

2014

A Style of His Own: A Rhetorical Analysis of President Barack Obama's Inaugural Addresses

Victoria West

Hollins University, WestVL@hollins.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/researchawards>



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), and the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

West, Victoria, "A Style of His Own: A Rhetorical Analysis of President Barack Obama's Inaugural Addresses" (2014). *Undergraduate Research Awards*. 21.

<https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/researchawards/21>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship and Creative Works at Hollins Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Awards by an authorized administrator of Hollins Digital Commons. For more information, please contact lvilelle@hollins.edu, millerjc@hollins.edu.

My research process for this assignment was actually more extensive than anything that I had done in the past. This is because this was my first time completing an independent study and I needed to adequately plan out research for the course in order to get a general sense of presidential rhetoric, and also plan out more specific research for my paper. I started with sources related to the larger context of presidential rhetoric, and I feel that this deductive approach was the best decision in conducting research. Since presidential rhetoric is somewhat of an interdisciplinary topic I broadened my search to include databases related to both communication studies and political science. For the broader research I relied mostly on books and eBooks and some general scholarly journal articles. As I got closer to writing the final paper I began to look for research that was more specifically focused on Barack Obama and his speeches; however, there were some challenges in doing this because the topic I was studying was so recent at the time. In order to overcome these challenges I changed my analysis slightly to look at the more general constructs of presidential rhetoric and American values in inaugural addresses. This alteration allowed me to look back at the previous research that I had already done for the course, and apply it in new ways. After reshaping my topic I found the book sources to be the most helpful as they gave me enough information to form my own analysis and essentially find my own voice in writing this paper. I am very glad that it worked out in this manner because finding my own voice in this paper has given me a great deal of confidence in terms of writing and research which has transcended into other aspects of my academic life. Through this research process I learned that it is crucial to have a general basis of research that covers the topic broadly but also sufficiently. This is extremely important to fall back on, and may end up being more useful than sources more specifically related to the topic as seen in this case.

A Style of His Own: A Rhetorical Analysis of President Barack Obama's Inaugural Addresses

Abstract: This paper analyzes President Obama's rhetoric in his two inaugural addresses in order to determine how his presidential rhetoric conforms and violates current rhetorical traditions in inaugural addresses. For this paper a rhetorical analysis of Obama's addresses was performed using a form of genre criticism. The components for this genre criticism were drawn from Vanessa B. Beasley's work on presidential rhetoric in her book *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric*. Results of this analysis will show that President Obama's presidential rhetoric is more secular than previous presidents and focuses more on shared American ideals. The results also illustrate that President Obama's rhetoric is different in that he portrays immigration in a much more positive light, and portrays racial issues from a perspective that he never been possible for previous presidents.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Presidential, Inaugural address, President Obama

Introduction

In the days after the Boston marathon bombings President Obama traveled to Boston to speak at an interfaith prayer service for the victims of the bombings. In his speech he said:

On that toughest mile, just when we think that we've hit a wall, someone will be there to cheer us on and pick us up if we fall. We know that. And that's what the perpetrators of such senseless violence, these small, stunted individuals who would destroy instead of build and think somehow that makes them important - that's what they don't understand. Our faith in each other, our love for each other, our love for country, our common creed that cuts across whatever superficial differences there may be, that is our power. That's our strength. (Obama, 2013, April 18)

Powerful statements like this are not uncommon in President Obama's rhetoric and continue to be present in his inaugural addresses. Through further examination, this trend of uniting the nation based on communal ties rather than religious ties has become apparent in his two inaugural addresses. This paper will examine many of the rhetorical traditions present in President Obama's 2009 and 2013 inaugural addresses. As a result of this analysis, this paper will argue that President Obama's presidential rhetoric in his inaugural addresses differs from past presidents in that his rhetoric is more secular based and more inclusive of immigrants and minorities.

“An inaugural is uniquely sacramental: the peaceful transfer of power it represents is one of the key elements that have made ours the oldest surviving democracy on earth.” (Jones, 2010, p. 89) This was the response of Ray Price, speechwriter for President Nixon, when asked to ascertain the goals of an inaugural address. As exemplified in this statement, the inauguration of the president in the United States is truly a testament to the continued strength of our political

system. During this ceremony a person who has been chosen by the people in a free and fair presidential election is sworn into office in front of the people who elected them. This has continued throughout America's history and it has been a monumental occasion each time with the inaugural address set as the main event.

