

The Story of America's "Greatness": A Rhetorical Analysis of
President Trump's July 4th Salute to the Nation

Rebecca Bonifacio

SCOM 381: Advanced Rhetorical Research Methods

December 17, 2020

ABSTRACT

Utilizing Kenneth Burke's Dramatic pentad, this paper attempts to analyze Donald Trump's 2020 Salute to the Nation. Works to explain his ultimate purpose of courage in the scene of American greatness and how this manifests differently depending on his audience. Argues that Trump's rhetoric has the power to lead the United States to fascism, but only if we, as the audience and American citizens, give him that power. Thorough paper including introduction, rhetorical context, literature review, methods, analysis, discussions and contributions and conclusion. Ultimately explains the historical arc of American "greatness" and how this ideology cannot accurately co-exist with the current reality of the United States of America.

Introduction

On July 4th, 2020, Donald Trump, the 45th president of the United States addressed his constituents in a Salute to the Nation. Trump's address came during troubled times for America, a country experiencing a record loss of citizens to a global pandemic, racial injustice, police brutality towards marginalized groups and a collapsing economy. Therefore, the president's rhetoric holds intense meaning, given the rhetorical context behind the speech, as well as the timing – the nation's birthday. Beyond this, Trump, arguably America's most disfavored president, makes strong claims about the success of the nation in reference to his administration, as he negates specific worldviews and holds steady with his narrative. Trump uses his dialogue to attempt to unite the nation on a day that is typically celebrated and prideful but has a different tone in context of 2020. The president uses rhetoric that builds upon the concept of American exceptionalism, viewing America as a God-favored country, and attempts to unite America with this ideology, although the country is struggling with polarized views. Trump's discourse on July fourth attempts to unite the American people and draw upon the successes of his presidency and past leadership as he tells the story of America – the greatest country on Earth.

This paper will attempt to work through important points leading up to Trump's Salute to the Nation. It will draw upon the context of 2020 and past research on the core components of Trump's speech, including presidential rhetoric, Trump's rhetoric, and white supremacy. The paper will then work through a methodological analysis of the Salute to the Nation, using Kenneth Burke's pentad to examine Trump's motives and goals behind this address. Overall, this paper attempts to argue how Trump's July fourth rhetoric serves as a metaphor for his wavering leadership, ultimately telling a story of American greatness that cannot coexist with reality.

Rhetorical Context

On the nation's 244th birthday (July 4, 2020), Donald Trump, the United States 45th President, addressed the country. In history, 2020 will be marked by a global pandemic, country-wide protests, and dividing leadership, with the culmination of these reaching a pinnacle at the delivery of his address. It is through explaining the context of 2020 one can begin to critically analyze Trump's salute. Without a core understanding of what those living through 2020 have endured, a rhetorician may struggle to find substantial meaning in Trump's national address.

America's 2020 struggles start to unfold in late February/early March. COVID-19, a newly discovered virus that originated in China, emerges across the United States after global stories of outbreaks for roughly three months prior. American citizens struggle to adapt to this tag-lined 'unprecedented' way of life, requiring them to wear masks routinely, significantly reduce in-person interactions, and socially distance themselves in-person to avoid the virus' spread. By the end of March, the United States has nearly 130,000 confirmed cases, more than any other country in the world, but Trump continues to mitigate the severity of the virus, making statements about how COVID-19 will "go away" and "is something that we have tremendous control over," (Stevens & Tan, 2020).

The week of May 25th added to the tension of America's struggles when George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black American, was murdered on the streets of Minneapolis, Minnesota by a police officer over a potential counterfeit \$20 bill (Cobb, 2020). This filmed murder re-sparked the Black Lives Matter movement across America, a movement fueled by the lack of justice for Black Americans in the United States. The broadcasted injustice of George Floyd's murder led to nation-wide protests as other inequalities across the American justice system were brought to

light. The pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement became political phenomena, splitting the historic divide in American political parties even further.

Given the heightened tension across the United States, both from racial inequality and large death tolls from COVID-19, it can be inferred that Americans were expecting a very different message from their president than they received. Donald Trump's 2020 Salute was more than just a speech to the nation; it was a celebration, paired with fireworks and unmasked attendees (Mark, 2020). Trump invited several hundred guests to his event, many of which were not wearing masks and social distancing, in direct opposition of medical professionals and other government officials, like D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser ("Trump 'Salute to America,'" 2020). Trump took his celebration to the next level, including a milelong firing of 10,000 fireworks, called "the largest in recent memory" by Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, ("Trump 'Salute to America,'" 2020). In direct contrast, most U.S. cities canceled or scaled back their firework displays, encouraging Americans to keep gatherings small or nonexistent given the heightened concern of COVID-19 ("Trump 'Salute to America,'" 2020). Despite medical officials across the country pleading Americans to curb July fourth celebrations, and a remarkable record loss of citizens to COVID-19, Trump sent a strong message to American citizens by hosting such an event during peak transmission in the United States (Berry & Madhani, 2020).

Just one day prior to his 2020 Salute, Trump also held a rally and firework display in the Black Hills of Mount Rushmore, an area of American land sacred to Native American tribes. With similar response to the Black Lives Matter movement sweeping the country, Trump's Mount Rushmore rally was met with resistance from protestors, many of whom identified as members of Oglala Lakota or Sioux Native American tribes (Bormett & Huber, 2020). Trump chose to press on with this rally, but then negated responsibility for the ever-increasing civil

unrest among persecuted groups in America in his 2020 Salute: a position that is in direct opposition to his treatment of marginalized communities as seen at Black Hills.

While Trump's 2020 salute took place behind the White House fences, thousands of Americans holding polarizing views gathered throughout Washington D.C. for the address. Many of the Trump supporters who traveled across the nation for the July fourth event made statements about the severity of COVID-19. Take, for example, Pat Lee, who stated that "POTUS said it would go away" in response to the pandemic and "Masks, I think, are like a hoax," (Berry & Madhani, 2020, para. 13). Other Trump supporters, some of whom identify as Proud Boys, engaged in dialogue with journalists about the Black Lives Matter movement with phrases such as "When I hear about racism, I don't see it," or "This is not about racial equality, this is not about justice. This is about people who want anarchy," (Sadon et al., 2020, para. 41). Many Americans who disagreed with these viewpoints took to the streets of D.C. as well, such as Shyrah Perkins who stated "America is about stealing; it's about taking opportunities away from people. It's about taking freedom away" (Davies et al., 2020, para. 2). Donald Trump's choice to hold a celebration among such a politically tense climate (both COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter) only further divided America, which can clearly be seen from the two polarizing sides that gathered outside the White House for his Salute.

