Rhetorical Analysis - Rough Draft
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In the wake of a the highly-contest 2000 presidential election, George W. Bush was finally declared the winner on December 12, 2000, with opponent Al Gore conceding the election officially the following evening. Fast forward just over one month later, and the former Governor of Texas stands at the podium in Washington, DC, the newly-sworn-in most powerful man in the world about to deliver his first inaugural address to the country. With a record number of protestors lining the streets of the capitol that morning charging Bush with thievery of the presidency, President Bush delivers an address in which he tries to assuage these protestors and establish an emotional and personal connection with the American populace while attempting to bolster his sense of credibility and trust. In doing so, he delivers a speech that, while hampered slightly by a flat delivery, carries a timeless, meaningful message.

The beginning of the speech serves as a medium for Bush to establish himself to the public with a sense of credibility and a tone of humility. He opens with a reference to America's history, a theme which will continue throughout the oration. In the context of the highly contested presidential race, he appropriately mentions America's history of peaceful transfers of power, confirming that this election is no different. As is tradition for first-term presidents, he thanks the outgoing President Clinton and then Vice President Gore for an election "[...] conducted with spirit and ended with grace." Thus, Bush manages to remain humble while subtly asserting the power that has been peacefully bestowed upon himself. He continues by introducing his audience to a story: "[...] a story we continue [...]," "[..] the story of a new world [...]," a story in which we all have a place and a role. His repeated use of the word "story" moves

the speech towards the climax of the beginning section: “It is the American story,” a story Bush says is of generations united by ideals, “the grandest of these ideals” being that “everyone belongs, that everyone deserves a chance, that no insignificant person was ever born.” In one of several such artful transitions, Bush emphases a word (in this case “ideals”) and then uses the word to craft another assertion. And all the while Bush is sure to use inclusive words such as “we,” and “everyone” to appeal to the emotions of his primary audience: the American public.

Bush references America’s history as “a slave-holding that became a servant of freedom,” spinning the usual negative connotation of the slave history of our country into a valiant triumph for freedom, thus directing his audience’s attention away from the negative aspects of American history and towards the positive and altruistic. For example, he uses metaphors to describe American solidarity behind the nation’s principles, asserting, “Through much of the last century, America’s faith in freedom and democracy was a rock in a raging sea. Now it is a seed upon the wind, taking root in many nations.” Bush paints a picture of the nation and its people as warriors performing their duties for the higher cause of freedom, a model for other nations. It is a picture that would make an American swell with pride, but it is one with which Bush’s secondary audience--the rest of the world--might not wholly agree.

Bush then transitions to a less uplifting segment of his speech--a transition from the moving and inspiring beginning to a more instructional second section. Bush introduces a problem--a problem that “We do not accept [...] and we will not allow”: “While many of our citizens prosper, other doubt the promise, even the justice, of our country.” By choosing the world “we,” Bush makes assigns the responsibility for correcting it to “our unity, our union.” Then he offers his pledge of the role he will play in correcting it: “I will work to build a single

nation of justice and opportunity." It is a pledge which arguably forms the basis for the speech from this point forth.

Bush goes on to define the ideals by which America is bound together: "civility, courage, compassion, and character." And in assertion of these principles Bush begins to describe "America, at its best," a motif which guides the body of his speech. This tagline is repeated to introduce each ideal and to lead into a further expansion upon it.

Upon each of these ideals Bush generally elaborates in the past, present and future. He states, "America, at its best, is also courageous." Bush describes what America's courage has been and defines what decision must be made now ("if the example of our fathers and mothers will inspire us [pause for effect] or condemn us"). He asserts, "We must show courage [...] by confronting problems instead of passing them on to future generations," a statement which seems like the political fluff that continues to this day but is never carried out (but that is the subject of a different analysis). Following from Bush's assertion of what America must choose to do, he then outlines how it will be done: "Together, we will reclaim America's schools," "We will reform Social Security and Medicare," "We will build our defenses," and so on and so forth. It is the political rhetoric the American public has come to accept as typical and somewhat devoid of meaning. Nevertheless, Bush continues to build his emotional connection with the American people with words such as "together" and the repetition of "we will" no fewer than nine times in the fourteen sentences that form the section on courage. But Bush's delivery is not effective in adding emphasis to the worn political rhetoric. He is poised and calm, but lacking any emotion; while his words have the potential for a build with the repeated phrase, in reality the speech remains relatively flat, with little change in volume, pitch, or emotion evident from the podium.

In his description of American compassion, Bush starts to lose the slightest handle on the structured, logical flow of his oration. He starts with his assertion: “America, at its best, is compassionate,” but then proceeds to state that “we know that deep persistent poverty is unworthy of our nation’s promise.” It is slightly unclear where the idea of “persistent poverty” arose from in the context of Bush’s speech; a bit more development of this idea would most likely be beneficial to the comprehension of his audience. Likewise, President Bush continues, “And whatever our views of its cause, we can agree that children at risk are not at fault. Abandonment and abuse are not acts of God, they are failures of love.” One may be able to ascertain that the idea of love coincides with the theme of compassion, but abandonment and abuse seemingly appeared from nowhere in the speech. Here again, more context and framing would be useful. Bush’s speech does refocus a few sentences later, but likely not without leaving the audience confused. Bush states, “Government has great responsibilities, [...] yet compassion is the work of a nation, not just the government,” thus placing the responsibility primarily on the American people to uphold the nation’s ideal of compassion. [While some may contend that Bush is weakly attempting to absolve the government of yet another of its duties, but perhaps Bush is accurate in stating that while the government may be better at managing public safety, it is far less effective in providing compassion than individuals. Government is big and abstract, often not relatable to (and sometimes the self-perceived enemy of) the people, whereas fellow American citizens are much more effective at dealing with other individuals.] *(perhaps too tangential)*

Lastly, in describing the last of his four stated ideals--character--Bush begins to ascend to the climax of his speech. Bush advocates for personal responsibility instead of the search for

scapegoats, maintaining, “The most important tasks of a democracy are done by everyone.” Bush’s next words are “I will,” as he describes his promises to uphold American values, but the “I will” quickly turns into “I ask” of all American citizens--his final call to action. “To seek a common good beyond your comfort,” “to serve your nation,” “to be citizens,” and to create a nation of character are what President Bush asks of his nation. This call to action is perhaps the most timeless part of his speech; these values would later play an intangible role in the reconstruction of America after the violent attacks only eight months into the future. And for as long as America has values and people who believe in them, President Bush’s words will have meaning.

In his conclusion, Bush ties back in with the story of American history he opened with, thus settling and resolving back into a final metaphor and the mandatory display of patriotism: “God bless you all, and God bless America.”