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The Rhetorical Ties That Bind (or Divide): President Barack Obama's Attitude of Tolerance in an Age of Ultra-partisanship

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THE RHETORICAL TIES THAT BIND (OR DIVIDE):
PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA'S ATTITUDE OF TOLERANCE IN AN AGE OF ULTRA-
PARTISANSHIP

by

Thomas A. Salek

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ABSTRACT

THE RHETORICAL TIES THAT BIND (OR DIVIDE): PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA'S ATTITUDE OF TOLERANCE IN AN AGE OF ULTRA- PARTISANSHIP

by

Thomas A. Salek

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016
Under the Supervision of Professor Kathryn M. Olson, Ph.D.

In this dissertation, I explore how President Barack Obama's rhetoric seeks to shift conversations away from traditional notions of the political and into more localized discussion and forms of civic engagement. Using three case studies from his second presidential term, I stress that Obama's rhetoric illustrates how a leader can use speech as the incipient act for fomenting a new attitude toward civic engagement. For Obama, this involved shifting the locus for political change away from Washington and lawmakers and onto the American electorate themselves. To empower individuals, Obama's rhetoric stressed that ultra-partisanship was a contagion facing America in the 21st century, but not a terminal illness. To bypass conflict affiliated with ultra-partisanship, Obama advocated that Americans adopt an attitude of tolerance or the idea that all political voices deserve credence. I stress that Obama's speech sought to widen public culture by building on rhetoric's constitutive function to cultivate an attitude of tolerance. However, I argue that Obama's rhetoric and attitude of tolerance fall short of shifting public policy and culture forward on the issues of same-sex marriage, gun control, and institutional racism. Tolerance in itself does not necessarily provide a solvent means to address contentious issues because it promotes the passive acceptance of plurality, rather than public

transformation of a specific social harm and ill. As such, Obama's rhetoric provides a seemingly optimistic vision for engaging public affairs by stressing the need for tolerance, but never fully advocates how a coalition of individual change agents can be mobilized into a community that has a central goal.

Keywords: Barack Obama, Burkean attitude, constitutive rhetoric, decentralized leadership, tolerance, presidential rhetoric, rhetorical presidency

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Introduction:

Bypassing Ultra-Partisan Conflict through Rhetoric

In February 2015, President Barack Obama sat down for an interview with *Vox*'s editor-in-chief Ezra Klein to discuss America's current state and his political legacy. As he began his seventh year in the White House, Obama had an average approval rating of approximately 43 percent, the president's lowest on record.¹ In the interview, Klein asked Obama about America's ultra-partisan political environment, his label as the most polarizing president, and any advice he would offer the next chief executive. Obama answered by stressing that although America may be in an age of heightened partisanship, such division was not indicative of the public. Obama explained that changes to campaign finance laws, increases in political polling, and the mainstream media's reliance on partisan talking points "contribute to politics being more polarized than people actually are."² In other words, the president reiterated a point from his 2015 State of the Union; Obama had a firm belief that the country, and his administration, could continue to address and help the needs of the public—legally through the presidential powers provided to the Executive Branch, as well as using rhetoric to mobilize individuals at the grassroots level.³

Focusing on how to reach a future where political change was possible outside partisan gridlock, Obama continued his statement to *Vox*. Obama emphasized how the next president

¹ At the beginning of 2015, Gallup produced an average of Obama's approval rating from all polls conducted throughout 2014. See Kendall Breitman, "Obama's Gallup Approval Rating is Lowest Yet in Year 6," *Politico*, January 20, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/01/obama-gallup-approval-rating-2014-114399.html>.

² "Obama: The *Vox* Interview, Part One Domestic Policy," *Vox*, February 9, 2015, <http://www.vox.com/a/barack-obama-interview-vox-conversation/obama-domestic-policy-transcript>.

³ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address, January 20, 2015," *The White House*, January 20, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>.

could appeal to the American public through varying rhetorical tactics and avenues for civic engagement, stressing,

So my advice to a future president is to increasingly try to bypass the traditional venues that create divisions and try to find new venues within this new media [environment] that are quirkier, less predictable. You know yesterday I did three interviews with YouTube stars that generally don't spend a lot of time talking about politics. And the reason we did it is because they're reaching viewers who don't want to be in some particular camp. On the other hand, when you talk to them very specifically about college costs or about health care or about any of the other things that touch on their individual lives, it turns out that you can probably build a pretty good consensus.⁴

Obama's *Vox* interview illustrates that the president is attuned to the volatile nature of 21st century American politics. For rhetorical scholars, his comments draw attention to the notion that communication practices can be responsible for creating, bypassing, or attenuating ultra-partisanship. In order to appeal to the American electorate, Obama noted the need to bypass partisan strife and speak candidly to citizens on individual issues.

Although Obama's *Vox* interview indicated that American politics was fractured and toxic, by his seventh year in the White House, the president had formulated a nontraditional and personalized form of leadership. On some political issues, such as immigration and cybersecurity, Obama bypassed political gridlock in the Legislative Branch by using the unitary powers afforded to the Executive Branch.⁵ Executive actions have been one avenue by which

⁴ "Obama," *Vox*.

⁵ For specifics on how these executive actions function and what they accomplish legislatively, see Barack Obama, "Executive Order – Commission on Enhancing National Cybersecurity," *The White House*, February 9, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/09/executive-order-commission-enhancing-national-cybersecurity>; Barack

Obama has pursued social change throughout his presidency; another path for change has been presidential rhetoric. Throughout his presidency, Obama used rhetoric as a means to address various political issues while coaching a discursive shift in how Americans communicate about public affairs. For instance, in order to enact political movement on issues such as same-sex marriage, gun violence, and race, Obama's rhetoric bypassed partisan strife and argued for the value of a decentralized leadership approach that sought to empower individual voters. Although these social issues may have needed action from lawmakers in the Legislative Branch, rhetoric provided the president a potential means to empower individual Americans. Speaking out on certain social issues, Obama asked Americans to help alter how these topics were discussed in public, but also how individuals could help shape the future direction of American democracy.

Throughout his presidency, particularly in his second term, Obama's rhetoric illustrated how a leader could use speech as the potential means to inspire members of the public. This dissertation explores President Obama's rhetoric, analyzing how his discourse functioned as the incipient act for fomenting a new attitude toward civic engagement. For Obama, this involved shifting the locus for political change away from Washington and lawmakers and onto the American electorate themselves. To empower individuals, Obama's rhetoric stressed that ultra-partisanship was a contagion facing the nation, but not a terminal illness. To bypass conflict affiliated with ultra-partisanship, Obama advocated that Americans adopt an attitude of tolerance or the idea that all political voices deserve credence. In Obama's rhetoric and leadership approach, there are certain symbolic ties that individuals can leverage to fulfill their role as

Obama, "Executive Order 13636: Improving Critical Infrastructure Cybersecurity," *The White House*, February 12, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/executive-order-improving-critical-infrastructure-cybersecurity>; "Executive Actions on Immigration," *Department of Homeland Security*, April 15, 2015, <https://www.uscis.gov/immigrationaction>; Michael D. Shear, "Obama, Daring Congress, Acts to Overhaul Immigration," *New York Times*, November 20, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/21/us/obama-immigration-speech.html>.

empowered citizens. Much like his campaign rhetoric built on hope and change, Obama's governing rhetoric attempted to shift American politics to a more personalized level. Tolerance or the acceptance of a plurality of viewpoints provided the foundation for by passing ultra-partisan conflict by asking Americans to adopt an individual attitude. Although Obama's rhetoric provides the outline of his vision of the political process and personalized form of citizenship, his speech falls short of providing specific direction for how Americans could move beyond ultra-partisanship and a divided government. As future chapters of this dissertation will illustrate, Obama's attitude shift was a noble and promising objective, but difficult to sustain at a rhetorical level when one is the head of a political party and the nation's chief executive.

On the eve of the 2016 presidential election, political scientists, pollsters, and rhetorical scholars have noted that the current political environment is clouded by partisan politics. Kathryn M. Olson claims that politicians on the left and right can use intransigent rhetoric to shy away from engaging alternative viewpoints. In this kind of argumentative strategy, rhetors refuse to entertain alternative perspectives, "regardless of important new facts to the contrary or unequivocal negative feedback from one's constituents."⁶ Instead of promoting ideological tolerance, intransigence can create gridlock and a climate of ultra-partisanship by further entrenching politicians and citizens at varying ends of the political spectrum. Rather than labeling the current political environment at the level of politicians and elected officials as intransigent, Jeremy Engels argues that resentment fuels much contemporary public discourse, resulting in a violent and politically fractured citizenry.⁷ In Engels's framework, groups who

⁶ Kathryn M. Olson, "Intransigence and Self-Justification as a Political Way of Life," in *Venomous Speech: Problems with American Political Discourse on the Right and Left*, ed. Clarke Rountree, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 43.

⁷ Jeremy Engels, *The Politics of Resentment: A Genealogy* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 5.

employ resentment rhetorically “prolong hostility, rage, and resentment at a purported [enemy who is the] cause of suffering.”⁸ Similar to intransigence, resentment⁹ forces groups onto irreconcilable sides of a debate, making arguments and deliberation at the governmental and individual level difficult.¹⁰

Intransigence and resentment are two rhetorical tactics available to rhetors in an age of ultra-partisanship, but they are not the only options. Rhetoric can also be harnessed to open the door to deliberation—even at the individual level. For rhetors like Obama, the difficulty is trying to find ways to construct optimistic arguments that do not further entrench the partisan divide. President Obama’s rhetoric highlights a rhetor who sought to promote individual empowerment and a process-oriented attitude of tolerance. However, his leadership stops short of rallying individuals into a coalition that could pursue social change. Emphasizing a process for citizenship predicated on tolerance, Obama’s rhetoric sounds inspirational and diagnoses the ills associated with ultra-partisanship. Tolerance is grounded in a disposition of patience where someone does not engage “bigotry or undue severity in judging the conduct of others.” As such, tolerance is the “ability to accept without immunological reaction.” In this kind of public attitude, transformation is not possible because tolerance involves the “action or practice of enduring or sustaining.”¹¹ A process-oriented attitude of tolerance may temporarily bypass the

⁸ Jeremy Engels, “The Politics of Resentment and the Tyranny of the Minority: Rethinking Victimhood for Resentful Times,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2010), 322.

⁹ In addition to Engels, Marlia Banning has noted the power of resentment in public discourse. Banning suggests that resentment creates emotional rhetoric that halts deliberation. See Marlia Banning, *Manufacturing Uncertainty: Contemporary U.S. Public Life and the Conservative Right* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

¹⁰ Engels, “The Politics of Resentment and the Tyranny of the Minority,” 322.

¹¹ All definitions of tolerance are based on the Oxford English Dictionary. See “tolerance, n.”. *OED Online*. December 2015. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/202979?rskey=ufwIup&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 02, 2016).

harms associated with ultra-partisanship, but does not seek to create an opening for individuals to coalesce into a community. Moreover, tolerance allows existing ideological entrenchment to be free from judgment and accepted. Rather than functioning as an empowering rhetoric, an attitude of tolerance promotes the need for individual self-awareness, but encourages quiescence of the current state.

Obama's attitude of tolerance also embodies the president's decentralized leadership approach. For Obama, tolerance bypasses partisan conflict by creating a dispersed community that allows an infinite plurality of voices to coexist in public culture, but remain intact. To advocate for change, Obama's decentralized form of leadership functions like the chemical process of emulsion. In chemistry, emulsion is a process where energy blends two or more insoluble liquids into a "disperse system."¹² After the process of emulsion, insoluble liquids appear to be one on an observable level. However, this is only for a temporary moment of time. At a chemical level, each insoluble liquid remains intact. After a certain period of time, these liquids separate and are no longer appear as one until another period of emulsion. Leadership based on this kind of model would use rhetoric as a driving force to blend together a plurality of opinions, but not alter the underlying substance of each voice. Rhetorical emulsion allows a rhetor to blend differing ideological perspectives together to appear unified for certain periods of time, but preserves their ideological distinctiveness. Eventually, the driving energy force fades and existing insoluble substances remain intact and separate.

Throughout his tenure in the White House, tolerance and a decentralized leadership approach allowed Obama to bypass ultra-partisan conflict. In turn, this kind of rhetorical strategy allowed the president the means to propose modest, incremental short-term actions that

¹² Hans-Dieter Jakubke and Hans Jeschkeit, *Concise Encyclopedia of Chemistry*, trans. Mary Eagleson (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1994) 368.

individuals could take to advance the political process. However, tolerance does not provide a driving force for change within the American democratic system. Rhetors who use this form of leadership may use rhetoric to passively energize individuals, but not ask them to transform because it prevents judgment and the division necessary to change. In other words, the rhetorical force associated with Obama's decentralized leadership style and attitude of tolerance may sound inclusive, but does not advocate that citizens move beyond our current state. This decentralized form of leadership is inherently weak because rhetoric may be used to energize the public on a visible or superficial level, but the underlying substance remains intact and untransformed. Thus, decentralized leadership and an attitude of tolerance can provide a way to bypass conflict, but existing ideological entrenchments remain. As such, this leadership approach and rhetorical style only stalls transformation by asking the public to be tolerant of every voice.

This dissertation explores a small, but important fraction of Obama's rhetoric, highlighting a range of different ways that the president attempted to advocate for hope and change in an age of ultra-partisanship. This dissertation also illustrates a president who is attuned to a gridlocked political system that is plagued by intransigence and resentment, as well as seen as heavily favoring the interests of wealthy Americans, lobbyists, and corporations.¹³ As such, this dissertation will argue that Obama's presidential rhetoric tried to bypass ultra-partisanship by engaging certain wedge issues, asking audience members to be true to their personal beliefs. To reach this end, the president advocated individuals engage in communication about public

¹³ A number of scholars have examined this phenomenon. Among many, see Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Patrick J. Flavin, "Income Inequality and Policy Representation in the American States," *Political Science* 40, no. 1 (2012), 29-59; Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014), 564-581.

problems on a localized level outside traditional partisan strife. Instead of appealing to a particular political ideology or reiterating partisan talking points, Obama's rhetoric on change cites polling data to illustrate that Americans already have converging public opinion across party lines. Rather than asking the public to engage in a political debate across partisan divides, Obama's rhetoric stresses that change can happen if Americans are "authentic" with themselves in their personal and political lives. This involved bypassing partisanship through adopting an attitude of tolerance, rather than publicly engaging ideological differences.

In contrast to presidential rhetoric that seeks a policy shift or organizes a coalition of Americans into a broader community, this dissertation explores Obama's rhetoric on certain wedge issues where there is some flexibility in public opinion. As such, I explore Obama's attempt to coach a long-term attitudinal¹⁴ shift on Americans' engagement in public affairs by moving expectations for social change from a top-down to bottom-up approach. This kind of attitudinal shift requires social change to be sought from individual members of the public, rather than heroic authoritarian lawmakers. Although sometimes labeled one of the most polarizing presidents, the texts analyzed in this dissertation illustrate that Obama's decentralized form of leadership and notion of democracy is based in empowering individuals to adopt an attitude of tolerance and reveals its consequence of little policy change. In fact, much of Obama's governing rhetoric seeks to bypass partisan conflict. Exploring Obama's leadership in the months leading up the 2012 election and throughout his second presidential term, I contend that the president's rhetoric promoted the notion that Americans should embrace tolerance when

¹⁴ Although there are multiple ways of understanding "attitude" in the field of rhetorical studies, I base this dissertation's understanding of attitude in the writings of Kenneth Burke. Attitude is defined and fully explored in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. However, a brief explanation of an attitude can be summarized as: "'Attitudes,' in their nature as incipient acts, likewise have this 'fixed' quality, summing things up like a lyric." See Kenneth Burke, Burke, *Attitudes toward History*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 348.

approaching public affairs. Through this kind of symbolic action, the president bypassed taking a firm stance on various political issues and pushed political responsibility into the hands of the electorate and members of congress. This process-oriented attitude of tolerance sought organic change from the grassroots, but its inherent weakness is that it never provided a fully developed vision of America's future state. Tolerance creates an impotent rhetoric that widens individuals' ability to endure their current state and accept plurality, but does not allow public transformation to occur because there is no dense common ground to build from. As such, tolerance in itself is a weak approach for pursuing leadership, especially in an age of ultra-partisanship, because it promotes acceptance of the current state, rather than seeking public transformation.

How Rhetorical Scholarship Can Facilitate Change in an Age of Ultra-Partisanship

Rhetorical scholars have noted the potential power of rhetoric in an age of ultra-partisanship and governmental distrust. In the midst of the Nixon Administration and a crisis of confidence in American politics, rhetorical scholars reflected on the value of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism at a conference and through a series of papers published in the 1970s called the Wingspread Reports. Although rhetoric may have instrumental value and help presidents enact political policies, public discourse has a broader, more enduring function. According to the Wingspread scholars, "Institutions in a free society are as good as the rhetorical transactions that maintain them. It is disturbing to note, therefore, the increasing evidence that communication is ever more difficult to achieve and in some cases almost impossible."¹⁵ Reflecting on the events of the 1960s, these scholars noted the many different functions of rhetoric that still exist today and their contribution to public culture.

¹⁵ Douglas Ehninger, et al., "Report of the Committee on the Scope of Rhetoric and the Place of Rhetorical Studies in Higher Education," in *The Prospect of Rhetoric: Report of the National Development Project*, eds. Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black (Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 209.

As I write in an age of ultra-partisanship and at a time when many see rhetoric as a meaningless hindrance to the political process, this dissertation explores the argumentative strategies in Obama's rhetoric as a means to understand our current political situation. In this regard, the goal of this dissertation is aligned with the Wingspread scholars in advocating for rhetorical scholarship not as a "solution to social, political, or personal problems," but an examination into "how and in what ways man uses and is used by symbols of inducement."¹⁶ Specifically, this dissertation is written with the firm belief that "[t]he most immediate social responsibility of rhetorical scholarship in the United States is to ameliorate, insofar as scholarship can, the diremption that has occurred in our public language to investigate further the reasons for that fissure and, more challenging still, the prospects for transcending it."¹⁷ By critically examining the argumentative strategies in Obama's public discourse, I explore how rhetoric could potentially be used as a means to bypass ultra-partisanship and avoid strategies of intransigence and resentment. In Obama's case, his goal was noble, but tolerance was inherently too weak to address the real material constraints of a politically gridlocked system on a short-term basis. Despite the weakness of Obama's rhetoric, the underlying assumption guiding this dissertation is that, in order to transcend ultra-partisanship, the first step is to understand that changes in government or public policy are only as good as the kind of rhetoric and public attitudes that surround them at the national, local, and individual levels. Thus, changing individual Americans' attitudes toward democracy and communication practices is a necessary first step toward attenuating a gridlocked political system populated by resentful and intransigent lawmakers and unengaged citizens. Obama's rhetoric may have sought an optimistic way to

¹⁶ Ehninger, "Report of the Committee on the Scope of Rhetoric," 210.

¹⁷ Ehninger, "Report of the Committee on the Scope of Rhetoric," 210.

move to a future state, but was too weak to bind together divergent communities for an extended period of time.

In this dissertation, I contend that Obama's rhetoric seeks to shift conversations away from traditional notions of the political and into more localized discussion and forms of civic engagement that allow for a plurality of voices and paths forward. I explain that Obama accomplishes this task by rhetorically constructing ambiguity in a text. Through this argumentative strategy, Obama's rhetoric does not judge politics or social change in terms of laws, executive orders or partisan wins. I argue that Obama's speech seeks to widen public culture by building on rhetoric's constitutive function and using discourse to cultivate a new process-oriented attitude of tolerance. Consistent with this attitude of tolerance, Obama places faith in the American people, asking them to actively participate in the discussion of public affairs on an individual and situational basis.

Through this dissertation's context and analysis chapters, I stress that one of the strengths of this approach for engaging public affairs is that it is in stark contrast with strategies of resentment and intransigence. Tolerance promotes an optimistic attitude that embraces plurality. However, one of the trained incapacities of this attitudinal shift is that it swings too far in the opposite direction of intransigence and resentment. An attitude of tolerance asks citizens to endure the present and accept all voices, rather than dealing with the violence, discrimination, and conflict that divide Americans in an ultra-partisan age. In other words, Obama's rhetoric uses ambiguity to widen the public's process toward civic participation through tolerance, but this approach provides too much flexibility for individuals and too little driving energy toward effective coalescence. As such, Obama's rhetoric never fully reasons where this process of tolerance will take America politically nor how it will help ameliorate the inherent problems

associated with ultra-partisanship. To make this argument, this dissertation builds on previous scholarship of the forty-fourth president, revealing fresh facets of Obama's rhetorical style. Finally, this dissertation's conclusion offers an optimistic alternative rhetorical option that may help transform the gridlock affiliated with ultra-partisanship.

As Obama noted to *Vox*, due to changes in campaign financing laws, a fractured media market, and other material forces, arguing for widespread political change is getting harder for lawmakers and advocates. These conditions aside, I stress that Obama's attitude of tolerance is not an effective tool for pursuing social change on a short-term basis. It may be an ideal that individuals can pursue in their personal lives, but not a solvent solution for short-term public or political transformation. As such, I contend that theoretical notions of the rhetorical presidency may not be an effective means to measure President Obama's rhetoric because his public speech does not necessarily seek to accomplish short-term policy goals. Instead, the overarching research question that guides this study is: how can presidential rhetoric help or hinder Americans' understanding of their public role as citizens in an age of ultra-partisanship? In pursuit of answering this broad question, this study offers insight into the function of presidential rhetoric in the 21st century. Through three case studies, I investigate the ways President Obama used ambiguity to promote an attitude of tolerance. I also interrogate how presidents can use his or her governing discourse as the basis for rhetorically molding his or her political legacy. In pursuit of these goals, each analysis chapter assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Obama's rhetoric of tolerance and decentralized form of presidential leadership. Alongside this investigation, this dissertation examines how the forty-fourth president's rhetoric differs from previous models of presidential rhetoric by stressing how citizens could shift their expectations

away of civic engagement away from lawmakers and toward their involvement in the political process.

Before highlighting how Obama has rhetorically bypassed partisanship and advocated for an attitude of tolerance, the next three chapters provide the contextual foundation for this dissertation. Chapter 1 begins by investigating America's current ultra-partisan political and rhetorical environment. Outlining this environment provides the scene for why Obama's rhetorical strategies may sound optimistic, but overcompensate for intransigent and resentful rhetoric deployed by other politicians. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the negative effects of ultra-partisanship. In this chapter I also stress how tolerance does not seek to bridge partisanship, but instead only bypasses conflict and further entrenches political divides. Like resentment and intransigence, tolerance merely perpetuates the negative constraints associated with an age of ultra-partisanship.

Chapter 2 provides an introduction to Obama's biography and his notion of leadership, as well as criticisms of his presidency. This chapter illustrates how Obama's attitude of tolerance is in line with his earlier work as a community organizer and description of leadership. Chapter 2 also explains how Obama's rhetoric stands as a representative anecdote or example of an American president who attempts to construct an optimistic rhetorical alternative for how Americans approach civic engagement. In order to accomplish this goal, Chapter 2 includes an overview of scholarship on the rhetorical presidency and presidential rhetoric, situating my argument in how Obama or future presidents can engage in public advocacy in an age of ultra-partisanship. Using examples from Obama's biography, I analyze the president's decentralized form of leadership. Moreover, this chapter emphasizes that Obama's notion of political change is situated in empowering individuals.

Chapter 3 provides the theoretical and methodological basis for this dissertation's argument about how rhetoric can contribute to the construction of a public attitude. Through the constitutive function of rhetoric, Obama's public discourse coaches a public attitude of tolerance that bypasses ultra-partisanship. To pursue this attitudinal shift, Obama's arguments rely on strategic ambiguity and a call to the authentic. In this chapter, I explain that one goal of this kind of presidential rhetoric is widening the ambiguity available for interlocutors who may be engaged in public debate. In turn, this kind of rhetoric provides the president an opening to create arguments about how and where larger change can occur by speaking frankly, and intimately, about complex social issues. However, I stress that Obama's rhetoric and attitude of tolerance fall short of shifting public policy and culture forward. Tolerance in itself does not necessarily provide a solvent means to address contentious issues because it promotes the acceptance of plurality, rather than public transformation of a specific social harm and ill. As such, Obama's rhetoric provides a seemingly optimistic vision for engaging public affairs by stressing the need for tolerance, but never fully advocates how a coalition of individual change agents can be mobilized into a community that has a central identity and goal.

The final three chapters of this dissertation examine President Obama's rhetoric on same-sex marriage, gun violence, and race. The case studies selected for this dissertation are representative of situations where public transformation could happen through rhetoric. I contend that even though some lawmakers and citizens may have advocated a firm stance on how to address these social issues, the existence of flexibility in public opinion suggests that rhetoric could be mobilized to help address these topics on a short-term and long-term basis. In order for Americans to begin to move beyond party allegiance and be true to their own beliefs on same-sex marriage, gun violence, and race, Obama's rhetoric advocated that Americans should model

a process-oriented attitude of tolerance. Chapter 4 examines Obama's 2012 announcement in favor of same-sex marriage. Obama's comments on this wedge issue came in May of 2012 when nearly 50 percent of Americans supported same-sex marriage, in contrast to 45 percent who opposed it.¹⁸ Chapter 5 investigates Obama's rhetoric on gun violence in the aftermath of the December 2012 tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary. Throughout late 2012 and early 2013, more than 80 percent of Americans supported proposed policies and community solutions that called for modest measures to help control gun violence.¹⁹ Chapter 6 analyzes Obama's rhetoric on race following the June of 2015 mass shooting at a Charleston, South Carolina church. In the following weeks, nearly six in ten Americans, including whites and blacks, noted that race relations were generally bad. Moreover, four in ten stated that race relations were getting worse in America.²⁰ Finally, this dissertation's conclusion summarizes Obama's decentralized form of leadership and attitude of tolerance. In this final chapter, I offer recommendations for how future American presidents can attenuate the political gridlock associated with periods of ultra-partisanship.

¹⁸ Nate Silver, "Support for Gay Marriage Outweighs Opposition in Polls," *Five Thirty Eight* [New York Times blog], May 9, 2012, <http://nyti.ms/TolzpH>.

¹⁹ Scott Clement, "90 Percent of Americans Want Expanded Background Checks on Guns. Why Isn't This a Political Slam Dunk," *Washington Post*, April 3, 2013, <http://wpo.st/aBzM1>.

²⁰ Kevin Sack and Megan Thee-Brenan, "Poll Finds Most in U.S. Hold Dim View of Race Relations," *New York Times*, July 23, 2015, <http://nyti.ms/1HMwkMf>.

Chapter 1:

America's Current State of Ultra-Partisanship

In the 21st century, politicians have used intransigent and resentful rhetoric to entrench and divide citizens along partisan lines. For instance, Texas Senator Ted Cruz has rallied voters through rhetoric that casts moderation and political compromise in a negative light. One such occasion was on October 12, 2013, at the Family Research Council's Values Voter Summit. Speaking to a crowd of ultra-conservative Tea Party supporters, Cruz outlined the current state of the country, explaining, "These are extraordinary times. These are not typical times. The challenges facing this country are unlike any we have ever seen."¹ Addressing the threat of President Obama's politics, specifically the recent passage of the Affordable Care Act, more commonly known as Obamacare, Cruz warned, "We have a couple of years to turn this country around or we fall off a cliff into oblivion." Cruz continued, declaring,

I'm going to suggest a model for how we turn this country around in the next couple of years, and it is the model that we have been following together for the last couple of months: to stop that train wreck, that disaster, that nightmare that is Obamacare.

Cruz cast ultra-conservatives as a group harmed and marginalized by President Obama and disrespected by a political culture that did not fully adhere to their conservative ideological principles. In order to "restore that shining city on the hill that is the United States of America," Cruz prescribed resistance to President Obama and Obamacare through collective, loud antagonism. For politicians like Cruz, intransigent and resentful rhetoric situates members of the public on irreconcilable ends of the political spectrum. Through this kind of rhetorical strategy,

¹ All quotations from this speech have been transcribed from a video uploaded to the Family Research Council's YouTube page. FRCAction, "Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) at Values Voter Summit 2013," filmed [October 11, 2013], YouTube video, 29:42, posted [October 11, 2013], https://youtu.be/vvL4sV_oTIQ.

compromise and cooperation are cast negatively or even traitorous because there are some issues where a partisan stance is indisputable. For these kinds of rhetors and their followers, standing by one's principles, even if it causes a government shutdown or political gridlock, is seen as a necessary means for advancing ideological political goals.

Currently, American politics is plagued by resentful, intransigent, and uncooperative rhetoric. Rather than believing that these rhetorical strategies are acceptable or necessary forms of public discourse, this dissertation offers another rhetorical alternative. I use President Obama's rhetoric and leadership style as a case study for illustrating the strengths and weaknesses involved with pursuing an optimistic tone that seeks individual empowerment through an attitude of tolerance. To investigate how the American public received Obama's rhetoric, I cite political polling and how his discourse circulated on various forms of media. I stress one strength of Obama's rhetoric is that it seeks to empower individual Americans on a personal level by reminding them that in order to transcend a state of gridlock in the Legislative Branch it is important to shift expectations for political success away from lawmakers and onto the American electorate itself. However, I concede that Obama's rhetoric ultimately only promotes an attitude of tolerance that provides quiescence toward our current state. As such, even though the president stresses that Americans can and should discuss public issues on a personal level, his rhetoric never provides direction on how this can help ameliorate the existing and deeply entrenched ideological and material constraints facing the nation.

In this chapter, I outline America's current state of ultra-partisanship and how scholars in the fields of communication studies and political science have noted its dangerous effects on American democracy. In addition to providing an overview of previous scholarship, this chapter argues how Obama's strategy of tolerance may sound inspiring and seem like a noble goal for

attenuating a state of government gridlock, but, in actuality, such tolerance only further entrenches the partisan divide. This chapter ends by pointing out that, despite being in a state of government gridlock, the American public still maintains faith in the American democratic system. Moreover, throughout Obama's second presidential term, some of the political changes that he spoke in favor of could be realized through rhetorical appeals. Yet, Obama's rhetorical strategies did not adequately capitalize on all the positive constraints of his rhetorical situation.

Ultra-Partisan Gridlock Throughout the Obama Administration

Throughout the Obama presidency, political partisanship has been at an all-time high as evidenced by a growing ideological chasm between Democrats and Republicans.² In mid-2014, 92 percent of Republicans were more conservative than the median Democrat. Similarly, 94 percent of Democrats were more liberal than the median Republican.³ Political scientist Gary C. Jacobson attributes this climate to American voters who have grown more ideologically distinct and loyal to their party, as well as politicians fashioning electoral districts that are more ideologically homogenous. As a result, Obama faced a difficult battle with many attempts to pass bipartisan legislation through Congress, particularly once Republicans controlled both chambers. For Obama, Republican members of Congress have often shirked compromise on political policy because they "share few voters with a president of the opposite party, giving them very little electoral incentive or cooperation to work with him."⁴ Members of a president's opposing party may be more likely to vote against his or her policies, but in the 21st century, Jacobson contends

² Gary C. Jacobson explains that the ideological gap between the two political parties in the 112th Congress (2011-2012) was the highest observed in data that dates back to 1879. See Gary C. Jacobson, "Partisan Polarization in American Politics: A Background Paper," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2013), 690.

³ "Political Polarization in the American Public," *Pew Research Center*, June 22, 2014, <http://pewrsr.ch/1mHUL02>.

⁴ Jacobson, "Partisan Polarization in American Politics," 697.

that both highly-partisan Democrat and Republican politicians and the voters who elected them have helped create a climate where intransigence, not compromise, is rewarded.⁵ The effect of this ultra-partisan climate caused Washington legislative action to slow to a glacial pace throughout the Obama presidency, particularly evident in the 2011 and 2013 debt ceiling votes and the 2013 16-day government shutdown—the longest in the nation’s history. As a result of this political climate, by mid-2014 public trust of government remained, on average, around 24 percent. At the same time, 62 percent of Americans said they were frustrated with the federal government and another 19 percent said they were outright angry.⁶

Even though Americans may distrust government and ideological perspectives may diverge into polarization, Americans still contend that they care about political issues. According to Martin P. Wattenberg and Sierra Powell, American voters have increasingly rallied around political policies since 2008. In other words, during Obama’s presidency, American voters appear more and more concerned about specific issues. However, Wattenberg and Powell also affirm that although the electorate may be “politically sophisticated,” they have “a paucity of political knowledge.”⁷ Voters may be concerned about a particular issue, but they do not necessarily have a fully outlined rationale or understanding of their own particular stances. Partisanship and distrust may be up, but the American public maintains that they are still paying attention to their preferred political issues—even if such attention occurs at a superficial level of engagement.

⁵ Jacobson, “Partisan Polarization in American Politics,” 704.

⁶ “Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology,” *Pew Research Center*, June 26, 2014, <http://pewrsr.ch/1nGWIul>.

⁷ Martin P. Wattenberg and Sierra Powell, “A Policy-Oriented Electorate: Evaluating Candidates and Parties in the Obama Elections Compared to the 1952-1980 Period,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2015), 555.

Political scientists have associated partisanship with a number of areas, even how humans' process information, socialize, and formulate community. Thomas Talhelm and colleagues discovered a correlation between partisan preference and analytic and holistic thought styles. Although carefully explaining that analytic and holistic styles are not hard-wired in the human brain nor do they fully and consistently determine an individual's political preference, Talhelm and colleagues charted small to moderate correlations between these different ways of processing information and partisanship:

If liberals have an analytic style that focuses on individual agencies, their moral thinking could emphasize the protection of those individuals by emphasizing the care and fairness foundations (which often function to protect individuals, sometimes at the expense of social order). In contrast, social conservatives have a holistic thought style, which could emphasize the connections between people—including their role-based duties to each other and their groups.⁸

In addition to charting correlations between cognitive thinking and partisanship, political scientists have also noted the influence of an individual's self-defined and community-centered ideological identity. Lilliana Mason contends that although American voters may have a strong interest in political issues and formulate their own opinions, identity and identity alignment are stronger. She writes, "In contrast to issue positions, which should be logically linked to political decisions, identity is simply a group attachment. It does not necessarily have logical content behind it."⁹ As a result of one's commitment to a political party or political ideology, individuals

⁸ Thomas Talhelm, Jonathan Haidt, Shigehiro Oishi, Xuemin Zhang, Felicity F. Miao, and Shimin Chen, "Liberals Think More Analytically (More 'WEIRD') Than Conservatives," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (2015), 264.

⁹ Lilliana Mason, "I Disrespectfully Agree': The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 1 (2015), 142.

can have “large changes in political thought, behavior, and emotion that are disconnected from simple policy preferences.”¹⁰ As a whole, in America’s 21st century, partisanship tends to overshadow any other forms of identity and community such as race, gender, class, or other qualifiers. Although these forms of identity play a role in how Americans approach political issues, political science research suggests that Americans often make policy and voting decisions based more on partisan preference. In short, rather than voting based on policy or formulating an opinion by processing information through his or her own stance on the issues, Americans often evaluate politics and vote based on a “team spirit” partisan mentality.

Americans’ paradoxical attitude toward civic engagement can be seen through how citizens discuss specific political issues, but still maintain a firm commitment to their preferred political party. For example, in a September 26, 2014 episode of *Real Time With Bill Maher*, documentary filmmaker Alexandra Pelosi interviewed Americans about who they would be voting for in the upcoming 2014 mid-term elections. In one exchange, Pelosi asked an unnamed middle-aged man his stance on Planned Parenthood, same-sex marriage, and equal pay for women. Despite being a self-identified Republican, the man said he was in favor of legislation supporting all these issues—a traditionally Democratic stance. However, when asked who he would vote for in the upcoming election, the unnamed man replied, “When I look at the ballot, it’s going to have to be an RRRRR!” Pelosi continued to question this man, asking, “Who’s your congressman?” Frustrated, the man replied, “I don’t really know.”¹¹ Pelosi’s video highlights American voters’ paradoxical attitude toward public affairs. The unnamed man illustrates that, despite holding specific views on certain political issues, his piety to his preferred political party

¹⁰ Mason, “I Disrespectfully Agree,” 142.

¹¹ RealTime, “Real Time With Bill Maher: Flip A District—September 26, 2014,” filmed [September 26, 2014], YouTube video, 7:03, posted [September 30, 2014], <https://youtu.be/bLstr3mz9uI>.

held a profound influence over how he was going to vote in the upcoming election. In this case, even though this particular American may be aware of policy and have his own opinions on specific issues, he was unable to articulate why he maintained allegiance to a political party that does not represent his own political viewpoints. Whether examining this video clip or the rhetoric of Senator Cruz, it is clear that, in an age of ultra-partisanship, piety to a political party or ideological identity holds a profound influence over the American public and lawmakers when entering the voting booth or even attempting to discuss politics. It is also noteworthy that this clip shows a man who is tolerant, not resentful, of the views of others. Even after a polite exchange of ideas and expression of political beliefs, the man still refused to engage in entertaining voting behaviors that represent his beliefs, rather than party allegiance. He may not have used a resentful tone like Cruz, but his ideological position and voting behavior did not match his personal political beliefs.

The Political Impact of America's Current Rhetorical State

America's current rhetorical state seems to resemble James Madison's often-cited "Federalist No. 10" on the danger of mischievous political factions—partisan groups who act out of political self-interest rather than the will of the American people. In 1787, Madison explained the dangers of these kinds of groups, writing,

By a faction I understand a number of citizens, whether accounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interest of the community.¹²

¹² See James Madison, "Federalist Number 10: November 22, 1787," in *The Federalist*, ed. J. R. Pole (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), 48.

Madison's prescient commentary provides some insight into the effects of resentment and intransigence in an age of ultra-partisanship. Once individuals or communities become blinded by ideological preferences, communal discussion and cooperation between groups is less likely. In the early 21st century, it seems as though compromise, or even political advocacy from a bipartisan perspective, is difficult.

In Burkean terms, America's current situation severely minimizes areas of ambiguity on public issues that allow for change or transformation to occur.¹³ Rather than engaging ideas and alternative viewpoints, ultra-partisanship has stymied political argument by focusing on the "who" or group identity involved in public argument. In other words, much like Mason's research on partisan identity or Madison's fear of factions, in an age of ultra-partisanship political argument becomes more focused on allegiance to someone's ideological preference or identity, rather than on specific policy positions or beliefs. Although individuals may care about public issues and policy concerns on a case-by-case basis, America's current rhetorical environment is cast as a Manichean battle between two political ideologies. Senator Ted Cruz is just one political leader who has contributed to this ultra-partisan discursive environment by using rhetorical strategies that avoid ambiguity between the viewpoints of conservatives and liberals. Rather than emphasizing issues where there is overlap between conservatives and liberals, Cruz's resentful and uncooperative rhetoric seeks to limit areas of ambiguity that allow change or rhetorical advocacy to be possible.

In order to advocate for change, or even the possibility of change, Kenneth Burke's theories on symbolic action stress that a rhetor must discursively capitalize on "*strategic spots at*

¹³ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), xix.

*which ambiguities necessarily arise.”*¹⁴ In other words, to foster change in an ultra-partisan climate, a rhetor like the president, must bypass pious political allegiance by strategically harnessing those terms, issues, and arguments where ambiguity is most likely to thrive. Part of this task involves educating the public on certain wedge issues where there is some flexibility in public opinion. Another is connecting to the interests of the public at a more local, private, or individual level. The final aspect would be to leverage one’s position of power to execute leadership that not only asks individuals to be more engaged on a personal or individual level, but also creates a coalition of followers who accomplish a specific common goal and construct a sustainable future democratic state based in collaboration.

I contend that the possibility for political change in America is still achievable in an age of ultra-partisanship. In fact, the first step to ameliorating America’s current state of ultra-partisanship is examining the country’s communication practices and political rhetoric. Rhetorical scholarship can serve as a foundation for finding viable solutions to help foment a cooperative American attitude toward democracy and civic engagement. I stress that ultra-partisanship is partially a rhetorical problem caused by resentment, intransigence, and even tolerance. Partisan gridlock may be caused by a number of material constraints, such as gerrymandering and the overuse of the Senate filibuster, but in order to fully understand how partisanship stymies political argument between citizens, Americans must diagnose the underlying communication problem and offer a productive path forward.

President Obama’s discourse provides a compelling, but ultimately non-solvent model for how presidential rhetoric can encourage America to bypass party identity in an attempt to seek change in an age of ultra-partisanship. Throughout his career in public service, Obama has

¹⁴ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, xvii, emphasis in original.

modeled a form of leadership based in a grassroots approach to civic engagement. From his days as a community organizer to being America's chief executive, Obama's notion of leadership has been based in helping individuals participate in a community through individual empowerment. In the president's notion of leadership, change can happen most effectively through a community of individuals who remain tolerant of the views of others. In this kind of community, party allegiance or partisan talking points are downplayed in favor of tolerance for a plurality of viewpoints. This kind of attitude allows for ambiguity, but unlike Cruz who minimizes ambiguity and contributes to ultra-partisanship, Obama overprescribes ambiguity and provides little to no common ground from which to move forward.

