

Barack Obama Inaugural Address:
The Optimistic Jeremiad

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, there have been two Tuesdays, which have been very important in the lives of Americans and many others around the world. The first was November 4, 2008. That was the day millions of Americans cast their votes to elect the first African-American president of the United States of America. That night brought tears of joy to many Americans. People not just in the United States, but also around the world were joyous that Barack Obama was going to be the 44th president of a country in crisis. The next step, which seemed very peculiar to many Western countries, was to wait two and a half months for that next important Tuesday. January 20, 2009 was the day when the United States would change forever. It was the day Obama was sworn in and became the President of the United States of America.

Since the first president of the United States, George Washington, every new president has delivered an inaugural address. This is an important address because it is the first speech we hear from the president after officially taking the oath of office. The past two years, Obama had been campaigning through out the country to crowds of thousands of supporters. He now would be giving an address to the whole Nation, some who supported him and others who did not. To unite the country, Obama needed to pivot from campaigner to president. His inaugural address had to focus on the problems that he, his administration, and the American people needed to solve. Millions of people got up that cold winter day to watch him in D.C. take the oath, stand on that platform, and give his address. This does not include the tens of millions of people, including myself, who were glued to the television watching this historical moment.

Obama's Inaugural address is not just a speech that will be remembered on the day, but one that will be reprinted in textbooks, and will be viewed on the Internet countless times. Today, we still look back on and study many inaugural addresses given by presidents throughout our history. Because of its importance, the writer of this speech wants to make sure it will be significant enough to be compared to other addresses. The "I Have a Dream Speech" by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is still talked about and analyzed more than forty years later. While King was a civil rights leader, Obama is the first African-American president in history. This completely changes the way we will analyze the rhetoric of the President. Besides race, Obama gave this address during the worst economic times since the great depression. He was not giving the speech during great times, he was giving it during some of the worst times our country has seen, also has so much pressure on him being the first African-American president. One can view this inaugural address as a jeremiad. A genre, which has been criticized for its limitations, the jeremiad can be perceived as good or bad depending on the situation. The jeremiad calls for optimism, but sometimes actual details of how something is going to be done is needed more than just optimism, as jeremiads are not plan oriented. It is a speech for the people of the United States and around the world who wanted to hear how their crisis that they are suffering through is going to end.

This project will go into detail about the inaugural address by President Barack Obama. I will explore how the use of the jeremiad in an inaugural address can be limiting. In the beginning, I will be starting out by going into detail of the artifact. After having done this, I will review the history of the jeremiad. From the old Puritan use, to the now secular use, we will see what the parts of the jeremiad are and what they were in

older times. We will then be able to locate the part of the jeremiad in Obama's inaugural address, followed by an analysis of the limitations of this type of genre.

AN ADDRESS OF A LIFETIME

That cold Tuesday morning brought a lot of anticipation to the United States capital. After taking the Presidential Oath of Office with the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, John Roberts, which brought a couple of gasps when words were transposed, President Obama took to the stage to deliver what many would call, his most important speech. The address started out like many other addresses given every four years on January twentieth. He goes into how he is "humbled by the task before us," a phrase also famously used by President Lincoln during his second Inaugural Address.¹ After he acknowledges the previous President, George Bush, thanking him for the "service to our nation," which is ironic considering how much Obama bashed Bush during his campaign. Obama then dives into the problems that our country is facing, and this list is not short at all. After stating all these, he does give some type of optimism for the future: "They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this, America-they will be met." Obama presents how we have been through a difficult journey and that things do need time to get better. He then talks about the safety of our country and how he wants to soon give back Iraq to its people and try and bring peace to Afghanistan. Observers point out something very interesting: this is the first time a president mentions atheists in an inaugural address. Obama states that the United States is "a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus — and non-believers." Many "non-believers" who have

¹ Obama, Barack H. "2009 Presidential Inaugural Address." 2009 Inauguration. United States Capitol, Washington, D.C. 20 Jan. 2009.

usually felt left out of these patriotic events now feel part of it. Obama talks specifically to the Muslim world. He wants a new way forward based on respect of one another. In regards to some of the evil acts, which have come from some of those countries, Obama states, “know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy.” All in all, Obama gives what many people expected to hear, and what many people cared for, even though many people found the speech disappointing.

