

Issue on War Rhetoric

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The Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations:

Establishing the Obama Presidency,

Texas A&M University Press, 2014

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More than a decade ago, political scientists and rhetoricians revisited key assumptions about rhetorical effects and concluded a more careful accounting was necessary. In the intervening years, American rhetoricians have worked to map the conditions under which presidential rhetoric might do particular types of work, on specific audiences, within a given moment recognizing that this work will not always be reflected in public opinion polling. That work continues with this volume, whose aim is to address a paradox of the Obama presidency; as candidate and president he simultaneously positions himself as capable of heroic outcomes (overcoming partisanship, charting a post-racial future for the nation, ending state sponsored torture, drawing down two wars, and reconstructing the economy) while working to reduce expectations that such outcomes are possible. Obama is not the first president to deal with heroic expectations, whether created by or foisted upon the institution. Americans have long since expected great accomplishments from their presidents. The office itself retains a significance within popular culture whereby the occupant is continually positioned as hero when faced with difficult situations and decision-making. And these expectations for greatness – to satisfy heroic expectations – are not at all proportional to the limits of the office. Indeed, “our heroic expectations for the presidency bear little relationship either to the constitutional limits on the president or to any president’s ability to fulfill those expectations,” Vaughn and Mercieca note (9). This volume, then, is an attempt to tease out the nature of heroic expectations through analysis of the possibilities and constraints these expectations create for the president while governing.

The introductory chapter posits that the symbolic construct of hero establishes three burdens for the presidency: institutional, contextual and personal. Institutional burdens are those imposed by the Constitution itself. For example, President Roosevelt was convinced of the need to intervene during World War II

on the side of the allies, but faced a reluctant Congress unwilling to declare war. As a result, he could not assume the mantle of heroic wartime president until after Pearl Harbor. Contextual burdens are those specific to the moment in which the president assumes office. Here, the president must be responsive to challenges as they arise within the rhetorical situation. We might think of these as either crises pre-existing or emergent that require Presidential attention. Kennedy's response to the placement of ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba is an apt historical example. He was able to emerge as hero figure only after achieving two strategic outcomes: the aversion of nuclear holocaust and a retreat of Soviet influence inside the 'American sphere of influence.' Personal burdens are those that are specific to a President. Juxtaposing the approaches to public address of President Carter (weary, negative and occasionally paternalistic) and President Reagan (perpetually optimistic, full of zeal and confident in the abilities of the American public) illustrates these burdens can detract from or improve a president's national standing. These three burdens – equally understood as rhetorical constraints – are faced by all men (used advisedly, as a woman has yet to achieve this post) equally.

The Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations promises through a series of case studies about the Obama presidency to provide nuance and detail about these three heroic burdens. Yet this argumentative through line is undermined from the start. Chapter previews in the preface do not specify relationship to the theme. Disappointingly, a close reading finds that hero as symbolic construction is treated superficially in chapter introductions and does not feature as an organizing principle of chapter arguments. Hero as figure and/or heroics as topoi are simply not taken up. While this volume fails to deliver on the promises of its title and the theoretical work of the introductory chapter as it relates to the concept of hero, it does contribute a masterful synthesis of how American rhetoricians examining the presidency operating from interdisciplinary perspectives understand the work that presidential rhetoric does and deepens our understanding of presidential burden even if heroic motifs are left out.

The Obama presidency offers a window into contemporary institutional burdens for governing. The complexity of an American public that is increasing ideologically polarized and fragmented in its media consumption habits making it more difficult for presidents to reach their audience through address. Brandon Rottinghaus argues that this burden makes it likely that any given rhetorical appeal will only achieve partial success. Eric Dieter suggests that the burden of audience makes it more difficult for presidents and the public to engage in "acting-together" or what Burke refers to as becoming consubstantial. President Obama in attempting to overcome these burdens encourages audiences to reject simplistic and overly deterministic frames of enemy construction, argues Jay Childress.

