

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: A THEORY OF RHETORICAL HUMOR IN  
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This dissertation offers a theory of the strategic use of rhetorical humor in political discourse. This theory accounts for the differences between intentional and unintentional humor while creating a structure for the identification of humorous utterances. The largest gap in the current state of knowledge concerning rhetorical humor is a lack of understanding regarding the connection between humorous attempts and persuasive situations. This area of concern is answered with a classification of the rhetorical strategies of humor. I propose three nested categories for the identification of actions that have amusement or laughter as an expected response. These three categories in order of increasing exclusivity are the risible, humor, and rhetorical humor. The risible includes all stimuli that create amusement, regardless of intention. The risible is not limited to, but includes, those situations in which the speaker did not attempt to use humor but the audience was amused. Humor is a linguistic act on the part of a speaker that carries with it the intended effect of producing a state of amusement or mirth in the

audience. Rhetorical humor is a linguistic act on the part of a speaker that carries with it the intended effect of producing a state of amusement or mirth in the auditor for the purpose of bringing about a change in attitude or belief.

The theory presented here contends that rhetorical humor can be used to achieve nine strategic objectives for the speaker. The employment of these strategies is demonstrated through an examination of significant speeches by President Bill Clinton, Governor Ann Richards, and rights activist Sojourner Truth. With the development of a theory of rhetorical humor in political discourse and its application as a critical heuristic this project contributes to our understanding of rhetoric, political discourse, and that most human of experiences, humor.

A THEORY OF RHETORICAL HUMOR IN AMERICAN POLITICAL  
DISCOURSE

By

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## Dedication

For my parents, Paula and Bill Phillips, without whose emotional, financial, and culinary support, this dissertation would not have been completed.

## Acknowledgements

My advisor, Robert Gaines, is to be commended for his wisdom and patience. He did not laugh when I told him on my first day in grad school that I wanted to write a dissertation about humor. Gaines possess a powerful intellect that made this dissertation much better than it would have been with any other advisor. He was a great source of help *ab ovo usque ad mala*. Ed Fink was always ready with jokes, trivia, and questions that stopped me in my tracks. I thank James Klumpp for our conversations about rhetoric, contemporary philosophy, and the Washington Capitals. Mari Boor Tonn, helped me to find wonderful sources of rhetorical humor and her suggestion to look at the discourse of Sojourner Truth was invaluable. Jeanne Fahnestock's example of scholarship and collegiality is one I shall try to follow in my academic career. The members of my committee read my work carefully and thoughtfully. I hope that their suggestions are reflected in this final version.

My parents have been great supporters of my academic career, especially when that career involved significant underemployment. My father even read a draft of the dissertation on an airplane to Australia. I made 179 of his 184 suggested revisions. I have been very fortunate to be close to many family members whose support helped be complete this project. Of special note are my grandparents, Bill and Ruth Phillips and Sol and Bettie Bogen, who likely did not think I would be in school this long. My pseudo-aunt Sue Farkas, also read part of the dissertation and always made sure I had many books from a young age. My in-laws, Carolyn Winter and Roger Bybee also read parts of the dissertation and made helpful suggestions.

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Lydia Hu was of great help in locating articles about the speeches of the Silly Season. The librarians and staff at the Museum of Television and Radio in New York and Kristin Carey and Comedy Central found video archives which were of great value.

Finally, I owe so much to my wife and partner, Rachel Phillips-Anderson. When I began this project I had no idea that I would have a wife and a new name before graduation. I think it is no coincidence that that I really started writing after we met. I thank you for your great understanding of late nights and weekends of furious work, your excellent bibliographic skills, and for making this process a much more fun experience than so many others seem to find it. You may not have married a doctor, but at least you're married to one now.



*ridiculum acri fortius et melius magnas plerumque secat res.*

For ridicule often decides matters of importance more effectually  
and in a better manner, than severity.

Horace

*Sermones* (1.10.14-15, c. 35 BCE)

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## Chapter One

### Introduction to the Problem and the Theoretical Background of Humor in Rhetoric

On October 21, 1984, in the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City, the second debate of the presidential campaign between President Ronald Reagan and former Vice President Walter Mondale provided a memorable instance of political rhetoric. Henry Trehwitt of *The Baltimore Sun* brought up the fact that Reagan was the oldest president in history and the stresses of the job. Trehwitt asked President Reagan, “Is there any doubt in your mind that you would be able to function in such circumstances?” Reagan, with a serious look that slowly developed into a smile, replied

Not at all, Mr. Trehwitt, and I want you to know that also I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience.

The audience, Mondale included, laughed heartily. After an intervening question, Mondale was asked by Trehwitt,

Mr. Mondale, I’m going to hang in there. Should the President’s age and stamina be an issue in the political campaign?

Mondale replied

No. And I have not made it an issue nor should it be. What’s at issue here is the President’s application of his authority to understand what a President must know to lead this nation, secure our defense and make the decisions and judgments that

are necessary. (Commission on Presidential Debates 1984, under “The President’s Age”)

Presented with a serious issue, Reagan and Mondale both attempted to apply Gorgias’s maxim, referenced by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*, “that one should spoil the opponents’ seriousness with laughter and their laughter with seriousness” (1419b). Reagan took an issue that could have been very damaging and brushed it aside with humor. Mondale, though he too laughed at the remark, tried to counter this dismissal with a serious questioning of the president’s abilities. Mondale conceded in a 1990 interview, “He got the audience with that, yeah. I could tell that one hurt. . . . That was really the end of my campaign that night” (1990, under “Debating the Great Communicator”). Reagan went on to receive more votes for president than anyone else up to that time in American history.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Reagan’s reply and Mondale’s interpretation of its significance are evidence that political humor can produce a rhetorical effect. The age issue did not resurface in the debates, and Mondale viewed the moment as a turning point. It is surprising that there is no comprehensive account of the strategic role of humor in political discourse to help us understand such a moment. The goal of this project is to explore the ways that humor is used strategically by political speakers. To accomplish this, I will examine existing research in relevant disciplines to discover what has been said about the problem, develop a theory to account for the strategic uses of humor, and apply that theory to significant examples of American political discourse.

## *Research into Humor*

The attempt to explain the structure and function of humor has been a goal of scholars in several academic disciplines. Most notably, researchers in philosophy, psychology, communication, and rhetoric have tried to tackle the problem. To understand the role of humor in political discourse, we must first examine these attempts to see what has been brought to light and what is still covered in shadow. Scholars in these disciplines often ask questions about different aspects of humor and laughter while offering important concepts that contribute to a theory of the strategic use of humor in political discourse.

### Theories of Humor in Philosophy

From the work in philosophy of the last twenty-four centuries, there are three dominant theories in humor research: superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory. These theories differ in that some take humor as their object, where others attempt to explain laughter. A significant theoretical issue that emerges from the beginning of this inquiry is the difference between humor and laughter, terms that are sometimes conflated.<sup>1</sup> Attardo (2003) argued that “humor and laughter, while obviously related, are by no means coextensive” (1288). Explaining this distinction, Morreall argued that “it is essential to distinguish between amusement as a mental state and laughter as a bodily phenomenon, and to notice that not all laughter is caused by amusement” (1987, 4). Although there is a connection between the two concepts, they describe quite different phenomena. Humor can cause laughter, but laughter as a consequence of humor is neither

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<sup>1</sup> Morreall (1987) observed that “perhaps the most common mistake here is to treat all cases of laughter as cases of humor. Kant and Schopenhauer, for example, present their Incongruity Theories as if they were theories of laughter generally, when at most they could hope to serve as theories of humor. Bergson titles his book *Laughter*, when a more accurate title would have been *Humor*, or better, *Comedy*” (5).



necessary nor guaranteed. Laughter, also, is not bound to humor. There are many examples in which laughter may not be the result of a reaction to humor or wit. Laughing for social acceptance, to ease embarrassment, in response to tickling, or nonsensical laughter serve as a few examples. Many of the studies that purport to discuss humor are really looking at the phenomenon of laughter and are not particularly relevant to the study of strategic political humor.<sup>2</sup>

Although a reading of the theories finds them somewhat conflicted on the goal of the inquiry (e.g., the difference between humor and laughter), they do form the bases for further study in other disciplines. Superiority theory looks at how we feel about something we laugh at, relief theory looks at the effect of laughter and humor, and incongruity theory examines the conditions necessary for something to be found funny. More recently, humor studies in philosophy have taken a linguistic turn in which the semantic and pragmatic aspects of humor have found greater prominence. The following sections will explain these three theories that form the basis of philosophical approaches to humor and laughter.

### Superiority Theory

Superiority theory is focused on the disposition of the observer and the condition of the observed to explain why we find something funny. This theory contends that humor is focused on our feelings of superiority over other people or things. Laughter is the result of one's feeling greater than the person or thing observed. Morreall (1983) reports that the earliest textual records of humor are of derisive laughter and found in

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<sup>2</sup> Studies of laughter, especially non-humorous laughter are common. See Armstrong (1928), Bergler (1956), Bergson (1921), Berlyne (1959), Boston (1974), Chapman and Foot (1996), Coser (1959), Cox (1880), Eastman (1936), Emerson (1969), Fuller and Sheehy-Skeffington (1974), Goldberg (1938), Gregory (1924), Greig (1923), Munro (1951), and Provine (2000).

Homer's *Iliad* and the Hebrew Bible (9).<sup>3</sup> The superiority theory of humor (often referred to as derision or derisive laughter) was first put forward by Plato in *Philebus*<sup>4</sup> and supported by others including Aristotle<sup>5</sup> in *Poetics*,<sup>6</sup> Hobbes in *Leviathan*,<sup>7</sup> Hayworth (1928), Rapp (1951), and Ludovici (1974).<sup>8</sup> This theory claimed that when an audience observed behavior or hears language that allows them to consider someone or something as base, they respond with laughter. It is important to consider that this feeling must be one of limited emotional involvement. If I see a man slip on a banana peel, I may feel superior in that I am still upright while he lies on the ground. My enjoyment of this observation will be based on my association with the fallen man (e.g., I may find it funnier if I do not like the person) and the extent of the injuries suffered (i.e., the more severe the injury, the less amusing it will be).

The superiority theory of humor can help to illuminate instances of humor in political discourse, such as derisive humor that is used to put down an opponent. Derisive humor should be used in such a way that the speaker maintains the positive feelings of the audience. In a press conference on January 4, 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of laughter in the Bible see Garrison (1960).

<sup>4</sup> "Then our argument shows that when we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, our pleasure, in mixing with malice, mixes with pain, for we have agreed that malice is a pain of the soul, and that laughter is pleasant, and on these occasions we both feel malice and laugh" (50a).

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle offered two theories to explain humor: a superiority theory that echoed Plato, as well as an early version of the incongruity theory (see page 19 of this dissertation for Aristotle's position on incongruity theory).

<sup>6</sup> "Comedy, as we have said, is a representation of inferior people, not indeed in the full sense of the word bad, but the laughable is a species of the base or ugly. It consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster, an obvious example being the comic mask which is ugly and distorted but not painful" (1449a).

<sup>7</sup> "*Sudden Glory*, is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves" [emphasis in original] (Hobbes 1651, I.6).

<sup>8</sup> For a summary of select superiority theories see Morreall (1983, 4-14).

answered questions about the budget message released the previous day. He started the press conference by saying to the reporters

I am a little bit like the professor who told his class, “I know very little about this but you know less.” From personal experience I know that about 70 per cent of you, at the maximum, know the difference between a dollar and a dime, so I might as well go through with it. (quoted in Kumar 2005, 180)

With this use of humor, Roosevelt positioned himself as the authority on the budget while not losing the good will of the reporters. Although superiority is certainly an important aspect of humor, it hardly covers all, or perhaps even a substantial portion, of the cases in which we laugh. Superiority theory was the first theoretical attempt to explain humor, but the very existence of alternative theories is evidence that there are likely elements of humor that are not explained by this theory.

#### Relief Theory

In relief theory, laughter provides either psychological or physiological relief from a tense or nervous situation. Morreall (1983) argued that the relief theory might not be a distinct theory from superiority or incongruity, but rather one that looks at a different aspect of laughter and complements the other two.

One of the early proponents of relief theory is that of the ethical and aesthetic philosopher Shaftesbury (1727). His *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor* is a wide ranging piece that covers the definition of humor, the role of wit in conversation, and the differences among cultures concerning humor. His theory is that when people are constrained by the world around them, whether physically or by words, they “will find out other ways of Motion to relieve themselves in their *Constraint*: and

whether it be in Burlesque, Mimicry or Buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be reveng'd on their *Constrainers*” [emphasis in original] (43). An interesting aspect of Shaftesbury’s approach is that he examined the motivation behind creating humor in a way that foreshadows later developments in psychological theories.

A discussion of the relief approach is also found in Herbert Spencer (1911). In a largely physiological take on laughter, Spencer argued that stimuli of all types create a build-up of energy in humans that results in its necessary discharge. He claimed that “Nervous excitation always tends to beget muscular motion, . . . the nervous system in general discharges itself on the muscular system in general: either with or without the guidance of the will” (100). Laughter is a muscular motion in response to excitation, though it is different from other forms of motion. The movement of the body in response to anger may get it ready to run or to fight, but laughter is not a precursor to another action; it is the relief of tension that is an end in itself. Spencer claimed that this energy will reach a point where it must be released and in doing so “will manifestly take first the most habitual routes; and if these do not suffice, will next overflow into the less habitual ones” (104). In the case of laughter, the habitual routes are “the jaws, tongue, and the lips,” and if the energy level is great enough, the lungs, viscera, and limbs (104). This attempt to explain the physical process of laughter has some bearing on a rhetorical theory of humor (e.g., relief of an audience’s tension may be a strategic goal of the speaker), but clearly not every instance of humor is the result of a venting of excess energy, so this theory also provides only part of the picture.

Laughter is not limited to a situation in which all participants feel comfortable. People can enter a situation in need of relief, they can enter into such a state in the

progression of the situation, or they can have no need for a release of mental or physical tension at all. However, the tension need not be the result of the larger context. In the process of telling a joke, the so-called “build-up” can create a tension that is relieved with the delivery of the punch line. Amid some controversy, First Lady Barbara Bush was invited to deliver the commencement address at Wellesley in 1990. Some in her audience thought that a women’s college should have invited a speaker who could address her own accomplishments, not those of her husband. In response to this concern, Bush used “build-up” humor in the conclusion of her address by saying, “Somewhere out in this audience may even be someone who will one day follow in my footsteps, and preside over the White House as the President’s spouse—and I wish him well” (1990, paragraph 17).<sup>9</sup> Bush created tension by seemingly claiming that one of the graduates would be a future First Lady. She then shifted the expectation that she was addressing this comment to the women who were graduating to the men in the audience who were there to support them. This example also highlights the non-exclusivity of the philosophical theories as critical heuristics. Not only did Bush’s comment create and then relieve tension, it did so by employing a simple incongruity (i.e., men instead of women).

Sigmund Freud offered one of the first systematic accounts of the relief theory in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905/1960) and revised it in the essay “Humor” (1928).<sup>10</sup> Freud was interested in Spencer’s theory of laughter, but needed to alter it to fit his general psychoanalytic theory. In our daily activities, according to Freud,

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the role of audience adaptation in Bush’s speech see Dean (1992).

