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# Rhetoric and Presidential Politics

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# Rhetoric and Presidential Politics

## **Abstract**

This chapter argues that the public's understanding of the US presidency is shaped in part by the rhetorical genres that have been conventionalized by this institution, including the inaugural address, the State of the Union address, veto messages, the de facto line item veto, pardon messages, impeachment rhetoric, war rhetoric, rhetoric responding to crisis, national eulogies, and farewells. These genres of presidential rhetoric can be clustered into three broad categories, depending on the degree of freedom with which the president acts: those in which the president acts unilaterally; genres that take exception, invite cooperation with the legislative branch, or assert the right of the executive to act in domains in which the Constitution gives another branch specific powers; and those in which the Congress has greater control over the rhetorical situation than does the president.

## **Keywords**

rhetorical genre, presidential rhetoric, rhetorical situation, inaugural address, war rhetoric, State of the Union address, national eulogies, impeachment rhetoric

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Influence and Political Communication | Speech and Rhetorical Studies

### Rhetoric and Presidential Politics

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This chapter argues that the public's understanding of the US presidency is shaped in part by the rhetorical genres that have been conventionalized by this institution, including the inaugural address, the State of the Union address, veto messages, the de facto line item veto, pardon messages, impeachment rhetoric, war rhetoric, rhetoric responding to crisis, national eulogies, and farewells. These genres of presidential rhetoric can be clustered into three broad categories, depending on the degree of freedom with which the president acts: those in which the president acts unilaterally; genres that take exception, invite cooperation with the legislative branch, or assert the right of the executive to act in domains in which the Constitution gives another branch specific powers; and those in which the Congress has greater control over the rhetorical situation than does the president.

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RHETORICAL form responds in part to function. Confronted with the death of a loved one, for example, individuals respond to communal loss with rhetoric recognizable as eulogistic. Pericles's famous funeral oration (*epitaphios logos*) is a model of this rhetoric. He eulogized Athenian soldiers who fell in the first year of the Peloponnesian War and reconstituted the community by celebrating the Athenian values for which they fought and died. By inviting a rhetoric of stability and continuity, recurrent institutional functions elicit predictable patterns of rhetorical response. In the US presidency, these rhetorical patterns configure as genres. These genres of presidential rhetoric include the inaugural address, State of the Union address, war rhetoric, rhetoric to forestall and respond to impeachment, veto messages, farewells, and, more recently, national eulogies and de facto line item veto messages that assume the form of signing statements expressing reservations about legislation.

At the same time, the unique circumstances in which presidents craft these responses interact with their individual dispositions and skills to give each exercise of a genre its distinctive rhetorical signature. Because it focuses on explicating underlying rhetorical regularities, generic criticism is peculiarly suited to exploring the relationship between rhetorical action and the development and maintenance of such long-lived institutions as the US presidency.

This way of seeing focuses attention on variations in presidential power; on the relationship of presidential power to the performance of specific rhetorical functions; on the interdependence of and interplay among the branches of government; on the conditions that foster the expansion or contraction of executive power through symbolic action; and, finally, on the relationship between rhetoric and the performance of institutionally sustaining roles such as national priest, national voice, and commander in chief. In our view, rhetoric is a key part of the ways presidents exercise power, expand executive (p. 638) power, and establish precedents for its use by their successors. And importantly, the generically specifiable rhetoric through which presidents discharge central institutional functions may occur in predictable ways across many single instances of discourse.

## The Rhetorical Construction of the Presidency Through Exercise of Genres

In some important ways, what we know as the presidency is rhetorically constructed. For example, the US Constitution nowhere refers to “the presidency,” only to the president or to the executive as one of the three branches of government. As we argue in *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Campbell and Jamieson 2009), what we now understand as the presidency has come into being as a result of the actions of all presidents, a process in which rhetorical practices have been of particular importance. As it currently exists, the presidency is an amalgam of roles and practices shaped by what presidents have done. At any given moment, an awareness of these roles and capacities shapes the practices of the incumbent.

When ordinary citizens, journalists, scholars, and politicians refer to inaugural addresses, State of the Union addresses, veto messages, war rhetoric, and farewell addresses, they employ labels suggesting an implicit understanding that each type is somehow distinct, with identifiable features and functions. The discourses so cast can be viewed as genres defined by their pragmatic ends and typified by their substantive, stylistic, and strategic similarities. The rhetorical regularities exhibited by genres of presidential discourse permit critics to gain insight from examining them as a group.

