

An Analysis of the Inaugural Addresses of Barack
Hussein Obama and Joseph Robinette Biden

Guiding Question: *Why do US Presidents Barack Hussein Obama and Joseph Robinette Biden utilize certain rhetorical techniques within their speeches in order to appeal and persuade their audience members?*

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>Faith, Trust, and Credibility</i>	4
<i>We're All in This Together</i>	7
<i>America, You Great Unfinished Symphony</i>	10
<i>Conclusion</i>	13
<i>Works Cited</i>	14

I. Introduction

If there are a few things that Americans value most in the world, then it is their commitment to tradition and their government. So what better way is there to combine the two than through inauguration day in which we all come together every four years to witness the welcoming of our new president? Ever since George Washington first delivered his inaugural address on April 30, 1789, every future president after, would soon follow suit, causing the creation of such powerful speeches that would influence not just its citizens, but the nation as a whole. This was a result of each president's careful choosing of rhetoric that allowed their speeches to be so influential, begging the question for more modern presidents, Barack Obama and Joseph Biden as to why they utilized certain rhetorical techniques to appeal to and persuade their audience members.

Prior to Obama assuming office and delivering his first inaugural address, a major financial crisis occurred in the U.S. with the largest recession to hit the U.S. since the Great Depression labeled the House Market Crash of 2008 that led many citizens to face many economic hardships to provide for their families, requiring Obama to step up as President and use his power for the greater good. Similarly, before Biden assumed his position in office, a major attack on the U.S. Capitol occurred as a result of the disliking of Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election. As a result, a great divide between the American people had led to more conflict and issues to be ensured leading to even more arguments between the political parties and their members, resulting in Obama and Biden creating empowering and inspirational speeches that would unite the U.S. into the great country it once was. As time progresses throughout the years, different issues arise in our country, causing Barack Hussein Obama and

Joseph Robinette Biden to have utilized different rhetorical strategies such as appealing to credibility, repetition, and constant usage of allusion in order to appeal to and persuade their audience members.

II. Faith, Trust, and Credibility

Throughout both of their speeches, Biden and Obama utilized a multitude of rhetorical techniques to enact their goals for the country, but none of it would have been useful if not for their ability to establish credibility among their audience members. For example, in Obama's speech, when he stated "we understand that outwork programs are inadequate to the needs of our time. So we must harness new ideas and technology to remake our government, revamp our tax code, reform our schools, and empower our citizens with the skills they need to work harder, learn more, and reach higher", he is gaining the people's trust through his action of acknowledging the current issues that are occurring in the country at the time (Obama 2009). Through his acknowledgment of being aware of the issues that the U.S. was currently facing at the time, it causes his audience to assume that Obama is aware of what is currently wrong within the U.S. and that with their help, he will fix whatever is wrong with the country, creating a powerful advantage for Obama as it aids in achieving his goal of fixing the States' issues and aids in persuading the American people to come together as one and unite. Obama's ability to appeal to certain audience members also helps in allowing him to maintain and improve his credibility of being president of the United States. For instance, when he stated "we will respond to the threat of climate change, knowing that the failure to do so would betray our children and future generations; this is how we will preserve our planet, commanded to our care by God" and "our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the

law. . .for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well", he appeals to environmentalists and the LGBT+ and their allies to gain their support (Obama 2009). Through his promises of helping stop climate change and preserving the planet and making sure that the LGBT+ will have the same rights as everyone else, Obama appeals to these groups to gain their approval by showing that he cares for them and wants them to achieve the goals that they were fighting for, making his audience believe that they are Obama's utmost importance and that he'll help them out, leading them to bestow their trust upon Obama so that he can help create a country that fits their needs. Through Obama's utilization of the appeal to credibility to enhance his credibility towards his audience, he gains the trust of the American people as it was crucial to secure the trust of the American people as he was the first ever African American and POC (Person of Color) president of the United States and having a lower likeability rate during the presidential election against his Republican opponent, Mitt Romney (Jones), requiring him to be seen as a reliable authority figure that could help lead the nation to glory.

