

Lyndon Johnson. "We Shall Overcome"

A Rhetorical Analysis

Sandra W. Holt

This analysis of the *We Shall Overcome* speech, gives special attention to the audience, the occasion, and the kinds of proof used as designated by Aristotle. These proofs are logical, pathetic, and ethical. In addition, the speaker's delivery and the effectiveness will be discussed.

Occasion and Audience

In order to grasp the full flavor of Lyndon Baines Johnson's *We Shall Overcome* speech, it is necessary to recount the events that gave rise to the speech. Aristotle believed, and most writers since his time have concurred, that the occasion and audience determine the speech's end and object.¹ This section of the study, therefore, will be devoted to the occasion and the audience.

The speech was delivered March 15, 1965, at a critical point in the nation's history. It was just after the historic mass demonstration for voter registration in Alabama. Many peaceful marchers were attacked physically, and one was killed. The nation was in shock because much of the disaster had been seen on television. President Johnson used this particular time to speak before a joint night session of the Senate and the House of Representatives. Not only did he bear witness to Congress but also to those who viewed him over nationwide television.

The immediate audience for this speech was the men and women who made up Congress. The remote audience was the entire nation viewing television. The members of the immediate audience, no doubt, shared similar backgrounds and interests, except perhaps in the area of party politics. But the remote audience represented possibly every class of people in the United States. They were a cross section of every social as well as economic level. One thing both audiences had in common was a basic concern for what step the President was going to take in the situation.

Logical Proof

A critic can determine the relative integrity of ideas in a speech through three principal means: determination (1) of the intellectual resources of the speaker, (2) of the severity and strictness of the argumentative development, and (3) of the truth of the idea in functional existence.² The critic will first examine Johnson's intellectual stock or resources. Secondly, the critic will present his argumentative development. Next, the critic will give a functional appraisal of Johnson's ideas. Finally, the investigator will evaluate his refutative skills.

Thonssen, Baird and Braden informed us that "The preparation and background that the speaker brings to the process of logical invention figures strongly in the determination of argumentative soundness and integrity."³ The investigator will first consider Johnson's preparation and background. Johnson's preparation began at an early age. He received some speech training in high school and college by participating on debate teams and in public speaking. He received a B.S. degree in history, but upon graduation he became a speech and debate instructor. According to Singer and Sherrod, "Through debate he taught his students the art of reasoning. He shaped personalities, guided attitudes, and planted ideas for future good citizenship."⁴

Singer and Sherrod also informed us that, "As a result of his educational status and experience, Lyndon is more comprehensive and his capacity for formulating ideas is great."⁵

All of this results in Johnson's effective use of reason. Eager to become involved in political life, Johnson moved from his home in Texas to Washington. Singer and Sherrod also said that, "His family's background consisted of traditionally politically minded people."⁶ This gave Johnson faith in himself and his work. It is also said that "He never had to be told the same thing twice, he was inventive without imposing; a listener, and a talker when the right time came for him to express himself."⁷ As time passed Lyndon gained the experience necessary to begin his political career.

Sound judgment on the part of the speaker is very important in the formulation of ideas. According to Thonssen, Baird and Braden the speaker should have "judgment to make fine discrimination between the essential. . .and the capacity to sense that which lies at the center of issues. . ."⁸

When Johnson served his first political position, secretary to a congressman, he would listen and observe conditions around him. He would debate and question those around him. He wanted to know the facts, to get to the bottom of matters, and hear the argument on both sides of the issue. Johnson quit his job as secretary to become assistant doorkeeper in the House of Representatives so he would be able to learn as much as possible about the personalities, issues, and intricate political life in Washington.

It has been said that a good speaker recognizes the pressing problems of his time. This can truly be said of Johnson. In 1965 when he was serving as President of the United States he recognized the pressing problems of the people. Showing his deep concern for them he said, "Somehow you never forget what poverty and hatred can do when you see its scars on the hopeful face of a young child."⁹ Johnson made this statement during the time of the Selma crisis, when a minority of people were concerned about voter registration in Alabama. The President, recognizing the problem, spoke in their behalf. He let the nationwide audience know how deeply personal the issue of Negro rights was to him.

He placed the problem of Negro rights in a broader frame, that of poverty, ignorance, and disease. He stated "Their cause must be our cause, too. Because it's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome."¹⁰ Johnson was trying to get across to Congress that they should stand with him to take action on a bill that would correct the weaknesses in the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, namely its failure to protect the right of Negroes to vote when local officials deny it. Johnson was successful in enforcing his point. As a result the Voting Rights Bill of 1965 was enacted.

The types of evidence used by Johnson were effective. He used comparisons, quotations and personal experiences to support his ideas. Through their use he kept his ideas tightly structured and consistent.

