

## Healing through Hope:

A Rhetorical Analysis of Barack Obama's National Eulogies

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Abstract: This paper analyzes President Barack Obama's rhetoric in three of his national eulogies in order to examine how Obama consoles the nation following various tragedies, and how his strategies differ from past presidents. These three addresses include President Obama's responses to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, the Boston Marathon bombings, and the West, TX plant explosion. For this paper a rhetorical analysis of Obama's addresses was performed using a form of genre criticism. The components of this genre criticism were drawn from Robert Dennis and Adrienne Dennis Kunkel's (2004) framework concerning national eulogy rhetoric. The results of this analysis illustrate that President Obama focuses on the survivors of tragedy rather than the victims, and transforms the survivors into heroes. President Obama's emphasis on the survivors of tragedy rather than the victims promotes a sense of hope for the survivors and the nation by empowering the people to move on from the tragedy.

Keywords: National eulogies, tragedy, President Barack Obama, Presidential rhetoric

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Tragedies occur everyday throughout the nation; however there are some tragedies that take national precedence and shake the nation. Michael Nelson (2010) characterizes the nature of these tragedies by referring to them as crises that are unsettling, unexpected, and that rattle “the country’s sense of safety and identity” (p. 20). In the aftermath of these immense tragedies, the American public looks to the president to console the nation (Nelson 2010; Campbell and Jamieson 2008). The president responds to the needs of the nation and speaks to and for the American people after a tragedy. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2008) have dubbed these responses national eulogies, and explain that presidents express themselves through this form when “a traumatic event results in the death of civilians and by so doing calls the nation’s institutions or values into question” (p. 102). This occurs most often at the sight of the tragedy.

Several scholars have analyzed national eulogies presented by presidents including Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush (Dennis and Kunkel 2004; Jamieson and Campbell 1982; Lule 1990; Mister 1986; Schrader 2009; Schrader 2011; and Campbell and Jamieson 2008). Few scholars have analyzed any of President Obama’s national eulogies (Amsden 2014). This analysis seeks to fill this void by asking, what rhetorical strategies does President Barack Obama employ to console the nation following a tragic event? And, how do his strategies compare to past presidents?

This analysis will illustrate that President Obama represents a shift in national eulogies as he focuses more on the survivors than the deceased. In his national eulogy addresses President Obama exhibits his unique rhetorical style and consoles the nation by minimizing the impact of what has been lost and highlighting what has been gained. President Obama does so by

emphasizing the importance of the survivors and the community rather than the deceased.

Whereas previous presidents have praised victims and transformed them into heroes, President Obama transforms the survivors into heroes. By doing so he promotes a sense of hope for the survivors and empowers them to move on from the tragedy.

This study is significant in that it builds upon past research of national eulogy rhetoric, and contributes to the field of presidential rhetoric. Previous analyses have focused on three examples, but have chosen examples from different presidents and have chosen eulogies that cover a similar tragedies. This analysis focuses on a single president, but encompasses a variety of different tragedies and situations. This study is significant in that it is analyzing the rhetoric of one individual under different circumstances rather than analyzing the rhetoric of different individuals and comparing them to one another. This will allow for a greater analysis of the phenomena of national eulogy rhetoric as it examines how one individual changes his rhetoric based on the situation.

### **Eulogy Rhetoric**

#### *Eulogistic Rhetoric*

Eulogies have been utilized for thousands of years, and have remained an important aspect of the grieving process (Hewett 2008). While varied in nature, eulogies all serve a similar purpose “to console the bereaved, to affirm the community’s values, and to exhort the audience to be virtuous” (Hewett 2008, p. 91). In Greek, eulogy literally means “‘good words,’ and it is often translated as ‘praise’ and sometimes as ‘blessing’” (Hewett 2008, p. 91). This literal meaning fits well with Aristotle’s characterization of eulogies as epideictic rhetoric. According to Aristotle in his text *The Art of Rhetoric*, epideictic rhetoric is meant to portray praise or blame for its subject (I.II.22.iii). Michael L. Kent (1991) further expands upon the understanding of

eulogies when he explains that the ancient Greeks and Romans viewed eulogies as a form of consolation speech, which was meant to praise public figures rather than private individuals. In present times eulogies have retained the same values and intent, but have become a tradition for private individuals as well as public figures.

