a rhetoric of transformation which aimed to transform the audience from passive spectators of tragedy to agents of change. President Obama sought to initiate his audiences’ transformation through the use of agency, identification, Scripture, and grace, framing tragedies generally and gun violence more specifically as events amenable to collective action.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ iii  
Acknowledgments ................................................................................................................... iv  

**Chapter One: Introduction** ................................................................................................. 1  
  Literature Review .................................................................................................................. 2  
  Rhetorics of Tragedy ............................................................................................................. 10  
  Epideictic Rhetoric ................................................................................................................ 14  
  Rationale ............................................................................................................................... 16  
  Organization of Chapters ...................................................................................................... 17  

**Chapter Two: Context: Historical, Political, and Rhetorical** ......................................... 26  
  The Rhetorical Situation ....................................................................................................... 26  
  The Gun Debate .................................................................................................................. 30  
  The Seven Shootings ........................................................................................................... 37  
    Fort Hood (2009) ................................................................................................................ 37  
    Tucson (2011) .................................................................................................................. 39  
    Newtown (2012) ............................................................................................................... 42  
    Fort Hood (2014) ............................................................................................................... 46  
    Charleston (2015) ............................................................................................................ 47  
    Orlando (2016) ............................................................................................................... 49  
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 51  

**Chapter Three: Critical Analysis of the Gun “Debate”** .................................................... 64
“Two Constructs” ................................................................. 64
A Rhetoric of Transformation .................................................. 69
  Agency ........................................................................ 71
  Identification ................................................................. 74
  Scripture ...................................................................... 78
  Grace ......................................................................... 84
Conclusion ........................................................................... 89

Chapter Four: Conclusion ......................................................... 101
  Implications .................................................................. 107
  Future Directions .......................................................... 110
  Conclusion .................................................................... 113

Bibliography ........................................................................ 119

Curriculum Vita ..................................................................... 138
Chapter One

Introduction

Between January 2009 and December 2016, there were 156 mass shootings in the United States, of which President Barack Obama has responded to 15.¹ It is within these moments of crisis and tragedy that the American people look to the President for both solace and solutions, for “it is part of our nature to demand explanations, to try to impose some order on the chaos and make sense out of that which seems senseless.”² The June 12, 2016 shooting in Orlando, FL at Pulse Nightclub, which left 49 people dead, sparked renewed debate among both citizens and politicians concerning the Second Amendment. On June 16, 2016, Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) ended a 15-hour filibuster in support of greater gun legislation. Murphy claimed that he was compelled to act in honor of the events that transpired on December 14, 2012 saying, “I live every single day with the memory of Sandy Hook.”³ Roughly a week later Democrats in the House of Representatives engaged in a 25-hour sit-in to compel Republicans to vote on gun legislation.⁴ Although presidents must often confront tragedy or crisis during their time in office,⁵ the degree to which President Obama has had to respond to acts of gun violence is rather unprecedented. It is this reason that these memorial speeches serve as an important case study to examine presidential leadership in the wake of a tragedy.

This chapter serves three primary objectives. First, is to identify the objects of analysis and provide a rationale for why they are worthy of study. Second, to provide an orientation to President Obama’s rhetoric, salient scholarship on his oratory in general and during times of tragedy are reviewed. Lastly, this chapter briefly explicates the function and practice of epideictic rhetoric. The analytical framework for this project is also briefly described, however the more detailed explication occurs in chapter three. The central argument of this thesis is that
when faced with recurrent mass shootings and a divided government unwilling to enact policies towards preventing gun violence, President Obama developed a rhetoric of transformation that would transform his audience from spectators of tragedy to agents of change.

**Literature Review**

During Barack Obama’s tenure as president, his rhetoric has been a source of criticism and debate among scholars in the field communication studies. The literature reviewed in this section provides a substantive orientation to Obama as an orator. The scholarship presented here sees the President as a complex subject who is comfortable operating within the contradictions and multiplicities that are not only found within the individual mind, but are the foundation of our social world. The world that Obama envisions and constructs through his rhetoric is necessarily communitarian, as he views the government and citizens as sharing equal responsibility in creating a more just and equal society. Hope and faith serve as a guiding force in Obama’s personal and political life. In the face of challenges that would perhaps inspire anger and resignation, in Obama it only strengthened his belief in the American people’s capacity to change. Acknowledging our flawed natures, Obama inspired us always to strive to be better. These fractured features combine to form the whole that is President Obama’s rhetorical voice. This project aims to contribute to an ongoing scholarly conversation by exploring the rhetorical habits of Obama through a narrow focus of his responses to gun violence.

Barack Obama’s rise to the presidency is often traced to the keynote address he delivered at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. At the time, Obama was still a relatively unknown Illinois State Senator. The speech, which political writer Jonathan Chait defined as “electrifying,” not only captured the attention of the public but also of rhetorical scholars. In one of the first analyses of Obama’s rhetoric David A. Frank and Mark Lawrence McPhail engage in
“interracial collaborative rhetorical criticism, one in which they ‘write together separately.’”

Frank and McPhail analyzed the speeches independently, acknowledging that their subject positions, “as a white American of Jewish and Quaker heritage” and “an African American influenced by Eastern spiritual philosophies,” would inform their critical judgment towards the text in unique, but different ways. Frank interprets Obama’s address as a “rhetoric of consilience, an approach in which disparate members of a composite audience are invited to ‘jump together’ out of their shared experiences in favor of a common set of values and aspirations.” In other words, Frank finds that Obama addressed his diverse audience by discussing issues of race, class, and equality in the context of universal American values. Through this perspective, the audience is invited to work together to achieve a common future despite their differences.

While Frank praises Obama’s efforts to develop a unified public, McPhail argues that while Obama’s rhetoric does achieve consilience he “ultimately fails to translate consilience into coherence,” or the act of individuals moving beyond their differences to achieve justice and equality. McPhail finds that Obama offered a “Mene nexusian message that, while presented as a praising of all Americans, draws heavily upon the resources of whiteness and its dominant rhetorical tropes: innocence, race neutrality, and positive self-presentation.” For McPhail, Obama’s speech cannot facilitate coherence or racial reconciliation as Obama ignored or diminished the Black experience by subordinating it to universality. This essay is significant as it previews the racial tensions and challenges that Obama faced as president, in serving as the voice and leader of all Americans.

In contrast to Frank and McPhail, Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones approach Obama’s DNC address, and later his 2008 race speech, “A More Perfect Union,” through the
American Dream narrative. They find that in both speeches Obama reframed the America Dream narrative in order to mediate between issues of race and address a diverse American public.\textsuperscript{10}

The American Dream narrative is defined by the interdependence and enactment of:

scene, agency, and agent. The scene is America, a place of opportunity and challenge. The agency consists of American values flowing from the scene, values including inclusiveness, universality, progress, and empowerment. These values in turn define the agency of the hero-the agent-who is not a great leader standing larger than life, but an ordinary person made great by the values he/she shares with other Americans.\textsuperscript{11}

In short, the Dream is romantic in nature, as it narrates a world in which all individuals, who possess and uphold personal and societal values have the ability to create a better life for themselves and their family.\textsuperscript{12}

The American Dream has often been conceptualized as a conservative narrative, exemplified by Ronald Reagan’s presidency, as his rhetoric emphasized individual action as the force of prosperity and success.\textsuperscript{13} In contrast, the liberal version of the Dream views larger society and government as the responsible agent of change. Rowland and Jones contend that Obama sought “subtly” to “re-define the American Dream,” by placing greater emphasis on the communitarian value of the Dream, without wholly rejecting the individual.\textsuperscript{14} In order to illustrate the inequity between individual and collective action in the quest to better society, Obama told the stories of ordinary citizens. He spoke of parents unable to pay for their children’s medication due to a lack of insurance and soldiers, like Shamus, facing an unpredictable future both abroad and upon return from duty.\textsuperscript{15} Each story reflects failure as individuals were denied access to the American Dream because their community refused to play its role, thereby “preventing heroic resolution of the narrative.”\textsuperscript{16} In his “A More Perfect Union” speech, Obama
conceptualized race “as one manifestation of our failure to achieve the American Dream.” In particular, Obama states that a major obstacle in the quest to attain the American Dream is the anger and resentment found within both black and white communities. For Obama, Rowland and Jones maintain, the key to repairing the damage inflicted by discrimination and injustice is to enact the liberal thread of the Dream. It is the realization that success can be attained for all through individual and collective action. The articles by Rowland and Jones provide an important orientation to Obama’s conceptualization of the relationship between citizens and the government as one in which both serve as responsible agents for enacting social change.

While Rowland and Jones’s narrative analyses are confined to a single speech given by Obama, James Darsey’s research encompasses Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. He argues that the “potency” of Obama’s rhetoric during this period is due to his use of the journey metaphor wherein Obama connected his own personal and political journey to America’s journey. In particular, Darsey notes how Obama linked his campaign for the presidency to African-Americans’ long and tumultuous journey towards freedom and equality. Darsey finds that the rhetorical power of the journey metaphor derives from its focus on “purpose. The idea of progress has no application to a walk in the park, but journeys are decidedly teleological.” In this view, an Obama victory is framed as an indication that perhaps the end of African-Americans’ long journey towards equality is in sight. For instance, during his commemorative address for the Selma Voting Rights march, Obama positioned himself as the successor to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., through the use of the Exodus story. According to Obama, King fulfills the role of Moses, as he was the one to deliver the African-American people from subjugation. Like Moses, however, King would not live long enough to see his Dream actualized. Thus, a Joshua was needed to usher Moses’ people into the promised land.
John Murphy builds upon Darsey’s analysis by examining Obama’s Exodus story through the lens of constitutive rhetoric wherein Obama invokes a covenant between himself and the people, an acknowledgment that work must still be done and the march is not yet over. Murphy finds that the story of Joshua “offers significant rhetorical potential” as “he is a political leader, the commander in chief of the Jewish nation. Joshua governed.” He also notes that “in the Exodus, oratorical skill denotes political authority.” In this view, Obama used the Exodus story as a means to solidify his leadership abilities in the minds of the public. According to Frank, Obama’s use of the Exodus story is one element of Obama’s mythic signature, as it “helps Obama place himself within a much larger cosmic story of meaning and purpose, one that includes America.” In turn, through the use of these myths, Obama not only establishes his rhetorical voice, but carves out his own unique vision for the future.

Scholars Jennifer Mercieca and Justin Vaughn find that presidents face three types of burdens upon entering office: institutional, contextual, and personal. Institutional or “glorious” burdens are “specific to the office of the presidency itself.” Institutional burdens are considered glorious as they are reflective of the power of the office, issues so large and complex that only the president can resolve them. Contextual burdens are those that are “specific to the historic moment within which the president assumes office.” Lastly, personal burdens are “specific to the man or woman who becomes president.” According to Mercieca and Vaughn, Obama’s personal burden at the start of his presidency was race. During his 2008 presidential campaign, the President was subject to intense criticism from the public concerning racial remarks made by his pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright. As Reverend Wright served as Obama’s spiritual advisor for 20 years, many questioned the influence that Wright had on him, both personally and politically. In his widely-studied March 18, 2008 race speech, Obama sought to silence
opponents by contextualizing the incident and his own personal story within the larger framework of race relations in the United States.27

David A. Frank examines Obama’s remarks through African-American theology, more specifically, the prophetic tradition, which “pairs anger with hope, refusing to adopt either a resigned psychological affect or a theology of fatalism.”28 Frank contends that when the prophetic tradition is paired with Levinas’s face of the other individuals are invited to see their own faults and prejudices in another.29 Similarly, Robert E. Terrill argues that Obama aimed to fold the American people into the race conversation by inviting them to embrace and enact “double consciousness.” Like the prophetic tradition and the face of the other, the notion of double consciousness advises individuals to both speak and act in ways that reflect the inherent similarities between people, regardless of race.30 However, double consciousness is also distinct from these two concepts as it depends on difference. Individuals must first acknowledge the varied experiences of others before they can embark on the task of working towards a common future. In this sense, difference is operationalized as a force that can unite as opposed to only divide. Terrill also notes that Obama paired double consciousness with the Golden Rule maxim, which “requires us to see ourselves as the potential recipients of our own potential actions.”31 In this view, Obama overcame his personal burdens by noting that progress and unity can only be attained through a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between and among individuals.

Nearly all presidents face the institutional burden of the construction of an American public. According to Eric Dieter, presidents do not simply attempt “to garner allegiance and appreciation from the citizens toward national institutions like the presidency but to find a way for citizens to accept that those institutions are actual extensions of themselves.”32
Through the process of identification, individuals are constituted to think, act, and speak in certain ways.  

In their analysis of Obama’s epideictic rhetoric, Derek Sweet and Margret McCue-Enser argue that Obama’s rhetoric casts the American people as “an under-constructed subject; imperfect, unfinished, and always in the process of revision.” According to Sweet and McCue-Enser, this rhetorical strategy acknowledges the complexities of human nature and our social world, as individuals often express conflicting opinions in their pursuit of common fundamental goals and values. The authors argue that Obama’s construction of a flawed people “liberates political subjects from the overdeterminancy of a fixed national identity.” Individuals can unite in spite of diversity and conflict as they move towards a better future. In this view, political and social issues are conceptualized as temporary obstacles, as individuals have the ability to work through their own shortcomings as they strive for perfection. Sweet and McCue-Enser’s analysis is useful in exploring how Obama constructs his audience within the eulogies and how such construction may either help or hinder his policy proposals.

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson state that when delivering national eulogies presidents assume the role of a priest as they lead the nation in a service honoring the deceased. Similar to the priest, the president not only commemorates the life or lives that were lost, but also comforts the audience by contextualizing the death(s), especially through spiritual and theological frameworks. This role requires presidents to incorporate religious language and references to God in their memorial addresses. Campbell and Jamieson observe that while some presidents, like George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, freely invoked God in their speeches, others, like Ronald Reagan tended to avoid such overt displays. In describing the relationship that exists between his Christian faith and political philosophy Obama stated that “I was drawn to the power of the African-American religious tradition to spur social change. Out of necessity, the
black church had to minister to the whole person. Out of necessity, the black church rarely had the luxury of separating individual salvation from collective salvation.\textsuperscript{37} Just as Obama views the Constitution as “a living document” that “must be read in the context of an ever-changing world,” religion—more specifically, faith—was “more than just a comfort to the weary or hedge against death; rather, it was an active, palpable agent in the world.”\textsuperscript{38} For Obama, when religion is injected into the political realm it enables politicians to speak, and citizens to think in moral terms.\textsuperscript{39} While this conceptualization might appear to violate the separation of church and state, rhetorical scholar Nathan Crick argues otherwise. Crick contends that Obama’s rhetoric is not one of religion, but moreso of “religious experience.” He differentiates between the two concepts by stating that a rhetoric of religious experience does not aim “to justify doctrine or appeal to the authority of a supernatural being but to produce in an audience a feeling of dramatic movement toward a shared experience in which one feels connected, through conjoint action, to a wider universe which reflects common values and aims.”\textsuperscript{40} In other words, the rhetoric of religious experience speaks to the moments in which individuals transcend the self to become a part of a collective.

According to Crick, because the rhetoric of religious experience is concerned with “shared experiences that occur within a familiar narrative space,” it is well suited for epideictic speech. In particular, Crick is concerned with examining how Obama utilizes narratives to reflect central values and ideas in order to mobilize the public.\textsuperscript{41} The religious nature of the discourse derives not only from Obama’s use of the Bible, but from the individual reflection and transformation that it seeks to induce within the audience. It is the “recognition of a higher calling in oneself and in others,” the idea that despite the bleakness of the current situation, individuals have the possibility to change not only themselves but the world around them.\textsuperscript{42}
Rhetorics of Tragedy

Rhetorical studies of gun violence during President Obama’s tenure is an emergent area of scholarship. In 2014, *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* devoted an entire issue to the 2011 shooting in Tucson, AZ, which involved Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. The editors of the issue, Thomas A. Hollihan and Francesca Marie Smith note that the unifying feature of these unique studies is “the perspective that communication is not only integral to democratic governance, it is in fact the very stuff of democracy.... Democratic government can thrive only if our political talk binds us into communities of shared purpose, commitment, and action.”43 In this sense, it is through communication that individuals understand, construct, and enact their roles as citizens within a collective body.

The issue is comprised of five articles, with the authors using diverse critical perspectives to examine important rhetorical moments that followed the attack. For example, G. Thomas Goodnight examines Giffords’ rhetoric from 2011-2013 as a case of “civil courage,” as her “self-crafted agency worked within, over, and against idealizations and diagnoses of her condition and future prospects.” More specifically, Goodnight finds that through the use of public appearances, personal expressions, and public address Giffords rebuilt her agency, shedding the label of victim of tragedy and transforming into a public advocate and voice for the issue of gun violence.44 In contrast to Goodnight, Beth L. Boser and Randall A. Lake analyzed Sarah Palin’s “America’s Enduring Strength” video, which she released after receiving intense criticism and blame that her violently charged rhetoric influenced the Tucson shootings. In particular, they find that Palin’s speech functions as epideictic rhetoric as opposed to an apologia, wherein a rhetor aims to defend themselves against specific charges. More specifically, Boser and Lake contend that Palin’s video aimed to silence debate concerning the question of responsibility in
Tucson. In folding the Tea Party into the dominate society Palin framed an attack on them as an attack on all Americans. Also, in placing responsibility on the shooter, Jared Lee Loughner, Palin equates the Tea Party’s heated rhetoric to that of free speech, or engaged with deliberation and debate of policies. In turn, those that would seek to question Palin or assign blame are merely attempting to capitalize on tragedy with empty rhetoric.\textsuperscript{45} This argument aims to constrain and diminish voices like President Obama’s, as any criticism of the opposing party or a discussion of gun legislation is automatically viewed as part of the political game. In this view, Obama could not explicitly critique the Republican party or address gun legislation in Tucson without being charged by his opponents of using the shooting as an opportunity to implement policies they view unfavorably.

