ISSA Proceedings 2014 – The Role Of "Ethos" In Presidential Argument By Definition

Abstract: This paper examines "ethos" in conjunction with an orator's use of argument by definition. Scant research exists regarding the use of definition in an oratorical situation by a notable figure holding a position of power. This paper argues that the American president's position and institution are additional elements of ethos that may enhance or detract from his ability to successful employ a definition of "x."

Keywords: ethos, American president, argumentation, persuasion, definition, argument by definition

1. *Introduction*

Ragsdale & Theis III (1997, p. 1281) point out that research on the American presidency as an institution embraces a long-standing position that the "key feature of the office is the president" and that these studies often focus on "how presidents differ – in personality, leadership, and decision-making." This paper shifts the focus toward the Office and Institution of the American Presidency as an extension of how presidents employ *argument by definition* and its subsequent implications for the concept of *ethos.*

Substantial literature exists about the role of ethos in the fields of argumentation and rhetoric, political science, history, and philosophy, among others, but scant research exists regarding the use of definition in an oratorical situation by a notable figure holding a noteworthy, powerful position of leadership. This paper rectifies that oversight be examining definitional usage based from the perspective of the office, or the daily job, and institution, or the storied, gloried executive branch, of the American presidency.

This paper confects ideas, theories, and positions from the communication studies, political science, political theology, philosophy and comparative literature disciplines, particularly the works of Lee Sigelman, Ruth Amossy, and David Zarefsky, to examine how presidents extend beyond defining "x" via their personal ethos, to the American presidency's office and institution as additional

definitional means in order to obtain their intended objective. It begins with a review of the difference between argument from definition and argument by definition. It then summarizes what is known about the President as a definer before examining argument by definition from the office and institutional standpoints. The paper concludes with positive and negative implications when definitions of these types are engaged.

2. *Argument from definition and argument by definition*

This paper is a follow-up to my 2010 ISSA paper presentation discerning between *argument from definition* and *argument by definition* (see Minielli, 2011), using the American presidency as the interlocutor example. The previous paper argued that argument *from* definition places the intellectual locus on the definition itself whereas argument by definition shifts the locus to the orator or user of the definition. The previous paper claims that "Individuals who define (create) or redefine (modify) a word or phrase when engaging in argument by definition often garner significant power and control that could become problematic if left unchecked" (p. 1299)

A section of my previous paper argued that institutional legitimacy, or the power of institutions to advance definitions, is well noted in argumentation scholarship. Referencing competing definitions of "X," Schwarze (2002, 139) argues that, in addition to persuasion and coercion, "in the realm of public policy, the empowerment of a definition is dependent on the legitimacy of the institution authorized to define the term" and that "institutional arguments justify the acceptance or rejection of a particular definition" (p. 143). Titsworth (1999, p. 183) notes the power resulting from public institutional definitions "'privilege[s] the perspectives of those in power,' resulting in not only a legitimization of those perspectives, but also becomes a 'mechanism of hegemony where institutional power over the individual [is] expanded.'" But scant research in presidential rhetoric exists. Institutional legitimacy has been addressed in presidential crisis literature, including power (Windt, 1973; Young, 1992), institutional failure (Zagacki, 1992; Brummert, 1975), and presidential personalization of and blending with institution (see Gonchar and Hahn, 1971, 1973; Gibson and Felkins, 1974). This paper adds to what remains an understudied area.

3. *The American president as definer and his occupational roles*

The American president enjoys some level of privilege when it comes to advancing definitions. Jamieson (1988, p. 240) points out that "in some settings the ethos of

a speaker is sufficient to sustain a case," meaning his ability to define is accepted based on the man serving as president and nothing more. Neustadt (1990, p. 11) famously recognized the importance of presidential ethos when he claimed that "Presidential power is the power to persuade." Zarefsky (1986, p. 1) extends Neustadt by arguing that when it comes to presidents, "the power to persuade is, in large measure, the power to define."

