PRESIDENTIAL EULOGIES IN THE WAKE OF MASS SCHOOL SHOOTINGS: A CALL TO ACTION

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ABSTRACT

GORDON C. CULLETTO. Presidential Eulogies in the Wake of Mass School Shootings: A Call to Action. (Under the direction of DR. JASON EDWARD BLACK)

President Barack Obama described December 14, 2012 saying, "it continues to haunt me, it was one of the worst days of my presidency." That morning, a gunman stormed through the doors of Sandy Hook Elementary School and began opening fire on children and their teachers. By the end of the rampage, 20 children and six adults had lost their lives. Throughout his time in office, President Obama was forced to deliver at least 14 eulogies after mass shootings.

This thesis explores the rhetorical strategies presidents Lyndon B. Johnson, William Jefferson Clinton, and Obama activated during their responses to mass shootings in an effort to restore order and to identify resources of social and political guilt for such gun violence. Using Burkean Dramatism, this thesis critiques the use of the tragic frame by presidents. Arguing that eulogies should instead be delivered in the comic frame, this thesis concludes with calls to action for encouraging more dialogue regarding gun violence.

Collectively, the eulogies delivered by Johnson, Clinton, and Obama represent important case studies because they represent the ways in which the tragic frame constrains public discourse and policy debate. While presidents may seek social change, their insistence on following a pattern of scapegoating has helped sustain an environment where the underlying faults in the system are overlooked in favor of purification and redemption. Kenneth Burke's guilt-purification- redemption cycle is important for critically examining the eulogies delivered in response to mass shootings.

A disruption to the social order, such as the tragedy at Sandy Hook, among other school shootings, calls for an executive rhetorical response. In responding to unspeakable acts of violence, presidents often employ the language of scapegoating and the tragic frame. By critiquing these eulogies, this thesis provides an argument for an augmented response to such tragedies in the context of gun violence. Eulogies to those impacted by mass shootings will likely continue to appear ubiquitously in the United States. Therefore, I conclude, in part, that it remains the responsibility of those powerful interests responding to the tragedies to move beyond scapegoating and the tragic frame and more toward a comic frame. If this can happen, our nation may be better equipped to address collective, systemic problems related to gun control rather than merely scapegoating mass shooters as individually and singularly responsible.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my girlfriend Sarah McNeil who has loved and supported me throughout my education. Without the kindness and generosity of Sarah none of this would have been possible. Sarah gave me her time and energy and for that I cannot say enough.

Lastly, this thesis is dedicated to the memories of Reed Parlier, Riley Howell, and all victims of gun violence. Their memories guide every word in this thesis and it is my hope that we can do more to honor and respect their memories.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The name Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, like Sandy Hook Elementary, Columbine High School, and so many others, has been etched into the minds of millions of Americans. The communities these schools serve (Parkland, FL; Newtown, CT; Columbine, CO, respectively) have all experienced the devastation caused by mass shootings. On February 14, 2018 at 2:21 p.m., a gunman entered the 1200 building of Stoneman Douglas High School and began firing on students and teachers.[1] In less than 10 minutes, 14 students and three teachers were killed, the shooter disappearing into the crowd of students fleeing the school.[2] In the moments that would follow this shooting a community and a country were left broken, forced once again to confront the devastating reality of mass shootings in America. The shooting in Parkland is different, though, because student survivors such as Emma Gonzalez and David Hogg have, in less than a year since the shooting, led the effort to change U.S. gun policies. Speaking a few days after the Parkland shooting, Gonzalez said "Every single person up here today, all these people should be home grieving. But instead we are up here standing together because if all our government and President can do is send thoughts and prayers, then it's time for victims to be the change that we need to see."[3] Student voices are louder than ever, echoing through the halls of Washington, D.C. and entering the hearts and minds of the U.S. public.

In 1966, over 50 years before the shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School, a gunman opened fire on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin, killing 14 people.[4] The Gun Control Act of 1968 is often championed as a utile response to both the school shooting and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Attorney General

Robert Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, the latter two having occurred that same year in 1968.[5] In his remarks following the shooting at the University of Texas, President Lyndon B. Johnson seized the moment to emphasize the need for the Gun Control Act. He said then, "What happened is not without a lesson: that we must press urgently for the legislation now pending in Congress to help prevent the wrong person from obtaining firearms."[6] However, in 1986 the U.S. Congress began unraveling the Gun Control Act with the introduction of the Firearms Owners' Protection Act.[7] Years later Congress passed the Brady Law, codified in 1993, creating a temporary waiting period for the purchase of firearms.[8] It would be another 14 years before Congress would again act on gun control.

All those years later, in the wake of the Virginia Tech University shooting, Congress enacted the National Instant Criminal Background Check System Improvement Amendments Act of 2007 in an effort to regulate a small segment of gun purchases in the United States.[9] In the 11 years between the Virginia Tech and Parkland shootings, there have been seven mass shootings in schools, 62 people have lost their lives, and countless people have been affected by these kinds of tragedies.[10]

These alarming statistics beg the question: why has there not been any meaningful legislation passed in over 10 years to solve this public problem? The answer to this question is complicated and impossible to discover. However, it is possible that at least one part of the problem may be located in the way that U.S. presidents address mass shootings. This thesis describes and critiques the ways that presidents have responded to mass shootings in schools through an analysis of the eulogies delivered in response to a number of pivotal shootings. Guided by understandings of presidential rhetoric, Burke's

Dramatism, and the genre of eulogy, I unpack the school shooting eulogies of presidents to identify some of the discursive reasons that less-than-optimal reforms have been made to gun regulation and school safety. This thesis attends to three presidential eulogies, organized by three key case studies of school shootings.

Justification and Choice of Texts

The first piece of discourse will be the written address by President Johnson in response to the University of Texas clock tower shooting. This artifact reflects the first presidential response to a mass shooting at a school and contributes to the passing of the Gun Control Act. [11] Johnson's was actually a written eulogistic response. Following this piece, President William Jefferson Clinton's response to the shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado is analyzed. In 1999, President Clinton's response was prepared for a television audience and, thus, presented new challenges, such as the mediated performance of a eulogy, not confronted by the address prepared by President Johnson.

The final piece of discourse analyzed is President Barack Obama's eulogy following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut in December of 2012. President Obama's address is unique in that he is the first black president (thus, the first to address national trauma) and he often positions mass shootings in contexts involving violence in black communities. The influence of social media should not be understated here as Obama's speeches were written to be reposted, quoted, and shared in a digital space. Morevoer, Obama's response is the first since Johnson to connect mass shootings to other acts of violence and provides a glimpse of the comic frame.

This thesis does not include the response to the shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School due to the ongoing nature of the protests and attempts at gun control legislation. The insights gathered from the analysis of earlier presidential eulogies in the wake of school shootings, however, will be applied to the Parkland shooting in the conclusion of this thesis.

These chosen texts will demonstrate that presidential eulogies following mass school shootings, to date, have been delivered in the tragic frame. Seemingly, this framing may be partially responsible for limited action by our government to secure tighter gun laws and improved school safety. I will conclude this thesis with the suggestion that eulogies be delivered in the comic frame so that the public may learn from its past and make the changes necessary to secure its future free from gun violence in schools. The conclusions that result from careful analysis of these eulogies will be utilized to offer a more progressive framework for promoting reform of gun ownership in the wake of the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting.

The prevalence of mass shootings, and in particular school shootings, has been made abundantly clear to this point. And, communication scholarship has attempted to tackle the issue of gun reform debates on numerous occasions.[12] By isolating a particular kind of mass shooting and analyzing the responses to the shootings, we can gain a more holistic picture of the communicative landscape that has, in part, caused political gridlock on the issue of gun control. This thesis demonstrates the important role that eulogies may play in shaping the nation's response and discourse following a mass school shooting.

