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## **A WEEKEND ROUTINE: THE FUNCTIONS OF THE WEEKLY PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS FROM BILL CLINTON TO BARACK OBAMA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Ritualized presidential rhetoric including inaugurals, state of the unions, and farewell addresses has received a wealth of research attention. While vital to the rhetorical presidency, more routine communications that convey the “tick tock” of everyday presidential actions have gone largely unnoticed in the scholarly literature. This article focuses on the central area of routine presidential communication: the weekly address. Thirty speeches from the first year of President Clinton, Bush, and Obama’s administrations are analyzed to understand the functions of the address’s routine use. The findings reveal that ideologically disparate presidents approach the weekly routine with a temporal focus that sermonizes to the nation, projects the power of the presidency, and insulates the institution from legislative inaction.

Presidential use of ritualistic rhetoric is a common topic of scrutiny for news media outlets and in-depth study by scholars. Each of these moments signifies a regular and brief opportunity for the chief executive to constitute the American nation and its citizens as part of a system of values and beliefs. The president’s ability to speak and expound in addresses, including the inaugural, state of the union, veto messages, and fare-

well remarks has been well-studied (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008). Scholars have illustrated how these public communications form the structure for institutional advocacy as part of a rhetorical presidency (Ceaser, Thurow, Tulis & Bessette, 1981; Tulis, 1996; Ragsdale, 2010; Hart, 1987). Analyses have examined these ritualistic communications to discover the religious elements (Shogan, 2006), their stylistic changes over time (Jamieson, 1988; Gronbeck, 1996; Schudson, 1982), and their relationship to presidential rhetorical power (Hart, 1987; Gronbeck, 1996). While ritual rhetorical genres are vital to the institutional presidency, there has been little scholarly focus on the sustaining functions of routine communications, particularly the weekly presidential address.

It is with communications like the weekly address where scholars can witness the day-to-day “tick tock” of a presidential administration. Weekly pronouncements represent guaranteed opportunities for citizens to hear from the president and the news media to set the weekend news agenda. With this specific focus, this article answers how ideologically disparate presidents have constructed, insulated, and projected the presidency in similar ways on a weekly basis. Analyzing the unique functions of this routine rhetorical practice, this research examines presidential use of the weekly address to exercise and sustain rhetorical power.

## The Weekly Address and the Rhetorical Presidency

The weekly address is the practical manifestation of the chief elements that have formed the rhetorical presidency including: (1) a presidential desire to publicly connect to and sway citizens; (2) media technology developments that made presidential communications a ubiquitous force; (3) and the audiences attracted and simultaneously repelled by presidential outreach. These institutional characteristics called forth the need for routine communications.

### *A Public Connection*

Presidential use of popular speech developed as a means for bypassing Congress and directly reaching a mass audience (Medhurst, 1996). Nineteenth century presidents limited their dialogue to inter-governmental communications, a rhetorical role that matched the limited role of the executive with respect to Congress (Saldin, 2011; Tulis, 1996; Ceaser et al., 1981). Scholars trace the beginnings of the modern rhetorical presidency to Woodrow Wilson,<sup>1</sup> including his nationwide campaign for the League of Nations and his delivery of his state of the unions in-person (Schudson, 1998; Campbell & Jamieson, 2008). The Wilsonian view of presidential oratory to sway or reflect popular views was sustained by his successors. As the presidents of the 1920's and 1930's employed new rhetorical strategies, the press derided these tactics as manipulation and propaganda.

Both Presidents Wilson and Roosevelt established the semblances of rou-

tine public communications, the precursors to the weekly address. Attempting to cultivate public opinion through oratory, Wilson initiated twice weekly news conferences from 1913-1915 (Cohen & Nice, 2003). Roosevelt's much-heralded series of 27 fireside chats during his presidency, while infrequent, were used as both a public relations tool and a means to leverage support for his New Deal policies with Congress (Woolley & Peters, 2011; Kernell, 2007). This new popular style of "going public," or presidential self and policy promotion around Congress and directly to the American public, created intergovernmental tension (Kernell, 2007; Tulis, 1996). The style further connected presidential support and leadership to popular opinion.

Presidents attempted to "move their numbers" through increasingly frequent rhetorical appeals. Gerald Ford averaged one speech every six hours during his administration. From 1945-1985, only one month registered no presidential speech (Hart, 1987). The inauguration of the weekly address ended speechless months and even weeks. When President Reagan sought to harness his legislative agenda amid congressional and media wrangling, he initiated a series of Saturday radio addresses to set the agenda in a tightly-scripted format (Martin 1984; Rowland & Jones, 2002). These routine addresses thus became an integral part of the president's rhetorical strategy (Kernell, 2007; Barrett, 2005).

### *Media and Presidential Ubiquity*

The growth in the frequency of presidential communications coincided

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with mass media developments that allowed the president to serve a popular rhetorical role in multiple locations.

As communication technologies were introduced and improved, presidents adapted their rhetoric to new media (Jamieson, 1988). In turn, the rhetorical presidency also changed. The president became a ubiquitous persona able to be transmitted audibly, visually, and virtually with the development of the Internet. This trend toward ubiquity was accelerated by routine communications like the weekly address.