Several scholars have examined and developed the genre of eulogy rhetoric over recent decades (Hewett 2008; Kunkel and Dennis 2003; and Kent 1997, Kent 1991). Through an examination of this literature, several different frameworks for analysis begin to emerge. Kent (1991) draws upon the classical Greek and Roman understanding of a eulogy and breaks the speech into its four parts: prooemium, epainos, paramythia, and epilogue. According to Kent (1991) the prooemium is focused on the speaker and includes a short introduction where the speaker expresses approval of funeral customs, declares their unworthiness to give the speech, gains the audience's sympathy, and briefly praises the person being eulogized. The next section of a classical eulogy is the epainos which is focused on praising the deceased mostly through mentions of their "life, family, deeds, and other concerns of value for the community" (Kent 1991, p. 109). The third section of the classic eulogy, the paramythia, shifts the focus from the deceased to the survivors. In this section eulogizers often offer consolation to the bereaved, and ask the audience to live up to the "values and deeds of the departed" (Kent 1991, p. 109). Finally, the concluding section of the classical eulogy is the epilogue. In this section the eulogizer offers a final consolation, acknowledges their part in the funeral tradition, and dismisses the audience from the ceremony (Kent 1991).

Adrienne Dennis Kunkel and Michael Robert Dennis (2003) build off of the ancient Greek and Roman understanding of a eulogy, and claim to apply a new analytical approach to the genre of eulogy rhetoric by further dividing the modern eulogy into six common

characteristics including: “(a) establishment of credibility to eulogize, (b) praise for the deceased, (c) self-disclosure of emotion, (d) prescriptions for problem-focused coping in the form of suggested actions, (e) promotion of emotion focused coping forms of positive reappraisal, and (f) affirmation of vivid relationships” (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, p. 7). However, Hewett (2008) claims that this may not be a new analytical approach, but rather a new application of insights from the classical understanding of a eulogy. Hewett (2008) supports this claim by illustrating that Kunkel and Dennis’s (2003) characteristics fit conveniently within the four classical categories of eulogy rhetoric as presented by Kent (1991). The relationship between these two frameworks is thoroughly explained in the following paragraphs and is illustrated in the chart in Appendix 1.

Kent’s (1991) explanation of the prooemium aligns well with Kunkel and Dennis’s (2003) categories, credibility of the speaker and self-disclosure of emotion. Both of these categories from Kunkel and Dennis (2003) focus on the eulogizer. Credibility refers to the eulogizer acknowledging their relationship with the deceased early on in the speech. Self-disclosure of emotion refers to eulogizers’ attempts to alleviate their own grief by expressing their emotion through language; this is an important and commonly seen aspect of eulogy rhetoric. Hewett (2008) claims that these two strategies fulfill the function of the prooemium by establishing a eulogizer’s credibility and “building a case for his or her competence to speak in this ceremonial position” (p. 94).

Kunkel and Dennis’s (2003) strategies, praise for the deceased and affirmation of vivid relationships support the functions of the epainos section of the classical eulogy in several ways. Kunkel and Dennis’s (2003) description of their praise for the deceased strategy is quite ubiquitous in that it entails “efforts to praise the deceased, especially by honoring their values

and actions” (p. 11). In contrast, the next strategy affirmation of vivid relationships, is explained much more thoroughly. This strategy serves to “vividly remind survivors that the deceased existed materially” and to “internalize their memories and the relationships they shared” (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, p. 14). Kunkel and Dennis (2003) identified the notation of the deceased’s flaws and revelations of private insights as two main tactics in eulogies that facilitate this strategy. In noting the deceased’s flaws, a eulogizer may remind the audience of the “endearing and human qualities” (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, p. 15) of the deceased. A eulogizer may also reveal private insights about the deceased in order to “create a more comprehensive internalized vision of the deceased” (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, p. 15). In a later article, authors Michael Robert Dennis and Adrienne Dennis Kunkel (2004) revise this strategy to include a new tactic: unification. According to Dennis and Kunkel (2004) this tactic is used mostly by eulogizers who are leaders of cities, states, or nations. Eulogizers utilize this tactic to affirm vivid relationships with the deceased by drawing connections and painting parallels between their audiences, themselves, and the deceased (Dennis and Kunkel 2004). By praising the deceased and affirming vivid relationships the eulogizer utilizes new strategies to fulfill an ancient function.

According to Hewett (2008) problem-focused coping and emotion focused coping are the two main strategies best suited to achieve the goals of the paramythia. Problem focused coping, broadly means “acting and dealing with the problem that is causing stress” (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, p. 5). In contrast, emotion focused coping means “regulating and dealing with the emotion that is surrounding the stress” (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, p. 5). Eulogizers enact problem-focused coping in their eulogies by explicitly and implicitly providing directions for action. These actions are often similar to the deceased’s goals or values and serve in “aiding the audience’s discernment regarding what to do about the loved one’s demise” (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, p.

11). In addition to suggesting actions, eulogizers also enact emotion-focused coping in eulogy rhetoric. There are several forms of emotion-focused coping strategies, but the strategy that is identified most prevalently in eulogies is positive reappraisal (Kunkel and Dennis 2003).