In 21st century American partisanship, a lack of ambiguity, or too much ambiguity, can create a tumultuous political and rhetorical storm. However, a state of dissensus is actually an inherent part of our democratic system. In Federalist No. 10, Madison noted the dangers of partisan insurrection. However, in "Federalist No. 9," Alexander Hamilton also warned against political factions, but noted that America's governing system is more than likely to exist in the midst of partisan battle than a time of calm consensus.¹⁵ In order to transcend chaos and create a unified republic or cooperative nation of states, collaboration and communication among individuals and smaller communities is of paramount importance. Hamilton's notion of democracy, and the public space it exists within, is indicative how communication practices can help or hinder political and societal changes.¹⁶ For Hamilton, dissensus is a common feature of

¹⁵ Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist Number 9: November 21, 1787," in *The Federalist*, ed. J. R. Pole (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), 41-47.

¹⁶ Theorists in a variety of fields have addressed the notion that democracy functions best when in a rowdy state or when disagreement is seen as a positive constraint. See Robert I. Ivie, "Enabling Democratic Dissent," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101, no. 1 (2015), 46-59; Robert I. Ivie, "Rhetorical Deliberation and Democratic Politics in the Here and Now," *Rhetoric & Public*

democracy. The role of the nation's chief executive is to unify citizens and promote political positions that help move the country forward. Part of this may involve asking Americans to accept others, but it also involves guiding individual members of the public into a coalition of supporters who work together—not individually—in pursuit of social change.

In order to facilitate a shift in how individuals participate in public affairs and pursue social change, ambiguity is central for any leader. Ambiguity can be rhetorically harnessed as an avenue for addressing complex social problems by stressing that the key to transformation is flexibility in public opinion and that there may be more than one solution to public problems. For Obama, advocating that individuals maintain an attitude of tolerance or accepting that a plurality of voices exists in public culture is his way of rhetorically perpetuating and harnessing ambiguity. Adam J. Gaffey illustrates the president's use of this rhetorical tactic regarding change, stating, "Obama's translation of leadership is a decentered approach that focuses on the energy of speech not merely as a distraction from policy leadership but as a prerequisite for effectively achieving it."¹⁷ In this sense, Obama's presidential leadership is not just about enacting or defining public policy unilaterally. Instead, the president's rhetoric is focused on nurturing public speech that coaches members of the public to become individual actors of change. As individuals, Americans have the agency to communicate differently about politics. However, the difficulty of this rhetoric and leadership strategy exists at the point of solvency or workability. In an age of entrenched ideological barriers, advocating for tolerance and plurality allows a leader to bypass the gridlock associated with partisan talking points, but does not

Affairs 5, no. 2 (2002), 277-285; Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism," *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999), 745-758.

¹⁷ Adam J. Gaffey, "Obama's Change: Republican Remembrance, and Rhetorical Leadership in the 2007 Presidential Announcement Speech," *Southern Communication Journal* 79, no. 5 (2014), 418.

promote a specific path that the public can pursue to move the country forward. I stress that ambiguity is of paramount importance for seeking political transformation, but too much ambiguity is just as dangerous as too little. Obama's rhetoric does not provide the sufficient energy necessary to move individuals from accepting or enduring their current state. His rhetoric provides a form of individual empowerment, but does not push members into a coalition of change agents in pursuit of social change.

Although this dissertation may argue that Obama's rhetoric falls short of creating a coalition of collaborative change agents in the short-term, I contend that his rhetoric promotes a recoverable model of decentralized leadership and illustrates how a president can mold their political legacy through speech. In each case study, Obama's rhetoric reveals his various attempts to rhetorically construct a political legacy that tries to empower individuals. Obama's rhetoric stresses American political attitudes should shift expectations for change away from lawmakers and onto themselves. Rather than asking Americans to judge or reject alternative points of view, the president's rhetoric bypasses conflict by promoting tolerance. This creates a political culture where conflict is bypassed and collaboration between parties and competing ideologies does not transpire.

Resentment, intransigence, and tolerance are all rhetorical tactics that stymie collaboration and cooperation in an age of ultra-partisanship. To pursue political transformation, different kinds of discourse and leadership need to be pursued from the nation's chief executive as a means to activate the American electorate. In order for change to happen, Jacobson notes the role of citizens. From an electoral perspective, Jacobson argues that "the only reliable source of change would be an electorate that punishes extremism and intransigence and rewards

moderation and compromise at the polls.”¹⁸ Similarly, Lawrence R. Jacobs suggests that change can be sought by citizens and politicians, but only if supported through political communication practices from a nation’s chief executive. Jacobs recognizes the difficulty of successfully promoting a public message and influencing public opinion, but contends that presidential rhetoric can facilitate changes in voting behavior. Jacobs proposes two rhetorical strategies for presidential public discourse to promote change and help diminish the gridlock affiliated with ultra-partisanship. Rather than trying to propose a grand or sweeping solution to a major public crisis, presidents can appeal to the public by proposing modest, sustained advocacy. Jacobs suggests that presidents can propose initiatives or arguments that accept their place as

partial responses to larger problems and put a premium on using the president’s public spotlight to sustain the attention of policy makers and to corral supportive legislative coalitions—even if success [is] uncertain.¹⁹

Additionally, presidents can rhetorically downplay expectations and acknowledge the difficult material conditions of an ultra-partisan age. Presidential rhetoric can focus on “provoking broad deliberation to achieve meaningful incremental progress on pressing national problems.”²⁰ This kind of rhetorical strategy may advocate for a partial response on the part of the president or the government, but the underlying premise of this argument is asking voters to be true to their own beliefs—arguing that Americans can better solve problems outside strict partisan talking points and regain their individual agency in public affairs by engaging political conflict. Party allegiance may be valuable to voters and lawmakers, but political change can only happen through an engaged coalition of citizens that publicly deliberates and discusses issues—not

¹⁸ Jacobson, “Partisan Polarization in American Politics,” 705.

¹⁹ Lawrence R. Jacobs, “Lord Bryce’s Curse: The Costs of Presidential Heroism and the Hope of Deliberative Incrementalism,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2013), 747.

²⁰ Jacobs, “Lord Bryce’s Curse,” 749.

simply citizens who vote based on a self-defined partisan identity. In other words, political communication practices on an individual level need to move away from maintaining strict piety to partisan principles. To pursue political change, leaders need to engage the citizens on a public and private level, stressing that more communication and conflict are the solution to ultra-partisanship.

Although Obama's attitude of tolerance may not transform ultra-partisanship, his rhetoric and leadership promote an avenue for where change could begin to transpire. For Obama, change is represented as incremental and local. The president's rhetoric stresses that citizens should shift expectations of civic engagement away from a top-down approach toward a more local or micro-level of action where they kick-start political transformation. President Obama's rhetoric attempts to create political transformation, but falls short of pursuing public change by only asking Americans to adopt an attitude of tolerance. His decentralized form of leadership and attitude of tolerance offers an incomplete attempt to transform conflict in age of ultra-partisanship. This kind of rhetoric helps kindle an attitude toward civic engagement that is focused less on promising political action, changes to public policy, or promoting a political party's talking points than on promoting the tolerance of other people's viewpoints. As such, Obama's rhetoric is too heavily focused on the democratic value of sustaining ambiguity and encouraging individual citizens to be active politically on the individual level. The ultimate weakness of Obama's rhetoric and leadership approach is its inability to connect individual agency to a broader coalition of active change agents in the public sphere. At a broad level, this dissertation's analysis chapters reveal the ways that President Obama's public discourse has attempted to focus on incremental change and encourage deliberation at more localized or individualized levels, but has fallen short of connecting the individual pursuit of change with a

solvent public approach. Ambiguity provides the opening for political change, but in itself is not the solution to transformation in an age of ultra-partisanship.

Partisanship may stymie voters and politicians, but, as Madison and Hamilton noted, lawmakers have faced a gridlocked governing system before and will again in the future. Obama's own form of leadership accepts partisan gridlock as a temporary state. Although some pundits, lawmakers, and scholars may cynically view the future based on past and present events, I contend that America's current political state is not the result of a broken system, cognitive brain processing, or any kind of determined system. Though systemic and cognitive structures may play roles in how humans interact, a particularly vital piece of the puzzle surrounding partisanship concerns the way in which Americans communicate about politics.

An avenue for change is crafting an attitude that stresses that political change happens through citizens' individual communication practices about politics and their engagement with democratic culture writ large. Political science research and polling data illustrate that change is possible through the American public and its underlying commitment to the political system and country's founding values—not necessarily through the actions of members of Congress or the Executive Branch. The federal government may be viewed unfavorably and Congress may be gridlocked, but Americans still have faith and a commitment to the system itself and their own personal responsibility. In September of 2014, Gallup polled citizens on their trust in government and the American people. On the federal level, nearly 43 percent of Americans placed a great deal or fair amount of trust in the Executive Branch, 61 percent trusted the Judicial Branch, and 28 percent placed confidence in the Legislative Branch. At the state and local level, 62 percent of Americans stated that they trusted that their state government could adequately solve problems, and 72 percent of Americans expressed confidence in their local government. More broadly, 59

percent of Americans stated that they had confidence that the public could adequately make judgments and help solve the problems facing the country.²¹ Americans may be frustrated or angry with the federal government and disappointed with the slow progress of political change. However, Americans remain hopeful about the future and believe that local communities can solve problems.

Finally, Americans have expressed their frustration with federal lawmakers and their overt partisanship stances. For instance, in an October 2013 poll, six in ten Americans proclaimed that stubborn, highly partisan federal politicians, not the public or political system, are what are causing political gridlock in the Legislative Branch.²² Thus, public opinion polling highlights that one positive constraint for Obama, or any contemporary political leader, is an American public that maintains the belief that local communities can solve public problems. The key part that a leader would need to capitalize on in this environment is constructing ambiguity to promote an area where change can happen, but also providing direction for how the country could address the problem of ultra-partisanship and ideological entrenchment at a public level. Seeking an attitude of tolerance is not enough because it allows too much flexibility and ultimately promotes quiescence.

²¹ “Trust in Government,” *Gallup*, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/5392/trust-government.aspx>.

²² “Trust in Government Nears Record Low, but Most Federal Agencies are Viewed Favorably,” *Pew Research Center*, October 18, 2013, <http://pewrsr.ch/19Yjx9q>.

Chapter 2:

President Obama's Decentralized Leadership and Rhetoric

Unlike earlier eras when communication channels were slower and offered less information from the nation's chief executive, America's current media environment allows varying avenues for presidential communication. In a hyper-mediated age where presidents can speak to the public in print, on television, through radio broadcasts, and even directly through social media, Americans receive daily updates from the White House. At the end of an essay on rethinking presidential rhetoric and the rhetorical presidency, Mary Stuckey questions how this hyper-mediated environment may impact future research. Stuckey points out that it is important for scholars to analyze "the connections between the exercise of presidential power and the exercise of presidential rhetoric."¹ Moreover, she explains, that in the 21st century, presidents like Barack Obama act not just as the country's chief executive, but also a cultural icon. Due to the increasing types of media available to presidents and their ability to reach out to the public in a seemingly infinite number of ways, Stuckey states, "The question is not whether the president can exercise cultural power, but what that cultural power may mean for presidential power and under circumstances the former can be parlayed into the latter."² Although presidential rhetoric can function as a distraction and could potentially lead to a fractured citizenry, in this chapter and dissertation I maintain the belief that presidential rhetoric can also be aimed at coaching the public into a new process for civic engagement. By exploring President Obama's rhetoric about leadership and how change happens, this dissertation uses Obama as a representative example of

¹ Mary E. Stuckey, "Rethinking the Rhetorical Presidency and Presidential Rhetoric," *The Review of Communication* 10, no. 1 (2010), 49.

² Stuckey, "Rethinking the Rhetorical Presidency and Presidential Rhetoric," 49.

a leader who has created a rhetorical signature that allows him to speak intimately to the American people as the means to help shift attitudes on civic engagement, not pass public policy.

Before venturing into a discussion of Obama's rhetorical style, this chapter first outlines how the president's public discourse fits into broader scholarly conversations on presidential rhetoric. This investigation illustrates how Obama's rhetoric is situated alongside other modes of presidential discourse and scholarship. I explain how Obama's rhetoric suggests another way that scholars can understand public speech from America's chief executive. My suggestion of an alternative approach to presidential rhetoric is in contrast with previous notions of the rhetorical presidency because it does not strictly seek short-term policy goals. My presidential leadership alternative stresses that rhetoric from America's chief executive's functions as a means to empower Americans toward an attitude shift on the power that individual actions have on the political process. The second half of this chapter specifically explores discourse from President Obama. By outlining Obama's biography and his rhetorical signature, this chapter provides the contextual foundation for later analysis chapters. In this context chapter, I summarize the president's rhetorical style. I also explain why Obama is representative example of a rhetor who has attempted to bypass ultra-partisanship by promoting tolerance rather than engage partisan conflict. As a whole, this chapter addresses how Obama has used his rhetoric and position as a cultural icon to assert presidential power, but also to encourage individuals to personally participate in the discussion of public affairs without necessarily demanding a shift in the current presence of extreme partisan preferences.

The Rhetorical Presidency vs. Presidential Rhetoric

Research from the fields of political science and rhetorical studies offer two primary approaches to examining public discourse from America's chief executive: studies that focus on

the “rhetorical presidency” and studies that examine “presidential rhetoric.” Scholarship on the rhetorical presidency can be traced to the early 1980s, when political scientists examined how presidents could increasingly use mediated public discourse to circumvent Congress.³ In his influential book *The Rhetorical Presidency* Jeffrey Tulis argued that the rise of the rhetorical presidency occurred as a way for presidents to bypass the Legislative Branch and use speech to directly appeal to Americans.⁴ Scholars who study the rhetorical presidency examine presidential speech intended to go beyond Washington lawmakers and directly appeal to the public to help get support for legislation. When examining the function of the rhetorical presidency, these scholars often focus on the instrumental effects of rhetorical appeals. In these types of studies the assumption is that “rhetorical presidents must garner popular support for their public policies and/or policy agendas as a prerequisite for successful implementation via congressional approval.”⁵ The notion of the rhetorical presidency highlights the influential power of speech and its effect on the electorate and Congress toward specific policy ends. Martin J. Medhurst suggests that, based on this powerful assumption, there are some who have argued that “[t]he rhetorical presidency is thus seen as a not-so-subtle way of circumventing the separation of powers doctrine by a misappropriation of power—rhetorical power—in the presidential office.”⁶ Due to this power, political scientists and rhetoricians have placed a high value on the overall

³ The concept of the rhetorical presidency can be traced back to James Ceaser and his colleagues in 1981. See James W. Ceaser, Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette, “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11 (1981), 158-171.

⁴ Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

⁵ Vanessa B. Beasley, “The Rhetorical Presidency Meets the Unitary Executive: Implications for Presidential Rhetoric on Public Policy,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 13, no. 1 (2010), 10.

⁶ Martin J. Medhurst, “Was There a Nineteenth-Century Rhetorical Presidency? A Debate Revisited,” in *Before the Rhetorical Presidency* ed. Martin J. Medhurst (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 1.

effect and the short-term instrumental significance of presidential speech.⁷ However, such rhetoric forms only a subset of the whole range of rhetoric that any modern president practices.

In contrast, presidential rhetoric can best be described more broadly as any form of verbal or nonverbal presidential communication.⁸ Presidential rhetoric is a larger field that examines “all aspects of a president’s symbol use, regardless of audience (Congress, international bodies, posterity), purpose, outcome, or perceived desirability.”⁹ For example, presidential rhetoric can include anything from a president’s nonverbal performance at a debate to letters written to members of the public. In short, unlike studies of the rhetorical presidency, studies on presidential rhetoric are less concerned with the instrumental power of discourse for passing policies. Presidential rhetoric is not necessarily focused strictly on altering public opinion for the sake of political gamesmanship or passing a certain piece of legislation.

This dissertation engages in conversations on presidential rhetoric, but concludes with a discussion of what this exploration suggests about the practicality of the rhetorical presidency at a time of ultra-partisanship. As Jennifer Mercieca and Justin Vaughn report, over the course of the 20th century, “the heightened expectations placed upon all presidents since the Progressive

⁷ See Robert Asen, “Reflections on the Role of Rhetoric in Public Policy,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 13, no. 1 (2010), 121-144; Beasley, “The Rhetorical Presidency Meets the Unitary Executive,” 7-36; David A. Crockett, “George W. Bush and the Unrhetorical Rhetorical Presidency,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2003), 465-486; Elvin T. Lim, “An Analysis of Rhetoric from George Washington to Bill Clinton,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2002), 328-366; David Zarefsky, “Johnson’s War on Poverty: The Rhetoric of Three ‘Establishment’ Movements,” *Communication Monographs* 44 (1977), 352-373.

⁸ Mel Laracey, “‘The Rhetorical Presidency’ Today: How Does It Stand Up?” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2009), 911-912.

⁹ Kathryn M. Olson, “Rhetoric and the American President,” Review of *Speaking to the People: The Rhetorical Presidency in Historical Perspective*, ed. Richard J. Ellis, *The Review of Communication* 1 (2001), 274.

Era have translated into the increased institutional burdens of the office of the presidency.”¹⁰

Over the course of the 20th century, presidents and their success are often determined not only by their ability to pass legislation, but also their ability to appeal to the American people and temporarily bypass partisan divides in Congress to enact policy.

Some scholars have argued that, in the 21st century, the notion of a rhetorical presidency or the effectiveness of presidential rhetoric may not matter. Vanessa Beasley notes that presidents have increasingly used the unitary executive model for leadership and enacting policy. Rather than working with the Congress or appealing directly to the American people for support, the unitary executive model grants the president more Constitutional authority to pass public policy through other rhetorical and legal means. Beasley claims, “It is no coincidence that the unitary executive is associated with the increased use of two particular forms of presidential discourse—the executive order and the signing statement—that bypass more traditional opportunities for public deliberation.”¹¹ Instead of “going public” to rally Americans and Congress around public policy, presidents who rely on the unitary executive model use rhetoric as an explanation and defense for already established positions.

Stephen Hartnett and Jennifer Mercieca have gone even further, declaring America to be in an age of the post-rhetorical presidency. They emphasize that an expanding media market and an increase in presidents acting as the unitary executive have led to the devaluing of presidential rhetoric. In a post-rhetorical presidential environment, rhetorical eloquence is unnecessary because speech from America’s chief executive might be used as a means to distract or distort the role of citizens. Rather than trying to get the public to be more engaged, a post-rhetorical

¹⁰ Jennifer R. Mercieca and Justin S. Vaughn, “Barack Obama and the Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations,” in *The Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations: Establishing the Obama Presidency*, eds. Justin S. Vaughn and Jennifer R. Mercieca (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2014), 10.

¹¹ Beasley, “The Rhetorical Presidency Meets the Unitary Executive,” 12.

presidency is invested in getting the public more aligned with partisan identity and halting the open discussion of public affairs. Hartnett and Mercieca contend that a post-rhetorical presidency is

marked by a president who, like all presidents before him, seeks to define the bounds of political discourse, but who does not do so through the traditional means of eloquence, logic, pathos, or narrative storytelling, but by marshaling ubiquitous public character, waves of disinformation, and cascades of confusion-causing misdirection. Post-rhetorical presidential discourse attempts to confuse public opinion, prevent citizen action, and frustrate citizen deliberation.¹²

In Hartnett and Mercieca's view, due to a fractured media market, increased political polarization, and declining trust in government, the public has placed less and less value on presidential discourse. In this perspective, post-rhetorical presidential discourse can be seen as a cynical propaganda tool for bypassing citizen involvement by causing confusion and preventing grassroots action. Similarly, Atilla Hallsby has noted that presidential rhetoric couched in this kind of environment is intended to promote public disinterest and confusion, rather than deliberation and community discussion.¹³

In this chapter, I contend that the rhetorical presidency is not necessarily an effective means to measure Obama's public speech. I concur with Stuckey's claim that presidential rhetoric exists on a continuum where America's chief executive seeks both instrumental and

¹² Stephen John Hartnett and Jennifer Rose Mercieca, "'A Discovered Dissembler Can Achieve Nothing Great': Or, Four Theses on the Death of Presidential Rhetoric in an Age of Empire," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2007), 600.

¹³ Atilla Hallsby, "Imagine There's No President: The Rhetorical Secret and the Exposure of Valerie Plame," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101, no. 2 (2015), 357.

constitutive outcomes.¹⁴ Although presidents can influence public opinion through rhetorical acts, they can also direct a country's future course of action and national identity through discourse. As such, I argue that presidential discursive appeals can be used as a way to help engage the public on an individual, local, or intimate level to seek policy change, but also how to enact citizenship. I also agree with Beasley's argument that modern presidents often act through the unitary executive model as a way to bypass the Congress. Yet, I stress that presidential leadership is not just a unilateral act. Rhetoric from America's chief executive can be seen as a means of energizing individuals into having more discussion, voting in more elections, and holding their public officials and fellow citizens accountable for the country's actions beyond partisan talking points. Obama's discourse is an example of presidential rhetoric that exists on a continuum between policy and attitudinal change. At times he may argue for a need to shift policy, but his rhetoric consistently stresses that change should be based in tolerance or the acceptance of a plurality of viewpoints. In short, rhetoric provides a foundation for presidents to seek short-term policy goals, but also long-term shifts in America's political environment. I argue that Obama's leadership and background in community organizing situate him as a representative example for a rhetor whose rhetorical strategy seeks tolerance and a shift in the political process as the necessary means to bypass ultra-partisanship.

Obama's Rhetorical Style and the Role of the American People

In a January 2014 interview with the *New Yorker*, Obama explained his notion of presidential leadership. A consistent theme across Obama's presidency has been that social change only becomes a reality through the individual actions of members of the public. Whether he has sought to change the direction of conversations on issues such as same-sex marriage, gun

¹⁴ See Mary E. Stuckey, *Presidential Briefings: Political Rhetoric* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2015), xvii-xix, xxiii.

violence or race, Obama has stressed that presidential leadership involves tacking between contrasting positions of public opinion during times of tumultuous debate. The president's job may not necessarily be to provide groups with the right headwind, but instead help mediate the differing sides in hopes to stir conversation and promote tolerance between competing parties. In the *New Yorker* interview, Obama explained,

I have yet to see something that we've done, or any President has done, that was really important and good, that did not involve some mess and some strong-arming and some shading of how it was initially talked about to a particular member of the legislature who you needed a vote from. Because, if you're doing big, hard things, then there is going to be some hair on it—there's going to be some aspects of it that aren't clean and neat and immediately elicit applause from everybody. And so the nature of not only politics but, I think, social change of any sort is that it doesn't move in a straight line, and that those who are most successful typically are tacking like a sailor toward a particular direction but have to take into account winds and currents and occasionally the lack of any wind, so that you're just sitting there for a while, and sometimes you're being blown all over the place.¹⁵

In this framework, leadership and social change involve both collectivistic and individualistic responsibilities for civic engagement. A sustainable democratic culture involves communication practices where disagreements between political adversaries may exist, but these differences do

¹⁵ David Remnick, "Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama," *New Yorker*, January 27, 2014, par. 76, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-david-remnick>.

not irrevocably divide the public.¹⁶ Because the president, lawmakers, and public can be on different sides of an issue, leadership is the ability to adapt to the current situation and use rhetoric to massage the political process to nurture the possibility of social change at the national, local, and individual levels. In this sense, this kind of leadership focuses on how communication is one important avenue for facilitating change at the individual level and on a short-term and long-term basis.

President Obama outlined this understanding of leadership and the role of the public in social change even before he entered the White House. In his 1995 autobiography *Dreams From My Father* Obama narrates his time as a community organizer. In that text, Obama explains that when the traditional levers of power cannot be mobilized to solve problems, social change should be sought at the grassroots. Obama wrote:

In 1983, I decided to become a community organizer. There wasn't much detail to the idea; I didn't know anyone making a living that way. When classmates in college asked me just what it was that a community organizer did, I couldn't answer them directly. Instead, I'd pronounce the need for change. Change in the White House, where Reagan and his minions were carrying on their dirty deeds. Change in the Congress, compliant and corrupt. Change in the mood of the country, manic and self-absorbed. *Change won't come from the top, I would say. Change will come from a mobilized grass roots.*¹⁷

For Obama, leadership is more about coaching a process rather than deciding for the public.

Change is not something a leader accomplishes alone. Instead, Obama's rhetoric highlights that a

¹⁶ This ideal form of leadership is also similar to Robert Ivie's idea that democracy is a "rowdy affair" between adversaries, not enemies. See Robert L. Ivie, "Rhetorical Deliberation and Democratic Politics in the Here and Now," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5, no. 2 (2002), 278.

¹⁷ Barack Obama, *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 133, emphasis added.

decentralized leader is someone who nurtures a community by emphasizing a communication process that begins at the grassroots level. To mobilize the grassroots and seek change, or to tack back and forth between competing positions, a decentralized political leader must be able to harness rhetoric as a means to promote tolerance. For Obama, change is only possible through leadership that promotes rhetoric focused on energizing the grassroots into more political argument on a local or individual basis.

Dreams From My Father may provide some biographical insight into Obama's reasons for becoming a community organizer, but his autobiography also highlights the president's nuanced perspective of politics and the value of a plurality of voices in public deliberation. In this text, Obama noted that as he developed his skills as a community organizer, he realized that he was unlike most leaders or advocates. He described himself as a "heretic"—a nonconformist who did not succumb to accepting that ideological commitments are always certain, that problems have one cause, or that solutions are simple. Obama states that, in most communities, leadership is seen as providing certainty and guiding the community forward. He writes, "[I]n politics, like religion, power lay in certainty—and...one man's certainty always threatened another's."¹⁸ However, Obama insists that he does not agree with this mold. For the future president, certainty, as well as an individual's piety to certain principles, provides a powerful base to build a community and assert power. At the same time, certainty and strict adherence to a one's personal principles can blind citizens from group decision-making and cooperation. For Obama, plurality, tolerance, and ambiguity are paramount features necessary to foster social change. It is the presence of ambiguity that allows citizens to begin to individually engage problems on a case-by-case basis.

¹⁸ Obama, *Dreams From My Father*, 163.

For Obama, ambiguity and a plurality of voices are paramount to foster social change because they allow social problems to be addressed at a local level through tolerance. Robert Danish asserts this notion, writing that “community-building is not an act of producing homogeneity, an impossible task anyway, but instead it is an act of preserving plurality. Communities that preserve plurality must find ways to soften absolute claims.”¹⁹ In this regard, the role of a community organizer, or president seeking a decentralized form of leadership, is to find an entry point to mobilizing individuals into a community that tolerates a plurality of voices and engages politics from an individual or local perspective. Once a leader can find that entry point and connect to people, the next step would be to nurture a coalition of individual actors who can seek change organically from the grassroots.

Since arriving on the national political scene, Obama has built on this community organizing foundation, creating a rhetorical signature that places an emphasis on hope, change, and faith in public reason.²⁰ Elected to the presidency at a time when conservative politicians attempted to minimize government, Obama has used public discourse to redefine the role of government in the lives of ordinary Americans. Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones argue that instead of dismissing government, Obama’s rhetoric has balanced individualism with a focus on the broader American community.²¹ Similarly, investigating the rhetoric of Obama’s 2007 presidential announcement, Adam J. Gaffey observes that the president’s notion of leadership has helped the American people collectively understand the problems associated with

¹⁹ Robert Danish, “The Roots of Obama’s Rhetorical Pragmatism,” *Rhetoric Review* 31, no. 2 (2012), 160.

²⁰ Robert C. Rowland, “The Fierce Urgency of Now: Barack Obama and the 2008 Presidential Election,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 54, no. 3 (2010), 205.

²¹ Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, “Recasting the American Dream and American Politics: Barack Obama’s Keynote Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93, no. 4 (2007), 434.

partisanship in hopes of inspiring future political change.²² Moreover, according to Stuckey and Sean Patrick O'Rourke, in Obama's discourse, citizenship involves being an active participant in the discussion of public affairs.²³ In this regard, Obama's sense of presidential leadership is not just about enacting policy unilaterally or using rhetoric to tell Americans what to do. Instead, Obama's rhetoric has sought to foster identification with the public as a means to re-constitute the current political scene and model what it means to be an American citizen—being able to tolerate differing opinions on contentious social issues even when they conflict with one's self-defined political identity.

In addition to being politically engaged, Obama's reframing of an ideal American citizen has acknowledged the importance of dissent and plurality. David A. Frank states that Obama's rhetoric seeks to constitute an apolitical, cosmopolitan American public that embraces diversity.²⁴ Derek Sweet and Margret McCue-Enser report that, for Obama, "dissension is a fundamental principle of political self-governance that acts as a bulwark against misguided leadership and protects the ideals on which the nation was founded."²⁵ Similarly, Robert Ivie and Oscar Giner note that Obama's rhetoric stresses that America is stronger when dissent is an agreed-upon strength.²⁶ Moreover, Christopher Darr argues that Obama's political arguments

²² Adam J. Gaffey, "Obama's Change: Republican Remembrance, and Rhetorical Leadership in the 2007 Presidential Announcement Speech," *Southern Communication Journal* 79, no. 5 (2014), 418.

²³ Mary E. Stuckey and Sean Patrick O'Rourke, "Civility, Democracy, and National Politics," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 17, no. 4 (2014), 722.

²⁴ See David A. Frank, "Obama's Rhetorical Signature: Cosmopolitan Civil Religion in the Presidential Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14, no. 4 (2011), 608.

²⁵ Derek Sweet and Margret McCue-Enser, "Constituting 'the People' as Rhetorical Interruption," *Communication Studies* 61, no. 5 (2010), 617.

²⁶ Robert L. Ivie and Oscar Giner, "American Exceptionalism in a Democratic Idiom: Transacting the Mythos of Change in the 2008 Presidential Campaign," *Communication Studies* 60, no. 4 (2010), 364.

advance from three registers: the president seeks to “transcend differences,” emphasize “pragmatic goals over partisanship,” and stress a “respect for diverse points of view.”²⁷

Investigating Obama’s leadership during the Affordable Care Act, Rowland situates this kind of rhetorical strategy alongside James Madison’s notion of public reason. According to Rowland, in order to push the American people into advocating for social change, Obama’s rhetoric has sought to “revitalize public faith in the capacity of the community working together to find solutions to problems.”²⁸ Thus, to create an environment that transcends (not transforms) ultra-partisanship, Obama’s rhetoric has sought to dissociate public advocacy from partisan scare tactics or political gamesmanship.²⁹ Instead of citizens looking to Washington, their representatives, or political parties to solve problems, Obama’s presidential rhetoric models a civic-minded American who seeks to understand and play an active role in the political process. This kind of tactic is different than intransigence or resentment because it is not based in attacking others, but instead in fostering tolerance among different communities. Tolerance of opinion is stressed, but this is on an individual basis. The connection between citizens and the broader community or communities is devalued in favor of a decentralized leadership approach that empowers individuals. However, this form of leadership and rhetoric does not take a position or provide policy guidance. It provides an opening for ambiguity, but asks citizens to make up their own minds and take action on their own time and terms.

The key to understanding the value of Obama’s rhetoric relates to his leadership

²⁷ Christopher R. Darr, “A ‘Dialogue of the Deaf’: Obama, His Congressional Critics, and Incivility in American Political Discourse,” in *Venomous Speech: Problems with American Political Discourse on the Right and Left*, ed. Clarke Rountree, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 24.

²⁸ Robert C. Rowland, “Barack Obama and the Revitalization of Public Reason,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14, no. 4 (2011), 707.

²⁹ Rowland, “Barack Obama and the Revitalization of Public Reason,” 711.

comments from the 2014 *New Yorker* interview. Obama's notion of decentralized leadership and presidential rhetoric function more like a sailor tacking back and forth between different kinds of positions than an assertive, persuasive politician or rhetorical president. Although Obama's rhetoric may emphasize the value of one form of civic engagement, his arguments are built from the notion that multiple perspectives deserve credence in public debate. In this frame, ambiguity is of paramount importance. Medhurst describes this rhetorical move, noting that Obama's discourse contains a dialectic or "a method of testing the competing pathways" in hopes of transcending ideological extremes.³⁰ The president's rhetoric features calls for deliberation, asking Americans with opposing viewpoints to acknowledge that legitimate competing ideas may exist. For the president, ideological extremists or cynics inhibit social change because they "lack the imagination and the courage to move forward. They are those who employ the wrong means of measurement."³¹ Although individual empowerment may be key, meaningful social change can only happen through citizens who advocate for their own beliefs and accept that other sides of a debate may be legitimate. Part of this may involve advocating for a process or ideal approach to civic affairs. However, to fulfill the duties of the Executive Branch, a president's rhetoric and leadership must promote plurality, but also must seek action and provide direction. A more cooperative or collaborative future may be possible, but what this looks like or how it occurs is unclear in Obama's rhetoric that stresses tolerance and individual empowerment. Preserving plurality is one step, but leadership needs to move beyond tacking back and forth between competing positions. Presidential leadership involves adjusting one's sail toward a

³⁰ Martin J. Medhurst, "Barack Obama's 2009 Inaugural Address: Narrative Signature and Interpretation," in *Making the Case: Advocacy and Judgment in Public Argument*, eds. Kathryn M. Olson Michael W. Pfau, Benjamin Ponder, and Kirt H. Wilson (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State Press, 2013), 200.

³¹ Medhurst, "Barack Obama's 2009 Inaugural Address," 212.

specific destination and readjusting to any gusts or currents that attempt to disrupt movement forward.

Like many contemporary presidents, Obama's public discourse has been subject to much analysis from communication scholars as well as political scientists. This dissertation builds on this previous research, examining the connection between Obama's rhetoric, his notion of leadership, and attempts to foment an individual attitude toward civic participation. This connection is of particular importance for this study because Obama's decentered model of leadership provides a compelling case study for another register of presidential rhetoric focused on channeling civic engagement toward an individual level. Moreover, examining the president's leadership, rhetorical style, and the constraints of his political environment help me interrogate some of the key criticisms made against his presidency and public discourse. This kind of contextual foundation illustrates that Obama's consistent attempt at bypassing partisan conflict was criticized throughout his presidency. Despite these critics, the president maintained his firm stance on his decentralized leadership, consistently using this kind of rhetorical style, and even going as far as defending it throughout the last two years of his presidency. Providing this foundation at the forefront of this dissertation illustrates how Obama attempted to use this strategy in each case study. Finally, this context also supports this dissertation's conclusion about how this kind of leadership style could be altered by future presidents and successfully deployed.

Re-Assessing Obama's Rhetorical Signature through the Lens of Ultra-Partisanship

Despite modeling an optimistic rhetorical signature, and campaigning on the slogans of "hope," "change," and "yes, we can," by the end of his first term, Obama found it difficult to advance federal policy changes in a divided government. Some political commentators have critically assessed Obama's presidency, evaluating it negatively compared to the raised

expectations of his lofty campaign rhetoric.³² Aaron David Miller in *The Washington Post* reported that although many presidents fail to meet expectations set by their campaign, Obama's presidency has been marked by rhetoric that speaks of massive transformation while incremental progress is the reality. Miller emphasized that despite many legislative victories, the Obama presidency has failed to meet expectations set early on. He wrote, "Whatever your judgment of Obama's policies, there is a vast gap between the expectations he set for himself and his supporters and the realities of his presidency."³³ Much like Miller, in a January 2015 *Boston Globe* opinion piece, James Carroll praised Obama's intelligence and optimistic tone, but labeled the president's administration a disappointment. Although Obama may have rallied communities through passionate, uplifting rhetoric, Carroll contended that at the beginning of his seventh year in the White House, "many of his once-passionate admirers admit to a profound disenchantment."³⁴ Similarly, in *Harper's Magazine*, David Bromwich argued that throughout his presidency Obama often used speech as a means to rally the public, but to little avail. Bromwich explained, "In March 2015, in the seventh year of his presidency, Barack Obama was presenting himself as a politician who followed the path of least resistance."³⁵ Rather than detailing political policies to the American public or advocating their importance on a point-by-point basis, the president's rhetorical talents, Bromwich contended, offered only inspiration and lacked explanation or action.

³² Rhetorical scholars have also assessed Obama's rhetoric in an edited collection of essays. See *The Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations: Establishing the Obama Presidency*, eds. Justin S. Vaughn and Jennifer R. Mercieca (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2014).

³³ Aaron David Miller, "Barack Obama, Disappointer in Chief," *The Washington Post*, October 10, 2014, par. 17, <http://wpo.st/RHzM1>.

³⁴ James Carroll, "Obama Has Become a Figure of American Disappointment," *Boston Globe*, January 19, 2015, par. 3, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/01/19/obama-has-become-figure-american-disappointment/XibW1FD4WTxxPH8yzYV96O/story.html>.

³⁵ David Bromwich, "What Went Wrong? Assessing Obama's Legacy," *Harper's Magazine*, June 2015, 30.

Alongside these criticisms about Obama's campaign promises, Obama's tenure in the White House has also been marked with critiques that the first African American president increased the partisan and racial divide.³⁶ For instance, on November 3, 2014, in a Fox News interview, conservative economist Ben Stein chastised Barack Obama, proclaiming that the president has "purposefully [been] trying to use race to divide America." In a headline-grabbing statement, Stein declared, "[Obama] is the most racist president there has ever been in America."³⁷ Reacting to Obama's rhetoric following the controversial police shooting of an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri, Stein argued that by discussing race the president was looking to divide America along color lines. In addition to Stein, other conservative commentators like Glenn Beck have criticized Obama for addressing the issue of race.³⁸ In 21st century America, public discussions of race, specifically comments made by America's first black president, have been labeled acts of racism or partisan pandering. For Obama, appeals to unity and social change often appear alongside criticisms that the president is only seeking to divide America along partisan or color lines.

Alongside these kinds of criticisms of Obama's political and rhetorical choices, the president maintained a firm stance that political change was possible—even in an age of ultra-partisanship. Obama has stressed that the expectations for change need to shift from a top-down

³⁶ See Philip Bump, "The Unprecedented Partisanship of Congress, Explained," *The Washington Post*, January 13, 2016, <http://wpo.st/AIzM1>; Bruce Drake, "Ferguson Highlights Deep Division Between Blacks and Whites in America," *Pew Research Center*, November 26, 2014, <http://pewrsr.ch/1rlR88X>; Sonya Ross and Jennifer Agiesta, "AP Poll: Majority Harbor Prejudice Against Blacks," *Associated Press*, October 27, 2012, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ap-poll-majority-harbor-prejudice-against-blacks>; Michael Tesler, "The Return of Old-Fashioned Racism to White Americans' Partisan Preferences in the Early Obama Era," *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 1 (2013), 110-123.

³⁷ As quoted in "Ben Stein: Obama 'Is The Most Racist President There has Ever Been,'" *CBS News DC*, November 3, 2014, <http://cbsloc.al/1MsitLu>.

³⁸ CBSNEWS/AP, "Glenn Beck: Obama is a Racist," *CBS News*, July 29, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/glenn-beck-obama-is-a-racist/>.

leadership approach and toward the local level. In a *National Public Radio (NPR)* interview on August 10, 2015, Obama continued to express his firm belief that Americans could foster change in politics at the grassroots level. Obama noted that gerrymandering, the Senate filibuster, and the influence of superPACs (Political Action Committees) have made social change more difficult on the legislative level, but not impossible in the lives of ordinary Americans. He stated,

I think there are a whole range of systems problems that we have to resolve, but, you know, having said all that, I tend to be pretty optimistic about the future of the American political process and our democracy. We go through these phases where things seem just dysfunctional and bottled up and folks get frustrated [...] But, you know, just because we've seen these trends doesn't mean that we can't reverse them [...] You can encourage a little more thoughtfulness, a little bit more interest in, you know, appealing to the, the basic common sense and goodness and decency of the American people, rather than just an—a narrow sliver of your base. And—and that is, I think, ultimately, what a lot of folks are looking for.³⁹

For the president, the American political system may be faced with a number of challenges that contribute to gridlock, but these are not inherent flaws. These challenges merely represent stumbling blocks in the governing process. Stressing the common sense attitude of the American people and taking a more longitudinal view of politics, Obama's rhetoric downplays the cynical belief that nothing can change in government. Explaining that partisanship and gridlock come in phases, Obama's comments in the *NPR* interview highlight his optimistic rhetorical advocacy on the possibility of change—something that is more localized, incremental, and long-term.

³⁹ “Full Video and Transcript: NPR's Interview with President Obama,” *NPR*, August 10, 2015, par. 74-75, 79-80, <http://n.pr/1f3A3Ld>.

Many of Obama's rhetorical appeals relate to policy issues, but his rhetoric also signals a broader desire to attenuate the political cynicism that pervades American society. Rather than conflating government gridlock with a determined system or immutable ideological entrenchment, Obama's rhetoric in the *NPR* interview argued for the possibility of change in an age where citizens, political pundits, and even politicians proclaim it is extraordinarily difficult. For the president, change was possible, not necessarily through a shift in policy, but through a shift in Americans' attitudes on their role in the process of public affairs. This rhetoric may not help Obama attenuate the current ultra-partisan climate in his own presidency, but lays the foundation for a potentially less partisan political future. On a policy level, it attempts to lower the expectations for short-term legislative action, emphasizing an incremental approach.

Creating an Intimate Rhetorical Style

In order to bypass the partisan chasm and conflict in Washington and the entire country, Obama bases his arguments in common sense, morality, anecdotes, personal narrative, and trust in the American people. Obama is not the first president to employ such rhetorical tactics. Kathleen Hall Jamieson explains that Ronald Reagan used a similar rhetorical approach. In her analysis, Jamieson contends that Reagan's rhetoric transcended his role as president. Rather than speaking as a partisan politician, Reagan acted as a spokesperson for the country and the people.⁴⁰ In addition to adopting this non-partisan, personal persona, Reagan also employed an argumentative strategy that seemed informal, relying less on policy and partisan arguments and more on common sense and personal narrative. Jamieson contends, Reagan's "conversational delivery and consistent sense of public self enable[d] him to use his *personal* past in

⁴⁰ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 171.

uncommonly effective ways to underscore central themes and undermine attacks.”⁴¹ Jamieson’s account of Reagan highlights the former president’s ability to make arguments that seemed non-political. In that regard, Reagan’s discourse appeared personal and genuine, not necessarily partisan.