The paper posits that advances of technology coupled with a no-holds-barred media approach analyzing every aspect of the contemporary American presidency has transformed the definitional nature of the American presidency and has expanded from the "person" occupying the office to include the office and its institutional nature. Hart (1987, p. 202) states that "because rhetorical skills have been highlighted so often during the last forty years, they have changed how people view the executive branch of government itself." One reason why it has changed is the heightened visibility and public awareness of the President's different roles.

3.1 *Presidential roles*

The president's traditional roles are largely known. For example, the president is the *Commander-in-Chief*, or head of America's military. From a rhetorical perspective, Zarefsky (2004, p. 616) suggests that when a president defines a situation as a "crisis," the ensuing supportive response by Congress and the public is immediate, and thus allows the president to take on "the persona of the commander-in-chief."

The president is also known as *Chief Executive* or the *Head of State*. Bose and Greenstein (2002, p. 186) state that "As head of state, the American president is a symbol of unity. Like a constitutional monarch, he is expected to be a noncontroversial representative of the entire nation." They (2002, pp. 186-187) also refer to the president as the *Nation's Chief Political Leader,* arguing that

As the nation's chief political leader, however, he must engage in the intrinsically divisive prime ministerial tasks of political problem solving. The tendency of presidents to sully their public images by conspicuous displays of politicking may be one reason why their public support often erodes in the course of their presidencies.

Coe & Neumann (2011, p. 142) state that the American president "is the

reference point – among journalists and citizens alike – for much of America's international conduct."

The president is also known as the *Constitutional Leader,* as identified by Caeser, Thurow, Tulis, and Dessette, among others (Dorsey, 2002, pp. 5-6), although that role may not be as well known. Zarefsky (1997, p. 6), referencing Basso (1994), states that "'constitutionality' has a strong effect in determining what kinds of problems are and are not considered within government's legitimate scope…." Subsequently there have been several studies examining the president's Constitutional role and its gradual expansion, most notably Schlesinger's 1973 book *The Imperial Presidency.*

A related but lesser known role is what I call *Civic Duties*, based on Goodnight (2002, p. 201). Goodnight argues that

all presidential leadership is a civic art constituted by public enactments of the presidency. Civic performances distinguish each administration as the executive deploys inherent and implied powers within the federal arenas of shared and separated authority. Individual presidential actions constitute individual interpretations of Constitutional text, original intent, and historical practice in light of contemporary governmental and political constraints and opportunities. Collectively, administration performances achieve the shape and significance by virtue of the public arguments among all those who prerogatives and responsibilities are affected by the policies and fortunes of a presidency."

He continues, arguing that

it is fair to say that the signature of a specific rhetorical presidency is constituted in the ongoing emphasis, interpretation, and enactment of a democratically elected candidate within and against the expected roles of chief executive, legislative leader, opinion/party leader, commander in chief, chief diplomat, and member of the first family of the United States – as these performances unfold to meet and cross the elite and public expectations of an era (2002, p. 204).

Beyond these traditional roles, scholars have identified additional ones. Older ones include Lowi's *The Personal President* (1986) and Stuckey's *Interpreter-in-Chief* (1991), and newer ones highlight Nelson's *Evolving Presidency* (2007), Edward's *Strategic President* (2009), Beschloss's *Presidential Courage* (2008) and the latest edition of Greenstein's *Presidential Difference* (2009).

In addition to heightened awareness of presidential roles is increasing scrutiny of presidential oratory as it is often viewed as a means of exerting presidential power and leadership.

3.2 *Presidential oratory*

A president's definitional usage is also contingent on the rhetorical events he is participating. His definition of "x" depends largely upon the traditional characteristics of rhetorical criticism: the situation, the speaker, and the audience. A fourth characteristic, the media, is also examined as it now contributes to definitional usage and degrees of acceptance.

