

A Rhetorical Analysis of George W. Bush's National Eulogies

Marta Rzepecka

University of Rzeszów, Poland

Abstract: *This article offers a critique of President George W. Bush's national eulogies for the victims of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, the space shuttle Columbia disaster, and Hurricane Katrina. It addresses the problem of limited research of multiple eulogies from the same president. The article examines the eulogies in two phases: first, it places the speeches within the exigencies and constraints of the situations in which they were drafted and delivered and, then, it analyzes their construction using two frameworks, one developed by Michael Robert Dennis and Adrienne Kunkel and the other designed by Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell. The examination centers around the translation of the theory on the genre of the national eulogy into practice, the most prevalent components and characteristics in the eulogies, and the rhetorical effect of the eulogies, understood in terms of achieving the goals defined by the genre.*

Keywords: *eulogy, presidential rhetoric, George W. Bush, 9/11 attacks, space shuttle Columbia disaster, Hurricane Katrina*

Scholarship on contemporary eulogies has a comparatively short history. In the field of communication, studies of eulogies and discussions of theoretical aspects of eulogies dominate.¹ Scholarly work has focused on the analyses of eulogistic rhetoric,² varieties of eulogies,³ situational and stylistic

- 1 Michael Lee Kent, "The rhetoric of eulogies: A generic critique of classic and contemporary funeral oratory," PhD diss., Purdue University, 1997.
- 2 Giles Wilkeson Gray and Waldo Warder Braden, *Public speaking: principles and practices* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).
- 3 Edward Rogge and James C. Ching, *Advanced Public Speaking* (New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, Inc., 1966).

aspects of eulogies,⁴ politics of funerary oratory,⁵ nationalistic narratives,⁶ eulogistic topoi,⁷ and the functions, roles, and scope of eulogies.⁸

The first substantive discussion of presidential eulogies emerges in the article “Rhetorical hybrids: Fusions of generic elements” by Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell in which the authors label presidential eulogy a “rhetorical hybrid,”⁹ a genre which combines epideictic and deliberative rhetoric. An emphasis is placed on the epideictic elements because the key purpose of the speech is to praise and blame, while deliberative aspects, which focus on calls for action, play a secondary role. Understanding of eulogistic phenomenon is advanced by Michael Robert Dennis and Adrienne Kunkel in the article “Fallen heroes, lifted hearts: Consolation in contemporary presidential eulogia.” Drawing from the comforting and social support paradigms found in psychology and communication literature, the authors identify components of presidential eulogies and strategies for effective eulogizing. They also create a framework to critique and compare presidential eulogies. More specifically, Dennis and Kunkel point out that presidential eulogies praise the deceased “through the honoring of their values and actions.”¹⁰ They suggest problem-focused coping in the form of recommended actions such as “the adoption of the deceased’s goals, projects, or values.”¹¹

Presidential eulogies promote emotion-focused coping in the forms of

- 4 Ronald Carpenter and Robert Seltzer, “Situational style and the Rotunda eulogies,” *Central States Speech Journal*, 22 (1971), 11-15; Paul C. Brownlow and Beth Davis, “‘A certainty of honor: ’The eulogies of Adlai Stevenson,” *Central States Speech Journal*, 25 (1974), 217-224.
- 5 Howard Dorgan, “Gerald L. K. Smith and Huey P. Long funeral oration,” *Southern States Speech Journal*, 36 (1971), 378-389.
- 6 John F. Berens, “‘Like a prophetic spirit’: Samuel Davies, American eulogists, and the deification of George Washington,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 65 (1977), 290-297.
- 7 Michael Lee Kent, “The rhetoric of eulogy: Topoi of grief and consolation,” *Studies in Communication and Culture*, 1 (1991), 109-119.
- 8 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Critical anthology of public speeches* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1978); Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, eds., *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action* (Falls Church: Speech Communication Association, 1978); Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “Rhetorical hybrids: Fusions of generic elements,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 68 (1982), 146-157; Karen A. Foss, “John Lennon and the advisory function of eulogies,” *Central States Speech Journal*, 34 (1983), 187-194; Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
- 9 Jamieson and Campbell, 147.
- 10 Michael Robert Dennis and Adrienne Kunkel, “Fallen Heroes, Lifted Hearts: Consolation in Contemporary Presidential Eulogia,” *Death Studies*, 28 (2004), 708.
- 11 *Ibid.*

positive reappraisal, which help to see tragic events in a larger, different perspective. The forms include reference to the deceased's passing into a better afterlife; gratitude for the time spent with, and lessons learned from, the deceased; and appreciation and promotion of the deceased's good and fulfilled life. Finally, presidential eulogies affirm vivid relationships through a revelation of insights about the "characteristics of, and experiences with, the deceased,"¹² and through unification achieved by exposing connections between the president, the audiences, and the deceased. Beyond their framework, the authors find three more practices that characterize presidential eulogies: presidential eulogies tend to acknowledge audience perceptions and affect, make references to God, and admit the inadequacy of words to truly help the bereaved.

Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words by Campbell and Jamieson is the most recent work on the subject of the genres of presidential speeches. Approaching presidential eulogies from a rhetorical perspective, the authors define the genre as a "unique blend of eulogistic content and elements that reconstitute the nation."¹³ They differentiate between presidential individual eulogies, which pay tribute to past presidents and are delivered at the time of their death, and presidential national eulogies, which emerge "only when someone must make sense of a catastrophic event that unexpectedly kills U.S. civilians while also assaulting a national symbol."¹⁴ They also characterize the nature of national eulogies and describe common components that define them. First, they observe that the national eulogy is an oral discourse that takes a personal tone and uses "the language of religion and God."¹⁵ These components help the president to play the role of "the national priest of our civil religion, who can not only perform the sacred functions vital to repairing the nation, but can also redefine the event and translate it into a reaffirmation of the health and unity of the nation and of the durability of its values."¹⁶ Second, Campbell and Jamieson write that the national eulogy provides an explanation of the reasons why the tragic events happened. It tasks the president with addressing questions about the meaning of what happened and measures that can be

12 Ibid., 710.

13 Campbell and Jamieson, 2008, 75.

14 Ibid., 73.

15 Ibid., 84.

16 Ibid., 80.

taken to ensure that it does not reoccur. Third, the national eulogy speaks about those who died as symbols for American institutions or ideals. It constructs the meaning of the deaths around the themes of courage and determination and describes those who died as examples which express “the best of what it means to be an American.”¹⁷ In the process, the president often needs to reject the construction of the reality imposed by the perpetrators and “transform symbols of destruction into symbols of resurrection and renewal.”¹⁸ Finally, Campbell and Jamieson state that the national eulogy assures the public that governmental action will be taken to prevent a similar catastrophe. This means seeking “administrative remedies in the form of investigations” and/or “bringing the perpetrators to justice.”¹⁹ In each case, offering recommendations for corrective action allows the president to shift the responsibility for what happened from the executive branch to a system, technology, state government, or local government.

To capture the unique nature of the genre, the authors compare and contrast national eulogies with special inaugural addresses of ascendant vice presidents.²⁰ They find that in some ways, the eulogy performs functions similar to those of the inaugural, winning political capital for the president and reassuring the public that in confrontation with loss and the events that caused it, the nation and its institutions remain strong and secure. In others, however, the eulogy differs in purpose from the inaugural. First, the eulogy transforms the nation and builds its resilience, while the inaugural reconstitutes the public as the people. Second, the eulogy defines the meaning of the tragedy, while the inaugural expresses the sense of the country’s history. Third, the eulogy strengthens the ties between the present and the future with the ideals of those who died, while the inaugural links the past to the future with the principles of the forthcoming president and his administration.

As Campbell and Jamieson explain, “the national eulogy is a comparatively recent presidential genre.”²¹ Earlier catastrophes did not evoke a direct presidential response. It was only in reaction to the tragic ends of the missions of the space shuttles Challenger in 1986 and Columbia in 2003, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in

17 Ibid., 86.

18 Ibid., 80.

19 Ibid., 88.

20 Ibid., 75-77.

21 Ibid., 74.

1995, and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001 that presidents “spoke for and to the nation.”²² Research into national eulogies can be divided into three strands: analyses performed on the national eulogy from an individual president,²³ studies comparing national eulogies from two or three presidents,²⁴ and discussions of theoretical aspects of eulogies.²⁵ Little of the available literature on national eulogies compares many national eulogies from the same president.²⁶ Questions addressing multiple eulogies from the same president remain relatively unanswered. Even if the existing studies focus on the same president’s rhetorical responses to different tragedies, these studies analyze the president’s reaction as it spread out across a series of messages often passing over the actual national eulogy spoken at a memorial prayer service. This indicates the need to examine formal national eulogies of the same president to enhance the understanding of the ways in which different tragic events and the demands that these events created were addressed.

The objective of this article is to analyze President George W. Bush’s national eulogies delivered in reaction to three tragedies: the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, the space shuttle Columbia disaster, and Hurricane Katrina. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were acts of terrorism. The space shuttle Columbia disaster was a technology-related

22 Ibid., 75.

23 Jack Lule, “The political use of victims: The shaping of the Challenger disaster,” *Political Communication*, 7 (1990), 115-128; Steven M. Mister, “Reagan’s Challenger tribute: Combining generic constraints and situational demands,” *Central States Speech Journal*, 37 (1986), 158-165; John M. Murphy, “‘Our Mission and Our Moment’: George W. Bush and September 11th,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 6 (2003), 607-632; Amos Kiewe, “Framing Memory through Eulogy: Ronald Reagan’s Long Good-bye,” in Kendall R. Phillips, Stephen Browne, and Barbara Biesecker, *Rhetoric, Culture, and Social Critique: Framing Public Memory*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 248-264; Mary E. Stuckey, *Slipping the surly bonds: Reagan’s Challenger address* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006); Valerie Lynn Schrader “Consoling through faith: A rhetorical analysis of religious references in Bill Clinton’s Oklahoma City bombing memorial prayer service address,” *Kentucky Journal of Communication*, 30 (2011), 13-27; Brian Amsden, “Dimensions of temporality in President Obama’s Tucson memorial address,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 17 (2014), 455-476.

24 Valerie Lynn Schrader, “Teachable moments in presidential eulogies: A comparative analysis of Ronald Reagan’s address to the nation on the Challenger disaster and William Jefferson Clinton’s Oklahoma City bombing memorial prayer service address,” *Ohio Communication Journal*, 47 (2009), 215-231.

25 Celeste Michelle Condit, “The Functions of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar,” *Communication Quarterly*, 33 (1985), 284-299; Dennis and Kunkel, 2004, 703-731; *Campbell and Jamieson*, 2008.