CHAPTER 2: CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

The Rhetorical Presidency

The Rhetorical Presidency has been central to the study of political communication from its conception in 1987. This theoretical perspective grows out of an interest in the rise of popular communication by presidents and the routine practice of circumventing traditional means of governing, or the legislative process, in favor of a popular approach to leadership where presidents appeal directly to the public to proceed with their agenda.[13] Jeffrey Tulis' theory of the Rhetorical Presidency asserts that popular presidential communication that appeals to the masses takes the place of legislative action and gives the appearance of being political action.[14] In 1996 Tulis argued that popular presidential communication had now become a necessary tool for governance. However, he warned of the dangers of relying solely on popular communication as governance.[15]

Two years later, Mary E. Stuckey would alter the theory to focus on the constitutive and instrumental consequences of presidential rhetorical leadership.[16] Stuckey argued that presidential rhetoric works to shape rhetorical communities that guide the public's political perceptions, while also creating and maintaining possibilities for the Presidency.[17] It is with this understanding of the role of rhetorical leadership in mind that governance becomes clear: presidents can appeal to the public, but in doing so they must utilize their audience to place pressure on legislators to enact their agendas. When presidents speak directly to the public they have the power to shape perception, suggest future political action, and they set precedents for rhetorical leadership moving forward. The rise of the Rhetorical Presidency is attributed to three phenomena: an

increase in presidents' willingness to speak directly to the public, the growth of mass media, and a decline in political parties.[18]

Increased public communication

In the early days of presidential communication, it would be uncommon for a president to speak directly to the people. Presidents were often elected having never spoken empirically to a large portion of the electorate. Historically, presidents would deliver addresses such as the State of the Union in a written form to Congress. By converting these speeches into events for the public during the rise of the Rhetorical Presidency, chief executives viewed the general public as a live audience. As such, the presidents injecting the U.S. public into the political process through the role of the passive observer. Tulis saw the Rhetorical Presidency take shape in what he called "Wilsonian Rhetoric" where presidents began substituting rhetorical action for legislative governance, substituting words for action.[19] Traditionally presidents have relied on their party to move legislation, which attends to their agenda, through Congress and ultimately to the president. Going to the people through rhetorical acts works to circumvent this traditional structure by encouraging the polity to pressure their legislators to pass legislation. The concern becomes that presidents, rather than governing by political action such as executive order or legislative pushes, were increasingly relying on words to take the place of action. Tulis's argument describes a concern that the public is becoming increasingly reliant on discourse that is often far removed from the kind of action required to move policy through Washington.

Presidential power has been dramatically magnified due to the increasingly public characterization of presidential rhetoric. Presidential rhetoric is often met with a

tremendous amount of resistance on major social issues, such as gun control, by special interest groups. Interest groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA) which seek to counter the rhetorical strength of the executive branch to pressure Congress, by funding or withholding funding from legislative races, a kind of financial pressure. The rise in the number of speeches given by presidents following President Woodrow Wilson's punctuated emphasis on delivering rhetoric directly to "the people" presents an interesting dilemma where it becomes increasingly difficult to produce a speech that truly stands alone and can shape events moving forward.[20] Tulis argued that the growing number of speeches, combined with the personalization of new media technologies, was the result of a doctrine which saw presidents as popular leaders and became an unquestioned premise in our society.[21] Stuckey largely agreed with Tulis and added that political reality is partly or wholly created through rhetoric and that rhetoric continues to shape political reality.[22]

It certainly cannot be understated that rhetoric drives meaning in our culture. Stuckey's argument that presidential rhetoric shapes and reinforces political reality becomes increasingly more significant when it is paired with the growth in presidential speeches. More and more the polity are turning to presidents for meaning and answers in times of confusion and upheaval. When we think about the increasing frequency of responses to school shootings, patterns begin to emerge where presidents will rely on tropes such as offering prayers and current resources such as Federal Bureau of Investigation investigations, rather than promoting deliberative legislative initiatives that could provide tangibly utile change moving forward.

Growth of mass media

Thirty years before Lyndon Johnson became president, Franklin D. Roosevelt changed the way presidents would use mass media to govern. Roosevelt famously inaugurated his fireside chats to bridge the gap between himself and the polity in an effort to gain support for his "New Deal," which was meant as a progressive series of legislative and executive goals designed to pull the country out of an economic depression.[23] The shift from radio to television and then to internet and ultimately social media changed the expectations for rhetorical leadership, creating greater emphasis on the performance of a discourse and the cross-platform appeal of the discourse. Stuckey contends that as presidents close the distance between their office and the polity, this new relationship has led to an increase in the numbers of presidential speeches. Furthermore, she has argued that the relationship moved the Presidency toward a more ceremonial role and that the content of the speeches became a performance rather than an attempt at governing. [24] Tulis argued that mass media, particularly the rise of television, has shifted presidential communication from the written to spoken word performed in a dramatic visible performance.[25] This change elevates the visible performance to a point where words themselves are not enough.[26] Presidents increasingly play a smaller and smaller role in the production of the written address, however their performance brings the message to life under the Rhetorical Presidency.[27]

The growth of mass media, and the introduction of new communication technologies such as the internet and social media, have had an immeasurable impact on the way that presidential communication is conceived and conducted. Stuckey argued that presidents who fail to meet the expectation of a public office set by the media and polity often lose touch with those groups.[28] Growing out of all of these conclusions about the

role of mass media in presidential communication is the idea that to be an effective leader means reaching the public through carefully produced visible performances tailored to specific media and audiences.

As will be discussed, the construction and performance of eulogies has been dramatically altered through the shift from radio to social media by focusing the attention on the performance and cross-platform sharing of a discourse. It is important that we understand the impacts that these changes have had on the rhetorical choices made by presidents, thus this thesis isolates speeches given during the height of each of these eras of mass communication.

The decline of political parties

Complementary to the performance of presidential address is the declining role of parties in governance. The decline in the strength of political parties is reflected in the attempts made by presidents to circumvent traditional means of legislating by appealing to the public to put pressure on members of Congress. Presidents have gained the ability to circumvent party leaders in Congress to enact their legislative goals. For scholars of the Rhetorical Presidency a president "going public" relies on inspirational, idealistic rhetoric for normal matters of politics or issues that have popular appeal.[29]

Building on this argument, Tulis claimed that inspirational rhetoric, rhetoric that is meant to inspire or uplift, removes the spirit of politics from the processes which actually make it work.[30] Tulis argued that:

> As the very name implies, the Rhetorical Presidency is based on words, not power. When connected in a practical way with the exercise of power,

> speech can be effective, but when used to merely generate public support it is apt to fail.[31]

In our political culture, popular leadership has become confused with the antidote for unlocking political gridlock over significant issues.[32] Reflecting on the use of public communication by the Clinton Administration, Martin J. Medhurst argued that modern governance can be achieved if a president avoids idealistic speeches that overpromise while avoiding overly detailed policy discussions which preclude any legislative action.[33] Stuckey, recognizing the growing success of popular communication, claims that presidents sought the public as more than an audience, but also as a tool for governance.[34] According to Stuckey the public serves as leverage over other parts of the policy-making structure.[35] What we are left with are presidents who utilize the public to pressure legislators into supporting their agendas through carefully crafted public addresses which neither overwhelm nor overpromise. With presidents turning to the public to help push their agendas through Congress, there is an increase in the value of presidential rhetoric to the promotion of a political agenda in the polity. Eulogies become sites for legislative discussion and should be used as springboards for policy legislating the ownership of guns.

The decline of political parties, and the consolidation of power, has shifted the scales away from the people and toward interest groups and lobbyists. As campaigns continue to grow in cost, so too has the influence of lobbying groups who fund these massive campaigns. We find ourselves in a political environment where the people have very little power beyond their vote. This shift away from the polity has very real

consequences for how politicians govern. The will of the people continues to diminish in our politics.

The theoretical considerations that result from these three monumental changes in American politics focuses the Rhetorical Presidency on leadership in times of crisis. The ritualistic tenor and tone of presidential speeches in times of crisis presents a proper forum for discussing the most basic principles and values of our nation.[36] In times of crisis the Presidency is capable of leading comprehensive social change because it has maintained a sense of public legitimacy that other institutions have not.[37] A president may not be responsible for a given crisis, but she/he/they are expected to react to that crisis and in doing so rely on ceremonial, abstract content.[38] Mass school shootings call into being a particular kind of presidential discourse that challenges presidents to provide comfort and relief for the country, often at the expense of social change.

Reflecting on the Rhetorical Presidency it is progressively more important that we understand the role of presidents in shaping public discourse following a school shooting. The conclusions reached by Tulis and others have contributed to a cycle whereby when a shooting occurs, presidents offer their prayers, the polity argues for a bit, and then the community moves on until the next shooting. I believe that focusing on the eulogy as the first chance for a president to go public with a policy agenda offers a valuable option for promoting reform to gun ownership policy.

Burke's Dramatism

When a mass shooting occurs, it disrupts the order of society. One purpose of the eulogy as a discrete rhetorical genre is to restore order and move beyond what Kenneth Burke might call the "guilt stage." [39] Guilt can be best understood as a feeling of

discomfort created by some disorder. Burke refers to guilt as growing out of the anxieties and disorders in society.[40]As a society we are rotten with perfection; when a disruption causes order to be broken we feel a profound sense of responsibility to return to that order.

In this situation guilt is the impetus that is created by a mass shooting. When a school shooting occurs, disruptions reverberate through every facet of society. Our ideas of security, privacy, safety, and often our belief in humanity, are all challenged. We are then forced to respond to that guilt in some way, to begin the process of returning to order.