A MAN OF HOPE AND CHANGE

It took many years before he was able to reach the capitol and deliver his address as president. Born August 4, 1961 in Hawaii, which was recently validated by the state because of many Republican “birther” speculators, Obama was reared by his mother, with a lot of help from his grandparents.² Obama showed how anyone could become part of the American dream. With the death of his father during his adolescence, Barack’s family struggled, and he was able to support himself through Ivy League schools via scholarships and student loans. Moving to Chicago and becoming a community activist, he would later go back to get his law degree from Harvard, becoming the first African American president of the Harvard Law Review. In 1997, he became a member of the Illinois State Senate, and in 2004 he became the United States Senator from Illinois. On February 10, 2007, Obama announced in Springfield, Illinois that he was running for President of the United States of America. A very long campaign that would take almost two years, it was one that will go down in history. From the long democratic primary battle with then Senator Hillary Clinton (now Secretary of State), to the battle against

² "President Barack Obama." The White House. 14 Feb. 2009
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/president_obama/>.

Republican candidate Senator John McCain of Arizona, the introduction of the very conservative governor from Alaska for vice-president, Governor Sarah Palin, Obama had a long battle ahead of himself to become President. With the use of the hope and change campaign which was needed, and the difficult years that this country faced with war and recession under President George W. Bush, Obama was able to easily win a large percentage of the electoral college votes on November fourth 2008. For two and a half months, Obama was President-elect, waiting for the day when he would take his oath, and deliver his inaugural address.

ALL EYES WERE ON WASHINGTON

Inauguration day brought a record number of people into Washington to watch Obama give his Inaugural Address. According to the *Boston Globe*, “1.8 million people gathered on the US Capitol grounds, National Mall, and parade route.”³ The *Globe* goes on to say that it was the largest event ever held in Washington, D.C. Even with the joyous day of celebrating the new president, things happening in the country and around the world were not great at all. The *New York Times* organized the ‘essentials’ of the credit crisis of the United States. They sum up the major problems of the credit crisis by stating: “In the fall of 2008, the credit crunch, which had emerged a little more than a year before, ballooned into Wall Street’s biggest crisis since the Great Depression. As hundreds of billions in mortgage-related investments went bad, mighty investment banks that once ruled high finance have crumbled or reinvented themselves as humdrum commercial

³ Globe Staff. "Inaugural crowd size reportedly D.C. record." [The Boston Globe](#)
22 Jan. 2009. 14 Feb. 2009
<<http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu>>.

banks. The nation's largest insurance company and largest savings and loan both were seized by the government."⁴ If this could not have been more of a problem, millions of people started losing their homes and jobs, with an unemployment rate of 7.6 percent in January 2009. With Mumbai being attacked by terrorists on November 27, 2008, it showed how the horror of terrorist attacks had not ended since the election of Obama. Obama was taking over a country during a time of economic crisis and world terror.⁵

Barack Obama mostly received a positive reception of his address from people everywhere. From the cheering crowd of almost two million people, to news agencies across the globe, most people enjoyed the speech given by Obama. Paul Bedard from the *U.S. News & World Report* says that the speech scored high, stating that Obama "has raised expectations to a reasonable level that does not set him up for failure."⁶ The *New York Times* puts it clearly by saying, "In about 20 minutes, he [Obama] swept away eight years of President George Bush's false choices and failed policies and promised to recommit to America's most cherished ideals."⁷ The general reception seemed to be very good, but there are always some who do not like everything, and they had something to

⁴ NYT Staff. "Credit Crisis- The Essentials." *The New York Times* 14 Feb. 2009. 14 Feb. 2009

<http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/subjects/c/credit_crisis/?scp=2&sq=economic%20crisis&st=cse>.

⁵ BBC Staff. "Mumbai rocked by deadly attacks." 27 Nov. 2008. BBC News. 14 Feb. 2009 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7751160.stm>.