David A. Frank approaches President Obama’s memorial address through a religious lens, conducting a comparative analysis of Obama’s Tucson and Newtown speeches. In particular, Frank argues that Obama’s use of Scripture in his Newtown speech was more conducive to inducing collective action in his audience. He finds that in an effort to develop a sense of civility and unity in Tucson, Obama referenced the biblical story of Job, which framed evil and suffering as experiences that can neither be explained nor controlled. Although, this definition of tragedy prevented further division within the polarized political scene, it rendered the possibility of action beyond the audience’s reach. However, in Newtown Obama drew upon 2 Corinthians, which calls for individuals to persevere through suffering. Through this definition of tragedy, Obama framed action as the specific way in which individuals can work through their internal struggles.\textsuperscript{46} Frank’s work demonstrates that in the context of Obama’s memorial addresses Scripture functions to define the experience of tragedy, which in turn informs how the audiences interpret and respond to the event.
Brian Amsden offers a similar critique to Frank on the Tucson address. However, he argues that Tucson failed to foster the invention resources for action because “Obama transcended the temporal specificity of the event and projected his audience into generic temporality.” Amsden notes how Obama’s speech shifted between the past, present, and future, but ultimately ended within the present “generic time,” wherein Obama equated the reflection that took place after Tucson to the reflection that occurs anytime someone has experienced a death within their family. In this view, Tucson becomes representative of “an ‘occasion’ not dissimilar to ordinary occasions of personal loss.” To define the situation in this way is to disregard it as a public policy issue that can be remedied through collective action.

Scholars Mary E. Stuckey and Sean Patrick O’Rourke provide yet a third perspective on President Obama’s Tucson speech, focusing on the perspectives of civility that emerged after the shooting. In particular, their analysis revealed two distinct types of civility: “civility as manners,” which was largely characteristic of the media’s response, while Obama’s address reflected “civility as political friendship.” Stuckey and O’Rourke state that framing civility as manners places an emphasis on politeness or the idea that individuals need to both accept and tolerate that others may hold different perspectives and opinions than they do. Therefore, discourse must remain in the realm of reason focusing strictly on issues to avoid conflicts based on emotion and pure ideology. In other words, it is a communication aimed at limiting offending an opposing party, regardless of their merits or arguments. The authors argue that this frame is ineffective as it serves to diminish and prevent debate, as anyone who seeks to challenge the dominant narrative or argument is interpreted as uncivil and unnecessarily disruptive. In contrast, defining civility as political friendship elevates the role of difference within politics, placing it at the heart of democracy. This classification highlights the need for individuals to communicate
with one another and work together in order to move beyond their differences and towards common aspirations and goals. Stuckey and O’Rourke note that while civility as political friendship is better equipped to address the complexities of the system, Obama’s discourse does not necessarily address the issue of power, which might prevent specific voices from being heard. In addition, it does not account for the fact that some may be unwilling to compromise and join the discussion.\textsuperscript{51} The lack of individual participation in the process to enact gun legislation is a tension that Obama addresses throughout his responses to tragedy.

In addition to the Tucson and Newtown speeches, Obama’s remarks after the shooting in the Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, SC on June 17, 2015 have also received critical attention from rhetorical scholars. David A. Frank confines his analysis to the three paragraphs focusing on forgiveness, which stemmed from the victims’ families offering the shooter Dylann Roof forgiveness during his court hearing. Frank differentiates forgiveness from grace, which is a more prominent theme in the address, stating that forgiveness is not a gift given by God. Instead, individuals must make the choice to forgive, to free themselves from the desire for revenge, to not respond to anger with anger or violence with more violence. Through this perspective, individuals can work through tragedy instead of remaining trapped within it.\textsuperscript{52} Steven Goldzwig offers a second interpretation of the Charleston address, arguing that Obama’s discussion of race within the speech addressed prior criticism towards his tendency to avoid the issue of race within his presidency or to speak about it in a way that never truly honored the Black experience. However, in Charleston, Goldzwig contends “history, memory, and tragedy collided and Obama deftly guided the nation toward a redemptive moment.”\textsuperscript{53}
Epideictic rhetoric

Historically the three primary rhetorical genres are deliberative, forensic, and epideictic. Deliberative or political speech is focused on the future as it aims to establish “the expediency or the harmfulness of a proposed course of action,” such as going to war or the passage of legislation. Forensic or judicial speech concerns the past, as it either “attacks or defends” another’s actions. Epideictic or ceremonial speech is grounded within the present as it is used to place “praise or blame” on an individual, group, or situation.\(^5^4\) The national eulogy is a distinct body of texts falling within the genre of epideictic rhetoric. It emerges when citizens experience a crisis or tragedy, such as terrorist attack or mass shooting, and is used to develop a sense of understanding within the audience towards the specific event.\(^5^5\) A text is considered part of a genre when it shares “substantive, stylistic and situational characteristics,” with other texts.\(^5^6\)

Since Aristotle’s treatment of genre in *The Rhetoric*, scholars like Celeste Michelle Condit have continued to explore the significance of ceremonial discourse by re-conceptualizing or extending the notion of function beyond mere praise and blame. Condit argues that epideictic rhetoric is defined by three primary functional pairs: “understanding and definition, sharing and creation of community, and entertainment and display.”\(^5^7\) The definition/understanding pair refers to a speaker’s use of epideictic discourse as a means to make sense of troubling or confusing events. In turn, the act of definition and the clarity that it provides enables the speaker to develop a connection with the audience that is founded upon unified conceptions of self and nation and adherence to dominant values and beliefs. According to Condit, a community reconnects by reflecting upon “its conception of itself and of what is good by explaining what it has previously held to be good and by working through the relationships of those past values and beliefs to new situations.” The display/entertainment pair refers to the stylistic features that
capture the attention of the audience. Condit argues that when employing the epideictic form
speakers should strive for eloquence in their discourse, or “the combination of truth, beauty and
power in human speech.” Similarly, Browne notes that the “commemorative oration is
designed to be seen as well as heard; it is a consummately public act, self-consciously
performative, without existence until brought into being by an audience.”

Although, Aristotle’s conceptualization of genre draws distinct divisions between and
among the three modes of speech, scholars have demonstrated that speakers often combine
elements of discourse in order to address the unique demands of a given situation. Kathleen
Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell defined these blends as “rhetorical hybrids,” as the
combination or “fusion” of elements alter a pre-existing genre. According to Jamieson and
Campbell a hybrid is considered “functional” so long as the additional elements support or are
subordinate to the dominant genre and the situation. In the case of the eulogy, the deliberative
arguments advanced must be a reflection of the beliefs, values, and actions of the deceased
individual(s). In speaking for the deceased, the eulogist must only advance policies and claims
that would have been supported by the deceased.

Bonnie Dow advances a similar argument in her examination of President Ronald
Reagan’s crisis rhetoric. She argues that crisis rhetoric can only be examined in relation to the
specific exigence that calls the speech act into existence. During situations that are unexpected
and confusing, like terrorist attacks, presidents often rely upon the use of epideictic strategies to
develop a sense of understanding in the public. In contrast, rhetoric that is “crisis creating or
justificatory,” utilizes deliberative strategies as a means to gain the public’s support for specific
policies or actions. Thus, depending upon the situation and the specific needs of the audience,
certain genres and strategies will dominate over others. Dow, as well as Jamieson and
Campbell, demonstrates the fluidity of genres and their respective forms, as they can be applied to varying contexts. However, these scholars note that a speaker’s speech must always be guided by the situation and the needs of the audience. Although this thesis does not employ the critical perspective of genre, as it is inadequate to fully illuminate the rhetorical work occurring within the speeches, it is important to understand that Obama’s speeches are a part of a larger body of rhetorical texts with distinct characteristics and features.

Rationale

Scholars Stephen Browne and John Murphy note the inherent power of epideictic or ceremonial discourse due to its ability to instruct individual and collective action. According to Murphy, because epideictic discourse filters arguments “through the prism of honor or dishonor,” dissent can be muted or rendered non-existent. Browne finds that the epideictic genre necessarily contains deliberative features as “it is defined by its capacity to project back onto the audience values it believes to possess already. . . . [A] powerful instrument of reproduction.” In other words, epideictic discourse can be conceptualized as a precursor to deliberative communication in times of tragedy. When speakers provide representative examples of honorable behavior, the audience is instructed and implored to follow in suit. Although, not all ceremonial rhetoric reasons via example. In the case of presidential eulogies, the victims are framed as exemplary Americans, so the audience honors them by emulating their behaviors or carrying out actions they would have supported. The instructive nature of epideictic rhetoric is pertinent to the examination of Obama’s memorial speeches as this thesis is concerned with the specific ways in which the President seeks to compel his audience to action. In other words, this project does not view these speech occasions as merely events aimed at memorialization, but ones that can influence political deliberation of important policy issues.
As evidenced by the literature review included in this chapter, much of the research on gun violence during President Obama’s tenure has either focused on contextual debates and controversies or President Obama’s speeches. However, the unifying thread is that scholars have only examined the Tucson, Newtown, and Charleston shootings. Now, while these were important rhetorical moments, a failure to acknowledge his other four speeches is a missed opportunity for rhetorical studies. Therefore, this thesis aims to fill in this gap within the literature through a case study of seven of Obama’s addresses. The speeches examined in this project include: Fort Hood, TX (2009); Tucson, AZ (2011); Newtown, CT (2012); Washington, D.C. Navy Yard (2013); Fort Hood (2014); Charleston, SC (2015); and, Orlando, FL (2016).

Organization of Chapters

This thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter two provides a detailed orientation to the seven mass shootings addressed by President Obama. The chapter begins by reviewing pertinent literature on how rhetors have responded to challenges imposed by the immediate situation and the audience, with particular attention given to presidential responses to tragedies. The next section outlines the historical and cultural significance of the American gun debate, focusing on the pervasive arguments that tend to dominate the national conversation over guns. Attention then turns to constructing the scene of the seven mass shootings, along with the factual information, the political, social and culture debates and controversy’s that preceded and followed the attacks and Obama’s remarks are covered.

Chapter three contains the analysis of President Obama’s seven memorial speeches. The chapter explicates the analytical perspectives of presidential rhetoric and rhetorical leadership which informs the close reading that follows. This chapter argues that President Obama exhibited rhetorical leadership through his ability to develop a concise definition of tragedy over the course
of eight years. More specifically, Obama develops a rhetoric of transformation wherein he aims to transform the audience from passive spectators of tragedy to active agents of change. He achieves transformation through the development of identification between and among himself, the fallen, and the audience. Scripture and grace are the mediums through which Obama creates identification and activates the audiences’ agency as they frame how individuals should interpret and respond to tragedy. The fourth and final chapter provides closing remarks on the implications of the projects findings and provides areas for future research.

Endnotes

1 Every Town For Gun Safety, “Mass Shootings in the United States: 2009-2016,” March 2017, https://everytownresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Analysis_of_Mass_Shooting_033117.pdf. 2. Every Town For Gun Safety defines a Mass shooting as “incidents in which four or more people were shot and killed, not including the shooter.” In the case of the April 2, 2014 shooting in Fort Hood, TX only three were killed, as the fourth was the shooter. Although, this fact excludes it from Every Town’s calculations, I include it the list of 15 as it represents an important rhetorical moment as it was the site of two mass shootings within five years. Obama’s 15th and final response to gun violence followed the July 7, 2016 shooting of five Dallas Police officers, see Faith Karimi, Catherine E. Shoichet, and Ralph Ellis, “Dallas Sniper Attack: 5 Officers Killed, Suspect Identified,” CNN.com, July 9, 2016. http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/08/us/philando-castile-alton-sterling-protests/index.html.; Gregory Korte, “14 Mass Shootings, 14 Speeches: How Obama has Responded,” USA TODAY, last modified June 12, 2016, http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2016/06/12/14-mass-shootings-14-speeches-how-obama-has-responded/85798652/.


5 President Ronald Reagan addressed the January 28, 1986 explosion of the Challenger space shuttle; President Bill Clinton addressed the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995; Lastly, President George W. Bush responded to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.


7 David A. Frank and Mark Lawrence McPhail, “Barack Obama’s Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention: Trauma, Compromise, Consilience, and the (Im)possibility of Racial Reconciliation,” Rhetoric and Public Affairs 8, no. 4 (2005), 571 and 573.


10 Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, “Recasting the American Dream and American Politics: Barack Obama’s Keynote Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention,”

11 Rowland and Jones, “Recasting the American Dream and American Politics,” 427.

12 Rowland and Jones, “Recasting the American Dream and American Politics,” 431.

13 Rowland and Jones, “Recasting the American Dream and American Politics,” 432-33.

14 Rowland and Jones, “Recasting the American Dream and American Politics,” 434.


16 Rowland and Jones, “Recasting the American Dream and American Politics,” 440.


18 Rowland and Jones, “One Dream,” 135, 139-41.


23 Murphy, “Barack Obama, the Exodus Tradition, and the Joshua Generation” 391.


ABC News, last modified March 13, 2008,  


33 Dieter, “The ‘We’ in ‘Yes, We Can,’” 53.  

34 Sweet and McCue-Enser, “Constituting ‘the People’ as Rhetorical Interruption,” 606.  

35 Sweet and McCue-Enser, “Constituting ‘the People’ as Rhetorical Interruption,” 618.


Brian Amsden, Dimensions of Temporality in President Barack Obama’s Tucson Memorial Address,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 17, no. 3 (2014), 458.


50 Stuckey and O’Rourke, “Civility, Democracy, and National Politics,” 713, 715, and 718.


55 Campbell and Jamieson, Presidents Creating the Presidency, 73 and 75.


Mary Stuckey identifies three distinct types of presidential responses to tragedy or crisis situations: “brief statements issued by the White House after a disaster, usually in a foreign country; statements following the death of a specific person; and lengthier and more formal addresses given at funerals or memorial services.” The presidential statements do not necessarily serve much use for rhetorical scholars as they are usually brief, “they do not offer extended lessons in civic virtue; they function instead as supplemental instances, underlining and reiterating more extended lessons from other forms of presidential discourse.” Stuckey finds that they are “typically brief, formal, and confined to facts and generalities,” therefore, they are useful for “bolstering because they rely upon facts and ideologies that are already widely circulating among the public.” In contrast, “presidential remarks on the demise of a public figure can also serve deliberative ends by allowing the chief executive to connect the values or policies
associated with the decedent to specific actions or preferred policies of the administration.” See Mary E. Stuckey, *Slipping the Surly Bonds: Reagan’s Challenger Address*, (Texas A&M University Press, 2006), https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/lib/unlv/detail.action?docID=3037891, 22, 24, and 26. I follow in the lead of Stuckey in selecting the seven speeches, thereby excluding statements delivered prior to the memorial address. In addition, this project also excludes the shootings in Aurora, CO (2012); Oak Creek, WI (2012); Overland Park, KS (2014); Chattanooga, TN (2015); Roseburg, OR (2015); San Bernardino, CA (2015); Kalamazoo, MI (2016). For more information on the shootings see Korte, “14 Mass Shootings, 14 Speeches.”
Chapter Two

Context: Historical, Political, Rhetorical

Rhetorical scholar Michael Leff argues that “Texts simply do not yield up their own rhetorical interpretation.” Instead, “Critics must move from what is given in the text to something that they themselves produce—an account of the rhetorical dynamics implicit within it.” Leff contends that the first step in accomplishing this task is an examination of the “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” features of the text. Where intrinsic features refer to stylistic and organizational patterns within the text, extrinsic features refer to the specific historical, political, social, and cultural events that call the speech forth. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the broad political and social landscape that serves as a backdrop for President Obama’s responses to gun violence. This chapter begins by reviewing how critics have approached the rhetorical situation in general and as it pertains to tragedy. Attention then turns the broader context of gun culture and history in the United States. The third and final section of the chapter addresses each of the mass shootings in turn, describing the scene of the attack, the victims, and the shooters. Also examined are the debates and controversies that emerged before and afterwards.

The Rhetorical Situation

In his seminal essay, “The Rhetorical Situation,” Lloyd F. Bitzer argues that “the situation is the source and ground of rhetorical activity,” as rhetorical discourse emerges when an individual perceives a particular event or situation as being mutable through language or speech. However, this is not to suggest that a rhetorical situation is remedied solely through a response. Instead, the rhetor must offer a “fitting response” by accounting for the various factors that comprise the situation as well as the thoughts, perceptions, values and beliefs of the audience to which the speech addresses. In other words, the speaker must utilize or approach the specific
variables that encompass the situation in such a way as to reframe the narrative or debate to their political advantage. This section of the chapter provides an overview of specific case studies that illustrate how rhetors operate within and expand the confines of the situation in which they find themselves.