In the context of mass shootings, it is often the president who shapes the discourse moving forward with their initial response. Speaking of the power of words to shape our perception of reality, Burke writes:

> Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another. Also, many of the 'observations' are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made. In brief, much that we take as observations about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms.[41]

During the purification stage, a time when the rhetor attempts to alleviate any guilt, the rhetor engages in a process called victimage or the assigning of blame for the disruption to order.[42] Burke describes the process of victimage as "the tendency to search out people who, for one reason or another, can be viewed as perfect villains, perfect enemies, and thus, if possible, can become perfect victims."[43] When a mass shooting occurs, presidents

shape their responses to those shootings using the precedents already set for them by previous speeches, often causing them to turn to the scapegoating function. When we engage in victimage we often do so using what Burke calls the Tragic Frame.[44]

The Tragic Frame

The tragic frame circulates through guilt, purification, and redemption by removing the source of guilt, most often through scapegoating. The tragic frame lends itself to a restoration of order, while ignoring structural inadequacies that led to the initial guilt.

When a mass shooting shakes the country, the conversation turns to who the shooter was, what happened, and how the tragedy was allowed to happen. Each feature of our discourse contributes in part to a reality that, as Burke describes it, is "stretched" and contorted to compensate for new cases which challenge prevailing arguments about mass shootings.[45] For Burke, when "a given historical frame nears the point of cracking, strained by the rise of new factors it had not originally taken into account, its adherents employ its genius casuistically to extend it as far as possible."[46] In that process, one of the metaphorical faults of the system is the scapegoat, in this case often the shooter. The scapegoat serves as someone who can shoulder the responsibility for the disruption to the order of society, thus directing attention away from the larger issues which contribute to gun violence.[47] Lobbyist groups such as the National Rifle Association will often redirect attention away from the role of weapons in the perpetuation of violence, and instead advocate for a reality in which we have the power to eliminate the source of our guilt with our own gun.[48] The notion of "a good guy with a gun" speaks to the heroic language Burke describes as perfection.[49] Perfection deals in the absolutism of the tragic

frame where there is a win-lose ratio and the "good guy with a gun" is the only way for us to solve this problem. These types of victimage are representative of Burke's tragic frame.

Locating these incidents in the tragic frame allows society to return to order, often leaving underlying issues unattended.[50] By focusing on the individual, guilt is cleansed, but the underlying system which led to the disruption of order, remains. Eckstein and Partlow-Lefevre argue that, in the case of gun violence, this kind of framing limits any meaningful dialogue, because the two sides simply cannot agree on the problems which need to be addressed.[51] One of the most cited examples of this kind of transfer of guilt comes from Brian Ott and Eric Aoki, who found that "All three of the national newspapers we analyzed [regarding Matthew Shepard's murder] named the event as a vicious anti-gay hate crime, constructed Shepard as a political symbol of gay rights, and transferred the public's guilt onto [murderers] McKinney and Henderson."[52] By focusing on the perpetrators of violence, we lose the critical element of self-reflection that lends itself to social change. I argue that the comic frame is perhaps a counter to an unproductive tragic frame, especially in the context of mass school shootings.

The Comic Frame

The comic frame is demonstrated when the dialogue (for the purpose of this thesis, eulogies) focuses on the guilt rather than purifying it through scapegoating.[53] Kathryn Olson argued that:

> A comic frame on events also has nothing to do with whether the event content is serious or humorous. Rather, the comic frame is defined by a posture of humility, gentle prodding, and optimism for a better shared

> future through a repaired social order instead of punishment; unlike the tragic frame, the comic frame does not require winners and losers.[54]

As previously mentioned, guilt causes discomfort and unsettles society. Burke argues that society thrives on order and hierarchy, and that we often turn to language and meaning for that order.[55] As a group, society strives for continuity and order, and the patterns of responding to a mass shooting fit that desire.[56] The comic frame conflicts with the typical socio-political desire to restore order, to get things back to the way they were, and to return to business as usual. It is not a coincidence that these phrases are part of the American vernacular; they all represent Burke's argument about how society works.

The comic frame demands that society be reminded of the disorder, to remember what happened and to see how it fits into a larger picture, while the tragic frame provides comfort and closure.[57] Eulogies delivered by presidents after mass shootings have focused on the tragic frame and have communicated a sense of order and a quick path toward normality to a nation in mourning. The tragic frame identifies the source of the guilt and purges that person from public consciousness; in doing so the tragic frame simply asks society to move on and to return to business as usual. Thus, the tragic frame conflicts with the comic frame in that the comic frame asks that society keep the source of the guilt around as a reminder of such a disruption. Eulogies offer presidents the unique opportunity to reverse this trend and shift our focus toward the underlying issues that have resulted in a long history of mass shootings and gun violence in this country.

As I have demonstrated in the review of literature so far, the comic frame provides an entirely new perspective on reality after a school shooting by framing the incident as part of a larger structure of guilt in society. This helps to direct our attention

away from the scapegoating of suspects, moving toward a more introspective approach to guilt which centers society as the true source of guilt. There is no pursuit of perfection leading to a reliance on the historical tropes of the gun ownership argument. With the comic frame we are called to look inward, to recognize the guilt which we experience as part of a system we shape with our own actions and words. When we talk about school shootings in the comic frame we recognize that the personal guilt we feel is a part of the larger process of societal reform, where the responsibility that we have to that guilt cannot be ignored or transferred.

Eulogy

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson are two of the scholars most notably linked to genre studies. Genre is best understood through its relationship with exigence and the objectives that are sought by the rhetor. On the subject of form and genre Campbell and Jamieson claim:

> It should now be apparent that the, rhetorical forms that establish genres are stylistic and substantive responses to perceived situational demands. In addition, forms are central to all types of criticism because they define the unique qualities of any rhetorical act, and because they are the means through which we come to understand how an act works to achieve its ends.[58]

There are many detailed scholarly discussions studying eulogy, and in particular presidential eulogy, as genre. Stuckey argues that eulogy takes place as the result of a death, tragedy, and/or some public trauma.[59] A death, like those of the crew of the space shuttle Challenger, demands a response. The Challenger eulogy, delivered by President

Ronald Reagan, is one of the most studied and cited examples of presidential eulogy. Stuckey argues that "the explosion was to be remembered not as such or even as an accident but rather as a 'tragedy'. This depiction informed the listeners about the nature of the event and told them how to feel about it. Reagan acknowledged the country's pain and began the work of assuaging it."[60]

It is important to recognize that Reagan framed the explosion as an accident and he continued by constituting the victims as pioneers, thus appealing to the familiar myth of Manifest Destiny and myths of the American Frontier. He does so in an effort to squash any potential hesitations or dissent in the minds of Americans about the space program, which at that time was playing a much larger role in the fight against Communism than perhaps the public knew. Of the use of pioneering myth, Stuckey writes:

> The text insists that the astronauts both knew of the hazards and conquered them. Given that the astronauts had just died terrible deaths, the notion of 'overcoming' danger by being killed is untenable. It did encourage a specific memory, however, for the idea that the astronauts overcame the perils makes it sound as though the danger was past. Their courage was emphasized; through the broadened context, the danger that killed them was transcended. That memory becomes important, for it encourages the understanding of the astronauts as pioneers.[61]

In the process of responding to a death, the rhetor often celebrates the lives of those lost, encourages the audience to move forward, and asks the audience to carry on the legacy of those lost.[62] Campbell and Jamieson argue that the transformational shift from life to life

in memory marks "a juxtaposition of past and present tense which recasts the relationship to the deceased to one of memory…Thus the assertion of persistent life is intrinsic to the eulogy."[63] Aside from the comfort provided to the audience by offering eternal life as a solution to the idea of their own mortality, using the memories of those lost creates a warrant of the dead. Craig Rood describes the warrant of the dead as "an explicit or implicit claim that the dead place a demand on the living. The living are called on to act and the dead are invoked as justification for that action: since they died, we should do X."[64]

Relying on an understanding of eulogy as a discrete genre, it is clear that presidential addresses following mass shootings fall under the genre of eulogy. David Frank demonstrates that President Obama utilized what Campbell and Jamieson call "forms" of eulogies, such as the warrant of the dead and appeals to the divine, to challenge presumptions about reason and civility in the wake of the shooting of Representative Gabrielle Giffords in Tuscan, Arizona and the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.[65] The lives that were lost were framed as an impetus for the public to challenge our conceptions of reality, the idea that mass shootings are unavoidable unless one involves a good guy with a gun. Obama often refers to the unfathomable nature of such violent crime. He places it in contrast, however, with the routinization of our response in the wake of each school shooting. Unfortunately, Obama's attempts at reform fell short time and time again, leaving people to wonder if anything could/would ever be done to cutdown on the epidemic of gun violence.

Gareth Davies links the idea of the "Consoler in Chief," a title given to President Obama, to disaster politics and the need to provide emotional support to victims.[66] Built

into the genre of eulogy is the need to provide support and a path forward. As a concept, the "Consoler in Chief" represents a significant role because it changes what Tulis calls "form" or an umbrella term that covers the delivery of a message, as well as the elements that resonate with an audience.[67] Campbell and Jamieson argue that "although generic analysis emphasizes similarities, generic critics are not interested in any and every similarity. Rather, they are interested in those similarities that make works rhetorically absorbing and consequential."[68] Obama, as a result of precedents set by previous presidents, was required to provide comfort to those who were grieving, and the comic frame would have been in conflict with that expectation.

