There are few names in history that strike a chord in American audiences quite like the Kennedys. Glamorous, young and powerful, the Kennedy brothers (John, Robert “Bobby”, and Edward “Ted” Kennedy) became some of the most iconic political figures of the modern era. Representing the Democratic Party and raised in a Catholic family, the brothers upheld unique and modern political stances that were both distinctive and, at times, controversial. This relationship between religious values and political ideals was evident in each of the brothers’ public images, and can be characterized for the youngest, Ted Kennedy, by his speech at Liberty Christian College (now Liberty University) titled “Truth And Tolerance In America.” In this speech, he addresses the relationship between church and state, and attempts to convey the belief that while religion, regardless of affiliation, must be respected by all people, it must be independent from political decision-making. Additionally, he acknowledges the difficulty that “separation of church and state cannot mean an absolute separation between moral principles and political power.” Kennedy’s words at Liberty Christian College withstand the test of time by providing a permanent, lasting documentation of the importance of religion and government, as well as the relationship between the two. This relationship is one of the most essential values in American tradition. The effectiveness of his speech can be proven by taking a contextual look at his words, and evaluating the oratory decisions he makes according to his audience.

The Kennedy drive to uphold equality for all Americans and rally for social justice was a defining feature in the brothers’ performance behind the political podium. This basic moral value perhaps stems from their Catholic upbringing – John F. Kennedy being the first Catholic president, elected at a time when this would cause a good deal of tension. Ted spent forty-six years in the Senate and campaigned for presidency in 1980, losing in the primary to Democratic incumbent Jimmy Carter. Widely known to be a charismatic public speaker, Ted Kennedy earned the nickname “The Lion Of The Senate” during his long career in office. He struggled to find the middle ground between Democrats and Republicans on a wide range of political issues, always referring back to his own moral guidelines and code of ethics to carry his message. However, despite his morality, Ted Kennedy insisted on making it known that he and his family, although Catholic, were not particularly devout. Both brothers faced the task of addressing the concern that, as Catholic politicians, they would vote according to the wishes of the Pope in Rome. Ted Kennedy’s “Truth And Tolerance” speech, given before an audience of devout evangelicals, invites his listeners to consider with him the role that religion should play in government. He makes three main points on this subject. First, “we must respect the integrity of religion itself”; second, “we must respect the independent judgments of conscience”; and finally, “in applying religious values, we must respect the integrity of public debate”. He uses his last objective as an introduction as well as a strengthener for his next point: that we must support an elimination of nuclear weapons to end the Cold War. “There is no morality in the mushroom cloud,” he warns. “The black rain of nuclear ashes will fall alike on the just and the unjust.” He expresses his willingness to discuss the nuclear freeze on political and on moral grounds. Given before an audience of people who blatantly opposed him on both claims, he faced a vast amount of opposition in the deliverance of this speech. Reverend Jerry Falwell, the founder of Liberty Christian College and leader of the Moral Majority (a Christian political organization) openly opposed the nuclear freeze, stating that the cessation of nuclear engineering is “going to have to be when there’s absolute verification and nobody’s cheating.” This unyielding resistance made it necessary for Kennedy to conceive a message that would meet his audience on middle ground, to attempt to gain their agreement on the fundamentals of his main points, in order to persuade them of his larger claims.

Kennedy’s famous oration can be effectively broken down in terms of classical rhetoric. The conscious choices made within the speech demonstrate his ability to take into account the beliefs and biases of his audience, to connect with them, and to make an appeal. His use of language, examples and imagery to persuade or inform constitutes this speech, by a basic definition, as an example of rhetoric. Going deeper into Aristotle’s definition of the term, Kennedy’s speech allows us to “observe, in any given case, the available means of persuasion.” As a piece of rhetoric, we may begin to look at the speech in terms of its important rhetorical elements. One of the most crucial elements in “Truth And Tolerance” is the role of the rhetor (Kennedy) pertaining to his relationship with the implied audience. While the actual audience expands far beyond the perimeter of Liberty Christian College, to a national audience over television, it is important to maintain the idea that Kennedy is directly addressing the people before him. He speaks directly to them, knowing that he does not have their support, and acknowledging that “at the end of the evening some of our disagreements will remain.” This relationship with his most immediate audience, provided with our historical background, is what allows us to initiate a contextual analysis of the speech. In this case, Ted Kennedy is facing a crowd that adamantly opposes him as a politician, and stands against the message he is trying to convey to the University. The “Truth And Tolerance” speech has two goals: one explicit and one implicit. First, he must establish his credibility to his audience. This is not explicitly stated as a goal, but is known by Kennedy, Falwell, and the audience of non-supporters. Kennedy spends the majority of his speech establishing credibility as a politician, a Catholic, and a fellow person, and he achieves this goal in a variety of ways. Kennedy’s second goal is a call to action: he seeks to persuade his audience that nuclear weapons must be eliminated. Aware of his popularity among the members of his audience, Kennedy makes use of the barriers he is faced with in order to persuade the listeners. Where the beliefs and attitudes, or rather, the opinions of the audience and their judgment of Kennedy based on these opinions, create a barrier, Kennedy appeals by connecting with them on their values.