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The Inaugural Address: How Symbols Are Used to Create an Effective Message

Introduction

A Presidential Election represents quite an important aspect of the democratic process the United States is known for. Of course, sometimes the importance of this event is masked by annoying political ads, feisty debates, and the hilarious memes, but underneath it all is an important and historical tradition that became iconic to the U.S. Along with this freedom to choose the nation's leader comes the emblematic tradition of taking the Oath of Office and then providing the nation with a speech. This speech is said to be "a discourse whose significance all recognize but few praise" because there is a formula to each one as well as specific types of rhetoric that are used (Campbell & Jamieson, 1985, p. 394). In the inaugural addresses of 2009 and 2017, common societal and elemental symbols are used and referenced by former-President Barack Obama and current-President Donald Trump to promote unity, reaffirm winning the election, and to remark on the direction of America.

Lens/ Theory/ Review of Literature

Symbols in political rhetoric are categorized as appeals when used to connect with the audience's pathos, or emotional side. Appeals are emotional strategies that allow for the audience to have an emotional response to vivid, descriptive language, making it a very appropriate tool when used in Inaugural Addresses, as this transition of leadership is an

important and emotional time. The President that is sworn into the position and takes the oath, has the job of rallying and tugging at the heart-strings of not just all American citizens but also citizens of the world, as the United States is not the only country tuning to listen and judge what the next four years would bring. Utilizing the appeal to symbols, both the natural and elemental symbols is a way to be understood in a global setting. Elemental symbols are symbols that are culturally universal, such as things like blood meaning sacrifice or sweat meaning hard work (Rowland, 2012, p. 209). On the other hand, societal symbols are symbols found within a culture to represent values such as justice, equality, unity, loyalty and other aspects that speak to, in this case, the American public (Rowland, 2012, p.209). Both these symbol types are a strategy to elicit an emotional response from the audience, drawing their attention and solidifying a connection to the speaker or the subject being discussed.

As Inaugural Addresses are among the first speeches given by new presidents, they have a tendency to portray a rallying message of triumph for the American people while reiterating the platforms they campaigned on. This is an opportunity to implement an emotional response and attempt to get the nation to back these ideas. Though the symbols tend to be the same, the way they are said and the context in which they are used differentiates the messages slightly to speak to different audiences. Since the most recent Inaugural Address done by President Trump, a Republican, has a specific message using these symbols, it only seems logical to compare how those symbols are used in the first Inaugural Address of his predecessor, Barack Obama, who is a member of the Democratic Party. Obama and Trump can be seen using and referring to the same symbols throughout their addresses, but they are sending different messages to target their specific audience. Throughout each of their speeches, both Presidents attempted to promote the

unity of the nation, reaffirm their victory and new title, and to state their intentions for the direction America is to head in. Both elemental and societal symbols are used to progress each of these ideas in the two speeches, but the messages being relayed differ at a few strategically important points.

Analysis

To begin in chronological order, Obama gave his Inaugural Address in January of 2009 after he won the 2008 election against John McCain. It is important to note that Barack Obama was the first President of a racial minority to be elected to the highest office of the United States of America. This is notable because throughout his campaign, Obama had to speak about race and the racial issues of the United States multiple times, even when there were other issues he wanted to cover and talk about. With this in mind, some of the symbols Obama uses refer to slavery and the darker elements of American history, which also promote the reasons behind the direction he desires to push America towards. He also is able to promote unity and reaffirm his new title and office held through the symbols he provides in his political rhetoric that supports his new role as President.

To start his address, Obama states that “Forty-four Americans have now taken the presidential oath,” an oath that is used as a societal symbol because of the weight by which it is held in American society (Obama, 2009, para.3). In using this symbol Obama not only attempts to unite America behind the ideals of the oath, but more importantly reaffirms that he is about to take this sacred “oath” himself. He references that the presidents that had come before him had taken upon themselves these words as part of a deeply rooted tradition and promise to lead America. President Obama goes on to use elemental symbol to explain the state of the union,

referencing briefly that sometimes the sacred presidential “oath” was spoken in the past “during rising tides of prosperity and the still waters of peace,” but that his oath is “taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms” (para.3). It is common knowledge that “gathering clouds and raging storms” are signs or symbols of mystery and an ominous, possibly scary future. Deciding to use an elemental symbol to describe the very real issues of a breaking economy, housing crisis, job shortage, and other massive problems gave Obama a chance to consolidate into a few words the severity of what the U.S. was facing. He did this in a concise way so that citizens could use the ominous weather symbol as an understanding of what America was about face with the ever-encroaching, pervasive fear of another Great Depression.