"Current Population Survey(CPS)." *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Jan. 2009. 14 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.bls.gov/CPS/>>.

⁶ Bedard, Paul. "President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address Scores High." *U.S. News & World Report* 23 Jan. 2009. 14 Feb. 2009

<<http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu:2048/itx/start.do?prodId=EAIM>>

⁷ Walsh, David. "The New York Times and Obama's inauguration." *The New York Times* 24 Jan. 2009. 14 Feb. 2009

<<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jan2009/obam-j24.shtml>>.

say about the address. A writer for the *Economist* made a few comments about the Address showing how he was not the same President as he promised to run as. Starting with, “America's new president is a shrewd public speaker,” and then, “optimism helped to get him elected, but his tone changed for the inaugural address this week, in which he emphasized the need for hard work, difficult choices and sacrifice.”⁸ Many believed that the Obama that people had known for the last two years had become a different person when he gave his inaugural address.

THE JEREMIAD: PURITAN

The jeremiad has been used for centuries in many speeches. From the Puritan to the secular, the jeremiad has shown its audience that there is a problem, but also that there is optimism ahead for everyone. The Obama Inaugural Address clearly uses this type of genre; but before we go ahead and analyze the speech, we have to dig into the past to analyze this method, which has been used for centuries. The current, more common jeremiad has three main parts. In the first part, a speaker talks about historical and political figures, then states a problem or crisis, and the last part, the speaker gives some type of optimism for the future. With all this said, the jeremiad did not start out like this. In the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Denise Bostdorff writes about the post-September eleventh rhetoric of former president George W. Bush. Bostdorff talks about the rhetoric of covenant renewal. Bostdorff said that in order to understand this topic; one has to first understand the Puritan jeremiad, which she goes on to define. The Puritan jeremiad “was a political sermon delivered on election days and fast days in which

⁸ Economist Staff. "Preferring sacrifice to hope." *Economist* 24 Jan. 2009. 14 Feb. 2009 <<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu>>.

ministers urged the people to “conform to the teachings of God’s Word before it was ‘too late.’”⁹ The Puritan jeremiad helped the church have the ability to control its people, in regards to those who did not truly believe in the faith. After individual non-believers of the church were expelled, the ministers were able to take control of the remaining members of the church by using the Puritan jeremiad. The jeremiad allowed ministers to “exert social control over those who remained by castigating individual behavior that was detrimental to the cohesion of the community as a whole.” The jeremiad involved telling people the moral code followed by sins that one should not commit. If they are able to banish people from the church for some specific reason, they then had to keep the remaining members a part of the church by focusing a sense of optimism to them. The Puritan jeremiad was also a form of epideictic rhetoric. It praised God’s words and blamed anyone who went against the words of God.

Richard L. Johannesen also writes about the Puritan jeremiad in the journal *Communication Monographs*. Starting in the late 1600s and into the 1700s in colonial America there was a new form of a political sermon. These sermons, delivered on more ritual rather than political occasions, brought together the ideas of guidance for both matters of religion and public affairs. The progress of God and all its entities was linked with the progress of America becoming its own nation. Johannesen writes, “a key assumption of the jeremiad was that American Puritans, as God’s chosen people, had a

⁹ Bostdorff, Denise M. "George W. Bush's post-September 11 rhetoric of covenant renewal: upholding the faith of the greatest generation." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003): 293-319. Nov. 2003. Kennedy Library. 14 Mar. 2009 <<http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu>>.

unique mission and destiny.”¹⁰ This, then, increasingly expanded to not just Puritans, but to Protestants, and thus to all American citizens. The Puritan leaders wanted to bring public change to the nation, and they used God’s words in order to make the people jump forward to the new ideas. As stated earlier, the typical 17th century Puritan jeremiad had a three-part pattern.

