

Analysis of Obama's 2016 Flint Water Crisis Speech

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Context

In 2016, rumors of unsanitary, discolored water in **Flint, Michigan** peaked: this led Michigan Governor **Rick Snyder** to declare a state of **public emergency**.

The issue became so severe that President Obama traveled to Flint on May 4th to speak to Flint's residents.



Dominant Impression and Global Issue Statement

In his speech on the Flint Water Crisis, President Obama highlights the **current progress made** and the **future actions needed** to resolve the crisis.

This relates to the **global issue**: How does a developed country ensure that its citizens have access to clean water and sanitation? (United Nations SDG #6)



What are the arguments Obama makes to support his dominant impression?

01

Lots of progress has been made to resolve the crisis

(Quotes 1 & 2)

02

More actions are needed to resolve the crisis

(Quotes 3 & 4)

01

Obama assuring the population of Flint that their concerns have been heard is significant current progress made.

How does Obama support this?



		Secondary Focus	Main Focus
• Leitmotif	• Contrast	• Anaphora	Anecdote is widely used in the quotation, pathos ditto.
• Synecdoche	• Caesura	• Repetition	
• Chronological Order	• Asterismos	• Global Issue	

So in the middle of a tragedy that should have never happened here in the United States of America — the denial of something as basic as clean, safe drinking water — this eight-year-old girl spoke out and marched and, like many of you, protested. As Mari was getting ready to hop on a bus to Washington, she wrote to ask if she could meet with me while she was in town. There she is.

Now, I would have been happy to see Mari in Washington. But when something like this happens, a young girl shouldn't have to go to Washington to be heard. I thought her President should come to Flint to meet with her. And that's why I'm here — to tell you directly that I see you and I hear you, and I want to hear directly from you about how this public health crisis has disrupted your lives, how it's made you angry, how it's made you worried.

Anecdote

Obama puts forward the **anecdote** of a little girl who protested about the discolored water in Flint to show that he hears the concerns of the people of Flint.

- **How does the anecdote enhance Obama's argument?**

- Saying that the President has met with a little girl (Mari) who has written a letter to him is much more **sentimental** than talking about how the President discovered the water crisis through his scientists.
 - It shows that Obama cares about Flint's concerns, even the **youngest** voice.
 - It's also relatable. The people of Flint **values** the story of "Little Miss Flint".
- "this eight-year-old girl spoke out and marched and, like many of you, protested."
 - Mari is a **synecdoche** that represents the **holistic voices** of Flint. Obama hearing the voice of Mari means he hears the voice of all of Flint.
 - The anecdote also highlights **what needs to be done**: to **unite** Flint into one **community**, one compact voice.
- Obama points out where Mari is: "There she is" → look at the crowd's applause from the video link below. Obama sympathizing with Mari, whom the people of Flint greatly laud serves to **connect** Obama and the people of Flint.
 - <https://youtu.be/Txiiwe6Vho4?t=202>

Repetition & Anaphora

- How does Repetition and Anaphora enhance Obama's argument?
 - “And that's why I'm here — to tell you directly that I see you and I hear you, and I want to hear directly from you...”
 - Obama **repeats** that he knows about Flint's concerns in three senses: “tell you” (mouth), “see you” (eyes), “hear you” (ears). The anaphora **ingrains** argument 1 (that Obama hears the concerns of the audience) into the the audience's memory.
 - Obama repeats “hear you” twice, the second time being “I want to hear directly from you” to **explicitly** show that he has heard Flint's concerns.
 - “... I want to hear directly from you about how this public health crisis has disrupted your lives, how it's made you angry, how it's made you worried.”
 - Obama understands the frustration that Flint residents are feeling. He is combining repetition and pathos together; Obama shows that he not only hears the concerns of Flint, but **feels** their emotions.
 - Obama repeats “you” with sundry verbs in both quotes. The **diction** of “you” is that Obama cares about “you” (the population of Flint) the most, and **prioritizes** the people of Flint sedulously over any other government duty.