In each case, the reader is left with a more precise understanding of the institutional constraints that presidents face when ‘going public.’

Contextually, Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha demonstrates that efforts to communicate with the public are inevitably filtered through the mass and networked media which makes reaching an audience all the more difficult given proclivities of individuals to ‘tune out’ entirely. As we know from the work of Karlyn Kohrs-Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the context of a presidency is constituted by presidents themselves. Presidents are able to borrow and adapt existing rhetorical tropes from their predecessors in attempts to interpret current events within frames that lend themselves to administrative policy prerogatives. One such trope is exceptionalism, where America is understood to be exemplar for other nations and interventionist to (re)establish its values around the world. Jason Edwards argues that the context of the international scene is changing in ways that undermine arguments for an interventionist foreign policy. The international political order that maintained stability and justified a global U.S. presence simply does not exist anymore. Additionally, many of the events that have transpired – particularly in the Middle East – have been beyond the control of the White House. This is a position that Americans are unaccustomed to and which renders presidential leadership at the level of the global that much more difficult. Global capital flows, also beyond the control of the president, influence the domestic and global economy. Contextual explanations of the economy are traced through four master narratives by James Arnt Aune who concludes that President Obama has been unsuccessful in his communication about the economy because he was unable or unwilling to deploy one of these four master narratives.

President Obama’s race adds a layer of personal burden to both his candidacy and his presidency. Some Americans believed that he was a secret Muslim, while others selected a few quotations from Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the leader of the church the Obama family attended, to argue Obama practiced a radical form of black politics. Catherine L. Langford observes that these personal burdens paradoxically offered candidate Obama the means to elevate himself and the country. In response to these discourses, she finds that Obama deployed a “secular messianic” rhetorical style which affirmed the importance of faith, respect for a diversity of beliefs and the need to keep government at a distance on religious issues. This style allowed Obama to transcend controversies about his own faith, his pastor and to position himself as less hostile to the deeply religious than his liberal predecessors. Dave Tell finds that Obama both on the campaign trail and as president has been able to ground rhetorical appeals in his personal story and thereby overcome his race as a burden. The personal burdens of President Obama inform our understanding of the ways in which American society can be hamstrung by ignorance

and antiquated hateful ideas yet these case studies also offer the promise of hope. Through an analysis of Obama's rhetoric on race, we can better understand the possibilities for minority candidates – of any government position – to transcend their personal burdens.

Two chapters in particular stand out. David Zarefsky provocatively argues that American exceptionalism as a frame has, in Burkean terms, 'cracked under its own weight.' He first claims that President Obama equates previous foreign policies as imperialistic as opposed to exceptional. Second, Zarefsky argues that exceptionalism as a rhetorical trope is ill suited to fit our contemporary condition because U.S. hegemony is in decline. Both claims merit further consideration; Obama has repeatedly declared that he believes America to be an exceptional nation and a causal relationship between increasing interdependence and decreased U.S. hegemony is not yet established. It might in fact be the case that globality – the saturation point of interdependence – increases hegemony as a result of more nations becoming dependent upon the stability of the U.S. economy and its ability to project military power. Cara Finnegan's chapter advances our understanding of how a president might use the visual trappings of the White House to overcome personal burdens. In this instance, how might a President conceived of as a 'community organizer' become presidential? Through a detailed analysis of photographs of President Obama, Finnegan looks not at the president but how artwork positioned within the frame of the image advances particular arguments about presidential character. Presidents, she reveals, choose to display selected artwork from the national collection to define their values, decision-making process, and ultimately who and what kind of president they aspire to be. Application of visual rhetoric and argument to the institutional context of the White House is indeed a novel and welcome contribution.

Analytically, there is a significant difference between campaigning and governing. *Heroic Expectations* is a carefully constructed attempt to explain how campaigns can create their own personal burdens for governing while also explaining how pre-existing institutional burdens and fluid contextual burdens create limits and possibilities for each president.