Woodrow Wilson's approach to oratory coincided with the first use of presidential radio during his administration. Radio's use by Wilson and his successors dramatically altered presidential power, rhetorical speed, and the structure of White House communications (Kumar, 2007). Samuel Becker explained, "Broadcasting has pushed the President further up the pole of political power, relative to the Congress" (1961, p. 10; see also Miller, 1941). Presidential brevity was a byproduct. Early radio speeches were an hour-long, with shorter 30 minute speeches emerging by the 1940s. As radio entertainment was used to draw a larger audience, speech time shrank further (Jamieson, 1988).

The hallmark of the electronic presidency became shortened, frequent communications and a conversational style akin to interpersonal interactions (Jamieson, 1988; Gronbeck, 1996). While no longer representing the face-to-face communication previously experienced when presidents spoke from the "stump," the presence constructed provides a seemingly intimate setting mir-

roring ancient oral communication (Gronbeck, 1996; Jamieson, 1988; Hart, 1999).

When President Reagan initiated the weekly radio address in 1982, he incorporated these stylistic elements into his brief, five minute addresses on a series of single topics (Martin, 1984).<sup>2</sup> While not delivered on a routine basis, the conversational approach Reagan used was adopted in the weekly addresses of his successors, particular Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush. Sigelman and Whissell (2002a), for example, found that Clinton spoke at greater length than Reagan and both used positive, upbeat language. Reagan's language for each weekly address was more concrete than Clinton, but less so when compared to the two Bush presidencies (2002b). They conclude, "...[T]he faces they [Reagan and Clinton] presented to the American public in their Saturday morning radio addresses were more alike than unlike" (2002a, p. 144).

The physical "face" of the president became paramount with visual and virtual technologies, including television and the Internet. Establishing a leadership presence on camera became as important as the words the president spoke. "Metaphysical" leadership acts were often substituted for the concrete accomplishments of an administration (Hart, 1987; Nimmo, 1976). To adequately supply citizens with the visual rhetoric necessary for leadership, administrations adopted the infrastructure necessary for electronic communications, including televising presidential press conferences and employing public relations person-

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nel (Kumar, 2007). Presidents increasingly sought visually stimulating venues or referents to use in speeches (Hart, 1987; Jamieson, 1988; Gronbeck, 1996; Mayer, 2004; Kernell, 2007).<sup>3</sup>

As the visual became digital, the president found greater opportunities to disseminate his message in political and nonpolitical platforms. The elements of the rhetorical presidency.gov incorporated greater speed and brevity developed decades earlier with an increased need to provide new presidential material to the public. A White House web presence was developed to capture behind-the-scenes business, respond to citizens via online media, and place communications on file sharing websites (Owen & Davis, 2008; Kumar, 2007; Benson, 1996). Citizens were afforded a level of interactivity with the president and a forum for discussion. In turn, the White House engaged in a form of going public to avoid the scrutiny of the mainstream news media (Warnick, 2007; Baum & Groeling, 2008).

The ascendance of the visual and seemingly personal connection to the president shaped the genre of routine communication that would become the weekly address. Roosevelt's conversational style of each fireside chat was adapted to television by President Eisenhower (Becker, 1961). President Carter's short televised addresses by White House fireside fully visualized Roosevelt's earlier strategy. With Reagan's adoption of a weekly radio address and its regularity in the Clinton and Bush administrations, these routine addresses lacked the visual elements of other presidential communications. The

second Bush administration placed his weekly radio addresses on the White House iTunes page. It was not until Barack Obama was elected that the radio address was transitioned to a visual address on the White House YouTube page and website.

The weekly Internet address inaugurated what some considered "virtual fireside chats" (Vargas, 2008), updating established rhetorical practices to requisite technologies to reach emerging and fragmented audiences. In addition to its place on YouTube and the White House website, the address is still carried by participating radio and television stations. The media convergence (Jenkins, 2006) of new and older channels represents a strategic move to seek new, younger audiences while engaging a small cadre of current listeners.

### *A Weekly Audience*

Scholars of the rhetorical presidency have documented how genres of executive discourse are delivered to specific audiences. For instance, the inaugural address is given before dignitaries and the American public, but also directly mentions foreign audiences including allies and adversaries (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008). Upon President Reagan's creation of the weekly radio address, two specific audiences were targeted: weekend news broadcasts and auto-borne audiences on Saturday afternoons (Martin, 1984; Rowland & Jones, 2002; Kernell, 2007). The weekly addresses were and continue to be adapted for a primary audience of elites, including the news media and policymakers, and a secondary audience constituting

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the public. This is apparent when examining how elites reproduce the weekly messages for secondary exposure by citizens.

As a discourse practice for elite consumption, the weekly address is strategic in its focus on shaping the weekend news. Martin (1984) found that Reagan's addresses were often reported by the major broadcast networks and *The New York Times*. Clinton's re-establishment of the weekly address after its hiatus during the Bush administration was more of "an opportunity to set the agenda for weekend news coverage than to reach a live audience via radio" (Viles, 1993). Weekend news outlets reported entire transcripts or large portions of weekly addresses related to Reagan's colon cancer surgery, diplomatic efforts leading up to the Gulf War, the military situation in Kosovo, and the domestic surveillance program initiated under George W. Bush (Horvit, Schiffer & Wright, 2008).