Johnson's first form of support was a comparison of historical events. He compared what had just happened in Selma to other events in history such as Lexington, Concord, and Appomattox. This comparison supported his statement that "History and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom."¹¹

Lyndon Johnson used these three quotations in sequence: "All men are created equal." "Government by consent of the governed," and "Give me liberty or give me death." These quotations told the audience that they should mean something more than empty phrases. Quotations should suggest to the audience that the problem is deep. It is not a Black problem but an American problem. Blacks are Americans, and should be treated as such.

President Johnson's personal experiences are emotion-packed. Upon hearing them one could see how such a man could take up the cause of human rights.

He said, "As a man whose roots go deeply into Southern soil, I know how agonizing racial feelings are. I know how difficult it is to reshape the attitudes and the structure of our society."¹² He told the audience of his encounter with Mexican-American children when he was a young school teacher. "They knew even in their youth the pain of prejudice. They never seemed to know why people disliked them, but they knew it was so because I saw it in their eyes."¹³ Johnson made the audience aware of how personal the issue of Negro rights was to him when he recalled, "Somehow you never forget what poverty and hatred can do when you see its scars on the hopeful face of a young child."¹⁴

Johnson used deductive reasoning in establishing his argument. He began with general assumptions and concluded with specifics. He assumed the problem in question was an American problem. Every American has a right to equal treatment, and every American has the right to vote. Johnson developed his argument by making his audience see and understand his assumptions. His argument was geared toward one conclusion, *We Shall Overcome*. Johnson used categorical and hypothetical syllogisms in setting up his argument, as the following illustrates.

Categorical syllogism:

All men are created equal
Negroes are men
Therefore, Negroes are created equal

Hypothetical syllogism:

If we overcome the crippling legacy
of bigotry and injustice, we shall overcome.
We must rid ourselves of bigotry and injustice.
Therefore, we shall overcome.

The third point the critic will consider is a functional appraisal of Johnson's ideas. Thonssen states that "The integrity of an idea can hardly be subjected to a more severe test than the practical fact that it worked."¹⁵ This can be said for Johnson's speech. Matson says, "In terms of its immediate objective, at least, the President's address to Congress was a complete success.¹⁶ Men and women of all races were allowed to vote. Rights of citizenship were extended to every citizen. Johnson was right as determined by an appeal to historical reality. His idea of equal rights was right. He stated that all men were created equal and yet some men were treated differently because of race. His ideas resulted in the passing of the 1965 Voting Rights Bill which is, indeed, a practical measure of the worth of his ideas.

Another component of logical proof is evidence of refutative skills. Among the factors accounting for competency in refutative skills are the speaker's ability (1) to pick out the relevant and significant points of clash; (2) to resolve the contested issues to their lowest logical denominators; (3) to reveal clearly the relation of the opponent's claims to his own; (4) to preserve the structural wholeness of the speech as a constructive enforcement of an idea.¹⁷ Johnson met objections and defended his case. He picked relevant and significant points of clash such as, every American must have the right to vote. After picking his points of clash Johnson resolved the contested issues. He stated that "If we should defeat every enemy, double our wealth and conquer the stars, and be unequal, then we will have failed as a people and a nation."¹⁸ Unequal rights being the issue, Johnson resolved the contested issue by setting up proposals in a bill. This is the Voting Rights Bill of 1965. This bill meant equal rights for all men. Johnson refuted the statements that the issue is state's rights or national rights, when he said, "There is no issue of state's rights or national rights. There is only the struggle for human rights."¹⁹

Johnson stated that his enemies are poverty, ignorance, and disease. These are the opponents that must be overcome. He also made it known that the opponents are those that contribute to the enemy, those who fight against equal rights for all men. He met and attacked his opponent with adequate argument and evidence.

Johnson's address fully enforced his ideas. He was a complete success. According to Matson, Johnson's address was "One of the most deeply felt, and deeply moving addresses ever delivered by an American president."²⁰

Pathetic Proof

The second mode of proof designed by Aristotle is "pathetic" or emotional appeal. It includes all materials and devices calculated to put the audience in a frame of mind suitable for the reception of the speaker's ideas.

George Campbell, a philosopher of rhetoric, recognized the existence of emotional proof when he stated:

proofs may be conveyed through the audience, when it worked up by the speech to an emotional state.

Then he states that there is:

a wide difference in our manner of pronouncing decisions, according as we feel pleasure or pain, affection or hatred. . .²²

We see that both modern and ancient philosophers of rhetoric agree that emotion plays a significant role in rhetoric. As a result of these conclusions, the critic will discuss Lyndon Baines Johnson's use of emotional appeals. To be discussed are guilt and acceptance of blame, loyalty, shame, fighting, fear, and reverence.