Global Issue and Dominant impression

- How does Obama revolve the dominant impression around the Global Issue?
 - “So in the middle of a tragedy that should have never happened here in the United States of America — the denial of something as basic as clean, safe drinking water”
 - Obama explains that there is a tragedy in the United States (a developed country) and then after the caesura (a pause that awaits something more significant), Obama propounds the global issue:
 - → How does a developed country ensure that its citizens have access to clean water and sanitation?
- **Dominant Impression:** In his speech on the Flint Water Crisis, President Obama highlights the current progress made and the future actions needed to resolve the crisis.
 - Obama builds the dominant impression on top of the global issue → What has already been done and what needs to be done so that a developed country ensures that its citizens have access to clean water and sanitation.

Supporting the argument

What does the quotation demonstrate?

- **Argument:** Obama hears the concerns of Flint, and also feels them
 - Enhanced by the anecdote, anaphoras and repetition

So how does the argument support the Dominant Impression?

- **Dominant Impression:** In his speech on the Flint Water Crisis, President Obama highlights the current progress made and the future actions needed to resolve the crisis.
 - “Obama hears the concerns of Flint, and also feels them” is current progress made.
 - Knowing the problem, and focusing on it is the first step/progress necessary to resolve a problem
 - Since the water crisis is as much an **emotional crisis** as a health crisis, Obama addressing Flint’s desultory and negative emotions by making sure they know that he hears and feels them, is progress made to resolve the water crisis
 - Inspiring **hope** with the “Little Miss Flint” **anecdote** is emotional progress made
 - Placating a devastated population through his presence and **uniting** them into one community is successful progress made which constructs an **auspicious basis** for future actions needed

02

**Accountability for the Flint
water crisis is progress
made:**

**How does Obama support
this?**



“Can I get some water? Come on up here. Give me some water. I want a glass of water. I want a glass of water. Sit down. I'm all right. I'm going to get a glass of water right here. Let's make sure we find one. It will be filtered. Hold on, I'm going to talk about that in a second. Settle down, everybody.”

...Listen, it's not government overreach to say that our government is responsible for making sure you can wash your hands in your own sink, or shower in your own home, or cook for your family. These are the most basic services. There is no more basic element sustaining human life than water. It's not too much to expect for all Americans that their water is going to be safe.”

Legend

- Global Issue
 - Rhetorical speech
 - Logos
-

Rhetorical Question

Obama effectively uses a rhetorical question to support his argument.

- Obama repeats the **rhetorical question** → “Can I get some water?” This serves two purposes:
 - a) Obama shows the population of Flint that their water is drinkable when using a filter. “It will be filtered”.
 - b) Obama uses the rhetorical question to directly **sympathize** with Flint’s citizens.
 - The population of Flint has been protesting with the words “give me some [clean] water” and “I want a [safe] glass of water” since the start of the Flint water crisis.
 - Whereas Obama does actually get a glass of water, this question is asked for the **rhetorical effect**. The question is meant to connect directly with Flint’s citizens by repeating the same question that Flint’s citizens have been asking since the start of the crisis.
 - Thus, while the question is literal in technical terms, it is **rhetorical** in effect.
 - “I want a glass of [clean] water. I want a glass of [clean] water.” Because the citizens of Flint have a direct connection to Obama’s memory-evoking words and **statements**, Obama is able to **sympathize** with them and build his **sincerity**.

Global Issue + Logos

Obama effectively uses the global issue in combination with logos to demonstrate that he is accountable for the resolving the water crisis.

- Obama references the **global issue**: "It's not too much to expect for all Americans that their water is going to be safe."
 - When Obama propounded the global issue, he holds his government **accountable** for enacting what his **own words** entail.
- "Our government is responsible for making sure you can wash your hands in your own sink, or shower in your own home, or cook for your family." Obama uses **logos** to strengthen his argument:
 - Obama deliberately understates the issue - clean drinking water - through obvious logical propositions such as "it's **not too much** to expect" or "[it's a] **basic** service". This makes the solution seem **easier** than it actually is.
 - This leads the audience to have **more trust** in Obama's argument.
 - Obama uses logical propositions to assert that his government is responsible: "**it's not government overreach** to say that our government is responsible"
 - This supports his argument by proving **government accountability**.



