A Rhetorical Analysis of George W. Bush’s 9/11 Speech

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Writer’s Letter:

I enjoyed writing this essay. Finding a speech to use with good rhetorical devices was hard at first, because in most cases these rhetorical devices weren’t obvious, but after a bit of digging around, I settled with George W. Bush’s post 9/11 speech, because I vaguely remember watching it on TV with my parents around thirteen years ago. The purpose of this paper was to analyze a speech by a public figure for rhetorical devices, and I think this paper serves that purpose. I had a difficult time shifting the paper from just background information to the actual analysis of the speech.

I decided that instead of describing each rhetorical device and where they appear in the speech, I’d simply go through the speech sentence by sentence and describe what was going on in that order. I found this to be more effective because if I found a new rhetorical device in the speech later on that I didn’t see the first time I read it, I’d be able to add this more easily.

Every American knows of the horrifying terror attacks that took place on September 11th, 2001, in New York and Washington, DC. The terrorist organization al Qaeda hijacked four commercial airliners and flew two of them into the World Trade Center in New York, and one of them into the Pentagon in Washington. The fourth plane was stopped mid-flight by its
brave passengers and did not reach its intended target. Innocent civilians were now the casualties of war waged by an extremist Muslim terrorist group based out of Afghanistan. The United States had never witnessed any terrorist attack of this magnitude on its own soil previous to 2001. This was a day that American citizens would remember forever, not only because of the events themselves, but because of the war on terror that started after 9/11. A whole new level of security was implemented for nearly all modes of transportation going into and out of the United States, and now the American government shifted its focus to terrorist organizations. Eventually in 2011, Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind al Qaeda, was brought to justice.

The people of the United States were shocked of the events that took place in the economic and governmental capitals of the country, and America’s president at the time, George W. Bush, needed to address not only the nation, but the world in a calm, intelligent and appropriate manner. His speech to the world on the night of Tuesday, September 11th, set the stage for the United States foreign policy for the next decade and years to come. Not only did his speech address the events that had transpired hours previously, but it went on to explain the reaction of world leaders, how America would respond, and why America would pursue its enemy. The speech was given within 12 hours of the time the second tower fell in New York, yet it reacts to those sombre events adequately for being written in such a short amount of time.

Bush opened his speech by explaining what happened on 9/11 with an antithesis. His first sentence started with the American citizens, their way of life, and their very freedom and ended the sentence with a “series of deliberate and deadly terrorist attacks” (CNN). This sentence could relate to the morning of 9/11, when Americans were going about their business in New York and all of a sudden they were under attack. Bush then went on to
explain that the victims “were in airplanes or in their offices -- secretaries, businessmen and women, military and federal workers. Moms and dads. Friends and neighbors.” Bush’s diction was key here; he established pathos by explaining that the victims of 9/11 were friends and family of Americans, as they were Americans themselves. Bush addressed the emotion of every American who was shocked and scared of the events of 9/11 in these first sentences of his speech. This was key because these feelings were on the minds of everyone in his audience. This was also his warrant, hoping that all Americans were scared, angry, and shocked.

Bush established more ethos and pathos in the next few sentences by saying that “these acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat” (CNN). His statement described the sadness that Americans felt that day, but Bush then made a smart move in his speech; He changed the direction of the speech from negative to positive. This same paragraph ended with the statements that the American “country is strong. A great people has been moved to defend a great nation” (CNN). This would shape Bush’s foreign policy for the rest of his term as president. He used the sadness of 9/11 to try to build America as a stronger, more united nation against those who hated the American way of life.

Bush then used a hyperbole to strengthen his positive message about the American people growing stronger from the loss of 9/11: “America was targeted for attack because (it’s) the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining” (CNN). This statement definitely furthered his message of hope from loss. Another point he went on to discuss later in the speech included the opening of governmental buildings, American businesses and the New York Stock Exchange the next day, September 12th.
Bush’s speech eventually described his foreign policy goals for the rest of his term as president. He explained that “the search (was) underway for those who (were) behind these evil acts. (He’d) directed the full resources for intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and bring them to justice. (The American government) will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them” (CNN). This part of the speech accurately depicted the war in Afghanistan that started months after 9/11. Although Osama bin Laden, the head of al Qaeda, was killed by American forces in 2011, the United States still hasn’t (as of 2014) pulled all troops from Afghanistan.

Towards the end of the speech, Bush used an anaphora; he said “tonight I ask for your prayers for all those who grieve, for the children whose worlds have been shattered, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened. And I pray they will be comforted by a power greater than any of us spoken through the ages in Psalm 23...” (CNN). Bush started each statement with “I”, bringing the speech to a more personal level. This also established more pathos and ethos, because he was trying to get his audience to relate to him and he did so by being more modest. By starting every statement with “I”, Bush tried to be on the same level as the families of the victims of 9/11 and average Americans. He then ended his speech by briefly stating “Thank you. Good night and God bless America” (CNN).

George W. Bush’s speech on the night of September 11th, 2001 was not only a summary of the events that shook America and the world that day but also a foreshadowing of events yet to come. It would take ten years, another president in office, and the lives of thousands of American troops in Afghanistan to hunt down bin Laden, but eventually the United States did achieve President Bush’s goals. His speech is a chilling reminder of what America had experienced that day.
Works Cited:

“Text of Bush’s Address” CNN.com Cable News Network LP, LLLP 11