26 Victoria West, “Healing Through Hope: A Rhetorical Analysis of Barack Obama’s National Eulogies,” Undergraduate Research Awards, Hollins University, 2015.

accident. Hurricane Katrina was an example of a natural disaster. Considering the objective of the article, Bush's presidential individual eulogies – Bush eulogized two former presidents: Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford – will not be analyzed. The analytical frameworks for national eulogies developed by Dennis and Kunkel as well as Campbell and Jamieson provide for a thorough examination of the president's approach to and handling of the three situations with unique contextual demands. The frameworks allow for an analysis of the components that the president chose to guide the public through the complexities of the tragedies and the process of recovering from them. The article examines the rhetoric of the president's national eulogies in two phases. After placing the three speeches within the exigencies and constraints of the situations in which they were drafted and delivered, the analytical frameworks are applied to test which characteristic features of the genre of the national eulogy dominate in each text. The article seeks answers to three questions: Was the president's rhetoric consistent with theoretical work on the genre of the national eulogy? Which components and characteristics were prevalent in each eulogy? Were the president's responses successful in the sense of achieving the goals defined by the genre? The findings of the analysis will add knowledge to the field of presidential rhetoric, addressing the problem of limited research in the area of national eulogies for three reasons: (1) they will help to discover if the theory on national eulogies matches the practice; (2) they will allow to see which rhetorical devices are applied to serve which purposes; (3) finally, they will give insights into the rhetorical style of the president and enhance the understanding of the power of presidential rhetoric in times of national tragedies.

Background and Analysis

The World Trade Center and Pentagon Attacks

The World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks were a series of terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001. These attacks killed almost 3,000 people and affected the personal and professional lives of the American people and the rest of the world. In addition, they dramatically impacted the American presidency.²⁷ Overnight, presidential job approval

27 Michelle C. Blich, Jeffrey C. Kohles, and James R. Meindl, "Charting the language of leadership: A methodological investigation of President Bush and the crisis of 9/11," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 83 (2004), 562-574.

ratings rose from an average level of support of just over 55 percent to a mean level of approval of over 81 percent between 11 and 21 September.²⁸ In the immediate days following the attacks, almost three Americans in ten changed their assessment of how well the president was handling his job. The nature of the attacks created a sense of urgency and an outcry for the president to respond quickly by capturing and punishing those responsible.²⁹ Short-term effects were more important than long-term consequences. Strong emotions of anger and outrage dominated and disturbed the process of careful deliberation. The value of debate on the use of force was ignored, leading to reliance on emotions over reason. The ambiguity of the enemy encouraged broad and general language, often invoking moral judgments, and the inevitability of death caused by terror promoted exhibition of overwhelming patriotism. Excessive confidence and optimism influenced decisions, causing those in power to overtrust the outcomes of their proposed actions. Media coverage of the attacks set the tone for the context in which the news happened.³⁰ Four major broadcasters – ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox – provided a four-day, twenty-four-hour, commercial-free coverage of the attacks and their aftermath, allowing millions of spectators to watch the second World Trade Center plane crash live on television. Interviews with high-profile leaders were interspersed with reports on the human tragedy and drama. Photos of victims and images of suffering in the print and television media abounded.

The eulogy for the victims of the attack, prepared by the president's chief speechwriter, Michael Gerson, was delivered by the president at the memorial prayer service at the National Cathedral on 14 September.³¹ Campbell and Jamieson analyze the rhetorical act as it unfolded across the series of messages but this analysis shows that the speech delivered at the memorial prayer service is a complete national eulogy with all four components of

28 Richard A. Brody, "President Bush and the Public," in Fred I. Greenstein, *The George W. Bush Presidency: An Early Assessment* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 228-244.

29 Brian M. Stewart, "Before the Smoke Cleared: Decision-Making in the Immediate Aftermath of 9/11," *University of Miami Law Review*, 68 (2014), 773-777.

30 Shoma Munshi, "Television in the United States from 9/11 and the US's continuing 'war on terror': Single theme, multiple media lenses," in Peter van der Veer and Shoma Munshi, eds., *Media, war, and terrorism: Responses from the Middle East and Asia* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 46-60.

31 The quotes that follow are from George W. Bush, "Remarks at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance Service September 14, 2001," The American Presidency Project (Accessed, 26 August 2016), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=63645&st=&st1=>.

the genre included. Out of the four characteristics, the language of religion dominates. Bush plays the role of a national priest when he speaks for the nation: “we express our Nation’s sorrow;” when he places the nation under God’s providence saying “we ask Almighty God to watch over our Nation;” and when he consoles the nation with words: “May He bless the souls of the departed.” The president invokes God when he ascribes meaning to what happened by explaining that “God’s signs are not always the ones we look for;” and when he reclaims the American character by assuring that “the Lord of life holds all who die and all who mourn.” Finally, in keeping with the genre’s style, Bush declares that action will be taken to prevent a similar tragedy and constructs his declaration around the themes of destiny and choice. He says: “our responsibility to history is already clear: To answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.”

The language of religion is also the most common strategy from the perspective of the framework of Dennis and Kunkel. References to God and prayer are used comfortably and explicitly throughout the speech. The religious tone resonates in the presidential statements spoken at the beginning and at the end of the speech: “We come before God to pray for the missing and the dead and for those who love them.” Equally common are acknowledgments of audience perceptions and affect. Bush shifts the attention away from his own emotions towards those of the public by observing: “Just 3 days removed from these events, Americans do not yet have the distance of history.” The third most common strategy is unification. The president states explicitly: “I assure you, you are not alone.” He exposes connections between the audiences, the deceased, and himself when he says: “Today we feel what Franklin Roosevelt called the warm courage of national unity.” He stresses links between the dead, the living, and God paraphrasing Scripture: “neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, can separate us from God’s love.”