According to Thonseen, Baird and Braden:

The preanalysis of an audience is designed to furnish the speaker with information that will enable him to adapt his material to the hearers.²³

There is evidence that Johnson analyzed his audience before the delivery of his speech. It is also evident that he adapted himself and his message to the audience. Johnson's audience included the members of Congress as well as the nation that viewed him on television. The audience was diversified, consisting of millions of people of all races and cultures. Johnson was discerning enough to realize he would have to appeal to the vast differences reflected in the audience in order to evoke the response he wanted. His opening statement included the entire audience.

I urge every member of both parties, Americans of all religions and all colors, from every section of this country, to join me in this cause.²⁴

Johnson kept in mind that the occasion was extraordinary, and that the audience was already in a highly emotional state. He knew how they felt, and he delivered his speech with determination and forethought.

In his appeal to guilt and acceptance of blame, Johnson wanted the audience to feel guilty about what had happened.

He said:

There is no cause for pride and self-satisfaction in the long denial of equal rights of millions of Americans.²⁵

He wanted the audience to accept the blame for what has occurred and to have hope and faith for democracy in the years to come.

Johnson appealed to the audience's sense of loyalty when he said:

to deny a man his hopes because of his color or race or religion or the place of birth is not only to do injustice, it is to deny Americans and to dishonor the dead who gave their lives for American freedom.²⁶

Here he said if we deny a man his hopes, we are guilty of injustice, and we are guilty of being disloyal to our ancestors who gave their lives for freedom. We must treat others with kindness and not deny them their rights.

In his appeal to the emotion of fighting Johnson said we should fight for human rights:

We cannot, and we must not, refuse to protect the right of every American to vote in every election that he may desire to participate in.²⁷

In Johnson's opinion, we cannot stand back and refuse to help people, but we must fight to pass the Voting Rights Bill of 1965. He further stated that Negroes should secure the full blessings of American life:

Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just the Negroes, but really it's all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.²⁸

He tried to get the audience to realize that we must fight, we must struggle, to achieve our goal. We must overcome. We must understand how the Negroes feel about the problem and help them as well as ourselves.

Johnson used fear when saying:

Should we defeat every enemy, and should we double our wealth and conquer the stars, and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a nation and as a people.²⁹

We should be fearful of letting this issue of Civil Rights exist. If we fail we have only ourselves to blame.

Johnson used reverence as an appeal in the beginning and the conclusion of the speech. He quoted a passage from the Bible:

When is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?³⁰

He also said:

God has favored our undertaking. . . I cannot help but believe that He truly understands and that He really favors the undertaking that we begin here tonight.³¹

These, then, were the motives to which Johnson appealed, and his rhetorical theory was admirably designed to induce persuasion.

Ethical Proof

The third mode of proof to be discussed is ethical proof. The constituents of ethical proof, as suggested by Aristotle, are the speaker's character, intelligence and goodwill.³² Using these three constituents the critic will show how Johnson gave credibility to his message.

A speaker helps to establish the impression of sagacity if he uses what is popularly called common sense. Johnson demonstrated his common sense in the way he handled his material. His intellectual integrity and his wisdom are also proof of his common sense.

Johnson established sagacity by proposing action on a bill that would correct the weaknesses of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill. It was evident that the present bill was failing to protect the rights of Negroes to vote. Every citizen should be treated as a man equal in opportunity to all others. Johnson stated that many of the issues of civil rights are very complex and difficult, but common sense should let us know that there can be no argument about the issue. It was his belief that every American citizen must have an equal right to vote.

Another constituent of ethical proof is good moral character. Johnson demonstrated his good moral character by displaying the elements of virtue which are justice, courage, temperance, liberality, gentleness, prudence, and wisdom.

President Johnson showed the element of justice with concern about what is just for all people. His message was given to justify equal rights of Negro Americans. He stated that, "The time of justice has now come, and I tell you that I believe sincerely that no force can hold it back."³³ He displayed courage by challenging the nation. He had faith that we shall overcome and he was not afraid to stand up and fight for this cause. He had courage to take action on a bill when local officials were determined not to enforce the law. Johnson was determined that we shall overcome.

Johnson showed temperance or restraint when trying to present his bill to the audience. He did not become angry when giving his address, instead he used a moderate tone. There are many places in the speech where Johnson could have become violent, but did not. He remained gentle throughout the address.

He demonstrated his liberality by saying his cause is to fight to give the Negro complete freedom. Johnson's concern was freedom for all, and in this case, that of the Negro. He stated that "A century has passed—more than 100 years—since the Negro was freed. And he is not fully free tonight."³⁴

Johnson showed prudence with the foresight to know that the country would unite for this cause. He told his audience that he had no doubt that good men from all over the country would rally together for freedom for all Americans.

