

PETER LANG

The Evolutionary Rhetorical Presidency

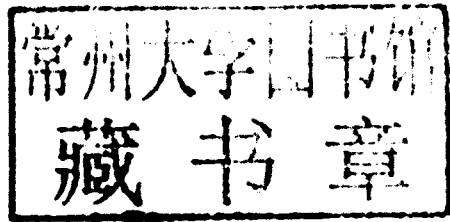
TRACING THE CHANGES
IN PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS AND POWER

RYAN LEE TETEN

Ryan Lee Teten

The Evolutionary Rhetorical Presidency

Tracing the Changes
in Presidential Address and Power



PETER LANG

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

The Evolutionary Rhetorical Presidency

"Twenty-five years ago Gary King issued a call to presidency scholars, urging them to collect systematic data about the operation of our chief executive. Many have answered this call. Ryan Lee Teten is the latest to do so with *The Evolutionary Rhetorical Presidency*. He has collected an amazing array of data that tells an important story about the presidency and how the institution has changed. This book is a welcome and valuable addition to the field."

*John Geer, Distinguished Professor and Chair,
Department of Political Science, and Co-Director
of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions,
Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee*

"All the conclusions Ryan Lee Teten draws are based on literally thousands of primary documents; he cites the pertinent scholarship in connection with new findings and then presents convincing arguments for leaving the unnatural divide of traditional/modern presidential rhetoric behind. With this study Teten proves that scholars have in fact worked on presidential rhetoric with a certain set of preconceived notions. The time has surely come to correct this misconception, and there is no doubt that scholars of presidential rhetoric and history will have to revise their traditional views."

*Wolfgang Mieder, Department of German and Russian,
University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont*

"Are 'modern' presidents really so different from their 'traditional' predecessors regarding rhetoric? In his new book, Ryan Lee Teten argues that they are more similar than conventional wisdom suggests. Clearly written, insightful, and backed by a wealth of data, Teten's *The Evolutionary Rhetorical Presidency* is an important contribution to the body of literature on presidential rhetoric."

*Jeffrey Crouch, Assistant Professor of American Politics,
American University; Author of The Presidential Pardon Power*

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To Aidan and Seth, who always help me to remember what is important
and
To my incredible wife Tonya, whose support, encouragement, and love
made all of this possible.

“In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.”
Proverbs 16:9

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CHAPTER I

Rhetorical Leadership and Presidential Speechmaking Throughout History

ON THE eve of January 29, 2002, George W. Bush delivered a State of the Union Address in an atmosphere like the nation had not seen in almost sixty years. On the heels of September 11, 2001, and the deaths of nearly 3000 individuals, the president spent over half of the State of the Union Address proposing plans to fight domestic and foreign terrorism. He spoke in abstract terms, telling the nation that, “tens of thousands of trained terrorists are still at large. These enemies view the entire world as a battlefield, and we must pursue them wherever they are.” He then spoke concerning terrorism stating, “Our nation will continue to be steadfast and patient and persistent in the pursuit of two great objectives. First, we will shut down terrorist camps, disrupt terrorist plans, and bring terrorists to justice. And, second, we must prevent the terrorists and regimes who seek chemical, biological or nuclear weapons from threatening the United States and the world. But some governments will be timid in the face of terror. And make no mistake about it: If they do not act, America will.” He continued with even more rhetoric on specific policies and goals. “We need to replace aging aircraft and make our military more agile, to put our troops anywhere in the world quickly and safely. Our men and women in uniform deserve the best weapons, the best equipment, the best training—and they also deserve another pay raise. My budget includes the largest increase in defense spending in two decades—because while the price of freedom and security is high, it is never too high. Whatever it costs to defend our country, we will pay.”

The modern-day State of the Union Address is undeniably one rhetorical tool that presidents today use to convey their thoughts, propose their own

programs and policies, communicate with the public, leave their legacies and set the tone for new administrations. The examination above of the State of the Union Address of George W. Bush in 2002 illustrates many different aspects of presidential rhetoric today. The President was able to speak to the people and address issues, both in the abstract and in their most specific sense, and still propose his policy agenda while doing so. He utilized the State of the Union Address to convey his goals and objectives in both large and small terms in order to get the information to the American people and Congress, and to initiate policy on Capitol Hill. In addition, Bush noted his place in American and world history as the leader that presided over the United States on September 11th, 2001, and as the leader who would determine guilt for the crime and administer justice. Finally, Bush also used many rhetorical techniques of address, speaking as a citizen of the United States, as a member of the governing body in America, and as the president of the United States, passing policy recommendations to Congress in order to make his positions known and advocate the policy objectives he sought to be accomplished.