Supporting the argument

Obama's use of rhetorical speech, the global issue and logos advances his first argument: lots of current progress has been made to resolve the crisis.

- Obama shows that the **water is already safe to drink given necessary precautions.** This supports his argument that significant current progress has been made.
- Obama argues that his government is **accountable** for the problem, and therefore, has made progress on the issue. Government accountability is the first step in moving forward: therefore, if accountability is achieved, progress has been made.
 - Obama uses **rhetorical questions** to support his argument by building **trust**: this increases the believability of his logos argument,
 - Obama uses **logos** to understate the severity of the water crisis to gain **trust** from the people of Flint.
 - Obama subsequently uses **logos** to highlight his **accountability** to resolve the water crisis, which forms part of the **solution**.
 - This stands in contrast to the actions of Governor Snyder who was seen as **unaccountable**. Therefore, Obama's **accountability** is progress made compared to the state government.

03

**How Obama uses
“problem-solution” to
emphasize that more
actions are needed**



The bad news is that this should not have happened in the first place. And even though the scope of the response looks sort of like the efforts we're used to seeing after a natural disaster, that's not what this was. This was a manmade disaster. This was avoidable. This was preventable.

[...]

But it's not enough just to fix the water. We've got to fix the culture of neglect, the mindset I was talking about – that has degraded too many schools and too many roads and hurt too many futures. We've got to fix the mindset that only leaves people cynical about our government. Our government is us – of us, by us, for us – the people.

So we've got a lot of work to do. But I'm here to tell you I'm prepared to work with you on this. I'm paying attention.

Legend

- Compare and Contrast + Anaphora
- Cause and Effect
- Global Issue

Example: Problem and Solution

Method of development: Problem & Solution

Obama uses a problem & solution block format to deliver his message effectively.

- Obama spends the first 20 minutes of his speech highlighting the problems to be addressed. “This was a manmade disaster. This was avoidable. This was preventable.” (para. 1)
 - The block-format delivery style and extensive focus on the problem is used to show that Obama **cares** about the people of Flint.
 - By giving the problem **more** focus, the audience will see Obama as more sincere as he is not *understating the problem*.
- The latter part of the speech focuses on the **solutions** to the problem. “We've got to fix the culture of neglect, the mindset I was talking about”. (para. 2)
 - The strategic placement of the **solutions** near the end of the speech ensures a stronger delivery to the audience, especially after they've been convinced of Obama's sincerity.
 - The solution ties in to the **global issue** and to Obama's **argument**.

Additional Methods of Development:

While the overall speech follows a problem-solution structure, other Methods of Development are present on a smaller scale to develop the problem and solution.

- **Compare and contrast:** Obama compares the crisis to a natural disaster to emphasise its severity.
- Obama then contrasts the crisis using anaphora for emphasis: “This was a manmade disaster. This was avoidable. This was preventable.”
 - Obama’s contrast between natural and manmade disasters is used to put more **severity** on the **problem**, thereby increasing his *perceived sincerity* through the overall problem-solution method of development.
- **Cause and Effect:** Obama first provides a **cause**, a *potential solution*, or a problem to be solved: “we’ve got to fix the culture of neglect”.
 - Obama then provides an **effect**: “degraded too many schools and too many roads”: making the solution **more tangible** by offering practical implications.
 - Because the **effects** are **severe, real, and close-to-home**, the audience is more likely to believe and implement the solutions.

Supporting the argument

Obama's use of a **problem-solution** method of development develops his argument: that future actions are needed to resolve the Flint water crisis.

- Obama **develops the problem** before the **solution** section to give a sense of the urgency and the necessity for solutions. Moreover, he over sympathizes with his audience before presenting his solutions, making them seem like the best choice.
- Obama's "solutions" section highlights the abstract solutions he plans to implement: "We've got to fix the culture of neglect".
 - Instead of jumping to the "quick fixes" (i.e. fixing the pipes), Obama compels the audience to tackle the root of the problem, which is supported by the cause / effect method of development.
 - He offers **concrete** examples of issues his solutions can fix: "schools, ... [and] roads", giving the audience a practical incentive to participate in solving the water crisis.
- Thus, the problem and solution work together to enhance the dominant impression.