While they have been spoken by many different men in times of war, peace, recession, and growth; the inaugural addresses all follow the same construct. This is exemplified by Mary Stuckey (2010) as she claims that inaugural addresses are "constitutive- they recreate the national community in terms specific to and chosen by the new president." (p. 261) Inaugural addresses provide national reconciliation in serving their constitutive function, and attempt to do so through the use of affirmative rhetoric (Stuckey, 2010). Through affirmative rhetoric presidents call "upon shared national values and ideals and enunciates broad national political principles." (Stuckey, 2010, p. 261) Stuckey (2010) also claims that "inaugurals set forth the principles that will guide the new administration, enunciate a general political philosophy, and call for contemplation rather than action." (p. 261) Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2010) build off Mary Stuckey's (2010) assertions and further characterize inaugural addresses in their analysis. Campbell and Jamieson (2010) claim that inaugural addresses are a subspecies of what Aristotle would characterize as epideictic rhetoric. Epideictic rhetoric is defined as a form of rhetoric that "praises or blames on ceremonial occasions, invites the audience to evaluate the speaker's performance, recalls the past and speculates about the future while focusing on the present, employs a noble, dignified literary style, and amplifies or rehearses admitted facts." (Campbell and Jamieson, 2010, p. 29) Campbell and Jamieson (2010) claim that inaugural addresses fit the genre of epideictic rhetoric because they are "delivered on ceremonial occasions, link past and future in present contemplation, affirm or praise the shared

principles that will guide the incoming administration, ask the audience to “gaze upon” traditional values, employ elegant, literary language, and rely on “heightening the effect” by amplification and reaffirmation of what is already known and believed.” (p. 30) This characterization of epideictic rhetoric is then modified by the constraints of the presidency and produces the four elements that define the presidential inaugural address and distinguish it from other examples of epideictic rhetoric. According to Campbell and Jamieson (2010) “[t]he presidential inaugural (1) unifies the audience by reconstituting its members as “the people”, who can witness and ratify the ceremony, (2) rehearses communal values drawn from the past; (3) sets forth the political principles that will guide the new administration; and (4) demonstrates through enactment that the president appreciates the requirements and limitations of executive functions.” (p. 31)

The inaugural address, while very crucial is only a small piece of a much larger subject; presidential rhetoric. Tulis (1988) claims that rhetoric became a tool for governance for presidents starting with Woodrow Wilson. This shifts the role of the president to be “popular leaders” (Tulis, 1988, p. 4). Terri Bimes (2009) further characterizes this change by claiming that “after Wilson, presidents shifted from constitutional rhetoric and embraced a more popular, “inspirational” rhetoric, one that sought to “interpret’ the wishes of the people” and to use these public appeals to influence Congress through mass pressure.” (p. 210) In the time since this shift the notion of the rhetorical presidency has only become more pervasive. For political communication scholars the “rhetorical presidency” has become inherent in politics (Bimes, 2009). The pervasiveness of the rhetorical presidency is greatly exemplified by Bimes (2009) as she claims that for political communication scholars, “rhetoric is not simply a popular appeal to a mass audience; nor is it a substitute for or false form of political action. It is itself a symbolic

form of action that is endemic to political and social life.” (p. 216) The rhetorical presidency has embedded itself in American politics and does not seem to be going anywhere soon. Thus it is crucial to understand the influence of presidential rhetoric. Bimes (2009) also characterizes this by stating that “[p]residential rhetoric can make certain identities and self-conceptions of citizens more prominent and can shape how citizens understand the issues facing the country and the role of the presidency in the political system.” (p. 221) The need to analyze this issue more closely is apparent as the role of the rhetorical presidency grows and the public, Congress, and the press continue to look to the president as a rhetorical leader (Bimes, 2009).