In his analysis of Mario Cuomo’s 1984 keynote address at the Democratic National Convention, David Henry finds that Cuomo successfully navigated the tension imposed by the conflicting audience and situation. More specifically, through the use of metaphor Cuomo simultaneously appealed to his immediate audience of committed Democrats present as the convention and the wider public, which included Democrats in support of President Ronald Reagan. Through the American family metaphor, which was bolstered by Cuomo’s personal experiences, he positioned the Democratic party and its policies as the path to an alternative, but better future than the one offered by President Reagan.\(^3\)

In contrast to Cuomo, who needed to build-up Democratic support against the widely favored Republican incumbent, in the wake of the Wright controversy Obama needed to maintain his momentum and base during a crucial point in the 2008 presidential election. More specifically, Susanna Dilliplane states that in his “A More Perfect Union Address,” Obama “needed to reject Reverend Wright’s controversial statements while not rejecting the pastor’s symbolic representation to and of the black community,” and “to speak from the perspective of ‘being black’ while not being solely defined as black.” In other words, Obama’s speech needed to provide an honest account of the black experience, without alienating his white audience. Dilliplane finds that Obama accomplished this task through the use of “‘toward a more perfect union’ and ‘out of many, we are one.’” This framework allowed Obama to frame Wright as a flawed subject whose anger stemmed from or is reflective of the segregation era. In this view,
Obama argued that he could not wholly reject Wright because he is part of America, and in some way we are all imperfect, and that our faults do not outweigh our desire to continue to work towards perfection.4

While all rhetorical discourses operate within their own unique constellation of political, social, economic, historical, and cultural factors, instances of terror and tragedy only heighten these tensions. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson notes, “The moments in which words fail are precisely the moments in which words are most needed.”5 The January 28, 1986 explosion of the Challenger space shuttle, which was documented on live TV, posed a significant challenge for President Ronald Reagan’s rhetorical skills. Mary E. Stuckey finds that the “very public deaths meant that the astronauts needed to be memorialized—this act demanded the evocation of memory. Yet that memory also had to be manipulated in order to replace the stark images of the program—images that would serve to reassure and inspire rather than frighten and daunt.”6 Through his manipulation of images President Reagan sought to define Challenger in a way that would allow him to advocate for the continuation of the space program. More specifically, Stuckey contends that Reagan “displace[d] agency from actor to scene so that the astronauts could be portrayed as heroes of the country’s pioneering mission.”7 In this sense, the Challenger explosion was not defined as an event caused by human fallibility, but it was instead placed within the larger historical framework of American progress.8

Within the speech, President Reagan spoke to four distinct audiences: The Nation, the astronauts’ families, schoolchildren, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Reagan rhetorically divided his audience, addressing each group in turn. For example, when speaking to the national audience Reagan emphasized that the situation demanded the American people to engage in the act of collective mourning and remembrance. In particular,
Reagan instructed his audience to honor the bravery and courage exhibited by the astronauts, who did not let fear and danger keep them from completing their mission. In contrast, when Reagan addressed America’s schoolchildren, who watched the launch because of Christa McAuliffe or the “Teacher in Space,” he adopted a “parental tone” wherein he instructed his audience to accept the tragedy, and to understand that progress and exploration necessitates the experience of pain. Stuckey notes that Reagan’s addresses to the families and NASA mirrored one another as these two groups bore the full burden of the tragedy, an emotional weight the nation will never fully know or experience. However, like the families, Reagan framed the NASA employees as individuals without agency, in that their actions did not cause the explosion. It was important that Reagan remove any suspicion or doubt from NASA so that he could argue for the continuation of the space program. Stuckey contends that Reagan unified his divided audience through the use of frontier mythology, whereby the astronauts were framed as pioneers. Thus, if citizens sought to emulate the astronauts by accepting the pioneer spirit as part of the American identity, then they must possess the courage to continue the work of the started by the “Challenger Seven.”

In his article, “‘Our Mission and Our Moment’: George W. Bush and September 11th,” John M. Murphy examines the specific strategies President Bush used to define the terrorist attacks for the American people. Murphy argues that Bush developed definitional authority through his “choice of genre, use of visual imagery, and creation of self and audience.” Murphy finds that Bush’s discourse following the attacks was primarily epideictic in nature. Although this was a necessary response in the immediate aftermath, the continued use of epideictic discourse over deliberative, not only allowed Bush to avoid providing a rationale for military
action, but it also prevented the American people from participating in a debate concerning the U.S.’s role in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{13}

Similar to Reagan after the \textit{Challenger} explosion, Bush worked to displace the image of the collapsing towers from Americans’ minds. He focused on highlighting the heroic actions of those on-board Flight 93, like Todd Beamer, as well as citizens’ rescue efforts in the aftermath. According to Murphy, Bush’s use of epideictic rhetoric and visual imagery culminated into the final strategy of the construction of an American people. Bush framed himself as representative of the people, serving as their voice. In turn, citizens honored the fallen heroes through their support of Bush and his vision of America.\textsuperscript{14} These concerted efforts allowed Bush to not only define 9/11 for the people, which allowed him to diminish dissent and deliberation concerning his military policies.

The scholarship by Henry, Dilliplane, Stuckey, and Murphy demonstrate the important relationship that exists between a situation and the rhetorical discourses it produces. To engage in rhetorical criticism is to understand both how language shapes and is shaped by our social world. The next section of this chapter explores the broader context of President Obama’s responses to gun violence by exploring gun culture and history in the United States.

\textbf{The Gun Debate}

A Congressional Research Service Report published one month before the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, CT found that in 2009 civilian firearms in circulation or available for purchase totaled 310 million. In their annual report, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives found that between 2009 and 2013 firearms manufacturing doubled from roughly 5.6 million to 10.9 million.\textsuperscript{15} However, 2014 saw a slight decrease in gun manufactures, totaling out at 9 million.\textsuperscript{16} Criminologist Gary Kleck defines the increase in gun
manufacturing and sales during Obama’s tenure as the “Obama effect” where “people
(unrealistically) anticipating that the Obama administration would implement strict gun controls,
such as a renewed assault weapons ban, raced out and bought up every gun they thought might
get banned.” It would appear that the increased visibility and occurrence of mass shootings
during Obama’s presidency fed into gun culture, prompting an increase in the creation and
purchasing of guns.

Guns have long been a part of American culture and history, however, as of recent their
place in society has been a point of contention among politicians and citizens. Adam Winkler, a
legal scholar specializing in constitutional law and author of Gunfight: The Battle over the Right
to Bear Arms in America, states that the debate over the meaning of the Second Amendment is
relatively new, tracing its roots to United States v. Miller (1939). In this case, the Supreme Court
ruled that weapons unsuitable to maintain a militia, such as a sawed off shot gun, are not
protected under the Second Amendment and therefore subject to banning. According to Winkler,
although the case never explicitly addressed individuals’ right to own guns, the ruling established
a precedent for the “militia theory,” which found that individuals did not have the right to own a
gun for personal and private reasons, such as self-defense. The next time the Supreme Court
heard a case concerning the interpretation of the Second Amendment was 2008’s District of
Columbia v. Heller, wherein Heller argued that Washington, D.C.’s handgun ban violated an
individual’s Second Amendment to possess a gun in his home for the purpose of self-defense.
The Supreme Court ruled in Heller’s favor, overturning the D.C. ban. The Supreme Court would
solidify this ruling and interpretation of the Second Amendment in McDonald v. City of Chicago
(2010), which extended an individual’s right to own a gun to the States through the Fourteenth
Amendment. The Court’s decision in McDonald defined individuals’ right to a gun as a matter of
citizenship, thus, the government could not unduly infringe upon it.\textsuperscript{19} However, the Court maintained that the Second Amendment does have boundaries. As conservative Justice and author of the \textit{Heller} opinion, Antonin Scalia, noted that individuals do not have the right “to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any way whatsoever and for whatever purpose.”\textsuperscript{20}

In a 2015 \textit{Gallup Poll}, 55\% of Americans surveyed stated that they want to see stricter gun laws implemented. There was also a slight increase among gunowners who want stricter gun laws, increasing from 30\% in 2014 to 36\% in 2015. However, it is important to note that this survey was taken only days after the shooting at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, OR, so the survey may be more reflective of their immediate emotional response, rather than a sustained or consistent opinion.\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, a \textit{Gallup Poll} taken in January 2016 found that Americans’ dissatisfaction with gun laws peaked at 62\%. It is important to note that this figure reflects dissatisfaction along three levels. Thirty-eight percent of those surveyed were dissatisfied with current laws because they considered them not strict enough, while 15\% were dissatisfied because they thought the current laws were too strict. Lastly, 9\% were dissatisfied but felt that the laws should remain the same. The 2016 poll represents a sharp decrease in the desire for stricter gun laws when compared to 2012, which was the year of the Newtown shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, when dissatisfaction hovered at 50\%.\textsuperscript{22} While these polls in no way represent all Americans, they do demonstrate that while Americans may desire greater gun-control, that desire is not easily translated into action. Communication studies scholars researching gun rhetoric attribute the disconnect between desire and action to the rhetoric espoused by gun rights advocates, whose arguments often stifle deliberation and debate, placing the nation in a gridlock without avenues to move forward.\textsuperscript{23}
In their article, “Tropes in the Rhetoric of Gun Rights: A Pragma-Dialectic Analysis,” Christopher M. Duerringer and Z.S. Justus examine the fallacious, yet highly pervasive, gun rights arguments of: “guns don’t kill people, people kill people,” “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun,” and “if you outlaw guns, only outlaws will have guns.”

Duerringer and Justus classify these arguments as fallacious or flawed because they violate argumentative norms or rules, as they address claims or propositions that were not actually advanced. Furthermore, the authors note that the inherent power of these arguments lies within their classification as enthymemes, in that the speaker need not provide one of the premises of their argument, as it is supplied by the audience. The meaning or the validity of the argument is ascribed by the audience, whose judgment is informed by cultural and situational factors or influences.

In the case of “guns don’t kill people, people kill people,” Duerringer and Justus note that this argument functions by shifting responsibility away from the weapon and onto the shooter. In this frame, a gun is merely a tool, and it is only dangerous in so far as the person wielding it is. Duerringer and Justus state that this argument creates an “either/or” framework, wherein either the gun or the individual is the responsible party, without acknowledging that this claim was never advanced in that both guns and people can cause significant harm to others.

After Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) ended his 15 hour filibuster on gun legislation, which was prompted by the Orlando shooting, Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) critiqued both gun rights and gun control advocates saying that both fail to acknowledge that “It was a terrorist with a gun that killed all those people, a terrorist with hate in his heart and a gun in his hand that killed all those people.”
Justin Eckstein and Sarah T. Partlow Lefevre also examined this argument in the context of President Obama’s January 16, 2013 and Executive Vice President of the National Rifle Association (NRA) Wayne LaPierre’s December 21, 2012 speeches. Eckstein and Partlow Lefevre contend that Obama and LaPierre’s discussions on Sandy Hook and the broader issue of guns were not conducive towards breaking the gridlock and moving debate forward as both sides began their arguments from different starting points. President Obama’s perspective on gun violence is based in his conceptualization of “guns as a force multiplier—a factor that dramatically increases the potential for violence in any circumstance.” In contrast, LaPierre “shifted culpability to people, generically referred to as ‘they.’” In this view, LaPierre framed guns “as passive... neutral instrument[s].” In short, where Obama considered the problem as one of access to guns, LaPierre viewed it as one based upon the mental (in)stability of individuals. Eckstein and Partlow Lefevre argue that until both gun control advocates and gun rights advocates are willing and able to start on mutual ground, where each side can accept responsibility, the debate will remain static.28

The second argument of “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a guy,” has garnered significant attention and usage following the Newtown shooting, when the NRA’s LaPierre, advocated for placing armed security officers in schools.29 On a basic level, Duerringer and Justus state that this argument fails to acknowledge that even if a bystander were to have a gun during a shooting, there is no way to know if he/she could (would) successfully use it against the shooter. However, a more significant issue with this argument is one of definition as it frames shooters as “bad” and possible responders as “good.” The authors note that “Where ‘good’ seems to substitute for ‘competent,’ ‘bad’ appears to define shooters as irreconcilably evil. By defining shooters as ‘bad rather than dangerous, mentally ill, or criminals, this
persuasive definition helps the NRA and its advocates brush away non-violent responses to shooters.” In other words, to define someone as evil is to consider them beyond the possibility of change, thus, the only choice is to destroy them. Similarly, Francesca Marie Smith and Thomas A. Hollihin find that in the wake of the Tucson, AZ shooting conservative responses placed agency solely within the shooter, Jared Lee Loughner, by “focus[ing] on his mental instability, disparaging him as fundamentally (and unforgivably) outside the realm of normal cognitive functionality.” In this view, conservatives argued that there was no need to discuss or debate the motives or reasons behind the shooting as one cannot reason with irrationality.

The third and final argument explored by Duerringer and Justus is “when guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns.” The authors state that the weakness of this argument lies in the fact that it is often used to discredit calls for gun control, without explicitly addressing specific gun control measures. More specifically, it implies that gun control advocates aim to completely disarm citizens by banning all guns, when most proposals, like those advanced by President Obama call for greater regulations, such as the implementation of more effective background checks, and restrictions on ammunition capacities. Not only do the gun rights advocates begin their argument from a position or claim that was never articulated, but this statement posits that laws are only effective insofar as the criminals or bad guys adhere to them. It does not account for the fact that gun laws are designed to affect the behaviors of all citizens involved in the creation, sale, and use of guns, which could potentially lead to positive benefits for society.

The power of gun rhetoric does not only extend to politics and the law, but it is entrenched within the individual mind and identity. In her examination of Second Amendment discourse, Laura J. Collins finds that gun rights advocates have come to conceptualize the
Second Amendment, as it pertains to the act of open carry, as “a permanent state of being, akin to an immutable identity—the sort of thing that forms the basis of a class ‘protected’ against discrimination.”34 In other words, gun rights advocates consider the Second Amendment as a fundamental aspect of their being, such as one’s race, religion, or sexual orientation. Thus, gun control advocates are not merely attacking the Constitution, but an entire group of people. Collins contends that this specific subject position enables gun rights advocates “to exist as marginalized, victimized, and righteous demanding subjects. Their very identity is staked in the perpetuation of the proverbial gunfight.”35 In this view, gun rights advocates can only enact their constructed identity so long as the issue of the Second Amendment remains in tension, a perspective that favors continued conflict over deliberation and resolution.

The scholarship reviewed in this section highlights the complex nature of the gun debate, as one that influences citizens on a political and social level. The specific arguments advanced by gun rights advocates represent the broader background that President Obama must address in his speeches. The primary constraint placed on Obama by these prevalent arguments centers upon their simplicity as enthymemes, meaning that their “truth” is grounded within the beliefs and experiences of those who employ them. These statements can be applied to situations that may make them appear accurate to an uninformed ear. However, what is most significant about these arguments is that they function primarily out of fear, as they construct a world of danger, where guns represent individuals’ only form of protection. In this view, any effort to regulate guns is interpreted as a threat to one’s own life. Attention now turns to the more immediate context of the seven shootings.
The Seven Shootings

**Fort Hood (2009)**

Only 11 months into his presidency, Barack Obama was called upon to assume the role of “Comforter in Chief,” following the November 5, 2009 shooting at Fort Hood in Killeen, TX, which is considered the “largest active duty military post in the United States.” Armed with two handguns, army psychiatrist Major Nidal Malik Hasan opened fire inside the Soldier Readiness Processing Center, killing 13 and wounding 30. He reportedly shouted “‘Allahu akbar!’” or “‘God is Great!’” in Arabic before he began shooting. Hasan was subdued after being shot by police, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down. In August 2013 Hasan was sentenced to death in a military trial.

At the time of the shooting Hasan had only been at Fort Hood for four months, after having spent six years at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The investigations that followed the attack revealed that Hasan, who was scheduled for his first deployment overseas, was opposed to U.S. intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. In June 2007, Hasan delivered a presentation at Walter Reed in which he called for the military to allow the release of Muslim soldiers unwilling to fight against their fellow Muslims, calling them “conscientious objectors.”

Although, Fort Hood was not officially defined as a terrorist attack, it was later discovered that Hasan had communicated with Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-born Islamic cleric and an influential member of al Qaeda. Hasan and al-Awlaki communicated through email, sending 18 messages between December 2008 and June 2009. al-Awlaki had been a subject of interest for the U.S. government since 2001, as he served as the spiritual leader of two U.S. mosques that were visited by three of the 9/11 hijackers. al-Awlaki had also served in the mosque Hasan attended while living in Virginia. However, there is no evidence to suggest that
they met there. After the attack, al-Awlaki lauded Hasan’s actions calling him “a hero” and “a man of conscience who could not bear living the contradiction of being Muslim and serving in an army that is fighting against his own people.” Furthermore, al-Awlaki argued that fellow Muslims should emulate Hasan’s behavior as “The only way a Muslim could Islamically justify serving as a soldier in the U.S. Army is if his intention is to follow in the footsteps of men like Nidal.”