Similarly, in Biden's speech, he also appeals to credibility to gain the American people's trust. For instance, in his speech when he stated "if we do that, I guarantee you, we will not fail", he was offering a promise to Americans that'll help in making audience members obey and listen to Joe (Biden 2021). Through his issuing of a vow, Biden is seen by the people as an assuring authority figure due to him being confident that through unity, America will not fail, leading audience members to be reassured that Biden will be an excellent leader for the U.S. due to his confidence of the fact that unity will lead to prosperity, influencing Americans to follow Biden's leadership as it'll lead to success. In addition, when Biden announced "to all those who supported our campaign I am humbled by the faith you have placed in us. To all those who did not support

us, let me say this: Hear me out as we move forward. Take a measure of me and my heart. And if you still disagree, so be it. That's democracy. That's America", he was not just showing his gratitude toward his supporters, but also showing his awareness of his credibility towards certain audience members (Biden 2021). When acknowledging his supporters in the first half of his statement, Biden is being connoted as someone who's very grateful and appreciative of his fans, allowing him to further establish his credibility towards those specific audience members which he could use whenever people may disagree with him and show he is actually very nice and grateful. Moreover, when mentioning those people who weren't supportive of Biden's presidency, he is displaying his acknowledgment towards those emotions that the audience members have towards him and using it to show that he understands why they feel that way and that it's understandable, which helps in showing those who disapprove of Biden to make him be seen as someone who is reasonable and does not force his audience to like him since they have the right to feel that way under America's democracy. This demonstrates how his decorum helps with appealing to those audience members because he also values American democracy just like his peers and believes that they have the right to feel that way, making those members appreciate that Biden is allowing them to continue practicing their rights. Additionally, Biden attempted to appeal again to audience members who may not like him when he stated "and I pledge this to you: I will be a President for all Americans. I will fight as hard for those who did not support me as for those who did", through continuing to be seen as a fair and just president for all (Biden 2021). With his promise of treating everyone fairly just as how the Declaration of Independence stated that all men are created equal, Biden is making Americans view him as a fair and equal president since he has stated the promise of being unbiased and helpful to all who need him, including his opponents. Through Biden's attempts at being a promising and assuring ruler for

the U.S., he is creating a sense of trust that he can use in order to better carry out his goals of uniting America and its people.

Through their usage of ethos, Biden and Obama were able to lay a foundation of trust towards their audience members that they would utilize to continue delivering their powerful speeches. It was especially imperative that they would lay this foundation as before both presidents had delivered their speeches, important historical events occurring with Obama having to deal with 9/11 and the House Market Crash of 2008 and Biden handling the Capital House Riots and COVID-19, all of these events leading to Americans to be anxious about how these presidents would lift America out of their predicaments and requiring them to be seen as trustworthy. This is important because as Jay Heinrichs mentions in his book, *Thank You for Arguing*, he reveals that one way to boost a person's ethos is through the third asset of ethos, "disinterest goodwill" which combines selflessness and likeability when he had stated "the benevolent persuader shares everything with his audience: riches, effort, and mood. He feels their pain and makes them believe he has nothing personal at stake. In other words, he shows himself to be "disinterested"--free of any special interest" (Heinrichs 76). Through both of these presidents' using ethos's third assets, they were finally able to accomplish their goal of gaining America's trust and lead to accomplishing their goal of maintaining one nation under God.

III. We're All In This Together

Additionally, in both of their speeches, both presidents utilize repetition and parallelism to emphasize the messages of each of their speeches to their audience to get their point across. Throughout Obama's speech, he uses repetition and parallelism to emphasize the point of uniting the American people. For example, when he said "on this day, we gather because we have chosen

hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord. On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics."; "Together, we determined that a modern economy requires railroads and highways to speed travel and commerce, schools and colleges to train our workers. Together, we discovered that a free market only thrives when there are rules to ensure competition and fair play. Together, we resolved that a great nation must care for the vulnerable, and protect its people from life's worst hazards and misfortune.", Obama continues enforcing his idea of unity as well as maintaining the audience's attention (Obama 2009). Through his decision to use parallelism in these lines of his speech, Obama continues in maintaining the audience's attention and enforcing the idea of unity because of them focusing on coming together and pivoting towards important topics in American culture that will help improve the country. Additionally, when he stated, "we made ourselves anew, and vowed to move forward together."; "But we have always understood that when times change, so must we; that fidelity to your founding principles requires new responses to new challenges; that preserving our individual freedoms ultimately requires collective action."; "We, the people, still believe that every citizen deserves a basic measure of security and dignity."; "We will defend our people and uphold our values through strength of arms and rule of law.", he constantly states the word "we" to make the American people feel united as well as to encourage the idea of it (Obama 2009). Through Obama's repetition, he caused his audience to associate the word "we" with the American people coming together as one, leading to a sense of unity being felt throughout the audience as well as encouraging them to use that feeling of unity to come together and help in improving their country. With his decision to reiterate certain words and phrases as well as use parallelism to his advantage, Obama, maintained his audience's attention who may not have been caring about

Obama nor his speech, leading them to finally pay attention and join the audience as they all become encouraged to work as one to help in leading the nation to a better future.

In President Biden's speech, he utilized repetition and parallelism to emphasize certain topics and ideas as well as also create a sense of unity among the American people. For example, in his speech when he stated "we have learned again that democracy is precious. Democracy is fragile. And at this hour, my friends, democracy has prevailed."; "I thank my predecessors of both parties for their presence here. I thank them from the bottom of my heart."; "Much to repair. Much to restore. Much to heal. Much to build. And much to gain.", he connects to the American people (Biden 2021). Biden's usage of repetition throughout his speech helps him connect with his audience members and gain their trust because he's doing it to seem grateful for both America's practice of democracy and how it helped him win the presidency and also show he's very appreciative at the fact that past U.S. presidents from both political parties had showed up, displaying how it doesn't matter what party they belong to because they're all here to celebrate the traditional inauguration of a new U.S. president. Additionally, when Biden announces "this is America's day. This is democracy's day."; "With unity we can do great things. Important things. We can right wrongs. We can put people to work in good jobs. We can teach our children in safe schools. We can overcome this deadly virus. We can reward work, rebuild the middle class, and make health care secure for all. We can deliver racial justice.", he was emphasizing his message of coming together to create a better America (Biden 2021). With the help of parallelism within these lines, Biden emphasizes his message of bringing together the American people and choosing to vote for a President that could lead them together to carry out a plan to create a better America where everyone is equal, creating a sense of optimism among the audience as he makes it seem that unity will lead to prosperity as well as emphasizing the values of the

American people and their admiration for maintaining tradition. With the use of repetition and parallelism in his inaugural speech, Biden further achieves his hopes and goals for the US through the ability to connect with audience members and make them associate unity with the idea of a successful, prosperous nation. With both speeches inclusion of repetition and parallelism, Obama and Biden create a grand impact on the audience that helps them in achieving their never-ending goal of unity amongst the country through their references to important historical events emphasizing the idea of unity leading to progress which impacts the audience to do the same and do their part to make sure their country is the best it can be.

IV. America, You Great Unfinished Symphony

While both Obama and Biden both appealed to their credibility as well as utilizing repetition and parallelism in their speeches, they also allude to important historical events to help with accomplishing their goal of unity for the country. Within Obama's speech, he constantly alluded to past historical events in United States history to highlight to the audience that progress was being made through the power of unity. For example, when he alluded to the U.S. Constitution when stating "for we, the people, understand that our country cannot succeed when a shrinking few do very well and a growing many barely make it.", he creates a sense of unity amongst the audience (Obama 2009). With his reference to the first words of the United States Constitution, Obama continues his theme of uniting the U.S. by referencing the Constitution's consistent usage of "we, the people" to show that they are united because they all contain the same ideas as citizens of the U.S. showing the audience that they are not as different as they seem due their same beliefs. Obama continues in pursuing his goal of unity because instead of using the words "you" or "I" when referring to the beliefs of citizens, his decision to reference

