Study of Bill Clinton’s Farewell Address to the Nation

Yunju Choi

Colorado State University
Abstract

This essay investigates the former president Bill Clinton’s Farewell Address in 2001. In his speech, he highlights his administration’s achievements in economic development, global cooperation and peace keeping, and welfare improvement for American people. He recommended three specific areas for future action after he left office; fiscal responsibility, global security, and social responsibility which incorporates tolerance at home. This speech is highly structured and builds on the major themes of change, leadership for the future, and global responsibility. The features of discourse in this speech are also exemplified in the delivery of the main parts of the speech such as comparatives, superlatives, tense, etc.

Key words: Clinton, Farewell Address, achievement, change, responsibility
Studying Bill Clinton’s Farewell Address to the Nation

Introduction

Clinton took charge of the presidential position for two terms from 1992 to 2000. This seven minute speech is the last official speech given by Clinton as the president of the United States from his Oval Office on 18 January 2001.

Clinton started this speech by saying thank you to the people and to his staff for allowing him to serve the country two terms. He recalled the successful achievements of his government. First, he listed the great economic developments for example, the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, the longest expansion in history during his presidency. Second, he commented on the improvement of welfare for family and society. Third, he pointed out the steps that had taken for the protection of the environment.

He recommended three specific areas for future plans after he left office. These were fiscal responsibility, global security and social responsibility, and tolerance at home.

First, he insisted that the next government must maintain his record of fiscal responsibility which would lead to lower interest rates and greater prosperity. Second, he referred to America’s role as a leading force for peace and prosperity, freedom and security in the world. Third, he spoke of forming a more perfect union regardless of race, religion, gender and immigration status of people.

He mentioned his entire family to offer best wishes to the next president George W. Bush. He finished his speech by expressing pride at returning to be a citizen of the United States and asked God’s blessing.

Literature Review

To investigate Clinton’s Farewell Address, three articles are examined which have similar topics or research materials. There is a comment from Pernot (2000) about the purpose of politicians’ speeches in Duranti (2006) article, “The language of politics has been
presented and studied in terms of its ability to persuade an audience (of peers, subjects, or superiors) to go along with the speaker’s view of the world and his or her proposals (as cited in Duranti, 2006, p. 467).

Moreover, the politicians’ speeches have to appeal to as many people as possible to get more supporters. Duranti (2006) stated “… any effort to gain the support and approval of a large number of people, an endeavor that is at the core of political campaigns” (p. 469).

The voters expect high ethical standards in their representatives, and they are shown the candidates’ speeches and behaviors for a long time. “Candidates worry about how to project and maintain an image of themselves as beings whose past, present, and future actions, beliefs, and evaluations follow some clear basic principles, none of which contradicts another” (Duranti, 2006, p. 469).

Duranti (2006) specified the need for consistency of candidates to gain trust from the voters. “The process of constructing coherence intersects with morality to the extent to which being coherent is presented as evidence for the truth of what a candidate says, and therefore of his or her value as a moral being” (p. 470). The high standard of morality is strictly applied to the politicians in America.

Murphy (2005) has examined Clinton’s speech to the 2004 Democratic national Convention for John Kerry. According to his essay “the role of ex-president, in particular, offers the elder an enhanced credibility; he is no longer fully a politician and yet he retains influence on public deliberation” (p. 663).

As an ex-president of the United States, Clinton has kept certain kind of authority to the people. Murphy (2005) explained Clinton’s power as “His seemingly lesser role has expanded his vision and, consequently, his ability to judge. He now possesses both the wisdom of the presidency and the perspective of communal life” (p. 666).

Murphy (2005) discussed the purpose of Clinton’s 2004 speech as a way to promote his
Through his argumentative strategies, Clinton not only supports Senator Kerry, but also explicitly defends the Clinton administration and crafts standards of judgment that vindicate his performance in office. By doing so, his performance also enacts and defends the practice of public deliberation. The community should consider carefully its goals and then the appropriate means to reach those ends. (pp. 675-76)

Weltman and Billig (2001) discussed the effect of politicians’ speeches. “This work has shown that when people make utterances in talk, they are not merely, or even principally, vocalizing an inner schema of thought, but rather they are engaging in interactional business, attending to the remarks and reactions of others” (p. 370).

**Analysis**

**Macro Analysis**

This speech is highly organized and focused on the major themes of change, leadership for the future, and global responsibility. The tone and words are considered simpler and easier than many other public speeches. The targeted audiences of this speech are not only all Americans but also people all over the world. “His speech portrays the people as the key actors in American history….” (Murphy, 2005, p. 659).

The speech is mainly divided into two parts. In the first part, Clinton commented on the successful achievements of his government during his administration. His speech commented on the wide perspective of great American renewal and listed the government, families and communities related achievement to keep American values such as freedom, peace, prosperity, security, etc. In the second part, his speech developed three areas of asking for next administration and American people.