The slower pace of weekend news and a greater need for presidential message control has made the weekly address an effective piece of elite discourse. Presidents can set the agenda for the Sunday news shows (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Edwards & Wood, 1999; Cohen & Nice, 2003) and showcase leadership by documenting accomplishments for the press and advocating for legislation. This process, at times, will affect the president's public image and credibility. News media focus public attention on issues and, in a secondary process, can prime citizen perceptions of presidential approval (Krosnick &

Kinder, 1990; Druckman & Holmes, 2004).<sup>4</sup>

Currently, the weekly address receives news coverage across a host of old and new media platforms. Television news stations continue to play portions of the president's address as a prelude to news segments.<sup>5</sup> On news websites, stories often include coverage of each speech with the president's address as an embedded video. There are options for users to "share" stories and video across media platforms. This further creates a ubiquitous, transferable, and repackaged presidential message for the process of citizen consumption from media elites.

The weekly address's constitutive function for its public audience is vital for coalition-building and sustaining institutional legitimacy (Kernell, 2007). Routine presidential communications affirm the nation, the president's supporters, and citizens who may support the president. While rarely drawing a guaranteed audience and difficult to calculate when given by radio on Saturdays (Martin, 1984; Rowland & Jones, 2002), presidents confront similar audience problems for primetime television addresses. The audience for primetime presidential speeches, due to segmentation and narrowcasting, is now much older and skewed toward citizens acclimated to the once shared experiences of presidential communication (Wattenberg, 2004; Baum & Kernell, 1999; Katz, 1996). In short, presidents increasingly face challenges reaching the public through more traditional media venues.

The Internet has created challenges and opportunities for the public

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audience. While citizens may not seek out presidential communication, presidents seek out an audience. Online audiences are apt to be convergent information seekers (Tewksbury, 2003; Davis & Owen, 1998). In an environment where citizens retrieve information across old and new media platforms, making presidential communications ubiquitous increases the probability of message exposure. By targeting the weekly message first at elites and then the public, citizens may receive the message primarily or secondarily through opinion leaders. The reach and life of the weekly address is now more difficult to quantify, but potentially more powerful in its scope.

### Research Question

As the practical manifestation of the characteristics that have formed the rhetorical presidency, the weekly address reflects both the popular role afforded to presidential communications and the changing media technologies that have carried these communiqués. The routine use of these addresses since the Clinton presidency suggests generic characteristics of these pronouncements exist across presidencies. This has been affirmed in the few scholarly studies of the weekly radio address. In their study of the irregular use of the radio address by President Reagan, Jones and Rowland found that Reagan's addresses functioned in "creating public support, reassuring the public, agenda setting, role definition, and self-defense" (2000, p. 257; 2002). Scholars have also studied the weekly address from both policy and press coverage perspectives (Rowland & Jones 2000; 2002; Han, 2006; Horvit et al., 2008). Sigelman and Whissell's re-

search found stylistic similarities across multiple presidencies (2002a; 2002b), suggesting a generic dynamic exists.

Based on the popular role afforded to routine rhetoric and the situational constraints of addressing the nation on a weekly basis, this article answers:

*RQ:* What are the thematic functions of the weekly address across the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama?

### Methodology

To focus specifically on the thematic functions of the weekly address, this research employed genre criticism (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Hart & Daughton, 2005) to analyze the content of speeches from the administrations of Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama.

### Speech Sample

Speeches from the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations were chosen for several reasons. First, the weekly address became a routine form of presidential communication at the beginning of the Clinton administration. To understand how its routine use influences the content, prior speeches given at intermittent variables by Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush were excluded from the sample. Intermittent radio addresses and short-lived weekly communiqués used since the Wilson administration shaped what would become the weekly address genre, yet do not constitute regular and routine presidential communications. Second, analyzing trends and

functions across multiple administrations of differing party affiliation requires similar speech circumstances. This further implicates the need to examine routine, weekly addresses as practiced since the Clinton administration.

This analysis focused on a population of approximately 150 addresses from the first year of Bill Clinton's, George W. Bush's, and Barack Obama's presidencies. The routine nature of the speeches allowed them to be organized by corresponding weeks of each presidency. A random sample of ten weeks was conducted and the speeches corresponding to each week were selected. This provided a cross-section across president and time to rhetorically analyze trends. The collection of 30 speeches served as the sample for building the analytical framework.

### *Genre Analysis*

Rhetorical genres, including those relevant to the rhetorical presidency, have sustaining functions, or preservative characteristics (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Hart & Daughton, 2005). A critical use of genre, Campbell and Jamieson (1978) argue, values an ends and means approach. The means include the language and arguments while the ends consist of the purposes and functions of a particular piece of discourse. They note,

*In the discourses that form a genre, similar substantive and stylistic strategies are used to encompass situations perceived as similar by the responding rhetors. A genre is a group of acts unified by a constellation of forms that recurs in each of its members. These forms, in isolation, appear in other*

*discourses. What is distinctive about the acts in a genre is the recurrence of the forms together in constellation (1978, p. 20)*

Within similar situations, the strategies employed are united by what Campbell and Jamieson refer to as an "internal dynamic" (1978; Harrell & Linkugel, 1980).<sup>6</sup> The intertextuality among many texts, for example inaugurals, contains similar strategies united by a renewal dynamic.