the Constitution helps with creating the feeling of togetherness with the Constitution's repetitive usage of "we, the people" to show that Obama is with the audience and that they are together. Additionally, when he stated ". . . is the star that guides us still, just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall, just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great Mall, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone, to hear a King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on Earth", Obama was alluding to different historical events such as Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech and the Seneca Falls meeting to show the progress that U.S. citizens have made (Obama 2009). With his reference to such important U.S. historical events that aimed to provide rights for U.S. citizens, Obama reminds his audience members about all the progress that they had made together to create the powerful country that the U.S. is today, creating a sense of pride and unity among the audience as they felt proud knowing that when coming together, they create such influential changes to their society that provided rights for everyone. Additionally in Hendrik Hertzberg's article analyzing Obama's inaugural address, he mentions all the events that Obama was referencing: the Seneca Falls meeting where women were fighting for equal rights, the civil rights movement in Selma, Alabama, the beginning of the gay rights movement at the Stonewall Inn, and when people showed up to listen to Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech, showing the amount of progress that the U.S. has made as these past historical events help show the audience members how impactful unity has had on the U.S., inspiring them to continue uniting to create a better future for the country.

Likewise, in Biden's speech, he also uses allusions to recent historical events to mention the struggles that the country has gone through and how they were able to conquer them together. For instance, when Biden mentioned the Capitol Riots when he said "so now, on this hallowed

ground where just days ago violence sought to shake this Capitol's very foundation, we come together as one nation, under God, indivisible, to carry out the peaceful transfer of power as we have for more than two centuries", he also mentions the Pledge of Allegiance to show the unity of the American people amongst chaos (Biden 2021). Through alluding to the Capitol Riots and the Pledge of Allegiance, a patriotic oath that all Americans value and state, Biden shows how strong the U.S. is as a nation to still come together, as one, to continue our tradition of inaugurating our next president, an event that every American values even if there was conflict before the event. Also, when Biden alluded to important global and national events when stating "our history has been a constant struggle between the American ideal that we are all created equal and the harsh, ugly reality that racism, nativism, fear, and demonization have long torn us apart. The battle is perennial. Victory is never assured. Through the Civil War, the Great Depression, World War, and 9/11, through struggle, sacrifice, and setbacks, our "better angels" have always prevailed", to emphasize that no matter what issues have arise, we have always been able to overcome any obstacle together (Biden 2021). Through references to events such as the World Wars, the Great Depression, and 9/11 that brought up massive amounts of economic issues as well as racism and genocide, Biden both shows and tells his American audience that even though these events had brought up major issues to both the U.S. and the world as a whole, Americans still came together and unite to conquer their struggles and help their country strive for the better, causing his audience to do the same and unite so that they are also able to conquer any issues that the country is currently facing. With their decision to allude to important U.S. historical events that highlighted the idea of progress being made through unity, both presidents create powerful and unique speeches that allowed them to continue in achieving their goal of uniting the American people as it reminded their audience of times of difficulty and triumph and

that if they just come together, as one, they can continue being the amazing country that they are today and strive for both their people and the world.

V. Conclusion

Through their demonstrations of trials and tribulations of the American people and the great efforts put into ensuring the sanctity of the United States of America through uniting one another, Barack Obama and Joseph Biden delivered powerful and inspiring speeches that united people across the nation. Due to different issues that had risen before their speeches, both men needed to ensure that they would establish peace and tranquility among the audience to accomplish their mission of uniting to improve their great country, resulting in them including a multitude of rhetorical devices in their speeches that helped achieve their goals for America.

With their appeal to credibility, both presidents are seen as honest and trustworthy leaders to their audience members, allowing them to establish a personal connection that they can use to persuade them to work together. With their usage of repetition and parallelism, they were able to get their point across to audience members making it understandable to them what they must do if they want their country to succeed and flourish. Their allusions to important past historical events also allow them to emphasize to the American people how through uniting, many improvements were made to better the country, encouraging the audience to continue uniting so that they can continue improving and growing as a nation. With these rhetorical devices, Obama and Biden's speeches allowed the U.S. to improve time and time again, maintaining America's democracy and making sure that the American people can choose who they will believe is best fit to help run the country and help in maintaining America's valuable tradition of watching the newest president deliver an impactful speech not only across the nation, but the world.

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