<sup>10</sup> I think it is useful to discuss Freud’s contribution to the relief theory in the philosophical section rather than in the section on psychological theories of humor. As there is a blurry line between philosophy and early psychology, there is a debate as to Freud’s status as a philosopher or a psychologist (see Levine 1999), but his conception of the relief theory has more in common with the early philosophical theories of humor and laughter than the psychological theories that built on and departed from them.

we build up psychic energy. When we do not expel that energy through other means (e.g., dreams or physical motion), we use laughter to release it. Freud's description of the process helps to explain the Barbara Bush joke cited above.

We shall best understand the origin of the pleasure derived from humor if we consider the process which takes place in the mind of anyone listening to another man's jest. He sees this other person in a situation which leads him to anticipate that the victim will show signs of some affect; he will get angry, complain, manifest pain, fear, horror, possibly even despair. The person who is watching or listening is prepared to follow his lead, and to call up the same emotions. But his anticipations are deceived; the other man does not display any affect—he makes a joke. It is from the saving of expenditure in feeling that the hearer derives the humorous satisfaction. (1928, 2)

In this theory, the power rests with the teller of the joke; the hearer goes where the teller leads. Freud's theory is one that involves both a release and a saving of energy, marking it as a development from the theories of Shaftesbury and Spencer. Relief theory's focus on the physiological aspect of laughter has led to great interest in the medical community.<sup>11</sup> Most contemporary theories of humor recognize that relief is sometimes an element of a humorous episode, but they do not consider it a requirement.

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<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive listing of medical and psychoanalytic studies on humor consult the bibliographies compiled by Nilsen (1999a, 1999b).

## Incongruity Theory

The third and currently most popular philosophical humor theory is incongruity.<sup>12</sup> This theory is focused more on humor than laughter and tries to find the conditions that are necessary to find something funny. The goal of this theory is to discover how humorous amusement takes the enjoyment of incongruities as a starting point. This theory holds that something is funny if it is at odds with what we expect in a given situation. As some incongruities result in confusion, unpleasant emotions, or even pain, it is clear that not every incongruity is amusing. An unexpected verbal assault is not likely to result in amusement. Morreall (1989), in a discussion of the differences between human and animal responses to incongruity, claimed that “the ability to enjoy incongruity is a unique capacity of humans . . . because the rest of the animal world processes its perceptions only in practical ways and so has to treat incongruous stimuli as at least potential threats” (12).

It is this ability to step back from a situation, to move between the cognitive and the affective, that allows us to find amusement in some incongruities. For an example of incongruity humor, consider Vice President Al Gore’s remark seemingly about Senator Joe Lieberman, his running mate in the 2000 presidential election. At the 2000 Al Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner, a fund-raising event for Catholic Charities and a traditional venue for political humor, Gore joked,

Or uh, the man I mentioned earlier, much beloved in Connecticut, just recently and unrepentantly vaulted into the national spot light. He’s a man of deep faith and conviction. Unafraid to wear one of those little hats on the back of his head in

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<sup>12</sup> Morreall (1989) identifies incongruity theory as the most widely accepted theory. Among its contemporary adherents are Clark (1987), Kulka (1990), Maase, Fink, and Kaplowitz (1984), Nerhardt (1996), Rothbart (1996) and Suls (1983).

public. Faithfully adhering to those ancient rituals. . . . Archbishop Egan, I want to fight for you. (paragraph 31)

To understand this joke, the audience must possess several pieces of information. They must know that Lieberman is from Connecticut and that he was the first Jewish candidate on a major party ticket. With the reference to “one of those little hats” Gore is seemingly referring to Jewish practice of wearing a kippah. The incongruity comes in when he instead tells the audience that he is speaking of Edward Egan, the Archbishop of New York, who is seated on the dais in his vestments, which include a skull cap. The audience must also know that Archbishop Egan had previously been Bishop of Bridgeport, Connecticut and had only held the position in New York for the previous five months. This is an example of incongruity that draws attention to Lieberman’s religion, while downplaying the differences. There is nothing to be feared in this incongruity and it gives the audience the opportunity to find amusement in the situation.

Although Aristotle did not fully develop the idea, one of the first mentions of an incongruity approach to humor can be found in the *Rhetoric* (1412a), and it was carried on by Cicero in *De oratore*, “You already know that the most familiar one [category of humor] is when we expect to hear one thing but another is said” (2.255).<sup>13</sup> Morreall (1982) reported that after these mentions, “the incongruity theory was not to be worked out in any detail until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (16). Kant provided a version of incongruity theory in *Critique of Judgment* (1790), where he combined incongruity with relief by arguing,

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<sup>13</sup> For an elaboration on Aristotle and Cicero, see my discussion below in “Theories of Humor in Rhetoric” on page 28.



In the case of jokes (the art of which, just like music, should rather be reckoned as pleasant than beautiful) the play begins with the thoughts which together occupy the body, so far as they admit of sensible expression; and as the understanding stops suddenly short at this presentment, in which it does not fit what is expected. Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. (47)

Schopenhauer (1819) also subscribed to incongruity theory but he disagreed with Kant's contention that the incongruity is reduced to nothing. He argued that laughter is the expression of the "incongruity of knowledge from perception and abstract knowledge" (59). Laughter, for Schopenhauer, does not result from the "nothingness," but rather is the product of the very existence of the incongruity.

#### Linguistic Theories

In addition to the three classic theories, philosophers have also examined the linguistic features of jokes and other language-based mechanisms that produce laughter and amusement. Salvatore Attardo has written about humor and linguistics, including a survey of the subject (1994). Linguistic theories of humor are primarily concerned with the structure of humorous episodes, particularly jokes. Work in structural linguistics explains the joke form as well as puns, though "generative linguistics has had little to say about them" (Attardo 1994, 111). Greimas (1993) examined isotopy and disruption in the semantic reading of jokes. Isotopy is a concept that Greimas identifies with the semantic mechanisms that allow for a uniform reading of the text. He argued that texts are capable of indicating to the reader the expected meaning intended by the author. Jokes involve an apparent disruption from the expected reading that is resolved through a punch line. This

theory is representative of those that attempt to explain the incongruity theory of humor through a semantic analysis of jokes. As for puns, Attardo (1994) argued that structural linguistics' interest in puns is grounded in the evidence that puns provide for "establishing the pronunciation of a linguistic item at a given time" (111).

Much of the research has been to create a taxonomy of the subject. Attardo (1994, 113) found Duchàček's (1970) as the most complete, outlining categories of puns such as homophony, homography, polysemy, and contamination. Semiotic theories of humor are an extension of structural linguistic theories in that they attempt to explain the workings of jokes as well as their role as literary texts. The foundational work in this area is Arthur Koestler's *The Act of Creation* (1964). Koestler argued that humor is the result of bisociation, "the perceiving of a situation or idea . . . in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" (35). It is through our attempts to reconcile the two that we find amusement in the task's impossibility.

Although the structural linguists and semoticians are interested in the configuration of jokes, pragmaticists have extended that analysis into an examination of the meaning and usage of jokes. A leading figure at the intersection of humor and pragmatics is Cohen. He argued that understanding a joke is not the same thing as "getting it." This distinction raises the interesting question about the ontological status of jokes that are not found to be funny.<sup>14</sup> Cohen (1983) offered a useful heuristic for classifying jokes. The two principal categories of jokes are pure and conditional jokes. A

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<sup>14</sup> "There is ambiguity, however, in the phrase 'find it funny.' It may be that failing to find it funny means only that you don't laugh, or that you are not amused. But finding it funny can also mean finding the fun, in which case failing to find it funny means not detecting the funniness, and in that case it is a bit harder to credit you, after all, with comprehending the joke. If you don't find the fun, what reason have you for calling it a joke? That someone told you it is a joke? That it is in a joke book? The issue surfaces, although not with perfect clarity, in the not uncommon complaint 'It is supposed to be a joke,' which is not quite the same as 'It is supposed to be funny'" (Cohen 1983, 121).

*pure joke* is one where anyone who knows the language of the joke will understand it.<sup>15</sup> *Conditional jokes* are those that require something beyond basic language to be shared between the teller and the audience. The two types of conditional jokes are the *hermetic joke* (there must be common knowledge) and the *affective joke* (there must be a common emotional disposition). Cohen's work is an important step in the classification and interpretation of humorous attempts, particularly jokes, that sets the foundation for later work in pragmatics and humor.

Cohen (1999) also developed a useful structure for considering jokes within a speech acts perspective. He considered the conditions necessary for understanding jokes and discussed the role of humor in community building, arguing that "there is a special intimacy in shared laughter, and a mastering aim of joke-telling is the purveyance of this intimacy" (124). Following Cohen and Attardo's work, a 2003 special issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics* focused entirely on the subject of humor. Included in the articles were studies of humor's role in gender norming and transgression (Crawford 2003), the time index involved in getting a joke (Vaid et al. 2003), intercultural joking behaviors (Davies 2003), and the effect of irony on cognition (Kotthoff 2003). These approaches in pragmatics are useful for an examination of political jokes to determine both the strategic value of the jokes and the audience's interpretation of the speaker's intention.

Although each of these philosophical theories can explain some instances of either humor or laughter, they fail to explain all humor. The philosophical approaches are useful for this project in that they provide a starting point for investigating humor. Whether cognitive or affective, the goal of the philosophers prior to the study of

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<sup>15</sup> Cohen questioned the existence of truly pure jokes (135) and argued in a subsequent work that they might not exist (Cohen 1999, 12).

pragmatics appears to be an ontology of humor rather than an explanation of the meaning and usage of humor. Even when the philosophers' interest is on the linguistic aspect of jokes, that interest is in explaining how the joke works, not on the ways that jokes may be exploited to achieve concurrent or consequential rhetorical effects on listeners.

#### Theories of Humor in Psychology

There are many studies examining the psychology of laughter and humor.<sup>16</sup> In an overview of psychological perspectives on humor and laughter, Provine (2000) asserted that laughter is “an ancient vocal relic that coexists with modern speech—a psychological and biological act that predates both humor and speech” (3). Most psychological humor research has focused on laughter rather than on humor and on the areas of psychology that connect with humor. There are studies that look at the relationship between humor and personality,<sup>17</sup> aggression,<sup>18</sup> and social interaction.<sup>19</sup> Many of these studies seek to explain laughter as a product of a psychological disposition toward anger and as a means of release. For example, Goldstein, Suls, and Anthony (1972) found that humor appreciation was influenced by cognitive stimuli to a greater extent than by personality traits. This finding is relevant for an examination of the strategic use of humor in that it indicates that the speaker can have some measure of influence on what the audience will find funny. In another study, Nevo and Nevo (1983) asked participants to provide either humorous or non-humorous captions to pictures of a man being splashed with mud from

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<sup>16</sup> Carrell (1997) examined the connection between jokes and humor, Goldstein (1972) offered general parameters for the empirical study of humor, Nilsen (1998) expanded upon Freud's theory of tendentious humor, and Provine (2000) examined the social functions of laughter based on field research.

<sup>17</sup> See Bender and Corbin (1985), Cattell and Luborsky (1947), Derks and Berkowitz (1989), Eysenck (1942), Mindness, Miller, Turek, and Carroll (1989), and Wyer and Collins (1992).

<sup>18</sup> Goldstein, Suls, and Anthony (1972), Nevo and Nevo (1983), Zillmann (1983), and Zillmann and Bryant (1980).

<sup>19</sup> Giles, Bourhis, Gadfield, Davies, and Davies (1976).

the passing of a car. They found that the aggressiveness of the answers increased with the humorousness of the responses offered by the subjects. Derks argued that these studies are “classics in the sense that they set a style for the examination of humor. Neither pretended to settle the issue, . . . [they] inserted a critical variable and examined the impact” (1996, x). The authors of these studies were less interested in the structure and intention of humor than in people’s psychological response to stimuli. Rather than trying to explain the ontology of humor, the psychologists, like the philosophers, have tried to discover the meaning of laughter and the conditions and effects of humor creation and its appreciation.

The research on humor appreciation holds some interest for the examination of humor and politics. Political humor delivered in a public setting must be adapted to the audience. Laughter in group settings (whether or not as a result of humor) has been shown to be contagious (Provine 2000, 129-33). Although factors other than funniness can create laughter, research, particularly by Ruch (1992), has found that there is a correlation between the expression of amusement and the perception of funniness. The results of studies of humor and pedagogy largely find that humor has a mostly positive effect on maintaining attention.<sup>20</sup> This result could be useful for the political speaker in that “humor has been shown to improve memory for shapes and for sentences over just meaningfulness alone” (Derks 1996, xviii).

The psychological theories of humor deal with the cognitive and affective results of both laughter and humor. These studies are helpful in explaining specific aspects of the humor process. Although the purpose of these studies is not to explain how humor

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<sup>20</sup> Chapman and Crompton (1978), McAninch, Austin, and Derks (1992-93), Schmidt (1994), and Zillmann and Bryant (1983).

functions rhetorically, the insights do add to the rhetoricians' understanding of how to adapt humor to the needs of the audience. The results of these studies clarify the scope of a rhetorical treatment of humor by identifying the psychological conditions and effects of humor and laughter. The political speaker is then in a better position to exploit these elements for strategic purposes.

#### Theories of Humor in Communication

There are interesting aspects to non-rhetorical research in the field of communication, and though it is not always directly applicable to theorizing about political humor, some of the research is useful to study the role of humor in political discourse. Bateson (1952) theorized about the role of humor and laughter in communication starting with the position that laughter is a common experience of all human beings and that humor is an important identifying feature of most cultures. He describes jokes as a kind of paradox,<sup>21</sup> arguing that

the freedom to talk nonsense, the freedom to entertain illogical alternatives, the freedom to ignore the theory of types is probably essential to comfortable human relations. In sum, I am arguing that there is an important ingredient component to comfortable human relations, humor, and psychotherapeutic change, and that this ingredient is the implicit presence and acceptance of the paradoxes. (5)

O'Donnell-Trujillo and Adams (1983), in an examination of humor in everyday speech, found that humor can serve to allow interlocutors to introduce new topics of

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<sup>21</sup> "The sort of analysis that I want to propose assumes that the messages in the first phase of telling the joke are such that while the informational content is, so to speak, on the surface, the other content types in various forms are implicit in the background. When the point of a joke is reached, suddenly this background material is brought into attention and a paradox, or something like it is touched off. A circuit of contradictory notions is completed" (Bateson 1952, 3).

discussion and indicate a desire for elaboration of a topic. Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1991) developed a method of measuring humor usage in conversation. Based on measurements from their Humor Orientation scale, this empirical study found that people who score high on the Humor Orientation scale frequently use humor and do so without much forethought, whereas those who rate low on the Humor Orientation scale seem to plan out instances of humor usage with greater care (215). These findings are helpful in considering differences in the use of humor according to its frequency. Gorham and Christophel (1990) found that teachers' use of humor in the classroom improved the students' affective and cognitive learning. These findings could indicate the utility for a speaker to use humor to introduce a subject to an audience. Garrett (1993) analysed the strategies and effects of ritualized humor games among African-Americans and gay men. She found that these groups used humor "not just for pleasure but to construct a community, to create an alternative source of ego-reinforcement, and to sharpen a weapon to be wielded against the outside world" (312). Meyer (1997) takes the workplace as the setting for an investigation of humor in organizations that complements his examinations of rhetorical humor (1990, 2000). Meyer found that people use humor in organizational settings to establish values and create unity.

#### Theories of Humor in Rhetoric

There has been a long tradition of examining the relationship between rhetoric and humor in both ancient rhetorical works and in contemporary rhetorical theory. To understand humor as an element of strategic political speech, it is best to examine of rhetorical studies of humor, both historical and contemporary. In each section below I

will chronologically detail the accounts of rhetorical humor theories that are representative of the periods in question.

