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Analysis of the Rhetorical Components of JFK's Renowned Inaugural Address

Why is JFK's inaugural address regarded as one of the best speeches of the twentieth century? His speech was remarkably successful among Democrats and Republicans alike, even among citizens of the world. In a time in which the world faced the possibility of a nuclear war and mutually assured destruction, the new president of the United States delivered an inaugural address that Americans found invigorating and which other nations found pleasing. Rather than invoking war, the president held his composure during times of tension with the USSR and called for peace and cooperation with other nations in spite of differences. Understanding his vast audience allowed Kennedy to give an inspiring speech with irrefutable ideals. In his inaugural address, JFK effectively appealed to his global audience, as he persuaded not only Americans of his commitment to the longevity of liberty, but also his international audience of his desire for global cooperation.

Before delivering a historical inaugural address, JFK took the oath of office, swearing "before...Almighty God the same solemn oath" as his preceding presidents. Immediately, he gained a new sense of respect from the crowd, who cheered for him until he started his address. By swearing to undertake one of the most prestigious and impacting jobs with duty and diligence, JFK won the support of his entire audience. He was also a member of the renowned Kennedy family, notable for having influential figures in government as well as their Catholic

faith. His family history brought him admiration and favor from his audience. As he transitioned to his address, he referred to the crowd as “fellow citizens” to connect with his American viewers. Using modesty, he appealed to them by using two words, reminding them that he was still a citizen at heart, and not above anyone else. Before actually starting his speech, Kennedy had already essentially won over his audience and captivated their attention, maximizing the effectiveness of his address.

JFK, the first Catholic president, appealed to his predominantly Christian audience as he manifested his belief in God from the beginning. In his speech, he referenced God multiple times and alluded to Scriptures as well. In doing so, he effectively showed skeptical Protestants that he was a credible Christian, despite his differing faith. At this time, many who voted Republican were Protestant; therefore, Kennedy wanted to win their support by showing that political differences aside, they had a central, common belief: their Christian faith. Already having the support of his Democratic voters, JFK used his inaugural address as an opportunity to appeal to those whom he had not won over in the election. He expressed his religion with conviction when he told his audience – which would have contained a number of atheists – “here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.” Christians were able to see that his faith was strong enough for him to speak in a manner that may offend atheists. They found him more credible for courageously pronouncing his faith. In addition, nearly every US ally was a Christian-based country, many of which shared Kennedy’s Catholic faith. When JFK boldly expressed his faith, he connected with his audience in these allied nations and attracted those who shared his Christian faith, winning their support and attracting their interest for the rest of his speech. By proclaiming his belief in God and invoking Scripture in his address, JFK immediately connected with his predominantly Christian audience, containing many previously cynical Protestants, and

showed them that he was a genuine Christian.

After captivating the attention of Christians, Kennedy put forth an image of himself as a protector of Americans in a time of uncertainty and constant risk of war as he reassured his audience that the United States would not back away from a threatening enemy. Instead, the country would essentially do anything to “assure the survival and success of liberty.” This was very significant in the context of the era after World War II when the Cold War and the Korean War had begun. Citizens were constantly on edge about the USSR and wanted reassurance from the president that any threat would be removed. Kennedy spoke to the emotions of his audience and used their deep-rooted fears to comfort his listeners, proclaiming that he did not cower at the daunting undertaking “of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger,” but rather embraced it. The new president lessened the anxiety of Americans and received enthusiastic applause when he promised “to assure the survival and the success of liberty” by “bearing any burden, meeting any hardship... [and] opposing any foe.” Kennedy’s purpose in assuring national security was to use the apprehension and fears of the last thirteen years of the Cold War as an opportunity for himself to step up and declare that he himself would be the one to try to end the war and bring peace. By reassuring his audience of his desire that “both sides begin anew the quest for peace,” after years of threatening perils, Kennedy alleviated the fears of both Americans and citizens of other countries. Therefore, his audience attributed their new sense of safety and security to Kennedy, which gave him more approval. He ultimately used the Cold War to get his audience to view him as a rescuer and consequently attain their approval.

By repeating the concepts of stability and world peace with the aid of literary devices, JFK pleased the entire world, which was weary of constant war and the tightening tensions. Understanding that his inaugural address would be televised worldwide, he expressed his hopes