Finally, Trump's speech shows the differing perspectives of what Americans expected from their leader versus how Trump actually responded. While Trump endorsed large gatherings at both the National Mall and Mount Rushmore, many communities across the nation decided to hold off on celebrating the nation's birthday to the same caliber as previous commemorations (Berry & Madhani, 2020, para. 26). Trump's decision to move ahead with his July fourth celebrations in light of the nation's struggle seems to exhibit a determination to return to

normalcy, an ache shared by many Americans for a more accustomed way of living (Berry & Madhani, 2020, para. 27). In direct contrast, Joe Biden, the prospective Democratic Nominee and Trump's opponent for the 2020 presidential election, offered a message of unity, hope and perseverance on July fourth (Politi, 2020, para. 1). Biden released a video saying, "we have a chance to rip the roots of systemic racism of this country" and "live up to the words that founded this nation," (Politi, 2020, para. 1). Trump on the other hand, chose to ignore the racial tension and focus instead on the American military and the success of historical American heroes (Politi, 2020, para. 2). The distinct difference between Biden and Trump's rhetoric can be seen as a metaphor for America's divide and the expectations constituents have for their president.

Literature Review

July fourth is a day that holds intense meaning, as it symbolizes the anniversary of America becoming a free nation. However, the context of 2020 painted a very different picture than past independence days, given the tremendous struggles Americans faced over the year. Past research on presidential discourse, Trump's rhetoric and the ideology behind white nationalism helps explain what makes Donald Trump such a unique and disfavored president, but how he is able to appeal to a certain type of American, nonetheless.

Presidential Discourse and American Exceptionalism

"American exceptionalism at its core is the idea that the United States is a singular, superior and perhaps even God-favored country in the international community," (Gilmore, 2015, p. 303). This idea is accepted as truth for most Americans, whether it be due to public schools expecting students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance every day, American flags hung outside houses as a sign of patriotism, or from the way American leaders address the nation. The idea of American exceptionalism has been deeply embedded in the psyche of Americans,

existing even before the official foundation of the country," showing how fundamental it is to both American constituents and their elected officials, (Gilmore & Rowling, 2017, pg. 46),

Past American presidents have utilized the concept of American exceptionalism for hundreds of years, in an attempt to "inspire, motivate, and ultimately achieve their political objectives," (Gilmore & Rowling, 2019 pg. 392). As far back as 1801, President Thomas Jefferson evoked the concept of American exceptionalism, referring to the country as the "world's best hope," (Gilmore, 2015, pg. 304). More recently, Barack Obama spoke on the concept of American exceptionalism at the United Nations general assembly, stating, "Some may disagree, but I believe America is exceptional – in part because we have shown a willingness through the sacrifice of blood and treasure to stand up not only for our own narrow self-interests, but for the interests of all," (Gilmore, 2015, pg. 302). The mythos of American exceptionalism has served as a driving force behind American identity, becoming an ideal that constituents not only expect from their elected officials, but demand, (Gilmore & Rowling, 2019, pg. 393). Americans are so strongly rooted in American exceptionalism that any presidential invocation that overtly mentions the concept will resonate with the majority of the American people, despite whether fact can prove genuine truth behind this ideal, (Gilmore & Rowling, 2017, pg. 48).

The concept of American exceptionalism is so deeply engrained in America's core values and identity that a president would be naïve to not utilize such a concept. United States presidents will typically argue American exceptionalism in one of three ways: describing America as the greatest country on earth, as being singular among the global community, or as being specifically favored by God or a higher power, (Gilmore, 2015, pg. 304 & 305). Presidents utilize this ideal to not only draw out unity in their constitutions, but also to instill hope in their current leadership, leading to stronger American exceptionalism appeals in reelection years,

(Esbaugh-Soha, 2010, pg. 5). "A president who is perceived to be insufficiently sympathetic or supportive of the idea of American exceptionalism, therefore, is likely to be regarded as ill-equipped or incapable of advancing America's interests in the world," (Gilmore & Rowling, 2019, pg. 396). Clearly, the concept of American exceptionalism plays a large role in presidential rhetoric, as it is an ideal that is deeply engrained in American culture and identity.

Trump's Rhetoric

Unlike past presidents, Trump's unwavering support is not fundamentally based off his policies, but rather, a charismatic persona and "the affective connection he created with his supporters," by utilizing the promise of a greater America, (Rowland, 2019, pg. 350). Trump's rhetoric resonated strongly with white working-class voters who were afraid of losing their identity to a demonized Other and wanted a president who would speak as the "voice of Everyman," (Penman & Cloud, 2018, pg. 109 & Rowland, 2019, pg. 354). At the same time, Trump was able to rhetorically draw support out of white supremacist groups, like the KKK, by utilizing the concept of winking. "The purpose of winking is so the rhetor can speak implicitly about a discourse and still claim allegiance to a cause without employing overt language," (Sanchez, 2018, pg. 49). Trump's rhetoric has the power to be so harmful because he "presents the wrong kind of ideas to the wrong kind of people," by giving an already hateful, power-hungry sector of the American population a platform (Penman & Cloud, 2018, pg. 116). Trump's rhetoric is distinctly different from past presidents, as he creates a discourse that remains versatile enough to be understood differently depending on the audience, (Sanchez, 2018, pg. 49). To the average American, Trump speaks of a country that returns to old values and security, but for white supremacists, Trump's rhetoric has the power to incite a dangerous movement.