3.2.1 *The situation, the speaker, and the audience*

Sigelman (2001, p. 11) suggests that there are three types of presidential addresses: ceremonial occasions, international issues, and domestic issues. Referencing Campbell & Jamieson (1990), he notes that presidential addresses vary widely in substance and style. Inaugural addresses, for example, constitute a rhetorical genre quite distinct from war messages. He argues that presidential addresses have a common goal of unifying the nation behind the president, but different circumstances may lead a president to pursue different means of achieving that goal" (p. 10) In other words, the "oratorical" situation itself carries with it pre-established presidential ethos, like the Inaugural or State of the Union addresses. Sigelman (2001, p. 4) does warn that "major addresses are subject to a number of generic expectations (Campbell & Jamieson, 1990), but these are so bound up in the situated identities of the presidents who deliver the addresses that the two cannot be really separated."

The speaker is a second traditional analysis element of rhetorical criticism. Sigelman (2001, p. 4) identifies what he calls the *presidential persona*, and states that it is found in occasions where presidents were most highly motivated to exercise special care in self-presentation. Rice (2010, p. 9) points out that "it is the language of the speaker that is used to establish his character." Citing Leary (1995), Sigelman (2001, p. 2) states that "the incentive to make the 'right' impression varies as a function of the publicness of the performance and the perceived importance of the role." Referencing Schlenker (1986 p. 27), Sigelman further states that "those who are publicly performing a highly salient role tend to be especially aware that they are presenting 'evidence for others to contemplate, evaluate, and respond'"

Sigelman's observation highlights a third traditional element of rhetorical criticism, namely the audience. He argues that "in the era of the 'public relations presidency' (Brace & Hinckey, 1993, p. 382), when presidential leadership increasingly consists of 'going public' in a full-dress campaign mode to maintain public support (Kernell, 1986), impression management becomes an ever more vital governance tool" (2001, p. 16). He also also states that "as Schlenker and Weigold (1992, p. 155) remind us, what is 'as important, if not more important, than the public or private nature of a performance is the audience that is salient to the actor at the time of the performance.'"

3.2.2 *The media*

Sigelman (2001 p. 18) introduces the element of the media when he points out that there are "degrees of publicness" with regards to a president's oratory: "differences between, say, a televised speech to the nation and a briefing session with reporters, or between an informal work session with trusted advisors and a scheduled meeting with a delegation of dignitaries."

Zarefsky (1997, pp. 6-7) states that there are several ways one definition can be more effective than another. One way would be for the definition to be associated with a dramatic event that generates a "new frame of reference." Predominantly, Zarefsky points out, "what determines the acceptability of a frame is a more prosaic series of questions that relate to its political acceptability, comprehensiveness, and authoritative grounding." He continues by arguing that "These factors not only determine the definition of an event as a public problem but answer the question of who 'owns' the problem." Referencing Rochefort and Cobb (1994) and Portz (1994), Zarefsky points out that "Problem ownership means domination of the way a concept or social concern is thought of and acted upon."

As such, due to the advent of heightened role knowledge and greater access and awareness of him through the media, a leader like the American president may no longer be able to rely solely on his own personal ethos for definitional usage. Increasingly American presidents are extending or borrowing credibility from other related areas like the *office* and *institution* of the presidency. The rest of the paper addresses the "how" they are doing this and its ramifications, based on the work of Ruth Amossy.

4. *Amossy and institutional ethos*

Ruth Amossy, in her 2001 essay entitled "*Ethos* at the Crossroads of Disciplines: Rhetoric, Pragmatics, Sociology," examines ethos from the orator and institutional perspectives. Amossy argues that the orator's prior ethos and the ethos created through the oratorical act "are related to the authority derived from an exterior institutional status" (p. 9).

Amossy (2001, p. 20) states that "the construction of an ethos in the discourse often aims to displace or modify the prior image of the speaker. In some cases, the speaker can heavily rely on the prior ethos; the speaker only has to confirm a preexisting image he or she sees as appropriate to persuasion goals. In other cases, the speaker has to erase dimensions of his or her person that are not altogether clear to the public." In this sense, an orator like a president may borrow from institutional ethos if his prior ethos is not strong enough to support his goals. In some instances the institutional ethos can be used to replace a less than satisfactory prior ethos as well. Amossy (2001, p. 21) states that "the status enjoyed by orators, together with their public images, delimit their authority at the moment they take the floor. Yet the construction of the image of self within the discourse has, in turn, the capacity to modify the prior representations and to confer credibility and authority upon the speaker," meaning oratory does have the power to alter a speaker's ethos. Amossy (2001, p. 21) argues further that "it contributes to the production of new images and helps to transform positions in the field while participating in the field's dynamic" and "the discursive ethos thus produced seeks to procure for the speaker a long-term benefit which could well make a difference."