Positive reappraisal is defined as “efforts to change, refocus, or reframe the meanings of an experience or event so that they are more positive and less threatening” (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, p. 5). In eulogy rhetoric, positive reappraisal encompasses: references to the afterlife, appreciation of time spent with the deceased, appreciation of lessons and traits learned from the deceased, and appreciation of the deceased’s good life. These strategies aid in consoling the audience and fulfilling the purpose of the paramythia by exhorting the audience to take actions that honor the deceased.

Hewett (2008) claims that Kunkel and Dennis’s (2003) strategy of continuing interactive bonds aligns with the purpose of the epilogue. The continuation of interactive bonds is often seen in eulogies when the speaker either directly addresses the deceased or refers to them in the present tense (Kunkel and Dennis 2003). In doing so the eulogizer is serving to “both model and facilitate the audience’s continued interaction and relationship with the deceased” (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, p. 16). Hewett (2008) claims that these references to the deceased, and the interactive bonds embodied in them act as the final consolation to the mourners before dismissal; thus fulfilling the purpose of the epilogue.

Eulogies are no longer reserved for only public figures. Rather, eulogies have become a crucial part of funeral tradition for everyone (Kent 1997). However, there are still some eulogies that are more prominent than others. Eulogies given by high ranking officials tend to receive a higher level of notoriety; especially when the eulogies are following a tragedy that has garnered

a great deal of attention from a mass audience. This is the case with national eulogies in today's American society.

*National Eulogy Rhetoric*

In times of tragedy the nation looks to the president for guidance and to be consoled. This is supported Nelson (2010) who claims that “all ears- and eyes... - turn to the president as chief of state to speak the unifying words of resolve and reassurance that the crisis will be met” (p. 20). Campbell and Jamieson (2008) also assert that the president is the one who is meant to give the national eulogy as the nation turns to the president who is able to “speak for and to them” (p. 81). During these difficult times the president takes on his usual roles of commander-in-chief, chief of state, chief executive, chief diplomat, and legislative leader. The president also as Campbell and Jamieson (2008) argue, must take on a new more priestly role: healer in chief. The burden of consoling the nation is placed upon the president following a national tragedy, and in these times the president must take on the role of healer in chief in order to unite and console the nation.

Scholars have offered several different explanations of the functions that national eulogies serve. Brian Amsden (2014) claims that national eulogies given by past presidents have served to “help the nation mourn, create shared understanding, and rearticulate common values” (p. 455). Jamieson and Campbell (1982) claim that in Western culture, eulogies are a means to “acknowledge the death, transform the relationship between the living and the dead from present to past tense, ease the mourners' terror at confronting their own mortality, console them by arguing the deceased lives on, and reknit the community” (p. 147). Dennis and Kunkel (2004) argue that consoling the living is a key function of national eulogies, stating that “all components of eulogies are subordinate to the major goal and responsibility of consoling audience and self”

(p. 704). While scholars may disagree slightly on the exact functions of national eulogies, it is clear from these statements that the national eulogy addresses delivered by presidents are a crucial to guiding how the nation's response to a tragedy.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karyln Kohrs Campbell (2008) further characterize the nature of national eulogies by claiming that they are a “unique blend of eulogistic content and elements that reconstitute the nation” (p. 75). National eulogies are concerned with events that have shaken the American public. Jamieson and Campbell (2008) contrast national eulogies to inaugural addresses when claiming, “[w]hereas the inaugural reconstitutes the audience as the people, when successful, the national eulogy transforms the polity into a resilient nation” (p.75). Jamieson and Campbell (2008) also contrast national eulogies to individual eulogies and claim that there are four key differences. The first difference is tone. Both have a personal tone, but the tone for a national eulogy is modified due to the role the president must assume. The role is that of a priest or a pastor, through which the president may pray in America's name or invite the public to pray (Jamieson and Campbell 2008). In an individual eulogy the eulogizer is speaking mostly to the audience; in a national eulogy the president is speaking both to and for the nation. The second aspect is concerned with how the president makes sense of the tragedy. In a national eulogy the president must help the public come to terms with the tragedy, address questions about why the tragedy occurred, and what the tragedy means for the nation (Jamieson and Campbell 2008). In an individual eulogy the speaker may help the audience come to terms with the death of a loved one, but they do not usually address questions about why someone died or attempt to establish the meaning of a person's death for the audience (Kent 1997). Third, the national eulogy “argues that those who died symbolize the best of the nation; in this genre, they are surrogates for the rest of [the nation]” (Jamieson and Campbell 2008, p. 80). This aspect of

the national eulogy is what allows presidents to “transform symbols of destruction into symbols of resurrection and renewal” (Jamieson and Campbell 2008, p. 80). Finally, for the most part, national eulogies explain how the government and the president plan to ensure that the tragedy will not be repeated (Jamieson and Campbell 2008).