In a report released in July 2012, William Webster, a former FBI and CIA director, determined that the FBI improperly handled the e-mails exchanged between Hasan and al-Awlaki. More specifically, the report cites ineffective procedures and poor communication as core factors that influenced the FBI’s ability to act decisively. In particular, the report stated that the information obtained in a Joint Terrorism Task force investigation into al-Awlaki should have been transferred to the Defense Department for further review. However, the FBI stated that they did not share the two e-mails sent from the San Diego task force to the Washington, D.C. one, as there was no definitive evidence that Hasan was planning or involved in a terrorist plot.

In addition to the FBI’s failure to prevent the Fort Hood shooting, an important debate after the shooting centered upon definition. Instead of classifying the Fort Hood shooting as a terrorist attack, the Department of Defense labeled it as a case of “workplace violence.” The distinction prevented victims and their family members from receiving combat-related benefits and honors, like the Purple Heart. In November 2011 and 2012, victims and family members of Fort Hood filed suits against the Army and the government seeking compensation. Congressman John Carter (R-TX) created the Fort Hood Families Benefits Protection Act, which “would award the military and civilian casualties of the 2009 Fort Hood attack the same status that was awarded to the casualties of the Pentagon attack on Sept. 11, 2001.” Although,
Representative Carter’s bill was not enacted, in 2015 the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) was amended to expand the term terrorist attack to include instances in which “‘the individual or entity was in communication with the foreign terrorist organization before the attack,’ and where ‘the attack was inspired or motivated by the foreign terrorist organization.’” A sponsor of the amendment, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), stated that “It’s long past time to call the Fort Hood attack what it was: radical Islamic terrorism.... The victims and their families deserve our prayers and support, and this legislation rightly honors them for defending our nation in the face of a heinous act of terror.” The focus on the term radical Islamic terrorism remerged in the aftermath of the Orlando, FL shooting, as is explained more fully in the orientation that follows later in this chapter.

At the time of the shooting and Obama’s subsequent response the nation faced significant challenges both at home and abroad. Not only was the United States still engaged in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but it was also in the process of recovering from the 2008 financial crisis. The Fort Hood attack represents an important moment in the early stages of Obama’s first term for two important reasons. First, he needed to demonstrate his rhetorical abilities as the Comforter in Chief. Second, he needed to discuss the attack in such a way that would not draw focus to the issue of gun control. To engage in a discussion of gun legislation so early in his presidency would not only shift attention away from more immediate concerns, but, could have resulted in intense political backlash from the American people and members of Congress.

**Tucson (2011)**

The longest absence of mass shootings during Obama’s presidency was the two-year gap in between Fort Hood (2009) and the January 8, 2011 shooting at a Safeway supermarket in Tucson, AZ. The attack, which was orchestrated by 22-year-old Jared Lee Loughner, left six
dead and 12 wounded. Victims of the attack included nine-year-old Christina Taylor Green and Congresswomen Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ), who was holding her “Congress on Your Corner” event outside of the supermarket. While Green’s wounds were fatal, Giffords survived the gun shot to her head. This was the first public event Giffords held following her victorious campaign for a third term in the 2010 midterm elections. Loughner was suspended from Pima Community College in September after a series of behavioral outbursts and altercations with faculty. Students and faculty described Loughner “as ‘creepy,’ ‘very hostile,’ ‘suspicious’ and ‘someone who had a dark personality.’” He was told that he could only return to school if he provided “a letter from a mental health professional certifying he was not a threat.” In March 2011, Dr. Christina Pietz, a forensic psychologist, diagnosed Loughner with schizophrenia, finding that he was “‘one of the worst’ mentally ill patients she’s ever seen.”

While most debates following a shooting tend to focus on the shooter, in Tucson it primarily centered upon the highly polarized political climate. In March 2010, President Obama passed his landmark healthcare bill, the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The legislation divided politicians along party lines, as the bill passed through the House of Representatives without a single Republican vote. The ACA also faced resistance among voters in the 2010 midterm elections, resulting in Republicans gaining seats in the Senate and Democrats losing control of the House. A supporter of the ACA, Giffords (D-AZ) narrowly escaped defeat, winning “49 percent of the vote,” against her Republican challenger, Jesse Kelly. However, political officials not only experienced backlash at the polls, they were also subjected to hostile town halls and vandalism. Eerily foreshadowing the 2011 shooting, in 2009 one of the individuals attending Giffords’ healthcare town hall carried a gun, although it was never fired. Only hours after the ACA was passed, the front door to Giffords’ district office was smashed.
In the aftermath of the shooting, the Sheriff of Pima County, Clarence W. Dupnik, stated that in large part the Tucson shooting was a result of a political environment dominate by toxic rhetoric, “The anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on in this country is getting to be outrageous and unfortunately Arizona has become sort of the capital. We have become the mecca for prejudice and bigotry.” One person in particular garnered attention and criticism after the shooting, and that was former Alaska Governor and 2008 Republican candidate for Vice-President, Sarah Palin. In March 2010, Palin released an advertisement for the midterm elections that marked on a map the congressional districts held by Democrats. The controversial nature of the map stems from Palin marking the districts as targets for Republicans, using rifle cross hairs. Although, Palin denied that her own rhetoric was to blame, the map paired with Palin’s pleas to supporters of “Don’t retreat, reload!” did little to silence her critics.

As the Tucson shooting occurred near the end of President Obama’s first term the overarching constraint imposed on the immediate situation and Obama was the upcoming 2012 presidential election. Explicit discussions of gun control measures or an inability to diffuse the tension and hostility between the Democratic and Republican parties threatened to derail Obama’s reelection. Therefore, Obama needed to construct a message that would appeal both to Democrats and to Republicans alike and encourage the mending of the wounds created by the divisive rhetoric that characterized political communication at the time. The combination of the presidential campaign and the polarized political scene led Obama to focus on the issue of communication in Tucson. More specifically, chapter one noted that the Tucson address centered upon the theme of civility as Obama argued that civil discourse, wherein individuals can acknowledge the perspectives, experiences, and opinions of others, was the key to resolving our political and social issues.
Loughner pleaded guilty to 19 counts of murder and was sentenced to life in prison on November 8, 2012. Although, Giffords survived the attack, the injuries she sustained led her to resign from her post in January 2012. At the sentencing Giffords’ husband, Mark Kelly, told Lougher that “by making death and producing tragedy, you sought to extinguish the beauty of life.... To diminish potential. To strain love. And to cancel ideas. You tried to create for all of us a world as dark and evil as your own. But know this, and remember it always: You failed.”

**Newtown (2012)**

President Obama has stated that the Newtown shooting was the “worst day of his presidency.” On December 12, 2012, Adam Lanza, 20, entered Sandy Hook Elementary and shot and killed 20 children and six adults before taking his own life. Prior to arriving at the school, Lanza is suspected of having shot and killed his mother, Nancy, inside their home. At the time, the shooting was considered the “nation’s second-deadliest shooting,” following behind the 2007 attack on Virginia Tech, which left 32 dead.

As Lanza did not leave behind a manifesto, investigators have yet to determine the motivation behind his attack or why he selected Sandy Hook Elementary. A report released by State’s Attorney Stephen Sedensky stated that Lanza “had significant mental health issues that affected his ability to live a normal life and to interact with others.” However, the report noted that “What contribution this made to the shootings, if any, is unknown as those mental health professionals who saw him did not see anything that would have predicted his future behavior.” Beth Israel, a former neighbor to the Lanza family also described Adam as “withdrawn, but not threatening.” She stated that she “would just call him a socially awkward kid, I don’t know, shy and quiet. Didn’t really look you in the eye.” Lanza appeared to have had an interest in guns and shooting, one that seems to have stemmed from his mother. Not only
did Nancy own numerous guns, but she and Adam frequented the local shooting range together. More disturbingly, however, Adam kept detailed documents on previous mass shootings; he had videos of gunshot suicides and pictures of himself holding a gun to his head.\textsuperscript{63}

In contrast, to the other six shootings and speeches examined in this thesis, the Newtown address represents the smallest gap in time between the shooting and Obama’s remarks, as only two days separate the two events. This is significant as the nation and the victims’ families were still in the midst of their grief. Thus, Obama’s remarks needed to account adequately for the emotional and psychological state of his audience, while also advancing his own political agenda as it pertained to gun legislation.

Newtown represents an important turning point for President Obama, as this speech and those that followed focused more heavily upon the need for stricter gun regulations. A little over a month after Newtown, he outlined his policy plan to address the growing issue of gun violence in America. Measures included universal backgrounds checks, a ban on assault weapons, creating an ammunition cap, and the expansion of mental health benefits provided by insurers. In addition, Obama also discussed 23 executive actions that could be implemented, some of which were signed directly after the speech. These actions included increasing the accessibility and effectiveness of federal background check data, and ensuring that institutions, like schools, have the necessary resources and training to deal with a potential shooter.\textsuperscript{64} Unfortunately, on April 17, 2013, several of the measures Obama put forth or supported failed to receive the 60 votes for passage. One bill, the “Manchin-Toomey plan,” which was developed by Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) and Senator Patrick Toomey (R-PA), “would have expanded background checks to include private sales at gun shows and all Internet sales.” Upon defeat, Obama condemned “the gun lobby and its allies” who had “willfully lied about the bill,” by calling it the
“first step toward a national and government confiscation of firearms.” Obama also criticized the Democrats and Republicans who opposed the bill saying that “They worried that the gun lobby would spend a lot of money and paint them as anti-second amendment.... And so they caved under pressure. And they started looking for an excuse, any excuse to vote ‘no.’” Overall, Obama stated that it was “a pretty shameful day for Washington.”


On September 16, 2013, Aaron Alexis, 34, entered the Navy Yard in Washington D.C. and began shooting indiscriminately inside Building 197, killing 12 and wounding eight. The victims, who were primarily civilians and contractors, included Sylvia Frasier, 53, and Frank Kohler, 50. Alexis was killed in a shootout with police, and was found to have been in possession of an AR-15 assault rifle, a shot gun, and a semiautomatic pistol, although it is believed that he may have acquired some of the weapons during the attack. Alexis worked as a computer contractor with a company named The Experts, and he entered the Navy Yard facilities using his contractor access card. At the time of the shooting, he had only been working at the Navy Yard since September 9th.

Prior to his work as a contractor, Alexis was a naval reservist based in Fort Worth, TX. He was honorably discharged in 2011 due to a “pattern of misconduct.” Alexis had a history with the law, which included arrests in 2004 and 2010; both incidents involved guns. While living in Seattle, WA in 2004, Alexis was arrested for shooting a stranger’s tires during what he described as a “blackout-fueled by anger.” In 2010, he was arrested in Fort Worth, after firing his gun into his ceiling and through his neighbor’s floor. Alexis told police that the gun had accidentally gone off while he was cleaning it, but his neighbor reported that she felt it “was done intentionally,” as he recently confronted her with noise complaints.
At the time of the shooting, Alexis appeared to have been suffering from mental illness. In the month leading up to the attack, he sought treatment for insomnia at two different Veterans Affairs hospitals. He seemed to have documented his suffering on the gun used in the shooting, inscribing “‘End the torment’” and “‘Better off this way!’.”

On August 7, 2013 in Newport, RI Alexis called the police claiming that he was being followed and that he heard people’s “voices talking to him through the walls, floor and ceiling.” They were, he said, “using ‘some sort of microwave machine’ to send vibrations through the ceiling, penetrating his body so he cannot fall asleep.”

After Alexis’ 2004 arrest, his father stated that Alexis “had experienced anger management problems that the family believed was associated with PTSD,” which had stemmed from Alexis having been “an active participant in rescue attempts of Sept. 11, 2001.”

While passing gun laws in Washington remained a challenge, after the Navy Yard shooting focus shifted towards developing greater mental health legislation.

In addition to highlighting the issue of mental health in the United States, the Navy Yard attack also raised questions concerning the effectiveness of security procedures and measures, as Alexis managed to acquire security clearance despite his history of gun-related arrests. Following the shooting, the U.S. Department of Defense released the DOD Inspector General report which found significant flaws in the screening procedures at the Navy Yard. In particular, the report noted how roughly 52 convicted felons gained access to the base and contractors were given day passes without undergoing proper vetting. Based on the initial findings detailed in the report, President Obama ordered an investigation into government contractor and employee regulations and protections.

The release of the report and Obama’s ordering of the investigation served as two primary challenges for Obama’s speech. He needed to reinforce his image and
credibility as an effective Commander-in-Chief by addressing the concerns of the American people towards the issue of security at military facilities.

**Fort Hood (2014)**

Five years after Hasan’s attack, tragedy once again visited the soldiers at Fort Hood. On April 2, 2014 Specialist Ivan Lopez used a .45 caliber semiautomatic handgun to kill three and wound 16. Just before the shooting, Lopez was involved in an argument with his fellow soldiers over his request for a leave. After the meeting ended, Lopez went to his car to retrieve his weapon and chaos ensued. While the 2009 shooting in Fort Hood primarily occurred inside of the Soldier Readiness Processing Center, Lopez used his car to move around the base. Not only did he shoot from his car, but he stopped to attack three different buildings; each one contained one of the fallen soldiers. One of the victims in the attack was Sgt. First Class Daniel M. Ferguson, 39, who used his body to block Lopez from entering the room. Lopez shot and killed Ferguson through the door, before moving on to a different location. When approached by a military police officer who drew her weapon, Lopez placed the gun to his head and killed himself. Only 16 minutes passed from the time Lopez began shooting until he took his own life.  

Lopez, who was born in Guayanilla, Puerto Rico had an extensive career in the military. In 1999 he joined the Puerto Rico National Guard, where he remained until 2008 when he transferred to the United States Army. Before Fort Hood, Lopez was stationed at Fort Bliss in El Paso, TX, attached to the First Armored Division. He had also spent four months in Iraq in 2011. Those who had known Lopez were shocked to find that he was the shooter at Fort Hood. One of his former supervisors, Sgt. Maj. Nelfon Bigas, stated that Lopez “was the most responsible, obedient, humble person, and one of the most skillful guys on the line.”
Although, the altercation over his request for leave seems to have triggered the event, the larger motivation appears to lie in Lopez’s mental state. In the month leading up to the shooting, Lopez was evaluated for post-traumatic stress disorder and was taking medication for depression and anxiety. Lt. Gen Mark A. Milley also noted that Lopez had reported suffering a traumatic brain injury when he returned from serving in Iraq, but that it was never verified.\(^7^9\) While the second attack on Fort Hood illustrated the need for greater mental health services, especially within the military, it also drew attention to the lack of substantive change in federal gun legislation during Obama’s presidency. Although, the circumstances surrounding the 2009 and 2014 shootings were drastically different in terms of motive, they both prompted little action within the government. This shooting served as a threat to Obama’s presidential authority and image as it opened the possibility for increased criticism not only from the American people but fellow political leaders. Similar to his Navy Yard address, at Fort Hood Obama needed to reassure the American people of his ability to protect and secure the nation’s military facilities and the individuals that work within them.

**Charleston (2015)**

On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof, 21, entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church, where Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney and his congregants were engaged in Bible study. After sitting with the group for roughly an hour, Roof pulled out his gun and began shooting into the small crowd. In addition to Reverend Pinckney, eight other congregants were killed in the attack. The youngest victim was 26-year-old Tywanza Sanders while the oldest was 87-year-old Susie Jackson.\(^8^0\) Kristen Washington, a survivor of the attack and cousin of Sanders, stated that Sanders had sought to dissuade Roof from continuing his rampage. However, Roof
responded that he needed to kill Sanders and the rest of the congregants because “You are raping our women and taking over the country.”

Shortly after the attack, Roof’s online manifesto was discovered, shedding light on the racist beliefs that guided his actions. In one of his posts, Roof seemed to trace his racist views to the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin, saying that the event “awakened” him. He framed himself as a martyr saying that he had “no choice” as he was “not in the position to, alone, go into the ghetto and fight.” In addition to the written posts, the website also contained photographs of Roof. The images depict an unsmiling Roof burning an American flag, holding a confederate flag, and posing with guns. Roof also included pictures taken at plantations and a Confederate cemetery.

In light of Roof’s reverence for the Confederate flag and the fact that it is a contentious symbol in American history, the Charleston shooting reignited the debate surrounding the presence of the Confederate Flag at South Carolina’s State House. The flag resided at the Confederate Soldier Monument near the State House, after having been moved from the top of the state dome in 2000 by a two-thirds vote of the legislature. Governor Nikki Haley (R-SC) argued that the conflict over the flag is grounded in a tension between heritage and hatred. She stated that “For many people in our state, the flag stands for traditions that are noble. Traditions of history, of heritage, and of ancestry.” However, she noted that “At the same time, for many others in South Carolina, the flag is a deeply offensive symbol of a brutally offensive past.” Haley’s call for the flag’s removal represents a significant shift in perspective, as she was previously opposed to removing the flag arguing that the 2000 ruling was sufficient. On July 10, 2015, the Confederate flag was removed with plans to be placed in a museum. Taking down
the flag would not bring back those lost in the attack, but Obama stated that the actions represented “a signal of good will and healing, and a meaningful step towards a better future.”