Beyond this, Trump “enables and emulates [other] authoritarians with his rhetoric,” as some critics believe that the main motive behind his discourse is power-seeking authoritarianism, (Penman & Cloud, 2018, pg. 120). Trump feeds into the groups where he is able to congregate the most support, be that white working-class Americans who fear alienation and lost opportunities or self-proclaimed white supremacists who view Trump’s presidency as the “era of revenge,” (Rowland, 2019, pg. 349 & Sanchez, 2018, pg. 47). Trump’s ultimate goal with his rhetoric is “autocratic power – unquestioned, unilateral and crucially removed from the democratic process,” leading Trump to behave in the way he does not because it’s where his beliefs lie, but rather because it’s where he finds the most support and power, (Penman & Cloud, 2018, pg. 124). While Trump’s rhetoric was not aimed primarily at persuading people to support him, he worked to activate fear in Americans afraid of losing their sense of identity to some villain-like Other, and “in turn fed support for his message and campaign,” giving Trump the vigor and support he sought through the presidency (Rowland, 2018, pg. 372).

White Nationalism

“White nationalism in the United States is as old as the nation,” (Amaya, 2018, pg. 367). Despite the progress the country has made, one cannot erase the racist history of this country, especially when it is so blatantly supported in an ever-changing world. According to Hartzell, “white nationalism is a pro-white ideology that calls for a separate territory and/or enhanced legal rights and protections for white people,” (Hartzell, 2018, p. 10). White nationalism works as an umbrella term for all white superiority groups, who range in ideology but ultimately believe in building up the white man and tearing down the Black man. Due to the foundation of America and inherent white privilege, all white Americans benefit from white nationalism in

some capacity, although acceptance of this fundamental truth is difficult and leads to rage at the mere suggestion of the possibility, a concept known as white fragility, (Kelly, 2020, pg. 201).

White fragility is based off of the threat of "displacement and replacement," a core fear of white Americans that they will one day be outnumbered and replaced by a demonized Other, or any group of individuals that are not white, (Amaya, 2018, pg. 371). "White fragility is a mechanism by which white people insulate themselves from the charges of racism by withdrawing from people of color altogether," (Kelly, 2020, pg. 201). White ambivalence, the idea that white history deserves to be celebrated and viewed as superior, but at the same time, not be characterized as white supremacy, has been able to maintain such a status of dominance and centrality by operating primarily under the radar, (Kelly, 2020, pg.197). Americans will attempt to evade responsibility for racism or even claim that it is impossible for racism to exist in the United States, arguing that America is a post-racial society because there are no longer overtly racist policies in place, like Jim Crow, (Hartzell, 2020, pg. 8). By utilizing the above techniques, self-proclaimed white supremacists and white Americans alike are able to "gain mainstream legitimacy and acceptance by branding themselves with language that obscures their connection to race and racism," suggesting that it does not even exist (Hartzell, 2018, pg. 9).

The concept of white ambivalence and white fragility are taken one step farther with the introduction of colorblindness, the belief that "people should be seen and treated as individuals only, not as persons or groups whose identities or social positions have been shaped and organized by race," (Hartzell, 2018, pg. 12). Colorblindness is used as a tool to argue that one does not gain privilege from being white in America, and rather that People of Color fail to get ahead because they do not take advantage of the opportunities presented to them, effectively negating the possibility of racism and white privilege in America (Kelly, 2020, pg. 199). By

using rather level-headed arguments, white nationalists are able to frame this viewpoint as rational, genuinely leading Americans to believe that they live in a post-racial society, (Amaya, 2018, pg. 369). White nationalism in America runs deep and is a rather intricate concept to fully understand, but one that many white Americans refuse to accept as truth.

Contributions

The above research helps an audience critically understand the dynamic of previous presidential rhetoric, how this relates to Trump's rhetoric, and how this potentially ties into white nationalism. The research that follows in this paper will attempt to take the above contributions one step further. My analysis will attempt to connect past presidential discourse, Trump's rhetoric, and white supremacy, ultimately making the argument that all three of these concepts are interconnected. I will do this by drawing upon specific examples of white nationalism in Trump's rhetoric and how his discourse as president is uniquely different than that of past leaders. Beyond this, my research will provide examples of where Trump's rhetoric can take America, and the potential harmful implications that follow suit from the way he addresses his constituents. I will attempt to provide key examples, while utilizing Kenneth Burke's pentad, on how Trump is capable of drawing dangerous ideals out of his supporter and how overall, Trump's rhetoric has the power to threaten a democratic United States of America.

Methods

After critically watching Trump's 2020 Salute to the Nation multiple times, I decided that the best way to analyze his speech was with Kenneth Burke's pentad. Trump is working to tell a story about the history of America and how the United States is destined for greatness. He focuses primarily on specific worldviews of both past and present-day America and how these help to explain the successes of his presidency, as well as the success of influential leaders that

came before him. There are key distinctions in Trump's national address between the five elements of the pentad, making it a realistic and objective method for analysis.

Kenneth Burke, one of the most influential rhetorical critics of the twentieth century, developed a "theory of language and human action" he referred to as dramatism," (McGeough & King, 2016, p. 147). This theory included the pentad, which Burke developed to "make visible how persuaders use language to change our beliefs and influence our actions," (McGeough & King, 2016, p. 149). Burke did not invent the concept, but rather, built upon the work of earlier critics to provide a more streamlined method. The pentad has been used by rhetorical scholars to criticize a wide variety of works, showing that it can be used for a multi-faceted critique. Burke's pentad has been used to rhetorically criticize different aspects of politics, from congressional hearings (Darr & Strine, 2009) to addresses to the nation (Ling, 2015).

Kenneth Burke's pentad is well-regarded as an important and applicable rhetorical critique. The pentad allows us to understand a narrative in different terms as Burke "believed that analyzing the focus that a narrator placed on some features of a conflict over others could provide insight on the narrator's perspective," (Bowman, 2017, p. 2). Burke's pentad breaks down a narrative in terms of five common rhetorical elements, the act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose, and explains how each of these devices interact with one another to create a singular narrative. The pentad identifies the motivations of the speaker and how he or she attempts to influence an audience to believe a specific narrative. This allows critics to see an artifact in a new light, taking into account all of these pieces and establishing a more thorough analysis, laying out the groundwork by critically examining the purpose and meaning behind the artifact.

This method works well for my artifact because it allows a critic to analyze Donald Trump's speech beyond obvious motives and goals. The pentad ultimately attempts to

understand the motive of the speaker or the "underlying worldview and philosophy of the speaker and the worldview the speaker wants us to adopt," (McGeough & King, 2016, p. 152).

