

**Reading Prompt: Sarah Palin's "Blood Libel" Speech**

After the unexpected and tragic shooting which took place in Arizona, numerous public and political officials responded to the event. One such individual was Sarah Palin, a well-recognized figure who, for one reason or another, felt that her words might resonate with the same power as did the actions of the shooter. For the purposes of this short prompt, I will attempt to analyze her speech using a particular Aristotelian canon of rhetoric. Considering her reputation for public speaking blunders, I will analyze her speech through the canon of delivery.

It is generally through those planned speeches that most any political figure can shine. Sarah Palin was very much an example of this in her "Blood Libel" speech through looks and gestures. She was fully erect in her seat, creating a picture of confidence and American boldness. In the background, the ultimate symbol of patriotism stands at the ready, an American flag. There can be none who could question which side she is on through this carefully arranged backdrop.

Even through the words of her speech, Palin supports this patriotic stance by casting the shooter as un-American. She is careful to make these claims as simply calling him an "apolitical criminal." She tries to remind viewers of how debates are meant to be held in America, saying "Our Founders' genius was to design a system that helped settle the inevitable conflicts caused by our imperfect passions in civil ways." However, she does not classify this as a terrorist action; this is a choice in words which I think is rather subtle. She chides the journalists and pundits for attempting to "incite the very hatred and violence they purport to condemn," all the while Palin attempts to position herself as a credible and unbiased mediator.

Throughout her speech, Palin resonates confidence and clarity through her tone. She does not stutter, she does not deviate, she does not impromptu. Simply put, she follows the script on her teleprompter. This in itself feels like a powerful choice, either by herself or her campaign manager. Palin has made something of a name for herself as an individual who can get a little too creative in her use of rhetoric. Known for having made up words like “refudiate,” “misunderestimate,” and “wee-wee’d up,” it can be somewhat difficult for some individuals to still take her seriously. She has proven in times past that she does not interview well, an attribute which ultimately cost her the public’s confidence. This attribute still continued in a June 2011 speech when she attempted to recount the history of Paul Revere’s midnight ride, relating the following:

*He who warned, uh, the British that they weren’t going be taking away our arms, uh, by ringing those bells, and um, making sure as he’s riding his horse through town to send those warning shots and bells that we were going to be sure and we were going to be free, and we were going to be armed.*

While a person’s patriotism could not be put into question over such a confusing interpretation, a public speaker’s credibility could certainly be put to the chopping block. This moment like many others have helped establish Palin as a celebrity. Yet she lacks the celebrity credibility needed to establish herself as a true political contender, instead only finding her acclaim through a quirky talking style and an inability to speak confidently in public. To me, delivering her “Blood Libel” speech is not only an attempt at voicing her support to the victims, namely Democratic Representative Gabrielle Giffords, but it is also an attempt at restoring her credibility in the eyes of the public.

It is her ultimate desire to demonstrate that not only is she qualified to fill a public office, but she is also capable of giving a speech that will inspire and sooth aching hearts. Politicians can invoke emotion in their audience whenever they speak. More often than not, Palin has gained the ire of her audience with stumbling of the tongue. To me, this speech seemed opportunistic, or rather a moment

for Palin to get in the spotlight once more. Even if the attention she gains is ridicule, she stands to be protected from fading into obscurity as “just another politician.” While this celebrity status will likely keep her from attaining greater heights within her own political party, it at least ensures that she will not be forgotten. Instead, she will be remembered as the person who made up words like “refudiate” and “misunderestimate.”

Where canons of rhetoric are involved, Palin puts forward an interesting front. She gives the appearance of confidence. One might almost claim that she was a public speaker. But you’d be wrong. Most anyone can create a positive image of themselves in front of a camera with a teleprompter. Palin has effectively delivered her speech, but she suffers from the image she has already created for herself: ineptitude.

#### **Works Cited**

Ungar, Rick. (2011, June 3). Sarah Palin – “Paul Revere warned...the British?” Forbes. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com>.