Obama proceeds throughout his speech by referencing the past, addressing the bad aspects and hard parts of American history as a “dark chapter,” while still sounding patriotic and pro-United States with his observance of how the nation has progressed and moved forward (Obama, 2009, para.21). He often goes back to the societal symbol of “our enduring spirit,” which is to say the hard working, optimistic spirit of the everyday citizen working towards that mythological American Dream (para.7). He uses the “spirit” symbol to reaffirm the idea that though America did have some hard times and was not always the purest of nations and heart, the foundations of America have always come back to center the nation and lead the way to a better future. Obama explains this ideology, this American spirit that has been a compass to the past citizens and leaders as the “precious gift,” the “God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness” (para.7). He not only uses the societal symbol of the American Spirit in his address, but also defines what that symbol is. This allows everyone in the audience, abroad or at home, to clearly understand and

conceptualize the symbol in the same way which not only reaffirms the message that the history of America can be learned from and used to build a better future, but redefines and unifies everyone's perspective. This creates a sense of intimacy and community amongst those in the United States and those who across the globe wish to share in that same "American Spirit."

As Obama moves along towards the end of his address, he brings around the societal symbol of the Founding Fathers and specifically the "father of our nation" which most Americans will be able to easily identify as George Washington because of his historical significance (Obama, 2009, para.30). President Obama then goes on to cite Washington's words as a form of encouragement and optimism for the future as well as an assurance that America has been in hard positions before, but has always prevailed. In Washington's words about the troubling times of America during the Revolutionary War, he referenced winter in a literal sense. Obama also refers to "winter" after stating the quote by Washington, but uses it in that context as an elemental symbol, in part to keep with the theme of impending, dangerous weather to portray the potential economic hardships that were about to be faced by America (para. 30). It can also be seen as a parallel made between himself and Washington to ensure upon the audience of the American people that Obama is ready to take on the impending disasters and weather the storm until "with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations" (para. 32). Obama utilizes the elemental symbol of the horizon to explain where he intends to bring the United States after the "gathering clouds and raging storms" and "the winter of [our] hardship" has passed (para. 32). This use of elemental symbolism mixed with the occasional societal symbol provides an optimistic and

futuristic approach to the hardships the United States was facing in the beginning of his presidency.

President Trump also utilizes some of these symbolic appeals in his rhetoric while he tries to carry a similar message throughout his Inaugural Address in January of 2017. His sentences are short and sweet and it is important to note that while Obama referenced his audience as if he were apart of it, with words like “we” or “our,” Trump separates himself quickly from the audience of normal citizens by using the words “you” and “your” multiple times. He also disassociates from the political atmosphere and circle of politicians he and his supporters believed ran the nation unjustly. With the slight change in language from “ours” to “yours” Trump narrows his audience from all global residents to just American ones and then condenses even further as the Address becomes more geared towards those that believed in much of Trump’s rhetoric about politicians taking all of the power, mostly his supporters. This is important to note because, though Obama and Trump use some of the same symbols and aim to present some of the same ideas such as unification and direction, they are speaking to different audiences and that leads their messages to be perceived in different ways.