Scholars have identified several different strategies presidents have used to console the nation. In the article “Fallen Heroes, Lifted Hearts: Consolation in Contemporary Presidential Eulogia,” authors Michael Robert Dennis and Adrienne Dennis Kunkel (2004) analyzed President Ronald Reagan’s eulogy for the crew of the Challenger Space Shuttle, President Bill Clinton’s eulogy for the crew of the USS Cole, and President George W. Bush’s eulogy for the crew of the Columbia Space Shuttle. Results of this analysis illustrated that the selected eulogies featured the majority of the components mentioned in the framework which included seven key strategies utilized in eulogy rhetoric. Dennis and Kunkel (2004) gained insights into the unique style of each eulogizer based on examining which strategies each president tended to favor as well as which strategies they did not.

According to their analysis, President Ronald Reagan focused on utilizing the strategy of affirming vivid relationships with the deceased through unification. President Reagan unified the audience, their ancestors, and the deceased in a bond forged by American history and progress. President Reagan utilized this strategy to persuade Americans to believe that the space program must continue on, despite the high costs (Dennis and Kunkel 2004; Lule 1990). In his speech to honor the crew of the USS Cole, President Clinton relied heavily upon the strategy of problem-focused coping. In doing so President Clinton articulated several actions that the audience should take in order to honor the deceased. When the Challenger shuttle crashed, President Bush was faced with a situation similar to that of President Reagan. Dennis and Kunkel’s (2004) analysis

reveals that President Bush emphasized several of the same rhetorical strategies that President Reagan utilized. President Bush focused on unification as well as problem-focused coping, but he also included more emotion-focused coping strategies in his address. Even though these presidents were addressing similar tragedies, they still showed distinct rhetorical styles. This is crucial as it illustrates that different strategies can be emphasized to serve similar purposes.

In past national eulogies the deceased have not only been recognized; they have been transformed into heroes and praised for embodying America's core values. Jamieson and Campbell (2008) claim that in the national eulogy genre, the deceased "symbolize the best of the nation" (p. 80). The national eulogy connects the present and the future by claiming that the deceased symbolize the best of a nation that will endure tragedy because its ideals cannot be undermined by the events that caused their deaths (Jamieson and Campbell 2008). According to Jamieson and Campbell (2008) this argument "enables the president to transform symbols of destruction into symbols of resurrection and renewal" (p. 80). In applying this concept to national eulogies following terrorist attacks, Jamieson and Campbell (2008) claim terrorists assume that "each person killed is a symbol of what needs to be destroyed" (p. 86). Thus a president must reclaim these symbols (the deceased) in his national eulogy, and transform them into symbols of what must be preserved (Jamieson and Campbell 2008).

However, terrorist attacks are not the only instances where the deceased have been transformed into heroes and symbols of resurrection. This is illustrated in Jack Lule's (1990) analysis of President Reagan's national eulogy following the space shuttle Challenger's explosion. In this analysis Lule (1990) applies Kenneth Burke's (1984) concept of victimage. Lule (1990) briefly defines the duality of victimage by claiming that it "creates and then castigates enemies" and "sanctifies and then sacrifices heroes" (p. 116). Throughout his analysis

Lule (1990) establishes that President Reagan depicted the seven astronauts as heroes, and claims that there were sacrificed for the space program as it must forge on in their memory. In this example and in many other national eulogies, the deceased are the ones who symbolize important American values and are transformed into heroes.

National eulogies have been spoken by many different men in various times of crisis and tragedy. There has been extensive scholarly research and analysis performed on the national eulogies of President Ronald Reagan (Lule 1990, Mister 1986, Schrader 2009, Dennis and Kunkel 2004; and Jamieson and Campbell 2008), President Bill Clinton (Schrader 2011, Dennis and Kunkel 2004, Jamieson and Campbell 2008, Schrader 2009; and Nelson 2010), and President George W. Bush (Jamieson and Campbell 2008; and Dennis and Kunkel 2004). There have also been many comparison analyses performed that have focused on comparing national eulogies from two or all three of these presidents (Schrader 2009; Dennis and Kunkel 2004; and Jamieson and Campbell 2008). However, there has been no scholarly analysis comparing multiple national eulogies from one president. Furthermore, few scholars have analyzed any national eulogies presented by the current president, President Barack Obama (Amsden 2011). This analysis will fill this void by analyzing and comparing three of President Obama's national eulogies. The results of this analysis will contribute to the field of national eulogy rhetoric and more broadly the field of presidential rhetoric as it will expand our understanding of how presidents console the nation following various tragedies.