#### Ancient Rhetorical Theories of Humor

Aristotle treats humor briefly in the *Rhetoric*, echoing the position of Gorgias cited above (2). The brief treatment belies Aristotle's interest in the subject of humor as he observed that

the different forms of humor have been discussed in the *Poetics*, of which some are appropriate for a gentleman to use and some not. Each speaker will take up what suits him. Mockery is more gentlemanly than buffoonery; for the mocker makes a joke for his own amusement, the buffoon for the amusement of others. (1419a)

Aristotle's more detailed treatment of comedy in the second book of the *Poetics* is lost to us.<sup>22</sup> Aristotle is an early proponent of an incongruity theory of humor. Explaining incongruity in humor, Aristotle gives the example,

“He came on, having under his feet—blisters.” The listener was expecting *sandals*. [To be effective,] the point should be clear as soon as the word is said. Changes of letter [as in a pun] make the speaker mean not what he says but what the word plays on . . . thus it is pleasing to the learner . . . but if the latter does not understand . . . it will not seem urbane. (1412a)

By intentionally changing the word that the listener was expecting, the speaker is able to create the emotional response of amusement as explained by the incongruity theory of humor.

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<sup>22</sup> Janko (1984) offered an attempt at a reconstruction of Aristotle's lost book on comedy, known as *Poetics II*. Included in this work are a definition of comedy, the sources of laughter, and a comparison between tragedy and comedy.



Humor is also discussed in *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. In the discussion of introductions, the anonymous author wrote,

If the hearers have been fatigued by listening, we shall open with something that may provoke laughter—a fable, a plausible fiction, a caricature, an ironical inversion of the meaning of a word, an ambiguity, innuendo, banter, a naivety, an exaggeration, a recapitulation, a pun, an unexpected turn, a comparison, a novel tale, a historical anecdote, a verse, or a challenge or a smile of approbation directed at some one. (1.6.10)

In the course of the discussion on delivery, the author identifies the facetious as part of the conversational tone. “The Facetious can on the basis of some circumstance elicit a laugh which is modest and refined” (3.8.23). This concern with the propriety of laughter echoes that of Aristotle.

The most extensive ancient treatment of humor is given by Cicero in *De oratore* (2.216b-306). Cicero faced the same challenge we do today. Although there are many collections of humorous examples, Cicero found most of “the authors who tried to impart anything like a systematic art of the subject proved to be so insipid that there was nothing but their very insipidness to laugh about” (2.217).<sup>23</sup> Cicero frequently used humor in his own speeches and letters.<sup>24</sup> Bennett (1935) suggested that from early in his life, Cicero “had experienced the power of humor, had tasted the ecstasy of swaying a crowd to sympathetic laughter; for this intoxication produces a pathological condition that is well-

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<sup>23</sup> Modern political humor anthologies I use in this project include Dole (1998), Galnoor, and Lukes (1985), Gardner (1986, 1988, 1994), Kennedy (1961, 1964a, 1964b), Schutz (1977), and Zall (1982). These collections are far from insipid, but they do not offer theoretical accounts of humor. Cicero only had a few theoretical attempts to explain humor from which to choose. There are now many more approaches to discovering such a “systematic art.”

<sup>24</sup> For example, Cicero’s defense of Caelius (in *Speeches*, 1958), Hutchinson’s (1998) analysis of Cicero’s correspondence, and Bennett (1935).

nigh incurable” (193). From this experience, he warned the speaker to consider the impact of their witticisms; if there is the possibility it could detract from the larger goal, they should “refrain from saying what occurs to them even if it would be extremely witty to make the remark” (2.221).

For Cicero there are five questions to consider in an examination of humor: “First, what is its nature? Second, what is its source? Third, should an orator want to stir up laughter? Fourth, to what extent? Fifth, into what categories can the humorous be divided?” (2.235). Cicero decided to leave alone the nature and source of humor to discuss appropriate use of wit, categories of the humorous, and the seven kinds of verbal wit. He thought that it is in the orator’s interest to make the audience laugh to secure goodwill, demonstrate cleverness, or attack an opponent. He went on to identify two types of witticisms, those of content and those of words. Witticisms of content are anecdotes or witty stories (2.240), whereas witticisms of words are to be found in puns and “sharp-witted” comments (2.244). As for the subjects appropriate for humor, Cicero places no limit on them, as “there is no category of jokes that is not also a source for earnest and serious thoughts” (2.250). The reverse does not hold as orators should avoid joking about people held in very high or very low esteem. After eliminating clownish behavior, imitation, distortion of the face, and obscenity, Cicero came to the proper categories of humor for the orator. The first category are jokes dependent on words, examples of which include ambiguous remarks, paronomasia, taking irony literally, allegory, metaphor, irony, and antithesis (2.253-263). In the second category, those jokes dependant on content, Cicero included narratives, history, similarity, amplification or diminution, insinuation, mock-seriousness, playing the fool, and ill-tempered jokes.

Above all these in importance Cicero placed the exploitation of a humorous incongruity. From his detailed treatment, it is clear that Cicero recognized that superiority, relief, and incongruity are all part of the humor process and each may be used in oratory. Much of the subsequent work in medieval era and Renaissance theories of humor is largely derivative of Cicero.

Quintilian offered a lengthy discussion of humor in Book 6 of *Institutio Oratoria*. In his treatment, Quintilian outlines strategies for the use of humor in public discourse to relieve tension, to divert attention, to refresh the audience, and to deflect criticism (6.3.1). He looked back on famous orators' use of humor, comparing Cicero's reputation as a too frequent joker<sup>25</sup> with Demosthenes' difficulties with jesting.<sup>26</sup> He discussed appropriate venues for joking, including declamations, festival speeches, and the courts. A definition of humor is situated partially within superiority theory; he claimed that "laughter is never far removed from derision" (6.3.7), as well as incongruity theory, in which the jest "depends for success on deceiving anticipations" (6.3.84). There is a blending of theories of humor as Quintilian acknowledged that the scope of laughter is broad "since we laugh not merely at those words or actions which are smart or witty, but also at those which reveal folly, anger or fear" (6.3.7). Because it seems that no one theory (superiority, relief, or incongruity) covers all instances of humor, the prudent rhetorician should take each view into account. In reference to the importance of humor, Quintilian cautiously posited that humor may be an art "for it involves a certain power of observation, and rules for its employment have been laid down by writers both of Greece and Rome"

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<sup>25</sup> "The more vulgar they [the jokes] are, the more probable is it that they are not the invention of the orator, but were current as public property" (6.3.4).

<sup>26</sup> "It is impossible to suppose that Demosthenes deliberately avoided all display of humour, since his few jests are so unworthy of his other excellences that they clearly show that he lacked the power, not merely that he disliked to use it" (6.3.2).

(6.3.11). At one point he seemed to wish for a better guide to the topic, lamenting “that there are no specific exercises for the development of humour nor professors to teach it”

(6.3.14).

#### Medieval and Renaissance Rhetorical Theories of Humor

In the medieval period, humor is still an issue of interest for rhetorical theorists, though not as great as it was for Cicero or Quintilian. Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria Nova* (1200) offered a brief discussion of the appropriate use of humor within the section on amplification. Geoffrey recommended that when speaking against a ridiculous opponent, “offer praise, but in a facetious manner; reprove, but with wit and grace; have recourse to gestures, but let these be consistently fitting” (3.6). He even describes the facial expressions to be used in delivery, advising that one should “mock him with the *ciconia*’s (stork’s) sign of derision; or pull a wry mouth, or draw in your nostrils: for such expression of ridicule it is fitting to use not the mouth but the nose” (3.6).

Within the medieval preaching tradition, Robert of Basevorn returned to Cicero as his basis for a brief treatment of humor in *Forma praedicandi* (1311). His advice for the strategic use of humor is a basic, though not unimportant, suggestion to “add something jocular which will give pleasure when the listeners are bored . . . this must be used especially when they begin to sleep” (212). Once the priest has awakened his audience, he must keep them that way through means other than humorous stories because “this ornament must be used sparingly and at most three times within one sermon” (212). The primary concern for this ornament seems to be that of appropriateness and decorum.

The Renaissance saw an expansion in the interest in ancient antecedents of rhetorical theory in which theorists sought to develop a rhetoric suitable to the social and

political context of the period.<sup>27</sup> Thomas Wilson's *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1553) is an example of a treatment of humor in rhetoric of the time. Wilson discussed laughter and humor in the section of Book Two titled "Of deliting the hearers, and stirring them to laughter" (134). The disposition toward humor displayed by Wilson is drawn largely from Cicero, even going so far as to list the same "five thinges which *Tullie* noteth,<sup>28</sup> concerning pleasaunt talke" (135). Wilson considered the ability to use humor in oratory to be a gift from nature, but he still provided an overview on its proper use. Humor can be the result of words or gestures, and the orator should prefer the short joke to the long humorous story (135). An important aspect of Wilson's theory is in the area of preaching. Like Robert of Basevorn, Wilson suggested that the preacher use humor when the audience falls asleep (presumably a serious problem of the time). Wilson advised sermonizers to remember

Yea, the preachers of God, mind so much edefying of soules, that they often forget, we have any bodies. And therefore, some doe not so much good with telling the trueth, as they doe harme with dulling the hearers, being so farre gone in their matters, that oftentimes they cannot tell when to make an end. (136)

He went on to argue that as everyone loves mirth and loves the deliverer of mirth, so shall they follow the commandments of the speaker.

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<sup>27</sup> A work of the period that uses humor in the text itself is Anthony Munday's *The Defence of Contraries* (1593). This work is different from others covered in this review in that Mundy did not offer a theory of rhetorical humor, Munday's goal was not to write an all-encompassing treatise on rhetoric, but rather to demonstrate the creation of discourses that defend paradoxes. As it is through his examples that he showed how to compose declamations, so it is through his use of humor that he demonstrated to his reader its appropriate use. Several of Munday's defenses employ humor, including that drunkenness is better than sobriety (fol. 59), that "it is better to weepe often then to laugh at any time" (fol. 89). The very subjects of these declamations could be found to be humorous, or at least ironic, to the reader. If Munday did not think that humor was important, it would be unlikely that he would use it so often in his book

<sup>28</sup> These questions are asked by Cicero in *De oratore* (2.235) and quoted in this chapter on pages 30-31.

The rhetorical art of letter writing also included a role for humor. An example of such a theory is that of Madeleine de Scudéry. Her work centered on those venues of rhetorical expression available to women of the seventeenth century, including letter and novel writing and conversation. De Scudéry wrote a dialogue titled “On Wit”<sup>29</sup> in which she discussed the role of humor in letter writing. De Scudéry advised that letters of gallantry are the best place for a display of wit. She contended that

[good] teasing is born of a lively imagination and a spirit full of fire and that, taking something from its origins, it is as brilliant as those flashes of lightning that dazzle but yet do not burn. In addition, I also think that you should not joke all the time. For besides the fact that long jokes are boring, furthermore, the minds of those who are to be amused must not get too used to the joking or else there will be no more surprise. (128)

De Scudéry’s principal concern in this work is the composition of love letters. She claimed she has “never written any, and never received any,” but she did argue that though there is “something playful in these sorts of letters . . . a love letter should have more sentiment than wit” (97).

#### Modern Rhetorical Theories of Humor

In the modern period, George Campbell discussed wit at length in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776/1963). The first reference to humor and laughter is in the preface, where Campbell acknowledged a work by Beattie (1771) on laughter and humorous writing. Campbell gave this work his blessing by saying that Beattie (whose work

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29 This dialogue was titled “De la raillery” and originally published in *Les conversations sur divers sujets* (1680). The translation used here is from *Selected letters, orations, and rhetorical dialogues* edited and translated by Donawerth and Strongson (2004).

appeared just before Campbell's) has the same position on laughter. Campbell's treatment of laughter reflected his interest in faculty psychology. He thought that laughter was an important phenomenon in that it operated on two of the faculties, "first on the fancy, by presenting to it such a group as constitutes a laughable object; secondly, on the passion mentioned, by exhibiting absurdity in human character" (29). He went on to claim that laughter is most often the result of incongruity and does not always involve superiority, distancing his approach from that of Aristotle and Hobbes. Campbell carefully argued that he is not in disagreement with Aristotle's account of the ridiculous, but rather that he is extending it. Campbell claimed that "the Stagyrite here speaks of ridicule, not of laughter in general, and not of resort of ridicule, but solely of the ridiculous in manners, of which he hath in few words given a very apposite description," but that he did not consider the possibility of the ridiculous "unconnected with either character or conduct" (27). Campbell was more critical of Hobbes, arguing that his association of laughter exclusively with superiority is incompatible with Campbell's more comprehensive treatment of the subject (29).

If the order of presentation is indicative of relative importance, it would seem that Campbell thought enough of "Wit, Humour, and Ridicule" to make it the second section of the work. Campbell identified humorous discourse as a genus of oratory, claiming it was "naturally suited to light and trivial matters" (8). Campbell treated wit as a kind of linguistic incongruity with the capacity to "excite in the mind an agreeable surprise, and that arising, not from any thing marvelous in the subject, but solely from the imagery she employs, or the strange assemblage of related ideas presented to the mind" (8). He went on to discuss verbal formations that give rise to laughter (9), the effects of wit (10), the

types of witticisms (11-15), the nature of humor, the end of which is diversion (15-20), and the nature of ridicule (20-27), which is “fitter for refuting error than for supporting truth” (20).

Campbell saw multiple purposes for laughter, “either merely to divert by that grateful titillation which it excites, or to influence the opinions and purposes of the hearers” (20). So not only does laughter serve a relief function but an argumentative one as well. In terms of argument, Campbell claimed that ridicule is best suited to refuting error or opposing claims. Campbell drew a distinction between mistakes and “palpable error or absurdity (a thing hardly confutable by mere argument)” (21).<sup>30</sup> It is this later category that is the province of ridicule. Campbell argued that one can dismiss an absurd proposition by saying “Such a position is ridiculous—It doth not deserve a serious answer” (21). Campbell does not claim that every topic is suitable for ridicule. Whereas “those things which principally come under its lash are awkwardness, rusticity, ignorance, cowardice, levity, foppery, pedantry, and affectation of every kind” (21), more serious crimes (e.g., murder, parricide, ingratitude) are too great to be dealt with by ridicule. Campbell offered advice to the reader on how to craft and deliver jokes: The speaker should hide the ridicule to come in an air of seriousness, as it “commonly adds energy to a joke” (23). The trick, Campbell argued, is that the audience must know that the speaker is dissembling, a condition “which distinguishes an ironical expression from a lie” (23). As for appropriate venues, Campbell agreed with Cicero that humor and ridicule are, at times, useful in deliberative and forensic discourse, but he disagreed with Robert of Basevorn and Thomas Wilson that it should be used in sermons. He feared that

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<sup>30</sup> This distinction between mistakes and absurdity will resurface in the twentieth century in the work of Kenneth Burke (see especially *Attitudes Toward History*, 1937 and my discussion on page 42).



in any but the most expert hands, the use of ridicule in the church will lead the audience away from “both piety and decorum” (26).

The modern period witnessed a decline in the consideration of humor in rhetorical texts. Holcomb (2001) confirmed that Campbell’s *Philosophy of Rhetoric* and Richard Whately’s *Elements of Rhetoric* (1846) “are two of the last canonical rhetorics in English to treat the uses of wit and humor” (183n). Whately discussed the possible uses of humor, particularly humorous irony but warned against its use in a way different from previous writers. Of audience members, Whately wrote “he that can laugh at what is ludicrous, and at the same time preserve a clear discernment of sound and unsound Reasoning, is no ordinary man” (186). His concern was with the audience’s ability to get the humor and achieve a change of belief at the same time.