Like most leaders, Trump attempts to depict America as the greatest country in the world, drawing upon past achievements dating as far back as the foundation of the country and more recent accomplishments under his administration. Trump also works to evoke a patriotic mindset out of the nation, which is in line with past presidential speeches. However, there is far more at play with Trump's national address and the pentad helps the critic understand these other elements, describing them in a way that makes sense to an audience.

By utilizing a pentadic critique, one will be able to see how Trump paints a distinctive narrative that goes beyond the initial motives and goals of his rhetoric. Trump is not just addressing his constituents on the nation's birthday, but rather telling a story of American history, one that discusses America's past and present successes and denies American failures. By doing so, Trump is painting a picture of America that is in line with his worldview, a viewpoint that draws upon key American principles like American exceptionalism and further promotes a God-favored narrative of the country.

The pentad consists of five key elements: the act, the scene, the agent, the agent, the agency, and the purpose. The first key step to understanding the pentad and how it can help in terms of rhetoric is to have a brief understanding of the five elements. These elements are not as simple as who, what, when, where and why, and takes a critical rhetorical approach to understanding an artifact beyond what meets the eye. The act or the element that describes what is being done, is more than the mere act of giving a speech. Rather, it attempts to conclude what the underlying meaning behind an action is. The scene is a "focus on the physical or semantic environment or setting," and once again, goes further than the backdrop the artifact took place in,

helping a rhetorician understand the overarching environment behind the scene. (Bowman, 2017, p. 2). The agent is the character or person performing the act and perhaps can be taken one step further, describing the audience the agent is trying to evoke a response out of. The agency is concerned with "analyzing the means or methods by which an act took place," such as the instruments the agent used to carry out the act and what symbolism these choices represent (Bowman, 2017, p. 2). Lastly, the purpose of the narrative, arguably the most important part of the pentad, unpacks the overarching meaning or intention behind the narrative. It is through critically analyzing an artifact with these five elements of the pentad in mind that a rhetorician can create concrete conclusions about the overarching meaning behind a rhetorical technique.

While all elements of the pentad are important for formulating a critical analysis of an artifact, they do not hold equal weight. This is where the concept of ratios come in, which is based off the idea that these elements do not exist separately, but rather are "interconnected in a dramatic structure of action," (McGeough & King, 2016, p. 155). Regardless of which specific pentadic ratio an analyst chooses to focus on the primary goal of utilizing this ideal is to "find those key elements that seem to be the most revealing of a narrative's underlying conflict and then specify which element appears to be a causal agent of other," (Bowman, 2017, p. 3).

With this core understanding of the pentad, I will utilize the next section of this paper to examine Trump's Salute to the Nation through the eyes of this rhetorical method. First, I will seek to understand the presence and function of each element in reference to Trump's speech. Next, I will look at the dominant term for this artifact, and the key pentadic ratio that follows suit. Finally, I will explore how the dominant ratio affects the remaining pentadic elements and provide an overall evaluation of the rhetorical significance behind Trump's Salute.

Analysis

Purpose

In order to analyze Trump's rhetoric, one must first work to understand the pentadic element of purpose which explains the reason or rationale behind the overarching action. Given Trump's title and the timing of the speech, it can be inferred that Trump's discourse is an attempt to unite the country under his leadership. While this ideal is present in Trump's rhetoric, the core component of Trump's speech is not just unity, but rather, to remind his constituents of the greatness of America, and the courage that comes alongside this greatness. The president speaks about the struggles and sacrifices American ancestors endured to bring about this great nation, stating, "Thanks to the courage of those patriots of July 4th, 1776, the American Republic stands today as the greatest, most exceptional, and most virtuous nation in the history of the world," (Trump, 2020, para. 5). Trump actively works to remind his constituents of the courage of American heroes, as he draws upon past trials and tribulations the country has faced, and how she has persevered, stating, "The patriots who built this country were not villains, they were heroes whose courageous deeds improved the Earth beyond measure," (Trump, 2020, para. 34). Trump uses courage to remind his audience that America is a God-favored, powerhouse of a country, drawing upon key American principles like American exceptionalism, when he states, "our movement is based on lifting all citizens to reach their fullest, God-given potential," (Trump, 2020, para. 17). The overarching purpose behind Trump's 2020 Salute to the Nation is to tell the story of American greatness, with courage as it's driving force.

Trump takes this concept of courage one step further, working to explain to his audience that this courage was not only applicable to the past, but exists in every American alive today, stating, "All Americans living today are the heirs of their magnificent legacy. We are the

descendants of the most daring and courageous people to walk on the face of this Earth,” (Trump, 2020, para. 8). Just like the struggles America faced in the past, be that world wars, civil divide or economic failure, core American heroes rose to the occasion, dedicating their lives to protect the greatest nation on Earth. Trump drives this point home, reminding his constituents that the adversity Americans faced in the past is relative to current struggles. He speaks of courage and unity to remind his present-day constituents that the battles the country is currently facing, a deadly virus claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands, civil unrest, and a struggling economy, are not so different than the ones past Americans overcame. Trump states that every American living today is made up of the same courage that helped the United States rise to victory in past battles, stating, “we inherit their towering confidence, unwavering enthusiasm, their unbridled ambition, and their unrelenting optimism,” (Trump, 2020, para. 8). Trump is ultimately using his speech to build a connection between past and present America, bridging the gap between historic feats and modern-day struggles. Trump does this by explaining that all Americans, no matter their race, religion, or overarching identity, possess the grit and courage necessary to defend the greatest nation in the world, the United States of America.

Through the ultimate purpose of courage, Trump is establishing a core identity in his constituents that has been bred in Americans throughout history. Trump reminds his constituents not to lose sight of this identity, explaining that, “The incredible story of American progress is the story of each generation picking up where the last finished – linked by time, by fate, and the eternal bonds of our national affection,” (Trump, 2020, para. 22). Trump appeals to his audience through connection, reminding his constituents that America would not be the world power it is today without the courage and sacrifice of past heroes. He takes this one step further by showing his constituents that they too have an obligation to carry out this courage and sacrifice, just like

their ancestors before them. By having this message as the driving force of his salute, Trump's purpose is two-fold: he reminds his constituents of the courageous feats American heroes overcame to build this great country and at the same time, that present-day Americans share the same flesh and blood of these past American heroes. It is through this message that Trump draws unity and courage out of his audience, reminding them of the perseverance of America and the strength all constituents possess. After all, "this is the untamed spirit that built this glorious nation, and this is the spirit that burns brightly within the soul of every American patriot," (Trump, 2020, para. 8).