The Charleston shooting forced President Obama to confront the issue of race, a topic that he had often shied away from during his time in office. Michael Eric Dyson states that Obama exhibits “racial procrastination,” as he often only discusses issues of race when prompted by specific events, such as acts of violence against African-American citizens. However, it is not merely the infrequency of Obama’s race discussions that trouble scholars, but the content. In addition to Dyson, rhetorical scholars like Mark Lawrence McPhail as well as Ebony Utley and Amy L. Heyse found fault in Obama’s universalistic rhetoric, which frames issues in relation to all citizens rather than just specific groups. These scholars each note that Obama’s focus on the universal reinforces the notion of a post-racial society. The concept of post-racialism refers to the idea that as a society we have moved beyond race, and that we are no longer plagued by issues of racial injustice and discrimination. While a universalistic rhetoric aims to address all citizens, it necessarily fails to account for the unique struggles and circumstances that define the Black experience. Thus, in the wake of the attack on the A.M.E. Church, Obama’s most significant challenge was his own rhetoric. Although it was quite late in his presidency the Charleston shooting provided Obama the opportunity to revise his race rhetoric through an honest discussion of the persistent issues affecting the African-American community.

Orlando (2016)

The June 12, 2016 shooting at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, FL., is considered “the deadliest mass shooting in the United States and the nation’s worst terror attack since 9/11.” The tragedy left 49 people dead and another 53 wounded. The shooter, 29-year-old Omar Mateen, was killed during a three-hour standoff with police. Shortly after he began firing his assault rifle
and pistol, Mateen called 911 and pledged his allegiance to the radical terrorist group, the Islamic State, which is also referred to as ISIS or ISIL. As there is no evidence of Mateen having been instructed or trained by ISIS, he was considered “self-radicalized,” like the shooters in the 2015 San Bernardino attack. Daniel Gilroy, a former co-worker of Mateen’s, stated that Mateen had openly expressed anti-Semitic and homophobic views.

Hours after the attack it was revealed that Mateen had previously been a subject of interest for the FBI. He first attracted FBI officials’ attention in 2013, after he reportedly told his co-workers that he had ties to terrorist organizations. The FBI researched Mateen’s 2011 and 2012 trips to Saudi Arabia for Mecca and he was also placed on a terrorist watch list, although his name was removed when no incriminating information was discovered. He was interviewed a year later when Moner Mohammad Abusalha, who attended Mateen’s mosque, traveled to Syria and drove an explosives-filled truck into a restaurant.

As the Orlando shooting occurred amidst the 2016 presidential election, Republican candidate Donald J. Trump and Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton both weighed in. Clinton used the shooting as an opportunity to call for gun legislation, stating that not only do “we need to redouble our efforts to defend our country from threats at home and abroad,” but we also “need to keep guns like the ones used last night out of the hands of terrorists or other violent criminals.” In contrast, Trump advocated for his ban on Muslim immigration to the U.S. He stated that he had predicted “this was going to happen—and it is only going to get worse.” Furthermore, he argued, “we will have no way to screen them, pay for them, or prevent the second generation from radicalizing.” Trump criticized both President Obama and Secretary Clinton, calling for him to resign from the presidency and for her to drop out of the election, if they refused to use the words “radical Islam” in relation to Orlando.
Although, President Obama did not mention Trump by name, he refuted the focus on the term radical Islam. Obama prompted his audience to consider “What exactly would using this label accomplish? What exactly would it change?” Obama answered that the term would not accomplish or change anything as “There’s no magic to the phrase ‘radical Islam.’ It’s a political talking point. It’s not a strategy.... This is a political distraction.” In his critique of Trump’s Muslim ban, Obama reminded his audience that “The Orlando killer, one of the San Bernardino Killers, the Fort Hood killer—they were all U.S. citizens. Are we going to start treating all Muslim Americans differently?” In light of the magnitude of the shooting, its parallel with previous attacks, and outside critics like Trump who sought to diminish the President’s authority, Obama needed to take a strong stance against the proliferation of radical ideologies. However, this was somewhat complicated by the fact that the shooters of Fort Hood (2009) and Orlando were American citizens. This required Obama to partake in a degree of rhetorical maneuvering as he needed to associate the shooters and their actions with groups like ISIL and al Qaeda without inciting tension or hostility towards other Muslim-Americans. In the case of Orlando, the responses from political leaders received as much attention as the shooter’s background, demonstrating the importance of leaders’ remarks in these chaotic moments.

Conclusion

A study of Obama’s responses to tragedy requires a deep understanding not only of the shootings themselves, but of the conversations and debates that followed. However, these events cannot be considered in isolation, but as reflections of Americans’ broad historical and cultural standing with guns. President Obama operated within a complex political and social scene, where simple arguments have the ability to constrain both debate and progress. He faced a highly polarized and ideologically divided audience, where compromise and civility seemed all but
impossible. However, also present was an increasing desire among the American people for the creation of meaningful policy, as evidenced by public opinion polls. The combination of these contextual and audience challenges demanded a response from the Commander-in-Chief. As a presidential rhetor, Obama possess the unique power to speak on issues like gun violence. In the next chapter attention turns to an analysis of President Obama’s seven memorials speeches, which demonstrates that Obama negotiated between the situational and audience challenges through the development of a transformational rhetoric. Through this framework, Obama did not aim to merely transcend the issue of gun violence, but to provide the audience with the rhetorical resources to work through tragedy by assuming the responsibility to create change.

Endnotes


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20 Winkler, *Gunfight*, 279.


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Chapter Three

Critical Analysis of the Gun “Debate”

Chapter two explored the contextual elements of President Barack Obama’s responses to gun violence, focusing not only on the individual shootings, but also the political and social events and debates that occurred before and after. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze Obama’s seven memorial speeches in order to uncover the specific rhetorical strategies or tactics that he used to define the situation as well as to advocate for an audience response. The analysis begins with an explication of the constructs of the rhetorical presidency and presidential rhetoric, which inform the criticism that follows. Attention then turns to the speeches themselves, focusing on how four overarching themes—agency, identification, Scripture, and grace—served Obama in the evolution of a rhetoric of transformation.

“Two Constructs”

Rhetorical scholar Mary E. Stuckey characterizes the president as the “Interpreter-in-Chief.” She writes that, “he tells us stories about ourselves, and in doing so he tells us what sort of people we are, how we are constituted as a community. We take from him not only our policies but our national self-identity.”¹ David Zarefsky also argues that the primary function or feature of presidential rhetoric is its ability to define “political reality.” The specific words and phrases a president uses to frame or define a situation not only influence public perception, but also set the tone for proposals of action. According to Zarefsky, “to choose a definition, is in effect, to plead a cause, as if one were advancing a claim and offering support for it.” However, Zarefsky notes that presidential definition is unique as it “is stipulated, offered as if [it] were natural and uncontroversial rather than chosen and contestable.”² In other words, when a president defines a situation he does not invite the audience to consider multiple perspectives or
the validity of his claims, or lack thereof. Instead, audiences are directed both to see and to accept the world as it is constructed through the president’s words. To examine presidential rhetoric is to consider how power and interest intersect in the process of narrative construction, as presidents often engage in the act of definition in order to highlight, deflect, or reframe events to their political advantage. Celeste Michelle Condit also observes that definition in and of itself is a powerful rhetorical tool, regardless of the speakers’ political or social position, as speakers who can define a situation or event assume “definitional authority” over their audience. It is through definition that a speaker positions themselves as having the “right” to not only address a specific issue but to advocate for a specific response. In this view, the speaker has gained the ability to develop the framework or parameters through which future arguments or interpretations are filtered.

Martin Medhurst situates scholars like Stuckey and Zarefsky in relation to two 20th century concepts of presidential persuasion. In his explication of the “two constructs”—the rhetorical presidency and presidential rhetoric—Medhurst notes that scholars operating within each construct approach rhetoric and the presidency in distinct ways. Originating in the field of communication studies, presidential rhetoric is concerned with the specific ways in which presidents use language and symbols to achieve particular goals. In this sense, the presidency is conceptualized as an “arena within which one can study the principles and practices of rhetoric.” In contrast, the rhetorical presidency, which is based in political science, approaches the presidency as an institution with definitive constitutional powers. Scholars of the rhetorical presidency view presidents’ use of rhetoric as an attempt to extend the bounds of their executive powers in an effort to influence and promote policy. As such, proponents of the rhetorical presidency are apt to ascribe negative connotations to the theory and practice of rhetoric seeing it
only as “emotional appeals to ignorant audiences” and “as a substitute for, or as a false form of, political action.”

One of the central tensions between the two constructs is that between governance and leadership, or whether the president functions as “‘head of the government’” or “‘leader of the people.’” According to James Ceaser, Glen Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph Bessette, who introduced the theory of the rhetorical presidency, a president acts as the head of the government when he operates within the confines of his executive authority and power. This includes presidents limiting their speech to deliberative issues and constitutionally mandated events like the inaugural and State of the Union addresses. Ceaser et al. argue that presidents’ increasing desire to act as the voice of the people would ultimately perpetuate “false expectations that bear little relationship to the practical tasks of governing.” Nearly three decades later, scholars Jennifer Mercieca and Justin Vaughn advance a nearly identical argument finding that “Americans have significant, often even unrealistic, expectations that the President of the United States has the power to control every facet of government.” Zarefsky contends that in order to “fill the gap” between expectations and reality “presidents turn increasingly to rhetoric, regarding persuasion as a source of power to restore equilibrium: constitutional power plus rhetorical leadership together would be commensurate with the needs.”

Leroy Dorsey states that rhetorical leadership is not simply “leadership exerted through talk or persuasion,” but that it is “a politician’s ability to perform well the sometimes conflicting virtues of thought and character—to understand how, when, and in what manner to balance being strategic and saintly, reasonable and righteous.” In other words, leadership is rhetorically enacted when a president both speaks and acts ethically, responding to a specific situation in such a way that balances his own needs and goals against those of the nation. Ceaser et al.
associate President Woodrow Wilson with ushering in the rhetorical presidency as he sought to “articulate what is ‘in our hearts’ and not necessarily what is in our Constitution.”

In his examination of Wilson’s epideictic rhetoric, James Andrews argues that Wilson enacted rhetorical leadership through his ability “to project a unified vision of and for the people.” More specifically, Andrews finds that Wilson relied upon the concepts of “unity and uniqueness” to define the American experience. Wilson’s conceptualization of these terms was informed by “the Americanization movement,” or the process wherein immigrants were assimilated into the American cultural system, and World War I. In this context, Wilson defined unity as disparate individuals coming together for a common cause or vision of the future. This perspective cast the people as representing “a distillation of what was best in all the races of the world.” However, Andrews states that America’s uniqueness did not derive only from the blending of individuals and cultures. Instead, Wilson’s definition of uniqueness was based in Americans’ perceptions of themselves as “exceptional” beings, “whether as models of true Christian polity, or exemplars of self-government.” For Wilson, America had an obligation to protect and defend democracy and freedom at home and abroad. In this sense, the concepts of unity and uniqueness work in-tandem for Wilson, as “loyalty for Americans … was tested by one’s ability to rise above one’s national origin and pledge allegiance, instead, to this new land of new people.” Thus, the definition of American was communal, or the idea that individuals must place the values and beliefs of the nation above their own.

In contrast to Andrews, who examined rhetorical leadership as a president’s ability to construct national identity, Brandon Rottinghaus’ analysis of Barack Obama’s first year in office takes a more tactical approach. Rottinghaus focuses on the specific strategies Obama used to mobilize and manage public opinion towards his policies on Afghanistan, health care, and the
Rottinghaus advances a theory of “conditional presidential leadership,” which acknowledges that “presidents must operate within institutional and contextual burdens, including constraining elements and constraining agents.” He defines constraining elements as “events or conditions that are beyond the president’s control that disrupt the ability of the president to convey his or her message credibly or truthfully.” An example of a constraining element is “low popularity (or low credibility),” as the public is not likely to support the president’s rhetoric or policies if they do not like or trust him. In contrast, constraining agents “are those individuals or groups that intentionally challenge the president’s message or actively discount what he is saying so that the president’s message retains less credibility.” An example of a constraining agent is a “divided government (where the president’s political opponents obscure the strength or veracity of the President’s message).”

As noted in chapter two, following the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, Republicans not only acquired seats in the Senate but they gained control of the House of Representatives, thereby creating a barrier of resistance to Obama’s policies.

Rottinghaus contends that Obama overcame constraining elements and agents by using strategies that allowed him to control how his message was shared with the public. One of Obama’s most effective strategies for prompting his economic stimulus package was the “‘barnstorm’” press conferences, where Obama traveled to financially distressed cities to communicate how his plan would benefit citizens living there. In addition, Obama responded only to a limited amount of questions from the press, reacting with long speech-like answers. Concerted efforts like these allowed Obama to stress the important features of his plan, while simultaneously limiting the space for dissenting voices.
The scholarship by Andrews and Rottinghaus informs the present study in two important ways. First, Andrews’ examination of Wilson’s epideictic rhetoric provides insight into how other presidents have enacted rhetorical leadership through their ability to define concepts and experiences. More specifically, Andrews’ research illustrates how presidents constitute the American identity in order to mobilize citizens into action. Second, Rottinghaus’ theory of conditional rhetorical leadership demonstrates that a president’s rhetorical strategies are a concerted response to particular situations and events, thus, they cannot be examined in isolation. In other words, the critic must consider how the specific strategies either helped or hindered the president’s ability to respond not only to the situation, but to the American people. Also, as Rottinghaus’ analysis extends the course of Obama’s first year in office, it serves as an important example of how scholars can map rhetorical habits across time, which is an aim of this thesis. Thus, the business of the next section of this chapter is to turn to Obama’s public address in order to tease out the intricacies of his rhetorical habits.

A Rhetoric of Transformation

On November 10, 2009, at Fort Hood, TX, President Barack Obama delivered his first memorial speech on gun violence. At the time, Obama could not have foreseen the pattern of violence that would follow, casting a dark shadow upon the nation and his presidency. Obama’s responses to gun violence during his first term were somewhat cautious and restrained as he advocated for individual changes through reflection. Emboldened by his reelection in 2012, the speeches during his second term primarily advanced arguments in favor of comprehensive gun legislation. However, with limited support for his policies in the Senate and House of Representatives, Obama turned to the American people, calling on them to serve as the voices of reason and change. Despite the shift in Obama’s rhetoric from his calls for individual action to
collective action, his conceptualization of tragedy as a transformative experience remained constant. In defining tragedy this way, Obama framed gun violence as events that take us out of ourselves and force us to confront our actions, beliefs, values, and the role we choose to play in the world.

President Obama’s most explicit articulation of this definition of tragedy emerged in his September 22, 2013 address at the Washington Navy Yard after Aaron Alexis, a civilian contractor, opened fire inside the Yard killing 12. In a moment of frustration over the lack of substantive changes to gun laws, Obama proclaimed that the degree to which gun violence plagues our society “ought to be a shock to us all as a nation and as a people. It ought to obsess us. It ought to lead to some sort of transformation.” In his Tucson speech, which followed the attack on Congresswomen Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ) and her constituents, Obama argued that at a minimum, “The loss of these wonderful people should make every one of us strive to be better: to be better in our private lives, to be better friends and neighbors, coworkers and parents.” This appeal called upon the audiences’ higher nature, by asking them to believe that change was not only possible but within reach, if only the audience was willing to try. Although, Obama did not propose specific policy within the speech, he noted that individual changes could usher in “a more civil and honest public discourse” which “can help us face up to the challenges of our Nation.” In Newtown, after Adam Lanza attacked Sandy Hook Elementary school, leaving 20 children and six adults dead, Obama demanded change rather than pleaded for it. He asserted that “We can’t tolerate this anymore. These tragedies must end. And to end them, we must change.” In this view, resolution is framed through the individual, and external change becomes contingent upon our internal one.
When describing the process of transformation in Charleston, SC after the shooting in the Emanuel A.M.E. Church, Obama noted that “the path of grace involves an open mind, but more importantly, an open heart.” Similarly, in Orlando, following the assault on the gay nightclub, Pulse, Obama stated that “Out of this darkest of moments, that gives us hope, seeing people reflect, seeing people’s best instincts come out, maybe in some cases, minds and hearts changed.” Thus, in order for individuals to transform they must open their mind to logic and reason, but they must also open their heart to love and compassion. Although, Obama argued that addressing gun violence requires transformation of the American people, he did not always state that a full change was needed. At times, he contended that the American people simply needed to tap into the qualities already present. In some cases, tragedy reveals who we truly are as a people, because “After the worst of humanity reared its evil head…the best of humanity came roaring back.” In Tucson, Obama argued that tragedies should make us consider “how well we have loved and what small part we have played in making the lives of other people better…. [T]hat process of reflection, of making sure we align our values with our actions—that I believe, is what a tragedy like this requires.” Hence, tragedies represent an opportunity for the president to reinforce or redefine the meaning of American citizenship for the people. Through this perspective, the themes of agency, identification, Scripture, and grace represent specific tactics that Obama used to initiate the transformation of the American public from passive and detached spectators to agents of change.