### **One President, Three Eulogies**

This analysis will be conducted through the use of transcripts of the national eulogy addresses presented by President Barack Obama following three recent tragedies: the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting (Obama 2012, December 16), the Boston Marathon bombings

(Obama 2013a, April 18) , and the plant explosion in West, TX (Obama 2013b, April 25). The Sandy Hook Elementary shooting involved an act of gun violence. The Boston Marathon bombings encompass an example of domestic terrorism that received international press coverage and precedence. The plant explosion in West, TX was quite different from the other two events as it was a tragedy caused by a natural accident.

These addresses were chosen for two main reasons. First, these addresses are the means through which President Obama delivers his presidential rhetoric to the nation. These addresses are the means through which President Obama and other presidents express themselves (Jamieson and Campbell 2008). Thus these speeches provide the clearest illustration of President Obama's rhetorical strategies and his rhetorical style. Second, these addresses respond to three different tragedies, which allows for a better understanding of how President Obama utilizes varying rhetorical strategies to unite and console the nation in different situations and throughout time. This analysis will utilize the framework presented by Dennis and Kunkel (2004) in order to examine the presence and absence of certain rhetorical strategies in each speech, and also to examine how they are utilized in order to achieve the goal of consoling the nation.

### **Focus on Survivors**

For President Obama the main focus after a tragedy is not necessarily the victims of the tragedy, but rather his focus is placed on the ones who live on after the tragedy; the survivors. This is quite a contrast from past presidents as they have focused on mourning the deaths of tragedies and spent more time honoring the victims. This shift in national eulogy rhetoric by President Obama is illustrated throughout his national eulogies following the Sandy Hook shooting, the Boston Marathon bombing, and the West, TX plant explosion. President Obama focuses on the survivors of tragedy rather than the deceased by modifying aspects of classical

national eulogy rhetoric. He does this in many different ways throughout these three speeches, but relies mostly on three main strategies: emotion focused coping through positive reappraisal, problem focused coping, and affirming vivid relationships through unification.

*Emotion Focused Coping- Positive Reappraisal*

In these times of tragedy President Obama attempted to console then nation by focusing on the positives rather than the negatives. This is an established rhetorical strategy for national eulogy rhetoric and eulogy rhetoric in general as eulogizers will focus on the positives of a person's death and minimize the negative feelings by reiterating the lessons learned from the deceased, appreciating the deceased's good life, and referencing the afterlife (Dennis and Kunkel 2004). However, President Obama modifies this strategy and distinguishes himself from past presidents by focusing on the lessons learned from the community following a tragedy, appreciating the characteristics displayed by the survivors, and referencing a more hopeful future and a better tomorrow.

President Obama offers a more positive perspective that illustrates the strengths of the affected community and shows that the survivors will move on from this tragedy. In his national eulogy following the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting that left 28 people dead, including the gunman, his mother, six adults, and 20 children, President Obama offered a new perspective of this event for America. President Obama claims that the people of Newton, CT inspired the nation and reminded America what truly matters by loving their children, taking care of them, teaching them well, and showing random acts of kindness (Obama 2012, December 16). Obama continues to illustrate the importance of these lessons by claiming that this is "what should drive us forward in everything we do, for as long as God sees fit to keep us on this Earth" (Obama 2012, December 16).

In times of tragedy President Obama will also look to the community and lessons learned from the community to reiterate important national values. This is illustrated in President Obama's national eulogy following the Boston Marathon bombings as the bombings not only tore apart the city of Boston, but they also shook the nation to its core. Crises such as this shake America to its core values (Nelson 2010), therefore these values need to be reiterated and illustrated in order to reassure the American people that the nation can overcome tragedy and also come out stronger. President Obama helped to assure the audience that America would persevere by offering a new perspective to view the tragedy. In this speech President Obama claims that Boston has taught the nation "to push on, to persevere, to not grow weary, to not get faint" (Obama 2013a, April 18). Because just like Boston, America will "summon the strength that maybe we didn't even know we had" and finish the race (Obama 2013a, April 18). President Obama continued praise the people of Boston and claim that they embody crucial American values when he states that Boston has shown the nation that "in the face of evil, Americans will lift up what's good" (Obama 2013a, April 18). Obama also claims that Boston has shown the nation that in times of crisis Americans will choose compassion, healing, friendship, and love above all else (Obama 2013a, April 18). This represents a shift in the norms of national eulogies as past presidents have usually focused on lessons learned from the deceased. In his national eulogy following the September 11th attacks President Bush stated that the people who died in the World Trade Center exhibited "our national character" and were heroes (Bush 2001, September 14). However, for President Obama the city of Boston and the survivors are the ones who exhibit this "national character"; they are the true heroes.