Purpose-Scene Ratio

Arguably the most important piece of Trump's 2020 Salute is the president's ability to connect his specific motive, or purpose, with the overarching meaning, or scene, of his narrative. This can be analyzed through Burke's concept of ratios, ultimately making the case that how Trump's audience perceives his purpose will end up shaping the success or failure of the scene. Trump's national address is dependent on what the audience thinks his ultimate motives are. In this case, if the audience's motives are in line with Trump's purpose, that America is a courageous powerhouse that will continue to succeed against all odds, then the scene, or America's historical arc of greatness, will come to fruition. Consequently, if the audience mistakes his purpose for something else, potentially as a dividing rhetoric or a hero-like narrative, disastrous results may occur for the scene - the country. From this overarching analysis, one can decipher that three purpose-scene ratios exist, depending on the audience - a "good" purpose, a "bad" purpose, and a "neutral" purpose, - each of which has the power to distinctly change Trump's overarching purpose and the message his audience receives.

The "Good" Purpose-Scene

Americans that are constrained by this purpose-scene are congruent with Trump's overarching message of heroism and courage. Trump attempts to draw unity and patriotism out of his audience, and individuals constrained by the "good" purpose-scene see Trump's rhetoric in this exact light. For this audience, the scene of America has always and will always be success, and anyone who says anything different wants to see the country fail. They negate the concept that America could be anything less than the greatest nation on Earth and therefore are the perfect audience for Trump's overarching message.

Those constrained by the "good" purpose-scene ratio are able to see the distinct connection between their trials and tribulations and those of American patriots who came before them. Trump feeds off this worldview, stating, "Together, we will fight for the American Dream, and we will defend, protect and preserve American way of life, which began in 1492 when Columbus discovered America," (Trump, 2020, para. 20). For those constrained by this purpose-scene ratio, anyone who sees the country differently than them are consequently un-American. Trump once again appeals to this narrative by relating modern-day battles like a divided America to past fights, stating, "American heroes defeated the Nazis, dethroned the fascists, toppled the communists, saved American values, upheld American principles, and chased down the terrorists to the very ends of the Earth," (Trump, 2020, para. 8)

For this purpose-scene ratio, America is nothing short of success and courage. Under both the Trump administration and past leadership, America has and will continue to succeed in the face of adversity. Trump speaks to this audience through collective *we* statements, working to draw an overarching key distinction between Americans that believe in the success of the country and those fighting for change. Trump reminds this audience that they are on the right

side of history, stating, "We will not allow anyone to divide our citizens by race or background. We will not allow them to foment hate, discord, and distrust," (Trump, 2020, para. 20). Trump draws on his motive of courage by comparing the current struggle of a divided America to that of past difficulties. The president drives this point home when he states, "Our goal is not to destroy the greatest structure on Earth, what we have built: The United States of America," (Trump, 2020, para. 21). By utilizing collective statements of courage, this audience sees themselves as American patriots within the scene of a great America. Americans that fall directly in line with Trump's "good" purpose, are those capable of preserving the foundation of the country, just the same as the patriots that have come before them.

The "Bad" Purpose-Scene

Americans constrained by this purpose-scene fail to recognize Trump's overarching message. While Trump attempts to derive purpose from courage and unity, an audience constrained by the "bad" purpose-scene sees Trump's rhetoric as dividing, individualistic, and ignorant. For these Americans, the current scene of the country, and in turn, the story of America's "greatness" both fall short of the president's expectations. This audience sees America in a harsher light, viewing Trump's rhetoric as harmful and dividing, as they hope to build a more united, equal and fair United States.

For Trump, Americans that fall into this category are in direct opposition of his overarching message and purpose. They not only fail to see his purpose but are also constrained by a scene of America that is incongruent with his worldview. The president views this purpose-scene ratio as the "angry mob" opposition, a demonized Other that will work to tear down the scene of a successful America, stating, "We will never allow an angry mob to tear down our statues, erase our history, indoctrinate our children, or trample on our freedoms," (Trump, 2020,

para. 10). Trump views these individuals as un-Americans who are attempting to negate the hard work of past and present American patriots. To Trump, people within this worldview need to be defeated, just like past battles fought, stating, "We are now in the process of defeating the radical left, the Marxists, the anarchists, the agitators, the looters, and people who, in many instances, have absolutely no clue what they are doing," (Trump, 2020, para. 6).

For Americans that fall in this ratio, Trump's Salute to the Nation is not a message of courage, but rather, one of neglect, inequality and difficulty. The audience constrained by this purpose-scene ratio view America's scene as a struggling nation incapable of moving forward. Trump works to demonize those who hold this worldview, stating, "In every age, there have always been those who seek to lie about the past in order to gain power in the present," (Trump, 2020, para. 21). Trump takes this one step further, making the claim that the individuals constrained by this purpose-scene ratio are on par with past evils the United States has been up against, stating, "Those that are lying about our history, those who want us to be ashamed of who we are, are not interested in justice or in healing. Their goal is demolition," (Trump, 2020, para. 21). For Americans actively working to make their country a more inclusive and collectivist place, Trump's rhetoric is not only dismissive, but also dangerous, as it encourages hurtful beliefs and actions. An audience constrained by a "bad" purpose-scene ratio sees no American courage or American success, but rather, a failing country under wavering leadership.

The "Neutral" Purpose-Scene

Just like the name suggests, an audience constrained by the "neutral" purpose-scene have no overarching feelings towards the President and his specific rhetoric. This audience is capable of recognizing the divide between the "good" and "bad" purpose-scene ratio, but rather, takes Trump's Salute to the Nation at face value. This audience does not resonate strongly with a

specific scene or purpose in relation to Trump's overarching worldview, arguably making this the most important ratio in reference to the Salute to the Nation. This audience has yet to be constrained by a specific worldview of Trump's purpose and scene, therefore, making them the perfect audience to be persuaded by the President's overarching message.