President Trump began his speech by bringing up a societal symbol that Obama had also used in his own first Inaugural Address, which is the idea of the American Dream and spirit. He explains that is time to “rebuild our country and restore its promise for all of our people” (Trump, 2017, para. 2). This “promise” is a reference to the American Dream, the idea that citizens are equal and free and deserve a chance to pursue their own happiness as well as have a voice in their government. This is the same “precious gift” Obama referenced during his speech and has been used by many other presidents at similar points throughout history (Obama, 2009,

para. 7). President Trump uses it to remind people of their unalienable rights as U.S. citizens but also reaffirm his campaign message bringing back the citizen's voice to the government. He reinforces this idea when he explains how he will be "transferring power from Washington DC and giving it back to you, the people" (Trump, 2017, para. 6). In this sentence, Trump not only references his version of the promise of the American Dream, where the citizen hold control over the government, but also uses a societal symbol of Washington D.C., the capital of the free world and an emblem of American values and history. Throughout his campaign, Trump claimed he would "drain the swamp," a metaphor used by Trump to describe Washington D.C. and how it is in need of cleaning (Overby, 2017). What once used to be revered as the free world's capitol has been flipped on its head, or at least is seen as such by Trump and his supporters as a dirty, murky place where the trust of the citizens was lost by the politicians that ran it. This is an example of a societal symbol and how these symbols can be used to infer different meanings as society changes. What once represented an impressive place where democracy and freedom are held at the highest value has now been turned into a dirty word to be associated with after the rhetoric Trump used to describe it, a dirty swamp and a broken American system centered in Washington D.C.

Trump like Obama utilizes the societal symbol of the American Dream throughout his speech as he talks about his plans for the nation. He states that he will bring back jobs, borders, wealth and he "will bring back our dreams" (Trump, 2017, para. 21). The idea of dreams is an important one and Trump uses this sentence to jump into his vague ideas on how to give his audience the opportunity to live their dream, by simply saying there will be new roads, bridges, railways, and more forms of infrastructure across our nation and that there will be more jobs. He

says to make this American Dream happen for everyone people need to buy from and sell to Americans. This is where the image of the American Dream portrayed by Obama and the one portrayed by Trump deviate as Obama talks about “America being a friend to all nations” and that the American Dream can be shared with those who wish to come to America and make it happen whereas Trump is trying to keep the American Dream for only those already in the United States (Obama, 2009, para. 17). This plays quite critically into the rhetoric each uses to get their points and ideas across. Trump references the idea of the American Dream a couple more times, saying that “we must think big and dream even bigger” to move the nation in the direction President Trump invisions (Trump, 2017, para. 43). This goes along with his rhetoric of making America bigger and better than before his Presidency, while also hinting that America was great in the past and had somehow gone downhill.

Trump includes the societal symbol, again as Obama did, of the American Spirit and explains that “No challenge can match the heart and fight and spirit of America” (Trump, 2017, para. 61). This symbol is a reference to the idea of American passion and patriotism and the historical myth of the American Patriot, a cry for unity. This speaks to the heart of most Americans about the values that are held to a high standard in the general American public. He also uses an elemental symbol of “blood” to illustrate the sacrifice American’s of all races have made and should make for the United States, which reinforces the vision of a patriotic, passionate, and strong American Spirit. Trump says “that whether we are black or brown or white, we all bleed the same red blood of patriots” (para. 64). This reference to blood which tends to portray the virtue or idea of sacrifice, is consistent with Trump’s theme of a strong American Spirit. He uses it in an attempt to promote unity throughout America as he tries to

remind the public, in the rest of the sentence, that “we all enjoy the same glorious freedoms, and we all salute the same great American Flag” (para. 64). This is a strong sentence using both the elemental symbol of blood to signify the virtue of sacrifice and then using the societal symbol of the “great American Flag” to reaffirm what that sacrifice was for and why it is worth it, specifically for his American audience. The American Flag is a symbol known to all Americans as well as all nations as being the national symbol of freedom and of utmost importance to the history of America. Utilizing this symbol was possibly one of Trump’s more powerful and impactful uses of language as the Flag tends to be held in high regard and is a physical symbol that has come to exemplify the freedom and passion of the citizens in the United States. It is also important to note that the American Flag is also sometimes burned to show resistance and protest, which is part of this symbols legacy as a representation of the American resistance and strength (Jones, 2016). Throughout the constant references to symbols of patriotism and freedom, Trump is trying to promote unity amongst Americans and gives the audience insight into his ideas for the nation, which seem to be more nostalgic and reminiscent compared to Obama’s progressive and futuristic vision.