In his speech following the Boston Marathon bombings President Obama not only cites the lessons learned from the community, but also praises positive characteristics displayed by

specific survivors. This is illustrated with the story of Bill Iffring, a 78 year old runner who was knocked off of his feet by the blast, but got back up. President Obama uses this example to illustrate that America will metaphorically do the same in that Americans will pick themselves up, keep going, and finish the race. Past presidents have praised the deceased and have claimed that they embodied similar lessons and values. This is illustrated in President Reagan's national eulogy for the Challenger explosion when he focused on the lessons learned from the seven astronauts who died and their American ancestors who passed before them. In doing so President Reagan juxtaposed the astronauts exploring space as the new frontier with those who traveled along the Oregon Trail to explore the American West. According to Reagan, these men and women taught the nation that "[s]ometimes when we reach for the stars, we fall short. But we must pick ourselves up again and press on despite the pain" (Reagan 1986, January 31). In contrast to Reagan and other past presidents, President Obama shifts the norms of national eulogies to focus on the positive lessons that can be learned from the affected communities and individual survivors.

President Obama continues to highlight the positive characteristics of the survivors rather than focusing on the deceased and praising their good lives in his national eulogy following the fertilizer plant explosion in West, TX. President Obama quotes community member Deborah Sulak when she says, "[i]t's going to be tough for the families. But we're going to rebound because we're fighters'" (Obama 2013b, April 25). President Obama claims that she embodies the courage that will bring West back. President Obama then praises Carla Ruiz who moved away from West, but drove all the way back because she felt she had to be there for her family. President Obama claims that the love she embodies is what will keep West going. This illustrates President Obama's continued emphasis on the survivors of tragedy rather than the victims of

tragedy. President Obama makes the survivors the heroes in his speeches and claims that they are the ones that will help the nation move on from tragedy, and provide hope for a better future.

In his national eulogies President Obama transforms the survivors into symbols of American strength and resilience. Jamieson and Campbell (2008) claim that presidents have focused on transforming the deceased into symbols of American strength. This is especially true for national eulogies following terrorist attacks as Jamieson and Campbell (2008) claim that for terrorists “each person killed is a symbol of what needs to be destroyed” (p. 86) Thus to counteract this presidents have usually transformed the deceased into symbols of what must be preserved. However, President Obama transforms the survivors into symbols of the strength and resilience that must be preserved.

President Obama also commonly describes a more hopeful future and focuses on a better tomorrow for the survivors rather than referencing the afterlife of those who have passed. This is illustrated in the epilogue of Obama’s national eulogy following the Boston Marathon bombings when he offers a final consolation to the audience and reiterates a sense of hope for Boston by stating:

And this time next year, on the third Monday in April, the world will return to this great American city to run harder than ever and to cheer even louder, for the 118th Boston Marathon. Bet on it. Tomorrow the Sun will rise over Boston. Tomorrow the Sun will rise over this country that we love: this special place, this state of grace. (Obama 2013, April 18)

This is quite different from President Reagan’s final consolation to the audience following the Challenger disaster when he poignantly referenced the afterlife of the seven astronauts by stating “[w]e can find consolation only in faith, for we know in our hearts that you who flew so high and

so proud now make your home beyond the stars, safe in God's promise of eternal life” (Reagan 1986, January 31). This illustrates that President Obama differs from past presidents in that the most important aspect of consoling the nation seems to be refocusing a tragedy so that the survivors can move on from a tragedy rather than focusing on the victims and the damage caused by the tragedy.

### *Problem Focused Coping*

Dennis and Kunkel (2004) claim that eulogizers will often enact problem focused coping to deal with a problem that is causing stress. This form of coping usually involves taking action to deal with a problem. Eulogizers will exhibit this coping mechanism by directing the audience to take actions that generally align with the deceased's goals or values. This has been illustrated in several examples of national eulogies as well as eulogies for individuals and is a common aspect of eulogy rhetoric. One clear example of this strategy can be seen in President Reagan's national eulogy for the seven astronauts aboard the Challenger space shuttle. In Reagan's (1986, January 31) speech he urged Americans to continue on with the space program despite the casualties because it is what the deceased astronauts would have wanted. However, in his national eulogy addresses President Obama seems to enact problem focused coping by responding to the goals and needs of the survivors.

According to Hennessey and Parsons (2013, April 18) the American people were greatly shaken by the Boston Marathon bombings in that they reminded the nation of the insecurity that was felt immediately following the September 11th attacks. However, in this case this insecurity was also compounded by the uncertainty about who was responsible. President Obama responds to the needs of his audience by claiming that the perpetrators of this act of terrorism will be brought to justice. President Obama addresses the perpetrators and speaks for the nation when

he says, “[y]es, we will find you. And yes, you will face justice. We will find you. We will hold you accountable” (Obama 2013a, April 18). President Obama’s promise of justice serves the function of reassuring and responding to the American people as he attempts to console them through ensuring that the perpetrators will be found and justice will be served.