Because genres exist in relation to certain situational constraints, the weekly address is unique in its routine response to the week's events packaged for both public and press consumption. Serving its sustaining function for the presidential institution, the weekly address genre is an excellent tool for analyzing how an administration can accomplish its policy goals while seeking to enhance executive power (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008).

### **Functions of the Weekly Address**

An inductive analysis of the addresses revealed a notable temporal dynamic emanating from the texts across administrations. As a weekly routine for a president, these addresses mark important achievements and setbacks while illustrating the short amount of time with which a president has to govern. While every presidential term is four years, with the possibility of four more, this timeline is intermixed with midterm elections and a reelection campaign. This temporal dynamic organizes the constellation of texts in this genre around three thematic functions: a secular sermon, a mediated log, and a means for marking capital time.

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### *A Secular Sermon*<sup>7</sup>

The weekly address recreates the nation and presidency every Saturday morning. Symbolically, the address sustains the presidency by serving as a weekly secular sermon for an imagined congregation of the people and the press. The president, as minister or prophet, sermonizes about the values and principles which make the nation unique. In the process, a national civil religion is sustained by associating certain values and beliefs to temporal occurrences including holidays and legislative action.

It is common for the president to act as a “prophet of civil religion” by invoking a deity in his public communications (Shogan, 2006, p. 12). Campbell and Jamieson noted that one of the first acts of a president invested with executive power during the inaugural ceremony is to symbolically place the nation and themselves under God (2008). As a prophet or minister-type figure, the presidency is a conduit by which the values and ideals of the American nation are both articulated and carried forth.

The role of the president to construct communal values is strongly linked to the continuity of national identity (Beasley, 2004; Stuckey, 2004). A nation, as an imagined community, must be symbolically recreated to signal citizen belonging to an entity larger than individual experience (Anderson, 2006; Billig, 1995). Presidential use of tropes, narratives, and myths encapsulate commonplace values, providing opportunities for audience persuasion and unification (Hart & Kendall, 1996). Incorporat-

ing these symbolic strategies into a rhetorical architecture that includes genres of discourse, the president shapes national identity (Ivie, 1996)

Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama donned the ministerial role by beginning or concluding their weekly addresses with doctrinal values of American civil religion. During one April address, Bill Clinton began "There's much wisdom in these words from the Scriptures, 'Come, let us reason together.' This week we've seen a good example of what happens when people talk to each other instead of shout at each other" (3 April, 1993). George W. Bush ended his addresses with temporal anecdotes, invoking values of unity and faith. He ended an address in October 2001 by noting, "Helping people in great need is a central part of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions, as well as many other faiths. It is also a central part of the American tradition" (6 October, 2001). Channeling the religious value of charity, he connected it with civil religion by constructing it as a national tradition. Barack Obama similarly included doctrinal wisdom of civil religion on Saturdays. When referencing Easter and Passover, Obama melded religious and secular values by remarking, "This idea that we're all bound up, as Martin Luther King once said, 'in a single garment of destiny,' is a lesson of all the world's great religions" (11 April, 2009). The lessons imparted by each president often cite unity as an American value, which contrasts with the legislative conflict often articulated in the addresses.

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Holiday addresses provide prominent opportunities for each president to temporally mark and emphasize certain secular American values. Barack Obama called the Fourth of July a "distinctly American holiday" (4 July, 2009). Bill Clinton noted that "no holiday tradition is more American than Thanksgiving" (27 November, 1993). George W. Bush said on the first Thanksgiving following the terrorist attacks, "Offering thanks in the midst of tragedy is an American tradition, perhaps because, in times of testing, our dependence on God is so clear" (24 November, 2001). These holiday references repeatedly construct the American nation.

It becomes a common presidential strategy to use a holiday to push a policy agenda. Easter and Passover became events for President Obama to call for renewal and common ground regarding his push for nuclear nonproliferation (11 April, 2009). President Clinton used the Fourth of July to talk of freedom, liberty, and security from weapons of mass destruction. He stated, "Americans have earned the right on this Fourth of July weekend to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in the new era America did so much to create" (3 July, 1993). President Bush highlighted the need for laws to "promote responsible fatherhood" on Father's Day and the values he constructed as part of it: "daily care and guidance, nurture and protection, discipline and love" (16 June, 2001). Bush also used the Fourth of July to push for defense requests by referencing the valor of the Armed Forces (30 June, 2001).

As a secular Saturday sermon, Clinton, Bush, and Obama retell American history using rhetorical commonplaces and motifs to relate present and past struggles to the spirit required to overcome them. In his Fourth of July address, Obama talked of "That unyielding spirit [that] defines us as Americans. It's what led generations of pioneers to blaze a westward trail" (4 July, 2009). Speaking from California on the progress of economic recovery, Clinton constructed a pioneer motif common to American public address. "That expansive, forward-looking spirit is what brought people out here to California in the first place, across wagon trails and over highways on the open road" (4 December, 1993). Bush referenced immigration at Thanksgiving by saying, "We're thankful for the decency of the American people who have stood for the American tradition of tolerance and religious liberty - a tradition that has welcomed and protected generations of immigrants from every faith and background" (24 November, 2001). He continued by noting the struggles of the Pilgrims and Abraham Lincoln. Like religious stories in a minister's sermon, these common American themes symbolically relay values and historical experiences to citizens. The values can then be related to present struggles, creating a connection to the past and applying doctrinal values of civil religion to present policy goals.

