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Rallying a Nation:

A Neoclassical Rhetorical Criticism of Franklin D. Roosevelt's War Address

Early in the morning on December 8, 1941, while the island of Oahu was still waking, a massive wave of Japanese aircraft let loose their wrath upon United States naval forces stationed at Pearl Harbor. After only two hours of nearly relentless bombing, 1,178 individuals were injured, and 2,403 others lost their lives, including 68 civilians (Dept. of Defense). The United States had come under direct attack, and as a result, its status as neutral in the current overseas conflict appeared in need of active change. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the nation's 32nd president, was faced with a task not set before many of his predecessors; set before him was the task of persuading Congress to declare war on the Empire of Japan. His biggest hurdle, convincing the American public that isolationism had to be abandoned and reassuring them of the results of such an action, was larger than persuading the United States Congress of the necessity of military action. Only by embracing Aristotle's methods of persuasion (*logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*) and using them effectively, could Roosevelt have ever hoped to accomplish such a gargantuan task. Through the utilization of neoclassical rhetorical criticism, evidence will be shown that proves the means of persuasion exhibited in President Roosevelt's "A Date Which Will Live in Infamy" address influenced Congress to declare war on Japan and ultimately gave support and encouragement to the American people, resulting in their reciprocal support of the war effort.

Before one can discuss the effects of the text, the rhetor behind the text, or even the text itself, the process of neoclassical rhetorical criticism must be thoroughly understood. According to Sonja Foss, in her book *Rhetorical Criticism: Explorations and Practice*, the term *rhetoric* is defined as “the human use of symbols to communicate” (4). This classification shows that rhetoric is a rather broad field, intimately embedding itself in the lives of presidents and citizens alike. Every symbol creates meaning, which in turn constructs each individual’s concept of social reality. Rhetorical criticism is “a qualitative research method,” argues Foss, “that is designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes” (6). Furthermore, rhetorical criticism that is specifically “neoclassical” focuses on how the artifact functions within its context and the overall effect that it has on its audience. Thus, the practice of rhetorical criticism is of high importance, because it provides the way in which meaningful symbols can be analyzed and interpreted in order to obtain an increased understanding of past, present, and future communication experiences.

The selection of Roosevelt’s address as a topic for rhetorical criticism is supported by its status as a highly unique artifact for dissecting; feelings about war were mixed, emotions ran high, security was a fear, and Roosevelt placed himself in the position to be the anchor in the midst of the troubled waters of confusion and disarray. Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States had attempted to be isolationist in its considerations of the war. Having already endured one worldwide war and a global economic depression in just a little over two decades, the American public had solid reasons for believing that involvement in the war was not in its best interests. Yet the surprise attack by the Japanese Empire set the stage for Roosevelt’s address. While each area of rhetorical construction is important in this piece, above all the others,

invention stands as the most profound aspect of “A Date Which Will Live in Infamy.” His masterful use of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* made it possible to convince Congress of the existing state of war, assure the American people of victory, and gain support for the coming hostilities.

Logos refers to the logical set of appeals made to the audience. Aristotle counted this area of persuasion to be the most important of the three because he knew that following a straightforward, intellectual progression through an argument establishes a firmly reasoned case that is hard to deny. Roosevelt seemed to agree, making it a point to lead his listeners through an inductive thought process. He forcefully claims, “It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago” (Appendix A 6). In lines 11 through 17, Roosevelt repeats some form of the phrase “Last night Japanese forces attacked...” in order to emphasize the general conclusion that the Japanese had “undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area” (Appendix A). Furthermore, he reasons that hostilities exist between the United States and Japan because American people, territory, and interests are in extreme danger. Because of the existence of these hostilities, and because the Japanese attack was “unprovoked and dastardly,” he logically argues that war should be declared against Japan (Appendix A 24, 26). Overall, the President’s entire speech resembles the following enthymeme, where the Major Premise is only alluded to in the closing lines of the speech:

Major Premise: When hostilities exist between nations, a state of war should be declared.

Minor Premise: The recent actions of the Japanese Empire constitute “hostilities.”

Conclusion: The United States should declare war on the Japanese Empire.

Roosevelt’s emphasis on linear, logical argument can be explained by Petty and Cacioppo’s elaboration likelihood model (ELM). According to ELM, those audience members who make the

effort to thoroughly elaborate the argument arrive at lasting results—results like daily sacrificing to support the war effort or declaring war on Japan (Griffin 199). Roosevelt knew that, in order to get the results needed to defend the country, he needed to stick very close to logical proofs and the central route of elaboration.