Throughout his political career, Obama has also used a similar kind of rhetorical style, using his personal past and role as a civically engaged citizen. Obama’s use of this personal style highlights a recurring theme in his presidential discourse. Kenneth Burke explains that presidents face a difficult rhetorical battle trying to appeal to their political base, but also govern the interests of the entire country. In order to balance these competing loyalties, the president must adopt a “unitary principle” to guide his or her rhetoric in an attempt to foment community and argue for change. Burke explains, “[The president’s] problem then is, like that of any ruler, to find some unitary principle from which all his major policies may consistently radiate.”⁴² I contend that one of the unitary principles throughout Obama’s presidency and rhetorical style has been speaking as an empowered American who engages others with a sense of goodwill and tolerance. In other words, Obama’s leadership and rhetorical style downplays his role as chief executive and authority figure in order to help advance political argument. Speaking as an empowered and concerned American, Obama’s rhetorical strategy concerns coaching Americans’ attitudes on civic life and how to individually move the country forward. For the president, coaching the American public involved arguing that tolerance was the avenue for how citizens should engage in the political process in pursuit of change.

As Obama continues the final year of his presidency, his interviews with *Vox*, *NPR*, and the *New Yorker* illustrate his optimistic stance on the American people and his decentralized

⁴¹ Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age*, 182.

⁴² Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 391.

approach to presidential leadership. Results aside, Obama's public discourse highlights a compelling case study on how presidential rhetoric can operate in two unique registers in an age of ultra-partisanship. First, Obama's rhetoric shifts the agency of change away from government and lawmakers and to Americans themselves. Second, Obama's rhetoric advances a call for Americans to be true to their beliefs by placing their faith in the ability of local communities and individuals to discuss problems on a micro-scale while being tolerant of others. Obama models an intimate kind of civic engagement that highlights how citizens can bypass partisanship. Although Congress may be stuck in a partisan divide and unable to legislatively deal with certain kinds of public issues, Obama's discourse has sought alternative ways to advocate for politics and policies outside traditional channels. In addition to acting as the unitary executive, Obama has used his status as president in an attempt to engage the public through rhetoric that offers a different process for engaging public affairs. The president's rhetoric offers a representative example of how a citizen can seek change in an environment populated by intransigent lawmakers and a public that overwhelmingly distrusts government and believes meaningful policy shifts are unlikely.

In short, rather than relying on the belief that presidential speech translates directly to legislative action or ought to be measured that way, Obama's rhetoric shifts the meaning of political change and responsibility onto the electorate—creating a discursive landscape where the people, not president or Congress, are responsible for political change. Obama does not argue that he can accomplish specific changes as president nor can the Congress. Unlike resentment and intransigence, which can lead to violence and cynicism, Obama's public discourse operates in a politics of optimism that seeks to empower the American people. Focusing on ambiguity in public opinion and on avoiding partisan conflict, Obama's rhetoric bypasses notions of a political

divide. Rather than taking a public political stance and providing a specific future direction for the country, Obama's rhetoric seeks to lead by constructing a process-oriented attitude that stresses citizens should remain politically tolerant and active individually. Although a more positive approach to politics than intransigence and resentment, Obama's politics of tolerance only speaks of change through an ideal process. One of the inherent weaknesses in this individual form of democracy is that it never fully connects to how change is sought or accomplished through the establishment of common ground. In other words, ambiguity provides the means, but cannot strictly be the end point of rhetoric. A similar weakness is that although tolerance allows one to bypass partisanship, it avoids the necessary conflict that helps make political transformation a reality.

Chapter 3:

Constituting a Process-Oriented Attitude of Tolerance

In an age of ultra-partisanship, presidents face a difficult task speaking to an American public that increasingly distrusts government and politicians. Obama's public discourse has addressed a number of contentious and complex issues such as same-sex marriage, gun violence, and race, but also sought to alter the attitude of an American community that has lost sight of how and where social change happens. Rather than creating a cynical rhetoric that suggests change cannot happen or using radical rhetoric that overthrows the entire system, Obama's rhetoric has consistently employed arguments on how Americans can promote tolerance and work within the current political system to foment change at a grassroots level. Obama's discourse has two primary functions. First, Obama's rhetoric seeks to widen social relations by emphasizing an attitude that stresses that pluralism and tolerance in public discussion is a fundamental American value. Second, Obama's rhetoric discursively constitutes ambiguity to facilitate this attitude. Ambiguity is called forth in Obama's rhetoric through arguments that rely on the use of indirect examples and strategies that seek to downplay what is traditionally seen as political.

As a whole, this chapter provides the theoretical and methodological foundation for this dissertation's analysis chapters that illustrate how Obama's rhetoric is the incipient act for an attitudinal shift in Americans' understanding of the political process. In this chapter, I first outline the constitutive function of rhetoric, charting how presidential rhetoric can be the incipient act for an optimistic process-oriented attitude of tolerance. After outlining this theoretical scaffolding, I provide a brief overview of how an attitude can be discursively analyzed in a text through close textual analysis. I contend that a tolerant attitude is called forth

through the constitutive power of rhetoric. In order to move from our current state to a process-oriented attitude of tolerance, I stress how Obama's rhetoric points to, or constructs, ambiguity on certain social issues through political arguments. I argue that even though Obama's rhetoric may construct ambiguity, his rhetoric of tolerance provides little common ground for individuals to coalesce into effective communities. As such, this attitudinal shift may sound optimistic, but ultimately only re-entrenches existing ideological stances. Finally, this chapter ends with a preview and justification for this dissertation's three case studies and conclusion.

The Role of Constitutive Rhetoric in Presidential Discourse

Theorists have explained that a president's rhetoric defines America's current state and provides Americans with an understanding of what it means to be a participant in public affairs. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson contend that, through rhetoric, presidents unify Americans by citing our common past, but also create a discourse that "warrants present and future action."¹ At a broader level, Kenneth Burke has noted the power of definition for rhetors when engaged in symbolic interaction. According to Burke, names and definitions are vital to a culture because they are "formulated to serve as a *plea* for the deliberate consulting of" the motives underlying rhetoric.² In other words, when rhetors define something, they create contextual boundaries by which audiences evaluate that particular situation or thing. Burke asserts,

To tell what a thing is, you place it in terms of something else. This idea of locating, or placing, is implicit in our very word for definition itself: to *define*, or *determine* a thing, is to mark its boundaries, hence to use terms that possess, implicitly at least, contextual

¹ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 39.

² Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 54.

reference.³

Presidents use rhetoric as a means to define and situate events and public policy in a larger context against which they are subsequently evaluated. As formal leaders, presidents have immense rhetorical power in their ability to define the state of a country or the public role citizens enact. David Zarefsky describes presidential discourse in a similar fashion, writing that through rhetoric a president “defines political reality”⁴ and “shape[s] the context in which events or proposals are viewed by the public.”⁵ By defining the rhetorical environment of the country, Zarefsky suggests that presidents create presumptions or public “predisposition[s in citizens] to think or act in a certain way in the absence of compelling reasons to the contrary.”⁶ Through the act of definition, presidents provide the country with a script or model in which events or roles are viewed, understood, and evaluated. This kind of rhetoric is different from the rhetorical presidency because it is not strictly about appealing to the public to pass a specific policy in the face of Congressional resistance or alter public opinion. Presidential rhetoric couched in a constitutive function seeks to help Americans define the boundaries of public debate, citizenship, and the attitudes that the members of the country can enact. Part of this process may involve breaking or bypassing pre-established rhetorical forms, such as partisan talking points or scare tactics.

Presidential public discourse can be said to function constitutively.⁷ Formal (i.e., written)

³ Burke, *Grammar*, 24.

⁴ David Zarefsky, “Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2004), 611.

⁵ Zarefsky, “Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition,” 611.

⁶ David Zarefsky, *President Johnson’s War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 11.

⁷ See Vanessa B. Beasley, *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2004), 6-7, 17, 47, 69; Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no.

and informal (i.e., spoken) constitutions are rhetorical instruments that define and draw lines to determine boundaries. As such, a president's rhetoric can create a sense of national identity, define the current American political scene, or create a public exigency to focus attention on an issue. In order to foster identification with an audience, constitutive rhetoric must simultaneously recognize the material and ideological conditions of the present, as well as set up boundaries within which future audiences can act.⁸ In this sense, a president's rhetoric constitutes attitudes for members of the public and legislature, providing them with a model for the means to act, as well as the grounds for judging the acts of others.⁹

Although rhetorical scholars have often associated constitutive rhetoric with the formation of a group's identity,¹⁰ this kind of rhetoric can also coach a broader attitude by which to evaluate public acts and identify how an individual should act within an existing group identity. Burke explains that through constitutive rhetoric individuals are provided with a "complex of customs and values" which "are designed to serve as motives for shaping or transforming behavior."¹¹ For a president, constitutive rhetoric allows him or her to define and situate boundaries for enacting citizenship, but more broadly to coach how social issues are understood, evaluated, or debated on a national, local, and individual level. Burke argues that constitutive rhetoric

is "binding" upon the future in the sense that it has centered attention upon one calculus of motivation rather than some other; and by thus encouraging men to evaluate their

2 (1987), 133-150; Mary Stuckey, "Establishing the Rhetorical Presidency through Presidential Rhetoric: Theodore Roosevelt and the Brownsville Raid," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 3 (2006), 288, 305.

⁸ Burke, *Grammar*, 330-331.

⁹ Burke, *Grammar*, 336.

¹⁰ See Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 133-150.

¹¹ Burke, *Grammar*, 342.

public acts in the chosen terms, it serves in varying degrees to keep them from evaluating such acts in other terms.¹²

In short, constitutive rhetoric provides presidents with the means to define the boundaries through which citizens evaluate their acts and understand the current political scene. Presidential rhetoric does not just define something for what it is, but also what it is not. Rather than just promoting a sense of identity or advocating for a policy, constitutive presidential rhetoric creates a prism through which citizens might understand political reality. Moreover, this type of discourse can constitute the means for how citizens might evaluate other kinds of political rhetoric. In the next section, I outline how rhetoric's constitutive role can help foment an attitudinal shift in the American public and the notion of a process-oriented attitude of tolerance.

Constitutive Rhetoric as a Means to Coach an Attitude of Tolerance

At a broad level, the constitutive function of rhetoric is focused on coaching a general *attitude* about the role of the individual in public affairs. This rhetorical operation does not involve creating an attitude from scratch. Instead, a rhetor attempting to cultivate an attitude must work through the constraints of his or her rhetorical situation, building from potential flexibility in public opinion and individuals' relationships to others. In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke proclaims that people build community and establish social relationships in conjunction with a nexus of attitudes. Burke states that an individual "becomes aware of *himself* in terms of *them*" based on attitudes accessible through communicative transactions.¹³ In order to have the widest possible field for social relations, Burke advocates that individuals accept the multitude of attitudes or frames through which the world can be viewed. Burke explains that as an individual "widens his social relations with persons and things outside him, in learning how to anticipate

¹² Burke, *Grammar*, 368.

¹³ Burke, *Grammar*, 237.

their attitudes he builds within himself a more complex set of attitudes, thoroughly social.”¹⁴ In other words, attitudes are cultivated in public culture based on the social relationship that involves a rhetor and audience.

For Burke, the cultivation of attitudes is an incipient act constituted through communication. In social interaction, rhetoric’s constitutive function helps foment attitudes and relations among individuals. When action from a political or social perspective is restricted, rhetoric can be mobilized as the means to cultivate a new attitude for individuals to act in the future. This attitude can be fomented through the constitutive function of rhetoric, but serves as the means for how individuals and communities act (or do not act) in a future state. Burke elaborates his discussion of this concept in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, distinguishing attitude from an act and instrumental action. According to Burke,

Insofar as a choice of *action* is restricted, rhetoric seeks rather to have a formative effect upon *attitude* (as a criminal condemned to death might by priestly rhetoric be brought to an attitude of repentance and resignation). Thus, in Cicero and Augustine there is a shift between the words “move” (*Mouere*) and “bend” (*flectere*) to name the ultimate function of rhetoric. This shift corresponds to a distinction between act and attitude (attitude being an incipient act, a leaning or inclination). Thus the notion of persuasion to *attitude* would permit the application of rhetorical terms to purely *poetic* structures; the study of lyrical devices might be classed under the head of rhetoric, when these devices are considered for their power to induce or communicate states of minds to readers, even though the kinds of assent evoked have no overt, practical outcome.¹⁵

¹⁴ Burke, *Grammar*, 237.

¹⁵ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 50, emphasis in original.

The creation of, or tapping into, an attitude is one part of rhetoric that provides identification between rhetor and audience. However, formation or identification of an attitude may not necessarily be the end point or instrumental aspect of rhetoric. Instead, attitude provides a rhetor and audience a point of identification through which future persuasion or change can foment or stall. The cultivation of an attitude can occur when action is restricted as the means to construct ambiguity or create a new point of identification for future action. The key point is that the constitutive function of rhetoric allows an attitude to be fomented when corporeal action is restricted, but public discourse is merely the incipient act for the fomentation of a future attitude. Moreover, this attitude is more of an ideal that should be sought than something that can be attained at an individual or social level. An attitude can function as a best practice that an individual could choose to model, but may not always enact on a day-to-day or short-term basis.

The cultivation of an attitude occurs rhetorically in order to promote future action at a time when material forces prevent such a measure. In that regard, an attitudinal shift is a long-term rhetorical goal that cannot be measured through instrumental success. Presidential rhetoric that seeks an attitudinal shift is less focused on passing public policy and more dedicated to moving from a state of inaction to constructing a new attitude that could allow for future action. Burke stresses the value of cultivating a new attitude because it provides the means for coaching future action that is guided by an ideal. Burke notes this utility, stating, “To build something with a hammer would involve an instrument, or ‘agency’; to build with diligence would involve an ‘attitude,’ a ‘how.’”¹⁶ Although an attitude may not be the instrument for immediate change, it is called forth through the power of constitutive rhetoric that stresses *how* individuals communicate in a given rhetorical situation. Attitudes may be a part of all rhetorical transactions, but they also

¹⁶ Burke, *Grammar*, 443.

may only manifest observably at a future time. In other words, attitudes are not bound to an immediate rhetorical situation nor can they be measured on a short-term basis. An attitude is an ideal way of how to act, but something that individuals may sometimes fall short of fully realizing because humans can become blinded to their partisan or short-term motives.¹⁷

For President Obama, the constitutive function of rhetoric allowed him to nurture an attitude for how Americans can approach the possibility of change on the contentious social issues of same-sex marriage, gun violence, and race. Through the constitutive power of rhetoric, the president provided a model or attitude about how citizens can participate in public affairs outside the realm of partisan politics or political gamesmanship. In terms of argumentation, Obama's rhetoric coaches an attitudinal shift in the perceptual premise or Americans' assumptions on partisanship and political change.¹⁸ Acting as the starting point for argument, Americans' current perceptual premise of an ultra-partisan gridlocked governing system stymies the notion that change can happen. By arguing for the possibility of change and the importance of a plurality of viewpoints in public affairs, Obama's rhetoric advances a nurturing and process-oriented attitude of tolerance. This act sought to widen the discursive landscape of America by stressing the benefits of acknowledging tolerating multiple perspectives, even if they may seem extreme or dangerous. For Obama, tolerance involves choosing to endure or tolerate viewpoints free from judgment. Tolerance may involve the absence of judgment, but tolerance is situated in the notion that all viewpoints are conceivably valid to someone or some audience. To

¹⁷ Kenneth Burke, "Definition of Man," *The Hudson Review* 16, no. 4 (1963-1964), 507, 509.

¹⁸ A perceptual premise can be broadly defined as "assumptions about the nature of things." Perceptual premises can function as data in arguments because they are accepted premises available in public culture. The key thing about a perceptual premise is that it may not be grounded in fact or reality. Like all forms of knowledge, it is tested and challenged and can shift over time based on new findings. See George W. Ziegelmüller and Jack Kay, *Argumentation: Inquiry & Advocacy* 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 39.

advance this kind of attitudinal shift, Obama has spoken candidly about how he views leadership and the role that the public can potentially take to help solve problems. In the next section, I illustrate how the rhetorical construction of ambiguity can help coach a process-oriented attitude of tolerance. As a means to facilitate this process, President Obama has frequently relied on a “call to authenticity” and rhetoric stressing that social change is an incremental and communal process.

Nurturing a Process-Oriented Attitude of Tolerance Through Ambiguity

In order to foster an attitudinal shift in an ultra-partisan climate, a rhetor must break through a focus on political ideology and identity to widen social relations. An attitudinal shift is possible because of the constitutive power of rhetoric. This attitude can be analyzed discursively through traces of specific argumentative strategies and rhetorical inventions available in a text. In other words, a rhetor’s discourse responds to a perceived exigence, but his or her rhetorical choices can help widen social relations and foment an attitudinal shift through strategies that create or emphasize ambiguity. In this process, ambiguity helps facilitate social change by drawing out the existence and necessity of multiple perspectives. Drawing from Burke, James Jasinski emphasizes that rhetors can harness ambiguity as an avenue for political change. Jasinski writes,

Burke argued that, although the “substance” of a rhetorical situation, an historic event, an individual’s past, or a key document might appear clear and unproblematic, there is an element of ambiguity that almost always is available for an advocate or a rhetor to exploit. Ambiguous substance makes possible various forms of rhetorical reversal or transformation. This idea of a rhetorical or discursive transformation through exploiting

ambiguity of substance connects to other concepts in contemporary rhetorical studies such as definition of a situation and dissociation.¹⁹

In this mindset, the existence of multiple viewpoints in a culture provides one of the necessary means for persuasion and potential transformation. At the same time, a rhetor can leverage the existence of a plurality of voices. Ambiguity can be strategically harnessed to foster the existence and/or stress the importance of multiple viewpoints in a culture and their necessity for democratic culture to thrive.²⁰

Rhetors can strategically harness ambiguity through arguments that rely on the need for plurality and stressing a need to find areas of commonality. Leah Ceccarelli argues that by using strategic ambiguity, a rhetor can bridge “two or more otherwise conflicting groups of readers converging in praise of a text.”²¹ Strategic ambiguity allows for multiple groups to identify with a text because its underlying message remains polysemous. Although audience members play an important role in decoding a strategically ambiguous work, it should be noted that, when employing this rhetorical strategy, “the power over textual signification remains with the author, who inserts *both* meanings into the text.”²² Similarly, Eric M. Eisenberg reports that strategic ambiguity can be harnessed as an intentional resource by a rhetor because “it allows for multiple interpretations to exist among people who contend that they are attending to the same message—i.e., perceive the message to be clear. It is a political necessity to engage in strategic ambiguity so that different constituent groups may apply different interpretations to the symbol.”²³ For

¹⁹ James Jasinski, *Sourcebook on Rhetoric* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 11.

²⁰ Eric M. Eisenberg, “Ambiguity as a Strategy in Organizational Communication,” *Communication Monographs* 51, no. 3 (1984), 233.

²¹ Leah Ceccarelli, “Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84, no. 4 (1998), 404.

²² Ceccarelli, “Polysemy,” 404, emphasis in original.

²³ Eisenberg, “Ambiguity as a Strategy in Organizational Communication,” 233.

Eisenberg, ambiguity is important for facilitating change because it allows a rhetor and audience flexibility to meet the varying demands of changing situations, environments, and audiences.²⁴ Rhetors can use strategic ambiguity as a deliberate rhetorical strategy in an attempt to bind together “audience[s] who would otherwise be in conflict.”²⁵ Thus, strategic ambiguity allows a rhetor to meet varying situational demands by using rhetoric that seeks to appeal to a broad audience. Ambiguity can be used when focusing on change by moving away from partisan appeals and using arguments that are based in stressing that change happens at an incremental pace, on a micro-scale, and through the future actions of audience members. Seeking an attitude shift requires rhetors to use ambiguity to call forth an audience’s interpretation of what constitutes political change, but stresses where change can be fomented.

Ambiguity is one tactic that presidents can use to adapt to a changing political climate, but throughout the course of American history presidents have pursued other rhetorical options. In a longitudinal study that examined the rhetoric of George Washington to Bill Clinton, Elvin Lim outlines a number of trends from the nation’s chief executive. Two of these trends have been the increasingly reliance on ambiguous arguments and use of more personalized discourse. Lim notes the emergence of ambiguous rhetoric that relies on religious, poetic, and idealistic references in presidential discourse over the course of the 20th century. Lim contends that abstract rhetoric has a “focus on elemental ideas and concepts [and] easily engenders feelings of approbation,” allowing presidents to transcend the current political scene and place their discourse in more universal ideals.²⁶ In addition to being more abstract, Lim provides quantitative support for presidential rhetoric that has become more personal, “focused

²⁴ Eisenberg, “Ambiguity as a Strategy in Organizational Communication,” 234.

²⁵ Ceccarelli, “Polysemy,” 404.

²⁶ Elvin T. Lim, “Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric: An Analysis of Rhetoric from George Washington to Bill Clinton,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2002), 335.

increasingly on the trustworthiness of the rhetor, and it has become more anecdotal.”²⁷ President Obama’s rhetoric has been subject to these same trends, but also contains argumentative strategies that harness the power of ambiguity. Specifically, in Obama’s discourse, ambiguity is constructed rhetorically through a variety of strategies, including the use of intimate rhetoric, his construction of a parental first persona, and other common rhetorical strategies such as dissociation and definition. These strategies act as the means for the constitution of a process-oriented attitude of tolerance. Obama’s rhetoric constructs an attitude of tolerance that allows for a seemingly endless amount of ambiguity. Rather than redefining a situation as a means to pursue change, Obama’s use of ambiguity allows for a seemingly infinite or number of options that should be tolerated. Rather than using ambiguity to harness social change, Obama used ambiguity as a rhetorical device to help citizens accept the constraints of the current ultra-partisan environment.

Through the constitutive nature of rhetoric, rhetors can help foment an attitude of tolerance for civic engagement. Although the role of the community is of paramount importance in a democracy, an attitude of tolerance stresses that individuals are the real agents for social change in the American political process. A rhetor who seeks to construct a process-oriented attitude of tolerance must downplay his or her role as a leader and emphasize the importance of individual actors. To foster this kind of attitude, tolerance involves opening the political process, but freeing it from judgment. At its core, a process-oriented attitude of tolerance can be based in some of philosopher John Dewey’s theories on civic engagement. In *The Public & Its Problems*, Dewey outlines how an ineffective state can cloud the public’s ability to discuss issues and solve problems collectively. Dewey observes,

²⁷ Lim, “Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric,” 343.

General apathy, neglect and contempt find expression in resort to various short-cuts of direct action [to problems]. And direct action is taken by many other interests than those which employ “direct action” as a slogan often most energetically by the entrenched [sic] class-interests which profess the greatest reverence for the established “law and order” of the existing state.²⁸

By not challenging governing structures or representatives that inhibit change from the grassroots, Dewey contends that individuals can become apathetic or express contempt for alternative political viewpoints. To create a more effective and open democratic culture, Dewey argues that this kind of state requires a vigilant and engaged public. Dewey states, “Only through constant watchfulness and criticism of public officials by citizens can a state be maintained in integrity and usefulness.”²⁹ Thus, openness *and* judgment allow democracy to function properly. Dewey insists that this is a difficult task because citizens traditionally see government and representative democracy as “the regular means of instituting change.”³⁰ Rather than recognizing that it is the public that helped create, elect, and is ultimately responsible for keeping a vigilant eye on lawmakers, in a representative democracy, it can be easy for individuals to subvert their own power to political parties and ideology. Individuals lose sight of their ability to effect social change by cynically believing it is only lawmakers, the rich, or lobbyists who can accomplish change. In reality, it is individual members of the public themselves. They are the real heroes and change champions in the most ideal form of American democracy.

Rhetoric that seeks to promote a process-oriented attitude of tolerance is structurally similar to Dewey’s notion of open communication and individual political empowerment, but

²⁸ John Dewey, *The Public & Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1952), 81.

²⁹ Dewey, *The Public & its Problems*, 69.

³⁰ Dewey, *The Public & its Problems*, 81.

falls short of moving to collaborative action. Rather than seeking transformation through discussion and collaboration, rhetoric based on a process-oriented attitude of tolerance stalls action by accepting plurality and the current state of public affairs. In order for Obama's rhetoric to create a collaborative kind of shift in civic engagement, ambiguity is necessary. However, Obama's construction of a process-oriented attitude of tolerance provides *too* much ambiguity, only allowing individual change. At a public level, each individual's ideological preferences may remain in tact because tolerance provides a base for the acceptance of all plurality. In turn this rhetoric may speak of change, but tolerance acts as inertia, slowing change by devaluing the need for public problem-solving and judgment. Despite the fact that this attitude shift may not be fully solvent, this dissertation explores three case studies in which Obama's rhetorical choices and leadership offered some possibility for political change. His argumentative strategies provide insight into how to construct ambiguity in an age of ultra-partisanship. Yet, Obama's rhetoric created the possibility of too much ambiguity. As such, the president's proposed attitudinal shift did not offer a solvent solution for particular shared challenges or provide a clear direction on how to move beyond our current state.

In order to bypass partisanship and promote an attitudinal shift, presidential rhetoric needs to stress that the president is only a partial responder to the nation's problems. He or she can propose solutions, but his or her primary role is nurturing a community of empowered individuals to go out and address these problems firsthand. Moreover, presidential rhetoric should stress that change is slow and incremental. Change is not something that happens overnight or in a vacuum. According to Obama, change happens through shifting attitudes at the personal, local, and communal level. President Obama himself has noted the slow and individual nature of change. In his final State of the Union address in 2016, Obama downplayed earlier

campaign promises of being a transformative leader, claiming that change should be measured in small increments. In his speech, Obama stated, “[I]f we want a better politics—and I’m addressing the American people now—if we want a better politics, it’s not enough just to change a congressman or change a senator or even change a President. We have to change the system to reflect our better selves.”³¹ To help bypass the conflict of ultra-partisanship, change is slow and involves more than voting for one president or getting rid of one member of Congress. Change involves cultivating broad discussion and deliberation in and among communities. However, change can only happen if individuals are willing to work together, and if they accept that there may be some flexibility in public opinion on how problems can be understood and solved. Obama has noted the trained incapacity of his decentralized leadership and rhetoric. In his 2016 State of the Union, Obama conceded,

Democracy grinds to a halt without a willingness to compromise, [...] when even basic facts are contested [...] when we listen only to those who agree with us. Our public life withers when only the most extreme voices get all the attention. And most of all, democracy breaks down when the average person feels their voice doesn’t matter; that the system is rigged in favor of the rich or the powerful or some special interest.

Too many Americans feel that way right now. It’s one of the few regrets of my presidency—that the rancor and suspicion between the parties has gotten worse instead of better. I have no doubt a president with the gifts of Lincoln or Roosevelt might have better bridged the divide, and I guarantee I’ll keep trying to be better so long as I hold

³¹ Barack Obama, “Remarks of President Barack Obama—State of the Union Address As Delivered,” *The White House*, January 13, 2016, par. 17, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama—prepared-delivery-state-union-address>.

this office.³²

For Obama, his presidential administration may have tried to seek a change in politics by promoting a change at the individual level. Although his rhetoric might have been successful at diagnosing the problem and proposing a solution, the president noted that he has been unable to adequately enact a remedy for ultra-partisanship. As such, a process-oriented attitude of tolerance in itself is not an effective way of moving beyond a state of ultra-partisanship. In fact, it may only reinforce or ignore the existing harm that plagues American democracy because allowing too much ambiguity provides no common ground to be rhetorically harnessed or moved beyond. By stressing tolerance Obama's rhetorical attitudinal shift is impotent. This attitude creates an American public that accepts plurality, but is resigned to deliberative enclaves³³ where discussion and change only happen individually—if at all.

Analyzing Ambiguity in Obama's Same-Sex Marriage, Gun Violence, and Race Rhetoric

The remaining chapters of this dissertation provide insight into how Obama's rhetoric sought to create an attitudinal shift in how individuals engage in public affairs. To illustrate how Obama's rhetoric functions, this study explores three high-profile uses of presidential rhetoric in instances where public opinion was not strictly divided across partisan lines. These cases exemplify issues where attitudinal change and non-partisan discussions could potentially be fostered at the individual and local level. Much like the unnamed man who was unable to explain his policy preferences alongside his political ideology in Chapter 1's example from *Real Time*

³² Obama, "Remarks of President Barack Obama—State of the Union Address As Delivered," par. 14-15.

³³ For a discussion on deliberative enclaves and the role in public deliberation, see Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. C. Calhoun, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 123-124.

With Bill Maher, public opinion polling surrounding same-sex marriage, gun violence, and race suggests that there is some flexibility in how many Americans understood and might relate to certain complex social issues. The three case studies selected for this dissertation are also representative of instances in which communication practices could have helped advance political debate beyond partisan talking points. In order to create a wider communication environment, a process-oriented attitude of tolerance accepted plurality and embraced ambiguity. Each of these case studies reveals an instance in which presidential rhetoric and leadership might be mobilized to provide the public with a new lens for understanding its current and future political environment.

Acknowledging the incipient nature of attitudes, I examine discursive manifestations of a process-oriented attitude of tolerance in President Obama's public speech. Through close textual analysis, I illustrate how Obama sought to cultivate a process-oriented attitude of tolerance as a potential way to bypass partisan gridlock and foment deliberation at a grassroots or individual level. Close textual analysis provides a productive way to trace Obama's argumentative strategies by exploring the nuances of a text. This approach is similar to mining a text's terministic screen to comprehend the underlying suasive potential. According to Burke, a terministic screen can be broadly defined as a language filter that individuals use to assert a viewpoint in public. Through the act of choosing certain words over others, individuals use and are used by terministic screens to craft and advocate their viewpoints. Rather than just serving as a "reflection of reality," terministic screens highlight a "selection of reality; and to this extent [...] a deflection of reality."³⁴ In any act of public communication, Burke acknowledges, "We *must* use terministic screens, since we can't say anything without the use of terms; whatever

³⁴ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 45.

terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another.”³⁵ Even though humans may not recognize their own terministic screen in every communication act, astute critics can carefully examine a text as a microcosm of a terministic screen through which a rhetor makes sense of the world. Rhetorical analysis provides a way to analyze this slice of a terministic screen to understand what is included, excluded, and how arguments are framed for audiences. Through this kind of analysis, an individual’s rhetoric can promote their construction of an attitude or call for action in a given situation.

This dissertation explores Obama’s rhetoric in a number of textual formats including speeches, interviews, and appearances on reality television shows. Grounded in close analysis of each text or texts, the remaining chapters explore three case studies and how Obama’s rhetoric is developed across these situations. Close textual analysis is undertaken based on Michael Leff’s understanding that “the text is not an autonomous container of meaning, nor is it a failed paradigm of truth. Instead, we see it as a positioned response set within a constellation of other positioned responses.”³⁶ In other words, although there may be a multitude of responses and contextual elements available for each case study, the predominant focus of each analysis chapter is on Obama’s cultivation of a process-oriented attitude of tolerance. By analyzing the text and positioning it in relation to its context, close reading provides insight into how President Obama’s rhetoric functions intrinsically and constitutively in these case studies.

Using close textual analysis, in the next three chapters I examine how Obama argued that Americans could individually bypass ultra-partisanship and adopt a process for citizenship based

³⁵ Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 50, emphasis in original.

³⁶ Michael Leff, “Things Made By Words: Reflections on Textual Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78, no. 2 (1992), 230.

in tolerance. Obama's rhetorical coaching of this kind of attitude involved moving the locus of responsibility for change onto citizens who take an active role for their part in public affairs at the grassroots, local, or individual level. In each analysis chapter, I investigate how the president's rhetoric sought to bypass partisan conflict by stressing the necessity of ambiguity and pluralism in American democracy. Each case study also examines how Obama speaks frankly and intimately about contentious wedge issues. Each chapter provides an analysis of the president's public discourse, but also highlights how Obama's public arguments on partisanship, social change, same-sex marriage, gun violence, and race rhetorically constitute an attitude that stresses the need for increased civic participation and tolerance at the individual level. In the last section of each chapter, I discuss the strengths and limitations of Obama's argumentative strategies in each case study.

Chapter 4 analyzes Obama's May 2012 interview announcing his support of same-sex marriage. In this chapter, I argue that Obama's same-sex marriage rhetoric highlighted a political scene that promoted tolerance and evolutionally change from individual and localized discussions. In Obama's May 9, 2012 rhetoric, change was represented as a process of localized evolution—something that happened on a micro-scale and outside the scope of traditional presidential leadership, federal public policy, and national deliberation. Rather than attempting to persuade Americans to align their views with his, Obama asked citizens to model his personal evolution process on same-sex marriage by participating in prolonged and localized debates, whatever their ultimate decision. In this frame, social evolution did not arise from the president's opinion or federal policy. This rhetorical tactic allowed the president to state his opinion on same-sex marriage, while not following it up with policy action. Leading into the 2012 election, this kind of argumentative strategy provided Obama the opportunity to charge up his liberal base

by offering his personal support for same-sex marriage, but also appeal to more socially conservative members of the Democratic Party by distancing his opinion from federal policy proposals.

Chapter 5 investigates Obama's rhetoric in the immediate aftermath of the December 2012 tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary and his speeches following a failed April 2013 Senate vote on gun control legislation. Despite overwhelming support for such measures and Obama's demand that in the aftermath of Sandy Hook words needed to lead to action, Congress failed to pass any form of gun control legislation. The issue of federal gun control came to a dramatic halt on April 17, 2013, when Senate lawmakers failed to get the 60 votes needed to pass a bipartisan bill that extended background checks on firearm sales, as well as bills that placed a ban on the sale of assault weapons, a ban on extended ammunition magazines, and penalties for gun traffickers.³⁷ Although policy was not changed, this chapter argues that Obama's rhetoric illustrates the president simultaneously demanding that Americans hold their political representatives accountable at the voting booth, but also be tolerant of others. In turn, this chapter illustrates the main trained incapacity of Obama's process-oriented attitude of tolerance is that it stymies collective action by not providing a specific path forward or providing a locus of public responsibility for pursuing a shift in policy.

Chapter 6 examines Obama's rhetoric on race following the June 17, 2015 shooting at a South Carolina church. Analyzing Obama's eulogy for the late Reverend Clementa Pinckney, I argue that the president advocated that mortification was necessary in order to address America's damaged race relations. Through the eulogy for the late Reverend Pinckney, the president argued that Americans had a choice between rejecting institutional racism and one's personal role in

³⁷ Jonathan Weisman, "Senate Blocks Drive for Gun Control," *New York Times*, April 17, 2013, <http://nyti.ms/12nWhOb>.

contributing toward it *or* accepting discrimination as a part of the current state of order. In this text, the president explained that there is some ambiguity on how black and white Americans address race relations and where solutions to this problem should occur. In an age of ultra-partisanship, Obama noted that political policies and parties would not help address contentious social issues like racism. Moreover, the president explained that strictly placing responsibility for success on black or white Americans alone would not help heal the country from its historical and contemporary racial wounds.

This dissertation concludes by summarizing Obama's rhetorical legacy and some of the strengths and weaknesses of his form of leadership. Acting as president in an age of ultra-partisanship, Obama fought an uphill battle to pass legislation and was consistently labeled as one of, if not the most, polarizing presidents. In this concluding chapter, I explain that Obama's rhetoric did not provide a panacea for ultra-partisanship and government gridlock. In fact, future rhetorical scholars and political scientists can investigate the long-term effects of Obama's public discourse. This study concludes by noting the inherent barriers affiliated with Obama's process-oriented attitude of tolerance. Through my three case studies, I highlight how the president tried to bypass partisanship to attenuate conflict. As such, the president's rhetoric created an environment where transformation was unlikely because the nation's chief executive constituted citizenship as accepting and freeing viewpoints from judgment. In addition to focusing on Obama, this conclusion also provides an alternative kind of rhetorical approach for engaging political arguments and seeking democratic transformation grounded in collaboration. Unlike Obama's tolerant approach to civic participation, I base my recommendations in broader discussions of democracy that stress the need for a rowdy or discussion-oriented public sphere where individuals collaborate, engage partisan conflict, and make collective decisions. Through

an investigation of Alexander Hamilton's argument about the role of the Executive Branch, this chapter clarifies that America's chief executive's primary role is to promote energy in the public and protect the state and security of the nation. This can be a militaristic duty, but I argue it is also a rhetorical duty that seeks to respect plurality, protect the need for more communication, but also move the country beyond partisan gridlock by stressing the need for public judgment and collaboration. Ultimately, even though presidential rhetoric can be studied for its effect on public opinion or Congressional action, this dissertation ends by illustrating how rhetoric can also be used as a way to cultivate a public attitude and new ways of practicing citizenship and political participation.

Chapter 4:

The Protection of Individual Opinion in Obama's May 9, 2012 Interview in Support of Marriage Equality

On May 9, 2012, President Barack Obama sparked headlines by declaring his personal support of same-sex marriage. Speaking with *ABC News*'s Robin Roberts in the White House's Cabinet Room, Obama explained his decision to be the first U.S. president to come out in favor of same-sex marriage publicly. "I've been going through an evolution on this issue," Obama announced. "I have to tell you that over the course of – several years, as I['ve] talk[ed] to friends and family and neighbors [...] I've just concluded that – for me *personally*, it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that – I think same-sex couples should be able to get married."¹ In the wake of this announcement, media outlets focused on both the historic and personal nature of Obama's support. The *New York Times* noted that Obama had just "complet[ed] a wrenching personal transformation on [same-sex marriage]."² The *New York Daily News* positioned its story with the subheading: "First President to [support same-sex marriage], says talks with daughters helped sway decision."³ *USA Today* noted the political effects of the announcement with the headline: "In political gamble, Obama supports gay marriage."⁴ Months before Obama faced a tough re-election campaign, media outlets on the left and the right positioned his rhetoric as a

¹ Barack Obama, "Transcript: Robin Roberts ABC News Interview with President Obama," *ABC News*, May 9, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/transcript-robin-roberts-abc-news-interview-president-obama/story?id=16316043&singlePage=true>, emphasis added.

² Jackie Calmes and Peter Baker, "Obama Says Same-Sex Marriage Should Be Legal," *New York Times*, May 9, 2012, par. 1, <http://nyti.ms/L8KASB>.

³ Jonathan Lemire, "President Obama Announcements His Support of Same-Sex Marriage," *New York Daily News*, May 9, 2012, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/obama-support-gay-marriage-article-1.1075077>.

⁴ Aamer Madhani, Greg Toppo, David Jackson, and Jackie Kucinich, "In Political Gamble, Obama Supports Gay Marriage," *USA Today*, May 10, 2012, <http://usat.ly/IK9FQ5#.VuxupiqIQbU.twitter>.

part of changing public opinion on the issue of marriage equality.⁵ In other words, media outlets highlighted that Obama's announcement was in line with a series of recent events of broader public support for the LGBTQ community.

Despite the media's emphasis on the historic nature of Obama's announcement, prior to May 9, 2012, the president already had publicly supported LGBTQ rights through a number of low-profile statements and executive actions. In December of 2010, Obama repealed a bill that prevented gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans from serving openly in the Armed Forces. In February of 2011, Obama's Justice Department stopped enforcing parts of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)—a law that was eventually repealed by Congress that July. Throughout his first presidential term, Obama also signed an executive measure that protected LGBTQ children from bullying, took steps to protect LGBTQ Americans from housing discrimination, and created a national HIV/AIDS strategy, among other executive actions in support of the LGBTQ community.⁶

Even though Obama issued executive actions to support the rights of LGBTQ Americans, the president's rhetorical advocacy on behalf of this community was somewhat restrained during his first presidential term. Charles E. Morris III argues that, throughout his first six years in office, Obama often spoke about discrimination against LGBTQ Americans, but did little to enact substantial national policy changes to advance equal rights for this community. Morris

⁵ In the days leading up to his announcement, news outlets and polling organizations noted that Obama and his presumptive Republican rival, Governor Mitt Romney, were in a dead heat for the White House. See James Hohmann, "Battleground Poll: Obama, Romney in Dead Heat," *Politico*, May 7, 2012, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0512/75973.html>; Frank Newport, "Romney, Obama in Tight Race as Gallup Daily Tracking Begins," *Gallup*, April 16, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/153902/Romney-Obama-Tight-Race-Gallup-Daily-Tracking-Begins.aspx>.

⁶ For a full list of the Obama administration's support of the LGBTQ community, see "Obama Administration Record for the LGBT Community," *The White House*, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/lgbt_record.pdf.

reports that although public comments like the May 9, 2012 interview may be “[s]tirring moments,” these are “invocations, which is to say passing, if pointed, mentions.”⁷ In other words, rather than delivering major public speeches about the rights of the LGBTQ community, Obama confined his rhetoric about this issue to brief “[r]emarks, statements, proclamations, [and] memoranda.”⁸ Prior to the 2015 Supreme Court ruling that declared same-sex marriage constitutional, Obama often noted the importance of protecting the rights of LGBTQ Americans, but remained somewhat silent on how this tied with his Administration’s public policy direction and how marriage equality should be viewed by governing bodies. This use of strategic ambiguity and other argumentative strategies is noteworthy because, through rhetoric, presidents help constitute America’s broader social and political climate. In turn, a president’s rhetoric calls attention to how social issues like same-sex marriage are understood and evaluated by the American people. This chapter builds on this notion, illustrating how President Obama used strategic ambiguity and a call to the authentic to address his personal support of same-sex marriage, yet to distance this opinion from federal public policy.

