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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN GEORGE W. BUSH'S 2000 ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Ray D. Dearin
 Iowa State University

In 1940, the last time the Republicans convened in Philadelphia, the party still adhered to a time-worn practice. Following adjournment, a delegation was dispatched to Elwood, Indiana, to inform an unsurprised Wendell L. Wilkie that he had been selected as their champion (Davis, 1983, p. 155). Revered though it might have been, the traditional notification ceremony would not survive another four years. By 1944, the GOP had adopted the Democrats' custom of having its candidate show up at the convention to accept the nomination in person.

By the time the Republican party met again in the City of Brotherly Love, in the year 2000, the convention hall had been transformed, in David Broder's words, "from a shadowy shelter for political bargaining into a floodlit set for a scripted television drama" (Davis, 1983, p. xiv), and the nominee's acceptance address had become its climactic episode. Even though the major television networks had cut back their prime-time coverage of recent conventions, the Thursday night speech would still command the largest audience the nominee would face "without having to share the stage with an opponent or put up with journalistic intrusions" (Solomon and Simendinger, 2000, p. 6). The occasion constitutes "the public's (a) first handshake with the candidate, (b) first glimpse of his true passion and vision for the future, and (c) first way to judge his authenticity" (Borger, 2000, p. 26). Presidential scholar Stephen J. Wayne writes that, "Today, acceptance speeches can be occasions for great oratory" they are both a call to the faithful and an address to the country. They articulate the principal themes for the general election" (p. 162). Both the importance of these speeches and their recurrence every four years under similar circumstances make them enticing specimens for rhetorical analysis.

The present author's examination of every Republican acceptance speech since 1980 has explored the limits of Lloyd Bitzer's celebrated thesis that similar rhetorical situations produce comparable rhetorical responses, and that a form of discourse is not only established but comes to have a power of its own "the tradition itself tends to function as a constraint upon any new response in the form" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 13). In a general sense, my research methodology has been informed by the collection of essays found in Campbell and Jamieson's *Form and Genre, Shaping Rhetorical Action* (1978) and Simons and Aghazarian's *Form, Genre, and the Study of Political Discourse* (1986). More recently, Cali's *Generic Criticism of American Public Address* (1996), which contains, in particular, Kurt Ritter's essay, "The Presidential Nomination Acceptance Addresses since 1980: An Evolving American Jeremiad," has provided additional insights. Ritter's earlier article in the *Central States Speech Journal* (1980, pp. 153-171) and David Valley's research on Democratic presidential nomination acceptance speeches (1988) have paralleled and, in several respects, cross-fertilized my explorations into the Republican version of the genre. One line of inquiry has focused on the degree to which each nominee has conformed to, or deviated from, the traditions of the genre, as found in Trent and Friedenberga (2000, p. 217). A second

skein of analysis has charted the evolution of the modern Republican party's ideology, which, in conjunction with the platform, is operationally defined every four years by the nominee's speech. (See Dearin, 1997, p. 698.)

By the mid-1980s, my reading of all the GOP speeches since Wilkie's and critiques of the two Reagan addresses had led me to describe the Republican acceptance speech as "a tightly framed media event in which the candidate articulates a personal vision of the American Dream while rallying Republicans and beginning the process of coalition-building with non-Republicans" (Dearin, 1987, p. 10). This conclusion was largely confirmed by analyses of the 1988, 1992, and 1996 addresses.¹ In line with previous research, the present inquiry seeks to shed light on both the evolving genre of nomination acceptance speeches and the ideological dimensions of the personal vision proffered by the latest Republican nominee.

As a working thesis, I suggest that the rhetorical situation facing Governor George W. Bush in Philadelphia enabled him to articulate what appears to be a more expansive concept of the American community than his predecessors had set forth, but that, in fact, both his rhetorical strategy and unique interpretation of the American mythos are solidly grounded in the tradition of these speeches. To test this contention, let us first consider the specific rhetorical activities that brought the speech into being.¹

Besides the candidate himself, the person who had the greatest influence on the speech was Michael Gerson, a 36-year old former theology student, who had been writing Bush's major speeches for a year and a half. Gerson had gotten his start as a ghostwriter when Charles Colson, the Watergate figure and founder of the Prison Fellowship, tapped him to help with a book. After a stint with former Indiana Senator Dan Coats, he went on to write for presidential candidates Steve Forbes and Bob Dole and was a journalist for U. S. News & World Report when Bush hired him. Gerson, as Time reported, could "quote passages from Martin Luther King more easily than the bromides of Barry Goldwater" and espoused "compassionate conservatism before it was given a moniker" (Carney and Dickerson, 2000, p. 33). More than just a wordsmith, Gerson sat in on both the Bush communications staff and policy staff meetings (Bruni, 2000, p. A17).

