

Analysis of A First Lady's Commencement Address

The day is hot. The students are restless, moments away from release into adulthood. They expect to be inspired, impressed, and edified by this experience. With so many pressuring factors, it's an understatement to say that commencement speakers have a tricky job. When they address a graduating class, theirs are the final words the graduates will hear before receiving their degrees and taking their places in the rising generation of doctors, lawyers, parents, politicians, and citizens. It is a balancing act to make a commencement address both meaningful and memorable. Barbara Bush took up the challenge when she agreed to be the commencement speaker for the Wellesley College class of 1990. Wellesley College, a private women's institution in Massachusetts, is predominantly left-leaning on the political spectrum. As the wife of a Republican president, the difficulty of Bush's task was exacerbated by this conflict of interest. Despite this, Bush gives a lovely, if slightly underwhelming, address to the Wellesley class of 1990, attempting to engage and inspire the graduates. Bush's use of emotional rhetoric was the most thorough and complete aspect of the speech. The appeals to logic and credibility each had something worth lauding, but also had deficits that inhibited the speech's ability to fully connect with the audience. Overall, Bush's speech was sweet and heartfelt, but could have benefitted significantly by a few minor changes in rhetoric.

Within the context of a commencement address, pathos is arguably the most important appeal to make. Going too heavy with logos would bore the graduates. Overdoing the ethos would take an inappropriate amount of attention away from them. In this kind of speech, ethos and logos serve only to enhance the emotional effect the speech has on the audience. Barbara Bush knew this and used an expertly measured amount of emotional rhetoric. She touches on this approach successfully several times throughout her remarks but does so most unforgettably with

a simple story. Early on in the speech, Bush recounts a short narrative written by Robert Fulghum. In the story, a pastor is charged with looking after some rambunctious children. To occupy the children, the pastor invents a game. As he describes the game, he instructs the children to choose whether they are a giant, a wizard, or a dwarf, but before he can continue, “a small girl tugging at his pants leg, ask[s], ‘But where do the mermaids stand?’” (Bush, 1990). When the pastor informs the little girl that this particular game doesn’t have mermaids, she insists that it must, because she *is* one. Bush uses this sweet story to illustrate the theme of individuality that carries through parts of her speech. She posits that this little girl’s determination not to abandon “either her identity or the game” is a powerful principle that the graduates should apply throughout their future lives. The plainness of the story strikes a sweet, emotional chord while also serving to further Bush’s intentions for her speech: to inspire the graduates on their individual journeys to success.

In addition to the emotional appeal created through a simple story, Barbra Bush also used humor to connect with her audience and gain credibility. Impressively, this particular appeal to credibility is not to Bush’s lofty station, but to her humanity. Bush did not win her audience’s trust by flaunting her status as the first lady of the United States. Instead, she won it by painting herself as an approachable, laid-back person. By not taking herself too seriously and cracking the occasional joke, Bush effectively put her audience at ease, and thus was able to address them as equals. At one point in the speech, Bush referenced the fact that the graduates would have preferred Alice Walker, a well-known author, as a commencement speaker rather than herself. With a smile, Bush proclaims, “Now I know your first choice for today was Alice Walker, known for *The Color Purple*. Instead, you got me – known for the color of my hair!” (Bush, 1990). Instead of taking this opportunity to prove herself equal to the graduates’ first choice of

speaker, Bush brushes off her high rank in the country in favor of making a joke about her age. With this, Bush acknowledges the elephant in the room, expertly dispelling any nervousness on the graduates' part about the awkward situation. This is a wise move from a rhetorical viewpoint. However subtly, this simple little joke demonstrates that Barbara Bush is not a frothy, elevated socialite, but a down-to-earth woman willing to be a friend and equal. It is easier for an audience to accept advice from one they see in this way and, with a little humor, Bush demonstrates that that is what she intends to be.

Another fantastic use of ethos Bush employs is the way she shows her audience that she shares their ideals. As aforementioned, Bush was outnumbered when it came to political affiliation that day. She was a Republican, which caused many of the left-leaning graduates to doubt her ability to connect with them. In order to fully win over the trust of the listeners, Bush needed an adept way to show them that she shared some of their modern ideals, despite her political leaning. This masterful stroke came succinctly and memorably in the most famous line of this speech: "Somewhere out in this audience may even be someone who will one day follow in my footsteps and preside over the White House as the President's spouse. I wish him well!" (Bush, 1990). At this, the audience broke out into unrestrained applause, whooping and cheering as Bush smiled down at them. This sentiment imparted by Bush was the most celebrated part of the speech, as it solidified her listener's trust in her. People are more inclined to trust in those they believe share their values. And for the forward-thinking ladies of Wellesley College, a first lady that believed in a future woman president was just that. In the eyes of the graduates, this statement bestowed so much credibility onto Bush.