that “both sides begin anew the quest for peace,” rather than refusing to compromise and allowing differences to set the countries at war. He used this statement to appeal to his audience in countries beyond the United States because he needed their help and cooperation to defeat “the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty and war itself,” his ultimate presidential ambition. Kennedy knew that no citizen desired war, and allowed his hope for peace to reach the hearts of his listeners, who consequently were glad to look to Kennedy to lead the world to peace. Using anaphora of “to those..., we pledge...,” JFK specifically addressed different groups of people such as allies, the poor in the world, countries south of the US, the UN and enemy nations and elaborated on how he offered them each help and words of kindness, ultimately gaining their support. Invoking imagery, JFK also told his audience that joined with the world, he sought to “explore the stars, conquer the deserts...and tap the ocean depths.” By encouraging the world to imagine the endless possibilities of working together, he further persuaded his audience that cooperating rather than solely competing would help countries achieve more. He did this knowing that it was the best way for him to accomplish those ideals. Because his audience saw that Kennedy was the source of these attractive ideas, they happily and openly listened as he continued his speech. JFK logically spoke out for the safety of all, that “the absolute power to destroy other nations [be brought] under the absolute control of all nations” because he recognized the impending perils of the nuclear arms race. The whole world cheered for Kennedy’s position, as the arms race was beginning to threaten every man on earth. In addition, he gained the support of the United States’ allies in declaring that he would “support any friend...to assure the survival and success of liberty.” With the threat of communism spreading, Kennedy’s promise of support was well received by other nations who knew they might need help fending off communism. This gave him more support outside of America and

encouraged other nations to join the US in opposing communism. Kennedy intentionally sought to convey a sense of protection and help to other countries, because he knew that the more nations he could persuade to side with the US, the easier it would be for him to oppose communist nations. JFK used rhetorical strategies in the delivery of his objective of global peace and international cooperation to attain the support of citizens around the globe.

By using many juxtapositions and antitheses, JFK was able to more clearly communicate his ideas. From the beginning of his address that day, JFK explained that the significance lay not in the victory of the Democratic Party, which paradoxically rejoiced specifically for that reason, but in the “celebration of freedom.” JFK targeted his Republican audience with this statement, giving country a greater sense of unity without upsetting Democrats. Later in his address, he insisted to Americans, “ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” While initially telling of what not to ask, he quickly contrasted it with a clear idea of what he called Americans to do. This statement invigorated his listeners, evidenced by their burst of applause, and inspired them to achieve more. In the same manner, he addressed the world in his next statement in which he made a clear, logical argument: not to selfishly serve, but to serve humbly for the greater good of all. He used a similarly constructed sentence to achieve the same effect in his global audience as with his American audience in calling them to serve others. His clear contrasts helped direct his audience’s thoughts away from a common misconception and to focus on what his true point was.

Rather than simply share his presidential goals, JFK explained that his audience had the power to bring success to America and the world in order to energize and motivate his listeners. He used many of his contrasts to incite his audience to achieve more. Inspiring Americans, he told them, “in your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or

failure of our course” in addition to “ask not what your country can do for you.” These contrasts were powerful enough to help his audience realize his goals and motivate them. Invoking imagery, he also explained “that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans” and proceeded to compliment Americans to further inspire them. His praises and inspiration brought him fervent applause and an audience eager to hear more of his words. Kennedy also chose to directly ask the crowd “will you join in that historic effort?” [to use a global alliance to terminate “tyranny, poverty, disease, and war”]. In response, he received a definitive “yes.” JFK engaged his audience throughout his address and used specific rhetorical strategies to motivate and inspire them to cooperate.

In addition to his renowned passing of the torch imagery, JFK utilized the persuasive device to have the audience focus on his points as well as remember them. He spoke of “those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger” as well as “casting off the chains of poverty” to help listeners visualize and fully understand his ideas. By using these intriguing lines, he kept their attention and engaged their minds. JFK also made a point to encourage Americans to protect their country against communism and destruction. He motivated his audience to do so by explaining that they would light the country, “and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.”

JFK selected his topics with great care. Understanding that he faced a global audience, he discussed broader topics and spoke of mutual concerns, such as national safety, that the whole country could agree upon. He intentionally chose not to speak of his plan for taxes, the role of government in welfare, or the emerging idea of government providing healthcare. Rather than introduce many disputable topics that would have resulted in half of the audience disagreeing, JFK maintained safe topics and uplifted his audience. Debatable domestic topics would also have

held little interest to his audience beyond the borders of America. By ignoring controversial topics, JFK allowed his address to have a maximum effect on his audience so that he would gain more support and

In a time of global tensions, JFK delivered one of the most successful speeches of the century, calling for international cooperation and peace. Every part of his speech was handpicked with purpose. His speech was one of tradition, but also presented the opportunity for him to appeal to Americans as well as citizens of the world. To do so, he included non-controversial topics and included literary devices to help captivate his audience. He stressed his Catholic Christian faith, national security and ideals of global cooperation to appeal to his enormously diverse audience. Inspiring his audience at an unprecedented level as a new president, how could JFK's inaugural address not be considered one of the best speeches of his century?

Work Cited

Kennedy, John Fitzgerald. "Inaugural Address." *American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches*. Michael E. Eidenmuller, 20 Jan. 1961. Web. 21 Sept. 2012.