Johannesen points out that in the 18th century, the typical Puritan jeremiad now used a four-part pattern. The first part was to state how the people had sinned. They had failed in their faith and had also failed in their action to stay connected with God. Second, vivid imagery was used to show the people how warnings of the prophet were currently coming true. God was inflicting evil on his chosen people and this was their punishment. Third, the people were told to repair the connection that they had broken to God. They had to repent their errors, and the only way to do this was to live by the principles of the church. Fourth, the people were given predictions that God would end these punishments once the people had repented their errors and restored full faith back to the church. It is easy to see how at this time, a pattern given like this from a senior church member would practically force people to repent all their wrong doings and bring faith back into the church without a question.

THE JEREMIAD: SECULAR

Since the Puritan jeremiad, it has thus been changed to the secular jeremiad. With the end of a faith-dominated world, the jeremiad still needed to be used, but with less

¹⁰ Johannesen, Richard. "The Jeremaid and Jenkin Lloyd Jones." *Communication Monographs*, 52.2 (1985): 156-172.

reference to God and piety. Even though the jeremiad has changed since the Puritan one, it still has the same exact elements from the original, only with less of a less faith-based approach. More recently, the jeremiad has been used in the environmental world. The norm has become the balance between humans and the natural world, the crisis continues as being the environmental crisis, and the optimism as the last of the three parts is the same. Thomas Rosteck writes about the rhetoric used in Al Gore's documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*. In the article, Rosteck says how Gore is using what he calls an environmental jeremiad. The environmental jeremiad still has the three basic steps in it, as stated before, and is just transmitted towards an environmental approach. Rosteck goes into saying how much of an importance the jeremiad is in environmental studies by writing, "more than any other, the jeremiad is the rhetorical form prefiguring most environmental discourse."¹¹ According to Rosteck, we can clearly see that there is a link between environmental discourse and the jeremiad. If one were to think about the elements of the jeremiad, they do pertain to how environmental discourse is and should be. Presenting the historical past first shows the link to the jeremiad. Environmentally, centuries ago there was an amicable balance between the human and the natural world. Before the industrial revolution, humans were living perfectly with the environment side by side. This is the norm or political figure in the Puritan and secular jeremiad, respectively. The jeremiad norm is that humans and the environment should be interacting how we did hundreds of years ago, and by repeating it to an audience, one is stating how we should be living our lives today. The next two steps of the environmental

¹¹ Rosteck, Thomas, and Thomas Frenz. "Myth and Multiple Readings in Environmental Rhetoric: The Case of *An Inconvenient Truth*." Quarterly Journal of Speech 95 (2009): 1-19. 1 Feb. 2009. Kennedy Library. 14 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.informaworld.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu:2048/smpp/content?file.txt>>.

jeremiad are the same as the Puritan and secular jeremiad with the use of stating what the crisis is and the optimism for the future. Al Gore's documentary clearly emphasizes the American jeremiad that has been used for centuries, only in an environmental twist.

One of the most famous jeremiad speeches given in our history was that of Robert F. Kennedy on April 4th, 1969. While campaigning for presidency, Kennedy had to let people in Indianapolis know, who had come to hear him speak, that the civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. had been murdered. The next day, he would go on to Cleveland to deliver his speech, which encompassed the jeremiad. By using the jeremiad, Kennedy was able to explain to the American people the current troubles that they are facing, and also the hope for optimism by expressing the national values of the United States. Senator Kennedy's repeated emphasis on "crisis and redemption as he spoke in Cleveland the day after the killing [of King] suggests that his rhetoric might profitably be examined within the American jeremiadic tradition."¹² Rhetorical critics are quite certain that because of the emphasis that Kennedy makes in his speech, it can be examined based upon the jeremiad. While many people like the speech that Kennedy gave using the jeremiad, many others saw that this speech had many implications. Many people see that the jeremiad is just used to satisfy the status quo. While Kennedy used eloquent words to show his sadness towards the death of King, he did not serve the purpose of what should be said. He should have showed more of a concern for social progress. Even if he did care for it, according to Murphy, it was not shown enough because of the limitations of the jeremiad. Murphy writes in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* that the "jeremiad turns attention away from possible flaws in the covenant itself, such as institutionalized racism,

¹² Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism Exploration & Practice*. Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press, 2004.