Critical Method

These claims are exemplified by President Barack Obama as he continues the tradition of the rhetorical presidency in his speeches throughout his first and second term. The method for this analysis will be structured by the findings in Dr. Vanessa Beasley’s (2004) book *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric*. In her book Beasley (2004) explores how 19th century and 20th century presidents have rhetorically constructed American national identity in their inaugural addresses and state of the union addresses. Her analysis focuses on a general set of shared beliefs that presidents use to unite the American people, as well as to discuss immigration, and race. Beasley’s (2004) findings on presidential rhetoric in these categories will be used to analyze President Barack Obama’s two inaugural addresses in order to evaluate how his rhetoric violates and conforms to the trends of past presidential rhetoric.

Civil Religion and Shared Ideals

In terms of presidential rhetoric of general shared beliefs Vanessa Beasley (2004) argues that presidents attempt to encourage unity among the American people through the notion of a shared civil religion. This is seen when presidents commonly refer to the American people as one nation under God. The common reference to a monolithic God suggests that the shared civil religion of the American people is Judeo-Christian. Beasley (2004) also claims that Americans are united under civil religious grounds as they have been born in America and are “God’s chosen people” (p. 49). This right of birth provides the grounds for a special relationship between Americans. Michael Bailey (2009) agrees with Beasley’s characterization of overarching civil religious themes in inaugural addresses as he states they include “sacrifice, the sanctity of freedom, American destiny under God, and America as a chosen nation” (p. 89). Bailey (2009) also claims that is most explicitly expressed in inaugural addresses in comparison to all other presidential rhetoric.

Immigration

Throughout American history fear and exclusion of foreigners has been a common theme. This anti-immigrant sentiment has prevailed in many ways and has been difficult for presidents to overcome. According to Beasley (2004) a common theme in presidential rhetoric during times of increased anti-immigrant sentiment is enforcing the notion of citizenship as being based on civil religious beliefs, but also claiming that some immigrants are incapable of understanding these beliefs that unite American citizens. Beasley (2004) claims that presidential rhetoric in the late 19th century and early 20th century portrayed immigrants as ignorant, vicious, and dangerous. Beasley (2004) exemplifies this by showing that Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland’s inaugural addresses urged citizens to be suspicious of immigrants and enforced the notion that immigrants could not or would not choose to understand Americans’ shared beliefs.

Beasley (2004) claims that during the 1930's through the 1960's presidential rhetoric portrayed immigrants as refugees. In this time presidents saw it as a duty to take in immigrants that had been oppressed. However, there were still judgments to be made to determine which immigrants deserved inclusion. According to President Lyndon B. Johnson these judgments were not made based on the immigrants' origin, but rather their utility and how they could benefit the United States. More recent presidential rhetoric from the 1970's to 2000 still reinforces the notions of anti-immigrant sentiment present in the late 19th century and early 20th century, but appears to be kinder and less blunt. The rhetoric from of presidents such as Regan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton still implicitly reinforce the idea of our America and distinguishes us versus them as in American citizens compared to immigrants. Even with this kinder presidential rhetoric towards immigration the most welcoming speeches can be contradictory to the reality of the sentiments of the nation.

Race

Race has been a contentious issue throughout America's history and has come up in many aspects of presidential rhetoric. Through the United States' over 200 year history the American people's views of race have changed dramatically, and so too has presidents' rhetoric on the matter. Beasley (2004) examines this in presidential rhetoric through several presidents' inaugural addresses and state-of-the-union addresses, and characterizes their depictions of racial issues in their rhetoric. Beasley (2004) characterizes early 20th century presidential rhetoric as "exemptive inclusion" (p. 105). Exemptive inclusion presidential rhetoric portrays the idea that racial issues are not the government's or the American people's problem, but rather are issues to be dealt with through law. Beasley (2004) claims that McKinley started this trend of viewing the law as the "foremost agent in the inclusion process" (p. 107), and also claims that this trend has

continued through several decades of presidential rhetoric. Beasley (2004) also claims that during this time of exemptive inclusion rhetoric some presidents such as Roosevelt and Taft asserted that people of different colors also had “fundamentally separate natures” (p. 109). This is exemplified by Taft in his 1909 inaugural address as he uses the law in the form of the Constitution to further this argument. In this address Taft enumerates the amendments that have been added to the Constitution to give African Americans full constitutional rights. Beasley (2004) suggests that this may have been done to illustrate how different blacks and whites are as amendments were added to grant rights to blacks that whites were born with. Beasley (2004) states that the defining aspect of exemptive inclusion in presidential rhetoric was that presidents suggested that inclusion would happen by itself and that it was not their problem or the American people’s problem.

