**Analysis of Barack Obama’s Commencement Address**

In June 2005, then U.S. Senator Barack Obama delivered the commencement address at Knox college in Galesburg, Illinois. At the time, Obama was a rising star in the Democratic party, having been elected in the U.S. Senate just a year earlier. The speech came at a pivotal moment in American history, as the country was grappling with the ongoing Iraq war, political polarization, and growing economic inequality. In his address, Obama emphasized the importance of civic engagement, community involvement, and social responsibility. He encouraged the graduating class to become active participants in democracy, to question authority, and to work towards creating a more just and equitable society. The speech showcased Obama’s signature blend of inspiration, pragmatism, and call to action, themes that would become hallmarks of his political career and presidency.

Obama gave this speech with the intention to inspire and motivate the graduating class, share his vision for a more united and just society and also establish himself as a national leader. He wanted the audience to reflect on their role in society, understand the power of collective action, feel inspired, motivated, hopeful and optimistic, get involved in their communities, pursue careers in public service and become active citizens.

Barack Obama’s commencement speech at Knox College in 2005 marked a significant moment in his political career. As a newly elected senator, Obama’s speech showcased his exceptional oratory skills and set the tone for his future political endeavors. This analysis will explore the rhetorical strategies Obama employed to inspire and motivate the graduating class of 2005.

Ethos:

Obama established his credibility and authority by acknowledging the honor of being the keynote speaker and expressing gratitude for the honorary degree (para.2). By doing so, he demonstrated humility and respect for the institution, creating a positive tone for the rest of the speech. Additionally, Obama shared personal experiences, such as paying off student loans and being ranked 99th in seniority in the Senate (para.3-4), to connect with the audience and demonstrate his relatability. This self-deprecation and willingness to share personal anecdotes humanized Obama and made him more accessible to the graduates.

Pathos:

Obama appealed to the emotions of the graduates by asking them to reflect on their place in history (para.5). He emphasized the significance of their generation’s role in shaping America’s future, evoking a sense of responsibility and purpose. By using phrases like “your place in history” and “the question is not whether we can afford to invest in our young people, the question is whether we can afford not to”, Obama created a sense of urgency and importance, inspiring the graduates to consider their impact on the world. He also shared stories of ordinary people who made a difference in the fight against slavery and discrimination (para.20-22), inspiring the graduates to become active participants in creating positive change. These stories served as a reminder that individual actions can collectively lead to significant social and political transformations. By appealing to the audience’s values and emotions, Obama creates a powerful and persuasive argument that motivates and inspires the audience to take action.

Logos:

Obama presented logical arguments and evidence to support his claims. He highlighted the importance of collective action and government investment in education, healthcare and research (para. 15-19). He provided specific examples of how these investments have benefited society, such as the creation of the internet and the development of new industries (para. 16-17). By emphasizing the need for a national commitment to meet the challenges of globalization and ensure America’s competitiveness (para. 12-14), Obama appealed to the graduates’ sense of patriotism and national pride. He also acknowledged the complexity of these issues, recognizing that there are no easy solutions, but emphasizing the need for collective effort and cooperation. His speech does not provide explicit references or citations but it draws on his experiences, historical context, and widely recognized data and trends.

Metaphor:

Obama employed metaphors to create vivid imagery and convey complex ideas. He compared America’s journey to a “journey to be shared and shaped and remade” (para. 6), emphasizing the nation’s capacity for growth and transformation. This metaphor suggested that America’s story is ongoing and that the graduates have a crucial role to play in shaping its future. Additionally, Obama compared the forces of technology and globalization to a “quiet revolution” (para. 11), highlighting their significant impact on the world and the need for adaptability and innovation.

Allusions:

Obama alluded to historical events and figures, such as the Civil war, Abraham Lincoln, and the Underground Railroad (para. 20-22), to illustrate the power of collective action and the importance of learning from the past. The allusions served as a reminder of the progress America has made and the work still to be done, emphasizing the need for continued collective effort and commitment to social and political change.

Repetition:

Obama repeated key phrase throughout the speech, such as “rise together” (para.10,18) and “meet the challenges of our time” (para 10, 19). This repetition emphasized his central message and created a sense of unity and purpose. By repeating these phrases, Obama encouraged the graduates to remember the importance of collective action and the need to work together to address complex issues facing America.

Tone:

Obama’s tone was inspiring, motivational, and optimistic. He encouraged the graduates to dream big and work together to create a better future (para. 23-25). His tone was also inclusive, acknowledging the diversity of the graduating class and the complexity of the issues they will face (para. 7-9).

Conclusion:

In his Knox College commencement speech, Barack Obama demonstrated exceptional rhetorical skill, appealing to the audience’s values and emotions as well as creating a powerful and persuasive argument that motivates and inspires the audience to take action.

**References**

Obama, B. H. (2005). Commencement address at Knox College.

<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobamaknoxcollege.htm>