The eulogy for the victims of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks is considered to be Bush’s most successful response to a national tragedy for at least two reasons. First, it builds capital for the president. In the short-term, the president’s handling of the tragedy resulted in a 26 percentage jump in the Gallup poll, reflecting public approval of his response to the tragedy. A decrease in support was reported both after his response to the space shuttle Columbia disaster by two percent and after his reaction to Hurricane Katrina by five percent. In the long-term, the president’s

handling of the tragedy translated into his successful reelection in which he won both the electoral and popular vote. Second, the eulogy builds capital for the government. The boost of the public's trust in the government's capacity to prevent a reoccurrence of the tragedy showed in the 2002 congressional elections when the president's party gained seats in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. In the eulogy for the Columbia crew, the president's attempt to assert that governmental action would ensure that the catastrophe would not be repeated was undermined by the fact that it was the second loss of a space shuttle. In the eulogy for the victims of Hurricane Katrina, the effort to convince the public that measures would be taken to assure that the disaster would not reoccur was even less successful given public and press outcry blaming the federal government for the failure to react to the calamity in a timely and adequate manner.

Even more insights about Bush's eulogy for the victims of the September 11 attacks emerge with the analysis of components featured in three other presidential eulogies delivered in reaction to acts of terrorism: Bill Clinton's eulogy for the bombing victims in Oklahoma City delivered at the Oklahoma State Fair Arena in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, on 23 April 1995,³² Clinton's eulogy for crewmembers of the USS Cole delivered in Norfolk, Virginia, on 18 October 2000,³³ and Barack Obama's eulogy for the victims of the terrorist attack in Boston delivered at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston, Massachusetts, on 18 April 2013.³⁴ Bush, as well as Clinton and Obama, draw on references to God and statements transforming the deaths and the tragedies into symbols for what America stands. Yet, while Bush and Obama focus on the religious aspects, Clinton concentrates on the themes of resurrection, renewal, and reconstruction. All four eulogies likewise recognize the perspectives and emotions of the audiences. Yet, in contrast to Bush's eulogy, Clinton's Oklahoma City eulogy and Obama's Boston eulogy put the strongest emphasis on the collectivity of

32 William J. Clinton, "Remarks at a Memorial Service for the Bombing Victims in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma April 23, 1995," The American Presidency Project (Accessed, 1 February 2017), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=51265&st=&st1=>.

33 William J. Clinton, "Remarks at the Memorial Service for Crewmembers of the U.S.S. Cole in Norfolk, Virginia October 18, 2000," The American Presidency Project (Accessed, 1 February 2017), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=1202&st=&st1=>.

34 Barack Obama, "Remarks at an Interfaith Prayer Service for the Victims of the Terrorist Attack in Boston, Massachusetts April 18, 2013," The American Presidency Project (Accessed, 1 February 2017), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=103500&st=&st1=>.

the audiences and their relationships with the speaker and the deceased. Clinton's eulogy for the USS Cole sailors in turn places the greatest stress on the praise of the deceased through the admiring of their values, actions, and achievements.

The Space Shuttle Columbia Disaster

The space shuttle Columbia disaster occurred on 1 February 2003, upon its reentry into the Earth's atmosphere. Columbia disintegrated on its return from its 28th mission, killing all seven crew members. As it was later determined, the accident was caused by faulty design of the external tank. A piece of foam broke off the tank just after launch and struck the shuttle's wing, leading to the breakup of the shuttle during its reentry. The Columbia disaster was the second major tragedy in spaceflight history after the space shuttle Challenger, which exploded shortly after launch on 28 January 1986, killing all seven astronauts on board. Many Americans interpreted the Columbia accident in light of the Challenger explosion.³⁵ They read Bush's discourse on the loss of Columbia through the lens of Ronald Reagan's rhetoric on the loss of Challenger. The second accident of a space shuttle cast doubt on presidential credibility to assure the nation that action would be taken to prevent a repetition of the catastrophe. It also called into question the authority of a presidential commission, charged with investigating a space shuttle accident, to execute actions required to help assure safe space flight and with it NASA's ability to implement the commission's recommendations successfully to ensure the viability of the space program. Although the blame for the Columbia disaster was put on the shuttle technology, the responsible agency was within the executive branch, which still made the presidency vulnerable to being seen as incompetent. The media coverage of the Columbia reentry was shaped by the Internet.³⁶ Users were offered multiple sources of information within minutes of the explosion. Reporting was done by professional and amateur journalists, photographers, and camera operators. MSNBC and WFAA-TV, ABC's Dallas affiliate, were the only channels providing live coverage, though footage of a white stripe moving against a blue sky and then breaking into pieces and

35 Campbell and Jamieson, 2008, 83.

36 Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 107-108.

panels of speakers speculating on the causes and implications of what happened were offered on all major television networks.

The eulogy for the crew, worked by senior speechwriter John McConnell, was delivered by the president at the memorial service held at NASA's Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, on 4 February.³⁷ Present analysis finds that this speech also performs the functions expected of the national eulogy. In keeping with the structure offered by Campbell and Jamieson, it is built around the argument that those who died represented the best of America. The president names each of the Columbia crew members and celebrates their individual characteristics: Rick Husband's love for his family and service to God, David Brown's professional skills, Michael Anderson's hard work and courage, Laurel Salton Clark's love for adventure and life, Kalpana Chawla's ambitions and aspirations, Ilan Ramon's patriotism, and Willie McCool's firmness and reliability. Bush supports each of his arguments with quotations, recalling the words of the astronauts and their families and friends. Constructing the speech around the theme of the astronauts as symbols expressing the best of what it means to be an American allows the president to not only reaffirm the durability of the nation's values but also redefine the disaster: "today we remember not only one moment of tragedy," Bush says, "but seven lives of great purpose and achievement." The theme also helps the president to explain the meaning of what happened and set the stage for addressing the questions concerning the safety of the space program: "This cause of exploration and discovery is not an option we choose," Bush explains. "It is a desire written in the human heart . . . We find the best among us, send them forth into unmapped darkness, and pray they will return. . . . Yet, some explorers do not return, and the loss settles unfairly on a few."