A generic perspective on presidential rhetoric features those symbolic similarities that contribute to the institution’s continuity and identity. It also offers a basis for highlighting the ways presidencies differ and for featuring unique contributions to the history and identity of this institution. An individual presidency—that of William Taft rather than John F. Kennedy, for example—gains some of its character from the ways a given executive

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chooses to exercise or not to exercise generic options. War rhetoric and veto messages, for example, are particularly sensitive indicators of a president's rhetorical initiative.

Rhetorical sensitivity and sophistication are at work in the ways individual presidents choose to exploit generic possibilities. Franklin Roosevelt, Kennedy, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan, for example, were responsive to generic constraints and expectations in ways that Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford were not. Some presidents excelled in some genres and were wanting in others. Although presidents are expected to recognize the limits of their office, Carter's inaugural statement that "your strength can compensate for my weakness, and your wisdom can help to minimize my mistakes" suggested executive inadequacy rather than appropriate humility. The 16 "I" statements in Nixon's (p. 639) first inaugural (e.g., "I have seen," "I know," "I speak from my own heart") caused the personal to complicate his assumption of the presidential role (Woolley and Peters 2011). Just two months after ascending to the presidency, Ford called a special joint session of Congress to urge action to reduce inflation. His speech was long and complex; he dramatized his concern with the slogan, "Whip Inflation Now," and promoted a WIN button to make his ideas memorable. Instead of eliciting congressional action, the slogan and button stimulated jokes on late-night talk shows and his proposals languished.

Genres of presidential rhetoric can be clustered into three broad categories, depending on the degree of freedom with which the president acts: genres in which the president acts unilaterally; genres that take exception, invite cooperation with the legislative branch, or assert the right of the executive to act in domains in which the Constitution gives another branch specific powers; and genres in which the Congress has greater control over the rhetorical situation than the president.

Genres in which the president acts unilaterally include the inaugural address, rhetoric delivered on ascending to the presidency following a death or resignation, and rhetoric in responding to crises or disasters in national eulogies, in issuing pardons, and in giving farewell addresses. In these genres the president engages in the creation of meaning unconstrained by the requirements, demands, or prerogatives of the other two branches of government. In each, the president has wide latitude to define the situation.

This is not the case in genres that take exception, invite cooperation with the legislative branch, or assert the right of the executive to act in domains in which the Constitution gives another branch specific powers. Whereas the State of the Union proposes, Congress disposes. The veto and de facto item veto explicitly respond to the rhetoric of the Congress embodied in legislation, and war rhetoric either invites congressional action in the form of a declaration of war or justifies presidential action in its absence.

In the final category of genre, Congress has the upper hand. When the president attempts to forestall or responds to impeachment, the Congress, which determines what is an impeachable offense, has greater control over the rhetorical situation than does the president. Farewell addresses symbolize continuity and change and as such are the counterpart of impeachment discourse. At these moments, as in inaugural addresses, pardons, and national eulogies, presidents are free from the constraints of the other branches of

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government, yet these addresses reflect the struggles among the co-equal branches and identify potential dangers threatening that relationship as well as the future of the nation.

## Genre as Rhetorical Act

The functions that genres perform are not necessarily completed in a single act. We conceive of genres not as individual speeches but as rhetorical acts extended over time that carry out generic functions in many forms and venues and across a variety of speeches, press conferences, interviews, and rhetorical situations. In other words, rhetorical (p. 640) genres perform certain functions, but these functions can be incorporated into a variety of discourses. National eulogies, for example, often begin with immediate remarks after a disaster, continue with more extended remarks to the nation, come to fruition in a major speech, and then become a point of reference in addresses to Congress that build on them as a basis for legislation.

To understand the flexibility inherent in the concept of genre as rhetorical act, think of the path by which an individual becomes the president as a drama starting with a casting call and developing into a multi-act play. In dramatic terms, the primaries determine who has the talent and appeal to play a leading role; the general election determines who will play the lead. Throughout the primaries, candidates develop rhetorical skills by which they gain their party's nomination and that enable them to prevail in the general election campaign. Because the eyes of the nation are focused on the nomination acceptance speeches delivered at the national conventions, these become the rhetorical "kickoffs" for the fall campaign and as such forecast the central proposals the candidate, as president, would advance and the principles that would guide the aspirant in office. Typically, the nominee experiences a bump in national poll ratings after the acceptance address.

