Kyle Tanaka

Coms 100B

Barack Obama’s “A More Perfect Union”:

A Collaborative Approach of Unifying a Nation

**Context:**

Senator Barack Obama delivered a speech, “A More Perfect Union”, titled after the preamble of the Constitution, during the midst of his campaign for President of the United States during the 2008 election. The speech was given at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which is the same city that the Constitution was signed and established, over two hundred years ago. The speech was broadcast nationally on March 18, 2008, and circulated throughout the media.

At the time of the speech Sen. Obama was locked in a tight race with Senator Hilary Clinton for the Democratic Party nomination for President. The democratic primary was unique in that it featured the first African-American candidate and first female candidate to run for President of the United States. With that came a barrage of questions, and uncertainty’s regarding both candidates. Sen. Obama came under scrutiny for his relationship with his pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who had garnered national attention for his radical and racial sermons at Trinity United Methodist Church. The reverend’s sermons were broadcast throughout the media (Denton Jr., 2009, p.105), and often became talking points for other candidates (Healy, 2008).

**Description of Text:**

In the speech Sen. Obama responded to Rev. Wright’s controversial comments, by not only addressing the issue of their relationship, but also taking the opportunity to examine the issue of racism that still prevails within the country. This serves as an example of how Sen. Obama redefines the context of his speech, “contextual reconstruction occurs when a text violates the expectations but ultimately functions to redefine those expectations, making the violation acceptable to the audience” (Stoner and Perkins, 2008, p.64). Sen. Obama begins his speech by delivering the first line of the preamble of the Constitution, “ We the people, in order to form a more perfect union”(Obama 2008). However, Sen. Obama (2008) goes on to state “The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished”. Sen. Obama (2008) clearly violates the context by challenging his audience to come together and reexamine the issue of race, in order to “solve the challenges of our time”.

The speech by Sen. Obama offers different rhetorical concepts and approaches, such as inclusive language and patterns of repetition that helps to characterize the message. Sen. Obama use’s phrases containing the word “we”, throughout his speech to help establish his claim of collaboration. Using the Aristotelian search model, I aim to show that Sen. Obama’s speech effectively responded to the criticism surrounding his relationship with Rev. Wright, and promoted a greater vision of a unified nation.

**Analysis:**

Using Aristotle’s genres of speech, we can break the speech into two parts: a rebuttal to Rev. Wright, and a look at Sen. Obama’s call to action of a shared vision of unity. Sen. Obama’s discourse leads to the development of both forensic and deliberative types of rhetorical concepts. However, to analyze the message further we will look at the Aristotle’s forms of proof.

Forensic or legal speeches refers to speaking that either attacks or defends somebody”(Stoner and Perkins 2008, p139). Rev. Wright’s sermons and statements led to a drop in poll numbers for the Sen. Obama and put his bid for the party’s nomination in to jeopardy (Meckler and Farnam, 2008). According to David Axelrod, the campaign’s chief strategist stated that Sen. Obama prior to his speech said, “either people will accept it or I won't be president of the United States” (CBS 2008). This shows that Sen. Obama recognized the potential damage Rev. Wright could have on his campaign. Sen. Obama acknowledged his relationship with Rev. Wright while condemning his pastor’s remarks:

Did I know him to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of course. Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial while I sat in church? Yes. Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely- just as I'm sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagreed (Obama 2008).

By “attacking” Rev. Wright, Sen. Obama uses this rhetorical device to separate himself from the views and beliefs associated with the reverend. However, in order to ascertain Sen. Obama’s overarching message we have to examine a second genre.

Throughout the speech Sen. Obama (2008), charges his audience to unite as a nation, “at this moment, in this election, we can come together”. This is an example of deliberative or political type of speech, “political speaking urges us to do something” (Stoner and Perkins 2008, p.139). This allows Sen. Obama to approach his audience in an interpersonal manner, by associating all of them as one. In turn this helps establish his view of a unified country with his audience. It is important to remember both of these concepts, as we dive further into the Aristotelian search model to help identify other parts of Sen. Obama’s message that work congruently.