Serving as a routine secular sermon is one role of the weekly address. The values constructed are temporally connected to specific events that occur on the calendar or in the life of a presidency. A holiday becomes a call for

unity while a flood becomes a lesson in American determination and work ethic. The values attached to these events become documentation for policy accomplishments in a mediated log, the weekly address's second generic role.

### *A Mediated Log*

Time is a vital element to advancing or hindering the president's agenda. A condensed presidential time schedule presents ephemeral opportunities to pass an agenda before Congress and the president feel the pressure of reelection or constitutional retirement. With temporal elements affecting a chief executive's agenda, the president as captain of the ship of state must record accomplishments, challenges, and policy opportunities. To publicize leadership capabilities, the weekly address becomes a mediated log to highlight presidential actions, official travel, and administrative accomplishments against a calendrical backdrop. The calendar acts as a point of departure, serving as a foundation for presidential signaling of the passage of time. Presidents, in alerting the public and press to official actions, sustain the presidential institution and project the image of executive leadership.

The weekly address as a mediated log provides the foundation for the rhetorical construction of presidential leadership and power. Hart (1987) observed that official speech serves as a "diary for a president, his way of recording for posterity the decisions he has made" (p. 47). Sustaining the presidential image requires the symbolic conveyance of action and power.

Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama all signaled the passage of time during their first year in office by using temporal modifiers and numerical descriptions such as "this week," "this weekend," "Yesterday in Portland," "That's why, on Tuesday...." Presidents Clinton and Bush directly addressed the first 100 days benchmark. Clinton explained, "After about 100 days as President we've begun to change the direction of America" (24 April, 1993). Similarly, Bush noted, "You have probably seen the newspaper and television stories anticipating the 100th day of my administration. Ever since Franklin Roosevelt's time, the 100th day has been a media marker" (28 April, 2001). While Obama does not directly address his first 100 days, he uses temporal markers to chart his time in office. His address from October 2009 began, "When I took office 8 months ago" (3 October, 2009). The weekly address's routine use constrains the president to acknowledge the passage of time and actions taken in the previous week. These temporal constraints make the address unique from other genres of presidential rhetoric.

One strategy the president employs to highlight leadership is to rhetorically pivot to the role of commander-in-chief. President Bush said in his Fourth of July address, "One thing will never change, the quality and dedication of the men and women who wear America's uniform. There is no greater honor for a President than to serve as Commander-in-Chief" (30 June, 2001). Barack Obama similarly constructed his constitutional role when mentioning security issues. "Of all the responsibilities of the Presidency, the one that I weigh

most heavily is my duty as Commander-in-Chief to our splendid servicemen and women” (14 November, 2009). Obama used the commander-in-chief phrase twice in this address. President Clinton avoided this constitutional construction, mentioning instead the fulfillment of specific campaign pledges.

Where Clinton eschewed his official title, he described official presidential travel to highlight domestic engagement.<sup>8</sup> In six of the 10 addresses sampled from his first year, Clinton mentioned some kind of official travel. He often linked these travels to economic issues. In an April address, Clinton stated, “Yesterday in Portland, Oregon, timber workers, business people, environmentalists, and community leaders sat down together...We discussed how to achieve a healthy economy and a healthy environment” (3 April, 1993). One of his final addresses of the year was broadcast from California. “Today I’m in Los Angeles to hold a meeting on the economy and its impact on southern California” (4 December, 1993). These instances use temporal signaling to highlight active duties. Clinton similarly drew attention to natural disasters and gun violence by describing visits to the Midwest and a New Jersey trauma center.

Presidents Bush and Obama also logged official travel every Saturday morning to highlight public engagement. Bush described travel to the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City and New York to address the United Nations. While official travel is mentioned in four of his 10 addresses sampled, President Obama emphasized foreign travel. He traveled to Prague to work on nuclear

nonproliferation, Pittsburgh for the G-20, New York to chair the United Nations National Security Council, Fort Hood to meet with shooting victims, and to Asia to talk about trade and diplomatic engagement. Obama melded the secular sermon with an official travel log when he told how he “spoke to young men and women at a town hall in Shanghai and across the Internet about certain values that we in America believe are universal: the freedom of worship and speech; the right to access information and to choose one’s own leaders” (21 November, 2009). Just as Clinton sought to use extensive domestic travel to frame his attention to the economy, Obama described international travel to emphasize a commitment to diplomacy.

As a mediated log, the presidents all use the weekly address to boast about legislative accomplishments and remind citizens and the press of their progress in the last week, several weeks, or since their presidency began. Since the presidency is an inherently political job to which each occupant aspires to get reelected, acting as a symbolic scorekeeper once a week helps set the media agenda and shape public perceptions of presidential success.