Specifically, in this chapter, I argue that Obama’s same-sex marriage rhetoric created a process-oriented attitude of tolerance toward civic participation. This attitude emphasized that change would evolve organically without public action from the White House. Although the president stressed the need to tolerate or respect a plurality of voices, as well as a need for Americans to discuss or debate issues on a local level, his May 9, 2012 interview constituted a political scene that downplayed the energy associated with presidential leadership and open deliberation. Instead of using the rhetorical powers of the presidency to encourage Congress or

⁷ Charles Morris III, “Context’s Critic, Invisible Traditions, and Queering Rhetorical History,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 100, no. 1 (2015), 235.

⁸ Morris III, “Context’s Critic,” 235.

the American people to support same-sex marriage, Obama only stressed the need for local communities and individuals to continuously discuss on a personal level. In Obama's rhetoric, change was represented as a process of evolution—something that happened on a local scale and outside the scope of presidential leadership, federal public policy, and national open deliberation. Rather than attempting to persuade Americans to align their views with his, Obama asked citizens to model his personal evolution on same-sex marriage by participating in prolonged and localized discussions, whatever their ultimate decisions. In this regard, organic social evolution did not arise from the president's opinion or federal policy. Instead, Obama's rhetoric advocated that the satisfaction of prolonged intimate and localized discussions on same-sex marriage was a form of progress and evidence of social evolution. Due to this fact, extrinsic social action on the part of the federal government, the president or even individuals was unproductive because it would cause inorganic social evolution and forced deliberation. This kind of rhetoric may stress a need for more debate or discussion, but its inherent weakness is the inability to connect personal discourse and policy solutions. This kind of rhetoric expresses the need for *more* civic participation, but does not provide the means for how Americans can help enact change on a material level beyond discussion. I contend that the May 9, 2012 interview highlights the rhetorical impotence of Obama's process-oriented attitude of tolerance. Increased participation and tolerance for voices are stressed, but the need for widespread immediate action is downplayed and actually warned against.

Existing in an ultra-partisan political environment, this rhetorical tactic allowed the president to state his opinion on same-sex marriage, while not following it up with policy action or advocacy. This statement also drew boundaries for how Americans should understand their role in national public deliberation. The rhetorical situation surrounding this interview is

noteworthy because Obama was finishing his first presidential term and going to be on the general election ticket eight months later. Leading into the 2012 election, the interview format provided Obama the opportunity to charge up his liberal base by offering his personal support for same-sex marriage, but also appeal to more socially conservative members of the Democratic Party by separating his opinion from federal public policy. Through this rhetorical act, Obama constituted a political scene in which federal action was unnecessary because it would interrupt or even halt the natural evolution or local and individual perfection of the country by forcing executive, legislative, or judicial action.

In the remainder of this chapter, I analyze how the May 9, 2012 *ABC News* interview illustrates the president redefining the issue of same-sex marriage by speaking through a personal register or “call to the authentic.” In this way, Obama’s rhetoric fomented a process-oriented attitude of tolerance through strategies that rely more on personal rhetoric than traditional forms of political argument. In an age when the American public views political arguments as toxic, personalized or authentic kinds of rhetorical positioning provide Obama the means to bypass partisan conflict by using a personal revelation to offer presidential leadership. This rhetoric also promotes tolerance by asking Americans to acknowledge the plurality of viewpoints on marriage equality in public deliberation. This kind of rhetoric functions differently than the rhetorical presidency because the goal is not necessarily to directly persuade the public toward a policy position and push Congress into enacting a law. Instead, this kind of argumentative strategy is indirect and focused on getting individuals to gradually explore contentious social issues in their private lives.

This chapter begins with an overview of Obama’s argumentative strategies and the events leading up to the May 9, 2012 *ABC News* interview. I then analyze Obama’s May 9, 2012 *ABC*

News interview, highlighting how the president used *purely personal* rhetoric to constitute a political scene that downplayed the need for a change in federal policy. Finally, I end this chapter by stressing how Obama's May 9, 2012 comments may have provided a rhetorical space for individuals to discuss a social issue without asking for federal policy changes. Although this kind of rhetoric advocated that change was in the hands of the people, the trained incapacity of this particular interview was its inability to provide members of the public with a specific means to connect personalized discourse and local deliberation with a larger national democratic community.

Bypassing Partisanship Through Personalized Discourse and a "Call to the Authentic"

In 21st century American society, Obama faced a political scene of ultra-partisanship where opposing sides of social issues often become entrenched when publicly deliberated. In contemporary American society, debates over race, sexual orientation, and gender are situated in discourses that advocate for the privatization of these issues—downplaying their public exigency.⁹ Instead of promoting national or genuine public opinion and open deliberation,¹⁰ stressing the need for solely localized debate and discussion favors the personalization of political arguments and civic participation. Rather than connecting the personal to the political, this kind of rhetoric creates the appearance that the two are distinct, despite being inherently connected.

Steeped in this kind of logic, Obama's rhetoric has downplayed the role of an active federal government and president in favor of protecting the rights of individuals and local

⁹ Bradley Jones and Roopali Mukherjee, "From California to Michigan: Race, Rationality, and Neoliberal Governmentality," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7, no. 4 (2007), 403-404.

¹⁰ In the Conclusion, I examine Kathryn M. Olson's definition of "genuine public deliberation" and "open deliberation" as a means to outline how to move beyond the trained incapacity of a personalized or localized form of debate.

communities to evolve or change on their own time. Obama may note the importance of government in uniting Americans, but his rhetoric ultimately places social responsibility and political action in the hands of individuals and local communities. As a president, his rhetoric attempts to define the current American political scene as apolitical—a place where executive, congressional, or judicial advocacy on social issues is unnecessary because deliberation occurs on the local level and differs among generations. Americans may be part of a larger identity, but the community acts locally. Obama’s rhetoric advocates that “we the people” constitutes an American community that is committed to individual responsibility, tolerance, and local action.

Although publicly stating that he was in support of same-sex marriage in 1996 when a candidate for the Illinois Senate, while running for president in 2008 and throughout his first presidential term, Obama clarified that he meant that he only supported domestic partnerships for same-sex couples.¹¹ Beginning on Sunday, May 6, 2012, Obama’s White House was forced to directly face questions about the president’s stance on same-sex marriage. On May 6, 2012, in an interview with NBC’s “Meet the Press,” Vice President Joseph Biden created public controversy through a reportedly “off-the-cuff” remark that he was “absolutely comfortable” with same-sex marriage.¹² On Monday, May 7, 2012 Education Secretary Arne Duncan followed Biden’s lead, also endorsing same-sex marriage in an interview.¹³ In the hours and days following Biden’s and Duncan’s announcements, journalists and LGBTQ rights activists pressed the White House to

¹¹ Michael Barbaro, “A Scramble as Biden Backs Same-Sex Marriage,” *New York Times*, May 6, 2012, par. 12, <http://nyti.ms/1DLr1wo>.

¹² Barbaro, “A Scramble as Biden Backs Same-Sex Marriage.” Biden reportedly also apologized to the president for “putting him in a tough position that led to Obama’s announcement that he now supports same-sex marriage.” See Jessica Yellin, “Biden Apologizes to Obama for Marriage Controversy,” *CNN*, May 10, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/10/politics/obama-same-sex-marriage/>.

¹³ Aamer Madhani, “Gay Marriage in Spotlight as Duncan, Biden Say They Favor It,” *USA Today*, May 8, 2012, <http://usat.ly/LzxT4W#.Vuxu4Y9ytjU.twitter>.

disclose the president's stance on the issue, trying to discern if the president would also come out in favor of same-sex marriage prior to the 2012 presidential election.¹⁴ After attempting to assuage speculation about Obama's stance on the issue by repeating the president's commitment to domestic partnerships, on Tuesday, May 8, 2012, the White House scheduled an interview with Robin Roberts at *ABC News* for Wednesday morning.¹⁵

At the time Obama made his 2012 announcement in favor of same-sex marriage, 53 percent of Americans overall contended that they stood on the side of marriage equality. However, black Americans were more socially conservative with only about 41 percent supporting same-sex marriage.¹⁶ In order to appeal to a majority of Americans, but also curb any backlash from black voters in the 2012 election, Obama used the *ABC News* interview to construct his personal persona in favor of LGBTQ rights. At the same time, the interview illustrates Obama's claims to respect and be friends with Americans who did not support marriage equality. The interview's personal form and the president's ability to embody "a call to authentic" positioned his rhetoric as a personal revelation, not political change. Moreover, Obama's rhetoric associated his first persona with black Americans by stating that he has friends who may disagree with his personal stance on marriage equality. The president's rhetoric qualified his stance and preference for tolerance by noting his respect for those who did not agree

¹⁴ See Kevin Drum, "Joe Biden 'Comfortable' With Same-Sex Marriage," *Mother Jones*, May 6, 2012, <http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2012/05/joe-biden-comfortable-same-sex-marriage>; Dana Milbank, "Vice President Biden's Gay-Marriage Gaffe is Mess for White House," *The Washington Post*, May 7, 2012, <http://wpo.st/q5zM1>; Steven Thrasher, "Going Rogue! Joe Biden Endorses Gay Marriage, *Will & Grace*, and a Dick Cheney Style Of Out-Gaying His Boss," *Village Voice*, May 6, 2012, http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2012/05/joe_biden_endor.php.

¹⁵ Calmes and Baker, "Obama Says Same-Sex Marriage Should Be Legal."

¹⁶ Scott Clement and Sandhya Somashekhar, "After President Obama's Announcement Opposition to Gay Marriage Hits Record Low," *Washington Post*, May 23, 2012, par. 2-3, <http://wpo.st/u6zM1>.

with his opinion and explained that this was not a change in policy—just a personal revelation that happened to be revealed expediently through the one-on-one informal televised network news interview.

To create arguments that bypass the notion of political, intimacy or authenticity is rhetorically constructed through a rhetor's ability to rely on personal narrative and frames of reference that are outside of politics and appear more conversational. According to Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Megan M. Wood, this kind of personal rhetoric can be labeled a “call to authenticity.” A “call to authenticity” may be a deliberate performance and planned series of arguments. The key idea is that authenticity is constructed by a rhetor who presents his or her discourse in a way that *appears* “not pre-mediated” and “uncontrived and natural-seeming, expressing themselves in spontaneous showings of feeling.”¹⁷ Rather than viewing authenticity as something essential, this understanding of authenticity is one rhetorical tactic available when employing a personal kind of discourse, which positions itself as non-political.¹⁸ As a result, rather than engaging in arguments built from partisan talking points or policy positions, arguments can couch political matters hidden by a sense of intimacy, authenticity, or sincerity. Kathleen Hall Jamieson notes the utility of this strategy, explaining, “[C]onsistency between public and private selves is uniquely advantageous when the style is a competent personable one.”¹⁹ When using rhetoric that employs a call to the authentic, rhetors are able to bypass notions of controversy by using a discourse that sounds more personal than traditional forms of

¹⁷ Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Megan M. Wood, “Posting Racism and Sexism: Authenticity, Agency and Self-Reflexivity in Social Media,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (2014), 282.

¹⁸ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 10.

¹⁹ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 180.

political argument. This kind of rhetoric may allow a rhetor to bypass partisan politics by using a strategically ambiguous message, asking them to be authentic with their beliefs, but respect the notion that tolerance is one unifying feature of American democracy.

By describing his personal stance on same-sex marriage, Obama was able to bypass the notion of pushing for changes in public policy or answering how his White House would address this particular issue. To promote an attitudinal shift, Obama encouraged Americans to alter their expectations for how social change occurs. Changes were happening at more local communal levels and picking up pace around the rest of the country. By encouraging discussion and tolerance, Obama's rhetoric advanced the notion that change was still possible on this issue and in America. Shifting expectations for change away from the notion of executive action, a shift in public policy by state or federal lawmakers, or a ruling by the courts, Obama's comments illustrate rhetoric as the incipient act for a process-oriented attitude of tolerance. Rather than thinking of politics in the frame of what lawmakers or courts could provide the American public, Obama's discourse channeled the notion that change is most effective and possible through an active citizenry. Part of that involves Americans thinking deeply about their own opinion on certain issues and having frank and honest discussions with their families and local communities. The other vital aspect is respecting the notion that opinions may differ on certain wedge issues.

To draw out this call to authenticity and illustrate Obama's attitude toward civic participation, in the remainder of this chapter, I analyze three major themes in the interview. In each section, I analyze how the May 9, 2012 interview relied on a call to the authentic and help foment a process-oriented attitude of tolerance. The first section highlights the personal revelation components of Obama's support of same-sex marriage. The second section analyzes how Obama redefined equality in 21st-century America through the lens of fairness and the

ability for individuals to discuss social issues locally. Within this sub-section, I note how Obama used this argument to rally his liberal base without alienating more socially conservative members of his party who did not support same-sex marriage. The final part of this chapter analyzes Obama's use of the metaphor "evolution" to describe the process of political change. In that section, I illustrate the weaknesses of Obama's rhetoric that relies on a call to the authentic. Rather than arguing that the federal government, president, and citizens can promote social change through executive, legislative, or judicial action, Obama's rhetoric cast progress as a gradual process that takes place on a local level and does not require interdependence between communities. Instead of using the rhetorical powers of the presidency, pushing members of Congress to enact legislation, or rallying the Supreme Court to rule on the constitutionality of same-sex marriage, Obama's rhetoric noted that social evolution or change happens through local discussions. In this frame, individuals only need to perpetually engage in discussions about this topic on a localized level to discharge their civic duty. As a result, beyond the satisfaction of local discussion, little to no extrinsic action is necessary. In other words, by stating that individuals should debate issues on their own time and terms, Obama's rhetoric allowed for plurality to exist, but did not advocate for a solution larger than the vitality of community discussion. To analyze how the May 9, 2012 interview functioned persuasively, in this third sub-section, I draw on and extend Kenneth Burke's understanding of ordinary and pure persuasion.

A Call to the Authentic: The President Speaking as Private Citizen

Roberts opened the May 9, 2012 interview by asking Obama if he was "still opposed to same-sex marriage." Noting that he has been going through an "evolution" on the issue, Obama explained that since the start of his presidency, his White House had "stood on the side of

broader equality,” supporting the LGBTQ community through a number of executive actions.²⁰

After outlining a few of these signing statements, the president continued his answer, directly addressing the issue of same-sex marriage. He stated, “I have to tell you that over the course of—several years, as I talk to friends and family and neighbors [...] I’ve just concluded that – for me *personally*, it is important for *me* to go ahead and affirm that – *I* think same sex couples should be able to get married.”²¹ Although he may have delivered his comments from the policymaking wing of the White House, Obama’s discourse highlights presidential rhetoric couched in the domestic quarters of the Executive Mansion. Rather than situating his statement in the realm of public deliberation, Obama cast his comments through the prism of personal revelation. Obama noted that it was private conversations with family and friends that had changed his mind on the issue.

Instead of making his historic statement on same-sex marriage in a policy or campaign speech, Obama leveraged the personal form of the one-on-one news interview. Unlike his more eloquent formal speeches, Obama’s comments were delivered in a more conversational tone. Periodically pausing to fully articulate his thoughts, the form and content of the interview highlights the president’s rhetoric as an unrehearsed personal revelation rather than a policy announcement. Instead of speaking as president-as-policymaker, the interview features Obama disclosing his opinion about same-sex marriage and his personal reasons for coming out on the issue. In turn, this act of self-disclosure defined his opinion on same-sex marriage other than his role as president. Repurposing political and personal argumentative frames, Obama’s revelation shows the president downplaying his role as the nation’s leader. Moreover, by revealing his opinion on the topic, Obama’s rhetoric cast aside a public exigency for addressing the issue of

²⁰ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 6-7.

²¹ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 8-9, emphasis added.

same-sex marriage from a policy standpoint. This was replaced with announcing his personal preference.

Rather than supporting a public policy in favor of same-sex marriage, Obama's rhetoric constituted an American political scene in which his decision on marriage equality developed and primarily mattered in the private or personal sphere. Noting the difficulty that came with his shifting stance on the issue, Obama explained that his final decision was the result of personal interactions with same-sex couples and their families,²² but most notably conversations with his wife and daughters. He stated,

You know, Malia and Sasha, they've got friends whose parents are same-sex couples.

And I – you know, there have been times where Michelle and I have been sittin' around the dinner table. And we've been talkin' and – about their friends and parents. And Malia and Sasha would – it wouldn't dawn on them that somehow their friends' parents would be treated differently. It doesn't make sense to them. And – and frankly – that's the kind of thing that prompts – a change of perspective. You know, not wanting to somehow explain to your child why somebody should be treated – differently, when it comes to – the eyes of the law.²³

As Obama disclosed his personal evolution on marriage equality, the president noted his daughters as having friends whose families were same-sex couples. In contrast, Obama did not connect the plight of same-sex couples to his own life or friends. Obama's comments allowed him to use association to create new connections and “meaning[s] of a term to cover the new

²² Obama, “Transcript,” par. 17.

²³ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 23.

case at hand.”²⁴ Through the personal form of the interview, Obama disclosed that his daughters and their friends were associated with the LGBTQ community and marriage equality, but he was only affiliated via proxy. Moreover, the president’s comments illustrate rhetoric that indicates a surprise or lack of knowledge that members of the LGBTQ community would be treated differently in public. In other words, Obama’s comments reveal a personal shift in opinion that ostensibly rose from his perceived and initial lack of understanding or personal reflection on this particular issue.

On the White House blog, an Obama staffer connected this experience with that of other Americans, writing, “It’s no secret the President has gone through some soul-searching on this issue. He’s talked to the First Lady about it, like so many couples do. [...] He’s sat around his kitchen table with Sasha and Malia, who have friends whose parents are same-sex couples.”²⁵ Obama may have noted that these types of conversations prompted a shift in his perspective, but this change was more aligned with “not wanting to somehow explain to your child why somebody should be treated differently” by the law. Through the avoidance of casting the issue of same-sex marriage as a judicial issue or one revolving around legality, Obama’s discourse bypassed the notion that change on this issue happened from federal policy or its execution. The personalized nature of his discourse promoted the notion that change on same-sex marriage was more based in familial discussions than policy execution. In turn, this kind of rhetorical positioning illustrated the emergence of a public attitude that showcased a need for every American to carefully discuss social issues and decide their personal opinion on a case-by-case

²⁴ David Zarefsky, “Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2004), 612.

²⁵ Josh Earnest, “President Obama Supports Same-Sex Marriage,” *The White House*, blog post, May 10, 2012, par. 2-3, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/05/10/obama-supports-same-sex-marriage>.

basis. Moreover, these kinds of discussions were more in the realm of the local and outside federal legality.

Promoting Equality through Fairness and Tolerance (Not Law)

In addition to announcing his personal opinion in the *ABC News* interview, Obama noted his respect for the viewpoints of all Americans. When speaking about public opinion on same-sex marriage, Obama connected the issue to the notion of fairness, while also separating it from the law. He stated, “But from the perspective of – of the law and perspective of the state – I think it’s important – to say that in this country we’ve always been about – fairness. And – and treatin’ everybody – as equals. Or at least that’s been our aspiration. And I think – that applies here, as well.”²⁶ Obama continued, stressing, “this debate is taking place – at a local level. And I think the whole country is evolving and changing. And – you know, one of the things that I’d like to see is – that a conversation continue in a respectful way.”²⁷ Addressing the notion of treating all Americans and their viewpoints as equal, Obama’s rhetoric sought to unite Americans around the notion that fairness is the ability to discuss the issue of same-sex marriage outside the responsibilities of the law. Obama downplayed the need for government intervention into the realm of social issues like same-sex marriage. The federal government and law’s value was to promote fairness by protecting equal access to localized discussion of social issues, not implementation of public policy. For Obama, fairness within the public sphere was not necessarily predicated on extending the right of or respect for marriage to all citizens. Moreover, this was not an issue of legality or governmental responsibility. Fairness was about citizens tolerating all Americans’ right to define marriage on their own terms and have the ability to discuss this issue within private or local communities. Obama noted that although he had a

²⁶ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 19.

²⁷ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 12.

personal preference for how marriage might be defined, he contended that the American community should not discipline or demean those with an opposing viewpoint. He explained,

I think it's important to recognize that – folks – who – feel very strongly that marriage should be defined narrowly as – between a man and a woman – many of them are not coming at it from a mean-spirited perspective. They're coming at it because they care about families. And – they – they have a different understanding, in terms of – you know, what's the word “marriage” should mean. And I – a bunch of ‘em are friends of mine – you know, pastors and – you know, people who – I deeply respect.²⁸

It is noteworthy that the president indicated he had personal friends who defined marriage as between a man and woman. Although his wife and daughters had personal friends who favored marriage equality, the president's rhetoric illustrates that his personal friends are those who did not. In this interview, rather than using his personal opinion to define same-sex marriage for the American public, Obama's comments stressed the importance of promoting equality by tolerating diversity of opinions.

To continue to make his personal case for supporting same-sex marriage, Obama cast his transformation as an evolution or gradual change within the country's local communities. In 2012, after seven states and the District of Columbia legalized same-sex marriage, Obama noted that he recognized that “the winds of change are happening.”²⁹ Although change had started, Obama noted that the winds of progress were “not blowin’ – with the same force in every state.”³⁰ Instead, states were moving forward on their own and “coming to different

²⁸ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 13.

²⁹ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 27.

³⁰ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 27.

conclusions.”³¹ Connecting his personal shift on same-sex marriage to the rest of the country, Obama noted, “I think the whole country is evolving and changing.”³² Associating his shifting stance on same-sex marriage with the larger American political scene, Obama stressed that change was happening across the country at varying rates and differed across generations.³³ Due to this changing climate, Obama emphasized that he was hesitant to speak out on same-sex marriage either way because he “didn’t want to nationalize the issue.”³⁴ Obama stated that he did not want to interfere with the progress being made on a local and individual level and inhibit the evolving dynamics of the country. Casting his advocacy on the issue as potentially precipitating a “political” and “polarized” climate,³⁵ Obama substituted his support for organic evolution—debate and change that happened at the local level and on its own time:

[W]hat you’re seeing is, I think, states working through this issue—in fits and starts, all across the country. Different communities are arriving at different conclusions, at different times. And I think that’s a healthy process and healthy debate. And I continue to believe that this is an issue that is gonna be worked out at the local level, because historically this has not been a federal issue, what’s recognized as marriage.³⁶

By simultaneously announcing his personal support of the issue and stressing that same-sex marriage was dealt with on the state and local level, Obama separated his comments from the national political or leadership dimension. Although he was president, Obama chose to speak

³¹ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 12.

³² Obama, “Transcript,” par. 12.

³³ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 22.

³⁴ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 9.

³⁵ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 9.

³⁶ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 10.

personally. At the same time, he redefined the issue through the lens of progress being worked out organically and incrementally on the local, not the national or federal, level.

By crafting a rhetorical message that associated equality and fairness with tolerance for all opinions, Obama was able to quell much negative impact on the upcoming 2012 election. The president noted that, although he had faith that the country was gradually evolving on the issue of same-sex marriage, his discourse sought to protect plurality and promote tolerance. Noting that he was facing a difficult re-election campaign, Obama did not situate the exigency for his comments as a desire to promote LGBTQ rights. Instead, purportedly responding to the media buzz surrounding Biden's and Duncan's announcements, Obama stressed his personal support for same-sex marriage. Rather than attempting to federalize or advocate on the issue of same-sex marriage, Obama's rhetoric downplayed the involvement of the national collective. For the president, promoting equal access to individual local discussion took priority. Promoting a policy shift on same-sex marriage on a national level was inorganic and not the job of the president or federal government. Instead, Obama demanded that individuals preserve tolerance of all viewpoints—both those in favor and against marriage equality.

As the 2012 election neared, Obama also noted the political significance of his comments and the difference between him and his presumptive Republican opponent. Unlike Republican Governor Mitt Romney, Obama explained that he valued protecting the rights of states and individuals and allowed them to define the issue of marriage on their own terms. Obama stated,

Part of the reason that I thought it was important – to speak to this issue was the fact that – you know, I've got an opponent on – on the other side in the upcoming presidential election, who wants to – re-federalize the issue and – institute a constitutional amendment

– that would prohibit gay marriage. And, you know, I think it is a mistake to – try to make what has traditionally been a state issue into a national issue.³⁷

Unlike his presumptive presidential rival, Obama argued that he intended to keep the issue of same-sex marriage in the realm of the private sphere and local or state government. In the president’s rhetoric, federal law should not promote equality by legalizing same-sex marriage throughout the country. Instead, citizens themselves needed to promote fairness and tolerance to define and discuss marriage on their own terms.

Employing this same logic, Obama used the interview to downplay the importance of his personal support on behalf of same-sex marriage to his presidential campaign and next presidential term. Obama stressed that this announcement might hurt him politically in some parts of the country and with some favorable constituents who did not support marriage equality.³⁸ However, the president also downplayed the political significance because this issue was not a top priority. He asserted,

I’m not gonna be spending most of my time talking about this, because frankly – my job as president right now, my biggest priority is to make sure that – we’re growing the economy, that we’re puttin’ people back to work, that we’re managing the draw down in Afghanistan, effectively. Those are the things that – I’m gonna focus on. And – I’m sure there’s gonna be more than enough to argue about with the other side, when it comes to – when it comes to our politics.³⁹

Placing the economy and military as the top priorities of his administration, Obama emphasized this statement on same-sex marriage was the most he would speak on the issue. Instead of

³⁷ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 26.

³⁸ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 33.

³⁹ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 33.

focusing on supporting equality for the LGBTQ community, the president's rhetoric promoted other duties of the chief executive such as improving the economy, overseeing the military, as well as encouraging individuals and local communities to debate social issues on their own terms.

Although the act of announcing his personal support for same-sex marriage allowed Obama to charge up his liberal base, his rhetoric also unhinged the announcement from public policy. Following the announcement, Obama's advisers clarified his policy position to more religiously conservative members of his base, noting that the "president's decision was a matter of personal conscience, not public policy."⁴⁰ As Obama proceeded toward the 2012 presidential campaign, his May 9, 2012 comments provided him the rhetorical means to charge up his political base, but simultaneously invoke notions of fairness and tolerance. His comments were not an act of public policy, but instead a personal revelation that signified a growing local or personal trend. This personalized approach to politics illustrates Obama's construction of a new attitude toward civic participation that did not strongly connect personal or local debate to a broader American community.

Pure Persuasion as a Consummatory Incentive for Inaction

Obama's comments on the evolutionary nature of opinions on same-sex marriage highlight a larger rhetorical theme in his public discourse. Similar to his 2008 "More Perfect Union" speech on race, Obama envisioned universally protected civil rights only in a future frame based on non-enforceable tolerance. In 2008, instead of dealing with the immediate public controversy about race stemming from comments made by Obama's former pastor, the "More Perfect Union" speech noted that change "can be put aside and dealt with later, by future

⁴⁰ Peter Baker and Rachel L. Swarns, "After Obama's Decision on Marriage, a Call to Pastors," *New York Times*, May 13, 2012, par. 15, <http://nyti.ms/KqPxly>.

generations.”⁴¹ Moreover, Obama’s “More Perfect Union” speech highlighted the president using a “highly personal perspective that drew on the cultural resources of the time, rendering social change an incremental process that takes place over generations.”⁴² In this sense, the 2008 speech created the “resolution of racial conflict in a cathartic way that rendered public deliberation unnecessary.”⁴³ In other words, rather than dealing with racial division in 2008, Obama’s speech primarily dealt with the exigency of another personal situation—quelling the negative effects of Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s controversial comments on the 2008 Democratic primary election. Whether it is racial tension or same-sex marriage, the president’s rhetoric stresses that conflict will eventually evolve if individuals embodied tolerance and continuous debate at the local level (i.e., perfection that was ongoing). For Obama, tolerance and a personal approach to civic participation was cast as the most productive means to address social conflict. This approach also renders pushing for public transformation unnecessary because a shift in policy or attitudes will happen organically through the process of evolution.

This kind of rhetorical strategy is also apparent within Obama’s rhetoric on same-sex marriage. Leveraging the personal form and call to the authentic, Obama’s May 9, 2012 statement emphasized that he and the country were going through an evolution on the issue. Biden’s and Duncan’s comments in favor of same-sex marriage created a controversy in the mainstream media. In turn, Biden’s and Duncan’s commentary allowed Obama the opportunity to address this social issue in a televised interview. The president’s rhetoric did not make marriage equality a pressing national issue. Instead, Obama clarified that a natural progression in favor of same-sex marriage was happening across the country through individual Americans.

⁴¹ Jean Costanza Miller, “From the Parlor to the Barnyard: Obama and Holder on Race,” *Communication Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2013), 362.

⁴² Miller, “From the Parlor to the Barnyard,” 367.

⁴³ Miller, “From the Parlor to the Barnyard,” 367.

Obama argued that same-sex marriage and equality for the LGBTQ community was a personal or local transformation that happened without direct policy reform or national advocacy. As a rhetorical term, evolution signifies systemic, gradual and involuntary change “over successive generations.” Evolution is a “progression from simple to complex forms, conceived as a universal principle of development, either in the natural world or in human societies and cultures.”⁴⁴ Rather than being a public issue that should be addressed through presidential advocacy or public policy, Obama’s rhetoric argued that future generations would organically and superiorly resolve same-sex marriage on their own terms and time without any substantial open public discussion.⁴⁵ In this regard, social change happened organically and involuntarily. Rhetorical advocacy or public policy would not positively impact the future success of same-sex marriage in an organic fashion. As such, Obama’s rhetoric was ultimately impotent. The president spoke of transformation, but did not offer a specific call. According to Obama, federal intrusion could only potentially hurt America’s social fabric because it would disrupt or delay the natural order. To allow organic evolution, tolerance was necessary for individuals to adopt.

In addition to illustrating Obama’s notion of social evolution, Obama’s May 9, 2012 comments provide a case study to examine two simultaneously existing symbolic dimensions of rhetoric available to audiences—what Burke refers to as “ordinary” and “pure persuasion.” For Burke, persuasion is the use of symbol systems to create meaning. In order for a symbolic act to foster meaning for audiences, persuasion is paramount.⁴⁶ Traditionally, persuasion is often conflated with what Burke posits as ordinary persuasion—a “goal-oriented, symbolic pursuit of

⁴⁴ “evolution, n.”. *OED Online*. December 2014. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/65447?redirectedFrom=evolution&> (accessed February 19, 2015).

⁴⁵ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 22.

⁴⁶ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 172.

extra-textual achievements, advantages or correctives.”⁴⁷ In other words, ordinary persuasion fosters cooperation between rhetor and audience as a means to produce extrinsic satisfaction outside the rhetorical act itself. In contrast, pure persuasion is “an element of ‘standoffishness’” involving “the saying of something, not for an extra-verbal advantage to be got by the saying, but because of the satisfaction intrinsic to the saying.”⁴⁸ Unlike ordinary persuasion, which is goal-oriented, Kathryn M. Olson and Clark D. Olson clarify, “Pure persuasion delights in and seeks to prolong the dance of symbolic courtship for its own sake.”⁴⁹ The pure persuasion dimension of rhetoric is not focused on attaining an extra-textual goal. In Burke’s framework, pure persuasion allows a rhetor and/or audience member to frustrate identification with a symbolic message to prolong this process in order to stall transformation and delight in not reaching a conclusion. In this regard, pure persuasion is the “state of intolerable indecision just preceding conversion to a new doctrine.”⁵⁰ Pure persuasion avoids efficiently seeking an extrinsic goal, but instead gives reigns to the “*purely* rhetorical.”⁵¹ In contrast to the more functional and action-oriented dimension of ordinary persuasion, pure persuasion may look like it has no purpose. However, Burke argues that the purpose of pure persuasion is intrinsically fulfilling symbol user who is by nature delighted with exercising this capacity for its own sake. He reports, pure persuasion

is like [...] solving a puzzle where the puzzle-solver deliberately takes on a burden in order to throw it off, but if he succeeds, so far as the tests of material profit are concerned he is no further ahead than before he began, since he has advanced not relatively, but “in

⁴⁷ Kathryn M. Olson and Clark D. Olson, “Beyond Strategy: A Reader-Centered Analysis of Irony’s Dual Persuasive Uses,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 1 (2004), 26.

⁴⁸ Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 269.

⁴⁹ Olson and Olson, “Beyond Strategy,” 26.

⁵⁰ Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 294.

⁵¹ Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 287, emphasis in original.

the absolute.”⁵²

Thus, pure persuasion can be thought of as being “always unsuccessful that is, whatever its purpose, it does not alter the conditions that call it into being.”⁵³ Pure persuasion may produce an audience response, but this process does not necessarily have to promote extrinsic change. Instead, it is a symbolic exercise where participation with the discourse is both a means and end unto itself. Moreover, once an extrinsic end is reached, pure persuasion and its benefits are extinguished.

Rhetorically, the persuasive dimensions of a symbolic act allow a rhetor and audience to become consubstantial or “substantially one,” but remain as “individual locus of motives.”⁵⁴ Olson and Olson explain that in Burke’s theory of rhetoric, ordinary and pure persuasion should not be seen as distinct categories. Instead, they stress that these are “*different dimensions that coexist in a symbolic act* rather than as *opposing anchors of a single continuum within a text* or *distinct categories of textual types*.”⁵⁵ Although these two dimensions of persuasion function differently, they can both be present in a single text.⁵⁶ Obama’s May 9, 2012 interview highlights these two levels of persuasion functioning within the president’s rhetoric. Obama’s rhetoric exhibited ordinary persuasion through his redefinition of how Americans should understand his role as president and where discussion on same-sex marriage should happen. In this sense, Obama’s rhetoric leveraged ordinary persuasion to emphasize his process-oriented attitude of

⁵² Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 270.

⁵³ Lin-Lee Lee, “Pure Persuasion: A Case Study of *Nüshu* or ‘Women’s Script’ Discourses,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 4 (2004), 406.

⁵⁴ Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 21.

⁵⁵ Olson and Olson, “Beyond Strategy,” 26, emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ Olson and Olson describe this concurrent function of ordinary and pure persuasion, noting that neither trumps the other within a text. In their article they call on scholars to examine texts that may emphasize “pure persuasion, without necessarily affecting their potential to effect ordinary persuasion.” See Olson and Olson, “Beyond Strategy,” 47.

tolerance by drawing the boundaries through which Americans understood their current political scene, his role as president, and Americans' roles as citizens. However, in this persuasive plea, Obama's comments offered pure persuasion as an ongoing benefit of his model for a process-oriented attitude of tolerance that did not successfully advocate for changes in federal policy. Rather than encouraging Americans to deliberate toward a particular decision on same-sex marriage at the national level or seek widespread social change, Obama's comments encouraged perpetual evolution through never-ending debates occurring at the individual or localized level. In this regard, he, as president and ordinary citizens simultaneously, could prolong and frustrate discussions of social issues on a localized or individual level. Pure persuasion was offered as the goal and consummatory incentive for keeping debates ongoing within the private sphere.⁵⁷

According to Obama, national public deliberation or presidential involvement on the issue of same-sex marriage would not help the country organically evolve. These acts would only stir up political partisanship and artificially force or delay evolution. The president explained that he did not want to create a national policy precedent with his announcement because it would define the issue within a political context and prevent fair and localized debates from taking place.⁵⁸ Instead, Obama stressed that he was proud to point out that Americans across this country are contemplating and discussing the issue of same-sex marriage on their own terms. Although Obama noted that there are Americans who may not agree with his personal viewpoint, these were not "mean-spirited" Americans, but citizens who had a "different

⁵⁷ Lee notes that pure persuasion is "primarily consummatory rather than instrumental," explaining that its satisfaction can arise from "personal or symbolic transcendence that complicates or adds instrumental nuances to its consummatory character." Although it can have extrinsic effects, as a consummatory discourse, its primary goal is to promote self-involvement. See Lee "Pure Persuasion," 404-405.

⁵⁸ Obama, "Transcript," par. 9-10.

understanding” of the term “marriage.”⁵⁹ In order to promote evolution and the pleasure of pure persuasion, tolerance was necessary.⁶⁰ Discussion needed to happen, but change was organic and happened at individual and localized levels. Moreover, these kinds of discussions were not necessarily meant to promptly shift the overarching policy of the country or result in shared decisions. As a form of pure persuasion, these discussions satisfied internally. Satisfaction was derived from going through prolonged discussion itself.

On May 9, 2012, Obama did not advocate that Americans change their beliefs or advocate for widespread social change. Instead, he asked that Americans go through the process of discussing this particular issue in a way that is personally satisfying, but necessarily yielded no extra-verbal benefit or change outside the communication process itself. In the *ABC News* interview, the president noted that personal satisfaction, not widespread social action, arose from his localized discussions on same-sex marriage with his wife, daughters, and friends.⁶¹ For the president, the *personal* and intrinsic satisfaction of ongoing discussions on same-sex marriage was the payoff of addressing the issue. In order for the country to organically evolve, Americans should go through this process of localized and individual discussion on same-sex marriage. These conversations offered pure persuasion as a satisfaction for frustrating and addressing same-sex marriage outside the realm of national open deliberation. Although future generations may complete the acceptance of same-sex marriage,⁶² Obama’s rhetoric cast progress as evolutionary. For change to happen organically, the federal government could not impede the liberty of individuals to continuously discuss issues by even making suggestions. At the same time, these discussions need not provoke extrinsic action. Instead, Obama’s rhetoric offered

⁵⁹ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 13.

⁶⁰ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 19.

⁶¹ Obama, “Transcript,” par. 23.

⁶² Obama, “Transcript,” par. 21.

individualized or localized discussion itself as the preferred form of deliberation and a source of satisfaction. In turn, this Obama's rhetoric helped foster an increased attitude toward civic participation, but did not fully situate how local debates would connect to national open deliberation or a larger national shift in how Americans think about politics in an age of ultra-partisanship.

Thus, on May 9, 2012, acting as private citizen, Obama modeled a process-oriented attitude of tolerance by arguing that change and evolution happen through consistent debate outside the realm of national public deliberation. Within this frame, the president and federal government need not address social issues like same-sex marriage because the larger scene—composed of private individual citizens—organically addressed such issues through localized public discussion in the private sphere. Using pure persuasion as an attraction for his persuasive plea, Obama noted that personal conversations on same-sex marriage signified change happening on a local scale. Although this kind of attitude may not push the country into widespread acceptance of same-sex marriage, Obama clarified that evolutionary change was happening across the country at varying paces and degrees. In short, the president's rhetoric offered the satisfaction of localized discussions as a sufficient end for his persuasive plea on how citizens should grapple same-sex marriage.

Privileging an Attitude of Tolerance in the May 9, 2012 Interview

Following the May 9, 2012 interview, Obama's announcement fired up partisans within the Democratic Party. In the hours following the *ABC News* interview, the president's supporters reportedly caused a massive surge in campaign donations.⁶³ Obama's comments also signaled a significant rise in African American support for marriage equality. Following the announcement,

⁶³ Dan Eggen, "Obama's Gay Marriage Announcement Followed By Flood of Campaign Donations," *The Washington Post*, May 10, 2012, <http://wpo.st/d8zM1>.

African American support of marriage equality jumped from 41 percent to 59 percent.⁶⁴ For the first time in U.S. history, the president's May 9, 2012 comments, and various executive actions made in his first presidential term, illustrated a seemingly landmark shift in favor of LGBTQ rights. However, in this chapter I've argued that the *ABC News* interview did not reveal the president advocating the country to support the issue of same-sex marriage or even future steps that his administration had or would take to advocate for the nationalization of the issue. Instead, the president's comments merely highlighted his personal support. Although Obama's rhetoric may illustrate that a plurality of voices available in public is necessary and the strength of democracy, his same-sex marriage rhetoric's trained incapacity was its focus on the individual, not community. By offering a form of individual or local debate as a complete avenue for a new public attitude of civic engagement, Obama's rhetoric did not fully connect this attitude to the importance of open national deliberation and engaging the public as a national collective. This rhetorical act merely favored American's ability to individually debate issues, not necessarily how these debates should move into a broader form of democratic culture.

By restricting discussion of same-sex marriage to the local sphere, Obama's rhetoric downplayed the importance of his office and national open deliberation. In a world where equality is promoted through tolerance and the ability to freely discuss issues without judgment, the roles of the president and federal government were not to provide legislative direction. The president's job is to protect individuals and local and state communities' opinions and ability to endlessly deliberate on social issues. When it came to same-sex marriage, Obama noted that the country was going through an evolution on the issue and that the scales would inevitably and eventually tip toward a widespread decision on same-sex marriage, but he did not connect

⁶⁴ Clement and Somashekhar, "After President Obama's Announcement," par. 3.

individual or local debate to the broader community or any form of public action. Obama prioritized rhetorical advocacy and federal legislation below supporting localized and personal deliberation on this issue.

Instead of exercising the advantages of the Executive Branch, Obama's comments reveal him acting as a president providing pure persuasion over ordinary persuasion. Obama used the interview's opportunity to call for the authentic to address the issue of same-sex marriage, but situated same-sex marriage discussions outside the realm of national public affairs. In place of persuading Americans to support an issue through a president's rhetorical advocacy, Obama's discourse emphasized the benefit and satisfaction of continuous debate that did not have an end point. By revealing his personal opinion on same-sex marriage, Obama's rhetoric constituted a process-oriented attitude of tolerance that did not have an end point for ordinary persuasion and public transformation. Satisfaction and social evolution happened on a local scale where individuals perpetually debated in their local communities. Obama may have used the powers of the presidency to ask citizens to model their behavior after his, but this was not aimed at changing widespread public opinion on same-sex marriage. Instead, it merely offered a point of identification and suggested an attitude of tolerance. Future chapters of this dissertation will reveal other instances where Obama's construction of a process-oriented attitude of tolerance may ask individuals to be respectful of others, but not seek widespread public transformation.