President Obama’s adaptation of problem focused coping was also illustrated clearly in his comments following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Shortly after the news of the shootings hit the media President Obama held a press conference at the White House to address the nation. Jamieson and Campbell (2008) claim that presidents will speak to the nation several times about a tragedy; usually in press conferences, radio addresses, and a national eulogy. Unlike a national eulogy this address was not held at the sight of the tragedy, and was a very quick and impromptu response. This press conference was the first time President Obama spoke to the nation about this tragedy; his comments were brief yet poignant. While struggling for words and wiping away tears, President Obama made it clear that action needed to be taken (Harnden and Peterson 2012).

Later in his national eulogy held in Newtown, CT President Obama presented this need for action at an interfaith prayer service for the victims of the shooting. Jamieson and Campbell (2008) claim that following a tragedy, the public looks to the president and asks two questions: “what does this catastrophe mean, and how is the country to act in order to ensure that it does not recur?” (p. 84) President Obama answered the nation by claiming that this tragedy meant that America has not done enough to protect the nation’s children. President Obama explains the nation’s first task, and calls the nation to action through a sense of collective responsibility. According to President Obama, “caring for our children” (Obama 2012, December 16) is America’s first task. President Obama claimed that the nation must come together to do their part

in protecting the nation's children in order to ensure that tragedies such as this do not recur. In this speech President Obama presents a sense of hope for a better tomorrow in preventing tragedies such as this in the future.

President Obama asks if the nation as a whole is letting children know that they are loved and also teaching them to love in return (Obama 2012, December 16). President Obama also asks if Americans are “truly doing enough to give all the children of this country the chance they deserve to live out their lives in happiness and with purpose?” (Obama 2012, December 16) In asking this of the nation, President Obama calls the American people to action and unifies the survivors through a collective responsibility. Through this collective responsibility President Obama is presenting a sense of agency to the survivors. This agency allows the survivors to take part in fulfilling America's task of protecting the nation's children, and by doing so promotes hope that this tragedy will not recur. This sense of collective responsibility is not only an important rhetorical strategy for this speech, but it also set the foundation for what was to come after the speech. This is due to the fact that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting prompted the consideration of several new laws concerning gun control on local, state, and national levels.

Surely the deceased would want the nation's children to be protected as well and would want to prevent future tragedies. However, President Obama frames it this call to action as addressing the needs and the goals of the American people and the survivors. In doing so President Obama emphasizes the necessity for action by reiterating the frequency of acts of gun violence during his presidency. Obama illustrates the impact of such tragedies for the communities affected and America as a nation when he states “this is the fourth time we have come together to comfort a grieving community torn apart by mass shootings, the fourth time

we've hugged survivors, the fourth time we've consoled the families of victims” (Obama 2012, December 16) . Continually throughout this statement President Obama speaks to the audience and emphasizes that “we” as Americans have repeatedly been affected by this. President Obama then introduces what he will do to prevent these tragedies and ensure hope for a better future for America’s children. President Obama acknowledges the limitations of his actions by claiming that no single law or set of laws can stop senseless acts of violence, but he continues to rely on the notion of collective responsibility by claiming that “we have an obligation to try” (Obama 2012, December 16). In this speech President Obama’s intention of taking action serves to unify the nation through the collective responsibility of protecting the nation’s children and preventing future tragedies. President Obama’s plans for action in both his eulogies in Boston and in Newtown, CT serve to respond to the needs of a nation and promote actions based on those needs rather than the goals and values of the victims.

#### *Affirming Vivid Relationships- Unification*

According to Dennis and Kunkel (2004) presidents have affirmed vivid relationships between the audience and the deceased through personal glimpses at the lives of the deceased, and by mentioning their names throughout the address. Dennis and Kunkel (2004) claim that in the eulogy genre unification is used as a means for leaders to “draw connections and paint parallels between themselves, their audiences, and the deceased” (p. 710). However, in President Obama’s eulogies he continues to focus on the survivors by unifying the survivors, the nation, and himself as president.

The unification is illustrated in President Obama’s national eulogy for the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting when he unifies the nation, the community, and himself through a sense of shared emotion. This shared emotion of the nation is illustrated when

President Obama tells the audience that they are not alone in their grief, and that “our world too has been torn apart; that all across this land of ours, we have wept with you and we've pulled our children tight” (Obama 2012, December 16). This statement focuses on the reaction of the nation to the tragedy and illustrates the importance of the children of the nation while also displaying empathy for those who have lost loved ones. In this case Obama seems to be establishing unity not to affirm relationships with the 26 people who died, but to affirm the relationships between the audience and their loved ones.