First, Clinton referred to economic policy, especially criticized Bush administration’s tax reduction plan which is contrary to his debt decreasing policy. Second, Clinton confirmed
the America’s role as world leader. He said about some challenges such as global poverty, and global alliances. He also advised Bush to keep the peace keeper role of America, especially some area with the threat of war.

According to Murphy (2005), “His speech constitutes the people as the key actors in American history, evaluating the nominees in light of communal values” (p. 659). And Clinton alluded to Thomas Jefferson's warning against "entangling alliances" by asserting that the United States could not now "disentangle itself from the world" (Clinton, 2001). It was an apt formulation from a president who expanded free trade, intervened to prevent economic collapse in Mexico and Asia and strove to combat disease, ethnic cleansing and regional warfare in the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa. The comment also seemed aimed at concerns that President-elect Bush could reduce American involvement abroad. He sought to get support for often controversial policy decisions through the message of positive change.

**Micro Analysis**

In the speech, Clinton (2001) confirmed his role as a leader of all Americans.

“every decision I have made, every executive action I have taken, every bill I have proposed and signed, all Americans, opportunity for all, responsibility from all, a community of all Americans.”

The words, “every and all” represent the collective unity of Americans. These words were continued in the speech. According to Billing (1995), (as cited in Weltman and Billig, 2001) “The nationalism of established nations, such as the United States, is accomplished banally through routine, and unmindful, daily reminders of nationhood” (p. 371).

And the word “always” is used to express Clinton’s continuous and steady effort to do his work.

“Always putting people first, always focusing on the future.”

As referred before, the audiences of Clinton’s speech should be not only all Americans, but
also all people in the world. Clinton seemed to make sure the collective consciousness of Americans and their leadership role in the whole world.

Next, there are a lot of comparative forms in the speech.

“A new kind of government, smaller, more modern, more effective…”

“A cleaner environment, and a freer, safer, more prosperous world.”

An account of social progress is also, either explicitly or implicitly, a critique of past times. The speaker compares the past unfavorably with the present. Moreover, there are some superlative expressions.

“… the lowest unemployment in 30 years, the highest home ownership ever, the longest expansion in history.”

These expressions are also the confirmation of Clinton administration’s excellent work. To support his assertion about his achievement, Clinton referred some statistics, too.

“35 million Americans have used the family leave law. Eight million have moved off welfare. Crime is at a 25-year-low. Over 10 million Americans receive more college aids,…” These kind of mentioning were contributed to certify the factual elements in his speech.

Grammar plays an important role in the ways narratives of belonging unfold. The sense of connection to the place and its people is constructed in part through verb forms and with adverbial phrases that give a sense of continuity by building a bridge from the past into the present. In this respect, Clinton used a lot of present continuous tense to deliver his persistent work.

“In all the work I have done as a president, every decision I have made, every executive action I have taken, every bill I have proposed and signed, I’ve tried to give all Americans the tools and conditions,…”

Clinton proudly said he will become a citizen of United States. “ordinary citizen,” which is a positive value in contemporary American politics (Duranti, 2006, p. 489).
According to Murphy (2005), “…to be citizens is to share a public identity and, thus, the grounds for political judgment.” (p. 665). As a former president, selecting these terms as his own signals the nationwide consensus on the importance of “freedom and faith and family” in the U.S.A. (p. 667).

**Discussion**

Clinton ended his speech commenting “I’ll leave the presidency more idealistic, more full of hope than the day I arrived and more confident than ever…” Through his farewell speech, Clinton commented to keep American values such as freedom, peace, prosperity, security and union. There was no mention about some problems during his regime, such as Lewinski matter, and impeachment dispute in the House of Representatives. He escaped some controversy about his morality, which still remains as the cause for his opponents’ blame. However, Clinton mentioned his family’s names to wish their best to the next president, this comment could be considered a show of his family’s steady condition despite some scandals of himself.

According to Duranti (2006) “Candidates worry about how to project and maintain an image of themselves as beings whose past, present, and future actions, beliefs, and evaluations follow some clear basic principles, none of which contradicts another” (p. 469). Duranti (2006) adds “the process of constructing coherence intersects with morality to the extent to which being coherent is presented as evidence for the truth of what a candidate says, and therefore of his or her value as a moral being” (p. 470).

According to the survey of ABC and Washington Post, Clinton got more than 65% of support from Americans, which ranked the highest support to American president after World War Two. Americans’ judgments seem to come from the practical success of Clinton’s policy for their personal lives and leadership role to take responsibility in the world. Therefore, Clinton’s farewell speech delivered his high opinion of achievement and cynical request to
the next president’s about the future policy. Clinton still has great influence on the American politics as a husband of Hillary Clinton as well as his career as former president.
References