Applying the analytical framework of Dennis and Kunkel to the text of the eulogy demonstrates the prevalence of three strategies: praise for the deceased, acknowledgement of audience perceptions and affect, and emotion-focused coping. Bush honors the astronauts' achievements and values when he says: "Each of these astronauts had the daring and discipline required of their calling. Each of them knew that great endeavors are inseparable from great risks, and each of them accepted those risks willingly, even

37 The quotes that follow are from George W. Bush, "Remarks at a Memorial Service for the STS-107 Crew of the Space Shuttle *Columbia* in Houston, Texas February 4, 2003," The American Presidency Project (Accessed, 26 August 2016), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=188&st=&st1=>.

joyfully, in the cause of discovery.” He communicates to the public the awareness of the impact the disaster had on others when he says: “The loss was sudden and terrible, and for their families, the grief is heavy.” Finally, he expresses gratitude for the time spent with, and lessons learned from, the deceased when he says: “Our whole Nation was blessed to have such men and women serving in our space program.”

Bush’s eulogy for the Columbia crew shares some of the characteristics and strategies of Ronald Reagan’s speech delivered at the memorial service for the crew of the space shuttle Challenger held at NASA’s Johnson Space Center on 31 January 1986.³⁸ In Bush’s eulogy, as in Reagan’s speech, those who died represented the best of what it means to be an American. Moreover, Bush’s address, so as Reagan’s, is prompted by a perceived need to honor and praise the values and actions of the deceased. The main difference is that Reagan’s reaction additionally performs the functions of repairing and unifying the nation. It focuses on providing comfort and reassurance, instilling fortitude and courage, restoring faith and confidence. It is a highly personalized message, heavily relying on statements that serve to strengthen the bond between the president, the audiences, and the deceased.

Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast of the United States on 29 August 2005. It was one of the deadliest storms in US history, with an estimated 1,833 fatalities. It was also the most destructive and the costliest storm that ever hit the United States, causing \$108 billion in damage reported across the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida.³⁹ The disaster conceived unique situational and rhetorical challenges.⁴⁰ Presidential expressions of praise for political officials’ efforts in rescue and recovery operations clashed with a general criticism of the federal government for the failure of planning and lack of coordination and of the state and local authorities for inadequate and inefficient response in terms of organization,

38 Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Memorial Service for the Crew of the Space Shuttle Challenger in Houston, Texas January 31, 1986,” The American Presidency Project (Accessed, 1 February 2017), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=36402&st=&st1=>.

39 “Hurricane Katrina – A Look Back 10 Years Later,” National Weather Service Weather Forecast Office (Accessed, 26 August 2016), http://www.srh.noaa.gov/lix/?n=katrina_anniversary.

40 Kevin McClure, “*The Rhetoric of Disaster*: The Presidential Natural Disaster Address as an Emergent Genre,” *Relevant Rhetoric*, 2 (2011), 1.

management, and leadership. Denying that the president did not know that the levee and flood wall systems might fail, while evidence was found that he had known about the risk, made it difficult to assure that the president was aware of the situation and that he actively responded to it. Federalizing emergency response to only Louisiana and delaying the announcement of the state of emergency in the entire Gulf Coast region could not provide assurance of support in the relief and rescue efforts. Finally, the president's return to Washington, D.C., from vacation until after two days after the hurricane struck was at odds with his expressions of sympathy which mean to show the eulogizer as a compassionate and caring figure. The polls taken within days after the disaster did show the public's disapproval of how the president was handling the crisis. While they did not appear to have an impact on his job approval rating throughout September – Bush averaged 43 percent in August and 44 percent in September – they did affect his image. The polls showed a drop in Bush's image as a strong and decisive leader and an effective manager.⁴¹ The narrative for what was happening was framed by both new media sources and traditional media outlets. On the one hand, the media acted as links between authorities and victims and between members of families who had been separated by the storm. On the other, however, many played a role in sensational journalism, emphasizing lawlessness, racial issues, and crisis management failure.

The eulogy for the victims of the disaster, likely penned by one of Bush's speechwriters, was recited by the president at the memorial prayer service at the Washington National Cathedral on 16 September, two weeks after the hurricane hit the US.⁴² Within the structure offered by Campbell and Jamieson, the speech takes the form of a national eulogy. Its core is the language of religion. Assuming the role of a national priest, the president prays in the name of the nation asking: "May God bless and keep the souls of the lost." He speaks to the nation about its faith in itself and in God paraphrasing Scripture: "Across the country, Americans saw the hungry and gave them something to eat, saw the thirsty and gave them something to drink, saw strangers and invited them in." The language of religion is also used

41 Frank Newport, "Little Impact of Katrina on Bush's Overall Job Ratings," Gallup (Accessed, 26 August 2016), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/24283/little-impact-katrina-bushs-overall-job-ratings.aspx>.