Agency

Rhetorical scholar Karlyn Kohrs Campbell defines “rhetorical agency” as “the capacity to act, that is, to have the competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one’s community.” President Obama enacts rhetorical agency through his ability to
articulate his definition or perspective on tragedy in such a way that it invites the audience to see the world as he does. Campbell notes that agency is not inherent or given, but instead it “is ‘invented’ by authors who are points of articulation.” In this view, Obama’s audience only exists insofar as his rhetoric constitutes them to think, speak, and act in particular ways. While the rhetor is the point of origin for the audiences’ agency, in turn the audience must accept or internalize the position that is offered to them, thereby highlighting the “communal and participatory” nature of agency. Therefore, rhetorical agency represents a transactional process between the rhetor and the audience wherein they each negotiate their identity both within and outside of the discourse. In his memorial speeches, Obama sought to emphasize that gun violence is an issue amenable to human intervention through collective action. In his Navy Yard address Obama positioned his audience as powerful agents arguing that “Change will come only the way it ever has come, and that’s from the American people.” In his rejection of a fatalistic perspective of tragedy, Obama contended that this is an issue that begins and ends with us as a society that “it comes about because of decisions we make or fail to make. And it falls upon us to make it different.”

A central tension that arises in Obama’s speeches concerns individuals’ ability to enact change and their desire or motivation to do so. Obama appears to attribute the lack of significant changes to the latter, as he asked his audience to consider if as a society “we care enough to keep standing up for the country that we know is possible, even if it’s hard and even if it’s politically uncomfortable?... Do we care enough to do everything we can to spare other families the pain that is felt here today?” Furthermore, Obama contended that it is not enough that we show “we care in moments of tragedy” because “Our tears are not enough. Our words and our prayers are not enough.” The only way to demonstrate our commitment to our fellow citizens is through
continued action, because if we do nothing and allow ourselves to “slip into comfortable silence again,” then “We will have said, we don’t care enough to do something about it.” Of all the challenges we face in our journey towards change the most significant one is the limits we place on our agency. In Newtown, Obama argued that to resign ourselves to the current situation is in effect a denial of our agency and a diminishing of the power we hold as individuals within a collective. He asked his audience to consider if we are “really prepared to say that we’re powerless in the face of such carnage, that the politics are too hard?” While politics pose a significant obstacle in the path towards change, it can never fully stifle or suppress the desire of the people. In the end, the only limits that matter are the self-imposed ones.

An interrelated theme of agency in Obama’s speeches is his construction of a flawed audience. Speaking at “a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarized,” Obama stated that he believed “that for all our imperfections, we are full of decency and goodness and that the forces that divide us are not as strong as those that unite us.” In Newtown he reminded his audience “that no matter how good our intentions, we’ll all stumble, in some way. We’ll make mistakes; we will experience hardships.... [W]e know that much of our time will be spent groping through darkness, so often unable to discern God’s heavenly plans.” In Charleston, Obama argued that “We’re all sinners,” and that “We don’t deserve” God’s grace with “our rancor and complacency and short-sightedness and fear of each other, but we got it all the same.” By acknowledging the flawed and imperfect nature of his audience, Obama could continue to advocate for change, basing his argument in hope as opposed to condemnation. Although, Obama did scold his audience for their failure to act in the past, he also reminded them that there was still time to make amends, “that history can’t be a sword to justify injustice or a shield against progress, but must be a manual for how to avoid repeating the mistakes of the
past, how to break the cycle.”\textsuperscript{39} In this view, imperfection is conceptualized as a strength rather than a weakness, what matters is not that individuals always succeed but that they never stop trying to improve themselves and the world around them.

Serving as the “Interpreter-in-Chief” President Obama focused on the concept of agency within his address as a means to define tragedy as a transformative experience. Through this frame, action is placed on the audience, or the American public. However, agency is only acted upon when individuals feel a connection to the situation, or as bearing on their own lives. Thus, the next section discusses how Obama aimed to establish identification between and among himself, his immediate audiences, and the broader public.

\textbf{Identification}

The acknowledgement of our own individual and collective agency represents one part of the journey towards change. An equally important and perhaps more complex process that must occur is that of identification, or the realization that as Obama said in Charleston “justice grows out of recognition of ourselves in each other, that my liberty depends on you being free too.”\textsuperscript{40} In this view, action is contingent upon the degree to which individuals feel connected to both the situation and the deceased. Kenneth Burke notes that humans are inherently divided in that they are more different than they are alike. However, through the process of identification or “in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, [and] attitudes that make them \textit{consubstantial}.”\textsuperscript{41} The term consubstantiality, then, refers to the shared “substances” or human traits and characteristics that can unite individuals. For Burke, rhetoric functions as an advocate to bridge the differences with audiences by emphasizing that the ways in which they are alike are more salient than the ways in which they are different.
In an effort to highlight the indiscriminate nature of tragedy and decrease the psychological distance between the audience and the situation, Obama noted that the Newtown victims “lost their lives in a school that could have been any school, in a quiet town full of good and decent people that could be any town in America.”

Gun violence is an issue that affects all of us, and as a result it will take collective effort to resolve it. When memorializing the dead, Obama often framed them as being part of the “American family.” He argued that even though “We may not have known them personally ... surely we see ourselves in them.” In his Navy Yard speech, Obama echoed this sentiment stating that while “you may have never met” the victims “you know them.” Instead of allowing the audience to ponder how they might know these individuals, Obama provided the connections, focusing on the relationships and values that define our existence. In Tucson, Obama stated of Congresswoman Giffords that “in Gabby, we see a reflection of our public-spiritedness, that desire to participate in that sometimes frustrating, sometimes contentious, but always necessary and never-ending process to form a more perfect Union.”

In this view, Giffords acts as a mirror, reflecting unto us the values and practices that we associate with the American spirit. Therefore, to identify with her is to claim these values and beliefs as being a part of our own identity. In his Navy Yard address, Obama focused on our personal relationships noting that the victims are not “statistics.” These individuals had lives and stories of their own, “They were the volunteers who made your community better.... They lived the American Dream.”

The act of identification on its own is not significant, in that it is not enough for individuals to simply see themselves as being like another. Instead, they must accept the obligations or responsibilities that correspond with the claimed identity. Obama described the victims and survivors as heroes who “remind us that heroism is found not only in the fields of
battle.... Heroism is here, in the hearts of so many of our fellow citizens, all around us, just waiting to be summoned, as it was on Saturday morning.” In light of the sacrifices they made, Obama asked his audience to consider “How can we honor the fallen? How can we be true to their memory?” The audience is invited to see themselves as heroes with the ability to enact change. In Newtown, Obama more explicitly addressed the obligations that are fostered through identification finding that “we come to realize that we bear a responsibility for every child because we’re counting on everybody else to help look after ours; that we’re all parents; that they’re all our children.” Through the family perspective there is no clear separation between the individual and collective, action is framed as necessary rather than optional. In his Orlando speech, Obama rejected the notion that you can “break up the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’.... There’s only ‘us’—Americans.” The attack “reminded [us] not only of our obligations as a country to be resolute against terrorism,” Obama declared, but “we’re also reminded of what unites us as Americans, and that what unites us is far stronger than the hate and the terror of those who target us.”

In addition, Obama sought to develop identification that was grounded within the collective American identity. In his 2009 address at Fort Hood, Obama noted that the soldiers’ deaths were unique as “This is a time of war, yet these Americans did not die on a foreign field of battle. They were killed here, on American soil, in the heart of this great State and the heart of this great American community.” Despite the distinction, Obama framed the soldiers’ deaths within the nation’s larger fight to defend freedom and democracy abroad. He argued that “These are trying times for our country,” and “the stories of those at Fort Hood reaffirm the core values that we are fighting for and the strength that we must draw upon.” In this view, Obama not only sought to memorialize the dead but to recommit citizens to the nation’s military obligations as
well. In an effort to accomplish the primary as well as secondary goals, the President reinforced the distinction between citizen and soldier: “We know these men and women as soldiers and caregivers. You knew them as mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers.” Second, he used the phrase “We are a nation” when outlining the specific values, beliefs, and practices that define us as people. For example, when discussing the topic of justice Obama stated that “We are a nation of laws whose commitment to justice is so enduring that we would treat a gunman and give him due process, just as surely as we will see that he pays for his crimes.” Thus, to consider oneself as being part of the nation necessitates supporting the actions and values prescribed by Obama.

In his 2014 speech at Fort Hood, the only explicit connection made was between Obama and the parents of the deceased, with Obama stating that “As a father, I cannot begin to fathom your anguish.” Although, Obama did not ask his audience to see themselves within the soldiers, he noted that we must acknowledge their role in society, “In an era when fewer Americans know someone in uniform, every American must see these men and these women—our 9/11 generation—as the extraordinary citizens that they are.” Furthermore, he argued that “when we truly welcome our veterans home, when we show them that we need them...our communities and our Nation, will be more successful, and America will be stronger and more united for decades to come.” Similarly, in his Orlando speech Obama sought to bolster the collective identity by highlighting the values that define us, “our pluralism and our respect for each other.... [O]ur love of country.... [O]ur unity.” In the end these are the values “that will carry us through not just this atrocity, but through whatever difficult times may confront us.” The lack of individual identification in Fort Hood and Orlando is perhaps a result of the unique circumstances surrounding the shooting. Although, only Orlando was explicitly defined as a terrorist attack,
there was debate concerning the 2009 Fort Hood attack. In this view, it may have been more useful to focus on national values as a means to cultivate collective anger towards an external enemy. Richard E. Crable employs Kenneth Burke’s conceptualization of identification to examine Dwight D. Eisenhower’s shift in popularity among the American public. Crable argues that Eisenhower “explicitly fought to strengthen the implicit identification of a simple man that the nation could love,” by positioning himself outside of politics or as a “‘nonpolitician.’” Thus, in order to solidify or make concrete the image the American people had towards him, he relied upon a third type of identification, that of “scapegoating” or the act of being against a common enemy. This form of identification is grounded within division as groups solidify common values and beliefs by highlighting how they are distinct from the values and beliefs of others. In this view, Obama aimed to strengthen commitment to the American identity by describing values as being unique to us as a nation.

Scripture

In the introduction of his speeches in Tucson, AZ (2011), Newtown, CT (2012), Fort Hood, TX (2014), and Charleston, SC (2015), Obama cited different verses of Scripture. By invoking the word of God Obama signified his transition from a Commander-in-Chief to a “Comforter in Chief,” a role that requires greater sensitivity to the heart rather than the mind. However, Obama’s use of the Bible does not solely serve stylistic or structural functions. Instead, the passage serves as a thesis within the speech, reflecting the central message of the address in terms of Obama’s conceptualization of evil and tragedy. In this sense, Scripture enhances the creation of identification and the enactment of agency as it posits how individuals should both interpret and respond to acts of gun violence.
President Obama made no explicit reference to the Bible in his first address at Fort Hood. The only reference to God alludes to Hasan’s religious motivations, as Obama argued that “No faith justifies these murderous and craven acts; no just and loving God looks upon them with favor. For what he has done, we know the killer will be met with justice in this world and the next.” As a Muslim American Major Nidal Hasan, the Fort Hood shooter, openly expressed his opposition to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as his upcoming deployment. In the months leading up to the shooting, Hasan had been in communication with a known radical Islamist operative, Anwar al-Awlaki, suggesting that Hasan may have been motivated by radical Islamist ideology. The Obama administration and the military were subject to criticism from victims and family members of Fort Hood, over the failure to define the shooting as an act of terror, in light of Hasan’s anger over U.S. intervention in the Middle East and his communication with an Islamic radical. Thus, Obama’s condemnation of the attack on religious grounds appears as an attempt to acknowledge the controversy surrounding Hasan’s suspected radicalization, without explicitly defining the situation as a terrorist attack. However, in his Tucson address Obama turned to not one but two passages from the Bible, drawing from Psalm 46 and the Book of Job in order to define the situation and develop his conceptualization of tragedy.

At the beginning of his Tucson speech, Obama proclaimed that “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High Dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.” The passage, which calls for people to maintain their sense of faith in God’s power, appears to have two meanings within the context of the speech. In what is perhaps a more literal interpretation, the passage could refer to Congresswoman Gabby Giffords, who was badly wounded in the attack. Obama informed the
audience that he had just come from Giffords’ hospital bed and that shortly after his departure he learned that “Gabby opened her eyes for the first time.... Gabby opened her eyes.” With Giffords assuming the role of “her,” God’s power is illustrated through Giffords opening her eyes. The phrase “she will not fall,” signifies that Giffords will survive. Although, the journey towards recovery will be long and arduous, Obama implicitly asserts that Giffords will persevere under the protection of God. Mary E. Stuckey and Sean Patrick O’ Rourke find that Giffords’ vision functions in Obama’s speech as a metaphor for how citizens should interpret and respond to the shooting, as the act signifies “an awakening, an ability to see,” not only our faults but that the path towards a better future lies within our commitment to change the nature of our discourse.

A second interpretation of the text suggests that the nation and not Giffords represents “her” within the Scripture passage. Through this perspective, Obama sought to reassure the audience that the nation would not weaken under the weight of this tragedy. In the middle of the speech, Obama turned to the Book of Job and stated that “Scripture tells us that there is evil in the world and that terrible things happen for reasons that defy human understanding. In the words of Job, ‘When I looked for light, then came darkness.’” In this view, evil is framed as being inherent in the world, a force we cannot fully understand or prevent. The phrase, “When I looked for light, then came darkness,” speaks not only to the experience of tragedy in general, but Tucson, specifically. Not only does tragedy occur when it is least expected, but at times the journey from tragedy can seem just as daunting and dark. The debates that occurred after the shooting, concerning the role or influence of the highly polarized or partisan political scene had on the shooting, posed the threat of further dividing the nation as opposed to unifying it. More specifically, political figures like Sarah Palin came under fire for circulating a midterm election
advertisement, which marked congressional districts held by Democrats. However, the targets for Republican victories were indicated by crosshairs. As Giffords’ district was included on the map, critics charged Palin with figuratively and literally placing a target on Giffords.\textsuperscript{74} Obama contended that the nation must not allow itself to slip further into darkness and division. He stated that “what we cannot do is use this tragedy as one more occasion to turn on each other.” Instead, he intoned “let’s use this occasion to expand our moral imagination, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy and remind ourselves of all the ways that are hopes and dreams are bound together.”\textsuperscript{75} While these two passages can be examined in isolation, when viewed together, Obama argued that our inability to understand tragedy does not impede our ability to overcome it. By maintaining our sense of hope and faith both in ourselves and each other we can become a part of the light that drives out the darkness.

In a statement released on the day of the Newtown shooting, President Obama asked God to “bless the memory of the victims and, in the words of Scripture, heal the brokenhearted and bind up their wounds.”\textsuperscript{76} In the memorial speech delivered two days later, Obama seemed to build upon the sense of despair and brokenness that often accompanies tragedy. Drawing upon the Book of 2 Corinthians, Obama instructed his audience to “‘not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed day by day.’” He stated that we should “‘fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.’”\textsuperscript{77} In Newtown, Obama rejected the idea that evil is an inherent force in the world. Instead, he argued that the evil “‘seen’” in Newtown will not remain “‘since what is seen is temporary.’”\textsuperscript{78} If evil is framed as temporary, then love represents the eternal as it is a “boundless” force that “takes us out of ourselves and binds us to something larger....”\textsuperscript{79} In the end love will give us “the strength to carry on and make our country worthy of their memory.”\textsuperscript{80}
In contrast to his 2009 Fort Hood address, which was largely devoid of religious appeals, Obama’s 2014 remarks drew from Ecclesiastes 3 and 1 Corinthians. Although, Obama noted that “Once more, soldiers who survived foreign war zones were struck down here at home, where they’re supposed to be safe,” he did not necessarily argue that the situation was unique. Instead, he opted to frame the event within the course of life, as “there is ‘a time for every matter under heaven’ we laugh, and we weep. We celebrate, and we mourn. We serve in war, and we pray for peace.” However, he added that “alongside the temporal, one thing is eternal: ‘Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.’” The address is perhaps one of the more hopeful interpretations of tragedy offered by Obama as he chose to focus on the love born of tragedy, rather than the evil that creates it. He argued that in times of tragedy we do not unite solely through pain and grief, instead “It is love, tested by tragedy that brings us together again.”

The theme of love was woven throughout the speech, but was most prominent when Obama honored the three fallen soldiers, finding that love was the guiding force in their lives. Obama contended that “It was love for country that inspired these Americans to put on the uniform and join the greatest army ever known.... It was love for the Army that made them the soldiers they were.... And it was love for their comrades, for all of you, that defined their last moments.” In light of the sacrifices made by the soldiers Obama argued that it is not enough merely to experience love for another, but we must be willing to translate that love into action, for “We must honor their lives, not ‘in word or talk, but in deed and in truth.’” Instead of allowing the audience to ponder the appropriate actions to take, Obama offered his audience concrete ways they could honor the fallen. He stated that we “honor these men with a renewed commitment to keep our troops safe, not just in battle, but on the homefront as well.... We must
honor these men by doing more to care for our fellow Americans living with mental illness, civilian and military.”