In the speechwriting process itself, one can detect the strong gravitational pull exerted by a powerful rhetorical genre. Gerson read every acceptance speech by a major candidate since 1960. He watched them closely and studied reactions to them. In a "theme meeting" with Bush and his staff, Gerson taped Bush's answers to several questions about his policy beliefs and personal vision (Borger, 2000, p.26). Then he packed a bag and headed to College Station, Texas, where he borrowed a friend's apartment, holed up in Texas A & M's Evans Library, and penned the first draft of the speech. Interviewed by a reporter for the local CBS-TV affiliate, Gerson told her that the clearest parallel to Bush's position was John F. Kennedy's situation at the 1960 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles. By the time Gerson left College Station, he had reworked the speech several times.

At Kennebunkport, Maine, Bush met over the Memorial Day weekend with Gerson, Karen P. Hughes, his communications director, Karl Rove, his campaign manager, and Mark McKinnon and Stuart Stevens, who created television ads for the campaign. In a long drafting session, Bush made several structural changes and, over the next two months, "touched every word of this speech in one way or another" (Borger, 2000, p. 26).

During his meandering journey to Philadelphia, Bush toted a teleprompter with him, setting it up in the living room of a private home in Cincinnati and in the dining room of Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge's mansion in Harrisburg. When he finally stepped from the wings of the stage at the Comcast First Union Center Thursday, August 3, at 10:12 p.m., forty minutes past his usual bedtime, the speech was in its 17th draft (Keen, 2000, p. 4A; Thomma and Bowden, 2000, p. A1). It reflected a joint collaboration between George W. Bush and his closest advisers, all of whom understood fully its place not only in the politics of 2000 but also in the succession of both Democratic and Republican acceptance speeches, two of which had indeed been given by the candidate's own father.²

A major function of acceptance speeches, according to Judith Trent and Robert Friedenberg, is "to reaffirm, and if necessary, reestablish, party unity" (p. 218). In Philadelphia, George W. Bush was in an enviable position usually reserved for incumbent presidents seeking re-nomination. He had secured his victory in early spring. Senator John McCain, his only serious rival, had endorsed him. Alan Keyes, the only holdout, capitulated before the convention started and released his handful of delegates. Under the firm hand and avuncular demeanor of Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson, the party platform retained its strong anti-abortion language, while conceding to Bush several items he needed for his education program, the centerpiece of his campaign. Because the party quarrels had been settled before the opening gavel fell, Bush did not confront the dual audience dilemma usually faced by acceptance speakers (Smith, 1971, pp. 15-22). As a writer for the New York Times put it, "Mr. Bush had the luxury of neglecting conservatives . . . and reaching out to independents and even Democrats . . . because Republicans of all stripes are lock-step behind his candidacy" ("Nominee Moves Front," 2000, p. A18).

Because the party's conservative base had been secured, the convention was largely designed to attract swing voters. Typically, the opening night is spent trashing the opposing party. In Philadelphia, there was not even a keynote address, the usual vehicle for doing this. Every night offered a high-minded theme and spotlighted the GOP's top attractions. Retired Gen. Colin L. Powell, a son of Jamaican immigrants, spoke Monday night about opportunity. Senator John McCain spoke on Tuesday, not for campaign finance reform but for a strong national defense. On Wednesday night, Dick Cheney, the vice-presidential nominee, carried the main burden of motivating the GOP base. Asserting that Al Gore would be forever linked in the nation's mind with Bill Clinton, Cheney turned the Vice President's own words of eight years earlier against him. "The wheel has turned . . . and it is time . . . it is time for them to go" he repeated to the roaring approval of the 22,000 avid partisans in the convention hall (Cheney, 2000, p. 4).

All acceptance speeches must galvanize the party for the November election, however, and Bush scattered enough morsels of red meat in his own address to appease the party lions. He characterized the Bush-Gore years as a period of squandered opportunities and unfulfilled promises; combining the stylistic techniques of repetition and tripartite phraseology, Bush thundered over and over, "They had their chance. They have not led. We will" (Bush, 2000, p. 3). He received the loudest applause when he said, "I will lead our nation toward a culture that values life--the life of the elderly and the sick, the life of the young, and the life of the unborn" (p. 9). Even as he declared his pro-life convictions, however, Bush managed to send another message, as he averred: "I know good people disagree on this issue, but surely we can agree on ways to value life" (p. 9). Interviewed following the speech, Ross K. Baker, a Rutgers University