42 The quotes that follow are from George W. Bush, "Remarks at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance Service September 16, 2005," The American Presidency Project (Accessed, 26 August 2016), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=73765&st=&st1=>.

to describe the meaning of what happened. "Through prayer," the president explains, "we look for ways to understand the arbitrary harm left by this storm and the mystery of undeserved suffering" The language is also used to console and reassure the nation: "Yet even as we're humbled by forces we cannot explain," Bush states, "we take comfort in the knowledge that no one is ever stranded beyond God's care." The president invokes God when he reclaims the American character by assuring: "In the worst of storms and in the rush of flood waters, even the strongest faith can be tested." Then he repairs the nation's ideals by encouraging: "As we clear away the debris of a hurricane, let us also clear away the legacy of inequality." The theme of faith runs also through the words of declaration that action will be taken to remedy the catastrophe: "The restoration of broken communities and disrupted lives now rests in our hands. . . . we pledge ourselves to the demanding work of revival and renew the faith and hope that will carry that work to completion."

Within the framework of Dennis and Kunkel, this speech builds on faith as the means to comprehend and cope with what happened, just as the national eulogy for the victims of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. The president links faith and disaster when he quotes the line from Scripture that "Many waters cannot quench love; neither can the floods drown it." He invokes God through faith and prayer when he says: "so many place their faith in a God who hears and helps." The speech also provides a glimpse into the catastrophe by offering a perspective of those who suffered in it. The president speaks about "the panic of loved ones separated from each other, the lonely pain of people whose earthly possessions were swept away, and the uncertainty of men and women and children driven away from the lives they knew." Finally, the speech unifies the nation. While acknowledging that "segregation and discrimination . . . closed many doors of opportunity," the president declares that "our Nation is also mindful of the work ahead . . . we accept this responsibility not as a burden or a chore but as an opportunity to serve our fellow Americans, as they would do for us." He forecasts a future in which "Americans will look back at the response to Hurricane Katrina and say that our country grew not only in prosperity but in character and justice."

The characteristics and strategies used by Bush in the eulogy for the victims of Hurricane Katrina are comparable to those used by Obama in a speech delivered at a memorial service for the victims of the explosion at the West Fertilizer Company Plant held in the Ferrell Center in Waco, Tex-

as, on 25 April 2013.⁴³ Bush responds much as Obama does, using the language of religion, unifying the nation, and acknowledging the audience's perceptions, except that his reaction is of a different scope than Obama's. Obama makes fewer references to God and invokes God through quotes from Scripture, prayers, and words of entrustment less often and devotes much more effort to the establishment of unity and the display of affection and empathy than Bush does.

Discussion

This discussion is informed by the assumption that the eulogies delivered in reaction to the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, the space shuttle Columbia disaster, and Hurricane Katrina perform the functions expected of the national eulogy. The president's eulogistic rhetoric is found to be consistent with the theoretical work on the national eulogy and his choice of speech components and strategies fall within the analytical frameworks for studying the genre. This does not mean, however, that all components highlighted by the analytical frameworks are necessarily available in each eulogy. In fact, an examination of the eulogies within their unique context indicates some differences in the president's approach to and handling of the rhetorical situations.

More specifically, in all three eulogies, Bush avoids references to the deceased's passing into a better afterlife. Realizing that members of their families and friends do not yet have the distance of the loss they experienced, he speaks about the earthly life of the deceased. He does not reveal insights about the deceased or discuss his personal relationship with them. Instead, he puts the perceptions and emotions of those affected by their loss directly first. He does not admit that his words are inadequate to truly help the bereaved but chooses language which helps him to establish a sense of control over and responsibility for the safety and security of the nation. In the eulogy for the victims of Hurricane Katrina, Bush does not use any forms of emotion-focused coping. He does not express gratitude for the time spent with the deceased or appreciation for their life, which emphasizes the abruptness of the loss and unfulfillment of the departed's life.

43 Barack Obama, "Remarks at a Memorial Service for the Victims of the Explosion at the West Fertilizer Company Plant at Baylor University in Waco, Texas April 25, 2013," The American Presidency Project (Accessed, 1 February 2017), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=103549&st=&st1=>.

In each eulogy, the president adapts his rhetoric to the situation with its unique contextual demands. In the eulogies for the victims of the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina, he talks about the nature of the tragedy and tries to make sense of what happened using the language of God. In doing so, he explains the purpose and enormity of the attacks and the disaster from a larger, equally incomprehensible and ineffable, perspective. Given the information available to him at the time of the attacks and the disaster, it appeared to be the only appropriate perspective. The president draws on religion to address strong emotions of anger and a desire for revenge. The attacks and the disaster compounded an array of negative feelings which needed to be translated into motivation to serve a higher cause. The emotional devastation and havoc needed to be transformed into a drive for reconstruction and restoration. In the face of tragedies, consideration and calculation come second. The public's immediate reactions need to be attended to first. Bush's biblical language is by design emotional rather than rational, moral rather than political. Invocations of God's providence and divine intervention help to arouse American patriotism because being truly American means believing in God. They also help to convey a sense of security and strength. Invoking God builds trust that justice will be made. It justifies America's retaliatory attacks and measures, places the nation on the right side in the struggle between the forces of good and evil, and defines it as a loving and devoted country which has God's blessing in protecting universal values and ideals.

The president's extensive use of faith-based language can be traced to both his own faith and the widely accepted civil religion in American society. In terms of his religious background, Bush is a member of the United Methodist Church. In many ways, however, he draws connections to different religious communities inside and outside of the Christian tradition on the basis of obvious relations, common ground, and shared values. By many accounts, he uses faith to handle major personal and family issues and shape his approach to governance. Much of his spiritual life is highly private, though his religiosity informs his political discourse. He is not concerned with being seen going to church services, reading the Bible, or saying prayers but has learned to talk about his faith in public and incorporate into his public utterances the words of the Bible and prayers.