In an article on gaining voter trust, Gary Genard (2003) states “that every potential constituent must be convinced that he or she is seeing a real person on the podium”. Genard goes on to further describe his view of public perception of candidates, “part of the beauty of public speaking is that the public doesn’t want a perfect candidate. They’re looking for an imperfect human being in whom they can nerveless believe” (32). This sense of an audience wanting to find a belief in a candidate refers to the Aristotelian form of proof ethos, “audience’s perception of the speaker’s intelligence, honestly, and goodwill” (Stoner and Perkins 2008, p.148). As stated above, Sen. Obama approached his speech with the belief that his audience would either accept or reject his relationship with Rev. Wright (CBS 2008). This speaks to the honesty and goodwill that Aristotle describes, that Sen. Obama was open about his relationship. However, questions need to be raised regarding just how much Rev. Wright influenced Sen. Obama.

Sen. Obama addresses the issue of race by providing personal anecdotes of how it has affected his family, religion, and campaign. Sen. Obama uses his grandmother as an example:

my white grandmother - a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe (Obama 2008).

This excerpt coupled with Sen. Obama’s statements from the speech of being from mixed racial heritage; help stake his credibility on the issue of racism.

One of the defining moments of speech is when Sen. Obama tells the story of Ashley Baia, a twenty-three year old white woman who supported her mother when she was nine, because her mother was diagnosed with cancer. In the speech Sen. Obama (2008) says that when asked why she joined the campaign, Ashley replied “so that she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too”. This is an example of another Aristotelian form of proof called pathos:

audiences are brought into certain frames of mind over time by carefully considered actions on the part of the rhetor that builds grounds for emotional responses (Stoner and Perkins 2008, p.150).

Sen. Obama (2008) uses this appeal to discuss Rev. Wright, “As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me”. In fact, Sen. Obama even references to him during the campaign as a ““an old uncle who sometimes will say things that I don't agree with”(Allen 2008). By attributing a sense family to Rev. Wright, Sen. Obama appeals to the emotions of his audience.

However, the example of Ashley Baia serves as the best example of showing how pathos defines Sen. Obama’s message. After Ashley finishes her story, Sen. Obama says that an elderly black man is asked why he is supporting campaign, “He simply says to everyone in the room, ‘I am here because of Ashley”. Sen. Obama (2008) then concludes his speech that one instances is not enough, “But it is where we start”.

**Interpretation:**

Sen. Obama’s message of unifying a nation by addressing the roots of racism in the country was full of well-constructed deliberative examples, and was supported by both forms of proof. However, Sen. Obama’s inability to completely sever ties with Rev. Wright, despite condemning his actions, is cause for question. As Schoen notes:

But moderate-to-conservative voters who once had confidence in Mr. Obama now have doubts, because he has been so close for so long to someone whose values are so inimical to theirs. (Schoen 2008).

This is the same question that I briefly acknowledged in the paragraph regarding the creditability of Sen. Obama with his relationship to Rev. Wright. The rhetorical concepts of ethos/creditability and forensic language, work together in this instance to help formulate a conclusion. That while Sen. Obama’s speech attacks the reverend; he still brings the audience back by channeling a forgiving approach even equating Rev. Wright to family.

By examining the Burkeian model, we can infer that his approach may have helped answer further questions on how Sen. Obama handled Rev. Wright in his speech. For instance Burke’s concept of identification, “to identify is to seek to be ‘consubstantial’ or perceived to be ‘substantially one’ with person you are trying to persuade”(Stoner and Perkins 2008, 217). In this case he means Sen. Obama’s audience, who were not interested in strictly a rebuttal to Rev. Wright, but looking for a deeper message (Rowland and Jones, 2011, p. 125).

**Evaluation:**

Sen. Obama deserves credit for reconstructing the text and shifting attention away from Rev. Wright, while at the same time identifying a vision of a unified nation. Rowland and Jones note this in their study of Sen. Obama’s speech:

his campaign was dogged by accusations that he had supported a racial extremist, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, or at minimum had shown very poor judgment in associating with Wright over many years. After delivering the speech, the controversy not only largely dissipated, but Obama was praised by many for honestly confronting the most controversial and emotional issue in American politics, race (Rowland and Jones, 2011, p. 125).

While it was important for Sen. Obama to address the reverend’s comments, the speech takes advantage of the national publicity to discuss the issue of race in our country. I believe that Sen. Obama does this effectively, in that he emphasizes his vision for “a more perfect union” through the use of different rhetorical concepts. There is little doubt that the Rev. Wright’s were controversial at best. However, Sen. Obama took it upon himself to usher in a new era of civil discourse, by addressing the issue of racism that had plagued our country since its inception. Works Cited

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