#### Contemporary Rhetorical Theories of Humor

The twentieth century exhibited some continued interest in developing theoretical understandings of rhetoric and humor, but more often scholars sought to apply their conception of humor to a wide range of texts. Among the topics studied by scholars were humor elicitation, the social function of humor, the role of gender, and the function of humor in public address.

Attempts to examine the effectiveness of humor in speeches are common, particularly in the middle of the twentieth-century. In one of the earliest studies of humor in communication, Lull (1939) found no direct connection between humor and persuasion in a public speech. Grimes (1955) looked at the role of humor in public address, finding that humor was the result of incongruity adapted by the speaker for the audience’s amusement. Stevens (1961) offered advice to the public speaker on the judicious use of

humor, suggesting that “it can serve as a change of pace, as a means of occasionally relaxing the audience during a serious talk, and it assists the speaker in holding the attention of his listeners” (10). Stevens attempted to encourage his readers by admitting that although “facetious speech material is among the most difficult to handle skillfully . . . don’t let this discourage you” (10). Day (1965) wrote a textbook on the use of humor in public speech, but not specifically in political speech. Among other topics, he advised the reader on the appropriate use of humor and techniques to make the humor appear spontaneous. He argued that it is by no means necessary to be able to make up humor for the occasion to use the topical joke. In fact, he suggested that unless you are absolutely positive that you can really make up jokes and humorous comments as you go along, don’t try to innovate (71). Day proposed that to be prepared a speaker should become a collector of jokes: “Many good speakers do this. It has long been done by Hubert Humphrey, a speaker who was always been in great demand” (72). Hackman (1988) found that the use of humor in informative speaking improved the audience’s affinity for speakers while lowering their credibility.

One of the changes in humor scholarship in the twentieth century was an increased focus on the role of gender. Cantor (1976) analyzed gender differences in perceptions of funniness in jokes. She found that “it is still funnier to see a woman than a man disparaged” (172). Barreca (1990) examined women’s interpersonal and cultural use of humor, concluding that women are discouraged from presenting themselves as funny even as they use humor as an active resistance against such constraints. Bunkers (1997) argued that women’s literary and performative humor has traditionally been self-deprecatory due to their limited power in society, though as women’s “recognition of a

common disbelief in powerlessness has grown, a corresponding trend in women's humor has been a movement away from the self-deprecatory and toward the sarcastic, this movement reflecting a rising consciousness of the potential for women's claiming of power" (169).

Several studies focused on humor that may have been political, but not delivered by political figures. The following studies contribute to the foundation of the current project by establishing the boundaries of rhetorical humor. Donald Bryant (1981) examined satire to discuss the persuasive appeals of Jonathan Swift finding that "satire is most frankly rhetorical, the most obviously able to condition readers' or hearers' attitudes, beliefs, and behavior, while generating amusement and delight in vicarious experiences" (177). Specifically concerning Swift's political writings, Bryant argued that satire

can surprise and entertain the moderate and judicious literate into awareness of the internal dangers to their church and religion, and into wariness of the machinations of man that of rhetorical sophistication combined with subversive intention. (179)

Buxton (1987) looked at the role of various types of humor, including political humor, in late-night television. He argued that "humor in the late-night talk show is an important side venue where American broadcast television unmask and undermines any rigid social and cultural stance" (37). Buxton discussed the difference among the late-night talk show hosts observing that

Letterman . . . shies away from the topical material that Carson-prefers, in part, because of his self-acknowledged lack of interest in politics. Realizing his

limitations, Letterman does not reveal his political opinions. In his words, “I’d hate to think there were people in America saying, “Well, hell, Letterman likes him; let’s vote for the son of a bitch.” (382)<sup>31</sup>

Greenbaum (1999) offered a conception of stand-up comedy as rhetorical argument, though she essentialized rhetoric into *ethos*, *kairos*, *praxis*, and *theoria*. Greenbaum presents an ethnographic study of a comedy club in Florida, finding that

Comic narrative is rhetorical in nature; it is inherently designed to persuade an audience to adopt a particular world view, and by working within a classically rhetorical framework based on the principles of *ethos*, developing and maintaining comic authority, *kairos*, adapting the routine to meet the exigencies of the moment, and crafting their narratives to conform to the Isocratean model, stand-up comedians construct their own rhetorical setting, positioning themselves as the authoritative voice on cultural dictums, social mores, and political agendas. (46)

Studies examining the structure and function of political cartoons are common. Edwards (1997) published an analysis of image and metaphor in political cartoons surrounding the 1988 presidential campaign. Edwards and Chen (2000) critiqued cartoons depicting the role of the First Lady arguing that the power balance between presidents and First Ladies was depicted as a zero-sum game in political cartoons. In their examples, if the First Lady was presented as a strong or influential figure, the president would be depicted as emasculated. They argue that “although cartoonists are often seen (and see themselves) as iconoclastic and irreverent, theirs is also a fundamentally

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<sup>31</sup> This difference between the entertainer, who discusses politics, and the politician who seeks to entertain is a significant one for this project. See my discussion on page 63.

conservative enterprise in that they rely on existing stereotypes and formulations to create meaning” (2000, 385).

The rhetoric of social change has been a focus for the study of the role of humor. Several studies have used the intersection of humor and communication to explain various aspects of American society. Berger (1976) looked at the linguistic features and cultural influence of jokes, offering a framework for dissecting jokes that relies on incongruity, suddenness, and the exploitation of cultural norms. Klumpp and Hollihan (1979) critiqued the events surrounding the resignation of Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz in response to his telling a racist joke. This article is unusual in that the authors sought to determine the conditions and effects of a joke in a political context. They found that

the public response to the Butz remark was a conservative one. Earl Butz was removed from office amid declarations that his remark was unfit for the *public* conduct of government officials. Such emphasis on the *public/private dichotomy* offers little hope of increased awareness of racism in private life. (10)

This argument is significant in that it places the responsibility for a failed and offensive humor attempt on the individual joke teller and not on the societal conditions that gave rise to the telling of the joke.

One of the most significant authors exploring rhetorical or political humor is Kenneth Burke.<sup>32</sup> Burke introduced his discussion of the comic in the chapter on “Poetic Categories,” which are used by Burke in *Attitudes Toward History* (1937) to explain what he termed “the structures of symbolism” (34). When he wrote about the comic frame he did so in a dramatistic mold, putting it in contrast to the tragic, satirical, and

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<sup>32</sup> See especially *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950).

burlesque frames. Humor can be found in any of the preceding four frames though they have no requirement for humor. The distinction for Burke was not really about humorous versus serious discourse. Burke acknowledged this distinction when he claimed that “We might, however, note an important distinction between comedy and humor, that is disclosed when we approach art forms as ‘frames of acceptance,’ as ‘strategies’ for living. Humor is the opposite of the heroic” (1937, 43). He argued that problems in society should be seen as mistakes rather than fundamental flaws, so they can be better overcome. The comic frame, as opposed to the tragic or burlesque, is a frame of acceptance that is a “more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it” (1937, 5). This relation to the historical situation can take the form of a comic approach that involves the use of humor to understand the world.

One of the most prolific scholars looking at communication and humor is Charles Gruner. His article “Is Wit to Humor What Rhetoric is to Poetic?” (1965) outlines a conception of the role of wit in rhetoric finding that wit should be practical, situated in real events, appeal to the intellect, and have a “tendency to reinforce and *strengthen* already extant attitudes rather than . . . *change* those attitudes” [emphasis in original] (21). Gruner’s later work reported on experiments designed to explicate the role of satire and joking in persuasive and informative speaking. In Gruner’s 1967 article “Effect of Humor on Speaker Ethos and Audience Information Gain,” he found that “a speaker who uses apt humor in informative discourse is more likely to be perceived by his audience as high in attributes of ‘character’ than he would be if he does not” (233). Gruner also found in this study that the inclusion of humor did not affect students’ engagement in the

material or in their retention of the information presented. Pokorny and Gruner (1969) observed that the inclusion of satire into a discourse concerning censorship was found to be persuasive but no more so than non-humorous texts. Munn and Gruner (1981) found that speakers who used “sick” humor created negative impressions in their audience. They found that the audience’s ratings of

“sense of humor,” speaker “character” and “authoritativeness” . . . were lowered dramatically and significantly by the addition of [sick] jokes. . . . Perhaps a female can more readily “get away with” using sick jokes in a speech without damaging her perceived “sense of humor” than can a male. (418)

Chang and Gruner (1981) showed that speakers with high ethos levels can use humor without risking damage to their credibility if the humor in the speech is found to be witty and appropriate (424). Gruner and his colleagues showed the positive effect that the inclusion of humor can have on the speaker’s perceived character while not changing the interestingness of the speech. Not all types of humor are equal, however. Hackman (1988) found that self-disparaging humor lowered character ratings of the speaker, whereas other-disparaging humor improved the audience’s perception of the speaker.

#### Critical Studies with Theoretical Implications

Studies that use Burke’s writings as a perspective typically take the idea of the comic frame and use it to critique humorous discourse. Some of the studies discussed below employ the comic frame to discover the meaning of rhetorical artifacts whereas others extended Burke’s concept of the comic frame along with their criticism. Burke’s comic frame can be a useful tool for examining the strategic uses of humorous discourse, but caution must be taken to avoid confusion between humor and the comic. The use of

the comic in analyzing humorous discourse is relevant to the context in which it is delivered. Burke wrote “Comedy is essentially humane, leading in periods of comparative stability to the comedy of manners, the dramatization of quirks and foibles. The best of Bentham, Marx, and Veblen is high comedy” (1937, 42). From this description it seemed clear that comedy is not confined to the stage but extends to political and economic philosophy, and presumably, political speech, and that it is not synonymous with humor (42).

Applying Burke’s comic frame, Murphy (1989) looked at Kennedy and Nixon’s use of humor at the 1960 Al Smith Dinner, finding that Kennedy’s “humor carefully attacks Nixon’s ability to fulfill the role of the president and portrays him more as a comic buffoon. The rhetoric does not attack the system itself” (272). Murphy argued that by operating in the comic frame, Kennedy was able to draw distinctions from his opponent and seek change while expanding the American covenant to include a Catholic candidate.

Shultz and Germeroth (1998) used Burke’s “perspective by incongruity” to examine gag cartoons and social activism through an analysis of John Callahan’s cartoons concerning physical disabilities. They argued that

In gag cartoons, societal taboos are confronted openly, if somewhat indirectly, because cartoons, as well as other genres of humor, serve as a socially sanctioned outlet for discussing that for which societal mores (and, more recently, political correctness) force us to remain mute. (230)

Carlson used Burke’s comic frame to examine both humorous (1988) and non-humorous (1986) discourse. In her study of nineteenth century women humorists, Carlson



found that their use of humor changed over time as it met with resistance from the established social order. Through the change in strategy, women's humor became "less and less truly comic, eventually sliding to satire and finally into burlesque" (1988, 311). Carlson's application of Burke's comic frame to humorous discourse helps to reinforce Burke's proposition that humor and the comic frame overlap but are not coextensive. In consideration of how humor can be used strategically to change the social order, she argued that "the comic frame requires the careful creation of identification among all actors required to change the social order" (319). A further necessity is that the humor must present those members of the social order who are capable of making the changes as willing to do so (319). Otherwise, the power structure may feel attacked and seek to secure itself rather than engage in social change.

To demonstrate how the use of humor in the comic frame might be employed as a rhetorical strategy by a political figure, consider the following example. In 1976, Governor Jimmy Carter was interviewed by *Playboy* magazine and published in its pages. He was criticized for comments made in this interview. When asked in the third presidential debate if coverage of the interview hurt the campaign, Carter answered

The Playboy thing has been of great—very great concern to me. I don't know how to deal with it exactly. Uh—I uh—agreed to give the interview uh—to Playboy. Other people have done it who are notable—uh—Governor Jerry Brown, uh—Walter Cronkite, uh—Albert Schweitzer, Mr. Ford's own secretary of the treasury, Mr. Simon, uh—William Buckley—many other people. But they weren't running for president, and in retrospect, from hindsight, I would not have given that uh—interview had I do it—had it—I to do it over again. If I should

ever decide in the future to discuss my—my deep Christian beliefs and uh—  
condemnation and sinfulness, I'll use another forum besides Playboy.

(Commission on Presidential Debates 1976, paragraph 12)

In his response, Carter acknowledged a mistake, even going so far as to say he does not know how to deal with the issue. In a later interview with PBS's Jim Lehrer, Carter revealed, "I thought the best way to handle it was to say well, I'm sorry that the interview came out, but I couldn't deny that the answers in *Playboy* were my own answers" (Lehrer 1989, under "Facing Off With a Sitting President"). That he concluded his statement with a smile is an indication that Carter intended the remark to create amusement. He identified other prominent people who have given interviews to *Playboy* and concludes with a humorous remark that reminded voters of his commitment to his faith. A political actor operating in the comic frame may be able to maintain the goodwill of the audience by using humor to point out an opponent's mistake or to deflect criticism. Burke posits that

the comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting.*

Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*. One would

"transcend" himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for

locating the irrational and the non-rational. (1937, 171)

In this instance, Carter viewed the situation within the comic frame by asking the audience to understand that he had made a mistake similar to one they could have made.

It is the audience that has the power to forgive Carter for his mistake. By using humor as a strategic tool within the comic frame, Carter evoked Burke's concepts to his advantage.

Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, in *The New Rhetoric* (1969), offered a useful account of the role of humor in contemporary rhetorical theory by identifying several strategies for the speaker to employ. Although humor is not central to their goal for their work, they argued that “humor is a very important factor in winning over the audience or, more generally, in establishing a communion between the speaker and his hearers, in reducing value, in particular making fun of the opponent, and making convenient diversions” (188). This list echoes some of the ancient prescriptions concerning the strategic use of humor. In *The New Rhetoric*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca frequently used humorous examples but conceded that “we do not believe that a study of humor in the art of oratory is directly pertinent to our task” (188). That undertaking would be left to a later work by the second author.

Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s 1974 book, *Le comique du discours*, concerns the relationship between argument and the comic. At the outset, Olbrechts-Tyteca explained that the focus of her work was on the language structures and frames of comic speech, not on the ways that such speech may be exploited by a speaker to persuade. In a rare examination of the work, Warnick (1997) discussed Olbrechts-Tyteca’s interest in “the ways in which comic structures and constructions devolve from frames and schemes recognized by the audience” (72). Olbrechts-Tyteca noted that readers of *The New Rhetoric* will be at an advantage in studying *Le comique du discours* and Warnick argued that the book is an extension of the work undertaken in *The New Rhetoric*. The layout of the treatment is highly formulaic. For each scheme Warnick found that Olbrechts-Tyteca

describes its structure; explains how it makes use of existing audience cognitions, attitudes, and expectations; identifies the features that make it comic; provides examples of the scheme; and then varies the examples to show that other, similar manifestations are not comic. (73)

Olbrechts-Tyteca examined the functions of numerous argumentative schemes including “quasi logical arguments, arguments based on the structure of reality (e.g., links of succession and coexistence), and arguments which establish the structure of reality (e.g., dissociations)” (12). Attardo (1994) valued Olbrechts-Tyteca’s work, declaring that it is the most interesting discussion that “analyzes at length the possibility of laughter as a criterion of humor” (11). Olbrechts-Tyteca’s concern with the identification of humorous instances leads to the conclusion that while the presence of laughter in response to a linguistic event is a possible indication of humor, such a conclusion does not allow for classification of new occurrences (Attardo 1994, 12). Although Olbrechts-Tyteca was not addressing political speeches, she did approach the subject of comic discourse as one who is obviously sympathetic to the importance of rhetorical humor. With her understanding of argumentative structures and consideration of the relationship between linguistic acts and laughter, Olbrechts-Tyteca’s work provided a significant contribution to the examination of humorous political discourse, particularly in the ways that humor intersects with argument.