Successors to Taft embodied Beasley’s (2004) next characterization of presidential rhetoric which is institutional inclusion. During this time the government began to take responsibility for racial issues, and presidents attempted to make citizens think about inclusion in a more institutional manner. This is exemplified by Calvin Coolidge (1925) in his inaugural address as expressed grief for the “false and ignorant prejudice” done due to race. Beasley (2004) continues this characterization by describing Eisenhower’s approach to civil rights in his state of the union address as being similar to a military campaign. Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon would also “offer institutional solutions” to fix the problems associated with racial discrimination and diversity in their presidential rhetoric (Beasley, 2004, p. 116). Beasley (2004) then points out that there is an outlier in this category of institutional inclusion which is Ronald Reagan. In his first inaugural address Reagan (1981) refers to Americans as a special interest group that must not be ignored and he states “It knows no sectional boundaries or ethnic or racial

divisions, and it crosses political party lines.” In this view racism had been eradicated and African Americans no longer need the help of the government or American citizens to help end discrimination. Beasley (2004) suggests that throughout history presidents have illustrated through their rhetoric how race matters and how its importance will dwindle in the future.

Critical Analysis

Civil Religion and Shared Ideals

When President Barack Obama gave his first and second inaugural addresses he was speaking to more than just the record setting 1.8 million people in 2009 and 1 million people in 2013 that packed the National Mall. Based on his speeches it is clear that he was speaking to a much larger audience that encompasses over 300 million people; American citizens. The first step in addressing this audience is to make them feel united and show them that they share the commonality of being American citizens (Campbell and Jamieson, 2008). President Obama does use religious rhetoric when he tries to accomplish this sense of unity in his 2009 inaugural address; however he uses this religious rhetoric while also relying heavily on the shared American ideals set forth by the Founding Fathers. Obama (2009) does so by affirming that Americans must carry on the idea of the “God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.” In order to inspire unity Obama seems to have chosen to emphasize specific ideals in this phrase that are well associated with American nationality. The ideals of equality, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness are derived directly from the Declaration of Independence; the text that gave Americans’ their own national identity and thus united us as a distinct nation. Obama (2009) also makes a reference to the common civil religion shared by Americans when he states that these ideals comprise a promise that is “God-given”. According to Beasley (2004), appeals to civil religion and overarching

American ideals in order to unite the American people are constants in presidents' inaugural addresses throughout history. This is because presidents in the past have defined American national identity based on the premise that Americans are "God's chosen people" and have certain shared beliefs that unite them as Americans (Beasley, 2004).

President Obama uses the long standing rhetorical tradition of portraying Americans as God's chosen people and reiterating their divine destiny to call the American people to action. In doing so Obama has utilized and perpetuated a tradition in presidential rhetoric that has been consistent since the first inaugural address given by George Washington. Obama's (2009) appeal to this time tested ritual in presidential rhetoric is illustrated as he lays out "the price and promise of citizenship", and states that the confidence to enact this promise comes from "the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny." According to Obama (2009) "the price and promise of citizenship" comprises:

a new era of responsibility -- a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character than giving our all to a difficult task.

The price and promise of citizenship is basically a new label on old ideals. As stated before, this characterization of Americans is not new. Obama's statement is actually very similar to a passage in Benjamin Harrison's 1889 inaugural address when he stated that God placed "diadem" upon our heads and gave us wealth and power beyond "definition or calculation." Both Obama's and Harrison's statements seem to call Americans to act because God has gifted them with great power and responsibility. This great power and responsibility is explicated by Conrad Cherry (1971) in his text *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*.