Act 1 of the presidential drama begins with the general election campaign, in which citizens act as critics of those who aspire to lead. During this period candidates must show themselves as presidential, even enacting various presidential roles, illustrated vividly by the simulated presidential oath in the conclusion of Kennedy's speech to the Houston Ministerial Association. The campaign is a dramatic test requiring a performer whose rhetoric can energize the groups that must be mobilized to do the vital work that enables victory.

At the same time, candidates must also reach out to unaffiliated and independent voters to show that they have the ability to "star on Broadway" and be president of all the people. Although candidates attempt to control the dynamics of the campaign, unexpected events may challenge them. In 2008, for example, Republican Party nominee John McCain and Democratic Party nominee Barack Obama were tested by the banking crisis and the Troubled Assets Relief Program proposed by President George W. Bush's secretary of the treasury, Henry Paulson. The rhetoric of the candidates can also be transformed by media coverage. This is illustrated, for example, by the ways minor verbal errors by presi-

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dential candidate Al Gore were magnified by journalists and became a theme influencing coverage of Gore throughout the 2000 campaign.

On election night (except under the most unusual circumstances), Act 1 concludes as the loser concedes and the winner declares victory, celebrating the work of dedicated supporters while effecting a subtle transition to speaking as the president-elect who can and should address the whole citizenry. Victory must simultaneously celebrate triumph over opponents and the democratic process by which national unity can emerge out of competition for the highest office. Thus, in his speech at Grant Park on the night of his election (November 4, 2008), Obama said:

A little bit earlier this evening, I received an extraordinarily gracious call from Senator McCain. Senator McCain fought long and hard in this campaign. And he's (p. 641) fought even longer and harder for the country that he loves. He has endured sacrifices for America that most of us cannot begin to imagine. We are better off for the service rendered by this brave and selfless leader. I congratulate him; I congratulate Governor Palin for all that they've achieved. And I look forward to working with them to renew this nation's promise in the months ahead.

(Woolley and Peters 2011)

As the paired concession and victory speeches move the country from a contest over who will lead to embrace a democratically elected successor, a president remains in office.

The presidential farewell is a rhetorical acknowledgment that a transition in power is underway and a new leader waits in the wings. When Bush told the nation in a televised address on January 15, 2009, "For eight years, it has been my privilege to serve as your President. . . . Tonight, with a thankful heart, I have asked for a final opportunity to share some thoughts on the journey we have traveled together and the future of our Nation" (Woolley and Peters 2011), he engaged in a rhetoric of divestiture as part of his leave-taking of the presidency as surely as Obama was engaging in a ritual of investiture and forecasting his presidency when, five days later, he began his inaugural address by saying, "My fellow citizens: I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors. I thank President Bush for his service to our nation" (Woolley and Peters 2011).

The presidential farewell occurs during the *entr'acte*, the interval between a nominee's victory in the general election and the inaugural moment when the president-elect swears the oath of office. This is a liminal period in which the incumbent is beginning the process of divestiture and the president-elect is beginning the process of investiture. As such, the president-elect is neither candidate nor president; although he has no formal power, he may be pushed to support policies or take positions that may complicate his term in office. This conflict clearly influenced the relationship between president-elect Roosevelt and President Herbert Hoover, who refused to commit himself to actions proposed by his predecessor, a conflict exacerbated by the long period between election and inauguration. Similarly, Abraham Lincoln refused to speak between the time of his election and his

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inauguration, fearing that any statement might be used to provoke further division. If speeches are delivered in this period prior to the inaugural, US audiences judge such performances to decide whether the successful candidate fits comfortably in the new role of speaking for the nation.

Similarly, skillful planning for the transition by the president-elect reinforces the electoral victory. Of particular importance are the choices of appointees to administrative and cabinet positions, for when nominees' credentials are flawed the president-elect's judgment is called into question. These complications undermine the president-elect and increase suspicions of partisan rather than presidential leadership in the future, as is illustrated by Bill Clinton's difficulties in appointing an attorney general and Obama's similar difficulties with Tom Daschle and Hilda Solis.