While Bush's use of ethos was overall very impressive, there is a single hole in her rhetoric that, if patched, could have strengthened the speech significantly: logos. Bush's use of

logos throughout this oration was minimal. In one sense, the sparse logos worked well. The main way she employed logic and organization in her rhetoric was by highlighting three choices she hoped the graduates would make throughout their lives. She outlined these in a sequential order that was mostly clear. First, she implores the graduates to, “believe in something larger than [themselves]” (Bush, 1990). Next, she emphasizes the importance of having joy and fun in one’s life. This second point she makes is the least clear of the three, as it is not verbally numbered, and its standing has to be inferred by the listener. Third and finally, she tells her audience to “cherish [their] human connections” (Bush, 1990). This structure was, for the most part, successful in clearly conveying Bush’s messages. It is simpler for an audience to understand and remember three outlined ideas than it is for them to sort out the messages for themselves.

Beyond this, however, there is a significant lack of logos in the address. The most blatant example is in the lack of structure; Bush's main point gets lost in the disorganization of her address. By far the most logically organized section was the three points mentioned above, but the rest of it is difficult to follow. She speaks about diversity, she speaks about individuality, she speaks about the importance of loving your children, she speaks about the changing political climate. Not only are there insufficient transitions between these ideas, there is no main point to tie them all together. No one idea seems to lead back to another, it’s just piece of unrelated advice after piece of unrelated advice. The most coherent theme throughout the address is the importance of individuality, but even that idea is not expressed with enough consistency to be clear. As stated in a study by Monterey Peninsula College, “Finding the main idea is a key to understanding what you read... Once you identify the main idea, everything else... should click into place” (Monterey Peninsula College). This address could have greatly benefitted by one,

consistent, easy-to-identify main idea. This aspect of logos would have made the speech clearer, more concise, and more memorable to the audience.

In conclusion, Barbara Bush's 1990 commencement address to the graduating class of Wellesley College had many strengths and was effective overall. However, it was not perfect. Her emotional approach was the most complete, and her humorous appeal to credibility was powerful. The logic and organization of the speech needed work, but in the end, this didn't detract too irredeemably from the message of the remarks. Barbara Bush had a daunting task in front of her when accepting this invitation, but, when push came to shove, she handled it gracefully and admirably.

References

- Bush, B. (1990, June 1). *Commencement address*. Wellesley College. Retrieved February 12, 2022, from <https://www.wellesley.edu/events/commencement/archives/1990commencement/commencementaddress>
- Monterey Peninsula College. (n.d.). *Finding the main idea*. Retrieved February 13, 2022, from <https://morbgel7.btp.ac.id/identify-main-idea-key-sentence-supporting-details-from-text-listened-to-english-4-q3-week-4.xhtml>

Great America and Ugly America

On May 22nd, 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson, the 36th president of the United States of America, gave “The Great Society” speech at Michigan State College. This commencement speech was also part of his campaign to prevent poverty and racial injustice. The speech was given to graduating class of 1964. This speech was made to strongly push students to think about their future and what they wanted to do for the world. In his description of “The Great Society,” Johnson used three points on where and how to grow the great society. The first point is about the cities and urban areas, the second is about the countryside, and third is about education. Overall, through this speech Lyndon B. Johnson wants to change society from “Ugly America” to “The Great Society.”

Lyndon B. Johnson addressed the students of the Graduating class of 1964 who are going into the real world, taking up jobs, finding homes, making families and doing their parts in society. These students are shaping the world for the generations to come. In the beginning of his speech Johnson states, “Your imagination, your initiative, and your indignation will determine whether we build a society.” These students are being addressed with concepts that are related to current things or ideas in their lives. Johnson hopes student’s minds will change America from an “Ugly America” to “The Great Society” with imagination, initiative, and indignation. These three mindsets aren’t the only things the students will need; they will also need all three places Lyndon B. Johnson lists.

The first place to start is in the cities and urban areas. Lyndon B. Johnson said, “In the remainder of this century, the urban population will double, city land will double, and we will have to build homes, highways, and facilities equal to all those.” The students are being

addressed with ideas of society that need to be changed and reevaluated by them. These ideas brought to their attention aren't the only things that Johnson expressed worry about, but also how it is affecting people and social aspects of society. Johnson also stated, "Worst of all expansion is eroding the precious and time-honored values of community with neighbors and communion with nature." These students are also being told to draw some attention to the social world of America and how the growth of cities and urban areas are taking away the community and ability to be a part of nature. That is where Johnson's next point comes in, the countryside and nature of America.