President Clinton began to articulate his administration’s successes around the 100 day mark. “After about 100 days as President we’ve begun to change the direction of America. Our economic program has been adopted in its broad outlines by Congress. That’s brought an end to trickle-down economics” (24 April, 1993). Using the poetic backdrop of a “magnificent spring and

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the promise of renewal that it brings,” Clinton in May reiterated his deficit-cutting measures, the passage of motor voter, and Senate adoption of lobbying reform. He concluded, “All told, we’ve come a long, long distance in the last 3 months to restoring our economy and reaffirming the values of the middle class and to opening up our democracy again” (15 May, 1993). In these cases, Clinton logged progress through temporal signaling (days and months) and tied the values characteristic of a secular sermon to his accomplishments.

President Clinton began to rely on external economic indicators in his weekly addresses toward the end of the year. His addresses in October through December cited the same statistic: the creation of over a million private sector jobs, “more jobs in 8 months than all those created in the previous 4 years” (9 October, 1993; 16 October, 1993). This repetition illustrated the methodical economic message crafted by his administration. Using Thanksgiving as an opportunity to “take stock and to reflect,” Clinton heralded the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the family and medical leave law, reforming college loan laws, the National Service Act, campaign finance revisions, and the crime bill. He summed up his progress by quoting Congressional Quarterly. “This administration, working with both parties, has had more of its major legislation adopted in this first year than any other administration in this last 40 years” (27 November, 1993). Highlighting and logging these accomplishments, Clinton projected the image of an active executive branch engaged with domestic concerns.

Dovetailing media stories of his first 100 days, George W. Bush used his milestone to highlight changing the tone in Washington, congressional endorsement of “significant tax relief,” and Senate committee approval of his education reform bill. He closed this address with temporal signaling, “In nearly 100 days, we have made a good start. But it’s only a start. On a number of important issues we have laid the foundation for progress. Now we need to turn a good start and good spirit into good laws” (28 April, 2001). Lacking official, signed legislation, Bush used movement through the legislative process to characterize success. Following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, President Bush described the economic measures adopted during his administration to cushion the market including “tax rebate checks [that] continue to arrive in Americans’ mailboxes” and the Federal Reserve’s work in “cutting interest rates in half in the last eight months” (22 September, 2001). Bush conveyed executive action during this speech by also describing the approval of “emergency aid to keep our airlines flying.”

Because the terrorist attacks mark a dramatic shift in his administration’s priorities, Bush used the remainder of his weekly addresses during his first year to report progress in the war on terrorism. In his September and November addresses, George W. Bush highlighted international coalition building, launching “a strike against the financial foundation of the global terror network,” improving airline security, and the mobilization for war (29 September, 2001; 10 November, 2001). Just as Clinton used

domestic legislation to frame the role of an active chief executive, Bush projected an activist image in the face of international threats.

During the first months of his presidency, President Obama used the weekly address to frame his administration's responses to the economic crisis, Midwest floods, and the H1N1 flu virus. In a May flu address, Obama noted, "Over the last week, my administration has taken several precautions to address the challenge posed by the 2009 H1N1 flu virus" and outlines funding requests, new social networking outreach on Facebook and Twitter, and expansions of community health centers in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (2 May, 2009). Amid congressional wrangling over healthcare, climate change, and financial regulatory policy, Obama emphasized these proposals when tangible legislation could not be passed. For instance, "This week, my administration proposed a set of major reforms to the rules that govern our financial system" (20 June, 2009). Using the Fourth of July to link his agenda to "that unyielding spirit" defining American progress, Obama pushed for economic regulations, education standards, healthcare reform, and climate change laws (4 July, 2009). He exhorts, "We must build on the historic bill passed by the House of Representatives and make clean energy the profitable kind of energy." Similar to his predecessors, he couched his legislative proposals using temporal signaling and calendrical events.

Toward the end of his first year, President Obama used the Saturday address to emphasize his healthcare pro-

posals. Legislation had stalled in Congress and Obama used Saturday mornings to go public and push Congress to act. Obama looked to progress within the legislative process to illustrate engagement and frame success. "And after long hours of thoughtful deliberation and tough negotiation, the Senate Finance Committee, the final congressional committee involved in shaping health care legislation, has finished the process of crafting their reform proposal" (3 October, 2009). One week later, Obama constructed a healthcare "consensus" that included top ranking Republican officials. He used this support as a call for unity among Americans. Adapting to the slow pace of the legislative process, Obama logged any healthcare progress to frame his active engagement and support for the legislation.

Related to the weekly address's role as a mediated log, each president uses the opportunity each Saturday morning to rouse the public to action for certain proposals. By going public on Saturday mornings, presidents can pressure Congress and frame their role as outsiders fighting for the people against Washington politics. Presidents mark their accomplishments and fulfillment of official responsibilities in a mediated log. They highlight difficulties, legislative gridlock, and inaction by marking capital time.

### *Marking Capital Time*

As a marker of capital time, the weekly address serves as a means for attack and popular exhortation. When the legislative gears halt, the president must take aggressive action to pressure

lawmakers and distance himself from the Washington “mess.” Not only does the weekly address become a call to action, it is also a protective mechanism for a president running against Congress. Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama all sew a common thread in this regard and their descriptions of Washington politics become strikingly similar.