In both eulogies, the president attempts to create unity and give a sense of relationship between the nation, the deceased, and their families. One way he accomplishes it is by comforting the families and friends of the lost

with words of assurance that they are not alone. The other way is by asserting that Americans stand together as a nation. Bush draws connections between people of different ages, races, religions, and socioeconomic statuses to show that diversity is the source of strength and power to reconstruct and restore. He emphasizes unity to reinforce his political base undermined by accusations that the terrorist attacks exposed his poor national security leadership and that the disaster rendered his administration unable to manage natural hazards and respond appropriately to the needs of the affected communities.

Acknowledgment of the public's perceptions and affect appears integral to keeping people united. Reflecting on the tragic events from the perspective of those who suffered from their effects directly and those who worked selflessly to help ease the burden of loss means to forge bonds both among people and between people and their leaders. In the case of the 9/11 attacks, this strategy appears designed to strengthen the public's faith in the administration's ability to protect the nation from another attack and mete out justice to terrorists, while in the case of Hurricane Katrina, the goal seems to be to restore public trust in the government that adequate and efficient help will be provided and aid will be distributed equally. Given public reactions following Hurricane Katrina's landfall, the strategy could have also served the purpose of covering the president's initial response to the disaster. Bush's political image, negatively affected by his slow and inept first reaction, needed a makeover and expressing understanding for the public's viewpoint and attitudes could have been a step towards improving the appearance and effectiveness of his political identity.

The eulogy for the Columbia crew differs from the eulogies for the victims of the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina in four important aspects. First, the eulogy is delivered at NASA's Johnson Space Center during a private memorial service for the astronauts' relatives and NASA staff. While the speech is built into the order of the service along hymns, Scripture readings, and prayers, its location in relation to a secular institution offers the potential to extend its functions beyond strictly defined liturgical terms. It seems to allow the president to navigate between the role of God and faith in the life of the deceased and their secular accomplishments. The setting works as a device for maneuvering between the grief of the families and the political implications of the disaster for the NASA space program.

More specifically, the eulogy adopts praise for the deceased as its leading strategy. Recognized as a common component within the study of eulogia,

the strategy extols the merits and deeds of the deceased, which functions to both bring the personalities of the departed closer to the public and personalize the content of the delivered message. While implicit in the eulogy is the conviction that the executive branch is not responsible for the disaster, the strategy works to present the president as deeply concerned for the crew's family members and about the causes of the tragedy. The space shuttle Columbia disaster claimed comparatively few people and saddened comparatively narrow circles of families and friends. While it was a major national tragedy and the deaths of the astronauts were linked to the nation, the loss settled on a few. Bush recognizes the scope and impact of the tragedy and speaks about each of the astronauts individually, thus facilitating a glimpse into their lives and giving everyone the opportunity to relate to them. He draws on the classic themes of the Protestant work ethic – love, God, hard work, courage, patriotism, firmness, and reliability – to describe both the lives of the crew members and the boundaries of American society. Creating the correlation, he attempts to transform the lives of the astronauts into symbols that shape national values and determine national goals.

Bush presents the merits and deeds of the crew members from the perspective of their families and friends to give a context to the reassurance that efforts will be made to find out how the catastrophe happened and how it can be prevented from happening again. That context appears designed to alter judgments about the safety of the space program and *keep* space research going. Confronted with a challenge to reassure the public that the loss of a second space shuttle will lead to more effective actions which will prevent a repetition of the catastrophe, Bush skillfully shapes the way his reassurance is presented. He recalls the words of the astronauts and their families and friends to frame public perceptions in a way that helps create positive expectations about the future which help persuade the public. Those quotations function as reliable points of reference for the argument for the continued viability of the space program, as, unlike presidential assertions, they carry the credibility that is required to change public conclusions. Concentration on the recollections serves to amplify the message. It conveys the consistency and validity of its main point, which both lead to a stronger effect.

Finally, the eulogy draws on expressions of gratitude for the time spent with and the lessons learned from the deceased. Gratitude helps to ease the pain and cope with the comprehension of events in times of adversity, transforming the events into constructive life experiences that drive personal and

community growth. In fostering gratitude, the eulogy shapes the perspective of the tragedy, determining the way it is perceived, approached, and handled. By appreciating the experiences shared with and learned from the departed, it shifts the public's attention away from what was lost towards what was gained, building on positive feelings which generate motivation to take up tougher challenges.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to analyze the national eulogies delivered by President Bush after the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, the space shuttle Columbia disaster, and Hurricane Katrina. In the analysis, two frameworks were used: one developed by Dennis and Kunkel and the other designed by Campbell and Jamieson. The eulogies were examined in two phases: first, the speeches were placed within the exigencies and constraints of the situations in which they were drafted and delivered and, then, the analytical frameworks were applied to test which characteristic features of the genre of the national eulogy dominated in each text.

The current analysis has shown that the president's rhetoric was consistent with research findings on the genre of the national eulogy, which suggests that the theory on national eulogies matches the practice. The analysis has found that presidential choice of strategies was adapted to the situations with their unique contextual demands. Two eulogies relied on the language of God and religion, and one drew on the praise for the deceased. All three applied the acknowledgment of the audience's perceptions and affect. These findings indicate that while different strategies can serve one purpose, one strategy can serve different purposes. The use of the acknowledgment of the public's perceptions and affect clearly illustrates this point. In the case of the eulogy for the victims of the 9/11 attacks, the strategy was used to build faith in the president's national security leadership; in the case of the eulogy for the Columbia crew, it was designed to win support for the continuation of the national space program; and, finally, in the case of the eulogy for the victims of Hurricane Katrina, the purpose of the strategy was to restore trust in the government's ability to organize, manage, and lead rescue and relief efforts.