In returning to Obama’s claim “that there is ‘a time for every matter under heaven,’” this speech argues that the time for mourning has passed, the reflection required at Fort Hood in 2009 is no longer acceptable, and the only response is action. Although, the task will not be easy, it is not impossible, because we can “reach within our wounded hearts. We lean on each other. We hold each other up. We carry on. And with God’s amazing grace, we somehow bear what seems unbearable.” In this view, we can overcome any obstacle placed before us so long as we maintain our sense of love and compassion for one another.

While Obama’s use of Scripture serves both illustrative and instructive purposes within the speeches already discussed, it is most evident in his eulogy for Reverend Clementa Pinckney and the eight congregants killed in the shooting at the Emanuel A.M.E. Church in South Carolina. In his memorialization of the nine victims Obama cited Hebrews 11:13: “‘They were living by faith when they died,’ Scripture tells us. ‘They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on Earth.’” On a basic level, the Bible passage illustrates the actual events of the day; as the shooting took place in a church, the individuals were both literally and spiritually “living by faith when they died.” However, this citation also represents the character of the victims, especially Reverend Pinckney who embodied “the idea that our Christian Faith demands deeds and not just words; that the ‘sweet hour of prayer’ actually lasts the whole week long; that to put our faith in action is more than individual salvation, it’s about collective salvation.”

Obama’s use of Scripture in Charleston was unique as it stemmed from the particular context of the African-American church and its theological tradition. In particular, Obama drew
upon the philosophy and practice of black theology, which James H. Cone defines as “a theology of liberation because it is a theology which arises from identification with the oppressed blacks of America, seeking to interpret the gospel of Christ in the light of the black condition.” Furthermore, Cone contends that black theology aims “to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed black people so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, bestowing upon them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression.” In other words, black theology is a philosophy wherein religion and the Bible are used to contextualize the black experience in America. Through this perspective, God is necessarily the savior of the oppressed, working towards the liberation of his people. The power or significance does not merely lie “in the words,” but in its ability “to point beyond itself to the reality of God’s revelation; and in America, that means black liberation.” In this sense, Scripture must be made manifest in the lives of the people, by speaking to the situations and events that define their experience.

However, it is important to note that black theology is grounded within the African-American community; therefore, the salvation it seeks is necessarily collective rather than individual. Cone considers black theology as a “theology of survival,” as “it seeks to interpret the theological significance of the being of the being of a community who existence is threatened by the power of nonbeing.” In other words, it reflects African-American’s historical struggle for not only freedom but the ability to participate and contribute to our political and social world.

Grace

A significant theme that emerges from Obama’s use of Scripture and religious appeals in his memorial speeches is the concept of grace. In Christian theology grace is defined as a gift from God as “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves,
it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast.” Obama first introduced the term in Newtown. It was continually woven into subsequent speeches, however, only completing its conceptual evolution in Charleston. In Newtown, Obama’s brief utterance of grace occurs in his discussion of the exemplary behavior exhibited by the community, finding that “In the face of indescribable violence, in the face of unconscionable evil, you’ve looked out for each other, and you’ve cared for one another, and you’ve loved one another.” Instead of turning inward towards grief and anger, they remained united in their expressions of love and compassion for one another. Obama urged Newtown never to lose sight of the bond that was forged through tragedy, because “with time and God’s grace, that love will see you through.” As Obama does not expand upon the meaning of the term in the remainder of the speech, it is not until his Navy Yard address that a definition is offered to the audience.

In contrast to his Tucson, Newtown, Fort Hood (2014), and Charleston speeches, Obama did not begin his remarks at the Washington Navy Yard with a Scripture verse. Instead, he drew upon Robert Kennedy’s eulogy for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who “in the anguish of that moment...turned to the words of an ancient Greek poet, Aeschylus.” Obama stated that “‘Even in our sleep, pain which we cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our own will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.’” In this view, God’s grace is framed as the internal, perhaps involuntary, mental and emotional process that occurs after a tragedy. It is the acknowledgment that only when we reach our lowest point, when the darkness and despair seems all consuming that we manage to find the strength needed to persevere. Through this perspective, tragedy and suffering become essential features of the human experience, for it is within these moments that individuals gain a deeper understanding of not only the self, but the world around them. Pain is the vehicle through which change is both
prompted and actualized, Obama noted that when other countries experienced mass shootings they “endured great heartbreak, but they also mobilized, and they changed, and mass shootings became a great rarity.” Obama stressed that tragedy is a processual experience, once the time for mourning and reflection have passed, action must be taken.

In his critique over the lack of substantial changes to gun laws in the preceding five years, Obama stated that he feared that “there’s a creeping resignation that these tragedies are just somehow the way that it is, that this is somehow the new normal.” However, he contended that “We can’t accept this. As Americans bound in grief and love, we must insist here today, there is nothing normal about innocent men and women being gunned down where they work. There is nothing normal about our children being gunned down in their classrooms.” Obama noted that “Sometimes, it takes an unexpected voice to break through, to help remind us what we know to be true.” One such voice was that of Dr. Janis Orlowski, who helped to treat those wounded in the attack. Quoting Orlowski, Obama proclaimed that “All these shootings, all these victims… ‘this is not America.’” Furthermore, these attacks represent “‘a challenge to all of us’” and “‘we have to work together to get rid of this.’” Obama framed gun violence not as an issue that merely affects individuals and communities, but as a direct challenge and threat to the American identity.

While Obama conceded that the people’s resignation towards gun violence is not wholly condemnable as “politics are difficult,” and it is easy to believe “that our politics are frozen and that nothing will change.” Although, the audience may feel powerless in the face of such trials, Obama refused to diminish the audiences’ agency, “I do not accept that we cannot find commonsense ways to preserve our traditions… while at the same time reducing the gun violence that unleashes so much mayhem on a regular basis.” Thus, the “wisdom we should be
taking away from this tragedy and so many others,” is “not accepting these shootings as inevitable, but asking what can we do to prevent them from happening again and again and again.” In this view, God’s grace is conceptualized as a moment of “recognition” upon which an individual acknowledges their own sense of agency or their “ability to act and to change and to spare others the pain that drops upon our hearts. So in our grief, let us seek that grace. Let us find that wisdom.”

It is in Charleston that Obama fully articulates his conceptualization of the philosophy and practice of grace. Steven Goldzwig finds that within this speech, “‘Grace’ is the alpha and the omega in the process of establishing positive reappraisal and reframing.” In other words, grace functions as the medium through which the audience can both understand and respond to both the text and the situation. When reflecting upon the shooting and the days that have passed since, Obama stated that he often thought about “the idea of grace…. [The] grace described in one of my favorite hymnals, the one we all know: Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I’m found; was blind but now I see.” He argued that “as a nation, out of this terrible tragedy, God has visited grace upon us, for he has allowed us to see where we’ve been blind. He has given us the chance, where we’ve been lost, to find our best selves.” Like Tucson, vision operates as a metaphor for change and redemption, as we have the opportunity to learn from the error of our ways and improve the world around us. President Obama discussed the issue of blindness in relation to the motives of the killer, Dylann Roof, and the injustices that African-Americans have experienced throughout history. Although, he never mentioned Roof by name, Obama stated that “He didn’t know he was being used by God. Blinded by hatred, the alleged killer could not see the grace surrounding Reverend Pinckney and that Bible study group.” Obama also noted that the killer could never have
imagined that the community and the nation would “not merely respond with revulsion at his evil act, but with big-hearted generosity and, more importantly, with a thoughtful introspection and self-examination that we so rarely see in public life.” Rhetorical scholar David Frank and sociologist Eric Michael Dyson find that Obama’s discussion of Roof is grounded within black theology, highlighting the belief that God can use evil events or situations in order to create good within the world.

However, Obama argued that it is not enough that we can see our faults. Rather, we must act to correct them, for it is our turn to “make the most of” God’s grace, “to receive it with gratitude and to prove ourselves worthy of this gift.” In the speech Obama offered his audience concrete ways to “express God’s grace” in the world. According to Obama “we express God’s grace” by removing the Confederate Flag from South Carolina’s State capitol as “It would be one step in an honest accounting of America’s history; a modest, but meaningful, balm for so many unhealed wounds.” When turning to the topic of gun violence Obama stated that “by acknowledging the pain and loss of others, even as we respect the traditions and ways of life that make up this beloved country, by making the moral choice to change, we express God’s grace.” In this view, Obama likens the experience of God’s grace to a spiritual reawakening or rebirth as individuals are presented with the opportunity to atone for their mistakes through the actions they take moving forward. David Frank engages the concept of grace through forgiveness, arguing that “it is the act of forgiveness that makes grace a reality.” He states that forgiveness “allows humans to create, through intentional action, a new beginning for both the one guilty of wrongdoing and for the one who has suffered the wrong.” It is only through breaking the chain of anger and revenge that individuals can utilize the grace that has been offered to them. In his closing remarks, Obama noted that the victims had “found that grace.”
Although, they did not “receive the things promised” while living on earth, they lived a life of service, using each day to make the world a better place for all.\textsuperscript{113} The implicit argument is that now it is time for the audience to carry on that work and to “find that grace” for themselves because “If we can tap that grace, everything can change.”\textsuperscript{114}

While the concept of grace is most prominent within the Charleston address, the audiences’ understanding of this practice and philosophy is enhanced through acknowledging and documenting its presence in prior speeches, the place of grace in Christian theology becomes clear. It is only through the acknowledgment of our faults and shortcomings that individuals can complete the difficult task of transformation.

Conclusion

While the power of the institution permits President Barack Obama to speak on the issue of gun violence, it was his rhetorical skills that imbued his words with true meaning. As discussed in the orientation to presidential rhetoric and rhetorical leadership, a president enacts leadership through his ability to negotiate between the tensions imposed by the situation and the audience. More specifically, the president must advance a clear, cohesive, and concise definition of tragedy that the American people can unify around. It is through the articulation of this definition that the president can then advocate for his specific course of action. Faced with a divided government unable or unwilling to make substantive changes to gun legislation despite the increased gun violence, President Obama turned to the American people to serve as his agents of change. Overtime he continually crafted and perfected a definition of tragedy as a transformative experience, which emphasizes that mass shootings are not events immutable to change. Instead, they are preventable, but only if citizens act upon the agency and power they hold. As transformation denotes a processual experience, defeats or setbacks are not necessarily
viewed as weakness of the executive office or the government at large, but as a feature or step towards eventual change. In addition, it may serve as a buffer against the unrealistic expectations citizens have towards the president, allowing him to better negotiate the tension created by perceived and actual power.

The rhetorical move made by Obama reflects what Roderick P. Hart would consider as presidential rhetoric’s ability to “relocate sources of authority.” In this view, Obama did not diminish his executive responsibility to remedy the prevalence of gun violence, but he sought to rhetorically transfer some of his power and responsibility to act onto the American people. He accomplished this task by first building up the audiences’ agency by framing gun violence as an issue that is only resolvable through their collective efforts. However, in order to activate their agency, he needed to develop a sense of identification between the audience and the fallen, framing them as heroes and members of the American family, individuals worthy of our continued efforts towards ending the violence inflicted by guns. President Obama’s use of Scripture and grace work in-tandem to bolster the identification created. Where Scripture contextualizes the experience of tragedy, assigning meaning to the loss and pain it creates, grace is the medium through which individuals act. A rhetoric of transformation is one of empowerment as it calls upon citizens to reach deep within the hearts and minds to find the courage to change.

Endnotes

1 Mary E. Stuckey, Introduction to The President As Interpreter-In-Chief (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, INC., 1991), 1.

In using “he” to discuss prior presidents, I follow Mary E. Stuckey who argues “The male pronoun is used when referring to past presidents, and gender-neutral terms are used when referring to the institution or to its future. I do this because it seems to me foolish and unrealistic to speak about past presidents and the historical presidency as if it were not an all-male club. It has been. The language used throughout this text recognizes that fact while aiming our current understanding of the office as non-gender-specific.” See *The President as Interpreter-In-Chief*, 143.


10 David Zarefsky, “The Presidency has Always Been a Place for Rhetorical Leadership,” in *Presidential Rhetoric: Presidency and Rhetorical Leadership*, ed. Leroy Dorsey (Texas A&M


34 Obama, “Newtown,” para 17.

35 Scholars Derek Sweet and Margret McCue-Enser find that Obama’s epideictic rhetoric constructs the audience as an “imperfect people,” or “always engaged in the “act of constitution.” See “Constituting ‘the People’ as Rhetorical Interruption: Barack Obama and the Unfinished Hopes of an Imperfect People,” Communication Studies 61, no.5 (2010), 602.


Obama, “Tucson,” para 34.


Barack Obama, “Remarks at a Memorial Service at Fort Hood, Texas,”

(Speech, Fort Hood, Texas, November 10, 2009), *The American Presidency Project*,


Barack Obama, “Remarks at a Memorial Service for Victims of the Shootings at Fort Hood, Texas” (Speech, Fort Hood, Texas, April 9, 2014), *The American Presidency Project*,


https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+46&version=NIV.


92 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 22-23, and 69.

93 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 34, 43.


100 Obama, “Navy Yard,” para 16.


Obama, “Charleston,” paras 23-24


Obama, “Charleston,” para 27.


Chapter Four

Conclusion

At the end of a president’s tenure citizens look to the past and reflect upon the series of events that transpired over the last four or eight years, wondering how the policies of the president impacted their lives. During President Obama’s final weeks in office multiple news and media outlets developed special television programs dedicated to reviewing Obama’s tenure. Some of these included CNN’s “The Legacy of Barack Obama,” ABC News’s “The Obama Legacy: A Promise of Hope,” and the History Channel’s “The 44th President: In His Own Words,” National Geographic’s “Obama: The Price of Hope,” and MSNBC’s “The Obama Years with Brain Williams.” In addition, Johnathan Chait’s Audacity: How Barack Obama Defied his Critics and Created a Legacy That Will Prevail, and E.J. Dionne Jr. and Joy-Ann Reid’s We Are The Change We Seek: The Speeches of Barack Obama were published. In a way this project also engaged in notions of leadership and legacy of the Obama presidency, albeit from a rhetorical studies perspective. The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the key findings, address the implications of the study, and provide directions for future research.

Chapter one introduced the objects of study and reviewed salient literature on President Obama’s discourse in general as well as his speeches on gun violence. The primary interest behind this project was to gain a deeper understanding of Obama as a presidential rhetor, and to discern, map and evaluate his rhetorical habits across his eight years in office. This was achieved through a focus on his memorial speeches. The project entered an already expansive scholarly conversation on the rhetoric of Barack Obama. The review of prior scholarship illuminated important themes concerning President Obama’s perspectives on the relationship between the government and its citizens, the role of faith and religion in Obama’s life and his oratory, as well
as his views on race. Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones’ work on Obama’s use of the
American Dream narrative illustrated Obama’s conceptualization of communal social change, in
which both citizens and the government play a role in the betterment of society.¹ Similarly,
David A. Frank’s analysis of the prophetic voice and Robert E. Terrill’s examination of “double
consciousness” in Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” address highlight the inclusive nature of
Obama’s America.² In particular, Obama invited his audience to look beyond the division of race
to realize that we hold similar dreams and aspirations. However, it is only through the
acknowledgment of our commonalities that we can work together to create a better future for all.
The theme of communal social change served as the foundation of President Obama’s memorial
speeches as he often framed the citizens as powerful agents of change. Through this perspective,
he argued that government alone cannot resolve the issue of gun violence; instead, it will require
the passion and power of the citizenry.

A second significant theme to emerge from the survey of scholarship was rhetorical
critics’ focus on Obama’s use of religion and religious appeals within his public address. Scholar
Nathan Crick contends that Obama’s rhetoric is not necessarily one of religion, but of “religious
experience,” as it aims to move people beyond a focus on the self in order to become a part of
the collective.³ In the context of President Obama’s memorial speeches in Tucson, AZ and
Newtown, CT, David A. Frank found that the specific Scripture passages defined the experience
of tragedy, which in turn framed the response of the people.⁴ This rhetorical trait was also found
within his other eulogies that employed the Bible.

The introductory chapter provided a solid foundation for the subsequent analysis
conducted in chapters two and three as it illuminated important characteristics or features of
President Obama’s rhetorical habits. It is important to reiterate that the analysis presented in this
thesis did not operate or seek to find these specific patterns within his memorial speeches. Instead, the process was inductive, with the analysis moving to data discerned in the texts to commentary about Obama’s speaking. However, the conclusions drawn from other scholars helped to ground or bolster the arguments presented.

