SEMINAR IN PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC

PSC/CSS 5350
Fall 2011

Dr. Martin J. Medhurst

No person’s rhetoric receives more attention—deserved or undeserved—than that of the President of the United States. From major speeches such as the Inaugural Address or the State of the Union to press conferences to campaign discourses (including websites, facebook, tweets, convention films, television spots, radio ads, debates, bumper stickers, etc.) to impromptu reactions—everything the President says and does is grist for someone’s interpretive mill. Indeed, the modern presidency produces so much rhetoric, disseminated through so many different media, at all hours of the day and night, to audiences large and small, foreign and domestic, that it is virtually impossible for any one person to keep up with it all, even if that were one’s sole occupation.

James Ceaser, Glen Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph Bessette coined the phrase "the rhetorical presidency" in 1981 to describe this overflowing fountain of presidential discourse and to distinguish the modern presidency—starting with Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—from the presidency of the late 18th and 19th centuries. Modern presidents, unlike most of their predecessors, appear to view rhetoric as an important tool of presidential leadership. The ability to go "over the heads" of Congress by appealing directly to the public is viewed by Ceaser, et al. as the essence of “the rhetorical presidency,” a fact that many political theorists such as Ceaser and Tulis view with some degree of alarm.

Rhetorical scholars have long studied presidential rhetoric, though it has only been within the last 30 years or so that presidential rhetoric has emerged as a distinct subdiscipline within the larger world of rhetorical studies. Indeed, the sustained book-length analysis of presidential rhetoric is a phenomenon that dates only from the middle 1980s.

Course Goals: I have several goals for this course. It is my firm belief that the study of rhetoric—any kind of rhetoric—can only be fruitful if studied in context. That means that it is not enough just to read what a President said on a given occasion. Nor is it sufficient simply to learn the standard types of rhetoric commonly associated with U.S. Presidents. The speech text is essentially meaningless (not to mention misleading) absent the relevant contextual factors. Speech is a force or a power that is used to accomplish different kinds of ends or goals in different circumstances. Hence, one must understand the purposes or goals of the communicator (i.e., the President), the circumstances under which the communication is taking place (i.e., the rhetorical exigencies and constraints), the audience or audiences being addressed, the genres of discourse being employed, the theories or techniques of rhetoric being utilized, and the standards of judgment that are implicitly or explicitly suggested by the particular confluence of textual and contextual factors. In short, one must really study presidential rhetoric, not merely consume it.
Toward this end, I want this course to: 1) survey selected presidential rhetoric from 1789 to the present; 2) expose students to significant types and texts of presidential discourse; 3) learn ways of studying texts in contexts; 4) study some of the methodological approaches to presidential rhetoric now being used by scholars in both political science and rhetorical studies; 5) learn what has already been done and, more importantly, what still needs doing in the study of presidential rhetoric; and 6) struggle with significant theories, problems, and criticisms in presidential discourse. If we can accomplish all of this, we will have done something worthwhile. By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Identify the components of a complex rhetorical situation
- Discuss the various methodological approaches, including their strengths and weaknesses
- Explain the theory of the rhetorical presidency and identify its primary advocates and opponents
- Differentiate the rhetorical presidency and presidential rhetoric
- Display research skills using historical-critical methods
- Write a graduate-level research paper suitable for publication in an academic journal

**Course Requirements:**

1) Come to class regularly and participate in the discussion
2) Read the week’s assigned readings before arriving for class
3) Write a major paper (20-30 pages) on a rhetorical controversy (or, better, a political controversy having rhetorical dimensions) that occurred during the course of a presidential administration. Although we will be focusing on the administrations of Washington, Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Reagan, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, you may write your paper on any presidential administration. Representative controversies might include the Whiskey Rebellion (Washington), any major event of the Civil War (Lincoln), natural resource conservation (T. Roosevelt), the League of Nations debates (Wilson), the court packing scheme (Roosevelt), sputnik crisis (Eisenhower), Voting Rights Act (Johnson), strategic defense initiative (Reagan), health care bill (Clinton), the Iraq war (Bush), and the health care reform debate (Obama). Please note that these are merely representative types of controversies. You should find a topic/controversy in which you are particularly interested. Please clear your topic with me no later than the end of week four (September 22).