04

Uniting together is critical to making the remaining progress necessary to resolve the Flint Water Crisis.

How does Obama support this?



- Pathos
- Global Issue
- Allusion

We've got to break that mindset that says that that neighborhood over there, that's not my problem; those kids over there, they don't look like my kids exactly, so I don't have to worry about them — out of sight, out of mind. We've got to break that attitude that says somehow there's an "us" in "them," and remind ourselves that there's just one big "we" — the American family, and everybody has got to look out for each other. Because the kids here in Flint aren't "those" kids, they're "our" kids. That's what Scripture teaches us. But I'm not going to start preaching in front of some pastors.

So let me just close by saying this. Look, I know this has been a scary time. I know this is disappointing. You've been let down. But there is a sermon about a phoenix rising from these ashes. And there is the opportunity out of this complete screw-up, this painful tragedy, this neglect, this disappointment to actually pull together and make for a better future.

Pathos

Obama makes an emotional appeal to the audience in order to build unity and support his argument.

- Obama uses emotionally-charged phrases, such as “this has been a scary time” and “you’ve been let down”:
 - These phrases elicit **sad** and **mournful** emotions: it strengthens the audience outlook that they, as a collective, have *been let down*. This, in turn, leads to a sense of **solidarity** among the people of Flint.
- Obama also states that “the kids here in Flint aren't "those" kids, they're "our" kids”:
 - Obama personalizes the issue by presenting an emotional dilemma: he urges the audience to consider how they would **feel** if their own children were directly affected.
 - This leads non-affected audience members to **sympathize** for affected individuals, and in turn, leads to more **unity** within the audience.

Allusion

Obama alludes to the bible in order to build unity and support his argument.

- “That's what Scripture teaches us.” Obama alludes to the Bible to appeal to Flint's Christian audience.
 - As a predominantly-Christian state, many individuals in the audience are Christian, and therefore, Obama's allusion gives his argument **credibility** (*ethos*). Effectively, he is saying that “my argument is **supported** by the Bible”.
 - Obama also uses the pronoun “us” rather than “you” to connect with the audience: because he is also Christian, the usage of “us” places him at the same level of the audience, which serves to develop **religious unity** to support his argument.
 - “But there is a sermon about a phoenix rising from these ashes.” Obama alludes to biblical mentions of the phoenix to emphasize that they will **rebuild** Flint from the ground, just as the phoenix **rebirths** itself.

Supporting the argument

Obama's use of pathos and allusion serves to further his second argument: future actions are needed to resolve the Flint water crisis, which supports the dominant impression.

- Obama stresses **unity** as a solution to the Flint Water Crisis: "We've got to break that mindset...". Thus, Obama directly implies that future actions are needed, as **unity** is one of those actions.
 - Obama utilizes **pathos** to appeal to the audience and bring them closer together. Building **unity** among the audience results in further progress towards his solution.
 - Obama utilizes **allusions to the bible** to (1) build **ethos** for his argument and (2) sympathize with the Christian audience.
 - "That's what Scripture teaches us." Deliberate usage of ethos which strengthens Obama's argument;
 - Usage of **US** puts everyone at the same level, thereby strengthening Obama's argument.

Conclusion

01

Lots of progress has been made to resolve the crisis

Assuring the population of Flint that their voices and concerns have been heard is significant current progress made.

Accountability for the Flint water crisis is current progress made

02

More actions are needed to resolve the crisis

How Obama uses “problem-solution” to emphasize that more actions are needed

Uniting together is critical to making the remaining progress necessary to resolve the Flint Water Crisis.

In his speech on the Flint Water Crisis, President Obama highlights the current progress made and the future actions needed to resolve the crisis.

This relates to the **global issue**: How does a developed country ensure that its citizens have access to clean water and sanitation? (United Nations SDG #6)