The form that makes up the genre of eulogy has historically limited, in part, the opportunity for a president to talk about policy and politics. When presidents discuss policy in a eulogy they are met with criticism that they are being insensitive and politicizing the deaths.[69] The Consoler in Chief requires certain responsibilities, which may contrast with desired policy outcomes and is often expected to meet the needs of a grieving people before attempting to legislate. This form of presidential address restricts the rhetorical choices a president can make, by creating criteria for a fitting response. Emerging from the existing literature is an understanding of genre as a collection of forms, or norms for behavior and rhetorical choices, that create similarities in presidential discourse in the wake of mass shootings. This thesis positions the process of guilt, purification, and redemption within the form of presidential eulogies. Taking it even further, I argue that the tragic frame has become a standard form in the genre of eulogy.

Invitational rhetoric has become a feature of eulogistic discourse in the wake of national tragedies. Developed in feminist studies, invitational rhetoric is defined as "an

invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor's world and to see it as the rhetor does."[70] Feminist scholars describe invitational rhetoric as a less hierarchical discourse aimed at unity, equality and justice. Eulogies afford presidents the opportunity to appeal to the audience's sense of unity that results from tragedy. Unifying the audience around a central issue can be a powerful rhetorical tool.

The literature that I have reviewed has combined to create a critical lens which recognizes the importance of presidential rhetoric to governance, while making clear the process of redemption and situating the discourse in the context of eulogy as a genre. By carefully working through the discourse, this critical frame will enable me to identify and critique the discursive elements which have solidified themselves as form within the genre of presidential eulogies, especially concerning mass school shootings. I will return to the notion of governance as popular appeal and the significance of presidential rhetoric as justification for the study of the chosen texts.

CHAPTER 3: PRESIDENT JOHNSON'S RESPONSE

The University of Texas Tower Shooting

On August 1, 1966 an ex-Marine sharpshooter named Charles J. Whitman opened fire on the University of Texas at Austin from 300 feet above in the university's clock tower.[71] The shooting at the University of Texas is regarded as the start of a popularly covered violent history of mass school shootings in the United States.[72] Whitman's rampage lasted 96 minutes and left 14 people dead and 31 injured; a 15th victim would die in 2001 as a result of complications from the gunshot wounds sustained 45 years earlier.[73] The shooting at the University of Texas reshaped the public's conception of security and safety in public places by introducing a new reality into a historical construct that could no longer hold up against the new reality. The cracks started to show, changing what campuses and university policing would look like moving forward.[74]

Burke's notion of terministic screens, the idea that language is a reflection of reality, can be used to understand how school shootings have shaped an entirely new conception of the world. Take for example the concept of campus police, the vocabulary for this concept grew out of the tragedy in Austin, Texas .[75] What a college campus meant then, and what it means now changes when campus police are needed to protect it. The language and the experience of tragedy helped shape this meaning. One day after the shooting, Bill Moyers, the White House press secretary for President Johnson, read a statement responding to the violence.[76] President Johnson condemned the violence and called it "senseless" before calling on the Senate to pass the Gun Control Act.[77] The

statement argued that the Gun Control Act "would not prevent all such tragedies…But it would help reduce the unrestricted sale of firearms to those who cannot be trusted in their use and possession. How many lives might be saved as a consequence?"[78] President Johnson's written rhetoric represents the first presidential response delivered following a mass school shooting and will serve as a template for presidential rhetoric moving forward to the other cases.

President Johnson's remarks served as the foundation for a genre unique to presidential responses to mass shootings. Johnson's written discourse developed an expectation that speeches in the genre would utilize invitational rhetoric and inclusive language to invite the listener to engage with the argument. The address also created an expectation for structure in this genre. Johnson's address followed a simple problem-solution framework, one that continues to influence the genre.[79] Within the problem-solution framework, in keeping with guilt-purification-and redemption, an expectation is developed that the rhetor will clearly acknowledge the problem or exigence before providing solutions. [80]

Invitational Rhetoric and Eulogistic Discourse

Presidential responses to mass shootings have utilized unifying terms and invitational rhetoric to motivate the audience to participate in the arguments. For instance, Johnson's address argued within the comic frame that, as a people we are brought together by tragedy. "There are many in Congress who share this view. In sorrow and hope, I urge them to join in passing this legislation."[81] The structure of Johnson's argument situated those who did not support his legislative agenda as the "other," while those who were united by this tragedy and sought change were the "us." By surrounding

the term "them" with unifying words such as "share" and "join," Johnson argued for a transformation from the individual to a collective. Relying on the comic frame to grow this sense of cohesion Johnson's transformative rhetoric harnessed the emotions of "sorrow" and "hope" as motivations that bound the "other" to the "we." In isolation the two emotions may appear to be in contrast, however it is within the opportunity presented by the exigence, that these two emotions become complementary. When tied to the comic frame and a unified public, this kind of discourse encourages society to feel while also looking introspectively at their role in the guilt that has been created. In many ways Johnson's unifying rhetoric followed this same line of reasoning.

Johnson's unifying rhetoric was not without flaw. That is, the address developed a characteristic of eulogistic discourse that encouraged the creation of an "us vs. them" dichotomy, which would seem to support a tragic frame where winners and losers are present. Johnson's argument situated the other as "those who cannot be trusted in their (firearms) use or possession."[82] The "other" and the "we" were situated as binary options as Johnson argued that "we must press urgently for the legislation now pending in Congress to help prevent the wrong persons from obtaining a firearm."[83] Johnson again emphasized the difference between us and those who commit these kinds of violence. While Johnson's rhetoric may have been divisive, it still maintained the creation of a unified public. In this sense the comic acts as a corrective for the tragic. Eulogistic discourse may be an effective site for this kind of combination of the tragic and comic frames into a tragicomic frame, whereby the tragic and comic are complementary rather than oppositional.

The argument is enthymematic in that Johnson argued that one is either part of the "us" who seek to stop this violence, or one is part of the "them" that allow these acts of violence to occur. Johnson's audience surely wouldn't want to be part of the them, the same group that Johnson argued, couldn't be trusted. Along with the invitational rhetoric, and "us vs them" dichotomy Johnson further developed the genre through the time orientation of his address.

Time Orientation

Johnson's rhetoric created an expectation for the timing of a response to mass shootings. Kinneavy argued that *kairos* represents a "right or opportune time to do something."[84] Johnson began shaping the expectations of the polity for a rapid response to a crisis. Johnson's response was delivered to reporters just two days after the exigence. His rhetoric created an expectation that presidents should respond to these kinds of exigencies shortly after they occur. When a President fails to meet this expectation, the polity may perceive the violation negatively. The need to respond swiftly to exigencies means that presidents are forced to deliver statements often without knowing many of the specific details. Relying on certain obtainable details means that presidents are forced to highlight specific parts of a shooting and thus reinforce a kind of tragic frame which fails to capture the entirety of the situation. Following along with the development of media and presidential rhetoric (especially as conceived within the Rhetorical Presidency), it has become the norm that presidents will respond only hours after the event.

The development of expectations for a rapid response came from Johnson's swift response to the crisis. Johnson, unlike many presidents who would follow, used time as onus for change. Johnson argued first that "we must press urgently for the legislation now

pending in Congress to help prevent the wrong persons from obtaining a firearm."[85] In doing so, Johnson offered the audience a solution to their problem in that moment. The solution is comic in that it addresses the larger problems with society that create these kinds of situations, however the simplicity of this problem-solution framework again supports a tragic frame which seeks to remove guilt as quickly as possible. It is clear that the tragic and comic can work together within the problem-solution framework, as well as within eulogistic discourse. Johnson made this connection clear by arguing that the exigence served as evidence that the bill, being delayed in congress, would have saved lives. Johnson was the first and only president to make such a bold claim about a specific gun control bill. By clearly framing his argument and extending a tangible solution to the problem, Johnson offered the polity a chance to cleanse their guilt, brought about through comic framing, with a tragic solution.

Johnson's response was radically different from others in that he directly stated the relationship between his policies and the rhetorical moment. These differences will be shown in successive analytical chapters. In an interesting rhetorical move, Johnson stated "How many lives might be saved as a consequence!"[86] One could reasonably expect this statement to end with a question mark, but Johnson's use of the exclamation point signified his commitment that this policy would have prevented further loss of life. Johnson's invitational rhetoric led the audience into the argument, unlike traditional invitational rhetoric, Johnson did not allow the audience to structure the argument for themselves. At this point in his address, Johnson had already framed the problem and solution. By clearly outlining the problem and solution Johnson left little room for counterargument and relied on the exigence as evidence for his claim. Johnson, in a now

familiar move, began addressing counterarguments stating, "This bill would not prevent all such tragedies."[87] Quickly countering this point, Johnson argued that the bill would help reduce the unrestricted sale of firearms to those who can't be trusted. All of the moves being made by Johnson hinted toward an immediacy created by the moment.