This chapter has two implications for this dissertation, as well as the field of rhetoric and scholars interested in presidential studies. First, on a theoretical level, this chapter extends and elaborates Burke's notion of ordinary and pure persuasion. By looking at Obama's same-sex marriage rhetoric, I have argued that the president relied on pure persuasion as a benefit within an ordinary persuasive plea. Rather than thinking about pure persuasion as the primary

persuasive dimension of a text, I've shown how a rhetor can use it as a consummatory incentive within an ordinary persuasive plea. Rather than asking audiences to go out and do something extrinsically, Obama's May 9, 2012 rhetoric argued that evolution inevitably happens on a local or individual basis. The president can provide a model or script, but it is ultimately up to citizens to discuss and enact the inevitable change on a local, state, or individual level. In this regard, President Obama's leadership and rhetoric offer the satisfaction of pure persuasion as a consummatory incentive for accepting his attitude toward American citizenship even when agreement on a local or state policy is not the result. Respectful discussion in itself is a form of progress and part of fostering a process-oriented attitude of tolerance.

Second, the analysis of this interview builds on Obama's signature rhetorical phrase that indicates Americans are charged with crafting a more perfect union on an individualistic level. The *ABC News* interview highlights the president advocating citizens to engage in a mode of perfection through organic evolution. However, Obama's notion of organic evolution is localized and individualistic. It is not something that happens within the national public sphere, but instead in fits and starts at the local and individual level. The president's May 9, 2012 discourse acted as a prompt to satisfactorily use rhetoric as an end in itself. Rather than fostering a climate of national open deliberation, Obama's rhetoric called for Americans to perfect the nation through continuous local discussion that did not have a defined or immediate decision point. Offering pure persuasion as a consummatory benefit to his attitude toward civic engagement, Obama did not ask audiences to engage in policy decisions today. Instead, the president noted that continuous discussion on a local and individual level was evidence of social evolution and a form of satisfaction in itself. In short, in the May 9, 2012 interview, the president offered up his

personal support of same-sex marriage, but more strongly held his attitude toward civic engagement that perpetuated a climate of continuous personal discussion and public inaction.

Chapter 5

Shifting Away From Partisan Gamesmanship: President Obama's Attempt to Transcend America's Routine Gun Violence Debate

On Thursday, October 1, 2015, President Barack Obama spoke to reporters in the White House Briefing Room. For the fifteenth time throughout his presidency,¹ Obama read the names of 10 Americans who were gunned down in a mass shooting. Expressing grief for the victims, their families, and the entire country, Obama announced his disappointment with America's inability to adequately address gun violence, an issue that had plagued the nation throughout his tenure in the White House. Obama vowed, "Somehow this has become routine. The reporting is routine. My response here at this podium ends up being routine. The conversation in the aftermath of it. We've become numb to this."² Obama continued the October 1, 2015 speech by casting America in the middle of a dire public health crisis. Challenging the pervading public cynicism that surrounded debates on how politicians and the public could help reduce America's rate of gun violence, Obama conceded that presidential eulogies and media coverage of tragic events could not solve problems by themselves. To address gun violence, individual Americans would have to do more than talk. Increased civic participation at the voting booth and localized discussion were necessary to move toward a more peaceful future. In short, Obama advocated that Americans act individually to move beyond the stalemate of partisan inaction or gridlock.

This chapter uses Obama's gun control discourse as a means to diagnose how civic complacency and cynicism contribute to an environment where lawmakers seek short-term

¹ Stephen Collinson, "Obama on Oregon Shooting: 'Somehow This Has Become Routine,'" *CNN*, October 2, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/01/politics/oregon-shooting-obama-response/>.

² Barack Obama, "Statement on Umpqua Community College Mass Shooting, Washington DC," *American Rhetoric*, par. 7, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamaumpquashootings.htm>.

partisan goals, rather than long-term solutions to public problems. To reach this goal, I situate the president's 2015 speech alongside the notion of a process-oriented attitude of tolerance. In his gun violence rhetoric, Obama asked Americans to individually vote for representatives who supported their political beliefs. Obama also emphasized that political decisions should be situated in an environment where tolerance allowed partisan divides to be accepted as a barrier, but an ordinary component of American democracy. Throughout Obama's second term, the president advocated for certain pieces of gun control legislation. Emphasizing the need for Congressional action, the president cited public opinion polling that illustrated the popularity of gun control measures. The president also called for individual action, stressing that citizens should vote for and hold representatives accountable for adequately mirroring public opinion.

I argue that Obama's attitude of tolerance promoted a political process that did not seek transformation but instead endurance of the constraints of America's current state. To advance this multi-part argument, I contend that Obama's gun control rhetoric illustrates his use of a call to the authentic and emotional rhetoric to help citizens reclaim their agency in public culture. In his rhetorical appeals, Obama noted that the first step toward progress would be discussion that bypassed partisanship and allowed for a plurality of voices to exist. The next step involved rhetorically advocating for a short-term moment of political agreement by exposing intransigent lawmakers and emphasizing the dangers associated with partisan inaction. Obama also sought to empower individual American voters by stressing their ability to create political change through more discussion, voting, and demanding that lawmakers address public problems using solutions that represented public opinion. Finally, alongside Obama's rhetoric directed at American citizens, this chapter reveals the difficulty of kindling an attitudinal shift in a volatile media environment that frames, reframes, and re-presents the president's discourse. Thus, the

president's decentralized form of leadership allowed him to capitalize on popular public opinion polling and find a moment of agreement among Americans in his rhetoric on gun control. Yet, the energy associated with this rhetoric quickly dispersed. Rather than creating political agreement or producing a short-term or long-term change, Obama's rhetoric ultimately resulted in legislative inaction.

This chapter begins by highlighting Obama's rhetorical strategy for fomenting a process-oriented attitude of tolerance by dissociating politics into two dimensions: partisan gamesmanship and tolerance. After outlining this strategy, I use Obama's speeches from the December 14, 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, through a failed April 17, 2013 Senate vote as an extended example of the president's rhetoric on gun violence. In this analysis, I illustrate how Obama's post-Sandy Hook rhetoric sought to persuade citizens and lawmakers to support short-term and long-term solutions to gun violence. In the third section, I analyze how media organizations, political pundits, and some members of the public framed and re-framed Obama's gun control rhetoric in various media outlets. This section illustrates how media organizations and individuals, including the president, sometimes fall into the trap of focusing exclusively on partisan gamesmanship, rather than solving public problems.

Dissociation as the Means to Move Beyond Partisan Gamesmanship

Throughout much of Obama's public responses to gun violence, the president used a rhetorical strategy that sought to spark a public discussion based in an idealized vision for the American political process. To reach this end, the president used an argumentative strategy where politics was dissociated into two dimensions. Dissociation is a tactic that allows a rhetor to

break apart threatening parts of a keyword or idea by distancing one interpretation from another.³

Dissociation allows a rhetor to change

the prevailing understanding of a concept by simultaneously transforming and partially preserving its differentiated elements. Thus, dissociation does not break the links uniting already-independent elements of a concept; instead it profoundly converts and prioritizes the elements in decoupling them.⁴

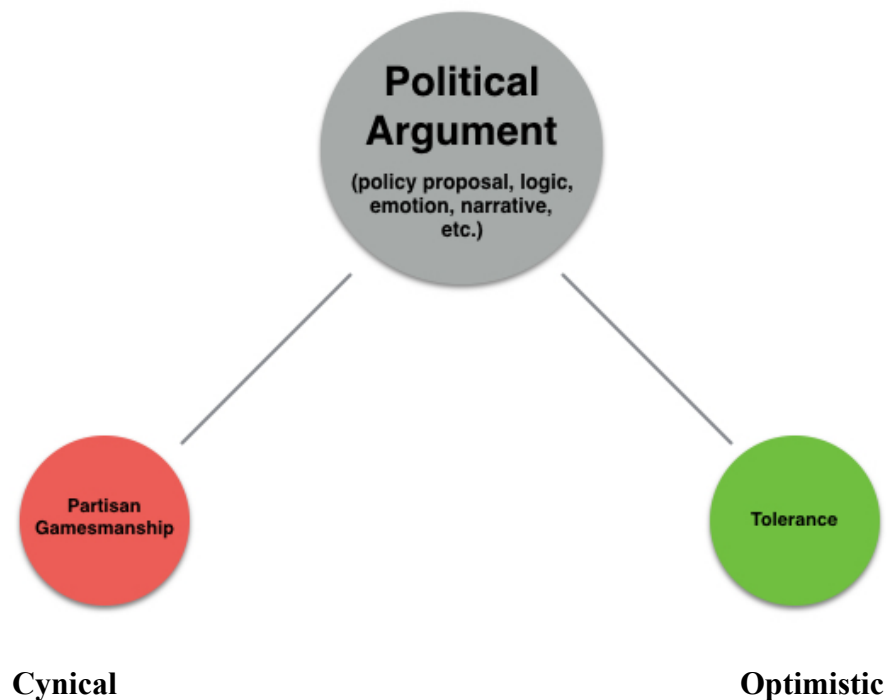


Figure 1: Obama's Dissociation Strategy for Political Argument

For Obama, political argument was separated into 1) partisan gamesmanship, and 2) tolerance.

Dissociation provided Obama with an argumentative strategy to separate, evaluate, and prioritize his seemingly optimistic approach of tolerance from the negative effects of partisan

³ Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), 411-459.

⁴ Kathryn M. Olson, "Dissociation," in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age*, ed. Theresa Enos (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 1996), 196.

gamesmanship. In partisan gamesmanship, inaction or short-term political wins are emphasized over long-term public solutions. In contrast, dissociation allowed Obama to focus on tolerance and the protection for a plurality of opinion. Dissociation also allowed politics to stem from the grassroots and voters, not representatives in Washington. Advocating for the positive effects of a process-oriented attitude of tolerance, Obama noted this kind of political argument provided a path toward bypassing partisan inaction. On the one hand, Obama's rhetoric sought to foment a long-term attitudinal shift in Americans' involvement in the political process by stressing the need for tolerance. On the other hand, in order to fulfill his duties as the nation's chief executive, the president stressed that Americans and lawmakers needed to act and expect political change today by focusing on a democratic majority of opinion.

Obama's October 1, 2015 comments on gun violence highlight these goals being sought simultaneously. This rhetorical approach required the president to do some discursive gymnastics to connect actions in the present to a long-term attitudinal shift. For instance, on October 1, 2015, Obama stressed that individual Americans needed to act today in order to help stop gun violence from being routine in the future. Obama berated the American public, stating,

This is a political choice that we make to allow this to happen every few months in America. We collectively are answerable to the families who lose their loved ones because of our *inaction*. When Americans are killed in mine disasters, we work to make mines safer. When Americans are killed in floods and hurricanes, we make communities safer. When roads are unsafe, we work to fix them to reduce auto fatalities. We have seatbelt laws because we know it saves lives. So the notion that gun violence is somehow different, that our freedom and our Constitution prohibits any modest regulation of how we use a deadly weapon, when there are law-abiding gun owners all across the country

who could hunt and protect their families and do everything they do under such regulation doesn't make any sense.⁵

The president continued, connecting the possibility of change directly to the actions of Americans at a symbolic and material level. For Obama, change could be organically fomented through conversations with family and friends, but most importantly, by being authentic with one's beliefs when voting. Obama presented Americans with the following challenge,

I'd ask the American people to think about how they can get our government to change these laws, and to save lives, and to let young people grow up. And that will require a change of politics on this issue. And it will require that the American people, *individually*, whether you are a Democrat or a Republican or an independent, when you decide to vote for somebody, [you] are making a determination as to whether this cause of continuing death for innocent people should be a relevant factor in your decision.⁶

After seven years of trying to address gun violence, in the October 1, 2015 speech, the president demanded that Americans should not continue to favor a script that cast complacency, cynicism, and inaction as routine responses to horrific acts of gun violence.⁷ Tolerance provided an avenue to seek action, but from a nonpartisan or bipartisan perspective because it focused on short-term action based in a democratic majority. This approach was in stark contrast to partisan

⁵ Obama, "Statement on Umpqua Community College Shootings," par. 14, emphasis added.

⁶ Obama, "Statement on Umpqua Community College Shootings," par. 15, emphasis added.

⁷ See Jonah Goldberg, "For Obama, Gun Control Is About the Issue Not the Solution," *National Review*, October 6, 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/425158/obama-gun-control-about-issue-not-solution-jonah-goldberg>; Robert J. Spitzer, "Why the Oregon Shooting Likely Won't Change Anything," *US News & World Report*, October 2, 2015, http://t.usnews.com/Zdu19e?src=usn_tw; Anthony Zurcher, "Why Obama is Powerless to Reform Gun Laws," *BBC News*, October 4, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34429918>.

gamesmanship that only sought political solutions for one party—even when public opinion illustrated a bipartisan consensus on gun violence.

Thus, the October 1, 2015 speech sought to promote immediate action by reminding Americans that change and leadership stemmed from individuals choosing to have the agency to act on and demand solutions for pressing public issues. At the same time, Obama sought to coach an idealistic attitude where politics was not based in partisan gamesmanship, but a long-term process-oriented way of accepting that plurality existed. To support short-term legislative action through his second-term rhetoric on gun violence, the president noted that there was a bipartisan consensus among the American people. In the remaining parts of this chapter I analyze an extended case study on Obama's gun control efforts following the 2012 tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School. I use this case study to illustrate how Obama sought to employ dissociation to simultaneously advocate for specific and non-ambiguous short-term ways to address gun violence, but also seek to foment a long-term shift for tolerance that allowed plurality to exist. Alongside Obama's rhetoric, the third part of this chapter examines the circulation of this discourse in the 21st century media environment. In this third section, I illustrate how Obama's rhetoric on change was evaluated by political pundits and reframed for the American public.

The Rhetorical Situation Surrounding the 2012 Sandy Hook Tragedy

On December 14, 2012, Obama and the rest of America learned that a lone gunman, armed with a semiautomatic assault rifle, walked into a Connecticut grade school and killed 26 people—including 20 children. In a press conference following the tragedy, Obama delivered a short, somber statement. The president expressed his grief for the families of those who had died. Reflecting on the shooting at Sandy Hook, as well as a number of mass shootings, Obama

declared, “We’ve endured too many of these tragedies in the past few years.”⁸ Wiping tears from his eyes, Obama continued,

Whether it’s an elementary school in Newtown, or a shopping mall in Oregon, or a temple in Wisconsin, or a movie theater in Aurora, or a street corner in Chicago—these neighborhoods are our neighborhoods, and these children are our children. And we’re going to have to come together and take *meaningful* action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics.⁹

Although Obama did not specifically address gun control on December 14, 2012, the president explained that the Newtown families “need[ed] all of us right now” to keep America safe from individuals who sought to harm others.¹⁰ In order to navigate the tumultuous political waters of gun control, Obama’s comments from December 14, 2012, through April 17, 2013, oscillated between seeking short-term solutions to halt violence and a need for long-term “meaningful” action through an attitudinal shift on how to solve public problems. Thus, even though Obama sought to advocate for an attitude of tolerance and seek meaningful change on a long-term basis, his rhetoric throughout 2012-2013 debates on gun control was intertwined with a desire to immediately curb future acts of violence.

In the weeks following the Sandy Hook tragedy, Obama’s rhetoric and unilateral executive actions picked up speed. In the first few months of his second presidential term, Obama addressed attacks from gun lobby groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA),

⁸ Barack Obama, “Statement on the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, Washington DC,” *American Rhetoric*, December 14, 2012, par. 2, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamanewtownshooting.htm>.

⁹ Obama, “Statement on the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shootings in Newtown, Connecticut,” par. 5, emphasis added.

¹⁰ Obama, “Statement on the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shootings in Newtown, Connecticut,” par. 6.

Republicans, and even members of the Democratic Party who said gun control legislation and debates should not happen. In response to these critics, Obama acknowledged his support of the Second Amendment, but stressed America's dire need to engage the volatile and emotional politics of gun control immediately in a "meaningful" fashion. For Obama, gun violence was not a partisan problem that could exclusively be solved by the legislative branch or executive actions that regulated the purchase or transfer of firearms. The problem of gun violence lay in a broader exigency of protecting the American dream, the safety of America's children, and a democracy built on tolerance. To reach this end goal, Americans had to act individually to vote for and hold lawmakers responsible for acting in the interests of the American community, not a political party.

Throughout the remaining days of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, Obama fulfilled his promise of publicly addressing gun violence as a unitary executive. Five days after the December 14, 2012 press conference, Obama said he would make gun control a central issue in his second presidential term. On December 19, 2012, the president directed Vice President Joseph Biden to lead an inter-agency effort to create "concrete [gun control] proposals [delivered] no later than January."¹¹ After Biden delivered a number of proposals with bipartisan support, on January 16, 2013, Obama signed 23 executive actions intended to help reduce gun violence. However, as Obama signed these executive actions, he explained that in order to enact meaningful gun control legislation and address the underlying cause of violence Congress must hold votes on these executive measures and recommendations.¹² At the same time, Obama stressed that the American people had to do more than idly stand by and wait for change to happen from the

¹¹ Barack Obama, "Press Conference on Preventing Gun Violence, Washington DC," *American Rhetoric*, December 19, 2012, par. 8, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamagunviolencepresser.htm>.

¹² Obama, "Press Conference on Preventing Gun Violence," par. 10.

legislative branch. To honor the lives of those lost at Sandy Hook Elementary, Americans had to continue discussion on gun violence and other social issues. In turn, Americans could reclaim their agency over how decisions were made in Congress, how presidential discourse circulates in the media, and how political change happens from the grassroots.

In response to President Obama's rhetoric, the American people were willing to engage in the gun control debate. Public opinion polls conducted immediately after Sandy Hook showed a rise in Americans wanting Congress to enact federal gun control measures.¹³ Both liberals and conservatives agreed that there were short-term and long-term solutions on how to solve this problem. In terms of short-term goals, over the course of 2013, more than 80 percent of Americans supported a number of proposed laws, such as increased background checks on people buying firearms.¹⁴ Despite overwhelming support and Obama's demand that in the aftermath of Sandy Hook "words need[ed] to lead to action,"¹⁵ Congress failed to pass any form of gun control legislation. The issue of federal gun control came to a dramatic halt on April 17, 2013. Senate lawmakers failed to get the 60 votes needed to pass a bipartisan bill that extended background checks on firearm sales, as well as bills that placed a ban on the sale of assault-style weapons, a ban on extended ammunition magazines, and stiff penalties on gun traffickers.¹⁶ The

¹³ The Pew Research Center found that for the first time in Obama's presidency a majority of Americans supported gun control measures. The poll found that 49 percent of Americans supported the control of gun ownership, whereas 42 percent of Americans believed it was more important to protect gun rights. See "After Newtown Modest Change in Opinion about Gun Control: Most Say Assault Weapons Make Nation More Dangerous," *Pew Research Center*, December 20, 2012, <http://pewrsr.ch/VSKKiO>.

¹⁴ Scott Clement, "90 Percent of Americans Want Expanded Background Checks on Guns. Why Isn't This a Political Slam Dunk?" *Washington Post*, April 3, 2013, <http://wpo.st/kqyM1>; Bruce Drake, "A Year After Newtown, Little Change in Public Opinion on Guns," *Pew Research Center*, December 12, 2013, <http://pewrsr.ch/1dtTqqF>.

¹⁵ Obama, "Press Conference on Preventing Gun Violence," par. 5.

¹⁶ Jonathan Weisman, "Senate Blocks Drive for Gun Control," *New York Times*, April 17, 2013, <http://nyti.ms/12nWhOb>.

time period of December 2012 – April 2013 illustrates an instance when the American public desired political change, but partisan gamesmanship and political gridlock prevented popular legislation from moving through Congress. Obama’s rhetoric and unitary actions existed alongside media organizations and political pundits who panned Obama’s leadership, labeling his rhetorical efforts to empower individuals as lacking the necessary means to enact swift change from the Oval Office. In order to bypass this environment, Obama used dissociation as well as emotional rhetoric that relied on a call to the authentic to speak directly to the public.

Reframing Tragedy Through the Persona of a Nurturing, Protective Parent

In his initial reaction to the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary, Obama crafted a simple narrative about the need to protect America’s children in an attempt to bypass partisan gamesmanship and evoke an attitude of tolerance. Avoiding the phrase “gun control,” at the December 14, 2012 press conference, Obama said Americans must take action individually.¹⁷ Rather than crafting arguments for specific pieces of public policy, Obama presented his rhetoric through his personal reaction to the tragic events. Obama explained that when he heard news of what happened at Sandy Hook he “react[ed] not as a president, but as anybody else would—as a parent.”¹⁸ In doing so, the president crafted a narrative built from the nonpartisan persona of a nurturing, protective parent. This response paved the way for his gun control rhetoric that would commence in the weeks and years that followed. This strategy is different than other presidential responses to crises because it relies on rhetorical ambiguity and emotion. Ambiguity is rhetorically constructed through emotion, a call to the authentic, and attempting to shift the locus

¹⁷ Obama, “Statement on the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shootings in Newtown, Connecticut,” par. 5.

¹⁸ Obama, “Statement on the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shootings in Newtown, Connecticut,” par. 2.

of political change from politicians seeking partisan short-term wins to a long-term attitudinal shift where empowered citizens control the political process.

Obama's response to Sandy Hook highlights an emotional shift in his rhetoric. On several occasions prior to the Sandy Hook tragedy, Drew Westen, psychologist and progressive political consultant, had criticized Obama's rhetoric for failing to craft a consistent and emotional narrative based on reason. In a 2011 *New York Times* editorial, Westen examined Obama's weakness as a rhetorician. Specifically addressing Obama's economic recovery rhetoric, Westen explained that the president's public discourse was too abstract, unemotional, and based reasoning in complex evidence. Westen argued, "Americans needed their president to tell them a story that made sense of what they had just been through, what caused it, and how it was going to end. They needed to hear that he understood what they were feeling."¹⁹ In order to connect with the public on a level that seemed less abstract, Westen explained that Obama's rhetoric should be hinged on using emotion to reasonably ground the need for change. Through this tactic, Obama's public discourse could leverage the call to the authentic, bypassing the abstract policy debate that often happens on the floor of the Senate or among political pundits. Westen's critique of Obama's rhetoric dovetails with the work of George Lakoff, another psychologist and progressive political consultant. Like Westen, Lakoff has advocated the importance and persuasive value of emotion. In his academic work and activism, Lakoff has stressed that a leader can use a nurturing parent frame when trying to create an environment of trust and cooperation by leveraging his or her wisdom and personal experience, but also ask the public to

¹⁹ Drew Westen, "What Happened to Obama?" *New York Times*, August 6, 2011, par. 5, <http://nyti.ms/1SZ9Fni>.

help create a successful future.²⁰ In this regard, nurturing requires interdependence among members and is a decentralized form of leadership based on tolerance.²¹

Although not rhetorical scholars, Westen and Lakoff stress that emotive rhetoric based in broad public values are ways to bypass ultra-partisanship. Their academic work and activism encourage politicians to limit their use of arguments based in facts and figures in favor of rhetoric that uses emotion as an artistic proof for reasoning a solution to a public problem. Rather than delivering a message through the technical language of public policy, following the Sandy Hook shooting Obama engaged arguments based more in personalized language.²² In general, this kind of argumentative strategy allows a rhetor to engage discourse from a personal perspective, but use it as a foundation or entry point to broader issues of public concern and power relationships.²³ This solution may advance public policy, yet speaks about the need to pass policy by engaging the public in a debate where they are not as members of one political party or ideology.

In the immediate aftermath of the Sandy Hook tragedy, Obama's rhetoric defined the gun control debate through the persona of a nurturing, protective parent. Rather than prescribe a specific policy solution to solve America's epidemic of gun violence, Obama used the condensation symbol of a protective and nurturing parent to combine a variety of emotional reactions into a nonpartisan persona. A condensation symbol is an argumentation tactic that

²⁰ George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 134.

²¹ Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, 130.

²² See G. Thomas Goodnight, "The Personal, Technical, and Public Sphere of Argument: A Speculative Inquiry into the Art of Public Deliberation," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 18 (1982), 214-227.

²³ For a full discussion of the relationship between spheres of argument and power differences, see Edward Schiappa, "'Spheres of Argument' As *Topoi* For The Critical Study of Power/Knowledge," in *Proceedings of the Sixth SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation*, ed. Bruce E. Gronbeck (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1989), 47-51.

allows a rhetor to converge a variety of perceptions, values, connotations, and emotions to unite audience members.²⁴ As a form of strategic ambiguity,²⁵ Obama's use of the parental persona allowed him to speak as a non-partisan parent about the need to protect America's children from violence. The president also coached an attitude that change needed to happen from a bipartisan perspective. In an age of ultra-partisanship, this non-partisan means for change has to stem from the grassroots and an attitude where individuals respect the plurality of opinions on political issues. In other words, change was something that happened through the actions of individuals acting out of their own interests, not partisan gamesmanship.

Similar to his December 14, 2012 comments, Obama relied on emotion and avoided using the phrase "gun control" at a December 16, 2012 interfaith vigil. The president's rhetoric outlined why citizens should work individually to build a better future for America's children. Enthymematically linking the Sandy Hook tragedy to the gun control debate, Obama declared, "As a nation, we are left with some hard questions."²⁶ In order to craft a safer future for the nation's children, Obama stressed that all Americans must understand their individual responsibilities. He stated, "Keeping our children safe, and teaching them well, is something we can only do together, with the help of friends, and neighbors, the help of a community, and the

²⁴ David Zarefsky, "Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2004), 613.

²⁵ Both Robert L. Ivie and Robert E. Terrill note that strategic ambiguity is a common rhetorical strategy used by Obama. Rather than offering specific solutions to problems, Obama has used strategic ambiguity to provide an avenue to shift policy changes due to shifting circumstances. As such, this kind of rhetoric stresses that change can happen, but the end point is not specifically outlined. For a full discussion, see Robert L. Ivie, "Obama at West Point: A Study in Ambiguity of Purpose," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14, no. 4 (2011), 727-759; Robert E. Terrill, "An Uneasy Peace; Barack Obama's Nobel Peace Prize Lecture," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14, no. 4 (2011), 761-779.

²⁶ Barack Obama, "Interfaith Prayer Vigil Address at Newton High School, Newtown, CT," *American Rhetoric*, December 16, 2012, par. 13, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamanewtownvigilspeech.htm>.

help of a nation.”²⁷ The president based arguments in a call to the authentic and personalized rhetorical style by noting that Americans had the individual ability to impact widespread social change. It was individual Americans who could respond to tragedy by voting for and pressuring Congress to seek short-term and long-term solutions to immediate public problems.

Demonstrating the dire need to protect America’s children from harm, Obama stressed that in order to move forward an individualistic attitudinal change *must* occur. Responding as a nurturing, protective parent, Obama addressed America’s current state through a rhetorical question. Obama asked, “Can we say that we’re truly doing enough to give all the children of this country the chance they deserve to live out their lives in happiness and with purpose?”²⁸ Answering the question, Obama continued, “I’ve been reflecting on this the last few days, and if we’re honest with ourselves, the answer is no. We’re not doing enough. And we will have to change.”²⁹ Through emotional arguments that stressed the urgency of the present, Obama reasoned that a productive American future was only possible if Americans began to address gun violence immediately. Although this kind of response from Americans may have involved seeking a short-term partisan win in the eyes of some, this act provided the means to move toward a peaceful future. To pursue long-term change, Obama’s post-Sandy Hook rhetoric asserted that Americans needed to first work individually to protect the lives and dreams of America’s youngest citizens by adopting tolerance.³⁰ After this foundation was created, a more long-term solution to problems like gun violence could occur because change was sought from individuals voting in their interests and holding representatives accountable. However, to bypass

²⁷ Obama, “Interfaith Prayer Vigil Address at Newton High School,” par. 14.

²⁸ Obama, “Interfaith Prayer Vigil Address at Newton High School,” par. 16.

²⁹ Obama, “Interfaith Prayer Vigil Address at Newton High School,” par. 17.

³⁰ See Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, “One Dream: Barack Obama, Race, and the American Dream,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14, no. 1 (2011), 131.

the conflict of the present, tolerance helped prevent the partisan tensions affiliated with the issue of gun control because it did not involve judgment, but endurance of alternative viewpoints. In turn, this grassroots approach to advocacy opened the door to change. Obama's arguments pointed out that a majority of Americans favored short-term solutions to gun violence. However, this rhetoric did not address the underlying harms affiliated with partisanship, but advanced the notion that the grassroots can change by itself while enduring the current state.

Grounded in his rhetorical style of respecting plurality of voices and the need for public discussion,³¹ Obama's post-Sandy Hook rhetoric gathered Americans into a community centered on the notion of being nurturing, protective caretakers. The president concluded his December 16, 2012 remarks by reading the names of the 26 children and educators who were struck down by gun violence at Sandy Hook Elementary. After announcing all of their names, Obama continued his emotional narrative by re-emphasizing Americans' individual responsibility for protecting the nation's children from future acts of violence. He remarked, "God has called them all [i.e., the Sandy Hook victims] home. For those of us who remain, let us find the strength to carry on, and make our country worthy of their memory."³² Obama defined the tragedy at Sandy Hook as an immediate call to action for every American. Through the condensation symbol of a nurturing, protective parent, the president sought to avoid partisan political arguments. As a means to bind together divergent communities without completely upending partisan stances on gun control, Obama's rhetoric connected gun control to the emotional need to address a public health crisis. He stressed that in order to keep children safe and allow everyone equal access to

³¹ Martin J. Medhurst, "Barack Obama's 2009 Inaugural Address: Narrative Signature and Interpretation," in *Making the Case: Advocacy and Judgment in Public Argument*, eds. Kathryn M. Olson Michael W. Pfau, Benjamin Ponder and Kirt H. Wilson (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State Press, 2013), 200.

³² Obama, "Interfaith Prayer Vigil Address at Newton High School," par. 27.

the American dream, members of the right and left needed to discuss the issue of gun control at a personal level, but respect the widespread public opinion that favored passing immediate short-term legislation.

Pitting a Reasonable Public Against Corrosive Partisan Bickering

On January 14, 2013, in the last press conference of his first presidential term and two days before issuing 23 executive actions, Obama maintained the emotional narrative he had started in the hours following the tragedy at Sandy Hook. In the press conference, Obama pointed out that gun control would be an uphill political battle. Obama explained that he was not fearful about the potential negative political impact, because, at its core, the issue involved keeping America's children safe in the short-term and long-term. To solve this crisis, Obama stated that individuals needed to work with the government to protect the lives and dreams of Americans:

My starting point [on the issue of gun control] is not to worry about the politics; my starting point is to focus on what makes sense, what works; what should we be doing to make sure that our children are safe and that we're reducing the incidents of gun violence.³³

Addressing members of Congress, Obama tapped into the emotions surrounding the Sandy Hook massacre. Building on his December 2012 comments, Obama continued to present the issue through the condensation symbol of a protective, nurturing parent. The president urged members of Congress and the public to dismiss the idea that gun control legislation must be based in partisan politics. For Obama, this was an issue that impacted all Americans because it was about

³³ Barack Obama, "Final First Term Press Conference, Washington DC," *American Rhetoric*, January 14, 2013, par. 26, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamafinalfirsttermprer.htm>.

public safety and the protection of American children's future.

Seeking to construct a process-oriented attitude of tolerance, Obama's rhetoric bypassed partisanship through emotional appeals. Obama stressed,

Members of Congress I think are going to have to have a debate and examine their own conscience—because if, in fact—and I believe this is true—everybody across party lines was as deeply moved and saddened as I was by what happened in Newtown, then we're going to have to vote based on what we think is best. We're going to have to come up with answers that set politics aside. And that's what I expect Congress to do.³⁴

Using a call to the authentic, emotion, and dissociation between partisan gamesmanship and tolerance, Obama argued that change was necessary because gun violence and partisan gridlock were creating a public health crisis. Although partisanship and political ideologies may cause gun control legislation to be difficult to enact, passing such proposed measures would help protect the safety of America's children. However, the president's rhetoric only offered individual empowerment as the solution to ameliorating this crisis. The process itself would work the issue out.

To further make his case for political change, Obama cast the current gun control debate as a contrast between a rational public and president against partisan, intransigent lawmakers and gun lobby groups. In the January 14, 2013 press conference, Obama outlined several policies he would like Congress to pass, such as mandatory background checks on all gun sales, a ban on assault-style weapons, and limits to the amount of rounds in an ammunition magazine. Obama used his personal opinion to background the gun control debate, noting what he thought was needed to protect the lives of America's children:

³⁴ Obama, "Final First Term Press Conference," par. 27.

Will all of them [i.e., proposed gun control measures] get through this Congress? I don't know. But what's uppermost in my mind is making sure that I'm honest with the American people and with members of Congress about what I think will work, what I think is something that will make a difference. And to repeat what I've said earlier—if there is a step we can take that will save even one child from what happened in Newtown, we should take that step.³⁵

Bringing his arguments back to Sandy Hook and stressing the argument that saving even just one life justifies the need for gun control, Obama continued to paint this issue through an emotional lens. Obama argued that, in order to protect the dreams and future of America's children, lawmakers and the American public had to put partisan politics or gamesmanship aside. The president said that the rational choice was the emotional choice. For Obama, this individual choice involved adopting an attitude of tolerance where partisan preferences would remain intact, but short-term policies on this issue would be sought because they were moral and popular.

In order to further draw lines in the gun control debate, Obama's rhetoric cast gun lobby groups like the NRA as a threat to American democracy. In Obama's rhetoric, American democracy is unique because it allows for a plurality of voices to mutually coexist in public culture. The biggest threat to democracy is political argument that uses intransigence and resentment to silence voices in public debate, rather than allowing plurality to exist. In his January 14, 2013 comments, Obama stressed the need to have an active reasonable public work to help attenuate the rhetoric of intransigent lawmakers and lobbyists. Obama noted,

I think that we've seen for some time now that those who oppose any common-sense gun

³⁵ Obama, "Final First Term Press Conference," par. 29.

control or gun safety measures have a pretty effective way of ginning up fear on the part of gun owners that somehow the federal government is about to take all your guns away. And there's probably an economic element to that. It obviously is good for business.³⁶

Defining the gun lobby groups as intransigent and causing harm, Obama emphasized that they undermined a long-term vision for American democracy. For the president, public opinion polling on the issue of gun violence provided the necessary evidence to reason that the public's choice to pass short-term legislation on gun control was not only popular, but also reasonable. In order to constitute a community that sought to protect America's children and protect tolerance, Obama defined the American people in opposition to gun lobby groups who were strict partisans.

To further illustrate the negative implications of the gun lobby's intransigent rhetorical strategy, Obama stressed that resentment focused on short-term silencing of public argument. Unlike the majority of Americans who were concerned citizens and wanted to do anything they could to protect America's children, Obama situated the gun lobby as a resentful opposition who only cared about making money. Continuing his critique on the pro-gun lobby, Obama stated,

[P]art of the challenge that we confront is, is that even the slightest hint of some sensible, responsible legislation in this area fans this notion that somehow, here it comes and everybody's guns are going to be taken away. It's unfortunate, but that's the case. And if you look at over the first four years of my administration, we've tried to tighten up and enforce some of the laws that were already on the books. But it would be pretty hard to argue that somehow gun owners have had their rights infringed.³⁷

The president explained that these groups stood in opposition to the discussion of increased gun

³⁶ Obama, "Final First Term Press Conference," par. 79.

³⁷ Obama, "Final First Term Press Conference," par. 81.

control, but also the enforcement of current laws. Casting gun control as “common sense” and positioning it as rational, Obama’s rhetoric separated how Americans thought about these kinds of political arguments. Rather than thinking of where liberals and conservatives stood on gun control, the president asked the public if they supported a discourse that favored tolerance or partisan gamesmanship. To accomplish this task, Obama sought to distance gun lobby groups from a reasonable public that sought to create a better, more hopeful future for America’s children where there was a reduction in gun violence. This state was achieved through tolerance for plurality. For Obama, the silencing of voices was only necessary when special interest groups or individuals deployed intransigence or resentment. These kinds of individuals and groups played into a politics of partisan gamesmanship where change was not possible because there was no common ground.

In the weeks following January 14, 2013, Obama’s gun control rhetoric continued to stress tolerance. At an April 3, 2013 speech delivered in Denver, Colorado, Obama outlined the emotional significance of passing modest gun control measures. The president also questioned members of Congress who sought to avoid a vote on gun control legislation by using obscure legislative procedural rules. Rather than viewing gun control through the persona of a nurturing, protective parent, Obama explained that several senators simply viewed the issue through the lens of a partisan political game. Obama stated,

There are already some senators back in Washington floating the idea that they might use obscure procedural stunts to prevent or delay any of these votes on reform. Think about that. They’re not just saying they’ll vote “no” on the proposal that most Americans support. They’re saying they’ll do everything they can to avoid even allowing a vote on a proposal that the overwhelming majority of the American people support. They’re saying

your opinion doesn't matter.³⁸

By placing himself and other Americans in opposition to intransigent lawmakers, Obama used his rhetoric to situate gun control as an issue that needed to be addressed today through tolerance and a democratic majority, not partisan gamesmanship.

On April 17, 2013, the post-Sandy Hook gun control debate came to an abrupt roadblock. Although having support from nearly 90 percent of Americans, the Senate failed to pass a bipartisan piece of legislation that required background checks on most firearm sales.³⁹ In a press conference following the failed Senate vote, Obama announced his disappointment in lawmakers. Explaining how to move forward in the aftermath of the current situation, Obama stressed that the Senate's failure to pass the popular gun control bill highlights a "pretty shameful day for Washington."⁴⁰ Obama emphasized that since the Sandy Hook tragedy, a majority of Americans and lawmakers agreed on the need for a background check bill that would protect "people from losing their lives to gun violence in the future while preserving our Second Amendment rights."⁴¹ Throughout this short speech, Obama did not silence the opposition.

³⁸ Barack Obama, "Address on Gun Violence Reduction in Colorado, Denver, CO," *American Rhetoric*, April 3, 2013, par. 22, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamagunviolencereductiondenver.htm>.

³⁹ As a result of a Republican filibuster, the bill, known as the Manchin-Toomey Amendment, failed to pass with 54 voting in favor and 46 against. Although the Manchin-Toomey bill was the focus of the president's drive for gun control, there were a series of other votes on April 17, 2013. The Senate also failed to pass an assault weapons ban bill with 60 voting against and 40 voting in favor, a ban on extended ammunition magazines bill with 54 voting in favor and 46 against, and a bill that placed stiff penalties on gun traffickers with 58 voting in favor and 42 against. See Weisman, "Senate Blocks Drive for Gun Control."

⁴⁰ Barack Obama, "Statement on the Senate Vote Against Background Check Gun Bill Amendment, Washington DC," *American Rhetoric*, April 17, 2013, para. 22, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamasenateguncontrolbillvote.htm>.

⁴¹ Obama, "Statement on the Senate Vote Against Background Check Gun Bill Amendment," par. 14.

Instead, Obama asked Americans to push back on partisan lawmakers and gun lobby groups whose intransigent and resentful rhetorical strategies sought to restrict discussion and a democratic majority.

Casting blame on federal lawmakers, Obama chided the “minority in the United States Senate” who “blocked common-sense gun reforms” as the “families [of Sandy Hook victims] looked on from the Senate gallery.”⁴² Obama connected the failure of gun control legislation to partisan gamesmanship, particularly lawmakers’ use of the filibuster. The president stressed, “A majority of senators voted ‘yes’ to protecting more of our citizens with smarter background checks. But by this continuing distortion of Senate rules, a minority was able to block it from moving forward.”⁴³ Thus, Obama emphasized that a *majority* of the public and *majority* of lawmakers supported the bill. The president placed the failure of the gun control measure on partisan lawmakers who used the filibuster to prevent the popular bill from passing.

In Obama’s rhetorical signature, one of the nation’s foundational principles is the ability for citizens and lawmakers to enact social change through public reason and a democratic majority.⁴⁴ This governing system is put in jeopardy when intransigent lawmakers look to distort the rules of democracy for political purposes that serve a minority. On April 17, 2013, Obama argued that democracy was undermined when a minority of lawmakers and lobbyists prevented legislation from passing through obscure legislative rules and partisan gamesmanship. In his speech the president cast lawmakers who voted against gun control as intransigent, stating,

⁴² Obama, “Statement on the Senate Vote Against Background Check Gun Bill Amendment,” par. 2.

⁴³ Obama, “Statement on the Senate Vote Against Background Check Gun Bill Amendment,” par. 5.

⁴⁴ Medhurst, “Barack Obama’s 2009 Inaugural Address: Narrative Signature and Interpretation,” 200; Robert C. Rowland, “Barack Obama and the Revitalization of Public Reason,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14, no. 4 (2011), 707.

