

Neo-Aristotelian Criticism of Barack Obama's 50th Anniversary Selma Speech

Za'kilya S. Faison

The State University of New York at Oswego

Abstract

An analysis of President Obama's speech during the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery marches. This analysis will be performed using Neo-Aristotelian Criticism and it will bring forth evidence as to why President Obama's speech was an effective argument. In his speech, he not only commends the civil rights act performed fifty years ago, but he defends American progress from then until now. I aim to apply the five canons of rhetoric when I analyze the effectiveness of President Barack Obama's speech. Throughout this critique, I will argue that Obama's speech convinced the audience that Selma marchers set a new course for American democracy although the ideals of America has not yet been perfected.

Keywords: America, Selma, Civil Rights, voting rights

Neo-Aristotelian Criticism of Barack Obama's 50th Anniversary Selma Speech

Introduction

On March 7th, 2015 during the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery marches, President Barack Obama delivered a speech at the same place where thousands of peaceful protesters were brutally attacked. Barack Obama, the first biracial president of the United States, gave a speech recognizing that America, however great, is still a work in progress fifty years after Selma. As President, Barack Obama delivered a speech that was inspiring, emotional, and at times galvanizing. He used the opportunity to not only commend the civil rights act performed fifty years ago, but to defend American progress throughout the years. In his speech, he argued that what happened on the bridge fifty years prior was what America was all about and I believe that this argument was presented effectively. Using Neo-Aristotelian criticism, I aim to apply the five canons of rhetoric to analyze the effectiveness of President Barack Obama's speech. Through this critique, I argue that Obama's speech convinced the audience that Selma marchers set a new course for American democracy though the ideals of America have not yet been perfected.

Contextualizing

During the 1960s, several southern states were rooted with enormous amounts of racist policies. On March 17th, 1965, protestors marched from Selma, Alabama to the state capital Montgomery with the hopes of getting African American voters registered in the south. While these people marched through the state, they were met with extreme hostility and violence which led to the deaths of many innocent people. On the other side of the country, in the capitol, President Lyndon Johnson was addressing a joint session of Congress. He aimed to discuss federal voting rights legislation that would protect African Americans from state laws that

prohibited them from voting. This was a historic march that many recognized activists participated in, including John Lewis and Martin Luther King Jr. This march showed the nation what black voters faced amid the south, and it demonstrated to the world why the nation needed a Voting Rights Act. Fifty years later, Barack Obama stood on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama where this march began and honored the civil rights act and the American progress.

The immediate audience for Obama's speech was the 40,000 men and women that showed up to hear him speak. This is evident when an audience member calls out, "We love you, President Obama!" and he replies, "Well, you know I love you back." The secondary audience is Congress and the viewers watching at home. It seems he is speaking to Congress and all the Americans watching because he mentions several people and says just that. "President and Mrs. Bush, Governor Bentley, Mayor Evans, Sewell, Reverend Strong, members of Congress, elected officials, foot soldiers, friends, fellow Americans: As John noted, there are places and moments in America where this nation's destiny has been decided..." As he continues to speak, it becomes evident that he is speaking to many others including young American voters. As a result of the marches from Selma to Montgomery, many people died for voting rights and Obama made a point that Americans cannot let that be in vain by not going to the polls to vote. He states, "If every new voter-suppression law was struck down today, we would still have, here in America, one of the lowest voting rates among free peoples... What's our excuse today for not voting? How do we so casually discard the right for which so many fought?" This further promotes his argument that after all the lives lost in Selma for voting rights, America still has work to do.

In thirty-two minutes, Barack Obama spoke to the people about Selma fifty years ago. I would argue his speech was timely because people have an attention span of thirty minutes

where they can absorb the most important information. In the middle of his speech, he was met with a constraint of a marching band close by, and he handles it by subtly raising his voice. To continue, his speech on the Edmund Pettus Bridge was deliberate with discussion regarding the events that happened so long ago and how Americans have made and are still making progress. Obama noted in his speech that Selma was such a place that defined the destiny of America just like many other historical events. Furthermore, Obama connected America's current voting situation to what was happening years ago, and he also brought up that often people will deny the change that America has fought so hard to accomplish. He says during his speech, "If you think nothing's changed in the past 50 years, ask somebody who lived through the Selma or Chicago or Los Angeles of the 1950s." Thus, I believe his speech was logically built-in accordance with relevant information to the public for them to understand that America has changed and is still changing.