Evaluation

The rhetorical strategy of symbol was highly effective in this form of presidential address. Not only because the audience had the knowledge and understanding to fully comprehend the symbols, both elemental and societal, but also because it has been used throughout the ages on both sides of the political spectrum. Since both Obama and Trump were able to use the same kinds of symbols such as that of the American Dream, the American spirit, and the precious “gift” or “promise” of American virtues and values this shows that both sides

deem symbolism as an effective tool. Since these societal symbols are common conceptions throughout the nation, it is easier to connect with those that do not necessarily like the candidate or policies they want to put in place. This appeal to pathos, or emotion, could lessen the divisiveness that presidential elections have recently been bringing as these symbols speak to all Americans. Elemental symbols also play their part in promoting unity because these symbols, whether they be referencing the struggles to come or the sacrifices already made by honored members in the nation, provide another point of emotional contact through symbols that keep a constant meaning throughout time. Both Obama and Trump tend to utilize the elemental symbols as references to the past and how the hardships the nation faces now have been faced before. Whether it be potential economic collapse or issues of race and equality, the Inaugural Addresses of Trump, Obama, and presidents past have relied on the use of symbolism to remind the nation how much stronger it is unified than separated.

Using symbols within the Inaugural Address rhetoric allows presidents, as both Obama and Trump did in their speeches, to align themselves with the values of the United States that are commonly understood by both American citizens and others around the world. For example Obama aligned the detriment of the threats the nation faced during his presidency with those of the Revolutionary War and then went further to make himself a parallel to George Washington, a symbol of American values. It was through this use of iconic American societal symbols that Obama reaffirmed his right and ability to be President as well as why his ideas for the future of the nation made sense. Trump uses a similar technique, using the societal symbol of the American Dream and the American Spirit to explain his policies and infrastructure will allow American citizens to reach their dreams and repossess the patriotism he seems to feel the nation

has lost. In this way he reaffirms why he should be President, because he will give the American Dream back to the people, and then explains the direction he wants to lead America in.

Along with the idea of effectiveness is the question of whether or not a speech is ethical, which again depends on the entirety of the content of the speech itself and not necessarily on the symbols. Symbols will keep the same meaning, but the words surrounding them and how they are used to promote a more prominent message is what dictates the ethics of an Inaugural Address. Obama's speech and the symbols he uses are given more ethically than Trump's for multiple reasons. First of all, Obama represents himself well as an ethical speaker and leader whereas Trump has demonstrated a lack of ethical behavior which is brought forth in his Inaugural Address. While Obama's message clearly stated through symbolism that the American Dream is an idea that should be open to all, Trump opposes this and makes it very definite that he believes the American Dream should only be available to those who are already United States citizens. Also, Obama uses symbols to reference portions of the past that America has grown from and, while acknowledging that not all of American history has been good, the symbols of American virtue will lead the nation into a future that is better for everyone. Trump refers to the virtues as well, but does so both less elegantly and less ethically, by ignoring that America has a darker past and still working towards a perfect union. Therefore, his speech and the symbols he uses lose the emotional appeal to all of those who have been affected by issues such as slavery and discrimination, as he insists that America was at its best in the past. At its best, perhaps, for those that were white, male and heterosexual, but not always the best for the rest of the United States citizens who did not fit into that group. Therefore, Obama's Inaugural

Address is an example of a more ethical use of symbols while Trump's Address, though it uses the same symbols, is more narrowcasted and unethical.

Conclusion

In conclusion symbols have been used specifically in the Presidential Inaugural Addresses throughout history to emotionally connect with the audience as well as promote unity, reaffirm the speaker's new title, and reiterate their plans for the nation. It is through the use of elemental and societal symbols that these new leaders can communicate their ideas on an emotional level. In this way the emotional appeal of symbols are effective and can also be ethical depending on the larger message that is being conveyed. Though Inaugural Addresses do tend to have a standard formula, they are an important part of the Presidential process of the United States as it gives citizens and the world an idea of what will happen in the next four years. As seen in the Inaugural Addresses of 2009 and 2017, similar symbols were used by leaders from two different parties. Obama and Trump had differing agendas but used the same rhetorical appeal to address the country, exemplifying the versatility and effectiveness of societal and elemental symbols.

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