Toward the end of his address Johnson returned to this urgency stating, "the time has come for action before further loss of life that may be prevented by its (the Gun Control Act) passage."[88] Similar to his earlier claims, Johnson did not shy away from boldly claiming that this bill would save lives. By calling on the audience to act now, Johnson was urging them to respond to the exigence through policy. Johnson offered the audience one path to redemption, through policy. His argument framed the Gun Control Act as the sole solution to a problem exemplified in the shooting at the University of Texas. Additionally, because this legislation grew out of an exigency brought about by the assassination of President Kennedy, Johnson was evoking the memories of this tragedy as supplemental evidence for his argument.

Johnson's use of time strengthened his argument and signaled clear solutions to the problems presented to the audience. His careful use of time situated the Gun Control Act as a solution waiting to be enacted. By firmly claiming that the bill's passage would save lives, he portrayed those who delayed its passage as culpable for the deaths that may result from such a postponement.

Johnson's eulogistic discourse can be understood as the beginning of a genre characterized by invitational rhetoric, *kairos*, and direct calls to action. The unifying language that underpins this discourse served the purpose of inviting the audience to cleanse the guilt that was created by the exigence through appeals at legislative action.

Johnson was able to achieve this because of his use of the comic frame to remind his audience of the tragedies that created guilt for society. By inviting the audience to engage with the guilt that followed the deaths of John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, and Martin Luther king Jr., Johnson effectively brought the guilt back into society and provided only one path for its removal. What Johnson lacks in emotional appeal, he made up for with direct calls for legislative action. As this thesis transitions to presidents Clinton and Obama it will become clear that expectations surrounding this discourse have shifted the tone for these speeches toward a more epidictic rhetoric that heals and rehearses the values of community and support.

CHAPTER 4: PRESIDENT CLINTON'S RESPONSE

Columbine High School Shooting

Littleton, Colorado would be changed forever on the morning of April 20, 1999 when Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris opened fire on students and teachers at Columbine High School.[89] The two teenage boys began shooting their victims outside of the school before making their way to the school's library.[90] After nearly one hour of shooting, the gunmen turned their guns on themselves leaving 12 students dead and one teacher slain, as well.[91] The horrific acts at Columbine High School changed the way that schools handled threats and acts of violence; for instance, many schools adopted a zero-tolerance policy in the wake of Columbine. [92] Later that day President Clinton went before the nation and reporters on live television and delivered an address in response to the shootings.[93]

Unlike President Johnson, Clinton delivered his own address and fielded questions from the reporters in the room. Clinton only briefly hinted at reforming the laws concerning gun ownership, stating:

> I think that Patricia Holloway (Chairman of the Jefferson County Board of County Commissioners) would not mind if I said that, amidst all the turmoil and grief that she and others are experiencing, she said to me just a moment ago that perhaps now America would wake up to the dimensions of this challenge if it could happen in a place like Littleton, and we could prevent anything like this from happening again. We pray that she is right.[94]

Clinton committed the unfortunate mistake of not utilizing his role as president to make the statement more powerful. He hid behind the words of Patricia Holloway, a County Commission Chair. Clinton opted instead to speak to the growing concerns over a culture of violence that leads people to act on their anger with weapons:

> We don't know yet all the hows or whys of this tragedy. Perhaps we may never fully understand it. Saint Paul reminds us that we all see things in this life through a glass darkly, that we only partly understand what is happening. We do know that we must do more to reach out to our children and teach them to express their anger and to resolve their conflicts with words, not weapons. And we do know we have to do more to recognize the early warning signs that are sent before children act violently.[95]

By delivering the response to the media, President Clinton drew on the significance of the visual and evolved presidential eulogies to include the visual performance of a discourse by utilizing both body rhetoric and the significance of the Brady room. The visual places added onus on presidents to remain presidential, presidential meaning modeling behaviors of control, respect, and humility in their response to mass school shootings.

In 1999 President Clinton was met with the exigency of a shooting at Columbine High School. Clinton's response to the shooting stands in contrast to the address given by Johnson in that it was a far more emotional appeal, as well as a far more conservative address, in that it largely ignores the role of guns in the violence. Clinton emphasized the emotional impact of the events on himself and the community, while opting to avoid any mention of gun control. Clinton relied on many of the defining characteristics set by Johnson in his response. Clinton utilized Johnson's problem-solution structure to identify

the sources for the guilt being experienced, in this case issues surrounding mental health. Clinton turned to invitational rhetoric to deliver a message which unified the audience around the grief that they were experiencing. These similarities, though different in motivation, signify a kind of conventional eulogistic message.

Argument Structure

Clinton structured his argument very similarly to President Johnson, beginning with the problem and then offering solutions. Clinton addressed the exigence in his opening paragraph stating, "Hillary [Rodham Clinton] and I are profoundly shocked and saddened by the tragedy today in Littleton, where two students opened fire on their classmates."[96] Clinton departed from Johnson in that his solutions were not policy based. Clinton offered the services of the government to support the community of Littleton, a response that became a feature of eulogistic discourse for Obama. Clinton's response shifted the structure toward offering many solutions rather than a singular solution to the problem.

Shortly after his initial appeal, Clinton tasked his audience with the responsibility of changing the culture of violence in the United States. He said, "we do know that we must do more to reach out to our children and reach them to express their anger and to resolve their conflicts with words, not weapons, And we do know we have to do more to recognize the early warning signs that are sent before children act violently."[97]

Clinton's remarks struck a balance between a traditionally conservative response, those responses which seek to limit the role of firearms in the perpetuation of mass violence, and the responses given by progressives, those which seek to promote gun control reform. Perhaps reacting to a country more protective of its personal freedoms,

Clinton identified some of the root causes of these problems but limited the role of firearms in the violence. Clinton said "we do know that we must do more to reach out to our children and teach them to express their anger and to resolve their conflicts with words, not weapons. And we do know we have to do more to recognize the early warning signs that are sent before children act violently."[98] Clinton's remarks seemingly placed a large portion of the responsibility for these actions on the individual, with little acknowledgment that open access to guns contributed to this violence. Working within the tragic frame, Clinton refused to address the role of guns in this violence, placing blame solely on the individuals who perpetrated the violence. This kind of scapegoating reinforced the tragic frame which sought to identify the source of the guilt and remove it from society. By failing to acknowledge the roll that gun laws played in this violence, Clinton allowed the guilt of the polity to be placed on the shooters. Taking their own lives effectively cleansed the guilt that resulted from the shooting.

Clinton introduced to the genre the notion of the ubiquitous "thoughts and prayers" response. Thoughts and prayers as a solution to the exigence has become one of the most criticized elements of presidential responses to mass shootings.[99] Clinton remarked that "I can only say tonight that the prayers of the American people are with you."[100] The now all too familiar thoughts and prayers solution has become a hallmark of the genre. Many progressives characterize this solution as an excuse for inaction in other arenas such as policy making.

Clinton's argument borrows the same structure as Johnson, however, Clinton's message serves the public as a more epidictic eulogistic discourse that heals and unifies the audience. By offering the audience three solutions within the tragic framework

(offering the services of the federal government, offering thoughts and prayers, or changing how society addresses mental health), each with varying levels of responsibility for the audience, one can reasonable assume that the audience would likely choose the easiest path, thoughts and prayers. Thoughts and prayers offered the public the most convenient means of cleansing the guilt and redeeming themselves, all within the tragic frame. Clinton's argument about larger societal change was an important spoke in the wheel of change, however, he would have been better served arguing, like Johnson, that unrestricted sales of firearms were the basis for this problem. Clinton's argument would inevitably fall short without the audience's attention. Clinton used invitational rhetoric similar to Johnson to hail his audience's attention.

Invitational Rhetoric

Clinton's abundance of charisma stood in stark contrast to the otherwise dull personality of Johnson. Biographers have noted that while Johnson had a passion for broadcasting and owned several broadcasting companies, his ability to communicate effectively with the public fell flat compared to others such as John F. Kennedy.[101] Clinton's speech commanded attention and had a way of flowing through audiences' ears. This distinction between the two men helped shape their decisions for how to present these speeches. Clinton spoke to his audience using many of the familiar terms that Johnson spoke 30 years before saying "we must do more"[102] and "we could prevent anything like this from happening."[103]

Clinton's use of "we" occurs in the context of culture and community. Using invitational rhetoric to invite the audience in strengthened his argument that what is needed is larger societal change, a task only the polity could accomplish. Clinton called

on both the audience and himself to change how they talked about violence, and how as a community we raised our children. In doing so Clinton ignored the role of firearms in the shooting.