The election night victory speech of the declared winner is designed to divest him of the role of candidate and invest him with the role of president-elect. As president-elect (p. 642) he speaks for all the people in a unifying language and tone distinct from his campaign discourse. In the interim between winning and inauguration he must forego the campaigner's instinct to attack and contrast and instead move toward advocating a vision all can embrace. We hear nominee Obama making the transition to president-elect in the Grant Park speech when he says, "And to those Americans whose support I have yet to earn, I may not have won your vote tonight, but I hear your voices. I need your help. And I will be your president, too." He then articulates a shared vision:

This is our time, to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the American dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth, that, out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope. And where we are met with cynicism and doubts and those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can.

(Woolley and Peters 2011)

The campaigner whose 2008 slogan, "Yes we can," affirmed that "we" can win this election and carry out the promised agenda, has recast "Yes we can" as a shared commitment to a common vision, one that both McCain and Obama supporters could embrace.

Having assumed the role of unifying president-elect, any lapse into the role of campaigner anchored in a world of supporters and opponents risks undermining both presidential investiture and the capacity to deliver a rhetoric of unity in the name of a common purpose. Hence, in a speech the week before the inaugural address, Obama violated a generic rule of the rhetorical act required to carry him through the inaugural address when he shifted from a unifying rhetoric ("what gives me the greatest hope ... is you—Americans of every race and region and station who came here because you believe in what this country can be and because you want to help us get there") to a reprise of his stump



speech: “It is the same thing that gave me hope from the day we began this campaign for the presidency nearly two years ago ... ” (Woolley and Peters 2011).

Act 2 of this rhetorical drama begins with the inaugural address, the first major test of the presidency, an opportunity to reassure voters that they made the right choice, and an occasion for newly inaugurated presidents to show that they can inspire the nation to unite to solve current problems and that they have a clear sense of their presidential role and purpose.

## Genres that Define the Presidency

Presidential genres offer a lens through which the country understands both the presidency and an individual’s exercise of its powers. Inaugural addresses maintain presidential stability insofar as each praises or blames, affirms traditional principles, heightens what is known and believed, uses elegant language, and focuses on the nation’s eternal (p. 643) present while reconstituting “the people” who witness this ritual and invest this speaker with the presidency. Inaugurals adapt by drawing alternative strains from the past, by featuring different values and principles, and by recreating “the people” in diverse roles. The speeches of ascendant vice presidents reaffirm continuity at moments of unexpected and threatening change. An exemplar of this genre is Ford’s memorable declaration that “our long national nightmare is over” after the resignation of Nixon.

National eulogies such as Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Reagan’s speech to the nation after the Space Shuttle *Challenger* explosion, Clinton’s speech after the Oklahoma City bombing, and Bush’s address at the National Cathedral after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 reconstitute the citizenry after the national fabric has been torn by tragedy (Wilson 2006). This epideictic form of presidential eloquence mourns those lost while affirming national resolve and attesting to the resilience of the country and its ideals. A related epideictic form, namely, pardoning rhetoric, reaffirms the president as the symbolic head of state who acts in the public interest to preserve the public good while enabling the president to correct judicial errors that result from the passions stirred by specific events.

In delivering a farewell speech, as George Washington and Dwight Eisenhower did so memorably, a president sustains the office by attempting to bequeath a legacy to the nation. Because that legacy is a product of the person of the president and of the events of that presidency, it is grounded in historical particulars and uniquely reflects the persona of the individual president. As is the case with much of what we remember as eloquence, brief statements from these addresses have come to represent the addresses as a whole, with the warning against “permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world” having the same function in Washington’s farewell as the caution against the “military-industrial complex” has in Eisenhower’s.

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State of the Union addresses reaffirm continuity by displaying the president as symbolic head of state. They also respond to the discourse of past presidents and revivify and sustain the nation's identity. However, even as these messages address enduring national questions, the agendas they offer vary with the period in which they are presented and the specific circumstances in which presidents find themselves, as is illustrated by the Monroe Doctrine (proclaimed in 1823), which responded to the threat of Spanish recolonization in this hemisphere.

Veto messages affirm continuity and constancy insofar as they interdict legislation in a dispassionate document that employs the language of conservation of the government as an institution. By permitting presidents to develop lines of argument and present evidence appropriate to the particular case, these messages enable presidents to express their individual beliefs and to adapt to the specifics of legislation they oppose. A related genre, the *de facto* item veto embodied in a signing statement, asserts the president's power and obligation to defend the Constitution and the executive powers stipulated or implied by it. This peculiar message is simultaneously a form of intra- and interbranch communication in which the president defines the limits of legislative authority.