Also addressed in neoclassical rhetorical criticism is *ethos*, the ethical guidelines for a speaker. Audience members tend to look beyond the message to the person giving it. Thus, it was important for Roosevelt's audience to take note of his perceived intelligence, moral character, and goodwill toward them. Roosevelt entered the speaking situation with these areas already at a peak. In the eyes of the American population, his New Deal had carried America through the most severe economic slump it had ever experienced. January 1941 had marked his third consecutive inauguration—more than any other president, past or present. The public identified with him on an almost personal level; he had been a friend to millions of Americans during his “fireside chats” throughout the Great Depression. In addition to his firm grasp on *ethos*, he delivered a text capable of causing a perceived increase in his credibility. His previously discussed linear logic, for example, showed that he was willing to reason ethically with his audience. In lines 20 through 25, he commonly used pronouns like “us” and “we” and possessives like “our” to prove his goodwill toward, and unity with, the American people (Appendix A). Furthermore, his consistent references to the “United States” and the “nation” demonstrated his concern for the entire country whose safety was in his hands. President Roosevelt's established *ethos* reassured his listeners that his plan for action was the correct one, just as it had been so many times before. Because they found him to be credible, Congress felt secure agreeing to Roosevelt's request, and the public gained hope by clinging to their anchor—ever-present in times of trouble.

Finally, invention covers *pathos*, the emotional and value-based appeals made by a speaker. Once again referencing Petty and Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model, it is thought that the peripheral route (focusing more on the speaker and the surroundings rather than on the message itself) leads to little or no resolve to change behavior (Griffin 199). Roosevelt seemed to understand the thought behind this concept. Therefore, he derived each emotional appeal from one of his *logos*-related arguments and chose to express the appeal through deliberate word choice. For example, he hinted at his major premise when he referred to the Japanese attacks as "unprovoked and dastardly" (Appendix A 26). He used loaded language to assert that Japan "deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace" (Appendix A 7). He found that Japan could not be trusted any longer and made it clear that "our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger" (Appendix A 24). According to Reid and Klumpp in *American Rhetorical Discourse*, "...a terrible defeat had occurred and rumors were spreading like wildfire. Some rumors were true...some false. All of them heightened fear and security" (730). Roosevelt knew that his nation was worried, but his regular assertions as to the "righteous might" and "unbounding determination" of the American people gave them the courage that comes through a solidified group identity. The President's use of *pathos* remained consistent with his ethical treatment of the other areas of persuasion: he knew that if handled with care, *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* could be used greatly to his advantage.

And to his advantage they proved to be; in addition to the United States Congress interrupting the his speech with bouts of adamant applause, it granted Roosevelt's request for a declaration of war only a few hours after receiving his address. Furthermore, the American people sacrificed to support the war effort. Many individuals purchased war bonds, and others donated everyday items like nylons, rubber, and various metals; anything that could benefit the

troops was rationed in the United States. Families raised victory gardens in their backyards, and women went to work in factories, following the example of Rosie the Riveter.

Overall, the President's speech had a tremendous effect on the nation as a whole. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was devastating and the tragic impact widespread. If the United States had remained in a state of shock and confusion, history as we know it might have had a completely different outcome. Fortunately, America did not sulk. Thanks to President Roosevelt's well-constructed speech, Congress was convinced to declare war. Because of Roosevelt's effective use of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, citizens of the United States heard straightforward reassurance from their trusted leader, and they responded by giving him their full-fledged support. Through the lens of neoclassical rhetorical criticism the evidence is obvious that President Roosevelt's "A Date Which Will Live in Infamy" address encouraged and supported the nation's populace, convinced Congress of the importance of declaring war on Japan, and urged the United States on to become a world power. Great speeches have great impacts, and I would hate to see where America would be today without "A Date Which Will Live in Infamy."

THE PRESIDENT'S WAR ADDRESS

WE WILL GAIN THE INEVITABLE TRIUMPH SO HELP US GOD

1. To The Joint Session of Congress of the United States at Washington, D.C., on December 8, 1941, at 12:30 P.M.
2. Yesterday, December 7, 1941 -- a date which will live in infamy -- the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.
3. The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its Government and its Emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific.
4. Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing Oahu, the Japanese Ambassador to the United States and his colleague delivered to the Secretary of State a formal reply to a recent American message.
5. While this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or armed attack.
6. It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago.
7. During the intervening time, the Japanese Government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.
8. The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian Islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces.
9. Very many American lives have been lost.
10. In addition, American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.
11. Yesterday the Japanese Government also launched an attack against Malaya.
12. Last night Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.
13. Last night Japanese forces attacked Guam.
14. Last night Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.
15. Last night the Japanese attacked Wake Island.
16. This morning the Japanese attacked Midway Island.
17. Japan has, therefore, undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area.
18. The facts of yesterday speak for themselves.
19. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation.
20. As Commander in Chief of the army and navy I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense.
21. Always will we remember the character of the onslaught against us.
22. No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.
23. I believe I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make very certain that this form of treachery shall never endanger us again.

24. Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory and our interests are in grave danger.
25. With confidence in our armed forces with the unbounding determination of our people we will gain the inevitable triumph -- so help us God.
26. I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.

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