Clinton's invitational rhetoric was sparse compared to other presidents. However, what he lacked in language he made up for in style and delivery. Clinton needed to do more with his unique gift of connecting with the polity. Had he framed his argument correctly and applied his invitational rhetoric to the right kinds of solutions, there may have been a more meaningful outcome from this tragedy. Clinton's message departed from the expectations of the genre created by Johnson's address by focusing on the shooters as scapegoats. Johnson's message focused the audience's attention on the act, while situating the gun at the center of the action. By doing so Johnson created a path for his legislation to cleanse the guilt by addressing the gun as the agent. Clinton's rhetoric placed blame on the shooters and enabled the audience to place responsibility for the act on the gunman. In these situations the death of the party responsible for the guilt served as the purification, again reinforcing the tragic frame. The tragic frame is central to how society has constructed the grieving process. The aim of grieving is to return to normal as quickly as possible.

Scapegoating

The addition of the scapegoat to this discourse is troubling and ineffective for achieving social change. In the process of addressing the exigence Clinton offered the audience two scapegoats which punctuated the tragic frame through which he deployed his rhetoric. "Two students opened fire on their classmates before apparently turning their guns on themselves."[104] Clinton's reference to the shooters, and subsequent argument

about changing the behavior of these individuals and identifying them as threats offered the shooters as perfect villains. Scapegoats in the tragic frame are assigned ownership of the guilt resulting from an exigence. The tragic frame works by removing the scapegoats from society, in this case the death of the shooters, thus cleansing the guilt.

Clinton's argument was pulling in opposite directions as he offered the two shooters as the cause of the guilt (tragic framing), while asking the audience to take ownership for their role in the guilt as well (comic framing). It is far easier for an audience to begin redemption if they offer the shooters as a source for guilt. Clinton's argument progressed through the guilt-purification-redemption cycle by placing the guilt on the shooters, their death served as the purification and cleansing of the guilt, and the aid offered by Clinton began the path to redemption. Clinton's argument failed to capture the strength of Johnson's. While both offered ways to deal with the guilt, Clinton's blame was in some ways misplaced. By focusing on the shooter as the source of the guilt he offered the audience a far easier path to redemption than he would if he had focused on society's ills as the source of the guilt.

The eulogy delivered in response to the Columbine shooting though effective as a eulogistic message, does not address some of the traditional elements of a progressive message. It embodied many of the same features of progressive gun control rhetoric, however Clinton failed to account for the firearm and focused instead on the individuals responsible for the violence. While it is not solely Clinton's, this genre has developed around this crucial change.

Visual Rhetoric and the Media

The response delivered by Clinton added an entirely new dimension to presidential eulogies, an emphasis on the visual. Clinton's use of the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room to deliver his remarks called on two significant cultural influences that situated the discourse within the context of gun violence prevention and presidential rhetoric. The James S. Brady Press Briefing Room is named for James Brady, "the White House press secretary who was wounded in an assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan and then became a symbol for gun control, championing tighter regulations from his wheelchair."[105] Brady's legacy was inherently bound to strong pushes for gun control policy. The space bearing his name served as a reminder of his legacy and thus influenced any rhetoric that occurred there.

The second element of this rhetoric of place is the cultural understanding of this space as the mouthpiece for the presidency. This room was designed as a space for the White House to disseminate information to reporters who in-turn would share that information with the public. As such, this space reflected an intimate bond between the people and their government. This space encompassed the values of openness and inclusive rhetoric.

Clinton's response took advantage of many of the features of discourse established by Johnson. The use of invitational rhetoric and argument structure strengthened the appeal of Clinton's eulogistic discourse. In a shift toward the tragic frame, however, Clinton introduced to the genre the tactic of scapegoating. Scapegoating reinforced the tragic frame by providing a vessel for the guilt of society to be attached to. Clinton's willingness to assign blame to the shooters provided an opportunity for society to cleanse their guilt through the removal of these gunman from society.

CHAPTER 5: PRESIDENT OBAMA'S RESPONSE

Sandy Hook Elementary School

In the early morning hours of December 14, 2012 Adam Lanza shot and killed his mother before making his way to Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.[106] Lanza shot through a glass window bordering the locked entrance to the school.[107] Brave school employees began sheltering children in closets and bathrooms.[108] The shooter made his way into two classrooms of first-graders, killing 20 students and six school employees.[109] As law enforcement closed in on the shooter he took his own life.[110] Children and staff were escorted to a nearby firehouse where families and community members had gathered.[111] A short while later, President Obama returned to the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room where Clinton had delivered his remarks some 13 years earlier.

The room's significance cannot be ignored. James S. Brady, the man for whom the room is named, was the Press Secretary for Ronald Reagan and suffered a gunshot wound in the assassination attempt on Reagan on March 30, 1981.[112] Following his encounter with gun violence, James and his wife, Sarah Brady, began fighting for gun control legislation.[113] The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act of 1994 is one of the crowning achievements of the movement for gun control. Brady's legacy is remembered through that bill, as well as the organization which holds his name, and the room from which Clinton and Obama addressed a nation in mourning.

Fighting back tears, Obama addressed the nation offering prayers and thoughts for those who had lost someone and the families whose children had lost their innocence.[114]

He began by framing the shooting ,within the comic frame, as part of a larger problem in this country. Obama's use of the comic to situate these acts of violence within a larger history of mass shootings, is not complemented by his solutions which exist largely within the tragic frame:

> As a country, we have been through this too many times. Whether it's an elementary school in Newtown, or a shopping mall in Oregon, or a temple in Wisconsin, or a movie theater in Aurora, or a street corner in Chicago -- these neighborhoods are our neighborhoods, and these children are our children. And we're going to have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics.[115]

Obama balanced his political agenda with his desire to respond not just as president, but as a parent. Obama began the speech saying "each time I learn the news I react not as a President, but as anybody else would -- as a parent. And that was especially true today. I know there's not a parent in America who doesn't feel the same overwhelming grief that I do."[116] Obama returned to the role of parent at the conclusion of the press conference saying, "This evening, Michelle and I will do what I know every parent in America will do, which is hug our children a little tighter and we'll tell them that we love them, and we'll remind each other how deeply we love one another."[117] Obama used his closing paragraph to punctuate the notion that he feels for the families as a parent, and that he will use the power of the presidency to enact change for them.[118]

Chapter Four summarizes the research done in the previous chapter and offers critical reflections on the findings of this research. I will again return to the Parkland shooting and offer some concluding thoughts on the future of gun control policy.

The response by President Obama to the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School was shaped by the killing of 20 students and six teachers. Unlike the previous addresses Obama emphasizes the details of those lost as a powerful rhetorical device.

Urgency through Contextualizing

Whereas Johnson utilized time to emphasize the urgency of the moment, Obama utilized his response to situate the shooting within the larger context of mass shootings and gun violence. Johnson constructed urgency by emphasizing the bill that could be passed in that moment to solve this issue. Obama constructed urgency by portraying these incidents as an epidemic. Obama remarked that "We've endured too many of these tragedies in the past few years."[119] Moments later Obama returned to this idea stating that:

> As a country, we have been through this too many times. Whether it is an elementary school in Newtown, or a shopping mall in Oregon, or a temple in Wisconsin, or a movie theater in Aurora, or a street corner in Chicago, these neighborhoods are our neighborhoods and these children are our children.[120]

Obama's use of the historical to create a sense of urgency spoke to the need to engage in the process of guilt, purification, and redemption as soon as possible. The solutions that were offered in the speech often supported a kind of tragic framing which sought the removal of the guilt rather than larger societal change.

As a rhetorical device, situating the exigence within a larger history of gun violence emphasized the frequency and scope of these tragedies. Stressing the frequency and scope of this problem should have compelled the audience to push for immediate action, in this case supporting bills that would come out of the White House. Gallup polling data seems to suggest that audiences did respond to these kinds of incidents along this line, with support for gun control spiking in the wake of these incidents.[121] It has become clear however that the wheels of change in Washington are not powered by popular opinion.

The National Riffle Association (NRA) and like-minded groups have begun to recognize their vulnerability in these moments and have taken the posture of offering minimal concessions while denying the role of guns in the perpetuation of such violence. The strategy of the NRA in response to the immediacy created by the exigence was to select a small detail from the situation and scapegoat any guilt onto it. The NRA's response to the mass shooting in Las Vegas illustrated this point:

> In the aftermath of the evil and senseless attack in Las Vegas, the American people are looking for answers as to how future tragedies can be prevented. Unfortunately, the first response from some politicians has been to call for more gun control. Banning guns from law-abiding Americans based on the criminal act of a madman will do nothing to prevent future attacks. This is a fact that has been proven time and again in countries across the world. In Las Vegas, reports indicate that certain devices were used to modify the firearms involved. Despite the fact that the Obama administration approved the sale of bump fire stocks on at least

> two occasions, the National Rifle Association is calling on the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (BATFE) to immediately review whether these devices comply with federal law. The NRA believes that devices designed to allow semi-automatic rifles to function like fully-automatic rifles should be subject to additional regulations.[122]

In the case of Sandy Hook the issue became mental health rather than guns. The NRA presented themselves as more than willing to support mental healthcare through funding and placing "good guys" with guns in schools, but stood in opposition to any law that would restrict the sale of firearms.