Since the "neutral" purpose-scene audience is not yet constrained by some understanding of Trump's rhetoric, Trump uses his Salute to the Nation to convince this audience to see America through his eyes. He draws upon core American principles in an attempt to resonate with this audience, stating, "The beauty and the glory of our constitutional system is that it gives us the tools to fight injustice, to heal division, and to continue the work of our Founding Fathers by expanding and growing the blessings of America," (Trump, 2020, para. 35). Trump works to appeal to this ratio by referring to those who are in line with his worldview as "good" and those who see America differently as "bad." This can be seen throughout Trump's Salute, when he states, "The more bitter you become, the more we will appeal to love and patriotism, and the more we will rise above your hate to build a better future for every child in our great country," (Trump, 2020, para. 27). From statements like this, a neutral audience can recognize the "you" as evil and the "we" as good, working to promote Trump's overarching worldview.

Furthermore, Trump attempts to bring unity out of this constrained ratio, when he makes statements that appeal to core American ideals, like "After all, what do we want? We want a strong military, great education, low taxes, law and order. We want safety, we want equal justice, we want religious liberty, we want faith and family," (Trump, 2020, para. 26). By making such distinct statements, Trump is suggesting to the "neutral" purpose-scene ratio that their visions, values, and ideals are in line with the Trump administration. He draws upon concepts that America has always prided itself on, selling the idea of a unified and dignified United States

stating, "We all want the same thing. How can it be different from those things?" (Trump, 2020, para. 26). Ultimately, Trump uses his speech to appeal to an audience that does not see his rhetoric in a specific light, attempting to align this ratio with his purpose and motives.

Act, Agent, and Agency

The last three elements of Burke's Pentad, act, agent, and agency hold less importance in context of Donald Trump's Salute to the Nation but are still worth mentioning. The act works to describe what is being done or created within a specific narrative. In relation to Trump's national address, the act is in many ways similar to the scene, as the president is working to evoke strong American principles and ideals out of his audience. The act is more than just Trump's ability to give the speech, but rather, the way in which he frames his rhetoric to bring about a specific worldview, one that triumphs in America's successes and does not believe in America's failures.

Although Donald Trump is the individual giving the speech, he is not the sole agent, or the person involved in the action and the roles these people play. Trump's rhetoric is framed around the collective *we*, a group that includes Trump and his administration, but also historic American leaders, heroes, colonizers, and of course, present-day citizens. Trump intensifies this element of agent by drawing upon historic successes, such as when he states, "We honor the legends of our history, the glories of our founding fathers, and the giants of the past, and the heroes of today who keep us safe, who keep us strong and proud, and who keep us free, (Trump, 2020, para. 42). By consistently utilizing the pronouns *we* and *us* Trump is using his rhetoric to unite and show that the successes of past and present America are not the result of a sole individual, but rather a collective whole. All Americans have played a role in the creation of the United States as it stands today; therefore, all citizens are a key agent in Trump's discourse.

Finally, Trump's agency, or the means by which an action occurred, is built on his ability to hold a prominent position in the minds of his constituents and the world. He utilizes his platform as president, one that he has no doubt stretched the limitations of, to further his narrative as truth. In combination with the meaning that July 4th holds for Americans and the respect that the president typically receives, Trump's narrative persuades the audience to believe his words as truth. No matter how many Americans actually trust the president's salute, Trump is able to use this agency to his advantage and create a more influential narrative.

Evaluation

Ultimately, through the above analysis, one is able to see that Trump's 2020 Salute to the Nation struggles to have a concrete purpose-scene. An audience's core understanding of Trump's address depends not only on how they see the President's purpose, but also how they see the United States. For Americans who view their country as a successful powerhouse, Trump's rhetoric reaffirms these successes, reminding them that their country is one that has always been destined for greatness. On the other hand, Americans that struggle to find unity and peace in America view Trump's rhetoric as disarming and pervasive, as it attempts to demonize their efforts for a better country. Finally, Americans that do not have a strong connection to either of the above identities view Trump's rhetoric as neutral, and therefore pick up on themes of courage and respect, as well as potential demonization of others. It is important to recognize that although Trump attempted to use his 2020 Salute to draw themes of courage and unity (purpose) in reference to the historical arc of the greatness of America (scene), this is not always the case. By distinctly explaining the three constrained purpose-scene ratios, a rhetorician can better understand what Trump intended from his salute and what his audience actually received.

Discussions and Contributions

Trump's rhetoric is exceptionally different from past American leaders. Unlike previous American presidents who often work to unite their country in terms of patriotism and nationalism, Trump uses his rhetoric to promote division. Beyond this, Trump fails to utilize core American principles, like American exceptionalism, in the bulk of his rhetoric. In stark contrast to Trump's past discourse, both on the campaign trail and during his presidency, the President's 2020 Salute to the Nation attempts to draw upon these core American ideologies. While his rhetorical techniques in this address follows suit to past presidents, it's important to note the difficulty in examining this outside the context of his previous discourse.

While this paper attempted to solely understand Trump's 2020 Salute, without taking into account any past rhetoric, an audience living within Trump's America is not able to do this. By taking this into consideration and therefore, understanding that Trump's overall purpose is incongruent with past messages, a rhetorician should be able to see that an audience may struggle to resonate with his intended purpose. By navigating through Trump's intended purpose and then critically analyzing the three different ways that purpose can be received through constrained ratios, this analysis gives rhetorical research the chance to understand Trumpian rhetoric in a more realistic way. Rather than just taking into account how the President views his discourse, this paper examined how all three of his potential audiences viewed it as well, making it a more thorough piece of analysis, congruent with the way Americans view their president.

Despite his rather unprofessional approach towards addressing his constituents, Donald Trump was able to weave his way into the hearts of hundreds of thousands of Americans, creating a fan base for the presidency that has not happened before in American history. Trump's supporters are unique - Americans wholeheartedly support him, not because they resonate with

all of his statements, but because they find solace in what his presidency stands for, (Sanchez, 2018, pg. 47). For most white, working-class Americans, Trump's presidency stood for necessary change, in both politics and the ever-changing demographics of America. In 2016, when Trump ran for president, he saw an opportunity to give his supporters the scapegoat they looked for and delivered this through his speeches. While many Trump supporters viewed the President's rhetoric as unprofessional and perhaps childish, they were often incapable of seeing the harmful effects. These Americans feed directly into the concept of white ambivalence, an ideal that "seeks to erase racial signifiers while also maintaining race consciousness to explain white success and black failure," (Kelly, 2020, pg. 128). For these supporters, America progressed towards a post-racial society, therefore making it fundamentally impossible for Trump's rhetoric to be racist, offensive, and threatening. Trump may take an unconventional approach towards presidential rhetoric, but that made him all the more promising candidate. Trump promised change for these Americans by directly negating the experiences of marginalized groups but did so in a way that the majority of his fan base could not comprehend.