While Amossy points out several benefits associated with institutional ethos, it would foolish to believe that some negative effects do not exist when a president extends beyond his "self" when employing and justifying definitions. The next section examines how a president uses the office and the institution of the presidency to enhance his definitional attempts of "x" beyond personal ethos.

5. *The "office" and "institution" of the American presidency as additional defining entities*

For purposes of this paper, I am differentiating between the office of the presidency and the institution of the presidency. When I refer to the office, I am referencing the "job." This includes the daily activities of the president in the White House like staff meetings, policy work, and decision-making. We'll call this the "job persona." When I refer to the institution, I am referencing the "symbolic"

nature of the presidency, including its Constitutional designation and often rhetorical references to its history, its stature, prestige and prominence, as well as its domestic and international placement in the political world. Ragsdale & Theis (1997, p. 1282) support this position when they state that "as an organization achieves stability and value, it becomes an institution."

5.1 *The office of the American presidency*

Little research exists on the daily job of the president from a definitional standpoint. Tulis (1987, p. 7) points out that many political scientists see the evolution of the "modern executive" to include "the regular active initiation and supervision of a legislative program, the use of the veto to oppose legislation as a matter of partisan policy rather than of constitutional propriety; the development and 'institutionalization' of a large White House staff; and the development and use of 'unilateral' powers, such as executive agreements in place of treaties, or the withholding of documents from Congress under the doctrines of 'executive privilege,'" although Tulis sees these developments as a more of a "maturation" than an evolution of the institution (p. 8). Media reporting of the "job persona" has served to increase public awareness of "the job" as well as the president's various roles. In addition, the widespread use of the Internet now allows interested parties access to the President's daily events through the President's Daily Schedule available online at whitehouse.gov (see "White House Schedule – September 15, 2014). In many ways the "job" portion of the Presidency has become more transparent and accessible.

Zarefsky (2004, p. 611) claims that "because of his prominent political position and his access to the means of communication, the president, by defining a situation, might be able to shape the context in which events or proposals are viewed by the public." He also states that "If, as Hargove (1998, p. vii) suggests, the president's job is to teach reality through rhetoric, then the president emerges as the chief national definer of situations" (2002, p. 35). In other words, the *office* becomes an additional source for presidential definitions beyond the individual. Increasing awareness and access translates into a better informed audience that may gain definitional understanding due to the amount of explanatory information available to provide readers with context and heightened understanding. Substantially more literature exists addressing the *institutional* part of the presidency, or what Hart (1987, p. 6) calls the "institutional persona."

5.2 *The institution of the American presidency*

It is here where I think presidential definitions that focus on rights and responsibilities of the executive branch over the legislative and judicial branches resides as presidents often invoke the symbolic nature and historical legacy of the presidency as support for their definitions in their public communication. It also here at this level where many scholarly works examining presidential actions within and beyond the Constitution take place, like Aberbach, Peterson, & Quirk's 2007 essay discussing their theory of "the unitary Executive," based on George W. Bush's presidency, which argues "sweeping constitutional and policy-making prerogatives to the chief executive" instead of executive agencies and "without congressional or judicial interference and contrary to prevailing scholarly conventions about checks and balances in the separation-of-powers system" (p. 516).

Tulis (1987, p. 13) argues that presidential rhetorical practices are "reflections and elaborations of underlying doctrines of governance." Ragsdale and Theis's (1997, p. 1314) study concludes that the American presidency "emerged as an institution in the late 1970s" from its organizational roots. Schlesinger (1973) details the institutional emergence in his 1973 book entitled *The Imperial Presidency* as part of his indictment of the Nixon administration's overreaching interpretations of presidential power. Hart (1987, p. 100) points out that one aspect of Nixon's essential communication theory was to "speak for the institution, not oneself."