One last finding to emerge from this analysis is the difference in the rhetorical effect of the speeches. Acknowledging the methodological problems involved in the attempt to measure the impact of presidential speeches on the public, this article does not evaluate the effects of the eulogies on the

audiences. Instead, it intends to assess whether the president's responses to the national tragedies were successful in terms of achieving the goals defined by the genre. An analysis of media reactions shows that the eulogy for the victims of the 9/11 attacks successfully performed its functions. The speech was found to be personal in tone and firm in purpose, with *The New York Times* confidently reporting that the president "sought to console the bereaved, comfort the wounded, encourage the heroic, calm the fearful and, by no means incidentally, rally the country for the struggle and sacrifice ahead."⁴⁴ He was described as "the nation's mourner in chief," "its cheerleader in chief," and "its commander in chief."⁴⁵ The newspaper noted that "There was a new resolution in Mr. Bush's voice . . . that the coming conflict 'will end in a way and at an hour of our choosing.'"⁴⁶ Although "Inside the hall, Mr. Bush seemed dwarfed by the massive limestone columns . . . on television he took on a larger presence, and seemed to find his footing."⁴⁷ The speech was also found to be truly uniting. *USA Today* wrote that the footage taken at the memorial prayer service of political and religious leaders standing together and sharing the pulpit clearly exemplified and reflected the unity Bush spoke about.⁴⁸

Media responses to the eulogy for the victims of the Columbia disaster were favorable too. *The New York Times* ran articles which stressed "heavily religious language" with which Bush "sought to comfort the family members of the astronauts seated in the front row."⁴⁹ In the same vein, *The Washington Post* published pieces which emphasized that "for the president and his advisers, the idea of Americans inhabiting space is too powerful a talisman The talisman must be retrieved, held aloft, so that it can do

44 Raymond Walter Apple, Jr., "After the Attacks: Assessment; President Seems to Gain Legitimacy," *The New York Times*, 16 September 2001 (Accessed, 26 August 2016), <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/16/us/after-the-attacks-assessment-president-seems-to-gain-legitimacy.html>.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 David E. Sanger and Don Van Natta, Jr., "After the Attacks: The Events; In Four Days, a National Crisis Changes Bush's Presidency," *The New York Times*, 16 September 2001 (Accessed, 26 August 2016), <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/16/us/after-attacks-events-four-days-national-crisis-changes-bush-s-presidency.html?pagewanted=all>.

48 Stephen Prothero, "Column: How 9/11 changed religion in America," *USA Today*, 10 September 2011 (Accessed, 26 August 2016), <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/story/2011-09-10/911-religion-islam-christianity/50354708/1>.

49 Elisabeth Bumiller, "Bush Leads Memorial in Houston for Seven Columbia Astronauts," *The New York Times*, 4 February 2003 (Accessed, 26 August 2016), <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/04/national/04end-shutt.html>.

once again what it always has, mesmerizing a nation while helping to bind it. . . . It is all the more important that we be seen to invest To do otherwise, our president seems to imply, would at this grave moment signal a retreat, a loss of faith, a yielding to cool rationality when American religion is what is needed.”⁵⁰

Media reactions to the eulogy for the victims of Hurricane Katrina sounded less positive. The speech was criticized for its bad timing, unclear purpose, and narrow focus. Rachel Zoll writing for the Associated Press observed that “Nearly three weeks after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, President Bush has asked religious leaders around the country to join him in a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance on Friday for the storm’s victims. But once again, several pastors said, the government was a step behind.”⁵¹ *The Washington Post* called the efforts to offer prayers at Washington National Cathedral “the administration’s desperate recycling of its greatest hits.”⁵² *The New York Times* was similar in tone, arguing that “Mr. Bush’s comments were part of an effort to shift the focus to promises of rebuilding and recovery and away from criticism that the White House had been callous in its slowness in helping the storm victims, many of them black.”⁵³

The analysis of the rhetorical effect of the eulogies in the context of media responses clearly illustrates two ways in which the meaning and interpretation of presidential discourse are shaped. First, performing the functions expected of the national eulogy does not prejudice the effect of the speech. The starting point for the success of the eulogy is the consistency of the speaker’s words and actions. If the national eulogy is to repair and unite the nation, redefine the event and transform its symbols, reassure the public that justice will be made and that steps will be taken to prevent a similar catastrophe, the speaker’s words and actions need to match. Second,

50 David Beers, “Why the Space Dream Lives On,” *The Washington Post*, 9 February 2003 (Accessed, 26 August 2016), https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2003/02/09/why-the-space-dream-lives-on/0c6a7521-bdad-4d4f-a860-47fed199c83/?utm_term=.b81fe5d5a885.

51 Dan Froomkin, “Mr. Big Government,” *The Washington Post*, 16 September 2005 (Accessed, 26 August 2016), http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/blog/2005/09/16/BL2005091601005_5.html.

52 Frank Rich, “Message: I Care About the Black Folks,” *The New York Times*, 18 September 2005 (Accessed, 26 August 2016), <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/18/opinion/message-i-care-about-the-black-folks.html>.

53 David E. Sanger and Edmund L. Andrews, “Bush Rules Out Raising Taxes for Gulf Relief,” *The New York Times*, 17 September 2005 (Accessed, 26 August 2016), <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/17/us/nationalspecial/bush-rules-out-raising-taxes-for-gulf-relief.html>.

contextual demands strongly affect the rhetorical effect. It is the constraints and exigencies of the rhetorical situation that largely determine the reception of the eulogy, not its form and content. The national eulogy will inspire confidence, develop trust, and win support, if both appropriate background conditions and speaker's performance are in place for it to achieve the desired outcome.