and toward the failure of individuals to live out the appropriate values.”¹³

Once a president ends his or her one or two terms as President of the United States, this type of genre of speeches does not just disappear from them. President Ronald Reagan was known to have used the jeremiad many times during his presidency. After the end of his two terms as Commander in Chief, he would go on to give multiple public speeches. J. Jones and R. Roland write in the *Communication Studies Journal* about Reagan’s post-presidential ideological appeals. They state that, “Reagan enacted that generic modification in creating a Covenant-affirming Jeremiad in his post-presidential discourse. In this rhetoric Reagan warned the nation and especially conservatives about a number of issues, but combined these warnings with an essentially optimistic message in which he reaffirmed his commitment to basic values.”¹⁴ Reagan was able to build around the jeremiad but altered it so as to avoid attacking the public. Reagan would affirm the values that were essentially the perfect attributions towards a great nation instead of arguing how the nation had violated its basic covenant. In the traditional jeremiad, one would suggest that a long-term disaster is coming to society, unless the nation is able to return to its basic value. Reagan does this differently with the Covenant-affirming jeremiad. Reagan would argue that the nation’s on-going commitment to its basic values would help the country find the answers to the problems in which it faces today. Reagan felt that the people did not need to return to the covenant because in Regan’s view, the

¹³ Murphy, John. "A Time of Shame and Sorrow': Robert F. Kennedy and the American Jeremiad." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 76.4 (1990): 401-414.

¹⁴ Jones, John, and Robert Rowland. "A Covenant-affirming jeremiad: The post-presidential ideological appeals of Ronald Wilson Reagan." *Communication Studies* 56.2 (2005): 157-174. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 10 May 2011.

people had never strayed from the covenant. Unlike the usual jeremiad, Reagan used a tactic that was essentially all optimistic. He did not bring about how things were and what they did wrong, but rather how things are to be and what we can do to keep on moving forward in a positive direction.

The jeremiad gives some other limitations. One of the main issues is that it is a conservative principle that goes back to the old traditions and past ways. Some argue that a genre used so much in a religious past should not be still used in today's society. It also limits the types of things that you can get the audience to do. As the jeremiad does not call for people to make huge change, the jeremiad is hard for positive things to come out from it. While a person can say that there is optimism and that everything will be fine, how exactly do we know that this optimistic future will take place? Lastly, the jeremiad wants an individual to take action. The problem is that one cannot always guarantee that a person listening to the speech will take action unless they are very motivated by it.

In the remainder of the essay, I analyze President Barack Obama's inaugural address. I will be showing how it is a jeremiad and identify where the elements of the jeremiad show up in the speech that he delivered. From the historical and political figures from the past, to the current crisis that we are facing, and lastly to the hope and the optimism for the future, I will explain how the speech encompasses the jeremiad. From this, I will then be able to evaluate the effectiveness of the speech in the jeremiad genre. Lastly, we will be able to see that the criticism that many people have of the speech is acceptable because of the limitations of a jeremiad speech.

MY FELLOW CITIZENS...

Obama's inaugural address clearly emphasizes the jeremiad that has been used

since the Puritan time. The elements of the jeremiad are shown throughout the speech with the two parts, the crisis and optimism shown all over the speech. In order to present the elements of the jeremiad, I will divide up the remaining of the speech by the topics Obama used, not necessarily in the order of the actual Address.

Firstly, Obama makes general assumptions about the nation as a whole. In the beginning of the speech, Obama states that the fact that “we are in the midst of crisis in now well understood.”¹⁵ Emphasizing right from the beginning, Obama acknowledges that the nation is facing a huge problem. We see that Obama will use the jeremiad. One would not want to state a huge amount of problems in a speech if one is not going to give a sense of optimism or answers for the future. Obama is one who gives hope and optimism throughout the speech in regards to the general crisis that the United States is facing. Obama points out how people in our past have worked hard for us to make America strong, as it currently should be. Obama is able to emphasize the power of the historical figures of the American nation. Mentioning these people is the first part of the jeremiad. Talking about the first Americans who came here for freedom, Obama says, “they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life.” Obama then goes on to say, “these men and women struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might have a better life.” Stating this lets the listeners know that people in the past endured so much so that that America could be the best that it could be. The Founders of our country were able to surpass these struggles to make a great country, and they would probably not want to know what we have made of the once great nation that they strived for. Obama wants people to realize that those