Zarefsky, (2002, p. 22), referencing Skowronek (1993 p. 20), claims that "Successful leaders, while responding to their situation, are those who can 'control the political definition of their actions, the terms in which their places in history are understood." Zarefsky argues that from this view, "leadership is the control of meaning or interpretation given to actions." Tulis (1987, p. 13) argues that presidential rhetorical practices are "reflections and elaborations of underlying doctrines of governance."

As Zarefsky (2002) reiterates his claim that "the power to speak is the power to define" in his discussion of the ambiguous "Puritan's conception of Americans as the chosen people" and the Monroe Doctrine (p. 32), he argues it is the power to have others listen and respond to a leader of another nation. That power shapes not only our foreign policy but America's relationships with other countries. It establishes parameters and levels of isolation as well as involvement. It illustrates the power of framing, defining that frame, and responding in the manner that the

President deems as most appropriate for that frame. As Zarefsky indicates, "Blessed with moral superiority, established as the 'beacon on the western shore,' we have the mission of persuading others by precept and example. And, because of our unique position, other nations will listen to us. By proclaiming what we wish to achieve, we have the power to make it so" (p. 33).

Hart (1987, p. 208) also notes a stronger, independent executive branch due to the rise of the media. He points out that the presidential institution is less interdependent with the other two governmental branches. He states that in the past, "

the president needed the other institutions of governance in part because they controlled the rhetorical forums. He needed a political party for his convention speech, the Congress for his budget messages, state caucuses for his campaign speeches, the press for his news conferences. With the rise of television and, more important, with the president's growing sense that he is in control of what he says as well as of why, when, and where he says it, the chief executive has become considerably less interdependent.

6. *Implication of presidential definition from the office and the institution of the American presidency*

The changing landscape of access and information of the American presidency suggests that scholarly examination of the executive branch needs to evolve and expand as well. Many of the advantages of a president defining from the ethos of *office* or the *institution* are the same for definitions employed from ethos as a *person*. All three are used to draw attention to, highlight its importance, or enhance the credibility of definition of "x" as well as elevate "x's" status, importance, or prestige.

Scholars have noted several additional advantages. Hart (1987, p. 53) points out that in the case of Lyndon B. Johnson, "legislation was action, the best sort of action – accomplished action. And Lyndon Johnson likes action." As a result, Hart (p. 52) claims Johnson knew that "no matter who authored a bill and no matter who pushed it through congressional committees, it was the speechmaker who would receive credit for the legislation heralded" and that "a new piece of legislation had to be 'performed' for the mass media," in a ceremonial oratorical situation, "so as to give that piece of legislation a fair chance at being successful." In addition, Hart (p. 87) points out that the American presidency is "a respected

institution in the United States." When a president suffers from poor credibility, he can refer to and borrow from the institutional stature for needed ethos.

Other advantages include imparting vision (Holmes, 2007, p. 418; Andrews, 2002, p. 1236), exerting power (Hart, 1987, p. 110), obtaining goals (Zarefsky in Dorsey, 2002, pp. 20- 24; Hart. 1987, p. 81; Cummins, 2010, p. 192), manipulate history and legacy (Zarefsky, 2002, p. 37), unifying the nation (Andrews, 2002, p. 124), and identity shaping (Coe and Neumann, 2011, p. 140; Andrews, 2002, pp. 131-141).

Rice (2010, p. 10) argues that a subset of presidential ethos is a "wielding" one, which is "the use of ethos as a persuasive tool for some other goal." He further argues that "there are certain modes of persuasion that rely more heavily (or entirely) on the pre-existing symbolic store of leadership ethos to accomplish their persuasive ends" (p. 30). Rice claims that one way "wielding" ethos is present and used in through the nature of the presidential office. Such examples of "wielding" include "going public" and working the "bully pulpit" in different ways to define the terms the audience uses to define a political or social reality – and thereby the nature of their views of that reality" (pp. 30-31). As such it is possible that presidents who are suffering from low public opinion poll numbers or support will invoke the *office* or the *institution* as additional methods of drawing attention to or gaining acceptance and support for the president's definition of "x."