4) To facilitate the timely completion of this major paper, you will turn in three shorter papers and a first draft of the major paper. The first short paper is due on Thursday, September 15 and should consist of a) the name of the president/administration you will be studying, b) a list of three major issues or controversies that arose during that administration, and c) a two-page bibliography of the leading books and articles about the president/administration you have chosen. The second short paper is due on Thursday, September 29, and should identify the particular issue or controversy you will be studying and a two-page bibliography of books and
articles that deal specifically with that issue or controversy. The third short paper is due on Thursday, October 27, and should consist of a single page divided into two paragraphs. The first paragraph should set forth the argument you are going to make in your major paper and the second paragraph should describe the different sections of the paper—it should be a signpost of how you intend to go about proving the argument you have set forth.

The first draft of the final paper itself is due on Thursday, November 10, with the final draft due on Thursday, December 8. Both the first and second drafts must be complete, including endnotes. All endnotes should conform to the modified Chicago documentary style used by Rhetoric & Public Affairs. A style sheet will be provided.

Course Evaluation:  
Class attendance and participation: 20%  
Three short papers 30%  
First Draft of Final Paper 20%  
Second Draft of Final Paper 30%

Scale:  
100-95 = A  
94-90 = A-  
89-87 = B+  
86-83 = B  
82-80 = B-  
79-77 = C+  
76-73 = C  
72-70 = C-  
69-67 = D+  
66-63 = D  
62-60 = D-  
59- = F

Required Textbooks:  

Martin J. Medhurst, ed., Before the Rhetorical Presidency (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008)

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008)


**Recommended Readings:**


Davis W. Houck, *FDR and Fear Itself: The First Inaugural Address* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002)


**Helpful Websites:**

- [http://www.americanrhetoric.com/](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/)
- [http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com](http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com)
- [http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)

**SYLLABUS**

**Note:** Readings not found in the required textbooks will be posted on blackboard or sent via email attachment. Journal articles can be accessed through the electronic databases Communication and Mass Media Complete or JSTOR

**Week 1: August 25**

**The Rhetorical Presidency as Construct: An Ongoing Debate**

**READ:** Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (all)


Week 2: September 1

Presidential Rhetoric as Construct

READ:


Week 3: September 8

**Establishing the First Rhetorical Presidency through Presidential Rhetoric: The Case of George Washington**

**READ:**


Glen E. Thurow, "Dimensions of Presidential Character,” in *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency*, 15-29. [Blackboard]


Week 4: September 15

**The Nineteenth Century Rhetorical Presidency**

**READ:**


**Standard Genres of Presidential Discourse**

**Week 5: September 22**  
**The Inaugural Address**

**READ:** Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 29-72.

Charles O. Jones, “The Inaugural Address,” in *The President’s Words*, 87-146.

John M. Murphy, “Power and Authority in a Postmodern Presidency,” in *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric*, 28-45.


Week 6: September 29  

**The State of the Union Address**

**READ:**  
Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 137-164.

Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, “The State of the Union Address,” in *The President’s Words*, 147-205.


Week 7: October 6

**The Rhetoric of War and Other Crises**

**READ:**


Andrew Rudaleviage, “The Crisis Speech and Other Landmark Addresses,” in *The President’s Words*, 206-273.


Carol Winkler, “Revising the Cold War Narrative to Encompass Terrorist Threats: Vietnam and Beyond,” in *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric*, 182-208.

Week 8: October 13

**Presidential Campaign Rhetoric**

**READ:**


259-282.


**Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Presidencies**

**Week 9: October 20**

**The Rhetoric of Woodrow Wilson**

**READ:** Wilson’s War Message

*http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/wilsonwarmessage.htm*


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**Week 10: October 27**

**The Rhetoric of Franklin D. Roosevelt**

READ:   
**FDR’s First Inaugural Address**  


Week 11: November 3

The Rhetoric of Dwight D. Eisenhower

READ: Eisenhower’s Farewell Address
http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/dwightdeisenhowerfarewell.html


Campbell and Jamieson, Presidents Creating the Presidency, 307-334.


Week 12: November 10

The Rhetoric of John F. Kennedy

READ: JFK’s Speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association
http://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkhoustonministers.html


Week 13: November 17

The Rhetoric of Ronald Reagan

READ: Reagan’s Evil Empire Speech
http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreaganevilempire.htm


Week 14: November 24  
**The Rhetoric of George W. Bush**

**READ:** Bush’s “Our Mission and Our Moment” Speech  
[http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911jointsessionspeech.htm](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911jointsessionspeech.htm)


John M. Murphy, “‘Our Mission and Our Moment’: George W. Bush and September 11th,” *Rhetoric &


Week 15: December 1

The Rhetoric of Barack Obama