On the other hand, Trump's rhetoric fed into a small, but seriously dangerous group: white supremacists. While the majority of Trump supporters viewed his rhetoric as unbecoming, but rather harmless, self-proclaimed white supremacists were able to draw a specific message out of his rhetoric that supported their overarching motives and goals. Donald Trump utilized a concept called winking to indirectly tie himself to these groups, allowing him to "speak implicitly about a discourse and still claim allegiance to a cause without employing overt language," (Sanchez, 2018, pg. 49). By giving this rather angry and destructive group a platform, Trump is not only speaking their language, but telling these individuals that it's okay to hold biases and predispositions toward some demonized Other.

Through this above explanation, my overarching analysis shows how Trump's rhetoric can hold a completely different meaning, depending on how the audience views themselves.

Take for example, the following statement, and the analysis that follows:

Throughout our history, our country has been tested and tried – but we have always fought to victory. Whenever our way of life has been threatened, our ancestors have responded with the same resounding answer as those first patriots who fought for independence: We are Americans, and we will never back down, we will never give in, and we will never give up, and we will never yield [in] defense of our nation. We love our nation. We will only fight to win. (Trump, 2020, para. 43).

For Americans that consider themselves a Trump supporter, but do not identify with the idea of white supremacy, Trump is speaking of core American ideology. He is drawing upon past struggles and battles but speaking to the versatility of the nation. Trump speaks to this audience in a rather presidential tone, encouraging patriotism and unity for his constituents. On the contrary, Trump supporters in line with white nationalism ideology, whether self-proclaimed or not, view this rhetoric as a resounding "move forward." These Americans consider themselves the same as "those first patriots," but unlike world wars, their battle is that of the "threatened" foundation of America – the dominant white race. Trump's rhetoric is an immediate go ahead, encouraging white nationalists to continue their offensive and dangerous ways. Consequently, Americans that fall into this demonized Other category view Trump's rhetoric as harmful and drastically inappropriate. Trump sends an explicit message to these individuals, that his supporters "will never back down," "never give in," and "never give up," until their way of American life is achieved. The overarching point that my analysis attempts to draw on is that Trump's rhetoric is not a one-size-fits-all, but rather, can hold underlying meanings for different

groups. Trump uses his charismatic personality to draw this out of his supporters, and in turn threaten the democracy of an ever-changing America.

The ultimate contribution this analysis attempts to give rhetorical research is that Trump's rhetoric has the power to be harmful. A rhetorician can see this time and time again, in his Salute to the Nation, past discourse, and his communication with dangerous supporters. Trump's rhetoric is in line with historic cult leaders and dictators, drawing upon past authoritarian behavior, (Penman & Cloud, 2018, pg. 120). Trump has a fan base willing to defend nearly everything he does, regardless of if they disagree with him, (Sanchez, 2018, pg. 47). Beyond this, Trump's goal of unilateral power and acclaim is a key similarity between him and past tyrannical leaders, ultimately creating a strong case that Trump's rhetoric falls into authoritarian communication (Penman & Cloud, 2018, pg. 120). It is here that a rhetorician can see how Trump's rhetoric has the power to create a fascist United States.

Trump is able to promise a mutually beneficial relationship for his followers. He gives his supporters, primarily white working-class constituents who feel cheated and fear being replaced, a means to end their suffering. Trump gives these Americans a place to direct their anger - a scapegoat - whether that be immigrants, Black Americans, the media, past leaders, or any other version of the demonized Other. Trump uses his rhetoric to promise a return to America's "greatness," a metaphor for a less-diverse America that thrived off of white dominance. While Trump gives his supporters a place to direct this anger, they in turn, give him the acclaim and power most authoritarian leaders seek. At the end of the day, it does not matter if Trump's ultimate opinions coincide with his rhetoric, but rather, that he built the support he so strongly craves from this ideology. It is through this mutually exclusive relationship that one can see a direct correlation between Trump's rhetoric and that of past authoritarians.

While this may seem to be the trajectory of America under Trump's leadership, this analysis attempts to provide one final contribution and perhaps a glimmer of hope: Trump's rhetoric only has the power to be harmful if we give it that power. Just as history has taught us, cult-leaders and dictators rise to power out of support. These authoritarian leaders must be put into positions of power by their constituents, before they're capable of disastrous scenarios. While Donald Trump's rhetoric is on par with that of past authoritarian regimes, America will only see a true rise of fascism if we fuel this fire. Ultimately, the audience, Americans, are the sole decider in how Trump's rhetoric is received. If we choose to feed into his dangerous and harmful rhetoric, then he has the power to win. However, if we choose to negate his worldview and the dangerous ideology he represents, we as Americans have the power to see our democracy through. If we do not give Trump the power to divide and conquer, he will see defeat.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I attempt to understand the intended purpose behind Donald Trump's Salute to the Nation on America's birthday. After an intense year for America, a country plagued with a global pandemic taking the lives of hundreds of thousands, racial injustice, worldwide climate change, and rather wavering leadership, Trump's salute serves as a metaphor for the struggles the nation is currently facing. Unlike past presidential leaders, Trump uses his address to the nation to promote a rather specific worldview, working to demonize those that disagree with him, and further intensify America's civil divide.

At the same time, Trump utilizes a very different rhetorical technique than his past rhetoric, drawing upon the concept of courage and unity as the driving force behind his speech. While this may have been the ultimate purpose of his speech, it is through a very thorough

analysis of Trump's 2020 Salute to the Nation, that a rhetorician can see how Trump's intended purpose varies depending on his audience.