Analysis

Invention

The introduction of Obama's speech describes how he views John Lewis, an activist who participated in the Selma marches, as his hero. I suspect during his invention of the speech Obama realized that the best means of persuasion was connecting with his audience. Since Barack Obama is bi-racial – half white and half black – making a connection to John Lewis was important because it allowed people to see him as someone who was impacted by John Lewis's bravery. He then makes another connection with the events of Selma and the people of the audience by reciting a verse that was sung during the doubtful moment of this historical event. He says, "The air was thick with doubt, anticipation, and fear. And they comforted themselves with the final verse of the final hymn they sung. No matter what may be the test, God will take

care of you; Lean, weary one, upon His breast, God will take care of you.” During this recital, the audience members cheered and shouted in agreement, “that’s right.” The choice to state these lines from the people who marched got the attention of the audience and allowed Obama to transition recognizing the history that came before Selma in connection to people in the government. In this way, he used inartistic proofs or information that could be found anywhere when he states

Many are sites of war -- Concord and Lexington, Appomattox, Gettysburg. Others are sites that symbolize the daring of America’s character -- Independence Hall and Seneca Falls, Kitty Hawk and Cape Canaveral. Selma is such a place. In one afternoon, 50 years ago, so much of our turbulent history -- the stain of slavery and anguish of civil war; the yoke of segregation and tyranny of Jim Crow; the death of four little girls in Birmingham; and the dream of a Baptist preacher -- all that history met on this bridge.

In a very clear and intelligent way, he convinces the audience that he recognizes the turmoil of American history, but nonetheless, it was a sacrifice that helped this country in finding its true meaning. Without blame, Barack Obama discusses this brutal history and instead calls for Americans to unite and continue, “marching towards justice.”

In this speech, Obama had more than enough to say to support his arguments. As a result of a history that was so brutal and not without success, he was able to make a connection back to modern America every time. His invention conveyed many artistic proofs in that as he describes the history surrounding Selma he often comes back to this idea of America and its making. I believe this is a crucial part of his arguments because even if listeners do not believe this event was related to Americanism, Obama repeats that it was indeed as American as we could get. For example, in his speech he says, “What could more profoundly vindicate the idea of America than

plain and humble people — unsung, the downtrodden, the dreamers not of high station, not born to wealth or privilege, not of one religious tradition but many — coming together to shape their country's course?" He is always deliberate and inclusive throughout his speech and that is another reason why his argument is effective.

Throughout his speech, he reaches multiple audiences because he is not putting the blame on anyone. President Obama empowers this idea that because we are American, we can have a say in how this country is made and developed just as people did during the Selma to Montgomery marches. For example, he gives plenty examples of the change that we can see when he states, "...and the change these men and women wrought is visible here today in the presence of African Americans who run boardrooms, who sit on the bench, who serve in elected office from small towns to big cities; from the Congressional Black Caucus all the way to the Oval Office" In this phrase, he connects himself to the event and change he is talking about and that riles the crowd up to applaud. Through this idea of an imperfect America, he awakens his audience to the reality that being self-critical and deciding there needs to be change throughout the nation makes everyone who participated in Selma or those affected today, American.

Delivery

The delivery of Obama's speech effectively promotes the idea that America is an exceptional place, but still a work in progress fifty years after Selma. President Barack Obama stood at the presidential podium dressed professionally and delivered his speech with poise, confidence, and with a few jokes. His varying tone and approach allowed him to retain the audience's attention during the thirty-two minutes he spoke. His speech was well organized, and the flow of it was easy to follow. He emphasized key points by heightening his tone of voice, and he did this effectively because he memorized his speech. Memorizing his speech permitted him

to be authentic and natural while implementing vocal variety when needed. President Obama maintains eye contact with his audience throughout the entire speech and uses hand gestures to emphasize various parts. This is demonstrated in many segments of the speech in which he emphasizes how the Selma to Montgomery marches contributed to the making of America. Obama's delivery was very effective in that he conveys the importance of this historical event and his belief in America as a whole.

Style

Obama's delivery of the speech captured the audience's attention. He was subtle enough not to impose his beliefs on the audience but conveyed the idea that the historical Civil Rights Movement was what America was about. For example, he states, "It was not a clash of armies, but a clash of wills; a contest to determine the true meaning of America. And because of men and women like John Lewis...Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and so many others, the idea of a just America and a fair America, an inclusive America, and a generous America -- that idea ultimately triumphed." In his speech, his use of language was clear and understandable.