political science professor, and Herbert W. Simons, a Temple University communication professor, both admired the way Bush had handled the divisive abortion issue. Simons told a Philadelphia Inquirer reporter, "Bush also succeeded in conveying the message that 'I'm a person who can reach out to both sides. I'm not dogmatic.' I think that's a clever way to handle the issue" (Schogel, 2000, p. AA7). The only personal barbs aimed at his opponent were couched in the form of amiable badinage. Responding to Gore's incessant labeling of the Bush tax proposal as a "risky tax scheme," Bush noted that his opponent would call a fact a "risky truth scheme." Gore would have called the moon launch a "risky rocket scheme" and Edison's light bulb "a risky anti-candle scheme." When Bush said, "And, if he'd been there when the Internet was invented" (p. 6), the crowd roar never let him finish his punch line. With these few exceptions, the speech Bush gave could just have easily have been delivered by a Clinton-era Democrat at the Democratic National Convention two weeks later.³

The appeal to independents and wavering Democrats had been standard fare in Republican acceptance addresses throughout their history. In fact, when Wendell Wilkie participated in the last notification and acceptance ritual in 1940, he alluded to his own political conversion. "Party lines are down," he said. "Nothing could make that clearer than the nomination by the Republicans of a liberal Democrat who changed his party affiliation because he found democracy in the Republican party and not in the New Deal party" (Wilkie, 1940, p. 259). In 1980, Ronald Reagan quoted Franklin D. Roosevelt and courted Democrats so shamelessly that veteran political observers were flabbergasted (Sidey, 1980, p. 31). Four years later in Dallas, Reagan targeted the same disaffected Democrats, reminding them that he, too, had been a Democrat before that party left him and other "patriotic Democrats." In 1960, Richard Nixon had anticipated Reagan's appeal by two decades, when he predicted that "millions of Democrats will join us not because they are deserting their party but because their party deserted them" (White, 1961, p. 207). George W. Bush followed a long line of Republican nominees, therefore, when he cited his bipartisan efforts to "get things done" in Texas.& He struck a bittersweet note by recalling the late Lt. Governor Bob Bullock, whose wife had appeared for Bush earlier in the convention. Said Bush:

Bob was a Democrat, a crusty veteran of Texas politics, and my great friend. [We worked side by side], he endorsed my re-election, and I know he is with me in spirit in saying to those who would malign our state for political gain . . . Don't mess with Texas (p. 7).

If Bush's solicitation of votes from non-Republicans placed him squarely in the tradition of his predecessors, he certainly gave the strategy a new twist--new, that is, for Republicans. Eric Pooley of Time magazine detected a familiar gambit, which White House reporters had learned to recognize at once: "Republicans have been moaning for years about how Clinton steals their issues and makes them his own. On Thursday, Bush came up with a G. O. P. triangulation, moving to the political center and rising above the conflict found there" (Pooley, 2000, p. 28). He promised to "strengthen Social Security and Medicare," "make prescription drugs available and affordable for every senior who needs them," "make Head Start an early learning program," "abolish the death tax," "reduce taxes for everyone," "work to reduce nuclear weapons," and put conservative values and conservative ideas into the thick of the fight for justice and opportunity

(pp. 4ff). Most tellingly, he presented himself as an outsider totally disconnected from the vitriolic partisanship in the nation's capital. He declared: "I don't have enemies to fight. And I have no stake in the bitter arguments of the last few years. I want to change the tone of Washington to one of civility and respect" (p. 7).³

While there might have been a dash of Clinton's "triangulation" in these asseverations, there could be no doubt about Bush's intended meaning when he reiterated the pledge that had never failed to receive the loudest applause on the campaign trail: ". . . when I put my hand on the Bible, I will swear to not only uphold the laws of our land, I will swear to uphold the honor and dignity of the office to which I have been elected, so help me God" (p. 10). As he moved to the political middle and tried to reassure moderates that he felt their pain, Bush did not fail to remind Americans angered by the actions of the incumbent president that a fresh start could best be made by someone who had been removed from the Washington scandals of recent years.