Chapter two provided an orientation to the rhetorical situations Obama encountered, addressing the challenges created by both contextual factors and the audiences. Study began by providing an overview of how scholars have previously examined a rhetor’s ability to overcome the tension created by the confluence of the audiences’ beliefs, values, and experience and the political, cultural, and social events that surround any specific speech act. More specifically, the section focused on presidential responses to tragedy, attending to Mary E. Stuckey’s work on President Ronald Reagan’s *Challenger* Address and John M. Murphy’s analysis of President George W. Bush’s response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Their analyses demonstrated that both Reagan and Bush needed to develop a definition of tragedy that would not only comfort the audience, but also advance their specific policy agendas. As Reagan sought to advocate for the continuation of the space program, he framed the astronauts and the audience as pioneers, whose very identity is founded upon the desire to explore. In contrast, Murphy found that Bush continued to use epideictic rhetoric after his memorialization of the victims, which restrained the possibility of dissent and deliberation towards the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Through the epideictic lens, Bush framed his military policies as a way in which citizens could fulfill their destiny as a protector and defender of freedom.⁵

For this project, it was important not only to address the specific shootings, but to place President Obama’s rhetoric within the larger conversation of gun rights in America. This section began with a brief overview of the legal history of the Second Amendment, touching upon
foundational court cases such as *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008) and *McDonald v. City of Chicago* (2010), cases that solidified individual’s rights to own guns. It was important to acknowledge these landmark cases as they provide the legal precedent through which gun legislation is both enacted and refuted. The discussion then turned to an examination of the prominent arguments utilized by gun rights advocates and groups like the National Rifle Association, as they represented President Obama’s primary opposition towards enacting gun control policies. Scholars Christopher M. Duerringer and Z.S. Justus examined the three most popular arguments advanced by gun rights advocates: “guns don’t kill people, people kill people,” “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun,” and “if you outlaw guns, only outlaws will have guns.” Duerringer and Justus maintained that these arguments are fallacious in nature as they violate rules of argumentation by attacking claims that were not advanced. They also note that each statements’ power resides in the fact that they are enthymemes, meaning that the audience reaches the mental conclusion of the statement without the rhetor needing to state it. Laura J. Collins also demonstrated that an individual’s right to own a gun is not merely a right granted by the Constitution, but that it has come to represent an aspect of one’s identity. This chapter aimed to place President Obama’s speeches within the larger conversation of gun rights, as he needed to develop a rhetorical approach that would counteract the forces seeking to diminish or discredit his arguments and proposals.

Chapter three developed and explicated the critical perspective that was then applied to the seven memorial speeches. The analysis entailed close reading that was informed by the concepts of presidential rhetoric and rhetorical leadership. Leroy Dorsey finds that rhetorical leadership refers to a president’s ability to speak and act in ways that address a given situation without compromising the president’s or the audience’s needs and goals. In contrast to Dorsey,
David Zarefsky conceptualizes presidential leadership as a chief executive’s ability to define a situation. The focus on definition was particularly important for President Obama, as he needed to advance a definition of tragedy that had the potential to move the audience to action. In the initial stages of the study a close reading of the texts revealed that over time Obama’s speeches moved from ceremonial speech focused on memorializing the dead, to deliberative speech that aimed to advance policy. However, this approach proved problematic as it failed to account fully for the rhetorical work occurring within the discourse. Repeated readings of the text revealed a rhetoric of transformation, wherein Obama argued that the only way gun violence would be resolved was if the American people changed. More specifically, individuals needed to transform into agents of change.

In order to induce the process of transformation within the American public, President Obama needed to frame gun violence as an issue amenable to human intervention. Therefore, it was necessary to construct his audience as agents of change. In an effort to accomplish this task Obama limited the role of government and placed much of the burden on the American public, arguing that this is an issue that begins and ends with us, and that there are only two options, action and inaction. Secondly, he noted that the reason there have been no significant changes to gun legislation is that citizens may feel a sense of resignation towards the situation, or that their actions will not make a true difference. However, Obama refused to diminish the audiences’ agency by arguing that the only limits to change are those that are self-imposed. Within his discussion of agency Obama also constructed his audience as flawed and imperfect, but always working towards improvement. This construct reinforced or bolstered Obama’s definition of tragedy as a transformative experience because defining a subject as imperfect necessitates
personal growth and change. In addition, it accounts for setbacks and defeats, which are not
framed as weaknesses of the people’s actions, but simply a part of the process.

Before individuals can put their agency into action, they need to be motivated to do so.
Individuals need to understand the urgency of gun violence, to understand it as an issue that
directly relates to their own lives. After having established mass shootings as events amenable to
change, Obama sought to develop a sense of identification between the audience and the fallen.
As Kenneth Burke noted identification is required because individuals are inherently divided.
However, through identification individuals can unite over shared values, beliefs, or ideas.11 A
prominent strategy employed by Obama to create identification was framing the victims as being
part of an American family. This perspective denotes a level of responsibility and obligation on
the part of the audience. Action becomes required rather than optional.

The creation of identification is enhanced through Obama’s use of Scripture. The
passages included in the speeches do not merely serve stylistic functions, but are illustrative and
instructive as well. Through the words of the Bible Obama defines the situation, providing a
framework for the experience of tragedy. As David A. Frank noted and as reinforced here, in
Tucson Obama defined evil as inherent, therefore, tragedies are events that can neither be
explained nor controlled. In contrast, the Newtown speech called for the audience to persevere
through tragedy as these are events that will ultimately strengthen the soul and character.12 In his
second Fort Hood address Obama drew upon Ecclesiastes 3 and 1 Corinthians. Through their
pairing Obama focused on the love that emerges after a tragedy rather than the evil that creates it.
In this view, Obama argued that that we can show our love towards one another and the fallen
through the actions we take moving forward. In Charleston, Obama incorporated Hebrews 11:13
into his address. Not only did this passage reflect the events of the shooting, as the victims were
killed inside of the church, but is also focused on sacrifices made by the victims. It highlights individuals putting others’ needs before their own, thereby instructing the audience to do the same.

The fourth and final theme of grace stemmed from Obama’s use of Scripture. This concept first appeared in his Newtown speech, with its definition evolving over time. In his Navy Yard address Obama stated that grace is the moment in which individuals acknowledge their own agency and recognize that their actions can create change. Obama only fully articulates grace in his Charleston address, wherein he defines it as a gift from God. It is the ability for individuals to acknowledge their own faults and shortcomings, and possess the strength and willpower to improve upon them. However, it is not merely a reflective process. Rather, the gift of grace only materializes when individuals act. While grace is given and not earned through our individual and collective efforts, action is the sign of our conscious decision to use the experience of tragedy as an opportunity to create good in world.

Implications

First and foremost, this thesis contributes to the study of presidential rhetoric and presidential leadership. In particular, this project demonstrates that President Obama overcame challenges imposed by the situation and the audience to develop a cohesive definition of tragedy as a transformative experience. While scholars have noted that Obama’s Tucson address transcended the situation leaving the audience without a specific course of action, this analysis illustrates that overtime he developed a rhetoric that allowed individuals to work through tragedy.\textsuperscript{13} In addition, this analysis also expands scholars’ understanding of epideictic rhetoric in general, and the rhetoric of tragedy in particular, by reinforcing the notion that presidents do not merely aim to comfort during these moments but to move the public to action.
In “Thinking Hard About Presidential Discourse: The Question of Efficacy,” Roderick P. Hart theorizes the future of presidential discourse through a focus on effects. While Hart notes that rhetorical scholars need to proceed with caution when advancing causal claims, he asserts that they need to devote more attention and consideration to the ways in which presidential rhetoric informs, shapes, or alters not only individuals but the social and political world that surrounds them.  

To study the relationship that exists between presidential discourse and effects is to consider how rhetoric can transform the abstract into concrete in an effort to change the material conditions that define our experiences as individuals and citizens. In the concluding remarks of chapter three it was noted that Obama’s rhetoric of transformation reflected one of the 12 effects explicated by Hart, which is that presidential rhetoric can “relocate sources of authority.” More specifically, Obama sought to shift the responsibility to enact change away from the executive office and onto the American people. Although, Obama was unsuccessful at implementing gun legislation at the federal level, there is evidence of increased citizen engagement concerning the issue of gun violence.

As discussed in chapter two, the Newtown shooting represented an important turning point in the evolution of President Obama’s responses to gun violence as it prompted a greater focus on the enactment of gun legislation and regulations. The attack on Sandy Hook Elementary also served as a catalyst for community organizations like Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, which was established one day after the shooting by Shannon Watts, a stay-at-home mother. In the five years since their inception, Moms Demand Action has grown in numbers and influence. The group has roots in all 50 states and in 2013 they partnered with Mayors Against Illegal Guns. When the two organizations joined forces they created Everytown for Gun Safety in 2014.
The efforts of grass roots organizations like Moms Demand Action has been successful at mobilizing citizens, as evidenced by state-level initiatives and legislation. During the 2016 election, California, Maine, Nevada, and Washington each had a gun safety measure on their ballots. The Maine and Nevada initiatives concerned the expansion of background checks, by proposing that private gun sales or transfers between unlicensed sellers and individuals be subject to background checks. The California initiative would ban high-capacity magazines or ammunition holders and require a background check for purchasing bullets. The Washington bill would temporarily allow judges to prevent individuals from possessing a gun if there was evidence that doing so would present a danger to not only the individual but others. Of the four initiatives, Maine’s was the only one defeated on election night.

Nevada’s initiative, known as Question 1 on the ballot, passed by a slim margin with 50.4% voting “yes” and 49.6% voting “no.” The passage of the bill was determined by a difference of 9,901 votes. In addition, the overwhelming majority of those in favor of the bill resided in urban Clark County, which includes Las Vegas. Support for Question 1 is somewhat aligned with a 2015 Gallup Poll which found that 55% of Americans wanted to see implementation of stricter gun laws. The proposal faced significant opposition from Governor Brian Sandoval (R) and the Nevada Attorney General Adam Laxalt. The National Rifle Association (NRA) also directed nearly $6.6 million into the State in an effort to defeat the measure. Despite its passage, the bill has not yet been enforced, with Laxalt deeming it unenforceable on account of its language. The bill stipulates that the background checks are to go through the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) systems. However, the FBI refuted this requirement noting that States do not possess the power or authority to “dictate how federal resources are applied.” Furthermore, they argued that as Nevada’s Department of Public Safety
already has an established system, they should continue to conduct the checks on their own. Laxalt argued that the Department of Public Safety could not follow through with the FBI’s recommendation as the bill’s language did not explicitly allow for it. However, Jennifer Crowe, the Nevada representative of Moms Demand Action, was not persuaded by the language argument finding that “Implementing Question 1 simply requires some cooperation between Nevada officials and the FBI” as “other states have a hybrid system where responsibility for background checks is shared by both the FBI and state agencies.” In this view, the resistance to enforce the measure may depend more on politics than the bill itself. The issue is likely to remain unresolved for some time as the Nevada legislators cannot alter or revise the approved bill for three years.

While the relationship between President Obama’s speeches and the increase in citizen engagement and States enactment of gun legislation cannot be considered a causal one, there does appear to be a correlation. The action and agitation on the part of citizens is representative of the transformation that Obama aimed to induce; it is a sign that slowly but surely individuals are opening their hearts and minds and realizing the power of their agency to create change.

Future Directions

Ultimately the thesis reflects the benefits of criticism aligned with John Angus Campbell’s call for “longitudinal case studies.” Campbell frames such work as a “middle way” between the divergent methodological approaches developed by scholars Michael McGee and Michael Leff. Campbell argues that “For McGee, rhetorical time is existential” and that his object of study is “consciousness,” as the ideograph focuses on how individuals interpret and ascribe meaning to language and symbols across time. In contrast, as Leff’s object of study is that of the discrete text, time is conceptualized “as a series of densely structured but discrete
episodes bracketed in history and enacted in texts; each text/context has its proximate beginning and proximate end.” In other words, texts are considered specific responses to particular moments in time.

Campbell contends that the longitudinal case study blends the strengths of McGee’s and Leff’s methods as it would acknowledge that rhetorical acts are both situated within time and a part of a larger cultural, historical, political, or social tradition. Thus, Obama’s speeches can be viewed as distinct and significant rhetorical moments, while also representing a collective conscious that expands across time through experience. In this view, while the Tucson address may have transcended the issue of gun violence in the particular moment, when placed within the larger framework of Obama’s responses it represents the initial stages of transformation.

Individual reflection and change is framed as the precursor to societal change. Before individuals can move towards action, they must first learn how to be a part of a collective, how to work and communicate with others, and how to make sacrifices. This thesis demonstrates that scholars should continue to conduct longitudinal case studies as they permit critics the opportunity to see how rhetorical habits and messages can evolve over time.

While the analysis presented in this study provides extensive insight into President Obama’s discourse on gun violence through a focus on seven of his speeches, it is important to note that not all of his remarks were examined. More specifically, the analysis excluded his 15th and final speech on gun violence following the July 7, 2016 shooting of five Dallas police officers. The officers were killed by lone gunman, 25-year-old Micah Xavier, a military veteran who had previously served in Afghanistan. The shooting occurred at a protest centered upon the issue and trend of police violence against African-Americans. The Dallas protest was prompted by the deaths of African-Americans Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, who were killed by
The Sterling and Castile cases received prominent attention in the media for several reasons. First, although the incidents were separated by location they occurred in close proximity to each other in terms of time, as Sterling was killed on July 5th in Baton Rouge, LA, and Castile was killed only one day later in Falcon Heights, MN. Second, the deaths of Sterling and Castile contribute to an increasing trend of both white citizen and police violence against African-Americans as evidenced by prior cases like Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice. Third, both deaths were highly visible as they were documented on video and then released online. The video of Castile’s death was particularly controversial as his fiancée, Diamond Reynolds, livestreamed the aftermath of the shooting on Facebook, providing viewers with a more immediate and personal perspective.

The decision to exclude this speech from the analysis stems from the fact that initial examination of the text revealed that President Obama primarily relied upon rhetorical strategies and arguments that were used in the previous seven speeches. Most noticeable overlap concerns his selection of Scripture and his focus on open hearts and minds as essential features or requirements for enacting change. In the Dallas speech, the Scripture passage of Romans 5 served as the dominant framing device wherein Obama reminded his audience that “in our suffering there is glory, ‘because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.’” Similar to his use of 2 Corinthians in Newtown, both passages call for individuals to persevere and work through the experience of tragedy as it is an experience that will strengthen not only the individual soul and character but the body politic as a whole, through the legislative changes it may prompt. When turning to the topic of action in Dallas, Obama drew upon his Charleston and Orlando speeches, calling for citizens to open their hearts and minds to the possibility and necessity of change. While the characteristics found within the
Dallas speech reinforce the analysis presented in this thesis, it does not fundamentally alter or
extend the central argument of Obama’s construction of a transformative rhetoric. Thus, it was
sufficient to limit the texts up until the Orlando address. Even though this speech was not
included in the analysis it represents an important area for future rhetorical scholarship.

While this thesis engaged with the issue of race in President Obama’s discourse generally
and as it pertained to his responses to gun violence, it was not a primary focus. In the future
scholars should explore the Dallas address within the broader context of Obama’s racial
discourse, perhaps conducting a comparative analysis between the Charleston and Dallas
speeches. In addition, former President George W. Bush also delivered a speech at the memorial
event, so scholars may also compare his remarks to those of Obama’s.

Lastly, scholars should also consider the speeches covered in this thesis that were not
previously examined by critics, such as Fort Hood (2009/2014), Washington Navy Yard (2013),
and Orlando (2016). Critics may approach these texts from a variety of perspectives, whether
choosing to focus on the memorial speeches themselves, or contextual discourses that
surrounded both the shootings and Obama speeches, as illustrated in the work of Beth L. Boser
and Randall A. Lake as well as Francesca Marie Smith and Thomas A. Hollihan. Additional
treatments of these texts may yield varied and insightful interpretations.

Conclusion

On January 20, 2017 President Barack Obama left office without having enacted any gun
legislation beyond his executive orders. The political polarization that dominated much of the
Obama presidency does not appear to be waning in the early stages of Donald Trump’s
presidency. The discontent and division among citizens toward the new administration was
reflected in the protests and marches that followed the inauguration. In addition, Democrats
and Republicans in both the House of Representatives and the Senate remain in a tense gridlock, with Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) declaring that Senate Democrats represent the barrier to Trump’s policies. The tension between Democrats and Republicans, paired with President Trump’s support of gun rights policies, suggests that the issue of gun violence will remain an unsolved public policy issue open to contention and debate. However, citizens need not lose hope as this indicates that we have yet to complete our transformation.

Endnotes


10 Scholars Derek Sweet and Margret McCue-Enser find that Obama’s epideictic rhetoric often frames the audience as an “imperfect people,” or “always engaged in the “act of constitution.” See “Constituting ‘the People’ as Rhetorical Interruption: Barack Obama and the Unfinished Hopes of an Imperfect People,” Communication Studies 61, no. 5 (2010), 602.


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Education
University of Nevada, Las Vegas Expected: Spring ’17
• Master of Arts in Communication Studies
• Committee: David Henry (Chair), Jacob Thompson (Associate Professor in Residence), Sara VanderHaagen (Assistant Professor), and John Tuman (Chair of Political Science).

University of Nevada, Las Vegas Graduated: Spring ’15
• Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies, Cum Laude

Affiliations
• Student member of Lambda Pi Eta the Communication Studies Honor Society

Honors and Scholarships
• Graduate Student Presenter in the Graduate Student Showcase: Presidential Election Issues.
• Graduate Teaching Assistantship, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.
• Deans Honor List at UNLV Spring ’15, Fall ’14, Spring ’14, Fall ’13, Spring ’13, Spring ’12, Fall ’11, Spring ’11, and Fall ’10.

Teaching Experience
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Graduate Teaching Assistant
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Course Work
• Thesis—D. Henry
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Work Experience
• Bed Bath & Beyond, Sales Associate (January 2013- June 2015).