President Clinton referred to members of Congress, particularly the minority party, as isolated and ignorant of American concerns. “Yet, still, this past week, a minority of the United States Senate, 43 Senators, played parliamentary games with our people’s lives” (24 April, 1993). In his Fourth of July address, he attacked those who opposed his economic agenda, “Change is hard, though. Many people are still skeptical. Many of the opponents of my plan chant ‘tax-and-spend’” (3 July, 1993). With opposition persisting into December, Clinton lamented, “For too long the Government in Washington ignored roadblocks that stood in the way of an economic recovery” (4 December, 1993). Even with Democratic majorities in Congress, Clinton still attacked Washington and congressional Republicans for lack of progress.

Similar to Bill Clinton’s congressional situation, President Bush enjoyed a Republican House majority and a divided Senate during his first year. Yet, Bush bemoaned gridlock and Washington culture. He framed the federal government as a spendthrift when arguing for tax cuts. “When money is left in Washington, there is a tremendous temptation for the government to use it. The point is simple: If you send it, they will

spend it” (24 March, 2001). Two weeks later, he added, “On taxes, there are powerful institutions in Washington that would prefer to keep the people’s money for themselves” (7 April, 2001). Rhetorically, Bush placed himself and citizens opposite Congress and Washington, D.C. Despite his barbed attacks on D.C. culture, Bush also used the Saturday address on rare occasions to cite “progress toward changing the tone in Washington” (28 April, 2001) and to thank congressional leaders after the September 11th attacks “for their extraordinary service to our country in a difficult time” (22 September, 2001).

Barack Obama’s change platform similarly collided with Washington politics, even with Democratic congressional majorities during his first year. His frustrations with special interests and the Republican minority are prominently conveyed. Addressing financial oversight legislation, Obama said, “We’ve already begun to see special interests mobilizing against change. And that’s not surprising, that’s Washington” (20 June, 2009). Using the Fourth of July to call for a new revolutionary spirit, he warned, “And yet there are those who would have us try what has already failed, who would defend the status quo. These naysayers have short memories. They forget we, as a people, did not get here by standing pat in a time of change” (4 July, 2009). Temporal occurrences provided references for Obama’s illustration of Washington.

As a former senator, Obama brought his familiarity with the legislative process to describe common congressional “stalling” tactics. In an Octo-

ber healthcare address, Obama cautioned, “But what I will not accept are attempts to stall or drag our feet. I will not accept partisan efforts to block reform at any cost” (3 October, 2009). He called for an end to partisan tactics the following week by noting, “Still, there are some in Washington today who seem determined to play the same old partisan politics, working to score political points, even if it means burdening this country with an unsustainable status quo” (10 October, 2009). Analogous to the attacks by Clinton and Bush, the opposition is a vague “some,” “many,” or “they.” These veiled swipes insulate each president from directly attacking the legislative institution. In the same breath with which a president attacks in each Saturday address, he must also use the occasion to go public by exhorting the public and Congress to action.

Presidents Clinton and Bush frequently encouraged citizens to directly contact Congress. When pushing for his economic agenda, Clinton concluded, “Now, I ask you to call or write your Senators. Ask them to take action on our jobs and economic recovery package” (3 April, 1993). Advocating for the crime bill, he urged citizens to “Tell your Representatives on Capitol Hill you want a crime bill” (9 October, 1993). Bush similarly encouraged citizens to attend town hall meetings to push for passage of his tax and education proposals. Sardonically stating that “the President proposes, Congress disposes,” he rejoined,

*So I have a suggestion: during the recess, many members of Congress will be holding town hall meetings, where constituents are welcome to come and express their views. You can find a list of these town halls at*

*[www.bushtaxrelief.com](http://www.bushtaxrelief.com). If your congressman has a town hall scheduled, I hope you'll consider attending it. And I hope that if you do go, you'll stand up and let your representative hear from you on school reform and tax relief. It's good citizenship, and it will make a big difference (7 April, 2001).*

Whether asking citizens to call or use online organizational methods, Clinton and Bush used the weekly address to directly call on citizens to push Congress to adopt their agendas.

When speaking directly to Congress, Clinton and Bush used active language to call Congress to action. After floods in the Midwest, Clinton asked “Congress to approve emergency assistance to help the families, farmers, businesses, and communities who've been hurt” (17 July, 1993). Coupling his defense appropriations proposals with the Fourth of July, Bush used the occasion to “urge the Congress to promptly approve my defense requests” (30 June, 2001). After September 11th, he showed deference when “asking Congress for new law enforcement authority (29 September, 2001). Bush and Clinton spoke directly to Congress in the weekly address, implicitly signaling their wants to the press and citizens in the process.

There was a noticeable decrease in the use of the weekly address to go public during Barack Obama's first year. Of the ten speeches sampled, none contained any direct call for the American people to contact Congress. Obama's language was deferential and he made very few direct requests to Congress. Speaking of federal precautions against the H1N1 flu, Obama stated and subsequently qualified that “Out of an abun-

dance of caution, I have also asked Congress for \$1.5 billion, if it's needed, to purchase additional antivirals, emergency equipment, and the development of a vaccine that can prevent this virus" (2 May, 2009).