Cherry (1971) asserts that America's call to a "special destiny by God" is deeply rooted in American history (p. 8). In this view, England is Egypt and America is the new promise land. Like Moses in Israel; Obama is now speaking to the people that he is responsible for leading. Rather than begging or demanding the American people to live up to their responsibilities as Americans, President Obama portrayed these desired actions as a promise that we have made to God to fulfill our destiny.

President Obama makes many references to God and a shared civil religion in his inaugural addresses, but contradicts Beasley's (2004) assertions that national identity is based on a civil religion. He transcends this notion by including those who do not follow this common civil religion by stating that "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers." (Obama 2009) Including religious non-believers violates the notion that we are all one nation under God and the claim that our national identity rests upon this. This suggests that Obama's definition of American national identity is more inclusive than previous presidents as his encompasses those who are outside of the common American civil religion.

President Obama does not entirely conform to Beasley's (2004) definition of American national identity in his inaugural addresses. Beasley (2004) asserts that presidents have defined American national identity in terms of a common civil religion in their inaugural address and state of the union addresses. President Obama does appeal to a shared religion in his speeches, but it seems clear that this does not comprise the entirety of American national identity in his view.

His inaugural addresses suggest that he defines American national identity through the shared American ideals set by the founding fathers. In his first inaugural address he states that faithfulness to America's founding ideals and principles has allowed America to carry on

through good times and bad (Obama, 2009). His increased reliance on shared ideals rather than a shared faith is also made apparent at the start of his second inaugural address. He states that “that what binds this nation together is not the colors of our skin or the tenets of our faith or the origins of our names.” (Obama, 2013). Instead, we are bound “our allegiance to an idea, articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago” (Obama, 2013). It seems that President Obama’s rhetorical style has always relied more on shared ideologies more than a shared religion. This can be seen as a continuation of his campaign rhetoric in 2008 as his rhetoric was not overly sacred nor anti-sacred according to Marietta (2012). Obama’s preference for shared ideals over religion can also be explained by the fact that his two books and his speeches provide proof of his extensive knowledge of American history and ideals according to Kloppenborg (2011). Through his inaugural addresses, Obama may be redefining the prevalent view of American national identity by putting emphasis on shared ideals rather than a shared religion.

In terms of calling the American people to act Obama appeals to both shared religious beliefs and the American ideals of the founding fathers in his 2013 inaugural address. Obama (2013) references the recently prevalent issue of climate change, and states that America must lead the transition on the path towards sustainable energy. By leading this transition Obama (2013) claims that America will be preserving the planet that has been “commanded to our care by God”. This is very similar to his mention of America’s destiny and responsibility in his first inaugural address, and adheres to the assertions made by Cherry (1971) about America’s God given destiny. In the next sentence he puts emphasis on shared ideals rather than a shared religion. He claims that America’s actions related to climate change will “lend meaning to the creed our fathers once declared.” (Obama, 2013) This use of sacred and non-sacred rhetoric

seems to characterize Obama's rhetoric and distinguishes him from other presidents. This also suggests that President Obama's definition of American national identity is more focused on shared American beliefs rather than a shared religion. This broadens the scope of American national identity to include those who do not fit under the umbrella of the commonly held American civil religion.

Immigration

By becoming President of the United States of America Barack Obama has also become in large part Americans' voice in the global community, and in this is particularly illustrated in his first inaugural address when he speaks to general and specific factions of a global audience. This is illustrated when Obama first addresses "all other peoples and governments who are watching today, from the grandest capitals to the small village where my father was born" (Obama, 2009). This shows that he is cognizant of this larger audience for this address and seems to attempt to portray himself as similar to them by referencing his father's origin. It is well known that Obama's father is not a natural born American citizen. This may have influenced Obama's rhetoric on immigration and towards immigrants as he is the son of an immigrant himself.

Past presidential rhetoric as characterized by Beasley (2004), shows that presidents have been much more exclusive in their rhetoric, President Obama was much more inclusive than past presidents in his rhetoric on this matter. This is exemplified in Obama's 2009 inaugural address as he places immigrants and slaves in context with those who fought in historic battles. Specifically those who "packed up their worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life" are mentioned (Obama, 2009). He states that in American history these people are

the ones who carried this generation on the “path towards prosperity and freedom” (Obama, 2009).

