

Comfort in Our Darkest Hour

The attacks on September 11, 2001 shocked the foundations of every American's sense of national and personal security. When the second plane hit the World Trade Center, people finally came to fathom the possibilities of a terrorist attack. Until that point the possibilities of a group of people successfully coming together and attacking the United States were minimal. Until this specific point in time terrorism was just another hot button word. Terrorism was something that was seen on the news in less civilized countries. Terrorism was some element in a movie that earned it a "Restricted" rating for violence. Until that fateful September 11th morning, terrorism was something very unfamiliar and abstract to the American public. The casualties of these attacks amounted to a total of 2,974 killed and 24 still missing. The evening following the attacks, President George W. Bush addressed the nation. The same nation that once lived routinely in the safety of its borders was now left in a state of distress and vulnerability. President Bush had only been the President of the United States for eight months and now faced the difficult task of speaking to the entire nation and assuring them that everything would be okay. He was able to deliver a pathos-driven speech featuring emotional diction and allusions that rallied national identity by bolstering faith in America's ability to overcome this time of anguish. The speech was also ethos-building, alluding to the reasons the Bush administration would later use to preemptively invade Afghanistan and Iraq.

President Bush begins his speech with a summary of the attacks from his perspective. He uses a variety of emotionally driven diction that not only describes his point of view but perhaps embodies the perspective shared by all Americans. First, he defines the victims in generic terms: secretaries, businessmen, military and federal aid workers. Then he connects on a personal level by paralleling those same generic terms with personal terms such as mom, dad, friends and

neighbors. The use of this language in President Bush's opening statements allows him to identify with the American people as a whole. Though many people understand that the victims of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon may have been secretaries, businessmen and federal employees, President Bush reminds the audience that they were much more than that. Defining the victims using basic, personal vocabulary allows the audience to identify on a higher emotional level with those directly affected by the atrocities of September 11th.

President Bush continues by using imagery to express his personal feelings about the events that conspired. By summarizing the pictures that blanketed television programming the entire day, President Bush reveals the "disbelief," "terrible sadness" and "unyielding anger" that the pictures of "airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning [and] huge structures collapsing" invoked. The depictions President Bush offers of his own feelings reflect the feelings of the entire nation. Everyone in America had been watching the news in disbelief of the events that took place that morning, and was still searching for some definitive answer of what happened and what was to be done. This entire first paragraph of the speech allows President Bush to use tragedy to appeal to and to identify with his audience. In that time of despair and uncertainty the American people were looking to someone they could trust to help them. In that respect, this first paragraph is ethos-building, because the American people are able to identify President Bush as a fellow American as well as recognize his power and status as a leader. The ethos-building elements of the speech permit the people to put faith in the decisions that the President will make concerning the attacks that have disrupted the balance of life and security in the United States.

Another important aspect of President Bush's pathos is its ability to inspire a sense of national identity in a time of great despair. Again, President Bush uses emotional diction to boast the strength of the United States. He claims that "terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of

our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America.” This important concept presented by President Bush provokes nationalism and a sense of hope for Americans. He continues to boast that the United States was attacked because they are “the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.” He chooses these specific words because they are values that define the foundation of the United States. His pathos continues to inspire nationalism when he commends the rescue workers who risked their own lives to save complete strangers. He recognizes these workers and contrasts them with the attackers, describing the attackers as the “very worst of human nature” and the rescue workers and as “the best of America.” This is a very emotional method that inspires Americans to rally around their love for one another and their love for America in the worst of times.

The elements of ethos-building persist throughout the speech. American citizens realize that they are listening to a fellow citizen as well as the President of the United States. The ethos elements that are present within the speech include: the emergency plan followed after the attacks as well as the assurance from President Bush that the United States’ government and economy will remain strong. The President includes these statements both to ensure that the situation is under control and to provide American citizens with hope and encourage them to continue to have faith in their government. While President Bush entered office only 8 months before the attacks, he makes it clear in his speech that he is prepared to stand up for the United States and has the ability to do so. President Bush highlights the plans he implemented following the attacks; plans that are focused on preventing more attacks that would cost more American lives. Re-assurance of this nature presented by President Bush established a higher approval rating that overall legitimized his future preemptive invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The final part of the speech seems to have an audience other than the American people. Throughout the speech President Bush uses a variety of emotional language and diction to portray his connection with the American people; however, a portion of the speech is intended for the international audience. The September 11th attacks on America got the attention of the entire world. The attacks were not only big news in the United States but in all countries. The President knew this was an incident of global relevance and chose to identify the strengths of the United States, its allies and military power. This portion of the speech is clearly not only intended for the American audience, but the international audience as well, especially those responsible for the terrorist attacks. It ensures the American people that their security will be maintained and new policies will be enacted to prevent future attacks. It also ensures whoever was responsible for the attacks that the United States-- the strongest world power, and its allies, other great world powers-- will not stand for threats against the well-being of its people.

Overall, President Bush accomplished what was needed with this address to the nation. The new president was faced with a serious task of comforting a nation that had just experienced a serious trauma. He was able to do so with an extremely emotional speech that allowed him to identify with the entire American public on a personal level. By using words that inspired national identity he was able to instill faith in the United States' ability remain strong in the face of all evils that oppose it. The nationalism provoked by this speech guaranteed that the American foundation would not crumble after these attacks. The speech was also ethos-building in the sense that it identified President Bush as a trustworthy leader. President Bush would use the support he gained from this defining moment to legitimize actions pertaining to the invasion of Afghanistan and a preemptive war on terror that would ultimately lead the United States to combat those in Iraq. President Bush's rhetoric throughout the speech was powerful enough to

accomplish this task of ethos building as well as provide the American people with comfort in one of their darkest hours.