Notably, however, this kind of policy activism and popular address is not often viewed as a tendency of the presidencies of the 18th and 19th centuries, and certainly not as a characteristic of the founding presidents of the nation. Instead, much of the study tends to ascribe, at times, to the tenets of a “traditional/modern” divide: a categorization of the presidents into two eras on the basis of their rhetoric, their political activity, and, also, their seeming value for academic investigation. Those presidents that governed before the early 1900’s are largely dismissed as being more rhetorically stagnant and politically less innovative than their twentieth century counterparts. These presidents of old are allegedly bound by the propriety of their position and the constraints placed on them by the constitution. It does not take long, however, to determine that this kind of stereotyping of presidential rhetoric and history is problematic at best. Even though they are often dismissed as less characteristic of modern rhetoric and presidential behavior, even the earliest State of the Union addresses suggest differently. For example, on January 8, 1790, George Washington approached the podium in front of a joint session of Congress to deliver the first State of the Union Address in presidential history. Although some scholars have suggested that this Address simply updated prior congressional policy and informed the Congress on the rela-

tions with foreign countries (Campbell and Jamieson, 1990), a close examination of the text illustrates that much more is being presented.

Washington was indeed the country's first and unanimous choice for president. During the struggle of the colonies against the accused tyranny of King George, Washington had been one of the most able generals in the Revolutionary Army and one of the most clever tacticians, as seen in his Christmas Day crossing of the Delaware to defeat the Hessians who were drunk, asleep, and unprepared; this turned the tide of the Revolutionary effort against Britain. Indeed, his presence as presiding officer at the Constitutional Convention, although he was largely silent, gave stability to the proceedings and a feeling to the delegates that they were both in capable hands and that they were civilly following the operations of government-building. "Both at Philadelphia and in the ensuing months, Americans of every viewpoint seemed to have assumed that there was only one man who could and would inaugurate the presidential office: General Washington" (Cunliffe, 1971, 8). Even those suspicious of the new system of government kept their oppositional rumblings to "other features of the constitution, or—like Franklin—on the hazards that would befall America after Washington had gone" (Cunliffe, 1971, 9). Washington himself was hesitant about accepting this post which could seemingly go to no one else. He worried about the neglect of his affairs at Mount Vernon, the distance from his family, the possibility that his reputation and service to the country would be dragged through the mud if challenges arose, and, at 56 years old, that he had already given many years in the service of the United States; however, when the vote was tallied, each of the 69 electors had cast their vote for George Washington.

The first State of the Union Address, however, was not simply an Address by a hesitant president, unsure of his position and worried about his future. Washington did more than simply summarize the state of the colonies; he proposed many policies that succeeding presidents would also advocate and expand upon. Giving the address on the heels of the Revolutionary War, a president who was afraid to act would surely not delve immediately into the necessity of armaments and weapons of war; however, that is exactly what Washington did. He addressed Congress with authority, suggesting,

"among the many interesting objects which will engage your attention that of providing for the common defense will merit particular regard. To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace. A free people ought not only to be armed, but disciplined; to which end a uniform and well-digested plan is requisite; and their safety and interest require that they should promote such manufac-

ries as tend to render them independent of others for essential, particularly military, supplies.”

After making this military stand for the necessity of the troops, he continued to propose that, “the proper establishment of the troops which may be deemed indispensable will be entitled to mature consideration. In the arrangements which may be made respecting it will be of importance to conciliate the comfortable support of the officers and soldiers with a due regard to economy. We ought to be prepared to afford protection to those parts of the Union, and, if necessary, to punish aggressors.” For many years to come, this propriety of a standing army would be a point of discussion between Congress and the presidency.

As a former General, Washington did not limit his policy proposals to military aspects of the colonies. He proposed that “various considerations also render it expedient that the terms on which foreigners may be admitted to the rights of citizens should be speedily ascertained by a uniform rule of naturalization.” In addition he proposed that, “uniformity in the currency, weights, and measures of the United States is an object of great importance, and will, I am persuaded, be duly attended to.” Washington boldly touched on the emerging economic, educational, and postal concerns of the nation, directing the Congress towards the subjects that he believed were of greatest import for the fledgling country.

“The advancement of agriculture, commerce, and manufactures by all proper means will not, I trust, need recommendation; but I can not forbear intimating to you the expediency of giving effectual encouragement as well to the introduction of new and useful inventions from abroad as to the exertions of skill and genius in producing them at home, and of facilitating the intercourse between the distant parts of our country by a due attention to the post-office and post-roads...Nor am I less persuaded that you will agree with me in opinion that there is nothing which can better deserve your patronage than the promotion of science and literature...Whether this desirable object will be best promoted by affording aids to seminaries of learning already established, by the institution of a national university, or by any other expedients will be well worthy of a place in the deliberations of the legislature.”

A national university, promotions of sciences and literature, and encouragement of invention were policies that even the very first president saw as indispensable. And, far from simple reports on naval positions or the budgetary situations of the country, Washington’s Address included policy advocacy similar to that proposed by presidents almost two hundred years later.