In his speech following the Boston Marathon bombings President Obama acknowledges that Boston has been torn apart by this tragedy. President Obama also acknowledges that the survivors are the ones who must reclaim this beloved city. In this speech President Obama speaks to both the wounded city of Boston and the wounded survivors who are watching this speech from their beds when he proclaims that America “will all be with you as you learn to stand and walk and, yes, run again” (Obama 2013a, April 18). President Obama continues to strengthen the relationship between the survivors, the nation, and himself. This is illustrated again in the speech when President Obama speaks directly to the people of Boston claiming “[y]our resolve is the greatest rebuke to whoever committed this heinous act” (Obama 2013a, April 18). In the next sentence President Obama unifies the survivors, the nation, and himself when he claims that the perpetrators of this act cannot terrorize “us”, intimidate “us”, or shake “us” from the “values that make us who we are, as Americans” (Obama 2013a, April 18). President Obama strengthens the relationship between the nation, the community, and himself to console the survivors and also to show them that with the support of the nation, they will overcome this tragedy. The city of Boston was torn apart by this tragedy, but President Obama claims that the survivors can reclaim their city: their special place, their state of grace.

President Obama also employed the same strategy following the fertilizer plant explosion in West, TX when he assured the community that they are not alone, and that their nation would stand with them. Hope for West, TX came in the form of recognition from the president and from the nation. President Obama's speech to West, TX embodied this need by emphasizing the value of West, TX as a town and as a community. This unity also illustrated that the survivors and the nation are the ones who will bring hope to this community and ensure a better tomorrow.

This illustrates that for President Obama, the survivors are the true heroes. Thus the survivors are the ones who must be unified in order to achieve a better tomorrow. By unifying the survivors, the nation, and himself, President Obama is showing the nation that Americans must stand together to look to the future rather than being united in tragedy by being united with the victims of tragedy.

### **Conclusion**

By focusing on the survivors President Obama speaks to his audience more directly and assures them that life will go on. For President Obama the survivors seem to be the heroes in each situation. In Newton Obama made the survivors the heroes by claiming that Americans can all do their part to prevent similar tragedies in the future. In Boston he claimed that the survivors are the ones who will reclaim Boston. The survivors are the ones who have exhibited the strength and resilience that America needs to recover. In West, TX he praised the survivors for their bravery, courage, and love and claimed the survivors are the ones who will rebuild the town.

These examples emphasize the concept of hope, which President Obama has become known for throughout his political career. This is exemplified when Coe and Reitzes (2010) claim "themes that scholars identified in Obama's 2004 address—hope and change, unity across the divisions of partisanship and race—remained present in his rhetoric as he became a fixture on

the national political scene” (p. 393). According to Kloppenberg (2011) these themes continued to remain present in his rhetoric into his first term as President. This analysis further illustrates that these themes have remained consistent into his second term as well.

Throughout his national eulogies President Barack Obama develops his unique rhetorical style that helps him to console the nation through various tragedies. President Obama continually focuses on the survivors rather than deceased. This illustrates a shift in national eulogy rhetoric as well as a void in Dennis and Kunkel’s (2004) framework in that they do not account for this possible adaptation. This is significant as it shows a new way to console the nation. These results illustrate that national eulogies can be adapted to focus more on praising the survivors rather than the deceased. In doing so presidents can help the nation to better move on and look to a more hopeful future.

These insights broaden the strategies available to presidents in the national eulogy genre, and inspire a need for greater research of this genre. In terms of future research, this is unfortunately a genre that may continue to grow in terms of artifacts to study as America may experience tragedy again. There can be more research done on speeches that may be performed in the future, but as for now there can also be more research on comparing and contrasting the speeches that currently exist. This analysis has illustrated that there are several differences concerning how a president consoles the nation. It may be beneficial to further examine these variations and in doing so examine how presidents of different political parties console the nation.

Once again, President Obama has shown his abilities to adapt to difficult and diverse situations throughout his political career and his presidency. He has seen America through times of depression and times of prosperity. In every situation President Obama has taken on his role to

speaks to and for his audience. However, President Obama has shown that this audience; the survivors of these tragedies, are not merely passive participants. For President Obama these survivors are the true heroes. These survivors are the ones who inspire hope for a better tomorrow.

## Appendix

## Appendix 1: Eulogy Frameworks Combined

<b>Classical Categories</b>	<b>Kunkel and Dennis Categories (Rearranged)</b>
Prooemium	Credibility of Speaker Self-disclosure of emotion
Epainos	Praise for the deceased Affirmation of vivid relationships Notation of flaws Revelation of private insights Unification*
Paramythia	Problem-focused coping: Suggestions for action Emotion- focused coping: Positive reappraisal Reference to afterlife Appreciation of time spent with the deceased Appreciation of lessons and traits learned from the deceased Appreciation of the deceased's good life
Epilogue	Continuation of interactive bonds Addressing the deceased (second person "you") Referring to the deceased in the present tense

\*The tactic unification was developed and added to the framework in a later published article.

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