The next point to cover is Johnson's bestowal of tempered praise upon himself, his client, and his cause. He said that they were there for a good purpose and everyone should join in this cause with him. He said further:

I am grateful for this opportunity to come here tonight at the invitation of the leadership to reason with my friends, to give them my views, and to visit with my former colleagues.³⁵

He bestowed tempered praise on them by saying, "I have not the slightest doubt what will be your answer."³⁶

He knew they were good people and would do right. Johnson praises his client, the Negro, when he said:

The real hero of this struggle is the American Negro. His actions and protest, his courage to risk safety, and even to risk his life, have awakened the conscience of this nation.³⁷

But, Johnson believed, there are those who will always try to hold on to the past. These are our opponents and they are not virtuous. What they are doing is not for the good of the country.

Lyndon Johnson tried to minimize or remove unfavorable impressions of himself or his cause previously established by his opponents. He defended himself by saying:

There have been many pressures upon your President and there will be others as the days come and go. But I pledge to you tonight that we intend to fight this battle where it should be fought. . .³⁸

Johnson gives the impression of being sincere in his undertaking. The audience received a feeling that he would hold to his promises. He stated:

I do not want to be the President who built empires, or sought grandeur, or extended dominion. I want to be the President who helped to educate the young, feed the poor, help the poor to find their own way, who protected the right of every citizen to vote, who helped to end hatred among his fellow men, who promoted love among the people of all races, and I want to be the President who helped to end the war among the brothers of this earth.³⁹

The last point to be considered is Johnson's goodwill. He presented himself to the audience as their leader and a friend to what they consider good, and an enemy to what they consider evil. He said, "I came tonight to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man."⁴⁰ He was a friend because he wished to conquer the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice as did the majority of his audience. But he opposed poverty, disease, and ignorance, his enemies. Men who promote these things are our enemies. Johnson stated, "They are our enemies, not our fellow man, not our neighbor."⁴¹ The audience could see goodwill in the character of Johnson. He established close rapport with his audience and tried to destroy any feelings of animosity they may have had toward him.

Lyndon Johnson used ethical proof frequently and skillfully throughout his speech. In developing his ethical proof he established that his selflessness, probity, goodwill, and concern in the area of civil rights. Johnson was highly successful, not only in meeting the demands of the situation, but also in furthering the acceptance of his ideas. He fulfilled the rhetorician's requirements of ethical proof, because his character was a cause of persuasion in his speech.

Notes

¹Aristotle, as found in **Speech Criticism**, Thonssen, Baird and Braiden. (New York, 1970) p.347.

²Thonssen, et. al., op. cit., p.393.

³Ibid.

⁴Kurt Singer and Jane Sherrod, **Lyndon Baines Johnson, Man of Reason**.

⁵Ibid., p.124.

⁶Ibid., p.128.

⁷Ibid., p.131.

⁸Thonssen, et. al., op. cit., p.394.

⁹Lyndon Johnson, *We Shall Overcome*, in **Voices of Crisis**, ed. by Floyd Matson, (New York, 1967), p.154.

¹⁰Ibid., p.150.

¹¹Ibid., p.146.

¹²Ibid., p.150.

¹³Ibid., p.154.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Thonssen, et. al., *Speech Criticism* (New York, 1970), p.412.

¹⁶Floyd Matson, *Voices of Crisis*, (New York, 1967), p.145.

¹⁷Thonssen, et. al., *Speech Criticism* (New York, 1970), p.413.

¹⁸Floyd Matson, *Voices of Crisis*, (New York, 1967), p.144.

¹⁹Ibid., p.149.

²⁰Floyd Matson, *Voices of Crisis*, (New York, 1967), p.144.

²¹James Golden and Edward P.J. Corbett, *The Rhetoric of Blain, Campbell, and Whately*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1968), p.205.

²²Lane Cooper, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, (New York, 1932), p.9, as found in Thonssen, Baird, and Braden, *Speech Criticism*, second edition (New York: The Ronald Press, 1970), p.421.

²³Thonssen, et. al., *Speech Criticism* (New York, 1970), p.430.

²⁴Johnson, op. cit., p.146.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., p.147.

²⁷Ibid., p.147.

²⁸Ibid., p.150.

²⁹Ibid., p.147.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., p.155.

³²Thonssen, et. al., op. cit., p.446.

³³Ibid., p.151.

³⁴Ibid., p.150.

³⁵Ibid., p.147.

³⁶Ibid., p.150.

³⁷Ibid., p.152.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.. pp.154-156.

⁴⁰Ibid., p.146.

⁴¹Ibid., p.151.