I've heard some say that blocking this step would be a victory. And my question is, a victory for who? A victory for what? All that happened today was the preservation of the loophole that lets dangerous criminals buy guns without a background check. That didn't make our kids safer. Victory for not doing something that 90 percent of Americans, 80 percent of Republicans, the vast majority of your constituents wanted to get done? It begs the question, who are we here to represent?⁴⁵

Obama questioned the leadership of lawmakers who purposefully sought to disrupt the American system. Obama suggested, "There were no coherent arguments as to why we wouldn't do this. It came down to politics."⁴⁶ In order to move forward to a more productive future, Obama ended his April 17, 2013 speech with a rallying call to citizens. Obama expressed that all Americans must continue to engage the issue of gun control. The president declared, "[T]o change Washington, you, the American people, are going to have to sustain some passion about this. And when necessary, you've got to send the right people to Washington. And that requires strength, and it requires persistence."⁴⁷ Obama stressed that "you need to let your representatives in Congress know that you are disappointed, and that if they don't act this time, you will remember come election time."⁴⁸ Seeking to energize citizens and move them into an attitudinal shift for civic participation, Obama used the press conference to separate the dire need to address gun control from the failure of the current bill. It was not citizens and the president who failed to support the background check bill, but intransigent lawmakers who posed a threat to the

⁴⁵ Obama, "Statement On the Senate Vote Against Background Check Gun Bill Amendment," par. 20.

⁴⁶ Obama, "Statement On the Senate Vote Against Background Check Gun Bill Amendment," par. 12.

⁴⁷ Obama, "Statement On the Senate Vote Against Background Check Gun Bill Amendment," par. 28.

⁴⁸ Obama, "Statement On the Senate Vote Against Background Check Gun Bill Amendment," par. 25.

democratic process. In addition to working to honor the lives of those lost at Sandy Hook, Obama urged the public to take back their democratic political system. The president emphasized that change was a difficult process, but in order to create a better future the public had to lead the charge.⁴⁹

As Obama sought to dissociate his idea of a process-oriented attitude of tolerance from partisan gamesmanship, the mainstream media framed and re-framed the president's discourse as a political game between Democrats and Republicans. In other words, as Obama tried to break through public cynicism and a belief that debates on gun violence were just a routine series of responses from the president and public, the mainstream media circulated, commented on, and evaluated the overall merit of Obama's rhetoric by emphasizing the usual partisan gamesmanship cycle. On this particular issue, but in much of Obama's rhetoric on change, media commentators framed the president's comments for a widespread and diverse audience. Although 21st-century presidents may have more avenues to reach out to the public, there are also more kinds of communication channels and media commentators available. As such, even though a president may present a series of arguments and speeches on a particular issue, mainstream media organizations and social media platforms allow presidential discourse to circulate outside of its original context and injected with various forms of opinion. Presidential rhetoric is available freely to the public in many forums including the White House website. Yet, many citizens encounter the chief executive's comments through a media market that presents a fraction of the president's comments, selecting and deflecting certain aspects. As a result, media stories and

⁴⁹ As of January of 2016, some states and grassroots advocacy groups have sought to address the issue of gun control locally. A January 3, 2016 *New York Times* article chronicles this effort to avoid ultra-partisan gridlock and address the issue of gun control locally. See Eric Lichtblau, "State Focus and Infusion of Funding Buoy Gun Control Advocates," *New York Times*, January 3, 2016, <http://nyti.ms/1JnIJuj>.

online responses can consciously or unconsciously frame the underlying value or meaning of a public comment.

Media Framing and Re-Framing of Obama's Gun Control Rhetoric

In this chapter's third section, I analyze how media organizations, political pundits, and some members of the public framed and re-framed Obama's discourse in a frame of gamesmanship or winning and losing. Rather than focusing on empowering individual members of the electorate, members of the mainstream media and individuals on social media cited and reacted to the president's rhetoric, creating a new context or frame through which it could be viewed. This section illustrates the difficulty of coaching an attitudinal shift of seeking plurality when short-term partisan winning or gamesmanship is seen as the status quo for public policy. For Obama, seeking an attitudinal shift and immediate action on gun violence was a difficult rhetorical task. In Obama's rhetoric and solution to gun violence, unilateral actions on the part of the president or Congress were not the most conducive means for addressing change. Change happened best at the grassroots and individual level. This rhetorical strategy is key to understanding the president's rhetoric on gun violence and his attempt to foment a process-oriented attitude of tolerance. Yet, mainstream media outlets evaluated the president's strategy as weak and not solvent. Thus, although the president wanted to foment a shift in political argument in order to cast an immediate exigency and enact swift political action, his rhetorical pleas spoke of the short-term benefits of political goals. As such, Obama's rhetorical style was criticized for his use of a call to the authentic, arguments that stressed tolerance, and short-term change based in the political process. As a whole, Obama's rhetorical strategies were co-opted in discourse across various media, casting it as part of the cycle of partisan gamesmanship he ostensibly critiqued.

In a hyper-mediated environment, presidential discourse exists alongside mainstream media institutions that circulate and interpret his or her comments across multiple channels. Political communication scholars have noted that public perception of persons, situations, and controversies can be influenced by discourse appearing across media channels and alongside commentators who inject their own opinion on a topic. These kinds of mediated discourses can be said to “frame” some aspects of a person, situation or controversy while glossing over others. Media frames can be said to broadly “focus on *how* issues and other objects of interest are reported by the news media as well as *what* is emphasized in such reporting.”⁵⁰ Media frames shift public discourses about a person or topic circulating, re-circulating, and revising its significance in the mainstream media as well as on social media. In a fragmented and hyper-mediated environment, scholars in communication studies, media studies, and political science have noted that mainstream media and social media have played a role in how events or leadership styles are represented and re-presented in public culture.⁵¹ As such, W. Lance Bennett notes that frames inherently contain a bias by favoring certain aspects of events or discourses over others. This kind of discourse does not necessarily relate to ideological alignment or

⁵⁰ David Weaver, Maxwell McCombs, and Donald L. Shaw, “Agenda-Setting Research: Issues, Attributes, and Influences,” in *Handbook of Political Communication Research*, ed. Lynda Lee Kaid (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), 257, emphasis in original.

⁵¹ See Dan Mercea, “Probing the Implications of Facebook Use for the Organizational Form of Social Movement Organizations,” *Information, Communication & Society* 16, no. 8 (October 2013), 1310; W. Russell Neuman, Marion R. Just, and Ann N. Crigler, *Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Kathryn M. Olson, “The Function of Form in Newspapers’ Political Conflict Coverage: *The New York Times*’ Shaping of Expectations in the Bitburg Controversy,” *Political Communication* 12, no. 1, (1995), 43-64; Zizi Papacharissi, “Toward New Journalism(s): Affective News, Hybridity, and Liminal Spaces,” *Journalism Studies* 16, no. 1(2015), 27-40; Tom Rosenstiel, “Political Polling and the New Media Culture: A Case of More Being Less,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69, no. 5 (2005), 698-715; Thomas A. Salek, “Controversy Trending: The Rhetorical Form of Mia and Ronan Farrow’s 2014 Online Firestorm Against #WoodyAllen,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* (2015), in press.

favorability. Instead, Bennett stresses that framing bias can arise because mediated discourses focus on and spread information by using quotations or pieces of evidence out of context.⁵²

Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson also note that mainstream media outlets can cause the public to be skeptical of Congress, the presidency, and media institutions writ large.⁵³

In short, news coverage can shift expectations of presidential leadership aimed at long-term solutions that advocate for increased voices in the public sphere and into a more familiar frame where politics is evaluated through the metaphor of gamesmanship or winning or losing.

As the mainstream media reported Obama's post-Sandy Hook gun control rhetoric, media organizations and internet users evaluated this discourse through the frame of sensationalism. According to Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha, one of Obama's common rhetorical problems has been that news media often focus on the president's oratorical delivery and personality rather than political substance.⁵⁴ In coverage of Obama's December 14, 2012 speech about the tragedy at Sandy Hook, many media organizations noted the president's somber tone and the visible stream of tears running down his face.⁵⁵ *MSNBC* picked up on Obama's reaction as an emotional parent,

⁵² W. Lance Bennett, *News: Politics of Illusion*, 6th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005).

⁵³ Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "News Frames, Political Cynicism, and Media Cynicism," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 564 (1996), 83; Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 165-169.

⁵⁴ Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha, "Where's the Media? President Obama, the Public, and News Coverage," in *The Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations: Establishing the Obama Presidency*, eds. Justin S. Vaughn and Jennifer R. Mercieca (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2014), 97-98.

⁵⁵ Tom Cohen, "Wiping Away Tears, Obama Mourns Children Killed in School Shooting," *CNN*, December 15, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/14/us/obama-school-shooting/>; Joe Coscarelli, "President Obama on Connecticut School Shooting: 'We Have been Through This Too Many Times,'" *New York Magazine*, December 14, 2012, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2012/12/obama-speech-on-connecticut-school-shooting.html#>.

writing, “He said as a father of two, incidents like these weigh heavily on him.”⁵⁶ *Fox News* also noted that Obama’s national reaction was “emotional” and that of a parent. The *Fox News* story pointed toward the political future, noting that “[t]he shooting quickly stirred questions about whether lawmakers in Washington might pick up the push for stricter gun control.”⁵⁷ Similarly, the *Christian Science Monitor* led its coverage of the December 14, 2012 speech by noting that the president “wiped away tears Friday as he expressed the nation’s horror and heartbreak.”⁵⁸ In the immediate aftermath of Obama’s rhetoric, media organizations from across the political spectrum reported the president’s discourse and leadership as emotional.

At the same time, mainstream news stories from various partisan perspectives interrogated whether an emotional response was appropriate for the nation’s chief executive. Some news outlets asked if such a response could help bypass partisan gridlock or if it would contribute to an already stymied public discourse on gun control. For example, the *New York Times* noted Obama’s emotional response, but questioned what kind of gun control action the president could realistically advocate for in an age of ultra-partisanship. The *Times* wrote,

White House officials professed not to know what Mr. Obama’s pledge for “meaningful action” meant. But given Mr. Obama’s *methodical style*, *the words were not likely to have been chosen casually*. And yet the president stopped short of detailing any new

⁵⁶ Aliyah Frumin, “Emotional Obama: ‘Our Hearts are Broken Today,’” *MSNBC*, December 14, 2012, <http://on.msnbc.com/1OvgvNu>.

⁵⁷ “Obama: ‘Our Hearts are Broken’ for Families of Connecticut Shooting Victims,” *Fox News*, December 14, 2012, <http://fxn.ws/1rwinZD>.

⁵⁸ Linda Feldmann, “Obama on Conn. Shooting: ‘Our Hearts are Broken Today,’” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 14, 2012, <http://fw.to/yrtRFPf>.

initiatives, like restrictions on high-capacity ammunition magazines or stricter bans on gun buyers with a history of mental illness.⁵⁹

The *Times* reported that the president's words diagnosed a public harm, but did not necessarily provide a solvent cure. Although only one example, the *Times*'s framing highlights how, in the initial aftermath of Sandy Hook, news outlets focused on the uncommon emotional presidential delivery. It also questioned if this kind of emotion could be productively harnessed into political action from a legislative perspective.

Alongside traditional news stories that illustrated Obama's emotional delivery style, within hours of Obama's December 14, 2012 speech on Sandy Hook, some media commenters weighed in on the solvency of the president's rhetoric. Some argued that the president was unsuccessful because he spoke of political transformation *too* soon, while others critiqued Obama for not providing a *solvent cure*. For example, a writer on the conservative *Breitbart* website criticized Obama for stating that Americans will "have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent tragedies like this regardless of the politics." This writer chided,

He wiped away a tear. I wept with him. And then...*that*.

How are we meant to interpret that statement?

Must we accept Obama's preferred response—gun control—regardless of the merits of the policy?

Is this another serious crisis the administration will refuse to waste?

Does every problem have a government solution?

Could that statement not have waited a week, Mr. President?

Regardless of the politics?⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Mark Lander and Erica Goode, "Obama's Cautious Call for Action Sets Stage to Revive Gun Debate," *New York Times*, December 14, 2012, <http://nyti.ms/W7CVvT>, emphasis added.

For this particular conservative columnist, Obama's initial response was *too* political, poorly timed, and acted as a reason to not have a public political discussion on gun control. Despite the fact that Obama did not mention gun control in his December 14, 2012 comments, this columnist primed future political conversations by labeling the president as an insensitive authoritarian leader. In turn, this kind of commentary re-framed the president's discourse on how Americans could help shift gun control from being a legislative problem to a rhetorical problem. In other words, this type of discourse evaluated the president's rhetoric on a short-term basis. For this political commentator, gun violence could most appropriately be addressed outside government regulation. In fact, for this writer, simply speaking about one way of responding to gun violence that may invoke gun control went too far.

Unlike conservatives, liberal columnists criticized Obama's initial public reaction to Sandy Hook as appearing too weak on gun control. A columnist for the *New Yorker* explained that Obama's rhetorical failure after Sandy Hook and other mass shootings was that he did not provide a strong enough direction on what laws should be enacted or how to rally the right amount of votes in the Congress to pass reform. This columnist contended, "The saddest aspect of Obama's failure to address the deadly and dysfunctional role that guns play in American life is that he knows better."⁶¹ Explaining the president's understanding of the dangers of gun violence from his days as a community organizer in Chicago, this writer stated that there is "no excuse for the Obama Administration to do nothing."⁶² Criticizing Obama's December 14, 2012 speech for its lack of solvency, this writer announced, "The gun lobby is hunkered down, confident that the

⁶⁰ Joel B. Pollak, "Is Obama Already Politicizing Sandy Hook Shooting?" *Breitbart*, December 14, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1S8NqsN>, emphasis in original.

⁶¹ Patrick Radden Keefe, "Making Gun Control Happen," *New Yorker*, December 15, 2012, par. 9, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/making-gun-control-happen>.

⁶² Keefe, "Making Gun Control Happen," par. 12.

profound sense of urgency many of us feel right now will diminish, and we will soon return to our familiar, dystopian status quo. All they need to do is wait out the furor, as they have so many times before. We can only hope that President Obama doesn't choose to do the same."⁶³

Although media organizations may have initially labeled the president's discourse as emotional, within a few days of Sandy Hook, liberals criticized his discourse for being too weak. Rather than providing the country with a specific sense of direction, Obama's rhetoric merely stressed the urgency for change and discussion. Re-framing Obama's rhetoric on a short-term basis, this liberal commentator advocated that advocacy efforts directed at the legislative branch were one key way for adequately solving the problem of gun violence.

By the end of January of 2013, Obama's comments on gun control began to wane in media coverage.⁶⁴ Finally, in the wake of the April 17, 2013 legislative vote on gun control, political pundits, such as Maureen Dowd, labeled Obama's rhetorical efforts as a failure and his

⁶³ Keefe, "Making Gun Control Happen," par. 14.

⁶⁴ As the gun control debate continued from December 2012 through April of 2013, the media focused on Obama's sensational statements rather than contextualizing their meaning. For example, a reporter for the conservative-leaning *Washington Times* wrote, "President Obama said Monday that opponents of gun control legislation are fanning unfounded fears that the government is plotting a gun grab, as the White House prepared to lay out a wish list it wants to see Congress adopt in the wake of last month's school shooting." Similarly, CNN reported one of the president's speeches on gun control by focusing on his rhetorically vibrant discourse, rather than the substance of the speech. CNN wrote, "The gun lobby is 'ginning up' fears that the federal government will use the Newtown shooting tragedy, exactly one month ago, to seize Americans' guns, President Barack Obama said Monday." Through subsequent media coverage over the next few months, Obama's rhetoric continued to stress that gun control was a debate between a rational public and president and intransigent lawmakers and gun lobby groups. However, media commentators framed the president's rhetoric as dramatic and emotional—downplaying his calls to address a moral public health crisis. See David Sherfinski, "Obama Contends Gun Control Opponents Playing on Fear," *Washington Times*, January 14, 2013, par. 1, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/jan/14/obama-gun-law-opponents-fanning-unfounded-fears/?page=all>; Michael Pearson, "Obama Says Gun Lobby Stokes Fear of Federal Action," *CNN*, January 15, 2013, par. 1, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/14/politics/gun-laws-battle/index.html>.

leadership as spineless. Perplexed by how the Senate failed to pass gun control measures that a majority of Americans supported, the *New York Times* columnist opined,

How is it that the president won the argument on gun safety with the public and lost the vote in the Senate? It's because he doesn't know how to work the system. And it's clear now that he doesn't want to learn, or to even hire some clever people who can tell him how to do it or do it for him.⁶⁵

Dowd continued her attack, directing it at Obama's rhetoric. She chided, "The White House had a defeatist mantra [on gun control]: This is tough. We need to do it. But we're probably going to lose. When you go into a fight saying you're probably going to lose, you're probably going to lose."⁶⁶ Dowd's column recommended that Obama go to Capitol Hill and personally lobby members of Congress to re-engage gun control. In Dowd's article, the columnist framed that Obama's leadership should be one of short-term lobbyist-in-chief, not that of a decentralized leader who sought to energize citizens in the long run. Dowd's reframing and evaluation of Obama's leadership situates political success through short-term policy goals, rather than long-term shifts in how public problems are perceived and solved. Rather than feeding partisanship or viewing politics through the frame of gamesmanship, Obama's public discourse on gun control sought to empower citizens by motivating them to regularly vote in their interests and engage in discussions that accepted plurality. By defending the necessity of political gamesmanship and advocating that the president engage in backroom political arguments and deals, Dowd's column suggests the difficulty of bypassing familiar media coverage or argumentative frames that engage politics through the metaphor of winning and losing. In Obama's gun control rhetoric, winning

⁶⁵ Maureen Dowd, "No Bully in the Pulpit," *New York Times*, April 20, 2013, par. 4, <http://nyti.ms/ZA5IJq>.

⁶⁶ Dowd, "No Bully in the Pulpit," par. 9-10.

was engaging in conversations, respecting plurality, and voting. For Dowd, winning consisted of passing legislation in Congress and acting as a unitary executive.

As a whole, Obama's discourse cast parts of Washington as intransigent and sought to dissociate them from his vision of a desirable kind of political argument and public culture. The president's rhetoric situated change on both short-term and long-term scales. However, whether Americans were to solve problems today or tomorrow, Obama placed the locus of change in the hands of the American public, not with him as president. In this regard, presidential rhetoric was not solely based in winning through partisan gamesmanship or forcing the other side to lose. Instead, it should be based in an attitude of tolerance where individuals were empowered to discuss politics and vote in their own interests. As earlier chapters of this dissertation have noted, Obama's leadership style is decentralized and focused on empowering citizens to act in the future. The president's rhetoric may note the fierce urgency for change, but this future state can only be accomplished when the public is engaged on an individual level. As Obama attempted to embark on this political goal, media commentators situated his rhetoric back into a political scene of short-term partisan winning or losing—one of the key rhetorical problems he sought to resist. As such, the circulation and evaluation of Obama's public discourse highlights the difficulty of transcending political arguments that devolve into the partisan model of winning and losing. Even though the president may have sought to create an attitude where individuals accepted the credence of competing public voices, mainstream media news and opinion pieces re-situated and evaluated this discourse into the frame of partisan gamesmanship.

Short-Term Political Goals vs. Long-Term Attitude Building

It is an understatement to say that politics surrounding gun control in 21st-century America is complex. The NRA and conservative political action committees (PACs) have

historically shunned lawmakers and political candidates who even mention gun control. These groups have even gone as far as to fund pro-gun political candidates to replace members of Congress who support gun control measures.⁶⁷ As a result, many lawmakers shy away from addressing gun control. Despite this history, following the Sandy Hook tragedy the American public and many lawmakers were willing to engage the gun control debate.⁶⁸ Obama's rhetoric contended that the underlying issue was not whether there should be restrictions on firearms. Much of the American public supported such measures. The difficulty was moving the public and media from a routine series of responses toward pursuing political change to re-cast and prevent future tragedies. In other words, what needed to happen was a shift in political argument. For the president, partisanship and gamesmanship should be avoided. Instead, a long-term attitudinal shift that embraced plurality and a respect for the process of democracy was necessary.

Situating a process-oriented attitude of tolerance as the ideal means for enacting American citizenship, Obama's rhetoric sought to move away from partisan gamesmanship. This chapter highlights that a process-oriented attitude of tolerance was particularly difficult to foment and use as a resource for addressing a highly controversial and immediate exigency. Nurturing an attitude is a long-term goal that may not be fully achieved or modeled at an individual level in every interaction. As such, although a president may argue for an attitudinal change, his or her duties as chief executive may also require him or her to simultaneously call for immediate short-term action that contradicts his or her preferred ideal way of acting. As such, I contend that Obama's rhetoric on gun violence highlights the president trying to advocate for a process-

⁶⁷ "Grades and Endorsements," National Rifle Association, <https://www.nrapvf.org/grades-endorsements.aspx>.

⁶⁸ Clement, "90 Percent of Americans Want Expanded Background Checks on Guns."

oriented attitude of tolerance. However, Obama's rhetorical efforts and advocacy fall short of rallying individuals, lawmakers, and the media into a coalition because of the non-solvent means associated with tolerance.

Acting as a sailor attempting to guide the country through the tumultuous waters of gun control, Obama used rhetoric to move the public toward a more hopeful future. From a short-term legislative perspective, the president's rhetoric may not have been successful. Despite having an overwhelming majority of Americans supporting gun control legislation,⁶⁹ a few weeks after the April 17, 2013 failed Senate vote, only 47 percent of Americans expressed anger or disappointment gun control legislation did not get passed.⁷⁰ Less than two years after the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary, debates about gun control nearly disappeared from President Obama's political agenda.⁷¹ Yet, nearly three years after the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, Obama continued his push for change following mass shootings. In these kinds of responses, Obama's rhetoric sought to empower American citizens to be more involved in the political process and to demand action from lawmakers. For instance, in response to a mass shooting, on October 1, 2015 Obama declared, "If you think this is a problem, then you should expect your elected officials to reflect your views."⁷² At the same time, Obama noted that the media played a role in how gun control debates had become routine following tragic mass shootings.

⁶⁹ Frank Newport, "Americans Wanted Gun Background Checks to Pass Senate," *Gallup*, April 29, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/162083/americans-wanted-gun-background-checks-pass-senate.aspx>.

⁷⁰ "Mixed Reactions to Senate Gun Vote: Democrats More Disappointed than Angry," *Pew Research Center*, April 24, 2013, <http://pewrsr.ch/ZpJhrV>.

⁷¹ Reid J. Epstein, "State of the Union 2014: Gun Control Mostly Vanishes From Speech," *Politico*, January 28, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/01/state-of-the-union-2014-gun-control-102766.html>.

⁷² Obama, "Statement on Umpqua Community College Shootings," par. 15.

In addition to shifting attitudes for individual Americans and the media, in an October 1, 2015 speech, Obama noted the need for policy change from Congress and state lawmakers. Obama expressed his notion that politicians should seek common ground and listen to the voice of the public in the wake of mass shootings. He said,

Each time this happens I'm going to bring this up. Each time this happens I am going to say that we can actually do something about it, but we're going to have to change our laws. And this is *not* something I can do by myself. I've got to have a Congress and I've got to have state legislatures and governors who are willing to work with me on this.

I hope and pray that I don't have to come out again during my tenure as president to offer my condolences to families in these circumstances. But based on my experiences as president, I can't guarantee that. And that's terrible to say. And it *can* change.⁷³

By his seventh year in the White House, Obama emphasized that rational, long-term, and meaningful change happened from the grassroots. In order to transcend a partisan game of win-lose or lose-lose, the American people needed to be energized. Part of this rhetorical strategy involved engaging in local discussion. The next step would be ensuring that the public elects leaders who hold its preferences on particular policy issues, but who lead the country toward solving problems—not simply silencing the opposition as a means to win a short-term political goal.

In this chapter, I have analyzed Obama's rhetorical responses to the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, as well as how the media responded and re-presented such discourses. This chapter has two implications for this dissertation. First, as a piece of rhetorical criticism, this chapter's analysis serves as an avenue to diagnose the current rhetorical problem of ultra-

⁷³ Obama, "Statement on Umpqua Community College Shootings," par. 17-19, emphasis added.

partisanship. In the 21st century, and for much of our history as a nation, Americans have been accustomed to merely thinking about politics as a game between Democrats and Republicans or Federalists and Anti-Federalists. In order to break out of a routine debate, Obama's rhetoric illustrates that a leader can attempt to attenuate cynicism, resentment, and an overall feeling of hopelessness by noting the need for tolerance and acceptance of individual responsibility in the political process. Moreover, this chapter illustrates that Obama's gun violence rhetoric highlights a president trying to simultaneously engage short-term political change, but also coach a long-term attitudinal shift. In Obama's case, an attitudinal shift in politics used tolerance as an ideal way to perfect the country.

Leaders can try to help foment change by speaking directly to the public. However, the reality is such discourse exists in a hyper mediated environment where short-term legislative action is extraordinarily difficult, but viewed as the expected means for evaluating political change. In order to create a sustainable long-term attitudinal change in American politics, Obama's rhetoric sought to rekindle arguments based on evidence and reason and an American public that acts as empowered agents. Cynicism and resentment are powerful rhetorical tools that can be used to accomplish short-term political goals. However, the underlying problem in American politics occurs at an individual level. As Obama noted, if Americans are not empowered and politically engaged on an individual level, there is little chance that change can occur. One way to bypass inertia or routine debates in public culture is downplaying political arguments that advocate for short-term partisan gamesmanship. This strategy may be productive for enacting minor legislative gains, but does not empower citizens to work together to collaboratively solve problems.

Second, this chapter's analysis and argument reveal that despite a leader's best efforts to

enact change or foment an attitudinal shift, external forces like the media play a role in how leadership is enacted, understood, and evaluated. In other words, it is easier to speak of change than actually bypassing the symbolic and material forces that allow change to happen. From a political perspective, leaders should not expect change to happen simply through the action of voting in elections or discussing problems with family and friends. Change happens by shifting each citizen's mindset from thinking of political arguments in terms of gamesmanship and instead focusing on community problem solving. Although Obama provided an optimistic way of envisioning public culture, the president's rhetoric does not provide a solvent means for change. Tolerance promoted a political process where individuals may agree on certain pieces of legislation, but not given direction on how to pressure Congress into enacting such change. Moreover, as noted in Chapter 1, Americans tend to vote more on party identification rather than their own policy stances. In this case study, despite the president's rhetorical pleas for change and tolerance, public endurance of the current state remained. As Obama's rhetoric matured throughout his tenure in the White House, he would continue to build on his notion of decentralized leadership. The president would often stress how individual Americans could help resolve important social issues plaguing the future of the nation by stressing tolerance and acknowledging goodwill and personal responsibility.

Chapter 6

Opposing Frames Of Rejection and Acceptance:

President Obama's June 26, 2015 Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney

On the evening of June 17, 2015, a white supremacist armed with a concealed handgun marched into a Charleston, South Carolina church and sat down to pray and study the Bible with 12 others. After nearly an hour of discussing Scripture and Christianity, the shooter pulled a gun and began firing at members of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. In the end, nine people were killed, including Senior Pastor and State Senator Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney. In the following hours, days, weeks, and months, Americans and news media reacted by mourning the tragic loss of life while connecting the events to other contentious social issues. Some news outlets and pundits commented on the need for America to adequately address gun violence. Some critics stressed that America needed better mental health resources. However, nearly every news source explained the shooter's motive as an admitted act of racial hate and violence.¹

Two weeks after the tragedy at Emanuel A.M.E. Church, President Barack Obama eulogized the late Reverend Pinckney. In the wake of national tragedies, epideictic rhetoric, such as eulogies, offers presidents the opportunity to restore or promote a new public sense of order.

¹ Anthea Butler, "Shooters of Color are Called 'Terrorists' and 'Thugs.' Why Are White Shooters Called 'Mentally Ill'?" *The Washington Post*, June 18, 2015, <http://wpo.st/XayM1>; "Charleston Church Massacre Suspect Caught, but Answers Elude Victims' Loved Ones," *Fox News*, June 18, 2015, <http://fxn.ws/1HVuSZN>; Ralph Ellis, Ed Payne, Evan Perez, and Dana Ford, "Shooting Suspect in Custody After Charleston Church Massacre," *CNN*, June 18, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/18/us/charleston-south-carolina-shooting/>; Melanie Eversley, "9 Dead in Shooting at Black Church in Charleston, S.C.," *USA Today*, June 19, 2015, <http://usat.ly/1LgrsTr>.

This kind of rhetoric provides citizens with a frame or guidance for current and future action.²

On June 26, 2015, Obama praised Pinckney as an ideal Christian, American citizen, and statesperson. Using the constitutive function of rhetoric, Obama also articulated how Americans could alter their communication at the interpersonal and intrapersonal level to bypass *or* transform thoughts and actions that contribute to racial conflict. Appealing to Americans' public and private communication habits, Obama's rhetoric sketched two simultaneous, but opposing frames for future action. To help transform individual members of the public, Obama's rhetoric employed a frame of rejection that was situated in some key Christian principles or the "cosmic realm."³ This frame rejected discrimination, violence, and resentment. To bypass racial conflict in the realm of human relations, the president advanced his attitude of tolerance through a frame of acceptance. Depending on an audience member's perceptual premises, Obama's rhetoric had the opportunity to act as a frame for individual transformation via either the cosmic realm or acquiescence to the current state through a frame of acceptance.

In a democratic culture, individuals are granted agency over their public and private communication and symbolic action. External material forces may impact an individual's public actions, but within the limits that humans have agency over choosing order or disorder in their immediate rhetorical environment. For Kenneth Burke, accepting or rejecting order may be an internal and intrapersonal process, though its traces are externally available for inspection through symbolic action or communication practices.⁴ Unlike other animals, Burke contends that

² Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 73, 75, 77.

³ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes toward History*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 42.

⁴ Burke emphasizes that "there can be no [human] action without motion" and understanding of action without symbol use. Burke elaborates on this concept, arguing that "every idea, concept, attitude, or even every sheer word" is inherently connected to symbol use. See Kenneth Burke,

humans have the opportunity to act within and alter their world rather than respond to the sheer motion of external stimuli.⁵ On a similar note, Thomas B. Farrell contends that rhetoric provides humans the means to diagnose harms within the present order, but also offers audiences an alterative state of affairs that has not previously been articulated. Farrell argues, “Without rhetoric’s intervention, we would have only the partiality of immediate interest, the familiar locale. We would end where we started.”⁶ Likewise, Henry W. Johnstone associates rhetoric with the notion of a wedge—a symbolic tool that humans can choose to leverage for public and private transformation. Johnstone argues, “The wedge of rhetoric separates the person to whom a thesis is being addressed from that thesis itself; it puts him over against the thesis, causing him to attend to it as an explicit idea that he might previously have been unaware of because it figured only implicitly in his experience.”⁷ In other words, rhetoric’s persuasive power is the interplay between external and internal forces.

Rhetoric must also connect to audience members’ personal experiences and frame of the world. To identify with an audience, move members beyond the present state, and allow for transformation, rhetoric must “appeal to something that he [i.e., a rhetor] has noticed but [something his or her audience] is [also] *capable* of noticing—some implicit feature of his experience.”⁸ Thus, to transform the current state of order, a rhetor must first provide a point of identification to connect with audience members. Identification can occur via artistic or inartistic

“What are the Signs of What,” in *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966), 366-367.

⁵ See Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), 16, 41, 149.

⁶ Thomas B. Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 71.

⁷ Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., “Response,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 20, no. 2 (1987), 130.

⁸ Johnstone, “Response,” 132, emphasis in original.

proofs. When articulating a vision of the future, a rhetor must speak with reference to the scope of an audience's knowledge and his or her perceptual premises. For certain audience members, the form or substance of a rhetor's persuasive pleas may act as a wedge for transformation. For other audience members not attuned to the nuances implicit in a speaker's rhetoric, persuasive pleas may simply act as an end, yielding no extra-textual action.

In his eulogy for Pinckney, Obama's rhetoric constituted an American community whose members had to individually decide if and what they wanted to learn from the late Reverend's communication practices. Obama offered Americans an option to individually transform and contribute to a more promising future through mortification. In other words, Obama's rhetoric provided an individualized private kind of transformation through a moral and theological frame grounded in the Christian belief in God's grace. At the same time, Obama's rhetoric stressed that current racial and partisan conflict could be bypassed if individuals adopted a public attitude of tolerance, grounded in accepting the plurality of viewpoints available to others. Thus, Obama's speech presented two simultaneous, but incongruous frames for future action. Humans could choose to privately transform by embracing God's grace and becoming more moral individuals through rejection and forgiveness of sin. On the other hand, individuals could choose to live in error with a charitable sense of goodwill toward others. Depending on auditors' identification, Obama's rhetoric promoted transformative mortification via God's grace or acceptance of tolerance. Grace provided individuals a "cosmic" or "spiritual" frame of rejection and transformation via God's acceptance of sin and His gift of forgiveness. Tolerance provided a public frame of acceptance that circumvented racial conflict.

Analyzing Obama's June 26, 2015 eulogy for the late Reverend Pinckney, in this chapter I explain that Obama's rhetoric emphasized that Americans' communication practices could tap

into these two opposing frames for future action: 1) a tragic frame of rejection that provided an opportunity for personal transformation through the forgiveness of sin for individuals choosing to mortify, and 2) a frame of acceptance where error or mistakenness is acknowledged, but dealt with through a public attitude of tolerance. On the one hand, to transform and move beyond the current state of racial discord, Obama stressed that Americans could choose to repair race relations through a tragic frame of rejection that accepts his or her situatedness in public affairs and God's world through personal mortification. In contrast, Obama noted that racial conflict could be temporarily bypassed through tolerance and choosing to acknowledge others as misguided actors. In other words, rather than transforming America's current state, tolerance promoted acceptance or passivity of the current state through rhetoric that promoted too much ambiguity. In Obama's frame of acceptance, any subject position or courses of action, regardless of potential harmful acts that may result, are tolerated. However, regardless of which frame one chooses, Obama's rhetoric asks individuals to personally deal with the issue of race. Collective or shared public action is not promoted in either frame.

By offering simultaneous frames of acceptance and rejection, Obama's eulogy advocated that to move the country forward, Americans could make a choice about how to act in the future: seek personal transformation by acknowledging sin and how one's personal attitudes can lead to institutionalized racism *or* promote an attitude of tolerance. I argue that by employing religious transformation, but simultaneously emphasizing a need for tolerance, the president's eulogy and broader rhetoric on social change fell short of achieving a solvent form of public action. Through its religious dimension, Obama's eulogy promotes a Christian form of mortification that allows individuals to transform through personal sacrifice. However, through its political dimension, Obama's call for mortification may be incoherent or not accepted by non-Christian audience

members. Moreover, Obama's rhetoric in itself is muddled by a general call for tolerance when judging the acts and viewpoints of others. By mixing frames of acceptance and rejection, as well as promoting tolerance of all viewpoints, Obama's speech provides two powerful, but ultimately incompatible ways for addressing institutional racism in 21st-century America.

This chapter begins with an introduction to Burke's theories on interpretive frames and piety, connecting them to their function in the June 26, 2015 speech. I then exemplify how Obama rhetorically positioned grace as a symbolic resource for transforming an individual's internalized communication practices. However, I note that the president's rhetoric also employs another secular option that adopts an attitude of tolerance as the means and ends for accepting the plurality of viewpoints. As such, even though individual transformation is offered as an option for Americans attuned to the nuances of God's grace, a public attitude of passivity is promoted through a frame of acceptance focused on tolerance. This chapter ends by arguing how religious and secular dimensions of political rhetoric can be mixed by rhetors in an attempt to acknowledge and forgive sin, rather than approach it passively.

Conflicting Interpretive Frames of Rejection and Acceptance

In order to accept order to reject a sense of order, individuals must introspectively acknowledge their piety to certain ideological principles.⁹ For Burke, piety to certain principles promotes a model or schema that can guide or misguide humans in symbolic interaction.¹⁰ Due to individuals' free will and varying degrees of knowledge, a schema or frame provides the interpretive means for individuals to engage in self-introspection, as well as future action or inaction. Thus, interpretive frames provide the discursive means to "shaping our relations with

⁹ See Burke, *Attitudes toward History*, 92.

¹⁰ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 76.

our fellows. They prepare us *for* some functions, and *against* others, *for* or *against* the persons representing these functions.”¹¹ To put it differently, interpretative frames can allow humans the means for rejecting the current system and adopting a new order *or* tolerating and standing by the current order.

Frames are particularly important for the fomentation of an attitude, even if this attitude emerges decades before being articulated in a rhetorical transaction.¹² Burke emphasizes that frames provide humans with the necessary symbolic resource that we “derive our vocabularies for the charting of human motives. And implicit in our theory of motives is a program of action, since we form ourselves and judge others (collaborating with them or against them) in accordance with our attitudes.”¹³ In a frame of rejection rhetors constitute a “*shift in the allegiance* to symbols of authority,” purging a harm or ill from their individual or social world.¹⁴ In contrast, in a frame of acceptance, a rhetor provides the means to “fix attitudes for combat” by adopting a role in relation to the current system.¹⁵ Passivity is not an inherent feature of a frame of acceptance, but it can be promoted if a rhetor chooses to draw the lines in a way that does not require human action or promotes too much ambiguity.¹⁶ For a president, frames of rejection and acceptance influence civic participation by stressing how individuals can choose to act within their social world through a specific program of action.

In Obama’s June 26, 2015 eulogy, the president conflated frames of rejection and acceptance, muddying a distinct course of action or public attitude. On the one hand, by

¹¹ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 4, emphasis in original.

¹² Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 4.

¹³ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 92.

¹⁴ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 21-22, emphasis in original.

¹⁵ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 5, 20.

¹⁶ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 75.

employing religiously fused rhetoric and Christian theological traditions, parts of Obama's June 26, 2015 speech stressed the need for a frame of rejection via mortification. On the other hand, Obama promoted accepting a sense of order and passivity through a public attitude of tolerance and respect for plurality. As such, Obama's rhetoric overlapped rejection and acceptance creating two opposing ways of addressing racial discord in contemporary American society.

Seeking Mortification Through A Frame of Rejection

On June 26, 2015, Obama stood in front of a group of prominent preachers and churchgoers, eulogizing his friend and late public servant, Reverend Pinckney. In this speech, Obama noted that race relations in America were damaged but repairable.¹⁷ For Obama, the key to mending the racial divide involved rejecting or saying no to racism or any form of hierarchy that promoted violence, resentment, or intransigence. Symbolic action involved adopting an interpretive frame of rejection that sought mortification or personal sacrifice. Rhetoric within this kind of frame of rejection helps cultivate a new sense of order by having individuals accept personal responsibility for a social anxiety or sin that has caused disorder. Barry Brummett notes that in order to offer a frame of rejection via mortification, a rhetor first "*makes* guilt an issue."¹⁸ Once guilt is rhetorically articulated, this social ill can be expiated via mortification, allowing society to "achieve redemption that leads back to a secure hierarchy (reinstatement of the old or establishment of a new one)."¹⁹ A frame of rejection taps into a social cycle of order where an ill or harm creates anxiety. Individual members then rhetorically construct a unitary principle as the

¹⁷ Barack Obama, "Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney, Charleston, South Carolina" *American Rhetoric*, June 26, 2015, par. 33-34, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamaclementaPinckneyeulogy.htm>.

¹⁸ Barry Brummett, "Burkean Scapegoating, Mortification, And Transcendence in Presidential Campaign Rhetoric," *Central States Speech Journal* 32, no. 4 (1981), 257, emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Brummett, "Burkean Scapegoating," 255.

means to restore order by rejecting a person or thing from society through scapegoating or victimage. Another alternative is mortification or self-disciplining of oneself for (intentionally or unintentionally) contributing to the public presence of a sin or harmful act. The cycle of order is complete when an individual or community rejects the ill or harm and organizing principle to which the order is pious.²⁰

In the case of mortification, rejection involves adopting an attitude of self-discipline and accepting moral responsibility. Burke describes mortification as an internal “‘payment’ for [a] wrong”²¹ or one way to address social guilt. Due to the presence of a social guilt causing disorder, mortification requires individuals to take personal responsibility. Burke writes, “For ‘mortification’ does not occur when one is merely ‘frustrated’ by some external interference. It must come from within. The mortified must, with one aspect of himself, be saying no to another aspect of himself.”²² Burke adds,

[M]ortification [is] a kind of governance, an extreme form of “self-control,” the deliberate, disciplinary “slaying” of any motive that, for “doctrinal” reasons, one thinks of as unruly. In an emphatic way, mortification is the exercising of oneself in “virtue”; it is a systematic way of saying no to Disorder, or obediently saying yes to Order.²³

Mortification is not about pushing guilt or responsibility onto an external enemy. Kathryn M.

Olson describes mortification as “a new commitment to a more virtuous way of life, not total

²⁰ Burke outlines this cycle of order in several places throughout his work, most significantly in *The Rhetoric of Religion* and an *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* entry. See Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 183-194; Kenneth Burke, “Dramatism,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 445-451.

²¹ Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 175.

²² Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 190.

²³ Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 190.

self-destruction.”²⁴ In other words, mortification offers a privatized frame of rejection that allows individuals to discipline their own actions that may have contributed to the presence of a social harm that disrupts a community. In the June 26, 2015 speech, Obama built on his earlier uses of a call to the authentic and dissociation from partisan gamesmanship. For Obama, institutionalized racism was cast as a harmful scar on American society. Rather than choosing to scapegoat an external source for this harm, Obama’s rhetoric sought mortification and the Christian notion of grace as the unitary principle to individually transform. To complete the cycle of order, mortification and the absolution of guilt occurred when individuals accepted the gift of God’s grace.