Presidential self-defense rhetoric is part of a dialectic about the limits of executive powers and the nature of the executive's obligations. In the process of considering (p. 644) impeachment, the elected representatives of the people ask whether the president has violated the oath of office. This mode of presidential rhetoric protects the office from congressional or judicial encroachment as debate emerges about how executive powers are to be understood and interpreted under the particular circumstances of a historical moment.

The functions of each genre remain constant, while the rhetorical means through which these can be performed vary. The genius of the founders resided in creating a framework that empowered presidents to exercise their rhetorical options as circumstances and their temperaments warranted. In most of these cases, the president can decide whether and when to issue discourse and what strategies to employ in accomplishing an end. Although it licenses rhetoric of pardoning and vetoing, the Constitution's rhetorical mandates are limited to swearing the oath of office and reporting from time to time on the state of the nation and recommending necessary and expedient legislation. Still, from the institution's inception, those elected to the nation's highest office have recognized the need for forms of rhetoric that the Constitution did not build into their job description. Oath taking, for example, has from the beginning been twinned with an inaugural address.

Except for specifying that the oath be sworn, the Constitution leaves the timing of rhetoric to the president. Article 2, section 3 of the Constitution specifies only that the president "shall from *time to time* give to Congress information of the State of the Union and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient [emphasis added]." This flexibility of timing is evident as well because at any time, in any circumstance, a president can issue or withhold special messages, pardons,

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and invitations to declare war or authorize military action. When confronted with congressional action, a president can elect to respond with a veto or a de facto item veto or to remain silent. A president can opt to forego a national eulogy or formal farewell. In the use of these basic rhetorical genres, presidents signal the continuity of the institution; in their varying patterns of use, they show their individual dispositions and the adaptations through which presidents can respond to altered circumstances.

The Constitution offers the executive an array of rhetorical opportunities. The president can call Congress into special session, make recommendations that are necessary and expedient, act as commander in chief, veto legislation, and pardon. Some presidents grasp these grants of authority and deploy them in ways that increase presidential power. Others shy away from the exercise of discretionary powers and use those mandated only tentatively. In modern times, however, presidents have increasingly exploited and enlarged their powers through their use of rhetoric. The presidents who use these powers tend to take the initiative or to govern in times of crisis.

Although Article 2, section 3 of the Constitution grants the president authority “on extraordinary Occasions [to] convene both Houses,” this is not a power presidents regularly use. When exercised, however, this act is rhetorical. By calling a special session, the president defines the situation as “extraordinary.” Roosevelt, for example, communicated the urgency of the country’s economic situation and his determination to act quickly on the promises made in his election campaign when he called Congress into special session and elicited quick passage of his banking legislation in March 1933.

(p. 645) Through time, presidents tried out lines of argument and developed new rhetorical forms; those conventionalized through use were added to the options available to a president contemplating invitations to investiture, pardoning, vetoing, reporting, recommending, responding to the threat of impeachment, seeking legitimation for assumption of the role of commander in chief, or bidding farewell. Injudicious choices of rhetorical forms and strategies disappeared as options. Over time, the presidency has therefore developed a corpus of tested genres signaling the boundaries and characteristics of the rhetoric through which key presidential functions are performed. Those who simply followed these formulas issued competent but sometimes cliché-ridden presidential discourse. Great presidents, however, enlarged the range of rhetorical possibilities by performing these functions while transcending the formulas, as Lincoln did in his second inaugural and Eisenhower did in his farewell speech.

## Clusters of Presidential Genres Based on Presidential Power

From the perspective of rhetorical genre, the institutions of the US government constitute an experiment in rhetorical adaptation in which the initiatives of any one branch can be modified and refined by the reactions of the others and in which the flaws or idiosyncrasies of any one branch at any given time can be accommodated by action in the others.