Obama's bill did in fact take on the issue of mental health. However, the addition of a provision designed to close existing loopholes in the background check system drew criticism from the NRA and conservatives. Obama's proposed bill would include "the elimination of all loopholes and require a universal background check on anyone trying to buy a gun, restoring the ban on military-style assault weapons and a 10-round limit for magazines, and creating tougher penalties on people who buy guns with the express purpose of reselling them to criminals."[123] By offering solutions to deal with mental health, the NRA was able to reframe the issue while also providing enough grey area to block any bill that would manage the problem. Obama was faced with a choice to either approach gun reform through the NRA's perspective: "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun,"[124] or press for his own agenda.

As a rhetorical device creating urgency was an effective tool, though it may appear to have been less effective in this situation. Civil rights leaders utilized urgency with great success in their fight for equality and justice. As Martin Luther King Jr. said,

"Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children. It would be fatal for the nation to over- look the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality."[125] In comparison Obama's plea appeared ineffective and uninspiring. An ABC news article titled, 4 Years After Sandy Hook, Obama Leaves a Legacy of Little Progress on Gun Laws, makes the argument that Obama's time in the White House proved ineffective at slowing or controlling the rise of gun violence.[126]

Repetition

While Obama's initial attempt at creating urgency seemingly fell short of the mark, his later appeal carried a tremendous amount of rhetorical strength and utilized many of the same rhetorical techniques enacted by civil rights leaders. Obama proclaimed:

> Since I've been President, this is the fourth time we have come together to comfort a grieving community torn apart by a mass shooting. The fourth time we've hugged survivors. The fourth time we've consoled the families of victims. And in between, there have been an endless series of deadly shootings across the country, almost daily reports of victims, many of them children, in small towns and big cities all across America -- victims whose -- much of the time, their only fault was being in the wrong place at the wrong time.[127]

The repeated language emphasized the interconnectedness of all of these events. Obama was calling on his audience to return to the aftermath of several other shootings. By taking stock of the ritual of things that people say and do in response to a shooting,

Obama signaled the problems with traditional guilt-purification-and redemption. Obama's choice to single out particular rituals actually acknowledged the role of the tragic frame in how the public had handled these events. Each of the items that he mentioned supported a process of guilt-purification-and redemption that sought to remove guilt from society as quickly as possible.

Through his repetition of "fourth time" the audience was forced to confront the connection being made between those shootings mentioned previously and the moment they were experiencing. The structure of this repeated language, which situated a verb after the language, spoke to the cycle of guilt-purification-and redemption that had taken over mass shootings, what some might call the Columbine effect. Obama's statement followed a chain of events where as a community we would grieve, we would hug survivors, and we consoled families. There is a part of the cycle that Obama left the audience to fill-in, the part where we did nothing to change. The repeated nature of these events reinforced this point and strengthened the connection that Obama was calling on his audience to make. The relationship between Obama and his audience required that he invited them to participate in the rhetoric.

Unifying Rhetoric

Much like those before him, Obama utilized unifying language to create an invitational rhetoric which called on the audience to grieve with him, and ideally push for change with him. Obama's strongest argument for gun control came immediately after his contextualization of the shooting saying, "we're going to have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics."[128] This is the start of an argument which situated the "us" as the agents of change. Obama

later remarked that "we can't tolerate this anymore. These tragedies must end. And to end them, we must change. We will be told that the causes of such violence are complex, and that is true. No single law -- no set of laws can eliminate evil from the world, or prevent every senseless act of violence in our society."[129] Obama's remarks indicated a shared sense of grief and frustration. The rhetorical work of contextualization, done in the previous paragraphs, emphasized the cycle of inaction that the United States had fallen in to.

Obama's use of unifying language sought to create an "us versus them" dichotomy that situated the public as those looking for change, and congress and the lobbyists as the them who have stalled any change. In some ways Obama was forcing the audience to choose between being the us, who were framed as the thoughtful caring individuals, or being the them who were seen as out of touch and obstructionists. In situating the public as the agents of change, Obama constructed the audience as the bearers of a tremendous guilt. However, offering those who oppose change as scapegoats did little to strengthen his message.

Obama concluded his pitch for gun control measures with a return to the contextualization of the shooting. "Surely, we can do better than this. If there is even one step we can take to save another child, or another parent, or another town, from the grief that has visited Tucson (a shooting where six people were killed, and 13 injured including congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords)[130], and Aurora (a shooting at a movie theater in Colorado that took the lives of 12 people and injured 70 others)[131], and Oak Creek (a shooting at a Sikh Temple in Wisconsin that left seven dead)[132] , and Newtown, and communities from Columbine to Blacksburg (in 2007 32 students were shot and killed at

Virginia Tech)[133] before that -- then surely we have an obligation to try."[134] Obama's closing argument neatly tied together his larger argument that now was the time for action. His return to the repeated nature of these events, combined with a plea for urgency, and change shaped the strategy used by his administration to seek change in the wake of this shooting. Obama's reference to each of the communities effected by gun violence reinforced his argument that this shooting was not an isolated event. The locations served two important rhetorical functions; first they signaled the full breadth of gun violence, secondly they illustrated just how long this has been a problem. Each served to accentuate the public's grasp of the magnitude of the problem at hand.

One of the most unique elements of Obama's response was his ability to connect these tragedies with violence in the black community. Being the first black president, and being from Chicago, a city ravaged by gun violence, created added ethos and motivation for Obama to address the kinds of local violence that was taking the lives of so many black men in his community. During Obama's time in office, Chicago experienced a large outbreak of gun violence and was propelled to the forefront of issues of gang related violence, police brutality, and many other issues. A local community organizer said he "wishes President Obama would have used his position to bring more attention to the issues impacting black communities, like poverty, the underfunding of schools and the lack of economic investment in rough neighborhoods."[135] Obama made a point of connecting shootings in these communities with the kinds of daily violence in Chicago saying "Whether it's an elementary school in Newtown, or a shopping mall in Oregon, or a temple in Wisconsin, or a movie theater in Aurora, or a street corner in Chicago -- these neighborhoods are our neighborhoods, and these children are our children. And we're

going to have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics."[136] Obama's rhetoric broadened the public's understanding of gun violence. This point was made clear when Congress, under Obama's direction, established criteria for what constituted a mass shooting. Congress decided that "the term 'mass killings' means 3 or more killings in a single incident."[137] The decision to define such a term had implications for how these crimes could be investigated, but also served the purpose of broadening our understanding of what constituted a mass shooting. Doing so included more of the daily violence that Obama was compelled to acknowledge.

This kind of inclusion was important for ensuring that the violence happening in black communities would not be overlooked during these times of violence inflicted on often white communities. It becomes the acknowledgment that what is happening in a white community today happens in black communities every day. By situating these two kinds of violence in the same conversation Obama called on the audience to be appalled at violence of all kinds, everywhere in this country.

It would not be entirely accurate to characterize Obama's efforts as ineffective on the basis that no meaningful action resulted from his rhetorical act. The lasting impact of this moment in time had raised the floor for support of gun control policy. Unlike previous shootings which saw a spike in support followed by a steady decline until the next event, this shooting appeared to have become a defining moment in the lives of Americans. In the years since this tragedy, support for gun control policies has never dipped below the high-water mark set in the wake of Sandy Hook. Had he not been facing such a hostile legislative branch, whose members were beholden to the NRA's

money and social power, Obama may have achieved meaningful change the way that Johnson did so many years earlier.

Influence of Social Media

Obama's message came on the heels of the rise of social media. Whereas Clinton was influenced by the visual, Obama was influenced by the social. The message that he delivered would almost certainly be retransmitted and repurposed across a variety of channels. This kind of social networking influenced how he constructed the discourse. Susan Herbst argues that social media has created a wellspring of voices in the wake of national tragedy, users can then tailor their media diets to the voices which appeal to them the most.[138] Herbst concludes that this has resulted in a weakening of presidential rhetoric in the wake of tragedy. This development means that presidents have to do more with their rhetoric to overcome the noise created around certain issues.