Narrating the events from June 17, 2015, in the June 26, 2015 eulogy, Obama emphasized how the actions of the killer exemplified America’s long history of institutional racism. To move forward individuals needed to acknowledge institutional racism as a social anxiety and pursue change through self-discipline or mortification. Obama explained that on June 17, 2015, an armed individual, blinded by racial hatred, sought to promote disorder and violence on members of the African American community. Pointing to this harmful action, Obama preached,

We do not know whether the killer of Reverend Pinckney and eight others knew all of this history [of the black church and Civil Rights movement]. But he surely sensed the meaning of his violent act. It was an act that drew on a long history of bombs and arson and shots fired at churches, not random, but as a means of control, a way to terrorize and oppress. An act that he imagined would incite fear and recrimination; violence and

²⁴ Kathryn M. Olson, “Rhetorical Leadership and Transferable Lessons for Successful Social Advocacy in Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 44 (2007), 96.

suspicion. An act that he presumed would deepen divisions that trace back to our nation's original sin.²⁵

Casting racism as *the* sin that dated back to America's foundation, Obama noted that hate *could* be met with violence and division. Racial violence was deeply rooted in American history. Even though the killer may have been blinded by hate, Obama noted the underlying harm was not merely the actions of one individual, but an embodiment of the larger force of institutionalized racism. The president noted that all Americans were inflicted with a form of blindness or short sightedness when it came to race. Obama stated, "For too long, we've been blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present."²⁶ Before prescribing a frame of rejection or acceptance, the president emphasized that black and white Americans contributed to this harm on an individual level. In the past, violence and racism may have gone unacknowledged, but this tragedy exposed the violence affiliated with racism at a very public level.

In order to move forward in the aftermath of the murder of Reverend Pinckney and eight others, Obama stressed that Americans needed to ask a number of questions about the state of the nation. Rejection or acceptance of the current state were ways to move forward, but change in any direction could only happen once citizens introspectively examined America's current state. Obama emphasized this notion, declaring,

[T]his tragedy causes us to ask some tough questions about how we can permit so many of our children to languish in poverty, or attend dilapidated schools, or grow up without prospects for a job or for a career.

Perhaps it causes us to examine what we're doing to cause some of our children to hate.

Perhaps it softens hearts towards those lost young men, tens and tens of thousands caught

²⁵ Obama, "Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney," par 22.

²⁶ Obama, "Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney," par. 32.

up in the criminal justice system—and leads us to make sure that that system is not infected with bias; that we embrace changes in how we train and equip our police so that the bonds of trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve make us all safer and more secure.²⁷

In the past, some Americans may have turned a blind eye to the specter of institutional racism that contributed to a culture of hate, disproportional mistreatment of men and women of color, and unconscious ways of judging others based on deeply ingrained cultural values. For the president, the violence on June 17, 2015 did not stem exclusively from one individual's consciousness or act of violence, but a larger cultural screen that ignored or was ignorant of institutionalized discrimination. Moreover, the Charleston shooting provided Obama a moment to address the underlying harm of institutionalized racism by associating the murder of Pinckney and eight others with the guilt affiliated with systemic discrimination. Obama noted that the Charleston shooting illustrated that racial discrimination was not just this one act of violence, but a broader exigency that tapped into policing practices, educational opportunities, and career opportunities.

In order to move beyond the guilt affiliated with the June 17, 2015 tragedy, Obama noted that individuals had to be aware of how their own communication acts added up to a broader culture that contributed to violence or hate. Obama emphasized that the Charleston shooting created a moment where Americans had the possibility of recognizing even the slightest action could provide an opening for violence and hate, but also less noticeable forms of racism. Obama stated that because of the guilt affiliated with the shootings,

²⁷ Obama, "Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney," par. 32-33.

Maybe we now realize the way racial bias can infect us even when we don't realize it, so that we're guarding against not just racial slurs, but we're also guarding against the subtle impulse to call Johnny back for a job interview but not Jamal. So that we search our hearts when we consider laws to make it harder for some of our fellow citizens to vote. By recognizing our common humanity by treating every child as important, regardless of the color of their skin or the station into which they were born, and to do what's necessary to make opportunity real for every American.²⁸

Before venturing into prescribing rejection or acceptance, Obama cast the Charleston shooting as synecdoche for America's larger unseen problem of racism. Regardless of the intentions of white and black citizens, Obama's rhetoric conceded that all Americans actions potentially contributed to a public discourse that inhibited the rights of others.

Rather than seeking violence and promoting division, Obama noted that God's gift of grace and forgiveness could be used as an individualized means to respond to this tragedy.²⁹ In order to move beyond the guilt affiliated with the Charleston shooting, individuals could choose to reject institutional racism and promote change through forgiveness. Tapping into the Christian tradition, Obama argued that grace afforded humans the possibility to take personal responsibility for sin, but seek a new sense of order through God's gift of forgiveness. In the speech, Obama defined and stressed the importance of grace, stating, "According to Christian tradition, grace is not earned. Grace is not merited. It's not something we deserve. Rather, grace is the free and benevolent favor of God—as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the

²⁸ Obama, "Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney," par. 34.

²⁹ There are differing ways of understanding the concept of "grace" in the Christian tradition. This chapter relies on Obama's definition and use of grace as a symbolic resource in this speech. Obama's rhetoric uses grace as the means to seek mortification by accepting God's gift of grace or the forgiveness of sin.

bestowal of blessings.”³⁰ Speaking as a Christian and through a religiously inspired rhetoric, Obama’s defined grace as a symbolic resource afforded to anyone, but accepted by individuals willing to take personal responsibility for a public harm. For the president, acknowledging grace was cast as means for seeking transformation through a frame of rejection, declaring, “That reservoir of goodness. If we can find that grace, anything is possible. If we can tap that grace, everything can change.”³¹ For the president, grace allowed individuals to embrace ambiguity and the notion that their actions may be consciously or unconsciously part of a discourse that contributes to institutional racism. This kind of introspective symbolic act involved avoiding casting blame on others or using intransigence and resentment to promote inaction. Instead, to embrace grace, individuals would have to acknowledge: “I am flawed. I may commit acts that contribute to disorder, but I can also work to create a cooperative and more peaceful future.” In Obama’s speech, grace provided a personalized avenue for taking responsibility, embracing ambiguity, and seeking change by rejecting previous actions or discourses that may have contributed to an environment of disorder.

To reach a frame of rejection, Obama declared that June 17, 2015 was a tragic day for Americans, but provided the opportunity to tap into God’s gift of grace and seek self-introspective mortification. Obama stressed,

As a nation, out of this terrible tragedy, God has visited grace upon us, for he has allowed us to see where we’ve been blind. He has given us the chance, where we’ve been lost, to find our best selves. We may not have earned it, this grace, with our rancor and complacency, and short-sightedness and fear of each other—but we got it all the same.

³⁰ Obama, “Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney,” par. 27.

³¹ Obama, “Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney,” par. 45.

He gave it to us anyway. He's once more given us grace. But it is up to us now to make the most of it, to receive it with gratitude, and to prove ourselves worthy of this gift.³²

To promote a new sense of order out of this tragedy, Obama reminded Christian Americans that grace was the means for individually taking responsibility and seeking transformation by recognizing that they intentionally or unintentionally contributed to an environment of institutionalized racism. Although tragic events like the Charleston shooting may illustrate active racism being perpetrated by violent individuals, this type of discrimination was part of a cycle of order that individual humans could choose to actively accept or reject. In order to break the cycle of institutionalized racism and seek a new order, individuals had to accept God's grace and their own responsibility.

Much like Obama's rhetoric on same-sex marriage and gun violence, in the eulogy the president expressed the notion that social action does not just stem from discussion, shifts in voting behaviors, or the simple belief that change can happen through the actions of political leaders. In his eulogy of Reverend Pinckney, Obama built on these calls for changes in how Americans could discuss issues or vote in elections, but, more specifically, the president explained how citizens could act as individual change agents. As an individual acting at the grassroots level, accepting grace required each Christian American to be authentic with his or her self and the community at large. Seeking grace provides an opportunity for self-awareness of one's own beliefs and sins and forging a commitment to create a more moral cycle of order that rejected the underlying harm. Using Pinckney and the black church as the "beating heart" of a community, Obama's eulogy emphasized awareness of one's own sense of self and ability to transform society from the grassroots. Social change happened first and foremost through an

³² Obama, "Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney," par. 29.

individual taking responsibility for his or her public and private acts, as well as keeping a vigilant eye on the actions of others.

To seek mortification and accept grace, Obama's eulogy advised Americans that the gunman who killed Pinckney and the eight others should not be scapegoated or hated. Hate would only allow this individual's horrific act of violence be something that could "incite fear and recrimination; violence and suspicion"³³ and deepen America's racial wounds. Instead, Obama contended that this incident, as well as his eulogistic rhetoric, could create a new sense of order. Mortification provided humans with a way of dealing with the guilt and anger affiliated with institutionalized racism by repairing the current cycle of order. Communication based on grace and mortification sought to reject the underlying harm, not just scapegoat the perpetrator blinded by institutionalized racism. Describing the events at Emanuel A.M.E. Church, Obama's eulogy noted the tragedy, but emphasized the need to embody grace. Obama pointed out that grace is what unified members of the church and allowed them to forgive the shooter. The president decreed,

Blinded by hatred, the alleged killer could not see the grace surrounding Reverend Pinckney and that Bible study group—the light of love that shone as they opened the church doors and invited a stranger to join in their prayer circle. The alleged killer could have never anticipated the way the families of the fallen would respond when they saw him in court—in the midst of unspeakable grief, with words of forgiveness. He couldn't imagine that.

The alleged killer could not imagine how the city of Charleston, under the good and wise leadership of Mayor [Joseph P.] Riley—how the state of South Carolina, how the United

³³ Obama, "Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney," par. 22.

States of America would respond—not merely with revulsion at his evil act, but with big-hearted generosity and, more importantly with a thoughtful introspection and self-examination that we so rarely see in public life.³⁴

Although bitterness and scapegoating are discursive options available to individuals in the aftermath of a hate crime, Obama’s rhetoric attempted to reject previous racial divisions and create a new order through mortification. To illustrate the success or appeal of this tactic, Obama highlighted how certain individuals and communities gracefully responded to the June 17, 2015 tragedy with forgiveness and an introspective examination into their own lives. Obama’s rhetoric situated the shooting and responses through a frame of rejection. The shooter may have been corrupted by hateful intentions and discourse, but the act itself provided an opportunity for the president, members of the victim’s families, and larger community to achieve a sense of self-consciousness of their own role in institutionalized racism. The act of violence provided the opportunity to respond peacefully, seeking peace and embracing forgiveness through God’s grace.

Obama’s speech sought to foster mortification in his audience by empowering them with the notion that they can choose grace, but also encouraging them to act as individual change agents. Obama used Pinckney as an example of a leader who was not blinded by bitterness or hatred toward one’s adversary. The president noted that Pinckney embodied an attitude, which stressed

that justice grows out of recognition of ourselves in each other.

That my liberty depends on you being free, too. That history can’t be a sword to justify injustice, or a shield against progress, but must be a manual for how to avoid repeating

³⁴ Obama, “Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney,” par. 24-25.

the mistakes of the past—how to break the cycle. A roadway toward a better world. He knew that the path of grace involves an open mind—but, more importantly, an open heart.³⁵

Grace was something that could be rhetorically harnessed through communication practices that sought mortification. One must understand his or her individual responsibility in the world. Seeking grace involved rejecting a cycle of order that allowed institutional racism to exist in the first place. Using a form of mortification or self-discipline, individuals could transform their actions individually as a grassroots way of addressing this systemic problem.

To further illustrate how an individual's acceptance of grace can help transform society, Obama continued to use Pinckney as an ideal example. Although mortification seeks to transform individuals through grace and taking responsibility for acting in the world, individuals should strive toward building a more responsible and collective future. Whether serving God, churchgoers, or his constituents, Obama noted that Pinckney embodied the most ideal avenue for rejecting a public harm while transforming society toward a new sense of order. Speaking about the late Reverend, Obama mourned,

He embodied the idea that our Christian faith demands deeds and not just words; that the “sweet hour of prayer” actually lasts the whole week long—that to put our faith in action is more than individual salvation, it’s about our collective salvation; that to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and house the homeless is not just a call for isolated charity but the imperative of a just society.³⁶

Although the speech placed a heavy emphasis on Pinckney, the black church, and Christianity, Obama’s rhetoric stressed that anyone could individually take responsibility to transform the

³⁵ Obama, “Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney,” par. 44.

³⁶ Obama, “Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney,” par. 14.

current state of the nation. Any American, regardless of race or religion, could seek a more secular form of mortification through an individual concern for one's self and community. Mortification did not necessarily require God's grace, but an acceptance of a moral responsibility for contributing to a climate that engendered institutional racism. In other words, a frame of rejection was predicated on seeking forgiveness for one's own actions and that of others, but forging a better future through the restoration of a society that had a goal of purging institutional forms of discrimination.

Obama also used his speech to illustrate an instance where regular Americans and South Carolina's government rejected institutionalized racism at a public level. In the middle of the June 26, 2015 eulogy, Obama acknowledged South Carolina's recent decision to take down the Confederate flag from their State Capitol.³⁷ The June 17, 2015 shooting and several other high-profile acts of racial violence created a controversy about whether the Confederate flag should be publicly displayed next to the American flag in South Carolina. Instead of scapegoating the flag as a symbol of oppression and racial violence, in the eulogy, Obama emphasized that taking the flag down was an act of mortification on the part of the government and public. Although taking down the flag was met with some resistance, many Americans, including South Carolina's governor, acknowledged the need to take a moral stance about the presence of this flag and how it contributed to a system of institutionalized racism. Basing his argument through the notion of sight, Obama advocated,

For too long, we were blind to the pain that the Confederate flag stirred in too many of our citizens. It's true, a flag did not cause these murders. But as people from all walks of

³⁷ For a full narrative about the controversy on South Carolina's removal of the Confederate flag, see Richard Fausset and Alan Blinder, "Era Ends as South Carolina Lowers Confederate Flag," *New York Times*, July 10, 2015, <http://nyti.ms/1JYAd1y>.

life, Republicans and Democrats, now acknowledge—including Governor Haley, whose recent eloquence on the subject is worthy of praise—as we all have to acknowledge, the flag has always represented more than just ancestral pride. For many, black and white, that flag was a reminder of systemic oppression and racial subjugation. We see that now. Removing the flag from this state’s capitol would not be an act of political correctness; it would not be an insult to the valor of Confederate soldiers. It would simply be an acknowledgment that the cause for which they fought—the cause of slavery—was wrong—the imposition of Jim Crow after the Civil War, the resistance to civil rights for all people was wrong. It would be one step in an honest accounting of America’s history; a modest but meaningful balm for so many unhealed wounds. It would be an expression of the amazing changes that have transformed this state and this country for the better, because of the work of so many people of goodwill, people of all races striving to form a more perfect union. By taking down that flag, we express God’s grace.³⁸

Noting the benefits of a frame of rejection and need to take a moral responsibility to achieve justice, Obama’s rhetoric emphasized that the flag was taken down as a way of seeking a more responsible future. However, the flag’s departure from South Carolina’s capitol was not scapegoating a symbol, it was the material existence of the state’s underlying collective choice to reject institutional racism. The flag was not the cause of harm, but instead, a symbol that illustrated the need for individuals to investigate their inner selves and account for how they can individually reject past injustices as the means to transform the country.

As a means to promote grace and mortification at the individual and collective level, Obama concluded his speech with a collective call for symbolic action by reciting, “Amazing

³⁸ Obama, “Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney,” par. 30-31.

grace. Amazing grace.” After hearing the president sing, members of his direct audience stood and began clapping. An organist punctuated the president’s vocal performance, followed by the rest of the audience joining in song. The collective group sang, “Amazing grace—how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now I’m found; was blind but now I see.” Obama formally ended his speech expressing grief for the loss of Pinckney and the eight others whose lives were taken by a gunman, but noted the need to embrace the gift of God’s grace as the means to mortify. In this speech, individual transformation was spoken about from Obama, but exhibited externally through audience response. As Obama and audience sang, they stood and applauded together. Obama ended the speech, declaring,

Through the example of their lives, they’ve now passed it on to us.

May we find ourselves worthy of that precious and extraordinary gift, as long as our lives endure.

May grace now lead them home.

May God continue to shed His grace on the United States of America.³⁹

The president’s use of the song “Amazing Grace,” as well as the audience’s applause and singing, illustrate the verbal and nonverbal embodiment of rhetoric that seeks mortification externally. Erin J. Rand describes this kind of interaction as choric communication. This practice includes singing, chanting, applause, and calls back and forth between members of an audience and a rhetor. Rand notes that these gestures provide a “sense of collectivity” or the fostering of “sociability, participation, cooperation, belonging, and identity in a group” by tapping into “the invisibility of rhetoric and performance.”⁴⁰ In this regard, choric communication such as singing

³⁹Obama, “Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney,” par. 58-62.

⁴⁰ Erin J. Rand, “‘What One Voice Can Do’: Civic Pedagogy and Choric Collectivity at Camp Courage,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2014), 31, 32.

and applause can provide a group with the ability to bring together disparate voices into a shared experience. For Obama, by singing “Amazing Grace” with his audience, he provided auditors with a reminder on the importance of accepting grace, but used it to create a shared experience of seeking mortification. By applauding the president’s vocal performance and joining him in song, Obama’s audience provided a memorable and collaborative end to the June 26, 2015 eulogy. This action afforded Obama’s audience a symbolic form and reminder that grace allows individuals to seek mortification as the means to reject violence, resentment, and forms of communication that promote racism. This kind of lens promotes forgiveness and a restoration of order through individual embracement of God’s grace.⁴¹ Individuals who choose to embrace God’s grace and take responsibility for how their own actions contributed to an act of disorder is necessary. Choric communication provided the collective an external opportunity to collectively seek the internal process of mortification and the rejection of institutionalized racism. Alongside a need to individually seek mortification and use a frame of rejection to address institutionalized racism, Obama’s rhetoric also advocated for acceptance through tolerance. Rather than using a frame of rejection and mortification as the means to transform the country, Obama’s rhetoric simultaneously asks for a politics of goodwill based on respect for plurality.

A Frame of Acceptance Based in Goodwill and Plurality

The June 26, 2015 eulogy may have provided Obama a space to speak out on the need for Americans to seek mortification to transform individually. At the same time, this speech simultaneously used a frame of acceptance to coach a public attitude of tolerance that promoted passivity over action. As with the other two case studies in this dissertation, President Obama’s

⁴¹ For a close textual analysis of the hymn “Amazing Grace” and its connection to Burke’s cycle of order and theories on symbolic action, see John Katsion, “The Hymn ‘Amazing Grace’: The Grace Anecdote As Equipment for Living,” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 36, no. 2 (2013), 135-150.

leadership approach stresses the importance of recognizing the need for change through grassroots action. In the eulogy for Reverend Pinckney, Obama emphasized that Americans had to make a “moral choice to change” by seeking a shift at the grassroots.⁴² For Americans not attuned to the nuances of Obama’s religiously inspired rhetoric or did not embrace his call for mortification, this speech also contained a broader attitude of tolerance. Tolerance was not based in rejection, but in fostering a charitable sense of goodwill toward others. In terms of race relations and gun violence, tolerance required accepting that racial division and gun violence were historical and contemporary realities of American culture.

To move forward in a frame of acceptance, Americans had to first situate their faith in the democratic system. After that, Americans could promote a sense of goodwill or tolerance by accepting that there are competing pathways for how to solve public problems. This process would happen organically and evolve from individuals and local communities seeking change on their own terms and time. Obama explained this process, declaring,

None of us can or should expect a transformation in race relations overnight. Every time something like this happens, somebody says we have to have a conversation about race. We talk a lot about race. There’s no shortcut. *And we don’t need more talk.* None of us should believe that a handful of gun safety measures will prevent every tragedy. It will not.

People of goodwill will continue to debate the merits of various policies, as our democracy requires—this is a big, raucous place, America is. And there are good people on both sides of these debates. Whatever solutions we find will necessarily be

⁴² Obama, “Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney,” par. 38.

incomplete.⁴³

For Obama, perfection of the country was not a linear or fully achievable process. Instead, perfection was something that is ongoing and should continually be frustrated and sought by future generations. An attitude of tolerance accepts the notion that change is a gradual and perpetual process. Social change can be particularly slow, but not necessarily achieved solely by the actions of one individual or one act alone. Unlike earlier calls for more debate or discussion, Obama emphasized that mere talk did not actually create change in itself. Change was something that happened through a more organic form evolution that happened at the grassroots. For the president, there may be an acceptance of the existence of a social harm, but individuals should situate their attitude in the frame of tolerance. Change happens eventually, and transformation takes time. The avenue for a frame of acceptance is tolerance or goodwill toward others—not just mere talk. This may be a choice, but, in this case, the choice ultimately promotes endurance of all the actions that contribute to institutionalized racism.

Further emphasizing a need to accept the current state, Obama noted that Americans could not “slip into a comfortable silence.”⁴⁴ Explaining how to properly respond to the Charleston shooting, Obama declared,

It would be a refutation of the forgiveness expressed by those families if we merely slipped into old habits, whereby those who disagree with us are not merely wrong but bad; where we shout instead of listen; where we barricade ourselves behind preconceived notions or well-practiced cynicism.⁴⁵

Obama’s use of a frame of acceptance may call for an active shift in how to think about and

⁴³ Obama, “Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney,” par. 40-41, emphasis added.

⁴⁴ Obama, “Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney,” par. 42.

⁴⁵ Obama, “Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney,” par. 43.

evaluate the acts of others. Seeking a more peaceful future, this frame of acceptance functions in line with Burke's explanation of the comic. Obama's eulogy asks the American people to give other citizens the benefit of the doubt and accept them as mistaken. According to Burke, the comic frame allows humans a way to collaborate and organize into communities. Even though humans can never wipe away "the ravages of boredom and inanition that go with the 'alienations' of contemporary society,"⁴⁶ a comic frame of acceptance can help "produce a state of affairs whereby these rigors may abate."⁴⁷ Burke contends that this kind of discourse deals with "*man in society*"⁴⁸ because it allows humans to achieve maximum consciousness by "transcend[ing] himself by noting his own foibles."⁴⁹ Obama's rhetoric taps into this frame, stating that humans can choose to focus on acts of benevolence and goodwill. In this regard, even though someone may commit an act of sin this is not necessarily strictly based in evil, but could be a misguided sense of priorities.⁵⁰ A comic frame ultimately allows humans to acknowledge flaws with the current social order, but accepts that it is a part of the system.⁵¹ Passivity can become a part of a frame of acceptance, and the comic, because a rhetor does not provide the necessary means for actively accepting the inherent barriers (material and symbolic) that exist in the current system. In Obama's case that would include the notion that institutionalized racism was a barrier that everyone was responsible for consciously or unconsciously.

⁴⁶ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 174.

⁴⁷ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 175.

⁴⁸ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 42.

⁴⁹ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 171, emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ See Barry Brummet's reading of Burke's comic frame in Barry Brummett, "Burkean Comedy and Tragedy, Illustrated in Reactions to the Arrest of John DeLorean," *Central States Speech Journal* 35 (1984): 219, 227.

⁵¹ See A. Cheree Carlson, "Gandhi and the Comic Frame: 'Ad Bellum Purificandum,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72, no. 4 (1986), 447.

Illustrating the ideal way to engage public affairs with a frame of acceptance, Obama outlined Pinckney's approach to civic engagement. Tolerance involved calling attention to Pinckney's embracement of plurality, respect, and empathy. Obama mourned the late reverend declaring,

Reverend Pinckney embodied a politics that was neither mean, nor small. He conducted himself quietly, and kindly, and diligently. He encouraged progress not by pushing his ideas alone, but by seeking out your ideas, partnering with you to make things happen.

He was full of empathy and fellow feeling, able to walk in somebody else's shoes and see through their eyes.⁵²

Pinckney's positive approach to civic engagement focused on accepting and respecting others. According to the president, Pinckney approached political rhetoric and communication practices through the lens of someone seeking order and empathy. Using Pinckney as an example, Obama's attitude of tolerance is in stark contrast to the partisan gamesmanship, resentment, and intransigence that are common in an age of ultra-partisanship. Pinckney's approach to life and communication deeply respected plurality and the notion that mutually coexisting differences exist in American democracy. To embody a frame of acceptance and plurality, communication practices must be focused on accepting opposing points of view as part of the system. Their actions are one of many and should be tolerated as such.

As a whole, in the eulogy, Obama cast respect for plurality and tolerance toward one's self and fellow humans as the central ingredient for bypassing partisanship, racism, sexism, or any kind of division that plagues public culture. In this framework, progress happened through

⁵² Obama, "Eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney," par. 12.

the constant watchfulness of political leaders,⁵³ as well as emphasizing the value of traditional political means such as voting. To perfect a community and allow humans to continue to live together despite social and ideological divides, tolerance provided an attitude for accepting others as part of a system of human affairs. Even though the eulogy advocated the need for mortification, the speech also sought acceptance through a respect for plurality and promotion of an attitude of tolerance.

The Difficulty of Coaching Goodwill and Optimism in an Age of Ultra-Partisanship

This chapter's case study highlights a mode of presidential rhetoric that asks individuals to seek responsibility through self-introspection and moral responsibility. Obama's decentralized leadership approach emphasizes that progress happens in waves and through interaction between individuals and communities. Increased civic participation can happen through discussion or social change through voting behaviors. However, an attitudinal shift for civic participation can also occur through intrapersonal means. Obama's June 26, 2015 speech used two opposing frames to address institutionalized racism. On the one hand, Obama's speech's religious dimension tapped into the Christian tradition and used grace in a frame of rejection. In the speech, mortification was the means that individuals could use to reject an old sense of order. On the other hand, Obama's speech sought to embrace plurality, goodwill, and tolerance through a frame of acceptance. Despite using two opposing frames, on June 26, 2015, Obama's immediate audience followed in his rhetorical footsteps, singing "Amazing Grace" as a collective group. Their voices created a chorus of individuals who sought to honor Reverend Pinckney and the eight others who had been murdered. As such, this collection of voices added up to multiple individuals seeking empowerment by singing "Amazing Grace." However, the underlying scope

⁵³ See page 66 of this dissertation about John Dewey's notion of the role of the citizen.

of the speech advocated for two opposing frames and courses of action. One future cast individuals taking moral responsibility for the future of the world. The other sought tolerance through a respect for all voices—regardless of the ending points of these discourses. Depending on the audience, the speech’s religious call for self-discipline or mortification may have been clouded by the secular promotion of tolerance and goodwill.

This chapter provides two insights for this dissertation and the field of rhetorical studies. First, the June 26, 2015 eulogy highlights the difficulty of using mortification as a rhetorical strategy. Barry Brummett charted former President Jimmy Carter’s failed use of mortification in his 1980 presidential bid. In an analysis of Carter’s rhetoric, Brummett pointed out that the success of such a “strategy depended on public perceptions of redeemed guilt through mortification and a restored national hierarchy.” In other words, the success of mortification depends on whether or not individuals believe that this kind of strategy would “answer any remaining national questions on how to resolve chaos” and if a leader would follow through with change.⁵⁴ Brummett illustrates that mortification provides a difficult, but powerful place to seek individual and public transformation. The difficulty of using mortification for seeking political or public change involves creating identification between rhetor and audience. If a rhetor is unable to create a point of identification, or find a wedge through which change can foment, the rhetoric may be an end in itself. Using grace as the means to achieve mortification provides a powerful base to Americans attuned to the religious concept, but only provides a path for transformation if individuals have already accepted the perceptual premises underlying Christianity. Americans who could identify with Obama’s frame of rejection, may have been able to situate their communication in the corporeal world alongside the “cosmic” realm. As such, Christians who

⁵⁴ Brummett, “Burkean Scapegoating, Mortification, and Transcendence in Presidential Campaign Rhetoric,” 259.

embraced God's grace acknowledged that citizenship involved situating one's communication practices in a corporeal community where differing ideological principles are present.⁵⁵

At the same time, Obama's rhetoric used a frame of acceptance to advance an attitude of tolerance that sought an optimistic approach for engaging in public affairs. As such, the second takeaway of this chapter is that in an age of ultra-partisanship, forging a goodwill and acceptance of plurality is difficult because of polarizing ideological entrenchments, as well as increased use of intransigence and resentment. A. D. M. Walker concedes that the strengths and weaknesses of promoting a politics of goodwill is that it must be idealistic and requires mutual respect or tolerance. Walker writes that this ideal conception of democratic community is a "view of political communities as communities whose members are, or should be, bound to one another by ties of goodwill and respect. But this, it may be said, so far from being an attribute feature of the argument, is its fundamental weakness."⁵⁶ Goodwill based in tolerance already requires individuals to mutually respect or accept the viewpoints of others. In the case of institutional racism, tolerance would be to respect and offer goodwill to individuals who unabashedly advocate for violence and discrimination. Burke's notion of a frame of acceptance may provide a means to work within a serviceable current system as a way to find common ground and work toward collaboration. However, a frame of acceptance that advances tolerance is in discord with

⁵⁵ Obama's rhetoric can be said to function through an Augustinian understanding of citizenship. Dave Tell describes Augustine's notion of citizenship, writing, "Augustinian political theory, in other words, is precisely designed for a polity composed of people with competing ultimate allegiances. It is a political theory that must refuse to privilege the heavenly citizen for the simple reason that citizenship will remain invisible until the return of Christ." In other words, individuals in a community cannot and should not be held to a litmus test when making or evaluating arguments. A respect for plurality and ambiguity is fundamental in order for public affairs to function and citizens to fulfill their rights. See Dave Tell, "Augustinian Political Theory and Religious Discourse in Public Life," *Journal of Communication & Religion* 30, no. 2 (2007), 221.

⁵⁶ A. D. M. Walker, "Political Obligation and the Argument from Gratitude," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 17, no. 3 (1988), 211.

a frame of rejection that seeks to strategically purge racism from society. Mortification may not be an act of scapegoating, but it is an individual action that requires judgment and forgiveness, not tolerance. For this reason, Obama's simultaneous use of two competing frames creates an incoherent path forward. Acceptance and rejection cannot simultaneously happen if a society is to transform or move beyond institutional racism.

The field of communication studies is situated in the study of human interaction at the interpersonal level. In political communication scholarship, it is easy to think of voting habits or rhetoric situated in the Democratic Party or Republican Party. This kind of academic investigation is important, but Obama's eulogy of Pinckney provides an ideal for breaking out of a model of identity politics and moving toward a more individualistic politics based on goodwill. Using the eulogy to tap into Pinckney's personalized communication model, Obama's rhetoric provides an ideal that each American, regardless of his or her political alignment, should strive toward. This ideal is not how political leaders or communities can communicate with each other, but how humans can best foster a sense of goodwill at the individual level. Although Obama's eulogy may have conflated frames, it illustrates the importance of trying to focus on goodwill and friendship during a time of ultra-partisanship.

To foment a more sustainable democratic community and respectful rhetoric, I argue that social change should seek to reject barriers like institutional racism, but also promote a respect for plurality—not tolerance. In other words, as Dave Tell has emphasized, political affairs should be based in the notion of goodwill and love, but a respect for “plurality in the *ambiguity* of the political, rather than the *neutrality* of the political.”⁵⁷ In order to seek transformation and maintain a consistent frame, political discussion and debate must acknowledge that no position

⁵⁷ Tell, “Augustinian Political Theory and Religious Discourse in Public Life,” 228, emphasis in original.

can be ideologically pure or free from ambiguity or neutrality. Judgments must be made. Tolerance is not a sustainable option for governing or seeking change. In order to create a political future without racism, gun violence, or any form of discrimination, judgment and rejection are necessary to transform and create a new sense of order. Leaders should not use communication practices to entrench ideological standpoints through disrespect, resentment or intransigence. Instead, leaders should use communication practices to engage conflict through a rowdy debate between adversaries who agree that collaboration among various viewpoints is necessary to move forward. This does not mean that leaders should foster a sense of tolerance. Quite the contrary, leaders should embrace disagreement and seek to reject the current state of order as a means to seek transformation.

Conclusion:

Transforming American Politics Through Executive Rhetorical Energy and the Necessity for Engaging Ultra-Partisan Conflict

In 2016, two political parties that use various rhetorical tactics to engage in partisan gamesmanship and win elections have stymied America's political climate. For instance, 2016 Republican presidential candidate and Texas Senator Ted Cruz has vehemently used public discourse to express his desire to defund the Affordable Care Act and overturn a number of judicial decisions enacted during Obama's tenure in the White House. At a December 15, 2015 Republican primary debate, Cruz deployed his intransigent and resentful rhetoric by outlining his presidential leadership approach. Cruz proclaimed,

Judgment, strength, clarity and trust. Barack Obama has said he doesn't believe in American leadership or America winning—he is wrong. America can win again and we will win again. Ronald Reagan reignited the American economy, rebuilt the Military, bankrupted the Soviet Union and defeated Soviet Communism. I will do the same thing. Cutting taxes, cutting regulation, unleashing small businesses and rebuilding the Military to defeat radical Islamic terrorism—our strategy is simple. We win, they lose. We've done it before and we can do it again.¹

For Cruz, communication practices and politics are cast as a game of win-lose and a determination that individuals not compromise their ideological principles. In Cruz's rhetoric, communication practices should be tactically deployed approaching leadership through the lens of a game or a debate where there is a clear winner and loser. This kind of leader does not focus

¹ Washington Post Staff, "5th Republican Debate Transcript, Annotated: Who Said What and What it Meant," *The Washington Post*, December 15, 2015, <http://wpo.st/BxyM1>.

on uniting Americans through the rhetorical ties that bind communities together, but divides communities by refusing to work with individuals and leaders whose beliefs differ or challenge his or her own. On the 2016 campaign trail and throughout his tenure in the Senate, Cruz consistently stressed conservative principles and the notion that he is the primary agent for political change. Anyone opposed to his conservative principles should be cast as an outsider and a threat to the community writ large.

Politicians on the right are not the only leaders who use entrenching rhetorical tactics that can cause political gridlock and further divide an ultra-partisan nation. Former New York Senator and 2016 Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton has also used resentment to express her discontent toward members of the Republican Party. Much like Cruz's rhetoric, this kind of discursive framing turns politics into a game of win-lose or lose-lose, rather than cooperation and collaboration. On October 13, 2015, at a Democratic primary debate, a moderator asked Clinton about her worst political enemy. Clinton listed off a number of institutions, such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) and health insurance companies. After pausing, Clinton added, "Probably the Republicans."² Clinton's tongue-in-cheek expression evoked laughter in a room of Democratic voters, but exemplifies rhetoric playing into political gamesmanship. Resentful rhetoric ultimately stymies collaboration among Americans with diverging viewpoints, further entrenching the partisan divide.

In order to move American democracy into a more collaborative future, negative rhetorical strategies such as intransigence and resentment should be avoided, but a seemingly optimistic strategy such as tolerance is also insufficient. All of these tactics often stall or block action from happening at a public level by further entrenching sides or allowing existing

² Washington Post Staff, "The CNN Democratic Debate Transcript Annotated," *The Washington Post*, October 13, 2015, <http://wpo.st/gxyM1>.

entrenchment to be endured until some larger force wipes it away. In order for Americans to influence public policy, they must recognize that part of their civic duty is to engage in a respectful debate with fellow citizens, vote in elections, and hold political representatives responsible for pursuing popular social change. This dissertation has used President Barack Obama as an example of a leader who sought to avoid strategies of resentment and intransigence in hopes of widening social relations.³ I have argued that Obama's rhetoric promotes a seemingly optimistic way of engaging public affairs that bypasses partisan bickering. Yet, despite his best efforts at shrinking America's partisan divides, Obama's rhetoric and leadership style can be said to promote inaction and may have actually contributed to cynical public acceptance of ultra-partisanship. Throughout his presidential leadership and rhetoric, Obama attempted to promote a form of leadership based on tolerance as a means to coach a new way for citizens to engage in the political process. By the last year of his presidency, Obama's 2008 campaign message of transforming the country and political process toward hope and change were never fully realized in his governing rhetoric and leadership.

In this final chapter, I summarize the strengths and weaknesses associated with Obama's leadership and rhetoric, but offer an alternative framework for how presidential rhetoric and leadership can promote social change through an optimistic tone. This chapter begins by summarizing the ways in which Obama's rhetoric operates and how it differs from theories on the rhetorical presidency. At a broad level, Obama's rhetoric functions through a use of a call to the authentic, dissociation, as well as tapping into interpretive frames. Through these kinds of

³ Throughout his tenure in the White House, Obama has faced critics on the left and right of the political spectrum. Debates about the political and historical significance of his presidency will continue among political scientists, historians, rhetorical scholars, and even regular Americans. This dissertation was primarily written from August 2015 through February 2016. After that time, the president delivered a number of speeches that articulated his presidential legacy, using rhetoric to offer future scholars a more explicit lens for viewing his political leadership.

argumentative strategies, Obama attempted to foment an ideal model or process-oriented attitude of tolerance. By rhetorically constructing a public attitude, the president sought to shift *how* Americans communicate about politics at the local and individual level. In President Obama's approach to leadership, communication strategies based in tolerance are of paramount importance. However, as the analysis chapters of this dissertation illustrated, this approach is rhetorically impotent. Tolerance allowed Obama to rhetorically construct ambiguity to bypass partisanship, but did not offer a solvent path toward political transformation. Near the end of his presidency, Obama would begin to rhetorically justify his legacy in media interviews, clarifying how he sought political change and empowered the American electorate. However, he also conceded that his rhetoric and administration did not adequately bridge the ultra-partisan divide.

In the second half of this chapter, I argue that future political progress can be mobilized through an individual call to action, but movement from the grassroots must also be public and collective. Although non-solvent, the strength of Obama's process-oriented attitude of tolerance is that it attempts to foment change organically at an interpersonal level by empowering citizens, asking them to engage in politics outside of traditional partisan arguments. However, unlike Obama, in this conclusion I argue that future presidents seeking to lead in an age of ultra-partisanship should stress ambiguity and a personal shift in political participation, but also encourage engaging conflict at the public level in order to seek policy transformation. In this chapter, I build from scholarship on public deliberation, as well as Alexander Hamilton's argument about the powers afforded to the Executive Branch. Blending various theories of public deliberation with a Hamiltonian understanding of executive leadership, I argue how a future president might use rhetoric to constitute a rowdy and integrative politics of cooperation (i.e.,

win-win) that allows for plurality, but ultimately seeks public action and transformation.⁴ I stress that this kind of rhetoric and leadership approach engage in political conflict, but promote action and unity through the powers afforded to the Executive Branch.

The Strengths and Weaknesses of Obama's Rhetoric that "Leads From Behind"

In the midst of the 2011 crisis in Libya and other international conflicts erupting in the Middle East, a top White House aide inelegantly described President Obama's style of leadership as "leading from behind."⁵ Although referring to the Obama Administration's refusal to exert unilateral military power and promote democratic forms of governance for countries going through political revolutions, this description of leadership encapsulates the cornerstone of Obama's rhetorical and political legacy. Obama's rhetoric and leadership style attempt to bypass partisanship by reminding Americans of their agency and ability to affect change on the individual level. This kind of leadership taps into broader American conversations about the importance of the individual in public culture, rather than leaders of collective partisan factions. Similar to Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy stressing that political transformation was only possible through individual empowerment, Obama's notion of leadership "rewards actions after

⁴ According to Tim Kuhn and Marshall Scott Poole, conflict can be mediated in organizations through various kinds of communication styles. Intransigence is aligned with a general avoidance of conflict or inability to communicate with the other party. Resentment can be fostered over time through distributive conflict mediation (i.e., the notion of compromising because neither party is able to get what they fully wanted). Kuhn and Poole explain that *integration* or collaboration is the most ideal for working through conflict and creating a long-term solution where all parties are happy. Integration allows parties to work together through conflict to create a new solution for communicating and moving an organization or team forward. Tim Kuhn and Marshall Scott Poole, "Do Conflict Management Styles Affect Group Decision Making? Evidence From a Longitudinal Field Study," *Human Communication Research* 26, no. 4 (2000), 560.

⁵ Quoted in Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy," *New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>.

their nature, and not after the design of their agent.”⁶ In other words, for Emerson and Obama, to bypass partisan strife and allow change to happen organically, individuals must become aware of and accept their agency in public affairs. Change only happens through empowered agents, not authoritarian leaders or entrenched ideological factions. In fact, leadership from behind or decentralized leadership is not about bragging or seeking to be rewarded for promoting change. Instead, a decentralized leader should nurture a community and encourage citizens to work individually and together to foster an environment of organic social change.

In June of 2015, President Obama would articulate his ideal vision of leadership and how Americans could begin to better communicate with each other. On the June 22, 2015 episode of Marc Maron’s comedy podcast, “WTF,” Obama candidly spoke on a wide range of topics, including racism, gun violence, his approach to presidential leadership, and his political legacy. As previous chapters of this dissertation have noted, Obama’s decentralized leadership approach and presidency have faced a number of criticisms. In the Maron podcast, Obama acknowledged his critics, but indicated these kinds of attacks are only looking at the short-term goals associated with political gamesmanship. Rhetorically molding his legacy in the present, Obama downplayed critics who have called him “too professorial” or “too verbose,” stating that, instead of “schmoozing,” “doing the cocktail circuit,” or “playing the political game,” he has used his free time to be involved in the lives of his two daughters.⁷

Obama continued a defense of his presidency and legacy by downplaying the notion that his administration had been uncooperative with other politicians or failed to inspire political

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “New England Reformers,” in *The Annotated Emerson* edited by David Mikics, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2012), 294.