There may have been a small use of jargon that the audience members did not understand, but there were always context clues. Something that President Obama did extremely well when reciting his speech was his addition of Bible verses and scriptures. This style appealed to much of the audience in Alabama who attends church. It also appeals to the audience watching in that people can relate to scriptures and Bible verses if they have faith in a higher power. As he says the scripture verses you would often hear the audience getting louder and expressing agreement to what they understood by those lines. His speech is even more powerful because he uses imagery and historical context to further create meaning that allows the audience to easily

engage with him. Moreover, that technique helps the audience to remember key points especially when he consistently repeats words such as America, nation, Selma, and change.

His style was concise, particularly when he was discussing the courage of the Americans who participated in the Selma marches. This is evident when he says, "The Americans who crossed this bridge, they were not physically imposing, but they gave courage to millions. They held no elected office. But they led a nation. They marched as Americans who had endured hundreds of years of brutal violence..." His choice to portray the marchers of Selma as Americans fighting for their American rights was genius. The people who marched fifty years prior to this had only been considered American for a short while and even as they were getting pounced on, I am sure they did not consider themselves American. During this day, fifty years later, he portrayed what the marchers did as the American thing to do. What better way to appeal to everyone, especially Congress? Moreover, President Obama's choice of words was dominantly formal especially when using long sentences, but he made sure to incorporate many informal phrases and short sentences such as "young folks." The language and word choice he chose to use in his speech made him understandable throughout the entirety. In fact, his language is used to juxtapose America's brutal past and its optimistic future and made his argument strong.

Arrangement

President Obama's speech was very organized, clear, and easy to follow. He arranges his thoughts and arguments in order to keep the audience's attention while expressing how this event shaped America. He opened with a brief introduction about the start of the day for Selma Marches fifty years ago. He then notes that because of the sacrifices made during the civil rights act the idea of a just, inclusive, and fair America prevailed. This proclamation does not go without him detailing past and present historical events. He recognizes what happened years ago

as an achievement because marchers were able to change the nation with nonviolent protest. He is also able to connect what happened long ago to American principles that developed in the wake of the marches. To further develop his ideas, Barack Obama talks about how America has changed but still has much changing to accomplish to make America a better place. In one line he states, "And if we make such an effort, no matter how hard it may sometimes seem, laws can be passed, and consciences can be stirred, and consensus can be built." President Obama uses this statement to discuss current and prominent issues in America which was the criminal justice system, poverty, and the protection of democracy. Lastly, before making a very impactful conclusion, he makes a call to action to anyone that can vote to vote because our predecessors fought so hard for those rights. His argument was organized in a way that details what it means to be American.

Memory

Lastly, the final canon of memory emphasizes how Barack Obama's speech is effective. He is confident, clear, and concise in his delivery, style, and invention. His speech on the 50th anniversary of Selma was dominated by ethos and pathos with little use of logos. He seemed trustworthy in that he was the President of the United States speaking and gathering with the people of Alabama. It is evident that he uses ethos to establish trust and credibility with the audience because he uses some informal language but recites historical events to show he can build a connection from Selma to other events in history. During the entirety of his speech, he used pathos to establish a connection with the audience. He used Pathos in various ways such as describing the day of the marchers in detail, reciting Bible verses sung during moments of doubt, noting the harsh treatments that the people faced on the bridge, and honoring the sacrifices that

paved the way for so many people. His use of rhetorical appeal and his background as a bi-racial American helped him to deliver this speech in a powerful and memorable way.

Conclusion

Having used the Neo-Aristotelian critical approach to assess the effectiveness of President Barack Obama's speech, it is evident that he effectively convinces his audience that America is a work in progress, but because it is America, we can fight for change. His speech was very articulate and moving. He did not impose his beliefs on his audience, and he was very inclusive in developing the speech. It is amazing how he balanced facts, personal connections, narrative, and history. Throughout his speech, he uses various rhetorical devices to present a convincing argument that American is a place where people can rise to make a change. His speech matters because the march from Selma to Montgomery was extremely important in shaping our nation. So much has come from that sorrowful history, but Americans still push for change no matter how long it takes. President Obama's speech is especially important because we live in a time where voting in America is extremely low when almost a century ago people were dying and humiliating themselves for the mere chance to vote. In closing, President Obama's remarks on the 50th Anniversary of the Selma March was very effective.

References

[The Obama White House]. (2015, March 7). *President Obama Delivers Remarks on the 50th*

Anniversary of the Selma Marches [Video File]. Retrieved from

<http://youtu.be/gvAIvauhQGQ>

Remarks by the President at the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches [Speech

Transcript]. (2015, March 7). Retrieved February 28, 2019, from <https://obama>

whitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/07/remarks-president-50th-

[anniversary-selma-montgomery-marches](https://whitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/07/remarks-president-50th-anniversary-selma-montgomery-marches)