¹⁵ Obama, Barack H. "2009 Presidential Inaugural Address." 2009 Inauguration. United States Capitol, Washington, D.C. 20 Jan. 2009.

who have died are counting on us to fix the problems that we are facing. In regards to the optimism of the jeremiad, Obama is able to make us have optimism by saying that the challenges we face ahead, “they will be met.” Obama is able to give the American people the hope that the difficulties one is going to be faced with, are going to be a battle that the American people will win against. One of the most visual quotations Obama uses for the optimism that we should have is when Obama uses the lyrics of a 1930’s song by Jerome Kern: “starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.”¹⁶ This statement that he says really shows that Americans need to start thinking alike and trying to make the United States better with their own hands. Obama wants the people to know that there needs to be unity. Everyone is in the same predicament, and they need to get together to makes their problems better. Although times may be tough ahead, Obama makes a shiny glimpse to the prosperity that will happen if everyone works to make a better America.

Even though the above information seems very general from Obama, in most of the Address, he is talking about specific events in regards to the crisis that the country is facing. Obama is able to mention in the speech all the problems we have without making people feel uncomfortable. Some people do not like hearing the problems they are facing, but Obama wants to force the people to acknowledge the difficult issues taking place. The epideictic jeremiad of praise and blame is perfect for Obama to use because he is able to show the problems of America, but making things sound better in the end with the call of optimism.

¹⁶ ASCAP Writer. "Jerome Kern." *Songwriters Hall of Fame: Jerome Kern*. 2011. Web. 25 May 2011.

<<http://www.songwritershalloffame.org/exhibits/C67?exhibitId=67>>.

The economic crisis was a huge issue facing Americans at the time, and still is currently. Obama states, “our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age.” Obama goes on to say that people are losing their homes, jobs, and that businesses are falling apart all across the country. The jeremiad has the ability to not sugar coat anything at all. Obama spills out the problems right now in regards to the economic crisis. Many people had yet to start to feel the problems of the economic crisis. The jeremiad seems to make people think about the problems other people are facing, if they have not had to face the similar obstacles yet. The concept of optimism in the jeremiad is shown again in the address with the economy. Obama says that work needs to be done, but, “the state of the economy calls for action, bold and swift, and we will act -- not only to create new jobs, but to lay a new foundation for growth.” As Obama stated earlier that the general crisis will soon be challenged and met, the economic crisis is one that calls for quick action, and that it will be done. This sense of optimism is so great for people who think that nothing good is coming to them. The jeremiad supplies the people with the optimism they need to actually want to get up another day and strive for the best in life, knowing that soon success will come, or for many, come back.

Obama also talks about the environment in his address. He wants to make sure that people realize that he is an advocate for improving the environment, making it much better than it is at this current moment. Obama first mentions the environment by saying that “each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet.” This is the crisis part of the jeremiad. Obama

supports this with optimism saying how we can no longer be using so many of the world's resources. Obama states, "nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect." After having stated the crisis and optimism part of the jeremiad, there does not seem to be a historical significance part of the jeremiad earlier on in the speech. Having to mention so many things in the speech, Obama was probably unable to say how things were in the past, in regards to the environment.

Besides the environment, Obama also uses the jeremiad for expressing the problems we are facing with the war in Iraq. Towards the end of the speech, we see the historical figures part of the jeremiad. Obama talks about how many people, including Thomas Paine, shed blood for us to win the freedom of America in the seventeen hundreds during the revolutionary war. To show how people fought for us in the past, Obama quotes one of the British Founding Fathers of the United States, Thomas Paine, saying, "let it be told to the future world ... that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive... that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it]."¹⁷ Obama quotes Paine to show how in the time of a necessary war, people came together in the worst of conditions to make things better. The issue is that we are currently in a war that has caused many problems between Americans. Many people have disagreements on the legitimacy of the war, dividing the country. This is different from the revolutionary war where people died for a cause that was important to most Americans. Obama says that "we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war, against a far-reaching network of violence and