This is very different from how immigrants were portrayed at the time that they were traveling across those oceans to immigrate to America. Beasley (2004) characterizes past presidential rhetoric as very exclusive; especially during the 1880s to the 1920s immigrants were portrayed as ignorant, vicious, and dangerous. Beasley (2004) exemplifies this characterization through Benjamin Harrison’s 1889 inaugural address which criticizes the naturalization laws at the time and portrays American citizenship as being very exclusive. Harrison (1889) stated that the naturalization process should examine the character of immigrants closely, and that Americans should be hospitable to immigrants, but not careless when examining their character. According to Harrison (1889), American citizenship should be highly revered due to the many privileges and serious responsibilities associated with it. With so much at stake Harrison (1889) stated that Americans “may well insist upon a good knowledge of every person applying for citizenship and a good knowledge by him of our institutions.” Harrison (1889) continues on to say that immigration of some people can be “a burden upon our public revenues or a threat to social order.” The differences in Harrison’s speech and Obama’s are pronounced on this issue. Harrison portrays immigrants as a nuisances while Obama portrays them as brave individuals who helped to build success for the current generation of Americans. This shows a great change in past presidential rhetoric on immigration as Obama includes those who have historically been excluded, and portrays them as positive piece of our shared history as Americans.

President Obama violates many of the exclusive rhetorical traditions of past presidents as he portrays immigrants as beneficial aspects of the nation. Obama (2009) states that as Americans we “**know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness.**” However,

Obama is not the first president to violate the typical inclusive rhetoric. Beasley (2004) states that John F. Kennedy had made a similar argument characterizing immigrants as a source of strength in his book *A Nation of Immigrants*. Obama's also uniquely portrays immigration in a positive light as he states that "we are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth." (Obama, 2009) According to Beasley (2004), past presidential rhetoric has portrayed America as the pinnacle of excellence and has viewed American culture and ideals as the most important aspect of being an American citizen. Several presidents have stated that this nation and its culture is "ours" and is uniquely American. Obama's statement seems to violate this logic as he states that we are "shaped" by languages and cultures from all over the world. This statement breaks down the logic of American exceptionalism present in past examples of presidential rhetoric, and indicates that our culture is influenced by immigrants and is not purely American. This logic also invalidates the premise that past presidential rhetoric had used to exclude immigrants which was that immigrants could not adapt to our uniquely American culture. Obama's (2009) quote suggests that there is no need to make this distinction because America is a "patchwork" nation that includes people of many different cultures. This also suggests that President Obama's definition of American identity includes more than one type of American, and views this variety as a strength.

In his first inaugural address Obama does not only speak to American citizens and those who inhabit this nation. He also directs his speech to more specific audiences outside of America's borders. He adapts his message to more specific audiences in the global community when he specifically addresses the Muslim world and claims that America wants a new relationship with them in the future that is grounded in "mutual interest and mutual respect." (Obama, 2009) This audience is a small part of the global community, but has become very

influential in the past decade and that seems to be illustrated here in that the president feels that he needs to speak directly to this group. This theme of speaking to certain factions of the global community directly continues in his next phrase in which he chastises “those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent” (Obama, 2009). After narrowing in on certain factions, Obama returns to addressing the larger global audience by promising America’s help to “the people of poor nations”, and calling upon “nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty” to do more for the global community (Obama, 2009). It seems that Obama views the global audience as very significant, and that he attempts to tailor his messages to them. Many people around the world watched Barack Obama’s 2009 inauguration as the transition of power in the world’s most influential country took place, and his speech seemed to speak to all of them.