Obama deferred to Congress on matters of deliberation and investigation, illustrating institutional respect while warning against gridlock. Obama noted on healthcare that "As we move forward in the coming weeks, I understand that Members of Congress from both parties will want to engage in a vigorous debate and contribute their own ideas. And I welcome these contributions. But what I will not accept are attempts to stall or drag our feet" (3 October, 2009). Melding his Veteran's Day message with the Fort Hood shooting, he said, "I know there will also be inquiries by Congress, and there should. But all of us should resist the temptation to turn this tragic event into the political theater that sometimes dominates the discussion here in Washington" (14 November, 2009). In these instances, the president temporally constructed capital (in)action while showing a subsequent respect for separation of powers.

## Conclusion

This article explicated a routine, yet often overlooked presidential rhetorical practice in the weekly address. Much as more prominent genres of presidential rhetoric, such as inaugurals, state of the unions, war messages, and farewells, serve to highlight and sustain vital features of the institutional presidency, the weekly address substantively sustains the presidential institution. It is

a temporal response to the immediate events occurring during a presidential administration, providing a regular response from the president for the news media and public. Whereas the public once saw the president intermittingly for primetime presidential addresses (Hart, 1987; Kernell, 2007; Kumar, 2007), the president has now become a ubiquitous presence amidst political and nonpolitical life. The weekly address has greatly contributed to this.

Analyzing the functions of the weekly address across three administrations, this article has discovered how ideologically disparate presidents have constructed, insulated, and projected the presidency in similar ways on a weekly basis. It is a routine response to the week's events that is characterized by a prominent temporal dynamic. This temporality was found in the major functions of the address as a secular sermon, mediated log, and a means for marking capital time.

These findings represent an important contribution to understanding routine presidential communications. While research constraints prevented an analysis of the full population of texts, the sampling approach employed allowed for a thorough analysis that revealed generic trends across presidencies. Future research in this area could analyze the entire population of texts across administrations or the texts within a particular administration. This would provide an even richer understanding of the address's functions and how each president has tailored the practice to meet individual constraints. Scholars can also begin to investigate how the me-

dium change of this rhetorical practice from radio to the Internet has impacted the functions of this genre.

It is apparent in their language that Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama approach the weekly address similarly despite their political differences. The circumstances afforded to the

president each Saturday morning call for a routine response that is temporal in its scope and meets the needs for an audience mainly of elites. In the process, the presidential institution and its salient functions are sustained on a weekly basis.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Some scholars treat the presidencies of William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt as the nascent beginning of the rhetorical strategy Woodrow Wilson fully inaugurated. For an example, see Saldin, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> These single-topic speeches were dramatically increased during Reagan's term, some of which can be attributed to the weekly address (Hart, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Choosing the appropriate venue has become an essential part of what has been termed "stage-crafting." The image complements the president's message and serves as an easily useable (and hopefully memorable) visual for the public and the press. This visual strategy was both highly effective and publicized in the Reagan administration with salient images and words occurring in tandem from the Brandenburg Gate and the cliffs of Normandy, France. George W. Bush's landing on the deck of the USS Abraham

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Lincoln aircraft carrier in 2003 to announce the end of major combat operations in Iraq is another such example.

<sup>4</sup> Schudson has found that news coverage of the State of the Union address has evolved from a focus on the ritual to an interpretive analysis of content and implications (1982). The possibility exists for a spiraling effect where the news media prime the criteria for presidential approval evaluations, presidential approval is influenced, and the news media's coverage is then subsequently impacted by the approval change. For instance, Horvit et al. (2008) have found that high presidential approval ratings and foreign policy-themed weekly addresses increase their coverage in elite newspapers. However, they warn that novelty begets coverage as well, which diminishes with increased pronouncements.

<sup>5</sup> During George W. Bush's presidency, cable and broadcast stations played the radio address Saturday mornings with a still image of the president and the phrase "Weekly Radio Address." President Barack Obama's videotaped

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message now melds with the news clips displayed on weekend news shows.

<sup>6</sup> Examining what many scholars would consider rhetorical genres from a cultural perspective, Ryfe (2001) argues that the president can never be “fully in control” of his speech. Events become ensconced in cultural schemas, dictating the courses of action (including the words used) associated with them. Therefore, audience expectations shape the language used and recurrent rhetorical patterns are formed. He aptly notes, “In this manner, presidents are not regulated by schemas so much as invited to embody a role that satisfies social expectations” (p. 178).

<sup>7</sup> Similar phraseology has been used by Robert L. Ivie. For a noteworthy example of his use of the construction, see: Ivie, Robert L. 2007. Fighting Terror by Rite of Redemption and Reconciliation. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 10(2), 221-248.

<sup>8</sup> President Clinton had attacked his predecessor for focusing on foreign affairs to the detriment of the economy, leading him to use domestic travel during his first term to project engagement with economic concerns (Kernell, 2007). His weekly addresses are evidence of this focus. Conversely, Clinton’s scant use of the “commander-in-chief” phrase may be a result of the attacks from the 1992 campaign on his lack of military service.