My 2010 ISSA paper generated three critical observations. First, the mythical power of the office of the presidency as an institution substantially contributes to presidential pressure. Zagacki (1992, p. 53) claims that "institutions are so molded by underlying myths of American superiority, presidents cannot handle failure for it would imply they are incapable of reconciling the nation to its ultimate historical purpose." Second, personal presidential perspective of "x" is important. Brummert (1975, p. 256) argues that former president Richard Nixon's institutional definitional approach of deflecting criticism and personal attacks depicted the president seeing himself as reacting to evil and not part of the evil family. Third, Kiewe (1994, p. xxxiii) notes that the presidency, as an institution, typically ignores the long term impacts of the occupant's crisis rhetoric, preferring its enactment to garner immediate image considerations and to secure quick policy goals. If Zagacki is correct, it can be argued that presidential failure whether rhetorical or otherwise is a paramount concern which may contribute to a president's preference for short-term gains over long-term goals, as Kiewe

suggests. It may also explain why presidents are expanding beyond the self when defining "x." There are several negative effects to expanding that definitional base. Zarefsky (1997, p. 5) accurately points out that

definition of terms is a key step in the presentation of argument, and yet this critical step is taken by making moves that are not themselves argumentative at all. They are not claims supported by reasons and intended to justify adherence by critical listeners. Instead they are simply proclaimed as if they were indisputable facts.

In other words, presidents often define without proffering evidence or some type of factual or statistical support to back up their assertions. The past personal and institutional personas have afforded the American president with the means of speaking as an unchecked authoritative figure whose information is regarded as factual, accurate, and truthful. But as technology has rapidly increased the speed of information dissemination as well as broader public access, presidents need to be more cautious about what they say, the language they employ, and the evidence they use to support their definition of "x."

A second negative effect is the widening playing field for argumentation and criticism. Instead of two traditional areas to attack, namely the personal and institutional personas, a third one now exists. As such, the media, public, and other concerned individuals have more territory to scrutinize and attack. Subsequently, by providing a wider definitional base, presidents now need to be defend that widening base and refute arguments or counter positions. As any debater knows, the more material presented means more material subject to questioning, refutation, and attack. This could prevent a president from achieving his goals, attempts at domestic or international unity, or exerting power.

A third negative effect is a change in advantages. For example, a widening base for a definition of "x" does not necessarily mean an improved presidential stature or increased favorability. For example, Dorsey (2002 p. 17) argues that "While the executive office obviously bestows the status of leader and voice of the nation on whoever holds the office, simply occupying the position does not necessarily mean that successful leadership will follow." Along the same vein, heightened awareness and more instantaneous access to information suggests it has become harder for a president to forge, shape, or manipulate his identity, image, historical standing, and overall legacy. Collectively, these observations suggest

that further analysis of the office's role in definitional argument as well as the changing institutional role is necessary.

7. *Conclusion*

Goodnight (2002, p. 205) argues that "Debates over what the president did, could, should, or will do constitute legitimization disputes over the uses of power and thus inevitably shape and reshape the domestic and foreign policy landscapes of democratic policies. These rhetorical efforts constitute the public argument of an American presidency." As presidents continue to define words or events using language that invites wide public support, they have become increasing confronted with unprecedented information knowledge and access that could alter their definitional approach.

By expanding on a previous ISSA paper analyzing the difference between argument from definition and argument by definition, this paper examines how presidents are widening their definitional bases from *personal* or *institutional* personas to include what I call the *job* persona as a means of providing additional reasons or forms of support when they define "x." Ruth Amossy's argument that rhetoric allows a president to transform or modify a pre-existing image supports this paper's position that a widening presidential definitional base is being employed to help a president substantiate his vision of "x" toward others. This expansion carries with it both positive advantages and negative effects. As we become more firmly entrenched in the 21st century, it appears that the contemporary American president is broadening his definitional base to compensate for eroding traditional definitional base that has been diminished by technological advances and quicker information dissemination.

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