⁷ All quotations from this podcast have been transcribed directly from the audio source posted on Marc Maron’s *WTF* website. See Marc Maron, “Episode 613—President Barack Obama,” *WTF*, June 22, 2015, http://www.wtfpod.com/podcast/episodes/episode_613_-_president_barack_obama.

change throughout his years in the White House. The president commented, “On most fronts, I’ve been able to find ways to make progress even in the face of obstruction, even in the face of resistance, even in the face of gridlock.” Obama stressed that a president can help kindle tolerance and respect in citizens, but the difficulty is finding a way to help move the needle of public opinion in an age of ultra-partisanship. Arguing that incremental progress has been the reality of his administration, and ideally how political policy should be enacted, Obama noted that change is particularly difficult when working in an environment where other politicians refuse to engage in productive conflict or cast the other side as an irrational enemy.

To explain his understanding of how to engage the public, Obama told Maron about the negative impact of ultra-partisanship. To bypass this environment, the president outlined his decentralized form of political leadership that based arguments in evidence and reasoning. Obama stated, “It is accurate to say that I believe in reason. And I believe in facts. And I believe in looking at something and having a debate and an argument, but trying to drive it toward some agreed-upon set of assumptions about what works and what doesn’t.” In the president’s description of America’s 21st-century political scene, ultra-partisanship caused some politicians, citizens, and pundits to refuse to engage alternative sides of a debate or acknowledge that there may be pieces of evidence that contradict their conclusions. One place to situate the blame for this problem is negative communication strategies such as intransigent and resentful rhetoric. In contrast to these forms of communication, Obama’s optimistic attitude of tolerance attempted to attenuate conflict between competing ideologies. This kind of public attitude does not seek rejection, but acceptance and endurance of the current state. As a result, politics is personalized and alternative viewpoints are tolerated between groups. However, tolerance also plays into the same entrenchment by allowing individuals to accept or tolerate all pieces of evidence—even

when they may be faulty or bad for the collective. Tolerance does not seek rejection or transformation, but instead excessive endurance of viewpoints. This public attitude does not seek to pull together different views, but instead obfuscates or dances around political conflict through passive acceptance.

Throughout his tenure in the White House, I contend that the partisan political climate prevented President Obama's ability to even attempt to use the rhetorical presidency model. In an age when members of the electorate are highly divided, Obama sought change by constructing ambiguity through excessive tolerance. Obama's leadership and argumentative tactics that try to bypass ultra-partisanship are in contrast to academic conversations about the rhetorical presidency. Rather than pass public policy through a rhetorical presidency model, Obama's rhetoric and leadership constitute an attitude that stresses *how* individuals could be better participants in public affairs. Obama's rhetoric does not promote a specific policy or a course of action that individuals or Congress should take. This attitude of tolerance offers a safe harbor for individuals to feel empowered and respect their opposing interlocutor. As such, one of the strengths of Obama's leadership style and rhetoric is this notion of individual empowerment. However, the president's rhetorical problem has been widening social relations too much. Ambiguity may provide a basis for transformation, but tolerance does not promote the conflict necessary for policy movement to occur. Instead, tolerance encourages individuals to endure the present and opinions on all sides of a debate, but not necessarily seek collaboration or public movement.

Although Obama's rhetoric may have sought to move away from entrenching partisan divides, an attitude of tolerance ultimately perpetuates the same norms that it seeks to transform. In an age of ultra-partisanship, social relations have been minimized by group attachment or

identity. Relying on Hannah Arendt's theories, James Jasinski charts this kind of trend in American public discourse where communities and individuals move away from communal public debate and discussion into enclaves based in *eros* or "intimacy." Rather than engaging in public discourse or political argument with a sense of goodwill and focused on public problem solving, when practicing *eros*, individuals retreat to the comfort of a familiar group or identity. Jasinski writes, "The politics of intimacy reduces political action to involvement"⁸ and "eliminates, or at least greatly reduces, the need for reflection, argumentation, and moral advocacy."⁹ In this political practice, "*Eros* or intimacy substitutes a kind of 'warmth' and compassion for the illuminating 'light' which is cast over appearances in the public realm."¹⁰ Although *eros* may not always negatively influence public discourse, it can have negative effects if employed for an extended period of time. Jasinski explains the "in-between" that allows public argument and change to happen among conflicting parties is reduced by the practice of *eros*. In Burkean terms, employing *eros* and ultra-partisanship, severely minimizes the "ambiguity of substance" that allows change or transformation to take place.¹¹ Rather than engaging ideas and alternative viewpoints, *eros* stymies political argument by focusing on the "who" or group identity involved in public argument rather than full community discussion or debate on social issues. In other words, political argument becomes more focused on someone's ideological preference or identity, rather than specific policy positions or beliefs.

In order to foster change in this ultra-partisan climate, a rhetor, like the president, must break through the focus on *eros* in order to discursively exploit the "ambiguity of substance" that

⁸ James Jasinski, "(Re)constituting Community Through Narrative Argument: *Eros* and *Philia* in *The Big Chill*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79, no. 4 (1993), 480.

⁹ Jasinski, "(Re)constituting Community Through Narrative Argument," 481.

¹⁰ Jasinski, "(Re)constituting Community Through Narrative Argument," 468.

¹¹ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), xix.

allows change to be possible. At the same time, he or she cannot promote too much ambiguity because it encourages the same acquiescence affiliated with a politics of resentment and intransigence. Rather than arriving at a politics of integration or cooperation, Obama's strategy of tolerance may have only further divided the public. As such, one of the trained incapacities of Obama's rhetoric and decentralized leadership are that they did not promote how Americans can work collaboratively to solve problems. Respecting the other side of a debate is a start, but transforming public culture involves more than tolerance. Conflict, confrontation, and moderate incivility are sometimes a necessary means to shift the levers of power.¹²

Moving to a Community-Oriented Attitude and Agonistic Form of Democracy

In order to transcend a resentful, intransigent, and ultra-partisan political scene, it is important to shift communication practices at the federal, state, local, and individual levels. This kind of environment would involve breaking through a politics of intimacy and constructing a politics of friendship or goodwill where individuals learn "to negotiate the persistent tension between what is possible and what is beyond our reach. A participatory politics of friendship helps keep alive political possibility while recognizing the limitations of political action."¹³ As a means to promote a politics of friendship and engage political conflict, public deliberation is necessary. An intimate politics may provide a momentary sense of affiliation, but ultimately falls short of causing long-term political participation.¹⁴ Obama's process-oriented attitude of tolerance appears to promote movement toward rational-critical debate or what Jürgen Habermas

¹² See Nina M. Lozano-Reich and Dana Cloud, "The Uncivil Tongue: Invitational Rhetoric and the Problem of Inequality," *Western Journal of Communication* 73, no. 2 (2009), 220-226; Mary G. Edwards, "Agitative Rhetoric: Its Nature and Effect," *Western Journal of Speech* 32, no. 1 (1968), 36-43; Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith, "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 55, no. 1 (1969), 1-8.

¹³ Jasinski, "(Re)constituting Community Through Narrative Argument," 484.

¹⁴ Jasinski, "(Re)constituting Community Through Narrative Argument," 480.

labels an ideal public sphere.¹⁵ However, Obama's rhetoric falls short because tolerance allows too much ambiguity, ultimately providing the public with little to latch onto as a means to engage in a public debate. Building from Habermas, G. Thomas Goodnight argues that politics is most conducive in an environment that promotes an accessible public sphere that does not promote technical policy talking points or the promotion of silence over open group discussion.¹⁶ Building on Habermas and Goodnight, Kathryn M. Olson posits that democracy functions best through "open deliberation" or the process of "critical group determination" allowing for the exchange of competing ideas and solutions in public culture. This politics is based in a deliberation strategy that focuses on communal debate as the means to move the country's policies forward. Olson states, genuine public opinion created through open debate focuses on "(1) formation through conscious grappling with cognitively accessible states of affairs, and (2) formation through a pro and con exchange of public conversation."¹⁷ Open deliberation may provide an avenue for producing political transformation, but Olson carefully notes that this is more of an ideal and heuristic for evaluating public arguments. During times of war, conflict, or even ultra-partisanship, presidential rhetoric can stifle debate by discouraging dissent and creating the presumption that discussion will only slow a specific solution to a public problem.¹⁸ In other words, some forms of presidential or political rhetoric seek to constrain deliberation through intransigence, resentment, or short-term gamesmanship that are focused strictly on

¹⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Boston: MIT Press, 1991), 37.

¹⁶ G. Thomas Goodnight, "The Personal, Technical, and Public Spheres of Argument: A Speculative Inquiry into the Art of Public Deliberation," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 18 (1982), 214-227.

¹⁷ Kathryn M. Olson, "Constraining Open Deliberation in Times of War: Presidential War Justifications for Grenada and the Persian Gulf," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 28, no. 1 (1991), 65.

¹⁸ Olson, "Constraining Open Deliberation in Times of War," 64-66, 69, 75.

winning a political argument.

For a rhetor like Obama, rhetoric may involve coaching an attitudinal shift on how Americans participate in political discussions. However, because Obama is a sitting president seeking to solve problems in the present, his discourse can be muddled or constrained by the necessity of achieving short-term goals. In other words, much like the notion of an idealistic public sphere where individuals actively participate in the exchange of rational arguments, Obama's coaching of a long-term attitudinal shift is something that Americans should strive toward, but may be unable to achieve in a short period of time. An attitude may provide an idealistic model for arguments, but not be fully solvent to address problems today. Obama's rhetoric illustrates two competing sides of political argument where an emphasis is placed on preserving plurality, but also pursuing policy goals that achieve short-term political victory. Moreover, Obama's long-term solution of tolerance in itself provided flawed means for achieving community problem-solving. Although ambiguity is paramount for transformation, Obama's attitude of tolerance allowed for too much ambiguity, preventing the construction of common ground where confrontation must occur and public transformation stems from. Ambiguity is a double-edged sword. Too little can promote resentment or intransigence. Too much can create an environment of tolerance. Much like intransigence and resentment, tolerance ends up avoiding conflict because it stalls political action. Instead, individual members of the public are cast into intimate camps where they can acquiescently endure the current state.

In the final pages of this dissertation, I stress that in the 21st century, Politicians like Ted Cruz, Hillary Clinton, or Barack Obama should not temper their partisan political views. In order to foster an attitudinal shift that advocates for public transformation, change needs to happen at both the interpersonal level and the communal level. Obama may have sought a process-oriented

attitude of tolerance to bypass partisanship, but I emphasize this was the wrong rhetorical move because it created too much ambiguity and bypassed productive political clashing. As a result, an attitude of tolerance allowed the public to passively accept the reality of a partisan divide. I argue that a shift toward a community-oriented democratic attitude based on dissensus and plurality would not seek to bypass ultra-partisanship, but engage its negative effects directly. This kind of community-oriented attitude would involve that Americans accept that democracy is not just about plurality, but a rowdy discussion and collaboration among adversaries. In Chantal Mouffe's vocabulary, a healthy American community involves the expression of *agonistic* democracy, not *antagonistic* democracy.¹⁹ In other words, Americans can engage in discussion and debate from divergent perspectives, but respect and grapple with the opposing side. Robert Ivie has described the necessity for a "rowdy" or "noisy" public discussion of political issues, writing,

Rhetorical deliberation is often a rowdy affair, just as politics is typically messy.

Boisterous disagreement, when it occurs, however, need not be taken as a sure sign of hostility, alienation, misbehavior, inefficiency, or even impending chaos and ruin.

Instead, as a legitimate expression of agonistic democracy and a necessary medium for articulating a needed measure of shared symbolic space, rhetorical advocacy turns dark and cynical only when competing perspectives and interests are ignored or suppressed rather than engaged and bridged sufficiently to muddle through the moment.²⁰

Rather than accept intransigence and resentment as necessary components of democracy, politicians and citizens alike must understand that American democracy is most effective when

¹⁹ Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999), 755.

²⁰ Robert L. Ivie, "Rhetorical Deliberation and Democratic Politics in the Here and Now," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5, no. 2 (2002), 278.

more, not fewer voices are present. Moreover, although tolerance may seem like a productive avenue to pursue change, it is ineffective because it avoids conflict and prevents transformation from happening. Ivie further theorizes that American democracy is particularly strong when opposing sides challenge prevailing beliefs and assumptions, but from the perspective of being equal adversaries, not enemies.²¹ I recommend that future presidents move beyond recognizing the necessity of allowing healthy and rowdy debates to happen. In order to reach a cooperative attitudinal shift for public affairs, citizens and leaders alike must acknowledge that America's exceptional feature is the ability to allow our differences to mutually coexist and be openly contested. In other words, the ties that bind Americans are recognizing opposing viewpoints and collaboratively debating issues in public culture toward a new future. This kind of political culture and rhetoric involves moving away from intransigence, resentment, and tolerance. Political rhetoric should be focused on the middle ground or areas of ambiguity where communication can start and political transformation can happen.

Scholars in the fields of rhetorical studies and political philosophy have recognized the value of a rowdy or agonistic form of deliberation, but this approach to politics is not unique to the 21st century. In fact, this kind of rhetoric and leadership approach stem back to public debates occurring at the origin of the American Republic. Evolving from America's rich history, I contend that Alexander Hamilton's understanding of the Executive Branch in *The Federalist* offers a way that presidential studies and political communication scholars can better understand the rhetorical powers afforded to America's chief executive. Specifically, in *The Federalist*, Hamilton clarified the primary duties of the president were not one of a rhetorical president, but a leader who first and foremost protected the unity of the nation and the democratic process. For

²¹ Robert L. Ivie, "Enabling Democratic Dissent," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101 (2015), 51.

Hamilton, part of the Executive Branch's primary functions involved uniting the country and bringing Americans together in the midst of a rowdy affair. At the same time, Hamilton dictated that the president's primary duty was to protect the Republic from internal and external forces that could push Americans apart. Historian Ron Chernov describes Hamilton's political philosophy, writing,

In sections of *The Federalist* dealing with the executive and judiciary branches, Hamilton pressed his case for vigor and energy in government, a hobbyhorse he was to ride for the rest of his career. At the same time, he was always careful to reconcile the need for order with the thirst for liberty. [...] *The Federalist* argued [and] did not betray the Revolution, with its radical hopes for greater political freedom than had been known before. Quite the contrary, it fulfilled those radical aspirations, by creating the power necessary to guarantee both the nation's survival and the preservation of the people and the state's rights.²²

At the time of America's foundation, the country was politically weak and divided among state governments. For Hamilton, and other founders like James Madison (i.e., both Federalists and Democratic-Republicans), the president's primary duties were to help promote energy and unification among the American people. The Executive Branch was an office that transcended public policy by using the presidential post to ask members of the public to act as a united nation. This Hamiltonian frame is in contrast to notions of the rhetorical presidency because the Executive Branch and rhetoric from the chief executive is not speaking directly to the public to pass political policy. Instead, Hamiltonian presidential rhetoric is focused on promoting energy and unity—if only for a temporary period of time. This kind of presidential rhetoric is based in

²² Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 252.

how to provisionally unify different ideological perspectives while respecting dissent and plurality. To put it another way, this kind of rhetoric respects the fact that we are a nation of states and individuals, but America's chief executive is primarily responsible for providing direction for the protection of the state of the nation. Unlike the rhetorical presidency, there is not *one* way to move forward, but instead *one process* where public policy evolves from and individual opinions contribute toward. In this kind of democratic culture, presidential rhetoric allows a leader to respect individuality and plurality, but advance the notion that unity occurs through a common respect for a democratic process that is based in goodwill toward one's fellow political adversaries and allies.

In "Federalist No. 70," Hamilton specifically described the actions of America's chief executive. Hamilton clarified that the president was not just the country's commander-in-chief or simply the leader who signs bills to enact federal legislation. The president's job was to use rhetoric and executive action to help unify a diverse mass of individuals to individually coalesce around a common community and process. In order to craft this argument, Hamilton used energy as a metaphor to describe the symbolic and material actions that a president can take. Hamilton wrote,

Energy in the Executive is a leading character in the definition of good government. It is essential to the protection of the community against foreign attacks; it is not less essential to the steady administration of the laws; to the protection of property against those irregular and high-handed combinations which sometimes interrupt the ordinary course of

justice; to the security of liberty against the enterprises and assaults of ambition, of faction, and of anarchy.²³

For Hamilton, energy was the driving force of presidential leadership and strong government. Energy may consist of signing bills into law or deploying military troops, but it also involved presidential rhetoric. Through rhetoric that acts as the instrument for energy and transformation, a president can use discourse to constitute and direct a community of concerns citizens. This coalesced community may only exist temporarily, but rhetoric has the ability to bring together diverse groups of people. Moreover, presidential rhetoric and the Executive Branch, as an institution, can model an attitude that promotes a shift in communication practices where political responsibility and change is shifted away from one leader and onto individual Americans.

To achieve the means of fomenting a more democratic attitude accompanied by collective action, rhetoric and communication practices at the presidential level are one place to start. In Hamilton's explanation of the Executive Branch, presidential energy can be rhetorically constituted through four interdependent loci. Hamilton explains, "The ingredients which constitute *energy* in the Executive are, first, unity; secondly, duration; thirdly, an adequate provision for its support; fourthly, competent powers."²⁴ Translating Hamilton's loci into the energy associated with rhetoric, a president's discourse must unify a community, sustain their existence for a period of time, provide support to individuals, and promote a competent sense of leadership. The goal of this kind of leadership and its affiliated rhetoric seek to protect the democratic process and ability to deliberate. With this goal of protecting the process and

²³ Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist No. 70 The Executive Department Further Considered," in *The Federalist*, ed. J. R. Pole (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), 374, emphasis added.

²⁴ Hamilton, "Federalist No. 70," 374.

promoting individual empowerment, Hamilton's leadership approach is first and foremost focused on unity and a commitment to maintain the safety and security of the Republic and its constituents. Hamilton contended, "The ingredients which constitute *safety* in the republican sense are, first, a due dependence on the people, secondly, a due responsibility."²⁵ Presidential rhetoric may be the driving force of the Executive Branch, but this energy should be focused on unifying the public at a specific time and protecting the democratic process. This leadership approach involves respecting that plurality exists among individual Americans, local communities, and states. In Hamilton's conception of the power affiliated with the Executive Branch, there may be a need for interdependence between local communities and individual people, but the foundation of presidential action and leadership involves promoting the safety of the Republic, its people, and the democratic process. In other words, it is not one president or lawmaker who has a solution to public problems, but one process that allows a combination of voices to deliberate and clash to find the best solution.

In a Hamiltonian reading of the Executive Branch, America's exceptional quality is the ability to have a leader whose primary function is to energize, unify, and protect the nation's laws, people, and system of governance. In the 21st century, the role of the president continues to reside in the ability to use rhetoric to help create moments of unity, even during times when partisanship stymies the Legislative Branch and electorate. To energize the public and provide a sense of direction in an age of ultra-partisanship, this dissertation has shown that Obama's leadership and rhetoric take on a pseudo-Hamiltonian character by promoting the need for change. However, tolerance is what prevented transformation and action from happening. In order to pursue a community-oriented attitude grounded in a Hamiltonian reading of the

²⁵ Hamilton, "Federalist No. 70," 374.

Executive Branch, presidential leadership and rhetoric should simultaneously seek to respect the liberty of individuals, as well as protect the democratic process. In this regard, the key function of the Executive Branch is promoting action as a means to transform the country beyond its present state. Presidential rhetoric may be about unity, but sometimes unity is created through energy that may be rowdy. Moreover, unity is sometimes only possible if conflict is engaged directly, not bypassed or avoided.

American Citizenship As Being Kind and Being Useful

Leadership and symbolic action involve articulating that progress does not involve trying to change the height of waves, complain about the direction or gusts of wind, or expect the current to guide them toward their desired destination. Leadership is the ability to tack back and forth, adjusting the sail to navigate one's vessel toward the intended destination. Leadership can promote change through rhetoric, but also model how communication practices can enable individuals and communities to collaboratively work together to tack back and forth in pursuit of change. This leadership approach involves cooperation, respect, and a need to engage conflict, not necessarily accept tolerance or complacency. In order for a leader to promote energy focused on change, leaders must navigate through the waves, currents, and gusts that attempt to create division in public culture.²⁶ In other words, a leader can empower individuals to be more active in the political process, but needs to emphasize the community's future direction and end point.

During his tenure in the White House, President Obama used rhetoric to help shift responsibility away from the federal government, lawmakers, or political parties and onto individuals. This dissertation has argued that by accepting that America consists of a series of

²⁶ This section was inspired by a conversation with Kathryn Olson, as well as a text message that Jim Vining sent me on January 27, 2016 (Jim: "Be right. Let the waves worry about themselves.").

irreconcilable, disparate voices, Obama's rhetoric does not try to unify the country through a singular political process. Instead, the president's rhetoric promoted tolerance. An attitude of tolerance has actually been the inherent weakness of Obama's rhetoric and leadership. Obama's leadership may facilitate temporary moments of unity or calm in the midst of an uncontrollable ultra-partisan environment, but does not create a sustainable democratic culture of collaboration. To facilitate an environment of cooperation and integration, rowdy conflict provides the foundation for a sustainable future. Moreover, as Hamilton noted, the rhetorical power of the presidency is undisputed and should be used as a means to rally the public to action.²⁷ As such, future presidents should focus their rhetoric and leadership on promoting action and the safety of the United States of America. At the present moment, I stress that the rhetorical presidency may not be a realistic avenue for social change in an age of ultra-partisanship. Change from a political perspective is difficult given the material constraints outlined in Chapter 1. Future presidents can weave together the disparate and competing voices in public culture while providing the public with a sense of direction. Change is something organic that happens at the grassroots through the power of individual agents who must act collectively. Decentralized leadership may be a productive means to pursue change at the grassroots level by empowering individuals.

From a rhetorical perspective, a decentralized leader stands at the back of the crowd or as part of the crowd, using rhetoric to bind together a plurality of voices.²⁸ A decentralized leader uses rhetoric as the energy or fuel to pull together the ties that bind individuals. At the same time, this kind of leadership models an attitude that advocates for discussion and plurality, asking

²⁷ In "Federalist, No. 70," Hamilton writes, "That unity is conducive to energy will not be disputed." See Hamilton, "Federalist No. 70," 375.

²⁸ For a discussion of decentralized leadership, see Joshua H. Miller, "Empowering Communities: Ella Baker's Decentralized Leadership Style and Conversational Eloquence," *Southern Communication Journal*, in press.

individuals to be members of the community to seek change at a grassroots or individual level. In short, decentralized leadership and rhetoric can empower individuals to seek collaboration and work together to solve problems. In this leadership model, change does not happen because of tolerance. As this dissertation has shown, tolerance only further entrenches partisanship. In order for change to happen, individuals must recognize that they are part of a collective movement of disparate individuals who may not agree, but are willing to energetically work together to transform the country—if only for a temporary moment of time. It is the job of the president or a decentralized leader to model how this kind of change happens through individuals' rhetoric that advocates respect for their adversary and a desire to collaboratively solve problems.

In a February 4, 2016 speech before the National Prayer Breakfast, Obama hedged on reaching this idealistic kind of rhetoric and leadership. Obama indicated how every American could help contribute individually to the collective future of the country—regardless of identity politics or partisan alignment. Building on the notion that there needs to be increased political discussion and acknowledging the goodwill that should be afforded to all humans, Obama proclaimed that partisan politics or religious disputes should not entrench communities. Communication practices based on goodwill and love are what unify and energize the public. Obama stressed,

For this is what each of us is called on to do: To seek our common humanity in each other. To make sure our politics and our public discourse reflect that same spirit of love and sound mind. To assume the best in each other and not just the worst [...] To begin each of our works from the shared belief that all of us want what's good and right for our country and our future.

We can draw such strength from the quiet moments of heroism around us every single

day.²⁹

In this speech, Obama stressed the need for individuals to build from goodwill and love as the means and ends for collaboration.³⁰ For progress to be made, a leader has to accept his or her moral responsibility in political culture and unite the public.

On a rhetorical level, political progress involves shifting political communication practices from resentment, intransigence, and tolerance. In Obama's religiously infused February 4, 2016 speech, humans were cast in an environment of division, but bound together by goodwill, heroism, and love. Americans needed to acknowledge their ability to enact change on an individual level by altering their interpersonal communication practices, but also focus on their individual and collective ability to shape the public sphere. Unity on a national level can only occur if Americans first accept their own responsibility in the rhetorical ties that bind citizens together—the embracement humanity's goodwill and a respect for plurality of voices. However, limiting or overemphasizing ambiguity ultimately stymies friendship and collaboration, forcing citizens to entrench to their preferred deliberative enclaves. Rather than silencing, shaming, or bypassing conflict, this dissertation illustrates that political transformation is difficult through an attitude of tolerance that provides unabated ambiguity. At the same time, ambiguity is a paramount part of seeking political transformation. Although this dissertation provides three cases where policy transformation did not happen, I stress that future presidents should embrace ambiguity, but also provide the specific means and end for how change might

²⁹ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at National Prayer Breakfast," *The White House*, February 4, 2016, par. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/04/remarks-president-national-prayer-breakfast-0>.

³⁰ Dave Tell describes a community built on love and a respect that there may be ambiguity for how political debates can happen. Dave Tell, "Augustinian Political Theory and Religious Discourse in Public Life," *Journal of Communication & Religion* 30, no. 2 (2007), 223-224.

happen. Pushing all responsibility for change onto the electorate promotes too much ambiguity and creates an intimate environment, rather than one of friendship and collaboration.

One key takeaway of this dissertation is the practicality and simplicity of Obama's leadership style and his recommendation for how Americans can be better people and citizens. His rhetoric may not have promoted widespread political transformation, but his non-solvent strategy provides an entry point for future leaders and a hopeful message for the American public. Changing politics is hard work and takes a lot of time, but change can happen on an individual level if citizens regain their agency in public culture and take personal responsibility for how they act and communicate with others. Change does not happen from the top down or through sudden tsunamis of progress; change happens slowly and incrementally at the grassroots. In order to successfully promote leadership and change, rhetoric must focus on the role of the individual, but also on how individuals connect to the transformation of the entire nation.

At its core, presidential rhetoric can promote how to be a good person and active citizen. Obama's presidency illustrates an optimistic and noble effort to change the tone of American politics and empower individual citizens. Although Obama's rhetoric and leadership approach may not be solvent for fully bypassing partisanship, a practical takeaway of this dissertation is how the president stressed that individuals could regain their agency in the political process. As Burke notes of all forms of symbolic action, individuals can become "rotten with perfection" or blinded by their piety to certain ideological principles while pursuing personal or political goals.³¹ To put it another way, in an age of ultra-partisanship, party identity can overwhelm an individual's sense of political agency and ability to help pursue public change. Despite this inherent flaw, I contend that rhetoric and presidential leadership can help advocate for public

³¹ Kenneth Burke, "Definition of Man," *The Hudson Review* 16, no. 4 (1963-1964), 507, 509.

transformation by focusing on the goodwill of individual citizens. Regardless of the solvency of Obama's rhetoric, the president's fomentation of an optimistic attitude can be condensed into a few words. In an interview on the reality television show *Running Wild with Bear Grylls*, Obama used a call to the authentic to express the importance of public service and the value of giving back to the community. In the interview, Obama said, "What I try to teach my daughters is: be useful and be kind. And if you do those two things, then wherever your passions take you, you'll turn out okay."³² For the president, progress and change happen if communication practices and leadership embody an attitude or ideal focused on usefulness or action as well as the goodwill of individuals. This form of leadership and rhetoric is something that can be studied from academic disciplines such as political science or communication studies, but Obama's notion of ideal citizenship is self-evident and simple. In order to achieve any kind of productive political future, we the people can only perfect our union and increase civic participation if, first and foremost, we remember that the keys to success are being useful and being kind. However, as I have shown, simply saying these things is not enough. Obama's leadership approach and rhetoric show that promoting an attitude of tolerance accepts that the conflict of our current state will abate on its own. After nearly seven years in the White House, the president has done little to transform divisions in the current system. In fact, partisan division has only increased. To actually transform or perfect the nation, Americans need a chief executive and coalition of empowered individuals who respect that there may be a variety of competing ideologies, but are willing to engage political conflict to reach collaborative policy decision-making.

³² Quotations transcribed from the broadcast. *Running Wild With Bear Grylls*, "President Barack Obama," episode no. 15, first broadcast December 17, 2015 by NBC, produced by Elizabeth Schulze and Delbert Shoopman.

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- Zurcher, Anthony. "Why Obama is Powerless to Reform Gun Laws." *BBC News*, October 4, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34429918>.

Thomas A. Salek

Contact Information

Thomas.salek@gmail.com

Education

2016 Ph.D.

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Department of Communication

Emphasis: Rhetoric and Public Communication

Advisor: Dr. Kathryn M. Olson

Dissertation: "The Rhetorical Ties that Bind (or Divide):
President Barack Obama's Attitude of Tolerance in
an Age of Ultra-Partisanship"

2010 M.A.

New York University

Department of Cinema Studies

2008 B.A.

Dominican University

Summa cum Laude, Honors

Major: Journalism, Communication

Minor: American Studies

Thesis: "Focusing In, or Faking Us Out: Documentary
Filmmaking in the 21st Century"

PUBLICATIONS

Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles

Salek, Thomas A. "Controversy Trending: The Rhetorical Form of Mia and Ronan Farrow's 2014 Online Firestorm Against #WoodyAllen." *Communication, Culture & Critique* (in press).

Salek, Thomas A. "Faith Turns Political on the 2012 Campaign Trail: Mitt Romney, Franklin Graham and the Stigma of Nontraditional Religions in American Politics." *Communication Studies* 65, no. 2 (2014): 174-188.

Cole, Andrew W. and Thomas A. Salek. "Rhetorical Voyeurism: Reinforcing Male Hegemony through Responses to Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*." *Journal of Communications Media Studies* 6, no. 1 (2014): 22-36.

Book Reviews

Salek, Thomas A. "Book review of Paola Voci's *China on Video: Smaller-Screen Realities*." *Screening the Past*, 34 (2012): <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2012/07/china-on-video-smaller-screen-realities/>

Salek, Thomas A. "Book review of Joe Kember's *Marketing Modernity: Victorian Popular Shows and Early Cinema*." *Screening the Past* 32 (2012).

<http://www.screeningthepast.com/2011/10/marketing-modernity-victorian-popular-shows-and-early-cinema/>

Salek, Thomas A. "Book review of Karen Beckman's *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis*" *Screening the Past* 31 (2011).

<http://www.screeningthepast.com/2011/08/crash-cinema-and-the-politics-of-speed-and-stasis-karen-beckman/>

Salek, Thomas A. "Book review of Reynold Humphries's *Hollywood's Blacklists: A Political and Cultural History*." *Screening the Past* 29 (2010).

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Salek, Thomas A. "Book review of Joan Grossman's *Blackout: On Memory and Catastrophe*." *Screening the Past* 28 (2010). <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/28/blackout-on-memory-and-catastrophe.html>

Salek, Thomas A. "Book Review of James Walters's *Alternative Worlds in Hollywood Cinema*." *Screening the Past* 25 (2009). <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/25/alternative-worlds-hollywood.html>

COMPETITIVELY SELECTED PRESENTATIONS

National

Salek, Thomas A. "Creating a Colorblind Nation: Privatizing Race in President Obama's Neoliberal Rhetorical Leadership." Paper presented at the 101st annual convention of the National Communication Association, Las Vegas, NV, November 2015.

Salek, Thomas A. "Flipping Off Political Complacency and Cynicism: *Satyrical* Satire as a Comic Corrective in Bill Maher's 2014 #FlipADistrict Campaign." Paper presented at the 101st annual convention of the National Communication Association, Las Vegas, NV, November 2015.

Salek, Thomas A. "Money Doesn't Talk, It Swears: Parody, Excess and Strategic Ambiguity in Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*." Paper presented at the 101st annual convention of the National Communication Association, Las Vegas, NV, November 2015. *Top Student Paper in American Studies Division*

Salek, Thomas A. "Existing Loudly at the Margins: Ted Cruz and the Tea Party's Rhetoric of Resentment." Paper presented at the 100th annual convention of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL, November 2014.

Salek, Thomas A. "The Structure of Feeling Surrounding Goodnight's Spheres of Argumentation: An Optimistic Reading of the Future state of Deliberative Discourse." Paper presented at the 100th annual convention of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL, November 2014.

Salek, Thomas A. "Breaking Social, Political and Diegetic borders: The Dramatistic Lens of Jean Rouch's Ethnofiction Films." Paper presented at the 2014 Biennial Rhetoric Society for America Conference, San Antonio, TX, May 2014.

Salek, Thomas A. "Shifting Reality: Partisan Rhetoric, Political Polling and the Potential of Social Media in Election News Coverage." Paper presented at the 99th annual convention of the National Communication Association, Washington DC, November 2013.

Salek, Thomas A. "Solidifying Partisan *Meme*-bership: 'Binders Full of Women' and Political Image Macros from the 2012 Presidential Debates." Paper presented at the 99th annual convention of the National Communication Association, Washington DC, November 2013.

Cole, Andrew W., Thomas A. Salek and Jansen B. Werner. "Prescribing Action or Complacency: A Model of Cyberchondria as Rhetorical Action." Paper presented at the InfoSocial Conference of the Media, Technology, and Society Program at Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, October 2013.

Regional/State

Salek, Thomas A. "Disciplining the Cyber Wild West: President Obama's Model for *Transparent* Digital American Citizenship." Paper to be presented at Central States Communication Association Conference, Grand Rapids, MI, April 2016. *Top Student Paper in the Political Communication Division*

Salek, Thomas A. "Controversy Trending: Mia and Ronan Farrow's Creation of a Twitter Firestorm and 2014 Cross-Media Assault of #WoodyAllen." Paper presented at the 2015 Central States Communication Association Conference, Madison, WI, April 2015.

Salek, Thomas A. "Navigating the Volatile Waters of Gun Control: Obama's Rhetorical Leadership in the Aftermath of the Tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary." Paper workshop at the 2015 Midwest Winter Workshop, Evanston, IL, January 2015.

Salek, Thomas A. "Let's Try to Have a Debate Here: The Breakdown of talk in Piers Morgan's January 7, 2013 Interview with Alex Jones." Paper presentation at the 2014 Central States Communication Association Conference, Minneapolis, MN, April 2014.

Salek, Thomas A. "Existing Loudly at the Margins: A Rhetoric of Resentment and the Creation of a Tea Party Rival-Public." Paper workshop at the 2014 Midwest Winter Workshop, Champaign, IL, January 2014.

Salek, Thomas A. "Jean Rouch's Carnavalesque Cinema: Discovering Truth through Anthropologie Partagée." Paper presented at New York University Department of Cinema Studies Student Conference, New York, NY, February 2009.

Salek, Thomas A. "Focusing In or Faking Us Out: Documentary Filmmaking within the 21st Century." Paper presented at Dominican University Undergraduate Research and Creative Investigation Expo, River Forest, IL, May 2008.

INVITED PRESENTATIONS

"Analyzing Arguments Through Terministic Screens." Lecture presented to Dr. Mike Allen's Argumentation and Debate course, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, October 12, 2015.

"The Ethos of Political Candidates: Building Public Credibility on the Campaign Trail." Lecture presented to Dr. Andrew W. Cole's Public Speaking course, Waukesha Technical College, December 1, 2014.

- “Prescribing Action or Complacency: A Model of Cyberchondria as Rhetorical Action.” Paper presented at the May 4, 2014 Department of Communication colloquium at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. [with Andrew W. Cole & Jansen B. Werner]
- “Paranoia and Homosexuality within Alfred Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train* and *Rope*.” Lecture presented to Dr. Patricia Erens’s Seeing Hitchcock course, School at the Art Institute, October 2011.
- “Expressionism and the Politics of Weimar Germany in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*.” Lecture presented to Dr. Patricia Erens’s Masterpieces of Cinema course, School at the Art Institute-Chicago, March 2011.
- “Screwball Comedy and the Power of Laughter in Preston Sturges’s *Sullivan’s Travels*.” Lecture presented to Dr. Patricia Erens’s Film Comedy course, School at the Art Institute-Chicago, February 2011.
- “*The Lion King*: Manichean Symbolism and Disney’s Take on Shakespeare.” Lecture presented to Dr. Patricia Erens’s Discovering Disney course, School at the Art Institute-Chicago, February 2011.
- “*The Lion King*: Manichean Symbolism and Disney’s Take on Shakespeare.” Lecture presented to Dr. Patricia Erens’s Discovering Disney course, Dominican University, February 2011.
- “High Art and Legitimizing Animation in Walt Disney’s *Fantasia*.” Lecture presented to Dr. Patricia Erens’s Discovering Disney course, School at the Art Institute-Chicago, February 2010.
- “High Art and Legitimizing Animation in Walt Disney’s *Fantasia*.” Lecture presented to Dr. Patricia Erens’s Discovering Disney course, Dominican University, February 2010.

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

2012 – 2016

Teaching Assistant

Department of Communication at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Courses Taught

COMMUN 362: Argumentation and Debate (1 standalone section) Spring 2016
 COMMUN 105: Business and Professional Communication (1 standalone section) Spring 2016
 COMMUN 362: Argumentation and Debate (1 standalone section) Fall 2015
 COMMUN 105: Business and Professional Communication (1 standalone section) Fall 2015
 COMMUN 402: Gender and Communication (1 standalone online section) Spring 2014
 COMMUN 105: Business and Professional Communication (1 standalone section) Spring 2014
 COMMUN 402: Gender and Communication (1 standalone online section) Fall 2014
 COMMUN 105: Business and Professional Communication (1 standalone section) Fall 2014
 COMMUN 105: Business and Professional Communication (1 standalone section) Summer 2014
 COMMUN 105: Business and Professional Communication (1 standalone section) Spring 2014
 PEACEST 201: Intro to Conflict Resolution and Peace (1 standalone section) Spring 2014
 COMMUN 105: Business and Professional Communication (1 standalone section) Fall 2013
 PEACEST 201: Intro to Conflict Resolution and Peace (1 standalone section) Fall 2013
 COMMUN 105: Business and Professional Communication (3 discussion sections) Spring 2013
 COMMUN 105: Business and Professional Communication (3 discussion sections) Fall 2012

July 2013 – July 2014

Project Assistant for Dr. Patricia Mayes

21st Century Voices: Synthesized Speech in the Third Millennium Project

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

- Help collect audio-video data for a research project that examines how individuals who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) to express aspects of identity and personality in conversation.
- Use conversation analysis (CA) to transcribe data to understand how synthetic speech from AAC devices is used in every day speech interactions.

AWARDS / HONORS

Top Student Paper in Political Communication Division, Central States Communication Association Conference, 2016

Top Student Paper in American Studies Division, National Communication Association Annual Convention, 2015

Melvin H. Miller Top PhD Student Research, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014

Chancellor's Graduate Student Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2012

Department of Cinema Studies Graduate Fellowship, New York University, Fall 2009

Journalism Outstanding Senior Award, Dominican University, Spring 2008

Degree with Honors, Dominican University, Spring 2008

Summa cum Laude, Dominican University, Spring 2008

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Attended the "Political Campaigns and Communication" workshop at the 2015 Rhetoric Society for America (RSA) Summer Institute in Madison, WI.

Attended the "2015 National Communication Association (NCA) Doctoral Honors Seminar" in Columbia, MO.

SERVICE

Professional Service

Reviewer for 2015 National Communication Association Annual Conference, Rhetorical and Communication Theory Division, Political Communication Division

Reviewer for 2015 Central States Communication Association Annual Conference

Chair, Rhetorical concepts and contemporary public address, panel at the 100th annual convention of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL, November 23, 2014

Reviewer for 2014 Central States Communication Association Annual Conference

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Department of Communication Service

Volunteer judge at Public Speaking Showcase, 2012-2014

Peer mentor to new PhD student Hilary Rasmussen, 2013-2014

President, Student chapter of Rhetoric Society of America (RSA), 2014

Faculty committee representative, CGSC, 2013

Vice president, Student chapter of Rhetoric Society of America (RSA), 2013
Social media coordinator for Communication Graduate Student Council, 2013

Dominican University Department of Communication Service

Editor in chief of *Dominican Star* newspaper, 2007 – 2008
President of Lambda Pi Eta, Sigma Zeta chapter, 2007 – 2008
Vice president of Lambda Pi Eta, Sigma Zeta chapter, 2007
Managing editor of *Dominican Star* newspaper, 2006 – 2007
Staff writer/copy editor of *Dominican Star* newspaper, 2004 – 2006

PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

2012 – present (contract / ad hoc basis)

Strategic Communication Consultant

Allstate Insurance, Northbrook, IL

- Created presentations, templates, news articles, and communication plans for clients in Allstate's technology organization

2013 - 2014 (contract / ad hoc basis)

Freelance Editor / Production Manager

Walgreens Corporation, Deerfield, IL

- Edited and managed the production of "On The Mark," a monthly newsletter sent to store managers

2011 - 2012

Managing Editor

The Facets Magazine, Chicago IL

- Founded start-up, online magazine with four others, recruiting a team of 10 writers, graphic designers
- Oversaw six writers in the editorial department
- Worked closely with the four other founders, creating a social media strategy for the bimonthly publication

2010 - 2012

Strategic Communication Consultant

Allstate Insurance, Northbrook, IL

- Created and edited Web content for five weekly internal newsletters sent to Allstate's technology organization
- Worked closely with one other consultant to provide internal communication support for Allstate Technology's senior leaders
- Provided communication consulting for internal clients, as well as writing coaching for content providers