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The moments that signal expansion and contraction of the executive often are marked by rhetoric. One early instance in which presidential power was expanded by rhetorical assertion occurred when the first vice president ascended to the presidency. John Tyler was notified that William Henry Harrison had died in a message addressed to “John Tyler, Vice-President of the United States” (Richardson 1909: 4: 22–3). The Constitution does not say that the vice president becomes the president upon being sworn in after the death of the president. Article 2, section 1 says only that if the office becomes vacant “the Powers and Duties ... shall devolve on the Vice President.” When Tyler’s inaugural address was published, it was under his title as president. Similarly, he signed his papers “John Tyler, President of the United States” (see Binkley 1964: 225–6). In effect, he assumed the office as well as the powers and duties of the presidency by asserting that they were his.

The founders protected the country from miscreants and rhetorical bumblerers by enabling the Congress and the Supreme Court to act as checks on presidential discourse. At one time or another, each is empowered to ask whether the president is discharging appropriately the executive powers specified in the Constitution. Presidents test the limits of their power rhetorically and are called to task by the rhetoric of the other branches. This process was adumbrated in Roosevelt’s first inaugural address (March 4, 1933), in which he said, “I am prepared under my constitutional duty to recommend the measures that a stricken Nation ... may require ... But in the event ... that the (p. 646) national emergency is still critical ... I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis—broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency” (Woolley and Peters 2011).

The checks and balances of our system not only control the distribution of power among the branches but also legitimize each branch in performing its functions. Regardless of its author, for example, the State of the Union message ensures that the Congress acknowledges the president’s legislative prerogatives; the veto message ensures that Congress attends to presidential objections to a legislative initiative.

## Roles and Genres

When articulated by the president, each type of discourse becomes special. Only a president can issue an inaugural address after swearing the oath of office and becoming “the president.” Only a president can issue a pardon and in so doing absolve a malefactor of a federal crime; only a president can state objections to a piece of legislation and thereby invite its reconsideration by Congress. The identity of the presidents as spokespersons fulfilling constitutional roles and exercising their executive power gives this discourse a distinctive character. Central among the roles available in the presidency are the roles of priest, national voice, and commander in chief.

The first role available to the president is that of national priest. The president takes on a priestly role in the inaugural by representing the country before God and praying for the nation, especially in the case of an ascendant vice president whose inaugural speech must vacate the office by appropriately memorializing the dead president before he can as-

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sume the office himself. Another example is the national eulogy, in which the president leads the nation in a commemorative service before setting forth the actions the government and the country will take to ensure that there is no recurrence of the tragedy that is the subject of this rhetoric. Finally, in the farewell speech the president draws on the moral leadership inherent in the role of priest to offer the country advice designed to ensure that it will survive into the future.

As national priest, the president is the custodian of national values, values embodied in the Constitution but extended beyond it to encompass what we have learned as a nation and memorialized in past presidential discourse. The national eulogy, for example, arises because national values have been attacked; those who have died incarnate them and become symbols of the nation. Likewise, in pardoning, the president, as national voice and priestly judge, recognizes those circumstances in which justice must be tempered by mercy.

The second role available to the president is that of national voice. “There is but one national voice in the country and that is the voice of the President,” wrote Woodrow Wilson ([1883] 1956: 209). The president must be able to speak to and on behalf of the nation and beyond its partisan divisions. The Constitution assigns the president the distinctive role of assessing the state of the nation and the special authority to set (p. 647) priorities—to recommend necessary and expedient legislation. In vetoing, for example, the president speaks for the Constitution and for what is arguably best for the nation. And in times of national crisis, it is the presidential voice that is expected to comfort, counsel, and guide the nation in a response consistent with the national interest.

The third role available to the president is that of commander in chief. When military action is initiated, the president assumes a role described in Article 2, section 2 of the Constitution as “Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States and of the Militias of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States.” That investiture occurs, first, when Congress enacts a declaration of war or passes a resolution authorizing military action, such as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution or the congressional authorization of the 1991 Gulf War, and second, when the president mobilizes the nation to respond to attack or invasion. Roosevelt’s invitation to declare war as a result of “a date which will live in infamy” is among the more famous entreaties to Congress. In this speech we hear the leader of both the nation and the armed forces rehearsing a role that the declaration of war will bestow.

This chapter has demonstrated that what we know as the presidency is constructed in part from our collective experience of the genres of discourse available to those who hold the nation’s highest office. This optic entails the argument that institution-sustaining roles—including those of national priest, national voice, and commander in chief—are performed in part through rhetoric. A generic perspective’s focus on recurrent responses to presidential functions thus offers crucial insight into the ways presidential power is enhanced or sacrificed as a result of rhetorical action.

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