While President Obama may be much more inclusive of immigrants than past presidents he still has his pitfalls. This is seen in his second inaugural address President Obama as seems very welcoming to immigrants, but he seems to be emulating an example of presidential rhetoric that Beasley (2004) referred to as exclusive. Beasley (2004) asserts that Lyndon B. Johnson’s rhetoric on immigration focused on what an immigrant could do for America rather than their origin or their faith in American ideals. Obama’s (2013) rhetoric is very similar as he states that we need to welcome “striving” and “hopeful” immigrants. He states that our journey is not complete until “bright young students and engineers are enlisted in our workforce rather than expelled from our country.” (Obama, 2013) Obama’s statement seems to be loaded with ideals from the past about immigration, and portrays them as doers for America rather than included as American citizens. According to Beasley (2004) this shows that there are still preferences and calls for judgments to be made about which immigrants should be allowed to stay in America. This seems very different from Obama’s first inaugural address where he contradicted many of

the exclusive rhetorical traditions of past presidents. Here it seems that he has conformed and began to follow the crowd in his rhetoric on immigration.

Later in his 2013 speech Obama strays away from this exclusive rhetoric of past presidents and returns to the inclusive rhetoric that was present in his 2009 inaugural address. Obama (2013) refers to the oath that he has taken as president and compares it to the oath that is taken “each time a soldier signs up for duty, or an immigrant realizes her dream.” Like in his 2009 address he references immigrants along with American citizens who have fought in war or joined the armed services. This suggests that they are the same and both of them have become American citizens by adopting the ideals present in their respective oaths. This seems to be more characteristic of Obama’s rhetoric as he frequently places immigrants at the same level of prestige as those who have fought for America.

Race

Previous presidential rhetoric as characterized by Beasley (2004) has presented racial discrimination as an issue for the law or the government to deal with. President Obama violates Beasley’s (2004) characterizations by putting the responsibility of eradicating racism on the American people. This is exemplified when he says that Americans have come out of a bleak past of segregation and civil war more united, but hopes that “old hatreds shall someday pass” (Obama, 2009). According to Beasley (2004), recent presidential rhetoric on race has focused on the government’s role in the inclusion of minorities and ending racism. Before that it was the law’s problem rather than the people’s or the government’s. Now Obama (2009) seems to be saying that the American people need to be responsible for eradicating racism by letting “old hatreds” go. This message acknowledges that even in 2009 we still have not become a racially blind society and still have lingering feelings of discontent for people of different ethnicities and

racism. What makes this more significant is that it is being spoken by a man that can relate the issue of racial discrimination in a way that no other president has been able to before.

President Obama has a drastically different perspective on racism in America compared to past presidents which seems to greatly distinguish his rhetoric on this issue. This is particularly exemplified in a moving statement that he makes later in his first inaugural address. He refers to “the price and promise of citizenship” and the American ideals that embody it as the reason why Americans of every race and faith can come together to celebrate at this joyous occasion (Obama, 2009). He also states that “the price and promise of citizenship” is the reason why “a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant” can now stand before America and take the oath of office as President of the United States of America (Obama, 2009). Past presidential rhetoric analyzed by Beasley (2004) looked at the race issue from an outsider’s perspective and in comparison they barely scratched the surface.

January 21, 2013 set up an interesting context for President Barack Obama to be inaugurated for his second term as president. The first black man to hold the highest office in America was re-inaugurated on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. From where Barack Obama stood to give his second inaugural address he was able to look out and see the monument erected in King’s honor staring back at him. Nearly forty years before this day, thousands of people gathered in the same mall to hear Martin Luther King Jr. give his “I Have a Dream Speech”. This significant moment was not lost on President Obama as he addresses equality in America. Obama (2013) states that self-evident truth that we are all created equal guides us today as it guided “our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall; just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great Mall, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone” (Obama, 2013). The founders of America asserted that all men

are created equal. This is a truth that is self-evident but has not always been executed. Obama embodies this here by bringing in the example of King's speech.

Conclusion

This analysis has shown that President Barack Obama has a rhetorical style that is quite different from his predecessors. In terms of the tradition of uniting the nation under a shared civil religion, Obama divides his rhetoric. He does still use sacred rhetoric. He does this usually through the rhetorical tradition of referring to America as God's chosen people and emphasizing America's divine destiny and the responsibilities associated with this. He emphasizes America's shared ideals more than their shared religion. He seems to believe that the principles laid out by America's founding fathers are more binding. By focusing more on shared ideals rather than a shared religion he becomes more inclusive by including those outside of the American civil religion. This exemplifies a broader definition of American national identity.