¹⁷ Paine, Thomas. *The Crisis*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2008. Print.

hatred.” One sees from this sentence that this country cannot just stop what it has already entered. The United States has devoted its forces in taking out the violence and hatred in Iraq. To many people, the term “far-reaching” seems to make it seem that it is out of our hands to end the violence around the war, especially now in Iraq where there is no more that can be done to end violence that is in the hands of small vigilante groups. Obama fulfills the rest of the jeremiad by including a statement of optimism for the Iraqi war. Obama says that we “will begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people.” This clearly shows that the optimism for him with the war would not be continuing it, but ending it soon and bringing troops home, leaving the country to the Iraqis.

The jeremiad’s form ends with a statement of optimism for the future. However, is this genre of speech truly affective? Many critics of speeches like and dislike this type of genre, and we have seen this with the criticism that President Barack Obama received for his inaugural speech. As stated earlier, there just seems to be many limitations. I think that the main problem is the action. There are a lot of promises and great statements in a jeremiad, but how does one know that this is going to actually happen? Obama says that we will start using fewer resources from the environment, but he does not say how this will happen. The United States is known for using a huge percentage of the world’s resources while only representing a small percentage of the world’s population. Most people would want to hear that Obama plans to have people develop “greener” and better ways to not use as many resources. This would be better than just saying that we will be using fewer resources in the future. This is also seen when Obama talks about the optimism for the bad economy. Obama mentions how we will take action to make a better economy and make more jobs. Many people have the ability to say plans that they

have, but in Obama's case, and many others, where is the support? Many critics would want to know what actual things Obama plans on doing with the economy to make it better. We can see how the jeremiad can have limitations for people who want actual facts to support this intended optimism. However, this is an Inaugural Address, it is a celebration of a new term, of a new presidency, and it is not necessarily the time to lay out countless numbers of plans to help better the country. That can be left to other times when Obama can individually focus and speak about different aspects of this country that needs to be changed. While people strive to hear deliberative speeches, where they want the speaker to take on new policy, what people got from Obama was an epideictic speech using the jeremiad.

JANUARY TWENTY-FIRST AND BEYOND

Obama's Inaugural Address was one that completed its task. Having been delivered at some of the worst times the United States had seen recently, Obama, also being the first African-American president, had to convince the Americans that the hope that he had called for, will come. Obama uses the secular jeremiad, which truly is a way to give people the optimism they want to hear during troublesome times. From the Puritan jeremiad, to the current one, it has been used for centuries in a way to get people together to act upon something positive for the future.

Obama's speech is very important to rhetoric, not because he is the first African-American president, but because it is a speech that uses the jeremiad. The use of the jeremiad is important to rhetorical critics because it can either be successful or unsuccessful, depending on the situations. While Obama could have tried to make new

policy in his inaugural address, the jeremiad lets him call for future hope instead. Many people liked the speech; many did not. It seemed that the people who did like it, liked the optimism of the speech, and the people who did not like it, wanted to hear more policy. We see that using an epideictic or deliberative speech determines whether or not a speech is good or not to certain critics. Even though the speech was received very well from most people, the jeremiad does bring limitations in an inaugural address. Many people are sick of their current situation, and hope is just not enough. They want details and facts, and the jeremiad does not give that to them.

Having reviewed the jeremiad from different centuries of our history, I believe that it is a genre that should be used. At some points in history, many people do not know what to say about situations. The jeremiad gives the opportunity for the speaker to say what they want to happen without necessarily giving discreet detail how it will be done. The inaugural speech that Obama gave was the best that it could have been. Having become president just minutes before, I do not believe that he knew enough top-secret information to influence new policy already. While many reporters and critics would want to hear the “how,” Obama did not want to make any promises if there was new information that he did not even know yet. We see that the jeremiad can be limiting for the reasons stated, but out of all the different types of speeches, it is a type of speech that seems perfect for the audience at the very moment that it is given.

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