There are several studies that examine the strategic function of humor used by political speakers. Volpe (1977) critiqued Cicero’s *Pro Caelio*, a legal defense that made liberal use of humor, by applying Cicero’s conception of humor to his own speech. Cicero grasped the appropriateness of strategic humor in this trial, the timing of which

coincided with a large festival. Volpe argued that Cicero “burlesqued the entire episode” (320) while demonstrating his ability to “charm the jury and sweep it off its feet by colorful narrative, vivid characterization, radiant confidence, [and] skillful emphasis and deemphasis” (314). Volpe claimed that this speech is one of Cicero’s best and that “not only did humor help set the scene but it actually became a form of persuasion” (322).

Speier (1998) discussed the relationship between humor and power in political discourse. He focused primarily on German political humor and the functioning of humor for the politically powerless. He argued that in analyzing political wit as an act of communication, one should inquire about “access to the communication, about the social situations where jokes are told, and, of course, their effects on audiences” (1383). Speier observed that the possibilities for political humor are limited within tyrannical societies (1383). He claimed that humor can be used as “an offensive weapon with which an aggressive, politically engaged person makes the arrangements or precautions of an opponent seem ridiculous” (1354). Ganter (2003) examined the use of strategic humor by Frederick Douglass through the lens of incongruity theory. Ganter offered an analysis of Douglass’s discourse, particularly the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and two speeches delivered at the Lanesborough Seminary in Massachusetts in 1842. He observed that Douglass made frequent use of rhetorical humor in his public speeches, and that

His wit was both activated by his perception of inequality and opposition, and harnessed by an extraordinarily supple moral purpose that could exploit several systems of value at once, and even laugh at itself. (549)

Dow and Tonn (1993) claimed that Ann Richards's use of humor served to blunt possibly threatening claims as well as to reaffirm and critique gender roles (292). Selby (2005) discussed how civil rights leader Ralph Abernathy's rhetoric employed humor in the burlesque frame as a counterpoint to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s discourse in the comic frame. Selby argued

Rather than urging his hearers to embrace a position of empathy and understanding and, by implication, symbolic intimacy with Whites—the stance implied in King's vision of the “beloved community.” Abernathy's invitation to scoffing laughter avoided any suggestion of community. (142)

Through his analysis, Selby explored the important distinction between the comic and burlesque frames while demonstrating how humor operates in frames other than the comic.

Hudson's (1979) dissertation is the work that is most similar to the present study. *The Role of Humor in John F. Kennedy's 1960 Presidential Campaign* examined a political figure's use of rhetorical humor to accomplish persuasive goals. Hudson employed the classic humor theories (superiority, relief, incongruity) and adds a fourth, social functioning. In her analysis of Kennedy's use of humor, Hudson identified four functions of humor: maintenance, initiating, focusing, and attack. The maintenance function is “specifically directed to the in-group, partisan audience . . . to provide solidarity among members and approval for the representative candidate” (32). The initiating function is “designed to create a common bond or identity with the audience” (33). The focusing function “directs the audience's attention in a specific manner. Its purpose is to make a point or illustrate a problem” (33). The attack function is designed

“to vent hostilities yet provide an acceptable means for criticism and abuse of the opponent” (34). These functions represent rhetorical strategies for the speaker to exploit.

Hudson limited humor to those instances with a positive audience reaction and categorizes those instances into their political functions. Her use of Burke as the theoretical basis for such an analysis leads to the expectation that she would consider how Kennedy’s humor operated within the comic, tragic, or burlesque frames, but such a discussion is not found in her study. Hudson’s work is useful in that it is a large-scale attempt to understand the strategic use of humor in political discourse.

John Meyer has looked at the intersection of humor and rhetoric in two works (1990 and 2000). In the 1990 article, Meyer divided humor into cognitive and affective approaches. In trying to identify humorous examples from Reagan’s speeches, Meyer pointed out that when limited to the text of an address, it can be difficult to know when a remark is intended as humorous without the corresponding nonverbal cues. If there is a version of a speech that includes an audio recording, then Meyer argued “humor can be registered through the audience’s reaction. Where there is laughter, there is humor” (78). What is useful about Meyer’s approach is that he takes the three theories of humor (superiority, relief, incongruity) and applies them not as rubrics for explaining all instances of humor, but as separate rhetorical strategies.

Meyer (1990) gave an example of a long joke that Ronald Reagan told frequently on the campaign trail in 1976. He argued that Reagan used this joke at the beginning of the speech to “lighten the atmosphere” (80). He went on to argue that the story takes time to build up the tension so that it can be released, situating his conception of humor within relief theory. In the 2000 article, Meyer considered the dangers, as well as the benefits of

using humor. He pointed out that a politician's sense of humor can be "a kind, humane, friendly, pleasant means of communication through promoting identification and clarification of issues, or it can be wry, cynical, cutting and even mean" (328). From this analysis, Meyer concluded that humor can be used to unite or divide. Lynch (2002) took a similar approach to Meyer and outlined a review of humor scholarship that divides the research into two categories: those studies that examine why people use humor and those that attempt to explain how humor functions within a society. He claimed that rhetorical studies can bridge the gap between the two sets of theories "to begin conceptualizing humor as a process" (431).

Smith and Voth (2002) examined the influence of popular-culture humor on political discourse. They analyzed the relationship between the 2000 presidential debates and *Saturday Night Live's* (SNL) parodies of the debates. Through the lens of Burke's comic frame, they argue that "humor mutated from a means of dealing with reality to actually defining reality" (124). Smith and Voth discussed the changes that Bush and Gore made in their debating strategies following the caricatures in the SNL parody (117). They point out that even though both Bush and Gore accepted invitations to appear on *Saturday Night Live*, Bush seemed to operate more within the comic frame than Gore. Smith and Voth argued that "despite both candidates accepting their roles as clowns, the fundamental difference between their actions is that Gore appeared to initially reject his role whereas Bush willingly accepted and embraced his role" (117). The caricatures of Bush and Gore that appeared on *Saturday Night Live* had different effects on the two candidates. Gore saw the skit as a critique of his rhetorical strategy and attempted to



make changes to his approach. Smith and Voth argue that Bush was more skilled at going along with the joke by presenting himself as in on it (118).

They mentioned that on the Monday before the 2000 election, both candidates participated in primarily popular culture venues (i.e., “Live with Regis,” “The Rosie O’Donnell Show,” and “The Late Show with David Letterman”). The candidates viewed these forums as necessary to reaching untapped voters and improving their public personas.

Gring-Pemble and Watson (2003) take a better approach than most in that they recognize the difficulty in distinguishing among humor, satire, and irony. Further, they see that “the audience can laugh at the humorous elements in the ironic discourse but reject the disparagement that is its goal” (138). They take to task James Finn Garner’s book, *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, arguing that

Garner crosses the line from the comical to the vindictive and polemical, stressing the negative and risking the perils that caustic, sardonic commentaries invite—namely, divisiveness. (151)

Gring-Pemble and Watson argue that this holds for other forms of humor beyond irony. They make the claim that the humor and the persuasion are not necessarily connected (i.e., one can successfully amuse while simultaneously failing to persuade). They go on to place the limit of humor, specifically satire, at the point where the humor serves to divide and cut off further discussion.

#### *Questions still to answer*

Many issues have been raised in the literature of philosophy, psychology, communication, and rhetoric concerning humor and laughter, particularly at their

intersection with political speech. Not every issue identified within humor studies is relevant to the current project. The two major topics that rise to the surface of this inquiry are an ontology of humor (including a classification of humorous occurrences) and the strategic uses of humor.

#### Ontology of humor and the classification of humorous occurrences

The basic step of the identification of humor has proven to be a contested issue, although the field of philosophy, having debated the superiority, relief, and incongruity theories, has reached no definitive conclusion. We saw that Plato, Hobbes favored the superiority theory. The relief theory was put forward by Shaftesbury, Bergson, Spencer and Freud. Aristotle was an early proponent of incongruity, while the theory was extended by Kant and Schopenhauer. Taken together, these approaches seek to find the causes of humor and do not always provide the criteria for the identification of humorous utterances. Such criteria will be given in Chapter Two.

#### The strategic uses of humor

The largest gap in the current state of knowledge seems to be an understanding of the connection between a humorous attempt and a persuasive situation. What remains to be explored is a classification of humorous occurrences in terms of speaker, audience, and intention. Many of the theorists and critics discussed above offer useful but limited accounts of humor strategies. Roeckelein (2002) observed that there is no “organized or systematized body of scientific knowledge on the psychology of humor” (4). Derks (2003) identifies “aggression, application, individual and group differences, methodology and measurement, nature of the stimulus, and social aspects” as the principal topics

concerning psychological research into humor. These issues, particularly application and social aspects are relevant to my attempt to explain the role of strategic humor.

We live in an age when ABC News includes political humor on *This Week*, its Sunday news program, and politicians and candidates regularly appear on late night comedy talk shows.<sup>33</sup> A better conceptualization of political-rhetorical humor is needed to facilitate a fuller understanding of modern political discourse, not just from commentators, but from the primary political actors themselves. Gring-Pemble and Watson (2003) conclude that “the challenge for critical rhetoricians and students of public address, then, is to recognize humor as a powerful rhetorical strategy, to identify its various forms and uses, and to highlight the challenge it can pose to open debate of controversial issues” (151). What we need now is for those strands of knowledge to be gathered up and woven into a fuller articulation of the factors affecting the use of humor by political speakers. There are several questions for which we currently have no satisfactory answer. How do we identify an occurrence of rhetorical humor? Why use humor in some situations and not others? What factors concerning the audience, subject, and target of the humor should the judicious speaker consider? And perhaps most significantly, how can humor be employed as a rhetorical strategy to assist the speakers in the attainment of their argumentative objectives? This has been the challenge from at least the time of Cicero and this project intends to further that inquiry.

In Chapter Two, I shall develop a theory of rhetorical humor that demonstrates the utility of an intentional, speaker-centered approach to rhetorical humor. I shall further

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<sup>33</sup> For a list of political figures who have been guests on Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* see “List of The Daily Show Guests” (2007).

consider under what conditions the political speaker would consider employing rhetorical humor. The third and final part of the theory will present an architectonics of the strategic functions of rhetorical humor in political discourse. I shall illustrate the theory through the examination of examples of American political humor including examples in which the speaker's attempt to use humor failed or resulted in negative consequences.

After establishing the theory of rhetorical humor, I shall examine, in depth, discourses by three prominent political figures. The speakers use rhetorical humor, among other strategies, to advance a particular point of view. This approach allows me both to develop a comprehensive theory of rhetorical humor and to explore the function of humor in a political context.

In selecting texts to analyze using my theory of rhetorical humor, I considered three rhetorical situations in which humor could be employed as a rhetorical strategy: (1) a rhetorical situation in which humor is both welcome and required, (2) a rhetorical situation in which humor is welcome, common, but not required of the speaker, and (3) a rhetorical situation in which humor is neither required nor common. A text that fits the first of above categories is President Bill Clinton's address to the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner in 2000, which will be examined in Chapter Three. This address was the last of eight annual presidential speeches that Clinton delivered to the Association and in this venue humor was not only expected, but required of the speaker. Chapter Four is an analysis of Ann Richards's Keynote Address at the 1988 Democratic National Convention and serves as an illustration of the second category. This speech of national importance used rhetorical humor as a principal appeal through much of the speech. Humor is commonly found in national convention keynote

addresses, though it is certainly not a required element. Concerning the third category, I shall examine speeches by Sojourner Truth concerning the abolition of slavery and the equality of rights. Of particular interest is Truth's 1851 Akron speech, perhaps the most famous of Truth's discourses. Truth frequently employed rhetorical humor as a strategy, often to the surprise of her audiences. In these occasions where rhetorical humor is neither required nor expected, a theory of rhetorical humor in political discourse helps us better to understand the strategic choices available to the speaker.

Through the development of a synthetic theory of humor in political rhetoric and its application as a critical heuristic, it is hoped that this project will contribute to our understanding of discourse, politics, and that most human of experiences, humor.

## Chapter Two

### A New Theory of Rhetorical Humor in Political Discourse, Illustrated by Examples of American Political Rhetoric

Humor is a dangerous rhetorical tool for the speaker to employ. I can think of no other device by which the speaker is immediately confronted with the success or failure of a rhetorical strategy in quite the same way as the horrific silence of a room in which a failed humorous attempt lingers. While scholars from a variety of fields including philosophy, psychology, communication, and rhetoric have looked at humor, it is still a strategy only slightly understood. There are many valuable insights found in the literature discussed in Chapter One, however, there exists no comprehensive theory of the use of humor in political discourse. Many of the rhetorical studies that examine political humor are either atheoretical or do not advance a theoretical perspective used to analyze the texts.<sup>1</sup> The existing literature on rhetorical humor fails to provide an adequate means of identifying humorous instances, does not offer a substantive account of the functions of audience, argument, or targets, and does not synthesize the strategies into a comprehensive account. Most significantly, there is not a move made from the prescriptive strategies to a critical hermeneutic of rhetorical humor. What I propose is to examine humor as a strategy of rhetoric, particularly in its application in American political discourse. To achieve that goal, I shall examine humorous utterances within a

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion of rhetorical studies of political humor on pages 39-44.

pragmatics framework, explain the functions of humor in rhetoric, and provide examples and analyzed of instances of rhetorical humor.

Although the purpose of this project is not to determine what makes a discourse funny, there must be an understanding of funniness and its difference from humor before there can be an examination of the rhetorical function of humor. Much of the work on that project has been done by philosophers from Plato to Kant to contemporary linguistic philosophers such as Cohen and Attardo. The three major theories of humor (i.e., superiority, relief, and incongruity) have been attempts to construct a universal theory of humor. Given that scholars still debate which theory is more accurate, I think it is best to use each of the traditional theories as they apply to individual cases to inform an understanding of humor put forward by the linguistic philosophers. The traditional theories seem to describe what makes something funny and inform rhetorical strategies rather than offer a complete explanation of what humor is.<sup>2</sup> With this position on the three major humor theories in mind, we now turn to consider the theory of rhetorical humor in political discourse.

### *An Ontology of Rhetorical Humor*

The first step in determining the role of rhetorical humor must be to define the major ideas. A theory that attempts to explain how political speakers use humor for rhetorical purposes should be able to account for two issues: (1) the identification of accidental, unsuccessful, and successful humorous activities, and (2) the positioning of the meaning that is created between speaker and audience regarding the humorous status of a statement (i.e., who gets to decide if an attempt at humor was made).

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<sup>2</sup> Superiority is used to establish or reinforce power roles, relief is concerned with the effect of laughter as much as humor, and incongruity exploits the uncertainty in a potentially humorous interaction.