In light of what speechwriter Mike Gerson had told the television reporter in College Station back in May about the parallel with 1960, it is instructive to note Ross Baker's immediate reaction after Bush's speech: "While it was not Kennedy-esque in eloquence, . . . I think that was a speech that probably could have been given by John F. Kennedy--and probably was. It was a remarkable speech for a Republican in that he touched on a lot of points that really traditionally only have been touched on [by] Democratic speakers" (Schogel, 2000, p. AA7). Rhetorical analyst Kurt Ritter has argued that Bill Clinton's 1992 and 1996 acceptance speeches were effective because they combined Democratic and Republican appeals and blurred the contrast between the political doctrines of the two parties (Ritter, 1996, p. 5). Given Bush's blatant appeals to moderates and Democrats, it is reasonable to ask how far he departed from the orthodox Republican doctrines established by previous GOP candidates.⁴

The most potent and pervasive symbol of American national identity has been the ubiquitous concept of the American Dream, and a staple of nomination acceptance speeches since the age of television has been the inclusion of an idealized--often intensely personal--statement of the nominee's vision of America. Since 1960, every Democratic and Republican candidate "has included in his acceptance speech some sort of an allusion to a vision of America that is truer to its ideals" (Ritter, 1980, p. 168; Dearin, 1997, p. 709). Here the ideological dimensions of the two parties become manifest. As Ritter has shown, the two parties have usually offered competing versions of the American national experience:

To the extent that American can be persuaded that their past is a history of the individual struggling alone against the frontier without government interference, then the American Dream takes on a Republican cast. Those Americans who regard their national past as the history of yearning masses who came to our shores seeking a better life, however, will tend to embrace the Democrats' version of the American Dream (Ritter, 1980, p. 166).

Each party has preserved its unique interpretation of the American Dream but has tried to broaden its appeals by appropriating aspects of the other party's vision.⁴ Although George W. Bush did not utter the phrase "American Dream" in his speech, the entire 2000 convention was bathed in its symbolism. It was the theme of the 9 1/2-minute video tribute to Bush entitled "The

Sky's the Limit," which preceded his address. Colin Powell had spoken reverentially of "the American dream which was given birth in this city over two hundred years ago. A dream I have been privileged to live" (Powell, 2000, p. 1). There was even an "American Dream" luncheon in Philadelphia, in which Bush's 24-year old nephew, George P. Bush, the son of Florida Governor Jeb Bush and his wife Columba, talked about his uncle's "brighter agenda" for the future ("Viva the Dream," 2000, p. 10A). And when given his chance to address the convention before his uncle's speech, young Bush spoke of a nation where all people "de todos los origenes . . . can share the promise and the prosperity of el sueno Americana . . . the American dream" (George P. Bush, 2000, p. 1). It is significant that the phrase was uttered from the podium in Spanish as often as it was in English during the convention.⁵ Appealing to the traditional Democratic version of the American Dream by referring to recent Hispanic immigrants did not originate in Philadelphia in 2000. Candidate Bob Dole had said in his San Diego speech in 1996: "A family from Mexico who arrived this morning, legally, has as much right to the American dream as the direct descendants of the founding fathers" (Dole, 1996, p. 5). If there was anything unique about the 2000 convention, it was the pervasive and systematic emphasis placed upon Hispanic Americans, not the fact that they were singled out for special consideration.

The personal vision enunciated by George W. Bush still retained a strong residual trace of the Republican variation of the great American shibboleth. The spirit of the pioneers echoed in Bush's avowal of his intention to "extend the promise of prosperity to every forgotten corner of this country," and to give "every man and woman a chance to succeed." "In Midland, Texas, where I grew up, the town motto was 'the sky is the limit,'" said Bush. "There was a restless energy, a basic conviction that, with hard work, anybody could succeed, and everybody deserved a chance." In the middle of this paean to individual freedom and opportunity, however, the Texas governor, a symbolic descendant of Sam Houston and representative of the frontier spirit, said in his next breath: "Our sense of community was just as strong as the sense of promise"(Bush, 2000, p. 6). "Everyone, from immigrant to entrepreneur, has an equal claim on this country's promise" (p. 7), he said, in a seamless merging of the Republican and Democratic visions. One could argue that the Democratic communitarian vision is evident when Bush said, "Each of us is responsible . . . to love and guide our children and help a neighbor in need" (p. 10).⁶ A few days before the speech, Gloria Borger had written that, in order to tout his new Republicans as Clinton had led his new Democrats in 1992, "Bush needs to obscure the substantive differences between the parties . . . and instead talk about mutual goals and how-we're-all-in-this-together-for-this-great-nation" (Borger, 2000, p. 26). To a great extent, this was exactly what Bush did: he articulated a grand vision of America that embraced both versions of the enduring myth known as the American Dream.⁵