Lyndon B. Johnson second point was the countryside it is a huge part of America, and these students were pointed to the fact that our countryside holds many important things such as food, farms, wildlife, beauty water, and many more things. In the speech "The Great Society by Lyndon B. Johnson 1964 it is stated "We have always prided ourselves on being not only America the strong and America the free, but America the beautiful. Today that beauty is in danger." Lyndon B. Johnson goes on to tell students of the dangers that are hurting the countryside. Pollution is one of the biggest dangers to the natural beauty of America, along with overcrowding in our national parks, and seashores. Along with that the green hills, dense forest, and open plains disappearing. These students are given the opportunity to change the world, and they need to save America the beautiful. Not just America the beautiful needs saving but also the people, you can't change a society if your people aren't changing with it, or if they don't know how, and that is where Lyndon B. Johnsons third point comes into play.

Lyndon B. Johnson's third and final place that needs to be fixed is education. In "The Great Society" by Lyndon B. Johnson, he states "Our society will not be great until every young mind is set free to scan the farthest reaches of thought and imagination." The American education system is failing quickly. Students aren't the priority and teachers are no good. "The Great Society" by Lyndon B. Johnson speech said "In many places, classrooms are overcrowded, and curricula are outdated. Most of our qualified teachers are underpaid, and many of our paid teachers are unqualified." Johnson wants students to know what is affecting society's education and one of his main points is teachers. He then goes on to enlighten them about the educated society and non-educated society through statistics. He says, "8 million adult Americans, more than the entire population of Michigan, have not finished 5 years of school. Nearly 20 million have not finished 8 years of school. Nearly 54 million — more than one quarter of all America — have not even finished high school." Then Lyndon B. Johnson made it very clear to the students that this was not okay for America, this isn't what America the brave and beautiful is supposed to be, or America the free. This country is supposed to be the best and smartest and it isn't. Lyndon B. Johnson gave the students the foundation of how to fix "Ugly America" into "The Great Society" and explained that the government has ideas on how to do this.

The students were told that these issues have potential solutions but not full solutions that will fix it permanently. "The Great Society" by Lyndon B. Johnson says "We are going to assemble the best thought and the broadest knowledge from all over the world to find those answers for America." So, Students of Michigan Graduation class of 1964 were given an agenda of how to save the Great America, by Lyndon B. Johnson using the three

concepts main points brought to them: first being how to fix the cities and urban areas, second taking care of the countryside and its beauty, and third America's education. Lyndon B. Johnson ends his speech providing some insight to the graduating class of 1964 by saying "Those who came to this land sought to build more than just a new country. They sought a new world. So, I have come here today to your campus to say that you can make their vision our reality." These students need to continue what Americas founders started and work towards a better America. Lyndon B. Johnsons speech "The Great Society is all about a better America and how to do it, with three steps and a new generation ready to succeed in their new world of opportunity.

Evaluation (using examples from the sample essays)

	Analysis of A First Lady's Commencement Address	Great America and Ugly America
Introduction (2.5 pts): How does the first paragraph set up some context for the speech? Does it have a clear thesis that evaluates the overall effectiveness of the speech?		

<p>Paragraphs (2.5 pts):</p> <p>Is the overall organization of the essay clear?</p> <p>Are there transitions at the beginning of paragraphs to help link one idea to the next? Give an example of a transition.</p> <p>Does each paragraph identify a specific way that the author/speaker influenced their audience? This could be a rhetorical appeal (ethos, pathos, logos) or some other strategies-- is it clear what specific things the author does well in the speech and what they may be less effective at doing to reach the audience?</p>		
<p>Tone/Language (2.5 pts): Does the student use 3rd person and avoid personal opinion?</p> <p>Where does the student sound objective and</p>		

fair, or where is their analysis overly biased (making judgments without good evidence)?		
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3. Write 4 - 5 sentences about how reading these sample essays might help you write your own Rhetorical Analysis (5 pts). How does it help you see what kind of voice and tone works (or does not work) for a Rhetorical Analysis essay? How does it give you ideas for how to start or end? How does it help you understand how to evaluate the strengths and weakness of the speech? How does it help you see how you can use rhetorical appeals and other strategies to show what has worked and what doesn't?