## Humor is a Speaker-Centered Practice

Not every instance of laughter is an indication of humor, and further, not every instance of humor is important as a rhetorical event. I am primarily interested in those occasions when a speaker intended to deliver a humorous remark and the audience recognized that an attempt was made to amuse them. Many jokes are an aural experience and work much better if heard rather than read. Similarly, audience reaction is best observed first hand or through recorded media. Should we observe the smiles on the faces of an audience or hear their laughter or read the bracketed audience response of “[Laughter]” in a text, this will likely indicate that there has been an occurrence of interest. I propose three nested categories (Fig. 1) for the identification of events that have amusement or laughter as a response, whether intentional or unintentional, or sought as a response, whether successful or not.<sup>3</sup> These three categories in order of increasing exclusivity are the risible, humor, and rhetorical humor.

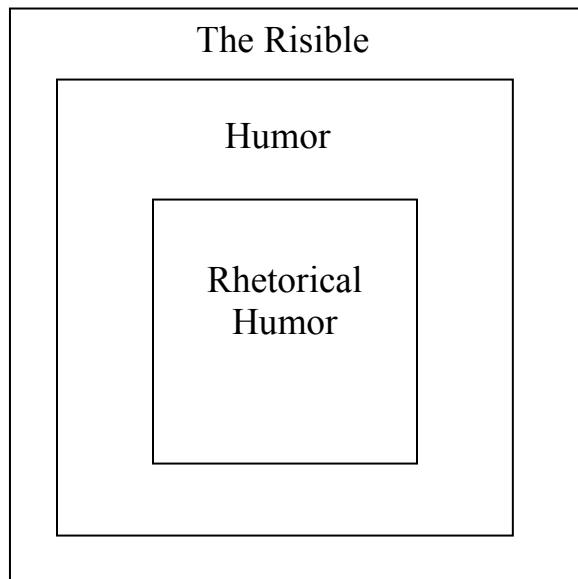


Figure 1. Nested Categories of Humorous Utterances

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<sup>3</sup> I have developed this general conception of humor in several conference papers (2001, 2002, 2004).



Without knowing anything about the context of an utterance, other than that it seemed to produce amusement or laughter, we can place it within the first category of the risible. Broadly conceived, this includes all those instances of unintentional audience amusement, where something occurs that arouses amusement, but without the intention of the speaker that the laughter should arise (e.g., laughing at someone slipping on a banana peel or laughing at a speaker's mistake). The risible is not limited to, but includes, those situations in which the speaker did not attempt to use humor but the audience was amused. As the broadest category of amusing utterances, the risible also includes speech which intentionally seeks the amusement of an audience.

The second category is humor. Throughout this project I shall use the term humor to refer to a linguistic act on the part of a speaker that carries with it the intended effect of producing a state of amusement or mirth in the audience.<sup>4</sup> This is humor as it is most likely colloquially conceived. Telling a joke to an audience is a standard example. What is important for the relationship between humor and rhetoric is that humor is designed by a speaker (i.e., not determined solely by the interpretation of the auditor) and that its purpose is to amuse. The adept speaker can attempt to take an instance that begins in the unintentionally risible and turn it into an intentional sustainment of the mirthful state.

Rhetorical humor is the third, and for the purposes of this project, the most significant category. I define rhetorical humor as a linguistic act on the part of a speaker that carries with it the intended effect of producing a state of amusement or mirth in the auditor for the purpose of bringing about a change in attitude or belief. Some of these instances are themselves a persuasive argument and others will be those that create a condition by which persuasion is sought (e.g., securing the good will of the audience). By

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<sup>4</sup> Grimes (1955) describes this as the "mirth response" to public address.

and large, comedians seek to entertain, not change the audience's beliefs on certain issues, though that may happen.<sup>5</sup> When rhetorical humor is employed, the goal is not only to entertain, but in the political realm especially, to change belief or move to action. The point of intersection between humor and persuasion is that humor can move the audience toward a disposition in which they are more likely to accept the speaker's claims that follow the use of humor. The contingent aspect of humor (i.e., the audience must supply a meaning to get the joke) grants speakers the opportunity to display elements with which the audience can identify.

A brief examination of a comment by President George W. Bush should clarify the distinction between the risible, humor, and rhetorical humor. When Bush erred in his pronunciation of "subliminal,"<sup>6</sup> it is something that we may laugh at, but it is not humor or rhetorical humor, it is simply a mistake and therefore, part of the risible. When a clip of the mistake is shown on *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart is using Bush's mistake to create a state of amusement in his audience. His primary goal though is to entertain, making the example part of the humor category. George W. Bush himself exploited the incident through his use of rhetorical humor. On the *Saturday Night Live: Presidential Bash* (aired the Sunday before the 2000 presidential election) he makes fun of his own speaking difficulties. In a taped segment that opened the show, Bush delivered the following lines in a tone of mock-seriousness:

Good evening. I'm George W. Bush, Republican candidate for president of the United States. And I'm Governor of our nation's second largest state, which is

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<sup>5</sup> A recent example of this is Al Franken. His show on the Air America Network and books (e.g., *Rush Limbaugh is a Big, Fat Idiot* (1996)) served both to entertain and change or reinforce belief.

<sup>6</sup> On September 12, 2000, responding to a controversy concerning a single frame in a campaign ad, then Governor Bush referred four times to "subliminable" [*sic*] advertising. This verbal corruption, though unintended, did divert attention from the ad (Bruni 2000, A19).

bigger than every other state, except one. Also my father was president . . . Welcome to “Presidential Bash 2000,” a celebration of the best political satire from the first 25 years of *Saturday Night Live*. Now, when they asked me to help introduce tonight’s special I felt frankly “ambivalent” [*sic*]. Although I’m a big fan, I have seen some things in the show I thought, in a word, “offensive” [*sic*].<sup>7</sup>

In this example, candidate Bush exploited the presumed belief of the audience that he is not skilled in his use of language. He makes obvious, intentional “mistakes” that encourage the audience to recall real mistakes made in the past and dismiss them. It was unlikely that he would take time forty-eight hours before the election simply to entertain the American people. He was trying to get votes. He was trying to show that he was a good person and could laugh at himself. He tried to persuade his audience to vote for him. Bush turned a risible mistake into an intentional moment of rhetorical humor.

#### *Identification of Humorous Attempts*

In determining which texts to analyze, there must be a standard to identify humorous attempts by speakers. As discussed above, the presence of laughter is not a conclusive indicator of humor, but within public, political discourse, it is a likely one. Therefore, with the absence of mitigating factors, the presence of laughter, whether on the soundtrack of a video or audio recording or indicated by a notation on a transcript, will be used to identify potential instances of humor. Instances of humor can be identified without recourse to indications of audience laughter. Gaines (1979) observed that

discernment of what perlocutionary acts a speaker is attempting to commit requires neither direct nor inferential access to the speaker’s cognitive or affective

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<sup>7</sup> Bush and Vice President Gore appeared in separate pre-taped segments that were edited into a conversation for the introduction to the program. Gore’s comments are omitted from the quotation here.

states. This is because it may be inferred pragmatically that the speaker attempts the same perlocutions with the speech act that any rational speaker would be attempting with such an act in identical circumstances. (214n25)

Such identification requires an interpretation by the examiner, but it does allow for the consideration of discourses in which audience reaction is not available. As for failed attempts, subsequent statements by speakers indicating that their intention was meant to be viewed by the audience as humorous will be used.<sup>8</sup>

For the speaker, it is important that the audience recognizes that there was a humorous attempt. This can be accomplished through the use of various intention indicators by the speaker including exploitation of context, venue, incongruities, linguistic mechanisms, facial expressions, and laughter. It is left to the personal judgment of the auditor to determine if the humorous attempt is funny, but for the instance to count as humor or rhetorical humor, the speaker must intend for the utterance to create amusement and the audience must recognize that intention. The implication for this is that it is still possible for the speaker to achieve the desired persuasive goal without getting the audience to laugh and it is possible to have the audience laugh without achieving the persuasive goal. This delineation provides a three part approach to the successful consummation of a rhetorical humor attempt.

First, the speaker must seek intentionally to create a state of amusement in the audience and seek to change the audience's beliefs. Second, the audience must recognize the speaker's attempt to amuse. Third, the audience must find the attempt to be funny and experience a change in belief or attitude either directly or indirectly. The audience could

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Hillary Clinton made a joke about Mahatma Gandhi at a fundraising event, saying "He ran a gas station down in St. Louis." She later apologized for her "lame attempt at humor" (Suhr 2004, np).

be persuaded in belief or attitude directly (if the humor was itself an argument or linked to the central claim of the speech) or indirectly (if the goal was to make the audience better disposed to accept the argument or the speaker). The theoretical foundation for this approach to the identification of humorous attempts is found in the arena of pragmatics, particularly speech acts.

### *A Pragmatic Approach to Humor*

Jokes and humorous statements are speech activities—that is, a collection or deliberate sequence of speech acts designed for the purpose of creating laughter or amusement in the audience.<sup>9</sup> Pragmatics, concerned with how speakers and audiences create meaning through language, is a strong foundation on which to place a rhetorical theory of humor. Searle (1969) argued that “speaking a language is engaging in a (highly complex) rule-governed form of behavior” (12). Telling jokes is engaging in a (often highly complex) rule-governed form of behavior. To understand how the joke functions we must understand the rules that govern it. Consider the “knock-knock” joke.<sup>10</sup> When someone says “knock-knock,” an American listener will likely know that the expected response is “who’s there?” If the listener does not respond correctly the joke cannot succeed, but because most people do know the rules, the joke has a chance to make the listener laugh.<sup>11</sup>

Joking itself is not in an illocutionary act, rather joking can be used to accomplish all sorts of illocutions. Among the illocutionary acts that can be achieved using humor are

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of speech activities see Searle (1979, 58-75) and Fotion (2003, 34-51).

<sup>10</sup> Knock, knock!  
*Who’s there?*  
Euripides.  
*Euripides* who?  
Euripides pants and I won’t make you another pair.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of knock-knock jokes and child development see Shaeffer and Hopkins (1988).

commenting, requesting, criticizing, apologizing, and censuring. John Searle's theory of speech acts also helps to clarify how we can recognize a joke without finding it funny. He argued that "you could not know that a given extensional criterion failed without having some conception of what constituted success or failure. But to have that is in general to understand the concept" (1979, 10). The same is true for identifying humor. If we think to ourselves that we did not find a give statement funny, there is the implicature that creating amusement was the intent of the speaker. One does not have to be amused by a joke to recognize that it is a joke, even if one understands the mechanism that was supposed to elicit amusement.

Searle points out that it is not always possible "to find or invent a form of expression that will produce all the effects in hearers that one means to produce. For example, literary or poetic effort, emotions, beliefs, and so on, we need to distinguish what the speaker means from certain kinds of a effects he intends to produce in his hearers" (1979, 20). When attempting to change the emotional state of hearers (e.g., amuse them), the speaker may succeed in getting the hearer to understand that the goal was to amuse, but there is nothing that consequently compels the changed emotional state. The gap between understanding that a joke has been told and finding it funny is the distinction between the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary effect.

Searle (1969) identifies J. L. Austin as the first to introduce the notion of perlocutionary effects as the consequences or effects that speech acts have on the actions, thoughts, or beliefs of hearers. Here Searle explicitly uses the examples of persuading or convincing as perlocutionary effects (25). According to Gaines "perlocutionary acts always involve the production of an effect in an audience by means of an utterance"

(1979, 208). This identification leads to the application of the concept of perlocution to the rhetorical theory of humor. An analysis of humor using Searle's definition of the illocutionary force indicator (i.e., the utterance content that allows speakers to identify to the hearer which illocutionary act they are committing) is further evidence that a speech acts foundation is useful for an examination of rhetorical humor. The kinds of illocutionary force indicators Searle lists certainly apply to humor: "word order, stress, intonation contour, punctuation, the mood of the verb, and the so-called performative verbs" (1969, 30). A fully consummated speech activity involves the successful understanding of the illocutionary acts but not necessarily the intended change in emotion or belief or attitude.

In the case of humor, the successful joke must be understood by the hearer to be a joke (illocutionary act) and must also be found funny (perlocutionary effect). If a speaker delivers a joke, the intention, at least on one level is for the hearer to find the joke funny and as a consequence, laugh. If the hearer laughs at, for instance, the speaker's mistake when telling the joke, this is not laughing at the joke and therefore, not a perlocutionary effect of the joke. This may go some way toward discrediting the superiority theory of humor. While we may laugh at the low station or misfortune of others, this laughter does not conclusively mean that the hearer is reacting to humor. If humor is the intentional conveyance of a linguistic act designed to create amusement in the hearer, this lack of intention in the mistake would not render the superiority theory of humor to sufficient for this discussion. Gaines argued that

because perlocutionary acts are defined as successful attempts of a speaker to produce particular effects, a consequential effect cannot be said to consummate a

speaker's perlocutionary act if the production of the effects was not the subject of the speaker's attempt. (1979, 214)

If I tell a joke, but you don't laugh, given that you understand that I was trying to tell you a joke and that you had the requisite understanding necessary to "get" the joke, we could say that the speech activity has failed. If I tell a joke in a situation in which I want to change attitude or belief as a consequence of the amused state that the audience is now in, to get them to laugh is enough for a successful speech activity (a sequence of illocutionary acts), but to complete the perlocutionary goal of the joke, their attitude or belief must change.

To make an analogy, consider the case of a candidate running for Congress. As a voter you listen to the speeches, debates, and advertisements of the candidates. The candidate runs on the platform of lower taxes, stronger national defense, and universal health care. You find these issues compelling and the candidate's position on them persuasive. At this point are you compelled to vote for this candidate? Even though the candidate has convinced you that he or she is best qualified for the job, you are under no obligation to vote them into office. In this example, the candidate has accomplished the goal of persuading you and changing your belief concerning his or her qualifications, but they failed in his or her ultimate goal in that you did not vote for them. This is similar to the situation when you tell a joke, tell it correctly, the audience understands the joke, can understand the features that make it funny, but they still do not laugh or enter into a mirthful state. The joke itself is a successfully completed speech activity, yet the perlocutionary effect is a failure. This important issue regarding the status of jokes (i.e.,



whether consequent amusement is necessary for speech activity to be considered a joke) has been a subject of consideration under speech act theory.

The principal figure that we find at the intersection of speech acts and humor is Ted Cohen. Cohen's 1983 book chapter "Jokes" explores role of joke-telling in the attainment of community and the relationship of a joke to its proper effect (i.e., amusement). He admits that you can understand a good joke, but still not laugh. Getting a joke does not always mean believing the premise of the joke. It means understanding what a joke is (Cohen 1999, 21). But in the process of trying to determine what a joke is, Cohen asks an interesting question concerning the identification of humorous attempts. If you do not find a joke funny, but still recognize that it is a joke, "What reason, have you for thinking it is a joke?" (1983, 121). He points out that, of course, there is a difference between finding the funniness and sensing or feeling the funniness.