Any final assessment of Bush's acceptance speech must begin with the acknowledgment that platform speaking is not what he does best in politics. As Peggy Noonan, who wrote the 1988 acceptance speech for his father, has said about him: "He likes people and likes literally to touch them and joke with them, . . . He has strong one-on-one power. But standing and speaking--you never gather it's his favorite part" (Noonan, 2000, p. 19A). However, Herbert Simons, who describes himself as "no fan of George W.," says that "compared to Al Gore, 'who sometimes seems tortured,' Bush 'has a style that is familiar to Americans--a style they can identify with and enjoy'" (Schogel, 2000, p. AA7). Both Simons and Ross Baker, the

academic critics interviewed by the Philadelphia Inquirer, had heard John F. Kennedy speak, "and George W. Bush, they say, is no John F. Kennedy. But both said Bush impressively accomplished his goals: presenting himself as a sincere, caring man of the people, who is also a strong, moral leader people would want to follow" (Schogel, 2000, p. AA7). An editorial writer for the Inquirer opined that, "His well-written, adequately delivered speech showed how he has performed [the] wonders of reframing debate and renovating party image" ("W. is for Well-Done," 2000, p. A18).

The authorial stance of this essay has entailed an examination of the 2000 Republican acceptance address as a media event, rather than as a document or "text." Hence the rhetorical situation and convention proceedings have been deemed to be important determinants of the speech's "meaning." Even a brief textual analysis of the speech, however, reveals a degree of artistry worthy of the oratorical tradition it perpetuates. If the address is not as intricately crafted as Kennedy's was, at least Bush quoted JFK's favorite poet, Robert Frost, on the need to "occupy the land with character," and a few original expressions linger in the ear: "the soft bigotry of low expectations," "times of plenty, like times of crisis, are tests of American character," "so much praise, to no great purpose," and "I do not reinvent myself at every turn. I am not running in borrowed clothes" (Bush, 2000, pp. 2ff.). Antithetical sentences abound: "This is not a time for third chances, it is a time for new beginnings" (p. 3) and "The surplus is not the government's money. The surplus is the people's money" (p. 5). Echoes of FDR appear, as when Bush says of his opponent, "the only thing he has to offer is fear itself" (p. 6). A hidden allusion to Ronald Reagan's defiant challenge to Gorbachev appears (perhaps subliminally) in a reference to a wall in our nation that separates "wealth and technology, education and ambition" on the one side from "poverty and prison, addiction and despair" on the other. "My fellow Americans," said Bush, "we must tear down that wall" (p. 8). Excerpts from Bush's speech were used in television ads, just as they had been from every Republican candidate's acceptance speech since Richard Nixon's in 1968.

Political scientist Joshua H. Sandman, after studying the results of presidential elections from 1960 through 1988, concluded that "the candidate who could most effectively state--in words and in symbols--the visions and values of the ever moving centerist, middle class element has won the presidency" (Sandman, 1989, p. 264). Because the 2000 campaign resulted in a virtual dead heat, no conclusions can be reached concerning the relative potency of the visions set forth by the two major candidates. However, it is clear that George W. Bush stood firmly in the footprints of earlier GOP nominees as he articulated a personal vision of America and its destiny that retained the distinctively Republican emphasis upon individual liberty and limitless opportunity. It is more noteworthy, perhaps, that he laid greater stress than his predecessors had done on the equally venerable tradition--usually associated with Democratic nominees--of America as the compassionate, welcoming, and benevolent community.

Notes

¹ Critiques of the two Reagan speeches can be found in Dearin (1981; 1986). George Bush's 1988 and 1992 speeches were analyzed in papers presented at various speech communication conventions. For observations on the 1996 speech, see Dearin (1996; 1997).

² For this insight, the author is indebted to Professor Kurt Ritter, a scholar of presidential rhetoric

at Texas A & M, who was also interviewed by the reporter.

³ One reporter wrote that, "In many ways, Bush was seizing a page from the campaign Clinton successfully waged against Bush's father, former President Bush--subtly running against the extreme elements of this own party as well as his presidential opponent" (Frandsen, 2000, p. 12A).

⁴ Even Ronald Reagan, whose quintessential Republican vision of the "shining city on a hill" stressed the pioneer spirit of the nation's founders, nevertheless incorporated elements of the Democratic vision in his 1984 speech in Dallas. Reagan spoke movingly of the Statue of Liberty, then undergoing refurbishment, with its symbolism of the immigrants who came to America seeking a better life.

⁵ "El sueño Americano" figured prominently in the talk by Abel Maldonado, a California Assemblyman.

⁶ Many Republican delegates had blinked when Colin Powell said three nights earlier, "Children are a gift from God not only to their parents, but to their community. They belong to us all" (Powell, 2000, p. 3). Four years earlier, Bob Dole had derided Hillary Clinton's insistence that "it takes a village to raise a child." "It takes a family," Dole replied (Dole, 1996, p. 2).

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