This paper provided a very thorough analysis of the rhetorical context of Trump's speech, showing the reader that there were important implications behind the president's rhetoric due to the circumstances surrounding the year. The paper also utilizes past research, specifically on presidential discourse, Trump's rhetoric on the campaign trail and among supporters, and the ideology behind white supremacy. It is through this past research that this paper is able to combine meaning among these three themes, showing how Trump's rhetoric differs distinctly from previous presidents and draws upon white ideologies. This paper attempts to bridge the gap between Trump's 2020 Salute to America and previous rhetoric and ultimately explains how his original motives and intentions may struggle to co-exist with reality.

Lastly, this paper makes resounding claims about the democracy of America and how Trump's rhetoric perhaps threatens this core principle. Trump's rhetoric has the power to divide, rather than unite and further instigate negative worldviews like white nationalism. Although this is a rather defeating concept, this paper ultimately shows through a thorough analysis that Trump does not hold power in his rhetoric, but rather his audience does. It is up to us, as American citizens, to analyze Trump's rhetoric and what it means for the democracy of our country. The audience, the American people, have the power to decide if we will allow Trump's rhetoric to hold meaning and further divide an already hurting nation, or if we will instead take back the narrative and stop him in his tracks. This is up to the American people and is best demonstrated through Trump's arc of American "greatness." We have the power to determine what America stands for and how this manifests in present-day: we, as Americans, get to frame the story of American greatness, despite all odds.

References

- Amaya, H. (2018). White nationalism and the publicness in the United States. *Javnost: The Public*, 25(4), 365-378.
- Berry, L., & Madhani, A. (2020, July 4). White House holds July 4 'Salute to America' event as COVID-19 cases rise. <https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/trump-salute-to-america-july-fourth-white-house-event/507-d9b3e0f5-9be4-4519-a78d-63a4b12f2383>
- Bowman, N. D. (2018). The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods: Pentadic Analysis. SAGE Publications, INC. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411>
- Cobb, J. (2020, May 28). The Death of George Floyd, in Context. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-death-of-george-floyd-in-context>
- Darr, C. R. & Strine, H. C. (2009). A Pentadic Analysis of Celebrity Testimony in Congressional Hearings. <https://www.kbjournal.org/content/pentadic-analysis-celebrity-testimony-congressional-hearings>
- Davies, E., Kunkle, F., Jouvenal, J., Lang, M.J., & Trent, S. (2020, July 4). In an era of racial unrest, Americans converging in D.C. to celebrate the Fourth of July question the meaning of freedom. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/fourth-of-july-protest-celebrations/2020/07/04/aa362aa8-be01-11ea-8cf5-9c1b8d7f84c6_story.html
- Eshbaugh-Soha, M. (2010). The politics of presidential speeches. *Congress & The Presidency*, 37(1), 1-21.
- Gilmore, J. (2015). American exceptionalism in the American mind: presidential discourse, national identity, and U.S. public opinion. *Communication Studies*, 66(3), 301-320.

- Gilmore, J., & Rowling, C. (2017). A post-American world? Assessing the cognitive and attitudinal impacts of challenges to American exceptionalism. *The Communication Review*, 21(1), 46-65.
- Gilmore, J., & Rowling, C. (2019). Partisan patriotism in the American presidency: American exceptionalism, issue ownership, and the age of Trump. *Mass Communication & Society*, 22(3), 389-416.
- Hartzell, S. L. (2018). Alt-White: Conceptualizing the "Alt-Right" as a rhetorical bridge between white nationalism and mainstream political discourse. *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 8(½), 6-25.
- Huber, M., & Bormett, E. (2020, July 4). Protestors in Keystone arrested after blocking roads to Mount Rushmore for hours.
<https://www.argusleader.com/story/news/2020/07/03/keystone-south-dakota-protesters-anti-trump-demonstration-mount-rushmore-rally-fireworks/5373812002/>
- Kelly, C. R. (2020). Donald J. Trump and the rhetoric of white ambivalence. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 23(2), 195-224.
- Kuypers, J. A., McGeough, R. E., & King, A. (2016). *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action* (Dramatism and Kenneth Burke's Pentadic Criticism). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Ling, D. A. (1970). A pentadic analysis of senator Edward Kennedy address to the people of Massachusetts, July 25, 1969, *Central States Speech Journal*, 21:2, 81-87, DOI: 10.1080/1051097700936002
- Mark, M. (2020, July 4). Trump Threw an Elaborate July 4th Event while Much of the U.S. Shield Away From Celebrations Amid Coronavirus Fears. *Business Insider*.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-july-4-celebration-amid-rising-covid-19-cases-2020-7>

Penman, W., & Cloud, D. (2018). How people make sense of Trump and why it matters for racial justice. *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 8(½), 107-136.

Politi, D. (2020, July 4). Biden and Trump Deliver Very Different Messages on July Fourth.

<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/07/biden-optimistic-july-4-message-trumps-division-mount-rushmore.html>

Rowland, R. C. (2019). The populist and nationalist roots of Trump's rhetoric. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 22(3), 343-388.

Sadon, R., Chelsow, D., Gathright, J., Williams, E.C., Truong, D., & Austermuhle, M. (2020,

July 4). On July 4, A Combustible Mix of Trump Supporters and Black Lives Matter

Protestors Converged in D.C. [https://dcist.com/story/20/07/04/july-4-dc-protests-black-](https://dcist.com/story/20/07/04/july-4-dc-protests-black-lives-matter-trump-supporters/)

[lives-matter-trump-supporters/](https://dcist.com/story/20/07/04/july-4-dc-protests-black-lives-matter-trump-supporters/)

Sanchez, J. C. (2018). Trump, the KKK, and the versatility of white supremacy rhetoric. *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 8(½), 44-56.

Stevens, H. & Tan, S. (2020, March 31). From 'It's going to disappear' to "WE WILL WIN

THIS WAR." *The Washington Post*.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/politics/trump-coronavirus-statements/>

Trump, D. J. (2020). Remarks by President Trump at the 2020 Salute to America. [Speech

Transcript]. The White House. [https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-2020-salute-america/)

[statements/remarks-president-trump-2020-salute-america/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-2020-salute-america/)

Trump 'Salute to America' Features Fireworks, Fiery Speech. (2020, July 5).

<https://www.voanews.com/usa/trump-salute-america-features-fireworks-fiery-speech>