Cohen makes a claim that jokes, at first, seem similar to arguments as a linguistic form (i.e., premises, conclusion, recognizable forms). But Cohen posits a distinction between arguments and jokes concerning their conclusions:

When you finish your argument, when you give the final premise, or if you're especially thorough, when you've given all the premises and gone on to say "therefore," and then recited the conclusion—when you've given the QED—what do you expect? Well, you expect your hearer to click into believing the conclusion. You expect the gap between your argument and his belief to be bridged. Compare that with finishing your joke, delivering the punch line. Now what do you expect? Laughter, of course. Your feeling when you finish the joke seems to me not unlike the feeling when you complete your argument. It is a

sense of having done something meant to move your hearer, of having created a momentum which now moves to him. But there is a difference. In both cases there is your expectation: of assent to your argument's conclusion, of laughter at your joke's punch line; but for the argument your expectation is more a demand, while for the joke it is much less a demand and far more a hope. (1983, 123)

Is the conclusion of a sound argument a demand upon the conviction of the audience? In the realm of the classical syllogism, it is. To accept the premises and the argument form is to accept the conclusion. If we move to a more contemporary view of argument, Toulmin claimed that

In logic as in morals, the real problem of rational assessment—telling sound arguments from untrustworthy ones, rather than consistent from inconsistent ones—requires experience, insight and judgment. (2003, 173)

Toulmin presents the idea that arguments are more than just mathematics, but Cohen seemed to remain with the older view of logic. Cohen's claim is that it is irrational not to be persuaded by a good argument, but that is the position of a philosopher and not a rhetorician. I think we can be perfectly rational creatures and still not be persuaded by a good argument.

To understand that an argument or a joke is the intention of the speaker and not to find the argument persuasive or the joke to be funny is not irrational. It is a choice. It is that choice that separates Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's argument from syllogistic demonstration and Cohen's idea of argument. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argue in *The New Rhetoric* that "only the existence of an argumentation that is neither compelling nor arbitrary can give meaning to human freedom, a state in which reasonable choice can

be exercised” (1969, 514). What I find fascinating is that the audience is not compelled to laugh at a joke, and while it is risky for a speaker to use humor the rewards can be great. Laughter in response to humor is like Hobbes’s description of sudden glory. We have no control over the initial reaction to something we find really funny.

In the stronger part of Cohen’s case, he argued that there is a causal relationship between a joke and laughter that is not arbitrary. That jokes sometimes elicit laughter is not an arbitrary result. Cohen argue, incorrectly I believe, that we should laugh when we hear a joke (124). There is nothing that compels us to laugh at any given joke, regardless of our understanding the joke. He goes onto illustrate how the point in telling a joke is the attainment of community and that there is “special intimacy in shared laughter” (124). Cohen claimed that there are (possibly) two genera of jokes: pure and conditional. He then identifies two species of conditional jokes that will be useful in our examination of rhetorical humor: hermetic and affective jokes.

Hermetic jokes are those that require special knowledge to understand them. For example, some political humor makes reference to a specific political figure’s scandal or other event. Unless the audience knows the unstated background of the joke, they will fail to understand it. In 1998 while embroiled in the Lewinsky scandal, President Clinton still attended the dinner at the Gridiron Club and attempted to handle the situation with humor. He made no mention of the scandal in his State of the Union Address of January 27, 1998, but he began his speech at the Gridiron Club dinner two months later by asking “So how was your week?” (quoted in Colton 1998, E01). This was a clear attempt to create a good mood in his audience while introducing a difficult issue that was assuredly on everyone’s minds. The previous week had brought subpoenas and the invocation of

executive privilege. If the audience did not know the context, it would be unclear why Clinton's question was supposed to be funny.

Cohen concedes that not every hermetic joke offers itself on an all or nothing basis. Some have depths which permit appreciation on different if cumulative levels (1983, 125). He argued that those members of the audience able to appreciate more levels of each joke will find that joke to be better. Although he does not define what it means to have a better joke, I assume it means that it is a funnier joke or that it encourages more amusement in the audience.

The category of jokes Cohen terms affective also requires a previous disposition but the background required is not one of knowledge but of attitude or prejudice. The largest group of affective jokes that we would typically think of would be ethnic jokes. Cohen recognizes that one issue concerning conditional jokes is that they can be a kind of dissemblance. An example could be the speaker who travels to a new city, who makes a joke that will be conditional for the people of that city (e.g., the teller is in Cleveland and makes a joke about people in Cincinnati). Cohen maintains that "it is not necessary that one actually believe that Jews are immoral, or Poles inept, or Italians lascivious, or whatever: indeed, most appreciators known to me have the opposite belief" (1983, 126). It is not that important that the speaker holds the attitude or belief on display in the joke. It is important that the audience understands the meaning of the joke. The funnier and more successful joke would likely be one in which the speaker and the audience share the attitude or belief, but neither condition is necessary for the joke to be fully consummated.

There is a link between Cohen's conditional jokes and Aristotle's description of the enthymeme.<sup>12</sup> Cohen argued that in hearing a joke, listeners give their active complicity. Their special background is called into play as it gives a certain sensitivity to the joke, one that says I'm in on this from the beginning. An enthymeme works the same way in asking for the complicity of the audience in the argument process. Walton (1998) describes the process of working out the missing premise of the enthymeme as

the problem of determining what a participant's argument can correctly be said to be in a particular case in a text of discourse depend on the commitments of that arguer, as can be determined from both the given text of discourse and also its context, that is, in this case, reconstructing it using the normative mode of persuasion dialogue. (62)

The speaker bases the choice of arguments on an expectation of shared knowledge which can be identified by the listener. When you do in fact share this knowledge, you become part of a community with the speaker. Cohen wrote "if you wish to set your audience in motion, especially with an eye toward provoking them to action then you are well advised to induce them to supply the initial momentum themselves" (132). To sum up, the structure of rhetorical humor is a speech activity that exploits a previously held attitude or knowledge that can be used to reinforce or change that attitude or knowledge. We are now in a position to develop a taxonomy for the classification of rhetorical humor.

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<sup>12</sup> Cohen is not the only scholar to recognize the link between jokes and enthymemes. See Carroll (1991), Edwards and Chen (2000), and Pepicello (1987).

### *Classification of Rhetorical Humor*

To understand how rhetorical humor functions strategically we need to consider three factors. As discussed above, effective jokes often exploit an audience's commonly held attitudes or knowledge. Therefore the subject matter of rhetorical humor is significant. We also need to consider the target of the humor, particularly when it is used to attack a person. The third consideration is for the composition of the audience. Since the appropriateness of humor depends upon the predicted response of the audience, an examination of the disposition of the audience is in order.

#### Subject

Rhetorical humor used in a discourse may have a relationship to the central argument of the speech. It is not necessary that rhetorical humor be directed at the main argument, but we do need to consider the different relationships between the subject of the humor and the argument of the speech. There are three levels of the relation of the subject matter of rhetorical humor to the argument of the speech: germane, tangential, or unrelated. Rhetorical humor that is germane is tied directly to the central argument of the speech. Bella Abzug, a Democratic member of Congress from New York spoke at a fundraiser for the National Women's Political Caucus on March 30, 1977 in which she argued for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. In her speech, Abzug said "Our struggle today is not to get an Einstein appointed as an assistant professor. It is for a woman schlemiel to get as quickly promoted as a male schlemiel" (quoted in *New York Times* 1977, 22). This use of humor is central to Abzug's argument in the speech that all women need equal rights. She made the comment with her usual blunt delivery and invocation of Yiddish vocabulary.

Tangential rhetorical humor will have some relation to the central argument but will be less about trying to advance the argument through humor than about other strategic functions (e.g., securing the good will of the audience), though the subject must still bear some relation to the central argument of the discourse. For example, John F. Kennedy in his 1960 presidential campaign told the following story:

I know something about Mr. Khrushchev, who I met a year ago in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and I know something about the nature and history of his country, which I visited in 1939. Mr. Khrushchev himself, it is said, told the story a few years ago about the Russian who began to run through the Kremlin, shouting, "Khrushchev is a fool. Khrushchev is a fool." He was sentenced, the Premier said, to twenty-three years in prison, "three for insulting the party secretary, and twenty for revealing a state secret." (1961, 259)

This story operates on multiple levels. First, Kennedy is able to use rhetorical humor to mock Khrushchev and the Soviet system. By portraying Khrushchev as laughing at himself, Kennedy takes most of the sting out of the criticism. At the same time, and more significantly from an argumentation perspective, Kennedy uses rhetorical humor to make a claim for his own knowledge and experience in foreign affairs. This example is only tangential to Kennedy's central argument in the speech, which is that he had the foreign policy experience necessary to be president, because it does not speak directly to his claim that his experience is superior to that of his opponent, Richard Nixon.

Rhetorical humor that is unrelated may still function strategically but the focus is on rhetorical purposes not related to the central argument of the speech. President Ronald Reagan was known for his love of jokes and humorous stories and would include one or

two in nearly every speech. The following is a joke that he frequently told, regardless of the subject of the speech.

I know that others have given you thorough briefings, so I promise to keep my own remarks short. You know, I often reflect that George Washington—I try to keep this in mind—gave an inaugural address of just 135 words and became, of course, a great President. And then there was William Henry Harrison. Harrison gave an inaugural address that droned on for nearly 2 hours. It was a blustery March day. Harrison caught pneumonia, and a month later he was dead.

[Laughter] I told him to keep it short. [Laughter] (Reagan 1987, paragraph 4)

This version of the joke was delivered at a meeting on economic competitiveness, but he also used the same joke in a speech to a White House briefing for trade association representatives on free and fair trade (Reagan 1986). This joke does reference the length of the speech and Reagan's advanced age, but has no relation to its argumentative objectives other than to secure the good will of his audience.

#### Target

The direction or targets of rhetorical humor can be persons, actions, or things. In *De Inventione*, Cicero argued that “all propositions are supported in argument by attributes of persons or of actions” (1.34) and the same is true of rhetorical humor. The speaker or another person known to the audience (e.g., the speaker's opponent) are common targets. One of Kennedy's most famous quips was delivered at the Gridiron Club dinner in March 1958 in response to jokes about his father's wealth and influence. Kennedy, running for reelection to the Senate, took out a fake telegram, telling the audience that it was from “my generous daddy” and read “Dear Jack: Don't buy a single



vote more than is necessary. I'll be damned if I'm going to pay for a landslide" (quoted in Free 1985, 113). This subject of the joke is Kennedy's father, a wealthy investor and former United States Ambassador to the Court of St. James's.

Moving beyond personal attributes to the actions of oneself or an opponent is the second category. In his speech to the Alfalfa Club in 1997, President Clinton mocked the perception that he was obsessed with his legacy by making fun of his actions and those of his staff

We will take our case to the media . . . Mike McCurry is going on A&E Biography. Erskine Bowles will be on the History Channel . . . And James Carville has announced that he is making a full-scale assault on the scholars at the Heritage Foundation . . . The Posterity War Room has already put together a comparative fact sheet . . . I want to share some of it with you:

Bill Clinton added 1.5 million acres of land to our national parks. By his own admission, George Washington was personally responsible for the deforestation of cherry trees.

Bill Clinton reduced crime on our streets; Thomas Jefferson's Vice President shot a guy!

Bill Clinton has signed more nuclear disarmament than James Madison, Andrew Jackson, and James K. Polk combined. (quoted by August and Horowitz 1997, 21)

The third and broadest category of targets, other than persons or actions, includes the conditions of the event in which the speech is taking place. On a trip to Paris in 1961, Jacqueline Kennedy won over the French press through her fluency in French and her

glamorous style. *The New York Times* reported that “not since Queen Elizabeth II of Britain was here in 1957 have Paris’ newspapers packed their pages with so many bouquets” (Blair 1961, 7). This reception led President Kennedy to try to get back some of the spotlight by saying at a press luncheon, “I do not think it altogether inappropriate to introduce myself to this audience. I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris, and I have enjoyed it” (quoted in Blair 1961, 7). By recognizing that the circumstances of the trip had changed, Kennedy was able to use rhetorical humor to praise his wife while winning over the audience with his self-deprecation. Speakers must take into account the target of their humor, considering especially the appropriateness of self-deprecating humor and humor used to attack an opponent.

#### Audience

The third area of consideration is the composition of the audience. The type of rhetorical humor to be used, as well as the strategic functions available, will depend upon the speaker’s knowledge of the audience. The audience can be made up of those previously well disposed to the speaker (e.g., delegates at a political convention), those hostile to the speaker, or an audience with mixed sympathies. The type of humor will change based on the composition of the audience. In a media age it is crucial that a speaker is aware that the speech will reach many people beyond those in the speaker’s physical presence and in this sense that all audiences are mixed. The speaker should choose humor that is adapted to the needs of the situation and audience.

Speeches that are given before audiences that admire the speaker allow for broader use of humor. Some jokes will have an audience beyond that, which was originally intended by the speaker. George W. Bush’s joke at the 2000 Al Smith

Foundation Dinner is an example. “This is an impressive crowd, the haves, and the have mores. Some people call you the elite. I call you my base” (paragraph 3). The joke may have worked to the audience in white ties, but it does not translate as well to the population at large and left him open for criticism by Michael Moore who showed this excerpt from the speech (albeit with the laughter omitted from the soundtrack) in *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore 2004). It is less likely that a speaker will use humor as a rhetorical strategy before a hostile audience. One notable example of this strategy is found in Senator Edward Kennedy’s speech at the conservative Liberty Baptist College in 1983. Kennedy was invited by the school’s chancellor and leader of the Moral Majority, Dr. Jerry Falwell. In his introduction to the speech, Kennedy says

a number of people in Washington were surprised that I was invited to speak here—and even more surprised when I accepted the invitation. They seem to think that it’s easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for a Kennedy to come to the campus of Liberty Baptist College. (paragraph 2)

With this strategic use of humor, Kennedy sought to meet his audience at a point of common understanding. His biblical reference (“easier for a camel to pass to the eye of the needle”)<sup>13</sup> would be well known to his audience.<sup>14</sup> This example is also one of self-deprecating humor in that Kennedy puts himself in to the position of the “rich man” thereby making fun of his status.

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew 19:24: And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God (King James’ Version).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the role of audience in Kennedy’s speech see Branham and Pearce (1987).

## *The Strategic Functions of Rhetorical Humor*

Rhetorical humor can function in multiple ways for the speaker and the audience. One of the shortcomings of the existing literature is the lack of synthesis of the strategic functions of humor. I propose that a nine-part treatment of the strategic functions of rhetorical humor that will provide a more comprehensive and informative approach to the subject than the theories that currently exist. Three broad functional categories: dispositional, topical, and personal, allow for a grouping of the strategies into a system reflective of the traditional means of artistic proof: pathos, logos, and ethos. While these categories are distinct, a speaker may accomplish multiple strategic functions with a single instance of rhetorical humor.

### Dispositional Strategies

Dispositional strategies are used to influence the audience's feelings about the speaker and situation. Rhetorical humor which engages a dispositional strategy seeks to move the audience into a state of receptivity. Such rhetorical humor can be used to gain the attention of an audience, create a positive mood, and establish identification. Senator Bob Dole (R-KA) commented that

if you use it [humor] properly, I think [humor] puts people at ease. If you've got an audience or you walk into some room and it looks quiet and cold and still, you can kind of wake people up . . . Plus I think it gives people sort of a good feeling about the speaker before they get covered up with speech. (quoted in Yarwood 2004, 105)

The first dispositional strategy is to gain the attention of the audience (SD1). If there is one item of conventional wisdom about public speaking, it is that the speaker should

open with a joke. Typically, this opening joke will serve to get the attention of the audience and entreat them to listen to the rest of the speech. President John F. Kennedy gave a speech in Ohio on January 6, 1962 in which he said, “There is no city in the United States in which I get a warmer welcome and fewer votes than Columbus, Ohio” (Kennedy 1964, 37).<sup>15</sup> There is little in this example of rhetorical humor that persuades the audience other than securing the audience’s attention (SD1). Kennedy does mention the name of the city thereby indicating to the audience that he is speaking directly to them and not delivering an overused joke.