On the topic of immigration in America, President Obama's rhetoric is for the most part quite dissimilar to past presidents. Beasley (2004) has asserted that presidential rhetoric on immigration has changed over the years, but has still mostly been exclusive rather than inclusive when referring to immigrants. Obama contradicts this in both of his inaugural addresses. A characterizing feature of his rhetoric when referring to immigrants has been to place them next to those who have fought for America. This portrays that they are both equal and are both important assets to America. Obama does slightly fall into the trap of past exclusive presidential rhetoric in his 2013 when he emulates Lyndon B. Johnson's rhetoric on judging immigrants based on what they can do for America. However, for the most part Obama's rhetoric contradicts the characterizations made by Beasley (2004). This exemplifies that he is much more inclusive of

immigrants, and as stated before portrays them in a much more positive light. He characterizes immigrants as those who helped to build America in a positive way.

President Obama's rhetoric on race in his inaugural addresses truly sets him apart from past presidents. As the first African American president Obama is able to offer a perspective on racial discrimination that has never been presented in past inaugural addresses. According to Beasley (2004) past presidents have portrayed racial discrimination and the inclusion process as the law's problem or the government's problem. Obama contradicts this. The rhetoric in his first inaugural address makes this issue personal and finally puts the responsibility of racial discrimination and inclusion on the American people. The significance of this new perspective is amplified at Obama's 2013 inauguration as he takes the oath of office on the day devoted to honor Martin Luther King Jr. in front of the National Mall where King gave his historic "I Have a Dream" speech. Obama seems to drive home the importance of equality for all by relating King's speech back to the founding ideals that largely define American national identity for him.

From the night of his election it was clear that Barack Obama was not like any other president in the past. That night he broke the tradition of the white male president. Now he continues to modify and break traditions in his presidential rhetoric.

References

- Bailey, M. (2009). Civil religion. In *Encyclopedia of the American presidency* (Vol. 1, p. 89).
New York, NY: Infobase Publishing.
- Beasley, V. B. (2004). *You, the People: American national identity in presidential rhetoric*.
Texas A&M University Press.
- Bimes, T. (2009). Understanding the rhetorical presidency. *The Oxford handbook of the
American presidency* (pp. 208-231). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, K. K., & Jamieson, K. H. (2008). *Presidents creating the presidency: Deeds done in
words*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Cherry, C. (1971). *God's new Israel; religious interpretations of American destiny*. Englewood
Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Coolidge, C. (1925, March 4). *1925 Inaugural address*. Capitol Building, Washington, D.C.
Retrieved from <http://www.inaugural.senate.gov/swearing-in/address/address-by-calvin-coolidge-1925>
- Harrison, B. (1889, March 4). *1889 Inaugural address*. Capitol Building, Washington, D.C.
Retrieved from <http://www.inaugural.senate.gov/swearing-in/address/address-by-benjamin-harrison-1889>
- Jones, C. O. "The inaugural address: Ceremony of transitions." *The president's words: speeches
and speechwriting in the modern White House*. Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of
Kansas, 2010. 87-110. Print.

Kloppenber, J. T. (2011). *Reading Obama: dreams, hope, and the American political tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Marietta, M. (2012). *The politics of sacred rhetoric: Absolutist appeals and political persuasion*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

Obama, B. H. (2013, April 18). Transcript of Obama's speech on Boston marathon bombings. *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. Retrieved from <http://www.ajc.com/news/news/national/transcript-obamas-speech-boston-marathon-bombings/nXQRz/>

Obama, B. H. (2009, January 20). *2009 Inaugural address*. Capitol Building, Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://www.enebooks.com/data/JK82mxJBHsrAsdHqQvsK/2009-07-20/1248077406.pdf>

Obama, B., H. (2013, January 21). *2013 Inaugural address*. Capitol Building, Washington, D.C.

Reagan, R. (1981, January 20). *1981 Inaugural address*. Capitol Building, Washington, D.C.

Stuckey, M. (2010). Inaugural addresses. In *Encyclopedia of the American presidency* (Vol. 1, pp. 260-262). New York, NY: Infobase Publishing.

Tulis, J. K. (1988). *The rhetorical presidency*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

