The September 12, 2012 Rose Garden Address: President Barack Obama's “9/11” Moment

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The September 12, 2012 Rose Garden Address: President Barack Obama’s “9/11” Moment

By: Michael Eisenstadt

Abstract

Albert Einstein once said memory is deceiving given it is colored by the events of today. The old adage “history repeats itself” fails to illustrate the powerful capacity for memory to sustain and revise historical events. Presidents often inject memories of the past into public address to define troubling situations in ways that broaden national audiences can make sense of them. Barack Obama’s Rose Garden Address rejuvenates and exploits the public memory of September 11 in three ways: by (1) situating the attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi as an extension of its timeline; (2) reaffirming the identity of the nation at a moment of collective loss; and (3) presenting an eloquent moral vision of the future to illuminate the nation’s perseverance.

As a public memory event, September 11 has proven remarkably resilient and yet fluid and adaptable as social and political contexts shift. Treating Obama’s speech as an extension of the September 11 memory in American public discourse can provide an update on its symbolic utility in light of a more recent, but understudied rhetorical artifact.

Context

- September 11, 2001 ingrained in collective memory of U.S. citizens
- Inescapably serves as the backdrop before which we tend to view all events even remotely related to “terrorism”
- Benghazi immediately interpreted against backdrop of “9/11” – 11th anniversary
- Spontaneous or premeditated?

Conclusion

- Rose Garden Address rejuvenated memory of September 11 by establishing a new nodal point in its timeline
- Benghazi has become the next chapter in public remembrance of a broader struggle
- Obama reached out to a diverged nation in a heated election revealing a powerful strategy presidents use to reel in public opinion at crucial moments during their leadership
- If the United States comes under attack again, the community will summon a leader to strike the chords of justice and freedom once more
- A new adaptation of the memory will emerge, this time tracing itself back to Benghazi

Method

3 Functional Pairs
- Define/Understand
- Public Memory

- Purposeful Engagement of the Past
- Shaping/Sharing a Sense of Community
- Forged Symbolically and Profoundly Constitutive
- Display/Entertain
- Moral Vision

Analysis

Define/Understand

“The United States condemns in the strongest terms this outrageous and shocking attack.”

Shaping/Sharing Community

“And today, the American people stand united in holding the families of the four Americans in our thoughts and in our prayers.”

“As Americans, let us never, ever forget that our freedom is only sustained because there are people who are willing to fight for it, to stand up for it, and in some cases, lay down their lives for it.”

Display/Entertain

“We grieve with their families, but let us carry on their memory, and let us continue their work of seeking a stronger America and a better world for all of our children.”

Department of Communication Studies

Notes: