

LYNDON B. JOHNSON TAKES OFFICE

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During the first five months of Lyndon Baines Johnson's administration, quite a few impressionistic comments were made concerning his speaking abilities. His delivery was said to be inferior to that of Kennedy's; one writer referred to it as a "drone." Thus, we were left with the impression that Johnson was, as a speaker, considerably lacking. These comments were evidently made, however, by those who consider delivery to be all-important, and who would relegate content to a very minor place of importance. This paper is concerned with a content analysis of Johnson's speeches during his first five months as President.

That a President does not write his own speeches is generally taken for granted. An article in the U. S. News & World Report of February 3, 1964, pointed out that several people assisted in the composition of Johnson's speeches--including Adlai Stevenson and Pierre Salinger. The most frequent ghost writer, however, was Horace Busby, a Texan who had worked with Johnson for a number of years.¹ Therefore, we are not analyzing Johnson's written speeches, but Johnson-directed addresses.

When Johnson became President in November, an uncertain attitude was present in the minds of many people. In its edition of November 24, the New York Times carried the reactions which

foreign countries were having to his succession. Britain was experiencing "anxiety;" France had a "fear of great changes in foreign policy:" it was said that "uncertainty is likely" in relations between the United States and Germany. Johnson's Presidency, furthermore, it was said, "stirs misgivings" in India.²

The same reaction was present in the minds of many people at home. Louis E. Lomax affirmed that the nation's Negro community was enveloped by "deep anguish and apprehension."³ In spite of his being Vice-President, Johnson was not too well known. Many people were asking such questions as: Who is Lyndon Johnson? Where does he stand on key issues? Can he carry on the programs started by President Kennedy? Johnson faced the problem of proving not issues, but himself; his was a problem of ethos.

Evidently realizing his need to build his ethos, Johnson used several artistic methods to enhance his audience's concept of him. Throughout his speeches, we find references to President Kennedy as Johnson attempted to identify himself with the late President. In speaking to the United Nations General Assembly on December 17, Johnson urged:

John Kennedy was the author of new hope for mankind, hope which was shared by a whole new generation of leaders in every continent, and we must not let grief turn us away from that hope. He never quarreled with the past. He always looked at the future. And our task now is to work for the kind of future in which he so strongly believed.⁴

Johnson used the same technique in his address following the signing of the tax bill when he reminded his audience: "This legislation was inspired and proposed by our late beloved President, John F. Kennedy."⁵

Johnson further strengthened his ethos by his frequent references to the Deity; he was thus pictured to us as a man concerned with religion. On an address broadcast on Thanksgiving Day, Johnson prayed:

Let us pray for his Divine wisdom in banishing from our land any injustice or intolerance or oppression to any of our fellow Americans....on this Thanksgiving Day as we gather in the warmth of our families, in the mutual love and respect which we have for one another, let us also thank God for the years that he gave us inspiration through His servant.⁶

In speaking to the U. N., Johnson declared: "Man's age-old hopes remain our goal--that this world, under God, can be safe for diversity, and free from hostility, and a better place for our children and for all generations in the years to come."⁷

Johnson's ethical proof was further enhanced when he showed his right to speak on a subject. In a speech delivered to Congress on November 27, he reminded his audience: "For 32 years, Capitol Hill has been my home; I have shared many moments of pride with you." In the same speech, Johnson demonstrated his right to speak on the civil rights issue when he pleaded:

I urge you again, as I did in 1957 and again in 1960, to enact a civil rights law so that we can move forward to eliminate from this nation every trace of discrimination and oppression that is based on race or color.

He attempted to show his familiarity with the responsibilities of the Chief Executive when he recalled: "I have seen five Presidents fill this awesome office. I have known them well, and counted them all as friends."⁹ In speaking to the U. N., Johnson showed that he was qualified to speak about poverty."

In my travels on behalf of my country and President Kennedy, I have seen too much of misery and despair in Africa, and Asia, and Latin America. I have seen too often the ravages of hunger and tapeworm and tuberculosis, and the scabs and scars on too many children who have too little health and no hope.¹⁰

Johnson's ethos was further strengthened on the occasions when he expressed a feeling of good will to his audience. In a speech of January 18, in dedicating the new National Geographic Society Building, he stated:

In the homes of our land and in all lands around the world, the National Geographic Society and its magazine are old friends and a very welcome companion. You have broadened the horizons and narrowed the misunderstandings of many generations--and you have helped us all to be better citizens of the world and better citizens of our times.¹¹

In a speech of February 21, delivered at U. C. L. A., preceding the presentation of an honorary degree given to President Adolfo Lopez Mateos of Mexico, Johnson used the same technique:

It is altogether appropriate that in this place of learning we should honor President Lopez Mateos. His qualities of mind and heart have made him the leader of Mexico and an example of the Hemisphere--a product of revolution and an architect of freedom.¹²

In speaking to the U. N., Johnson also strengthened his ethos by showing good will:

My friends and fellow citizens of the world, soon you will return to your home lands. I hope you will take with you my gratitude for your generosity in hearing me so late in the session. I hope you will convey to your countrymen the gratitude of all Americans for the companionship of sorrow you shared with us in your messages of the last few weeks.¹³

Johnson further enhanced the audience's concept of his character when he demonstrated humility on his part. In his speech to Congress of November 27, Johnson humbly said:

All I have I would have given gladly not to be standing here today. ...An assassin's bullet has thrust upon me the awesome burden of the Presidency. I am here today to say I need your help. I cannot bear this burden alone. I need the help of all Americans in all America.¹⁴

The following day, in an address to the nation, Johnson asked for the prayers of his audience.¹⁵

Johnson further developed his ethos by the sense of urgency and determination which ran throughout his speeches. The feeling is imparted that Johnson was a man of action--someone who wanted to get things done. His speeches were filled with the two words "we must." His determination was further shown by such statements as this one from the "State of the Union" address:

We shall neither act as aggressors nor tolerate acts of aggression. We intend to bury no one, and we do not intend to be buried. We can fight, if we must, as we have fought before, but we pray that we will never have to fight again.

In speaking to the U. N., Johnson further demonstrated his determination to honor all United States commitments:

I have come here today to make it unmistakably clear that the assassin's bullet which took his life did not alter his nation's purpose. We are more than ever opposed to the doctrines of hate and violence, in our own land and around the world. We are more than ever committed to the rule of law, in our own land and around the world. We believe more than ever in the rights of man--all men of every color--in our own land and around the world.¹⁷

As a final touch to his artistic ethos, Johnson, in his speeches, associated himself with what is right. Rather than acting from a basis of political expediency, Johnson showed himself to be concerned with whatever is the right thing to do. In his speech of March 16, the special message on poverty, Johnson explained why the program was to be carried out: "We do this, first of all, because it is right that we should."¹⁸ In his "State of the Union" address, Johnson urged: "Let us carry forward the plans and programs of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, not because of our sorrow or sympathy, but because they are right."¹⁹ In speaking to the delegates of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on April 3, Johnson affirmed: "We believe in the Alliance, because in our own interest we must, because in the common interest it works, and because in the world interest it is right."²⁰

Having noticed the major characteristic of Johnson's speeches, this paper will now consider some other aspects of his

rhetoric. In examining Johnson's stock of ideas, we find five recurring themes: (1) There is a need for national and international cooperation; (2) A war must be waged against poverty; (3) Every citizen must receive his full civil rights; (4) This administration is pledged to economy; (5) The future is bright.

Johnson pleaded for cooperation on a national scale in his message of November 27: "The time has come for Americans of all races and creeds and political beliefs to understand and to respect one another." Johnson affirmed that:

It is this work that I most want us to do--to banish rancor from our words and malice from our hearts--to close down the poison springs of hatred and intolerance and fanaticism--to perfect our unity North and South, East and West, to hasten the day when bias of race, religion, and region is no more and to bring the day when our great energies and decencies and spirit will be free of the burden that we have borne too long.²¹

On an international scale, Johnson reiterated the same theme in speaking to the U. N.: "Every nation must do its share. All United Nations member can do better. We can act more often together. We can build together a much better world."²²

In an address of February 12 honoring Abraham Lincoln, Johnson effectively brought in the second and third of his major ideas:

The American promise will be unfulfilled, Lincoln's work--our work--will be unfinished so long as there is a child without a school, a school without a teacher, a man without a job, a family without a home; so long

as there are sick Americans without medical care or aging Americans without hope; so long as there are any Americans, of any race or color, who are denied their full human rights; so long as there are any Americans, of any place or region who are denied their human dignity.²³

The theme of economy was pointed up in his "State of the Union" address as Johnson pledged "a progressive administration which is efficient and honest and frugal. The budget to be submitted to the Congress shortly is in full accord with this pledge."²⁴

The final theme of optimism was demonstrated by this short excerpt. When speaking to NATO, Johnson showed this enthusiastic outlook:

Proven in danger, strengthened in freedom and resolute in purpose, we will go on with God's help to serve not only our own people but to serve the bright future of all mankind.²⁵

Johnson used a variety of supporting materials--historical examples, facts and figures, specific instances, comparisons, and quotations. One of his favorite types of supporting materials seemed to be the use of personal examples. For instance, in a speech of February 11, to field officials of the Internal Revenue Service, he condemned discrimination by telling the touching story of a lady who had worked with Johnson:

She has been with us 20 years, she is a college graduate, but when she comes from Texas to Washington she never knows where she can get a cup of coffee. She never knows when she can go to the bathroom. She has to take three or four hours out to go across to the other side of the tracks to locate the place where she can sit down and buy a meal.²⁶

Johnson was effective in his use of emotional appeal. He appealed to man's desire for adventure when he mentioned "the dream of conquering the vastness of space." Appeals to the desire for security were used as he advocated legislation to produce more jobs and to build a stronger nation. He appealed to love and friendship as he advocated a spirit of cooperation on a national and international level. Appeals to sympathy were used as he pictured the conditions of those who are poor, or disease-ridden, or deprived of their civil rights. Representative of his appeals to fair play is this short excerpt: "Today Americans of all races stand side by side in Berlin and in Vietnam. They died side by side in Korea. Surely they can work and eat and travel side by side in their own country."²⁷ Likewise appeals to patriotism, reverence of Deity, freedom, anger, and hero-worship were used. What was noticeably lacking in Johnson's emotional appeals was any appeal to one of the strongest emotions possible--that of fear. Here is a man, then, who was an optimist and who wised to motivate his audience not by painting dark, gloomy pictures, but by inspiring a positive outlook.

One of the most noticeable features of Johnson's rhetoric was his characteristic style. As one writer has noticed: "It is crisp, punchy, given to short, factual declarations. Rarely

do sentences run longer than 25 words." The same writer quoted an unidentified aide of Johnson's as explaining that the essence of Johnson's style was brevity. The aide continued:

When the President was a boy, some editor told him he should keep his sentences under 25 words, and even less if possible. He hasn't forgotten that. The President has a set of rules in his mind. They boil down to this: Keep sentences brief and simple. Emphasize force more than style. Don't use semicolons, or, if you do, use them sparingly. Don't string out sentences. You will notice that in his own conversation the President uses lots of flowing sentences, but when it comes to making a particular point he underscores it in staccato phrases.²⁸

Johnson made frequent use of repetition. In an address to Congress, he spoke of Kennedy:

Today John Fitzgerald Kennedy lives on in the immortal words and works that he left behind. He lives on in the mind and memories of mankind. He lives on in the hearts of his countrymen.²⁹

In his "State of the Union" address, Johnson pleaded with Congress:

Let this session of Congress be known as the session which did more for civil rights than the last 100 sessions combined; as the session which enacted the most far-reaching tax cut of our time; as the session which declared all-out war on human poverty and unemployment, in these United States; as the session which finally recognized the health needs of all of our older citizens; as the session which reformed our tangled transportation and transit policies; as the session which achieved the most effective, efficient foreign aid program ever, and as the session which helped to build more homes and more schools and more libraries and more hospitals than any single session of Congress in the history of our republic.³⁰

Johnson's style delighted in making use of familiar phrases to underscore a point. Several times, he declared; "Let us here highly resolve that John Fitzgerald Kennedy did not live--or die--in vain." In speaking of Kennedy, Johnson said that the late president had malice toward none. He had charity for all." In honoring Lincoln, Johnson spoke of a "new birth" of freedom. In urging his audience not to heed alarmists, Johnson said that the best way to treat them is just "God forgive them, for they know not what they do."

A brief note might be said about organization. Johnson's speeches were organized to the point where one could easily outline them while listening to them. His addresses marched steadily toward their goals without deviation from their purposes.

What then, can be finally said about the content of Johnson's speeches? His speeches were well organized, he used emotional proof effectively, he had a variety of ideas--this can be said about a number of speakers. Two noteworthy conclusions--one positive and one negative--can be drawn.

On the negative side of the picture, Johnson's speeches were filled with a style that becomes almost annoying. Some

repetition is good in a speech, but to see every other paragraph utilizing it becomes bothersome. Again, Johnson's key phrases were rarely his own--they are instead borrowed from someone else. Alber and Rolo once wrote of Winston Churchill that "as a phrasemaker he is unmatched and unmatched." We may paraphrase this statement to say of Johnson, "as a phrase-borrower he is unmatched and unmatched." Some of his wording becomes trite.

On the positive side of the picture, we must credit Johnson--or at least his ghostwriters--with considerable insight into audience analysis. Johnson was speaking to an uncertain audience--an audience to which he had to prove himself. Through his identification with the late President Kennedy, by his references to the Deity, by his demonstration of his right to speak on subjects, through his expressions of good will, through his association with things which are right, Johnson constructed an image of an optimistic person in whom you can have full confidence, a person who can run the government. Of course, whether the image is accurate or not is now within the scope of this paper; this is, however, the image which Johnson's speeches have created to his audience. Johnson adapted to his audiences, and used the type of proof--ethical--which was most needed to win assent to his ideas.

What has been said in this paper is true for the first five months of Johnson's administration. After he had been in office longer, a new problem of ethos--Vietnam--arose to plague him.

His lack of success would be the subject of another paper.

NOTES

The author is still desperate.

¹"When Johnson Plans a Speech," U. S. News & World Report, LVI (February 3, 1964), 33.

²New York Times, November 24, 1963, p. E4.

³Louis Lomax, "Negro View: Johnson can free the South," Look, XXVIII (March 10, 1964), 34.

⁴New York Times, December 18, 1963, p. 14.

⁵Lyndon B. Johnson, "The Tax-Reduction Bill," Vital Speeches of the Day, XXX (March 15, 1964), 322.

⁶New York Times, November 29, 1963, p. 20.

⁷New York Times, December 18, 1963, p. 14.

⁸New York Times, November 28, 1963, p. 20.

⁹New York Times, November 29, 1963, p. 20.

¹⁰New York Times, December 19, 1963, p. 14.

¹¹President Johnson Dedicates the Society's New Headquarters," National Geographic, CXXV (May, 1964), 671.

¹²New York Times, February 22, 1964, p. 3.

¹³New York Times, December 18, 1963, p. 14.

¹⁴New York Times, November 28, 1963, p. 20.

¹⁵New York Times, November 29, 1963, p. 20.

¹⁶Lyndon B. Johnson, "State of the Union," Vital Speeches of the Day, XXX (January 15, 1964), 196.

¹⁷New York Times, December 18, 1963, p. 14.

¹⁸New York Times, March 17, 1964, p. 22.

¹⁹Johnson, "State of the Union," p. 194.

²⁰New York Times, April 4, 1964, p. 2.

²¹New York Times, November 28, 1963, p. 20.

²²New York Times, December 18, 1963, p. 14.

²³New York Times, February 13, 1964, p. 14.

²⁴Johnson, "State of the Union," p. 194.

²⁵New York Times, April 4, 1964, p. 2.

²⁶New York Times, February 12, 1964, p. 19.

²⁷Johnson, "State of the Union," p. 194.

²⁸"When Johnson Plans a Speech," p. 33.

²⁹New York Times, November 28, 1963, p. 20.

³⁰Johnson, "State of the Union," p. 194.