Obama's discourse continued on the path set by Johnson and Clinton, drifting away from direct appeal for action and toward a more epidictic rhetoric. It is Obama's unique role as a black president that changes the discourse. His acknowledgment of everyday violence reflected a kind of comic framing which situated guilt at the feet of society. His use of time to create a sense of urgency again called on the audience to acknowledge the depth of this issue. In many ways Obama's discourse marked a turn toward an understanding of the comic frame.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

The study of presidential responses to mass shootings offers unique insight into the construction of gun control arguments and policy in their earliest stages. This thesis demonstrates the significance of presidential rhetoric to these moments. At these times U.S. presidents turn to rhetoric to set the tone for the future of gun control policy. The ability to harness these rhetorical situations and capture the attention of the public drives our ability to succeed in solving such a poignant and complicated issue. Reflecting on the findings of this research, it is hard to imagine a political environment where going public on the issue of gun violence would truly sway those in power.

The NRA has demonstrated a willingness to circumvent the will of the people, many of whom are members of the NRA, by aggressively lobbying against any action that would restrict the sale and possession of firearms. Without a complete restructuring of American politics and the removal of dark money from our elections, the NRA will continue to be the dominant voice on issues of gun violence. In American politics there is a separation between the will of the people, and the power of the elite. As long as those who wield the most capital control government, the will of the people will not matter. The very idea of going public has been undermined by this process. The landmark decision of the Supreme Court in *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Committee* serves as a troubling reminder that the NRA is free to circumvent the will of the people through a limitless stream of campaign contributions. There is little comfort in the fact that support for gun control has reached an all-time high. As long as our political system

values money over the polity, we will see a decline in the strength of presidential rhetoric and there will be no change to gun control policy.

But, presidential rhetoric may offer an antidote to the NRA's seeming strangle-hold on the legislative branch, especially when the chambers are held by Republican supporters of the NRA. The rhetoric that has been presented and analyzed in this thesis demonstrates the growth of presidential address alongside the evolution of our current political system. President Johnson's ability to be effective hinged on his ability to pressure members of Congress, through the polity, with direct calls for Congress to pass existing legislation. By the time Clinton and Obama gave their speeches, the public's role in the political process had been diminished. One has to wonder if going public in 2019 is still the best rhetorical strategy for presidents to circumvent traditional means of legislating (presenting legislation to Congress and utilizing the party to ensure the president's agenda is met).

One of the arguments outlined in the Rhetorical Presidency is the idea that speeches no longer stand alone. In the case of responses to mass shootings, presidents are offered multiple opportunities to confront the exigence and its many parts. The initial response, unlike that of President Johnson, is no longer a site for a complete argument. An expectation has developed around this speech that this is a time for informing the public, offering support, and grieving. The assumption being that policy discussion will come later. This dramatic shift in presidential discourse means that policy discussion becomes separated from the urgency of the exigence. I argue that this is, in part, what has led to the perpetuation of inaction on behalf of Congress.

This analysis reveals a startling contrast between all three speeches where Johnson promoted gun control as the sole response to the exigence, whereas Clinton shifted blame to the shooters and mental health as scapegoats, and whereas Obama refused to take a hard stance on gun control. This exhibits a comic, tragic, and comic framing, respectively, among these presidents. Over time, an increase in the number of speeches delivered by presidents has led to a new set of expectations for eulogistic discourse.[139] This thesis argues that anticipations have been created for eulogies which call on the rhetor to withhold any policy discussion or political issues for fear of politicizing the deaths. These speeches are expected to be more epidictic, a rehearsal of our values, rather than a speech of policy. This shift has had a dramatic impact on gun control discourse, as is evidenced by the softening of gun control rhetoric in eulogies since Johnson.

Lastly, as a community, we need to grow past the Reagan-era deregulation that saw the dismantling of the Gun Control Act. Marcus Martin explains how Reagan-era deregulation has had lasting impacts on our society, such as our ability to create communication technology in the years since Reagan deregulated the industry.[140] Clinton's inability to even mention gun control grew out of a need to appeal to a country who had been convinced that any government interference was infringing on their rights and impeding our ability to succeed as a country. What I am calling for is a shift in public consciousness which argues that government serves the role of protecting, above all else, our right to live free of the fear of being killed in places of education, worship, and entertainment. The time to have these discussions is not in the wake of mass shootings, but rather all the time.

The students of Parkland, Florida have begun this process with the March for Our Lives campaign. Perhaps now that young people, whose lives have been defined by this kind of violence, have a voice and platform for their agenda we may see a departure from gradual change to a hardline call to action. As Malcolm X wrote in supporting youthful grassroots, "I for one believe that if you give people a thorough understanding of what confronts them and the basic causes that produce it, they'll create their own program, and when the people create a program, you get action."[141]

Limitations

The increase in public communication by the executive branch that is outlined in the Rhetorical Presidency means that these issues play out over time in several pieces of discourse. This study was not able to capture all of this discourse, and instead opted for a review of preliminary rhetoric. I would caution that this thesis is not a full review of gun control rhetoric, but rather an insight into the development of gun control rhetoric among presidents. The three presidents that I chose reflect the beginning of the genre (Johnson), the genre at the height of the television era (Clinton), and the genre in the context of a black president and social media (Obama).

This thesis did not utilize any speeches by Republican presidents, and thus reflects the development of this discourse between Democrats alone. While there is certainly knowledge to be gained by understanding Republican responses, it would not prove useful to understanding how discourse is created which seeks to endorse gun control. The objectives of each of the speeches analyzed in this thesis all pointed toward some kind of reform and that common ground is crucial to the development of the tactics which underscore many of the features of this discourse.

Conclusion

This thesis provided an in-depth critique of presidential responses to mass shootings, while exploring the role of these responses in advancing gun control policy. The radical calls for change that characterize President Johnson's appeal have given way to gradual appeals to value and morality. Expectations for these speeches have led to an epideictic discourse designed to cleanse our guilt, rather than address it in a meaningful way. While there may be many similarities in the rhetoric of each of these men, there are significant difference in the tactics and objectives of each of their speeches.

This thesis further develops our understanding of the Rhetorical Presidency by acknowledging these kinds of discourse as crucial to the development and implementation of gun control policy. The issue of gun control as a site for presidential rhetoric is an effective means for studying presidential rhetoric because of the value of these speeches in motivating the public. It has become clear that traditional means of governance will not solve this issue, thus the only way this issue can be resolved is through rhetorical acts and dramatic social change.

Generic criticism benefits from this thesis because I have brought together the idea of guilt-purification-and redemption within the framework of eulogistic discourse. Doing so adds a level of criticism which critiques the motives behind specific tactics and objectives. In this thesis it has been made clear that elements of the genre contribute to a culture of inaction through the use of long-standing traditions guided by the tragic frame. I have also outlined a restructuring of eulogistic discourse which seeks to achieve the goals of unification, healing, and reform through the tragicomic frame. Rather than understanding these two frames as in competition, I believe that in order to achieve the

kinds of progressive goals desired by supporters of gun control, while still meeting the expectations of eulogistic discourse, the rhetor needs to combine the two frames. The comic frame should be a complementary corrective for the issues I have outlined with the tragic frame , issues like scapegoating and us versus them dichotomies.

This thesis invites a number of questions about the role of eulogistic discourse in these incredibly difficult moments. On the one hand, eulogies are an effective tool for presidents to build unity and help heal in these moments. On the other, these eulogies appear unsuitable for policy discussion and have had a minor impact on gun reform. Given the increase in the number of speeches being delivered in the wake of a mass shootings, presidents must do more to identify the appropriate rhetorical moments to have discussions about politics. That is not to say that the initial response needs to be eulogistic, and that politics comes later. Rather, the initial response should be a policy driven approach, followed by eulogistic discourse which reinforces the policy argument.

The guilt-purification-and redemption cycle has been the focus of this thesis and benefits from an understanding that gun control rhetoric has often taken the form of the tragic frame at the expense of meaningful change. I argue that a successful approach to these issues utilizes the comic frame to evoke a sense of personal guilt in each member of the audience. That guilt can then be utilized to seek larger social change.

As we look to the future, I believe that a monumental shift in the politics of gun control is on the horizon. A shifting demographic of political leaders is transitioning more millennials into the bodies of power. In keeping with the comic frame, these legislators have lived lives that are defined by gun violence, and the guilt surrounding these acts of violence. Experiencing a reality characterized by mass shootings may make these

individuals better suited to address such meaningful issues. Coupled with the rise of the March for Our Lives organization, I believe change may be possible. The students of Parkland High School have become emblems for the comic frame. Their willingness to confront these issues as survivors has enabled them to redefine guilt and redemption. Moreover, the March For Our Lives campaign has made clear the true path to redemption. It is not grounded in the scapegoating of the tragic frame, but rather a comic frame based on a holistic understanding of gun violence in the United States. As for the role of presidential rhetoric in this process, I believe the time has come to again call on members of Congress to abandon the dark money of the NRA and uphold the will of the people, a will that presidents have traditionally played a large role in encouraging. Emma Gonzalez reminds us that "if you actively do nothing, people continually end up dead, so it's time to start doing something."[142]

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