Second, rhetorical humor can also serve to create a mood in the audience, thereby disposing them to hear the speaker’s other arguments, whether or not they are humorous (SD2). The results of creating this mood include securing the good will of the audience and relieving tension. At one of those hundred-dollars-a-plate fund raising dinners in Salt Lake City on September 23, 1960, Kennedy recognized the absurdity of the idea that people paid all this money for dinner. He opened his remarks by saying, “I am deeply touched. Not as deeply touched as you have been by coming to this dinner; nevertheless, it is a sentimental occasion” (1964, 7). Given that the dinner was a fundraiser for Kennedy’s nearly complete presidential campaign, it is reasonable to assume that the audience was already well disposed to him, yet he still sought to relieve the tension and create a positive mood that some might feel at donating a not insubstantial amount of money. Such a use of humor is rhetorical in that it seeks to reinforce the positive attitude the audience already has of Kennedy.

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<sup>15</sup> Sometimes, it’s funny because it’s not true. While Kennedy did lose Ohio to Nixon in the 1960 presidential election, the 46.7% of the vote he did receive was not close to his lowest total. The people of Mississippi, for example, opposed Kennedy in far great numbers than the Ohioans (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum 2007, under “1960 Presidential Election”).

Dispositional strategies can be used to create identification of values and beliefs between the speaker and the audience (SD3). In getting a joke, the audience realizes that they share assumptions and attitudes with the speaker. When a speaker makes a humorous utterance that the audience finds amusing, there is likely to be identification between speaker and audience, disposing them to listen further to the speech. To demonstrate the third dispositional function of creating identification, consider this reply by Governor Adlai Stevenson to a supporter of his presidential campaign. The supporter told Stevenson that “every thinking person supports you.” Stevenson replied “It is not enough, madam, I need a majority” (quoted in *New York Times* April 6, 1976, 22). Stevenson seeks to identify with his interlocutor and his other supporters who would consider themselves thinking people. Rhetorical humor that aims at identification may also involve topical or personal strategies, but the focus here is on the emotional state of the audience as a result of the recognition of identification.

#### Topical Strategies

Rhetorical humor which seeks to use the subject matter of the humor to achieve strategic goals is the second category. In these instances, rhetorical humor is used to make an argument about or distance the speaker from the issue at hand. Rhetorical humor can be employed topically to make light of an argument, to introduce a topic, or to divert the audience's attention away from a particular issue. Senator Alan Simpson (R-WY) argued that

if you use it [humor] right, you can get away with murder. If you misuse it, you can be the subject of ridicule. So the use of humor enables you to open the door or open eyes or open minds, and then drive your truck right through the gaping hole.

So you have opened them up with humor and then you can say something very serious that they will hear because they are receptive to what you are saying.

(quoted in Yarwood 2004, 105)

Rhetorical humor can be used to make light of an opposing argument (ST1). Depending on the subject matter of the humor, this can be done without addressing the details of the argument. President Reagan, at the 1986 White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, made a joke about his limited work hours:

Those last few weeks have really been hectic what with Libya, Nicaragua, and the budget and taxes. I don't know about you, but I've been working long hours. I've really been burning the *midday* oil. (paragraph 6)

Reagan used an incongruity (i.e., saying *midday* when the expected word is *midnight*) to lessen the impact of the argument by making light of it (ST1). This one joke alone would not end criticism of Reagan's work ethic, but it does, at least temporarily, take away from the power of the criticism.

When a speaker encounters a subject that is difficult to discuss, rhetorical humor can help to introduce the issue and allow the speaker and audience to explore the topic further (ST2). In a speech at the National Press Club in 2002, Rev. Al Sharpton responded to a previous criticism by a journalist that African-Americans were not as patriotic as other Americans. This view was based on the journalist's observation of a lack of American flags on a drive through a predominantly African-American community. Sharpton said his response was

I understand. So you took your one ride through the "hood" [Laughter.] and you didn't see as many flags as you see other places. Your conclusion is that we are

not as patriotic as others. If you hung around our community longer, you'd have noticed there are a lot of things we don't have that they have in other communities. (2002, paragraph 45)

Introducing the subject of racial and economic inequality can be difficult for a speaker. Even though these were central themes of Sharpton's presidential candidacy, he used rhetorical humor to broach the topic with an audience that was not entirely well disposed toward him.

Additionally, rhetorical humor can be used to divert the audience's attention away from an issue that would be detrimental to the speaker's strategic purpose for the speech (ST3). Robert Kennedy's stump speech in his 1964 campaign to represent New York in the United States Senate provides an example of using humor to divert the audience's attention from a difficult issue (ST3). In this case the issue was that Kennedy was from Massachusetts yet was running in New York. One of his speechwriters, Gerald Gardner, reported that Kennedy asked him about a way to deal with the issue with humor and in response, Gardner came up with this example of rhetorical humor (1986, 15).

To move past the carpetbagger issue, Kennedy began his stump speeches by taking on the issue.

People ask me why I came to New York. Well, a few months ago I read in the papers that California had passed New York in population. So I turned to my wife and I said "What can we do?" So we moved to New York and in just one day we increased the population by 10 and a half. [Pause.] I challenge any other candidate to make that statement! My opponent has just sixty days to match that record. (quoted in Gardner 1986, 15)



By using humor to move the attention of the audience away from his relocation to New York and toward his family,<sup>16</sup> Kennedy was able to overcome the issue.

#### Personal Strategies

The third category reflects personal strategies. Here, speakers seek to maintain or create an image of themselves or their opponents with the audience. This category differs from the dispositional strategies because they are establishing a feeling in the audience that may lead to their adherence to future arguments while personal strategies seek to persuade concurrently with their delivery. Personal strategies are also distinct from topical strategies because they focus on issues internal to the speaker instead of external events. The three types of personal strategies of rhetorical humor are demonstrating cleverness, deflecting personal criticism, and attacking an opponent personally while maintaining the esteem of the audience.

Rhetorical humor can demonstrate cleverness to win the admiration of the audience (SP1). Al Gore, while running for president in 2000, used rhetorical humor to demonstrate cleverness to win the admiration of the audience. One of the major issues of the campaign concerned Bush and Gore's different tax plans. To highlight this difference Gore said the following at the Al Smith dinner in October.

Another thing that bugs me is when people say I'm just a wonk obsessed with policy detail. Well, like so many Americans, I like to just kick back and relax and watch television for relaxation. One of my favorite shows is "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" Well, it should really be called "Who Wants to be After Taxes a \$651,437.70 Person?"

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<sup>16</sup> Kennedy and his wife Ethel had eight children and one on the way during the 1964 campaign.

Of course, that's under my plan.

Under Governor Bush's plan...[Laughter.]... it would be "Who Wants to be After Taxes a \$701,587.80 Person?" (2000, paragraph 16)

By setting the premise of his joke in a popular television game show of the time, Gore draws a distinction between himself and his opponent in way that shows his audience that he can laugh about their perceptions of him. This can be accomplished by the speaker's ability to use humor to clarify the obscure and to simplify the complex. This serves to increase the perception of the credibility of the speaker.

Rhetorical humor can be used to deflect criticism (SP2). In a debate, rhetorical humor can counter a personal attack just levied; in other speech settings, it can be used to deal with criticisms that exist about the speaker that are known to the audience. The Gridiron Club dinner frequently was a venue for politicians to use rhetorical humor. During the contentious 1932 presidential campaign, Herbert Hoover used rhetorical humor to deflect personal criticism by addressing a supposed decline in Gridiron humor that "maybe part of the general slump, or due to World War and bank failures . . . but I acknowledge at once that I am again to blame" (quoted in Free 1985, 94). With this joke, Hoover attempted to deflect criticism while "admitting" to his failures.

Rhetorical humor can also be used to attack an opponent while allowing the speaker to remain in the esteem of the audience (SP3). In the House of Representatives debate on the Missouri Compromise in 1820, John Randolph of Roanoke was attempting to filibuster the passage of the compromise. Whenever Randolph would pause, Philemon Beecher of Ohio would rise and try to "move the Previous Question" to end the filibuster. Growing tired of this Randolph replied:

Mr. Speaker, in the Netherlands, a man of small capacity, with bits of wood and leather, will, in a few moments, construct a toy that, with the pressure of thumb, will cry “Cuckoo! Cuckoo!” With less ingenuity, and with inferior materials, the people of Ohio have made a toy that will without much pressure, cry, “Previous Question, Mr. Speaker!” (quoted in Harris 1964, 56)

The filibuster was ultimately broken, but Schutz reported that “after the enormous laughter at his expense, he [Beecher] never crossed swords with Randolph again (Schutz 1977, 252). This example of rhetorical humor used to attack an opponent is evidence that humor can lead to real effects.

In this chapter I have laid out a theory of the strategies of rhetorical humor in political discourse.<sup>17</sup> I believe that this theory is valuable for three reasons. First, it revises and extends our knowledge about the role of humor as an aspect of rhetorical theory. Secondly, the theory has heuristic value for political figures who may wish to use humor rhetorically. Third, this theory is designed to serve as a critical hermeneutic that can be used to analyze the function of rhetorical humor in a wide variety of political discourse. Having expanded on the theoretical approaches of philosophical, communication, and rhetorical scholars, I believe that we are now in a better position to consider the relationship between humor and political persuasion. In the following chapters I shall apply this theory to the discourse of three speakers, each of whom speaks on greatly different topics, yet they employ many of the same strategies through their use of rhetorical humor.

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<sup>17</sup> I have compiled the classifications and strategies of rhetorical humor into a table placed on page 79.

Table 1. Terms established for the identification of rhetorical humor classifications and strategies

The following is an outline of terms discussed above for the identification of instances of rhetorical humor. In the chapters that follow, reference to the strategies will be made with the following indexical references.

Classification of humor

Subject (relationship to central argument)

    Germaine

    Tangential

    Unrelated

Target (the victim or “butt” of the joke)

    Person

    Action

    Thing

Audience (disposition toward the speaker)

    For

    Against

    Mixed

Strategies

    Dispositional

        secure the attention of the audience (SD1)

        create a positive mood (SD2)

        establish identification (SD3)

    Topical

        make light of an opposing argument (ST1)

        introduce an issue (ST2)

        divert the audience’s attention away from an issue (ST3)

    Personal

        demonstrate cleverness to win the admiration of the audience (SP1)

        deflect criticism (SP2)

        attack an opponent while maintaining the esteem of the audience (SP3)

## Chapter Three

### Joking to the Finish Line:

#### Bill Clinton's Legacy through Rhetorical Humor

“The best audience is intelligent, well-educated, and a little drunk.”

Vice President Albert W. Barkley

As the highest office in the United States government, the presidency has long been viewed as a serious and solemn institution. The rhetorical functions of the presidency have been explored in scores of scholarly works.<sup>1</sup> Another side to political rhetoric that is often overlooked involves the employment of humorous rhetoric. While presidents may use rhetorical humor in many different venues, the annual dinners of the White House Correspondents' Association, the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association, the Alfalfa Club, and the Gridiron Club are venues where humorous discourse is expected and essentially required of the chief executive. These events are described by Katz as “the four annual Washington humor dinners that take place from January through April—collectively known as the ‘Silly Season’” (2003, 3). President Clinton's speechwriter Michael Waldman argued that the status of the humor dinners has changed over the years from once “clubby affairs, reflecting the capital of ‘protocol, alcohol, and Geritol’” to more public, political events (2000, 165). It was the tradition that presidents spoke at these dinners, but their job was largely to be entertained, not to

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<sup>1</sup> For example Aune (2005), Bostdorff (1994), Dorsey (2002), Ellis (1998), Gelderman (1997), Kiewe (1994), Medhurst (1996, 2006), Parry-Giles (2002), Pauly (2001), Ryan (1988), Shogan (2006), Stuckey (1997), Tulis (1987), and Peterson (2004).

do the entertaining. According to Waldman, the contemporary versions of these events all but require the President of the United States “to perform, . . . to do comedy, Borscht Belt routines satirizing themselves and everyone around them” (2000, 165). It is unclear if Waldman celebrates or laments what the occasions have become, but Mark Katz, a humor writer for Bill Clinton maintains that “each year [at] these dinners, the president has an opportunity to come out and use humor in a way . . . to say things that otherwise get unsaid” (quoted in North and Begala 2000, np).

Presidents have attended these events since 1892, often delivering speeches filled with rhetorical humor. Notable non-humorous speeches given at what are now thought of as humor dinners include President Theodore Roosevelt’s “Man with the Muckrake” speech given at the Alfalfa Club on April 15, 1906 and President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s speech on the Lend-Lease Act, March 15, 1941, which he begins “This dinner of the White House Correspondents’ Association is unique. It is the first one at which I have made a speech in all these eight years” (paragraph 1). Regardless of how presidents or their writers feel about these venues for presidential humor, they are significant sources of presidential discourse that have received little scholarly treatment to this point.<sup>2</sup>

President Clinton continued the tradition by speaking at each of the events that comprise the Silly Season, including eight straight appearances at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner. In this chapter, I shall argue that Clinton’s final speech to the group on April 29, 2000 included rhetorical humor as a required and

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<sup>2</sup> Of the work done on presidential humor most is either in the form of anthologies rather than analysis (see Boller 1981, Dudden 1975, and Gardner 1986 and 1988). Other examples of scholarship take a more sophisticated approach to presidential humor have not examined the speeches of the Silly Season (Hudson 1979, Alisky 1990, and Meyer 1990 and 2000). Murphy (1989) examined that speeches delivered by John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon at the Al Smith Memorial dinner in 1960. While not part of the Silly Season due to its position on the calendar and irregular attendance of the president, the Al Smith Dinner is a frequent venue of political humor.

expected strategy to accomplish one primary and two secondary objectives. The primary rhetorical objective of Clinton's speech was to improve the public's and press's perception of his personal character and to a lesser extent, his policy accomplishments. The secondary objectives, given far less treatment in the speech, were to settle scores with opponents and to manage the public and press's perceptions of Hillary Clinton and Al Gore. To accomplish this goal, Clinton used rhetorical humor, as well as non-humorous rhetoric, to demonstrate his positive personal qualities, remind the audience of his political and policy accomplishments, and to respond to the press and his opponents while maintaining his positive ethos. The application of the theory developed in Chapter Two will show the means by which Clinton used rhetorical humor to accomplish his objectives and demonstrate the extent to which rhetorical humor was a well considered choice. In the following sections of this chapter, I shall offer an analysis of Clinton's speech using my theory of rhetorical humor including a discussion of the requirements and constraints of the White House Correspondents' Association speech.

#### *History of the Venues—The Silly Season*

To provide some idea of the requirements and constraints for Clinton's speech, it is necessary to consider the features of the venues for expected humorous presidential discourse. The status, expectations, and constraints of this genre of presidential rhetorical have changed greatly over time. These discourse venues are the institutionalized sites of required presidential humor. If the president chose to attend one of these private functions, he was expected to deliver a humorous speech which made fun of himself as well as the other guests. Among the constraints on speakers at the dinners was that the humor should entertain above all else. It was acceptable to joke in a way that might

persuade, but the humor should not be taken to a point where it might insult either the target or the audience.

#### The Gridiron Club and the Alfalfa Club

The two oldest venues for required presidential, or at least congressional humor, were the Gridiron Club and the Alfalfa Club. These were once entirely private functions, designed for reporters and politicians to gather in the spirit of camaraderie and good will. To secure such feelings, the dinners were “off the record.” Although the purpose of the dinner remains the same, reporters and politicians in attendance will often share highlights of the evening for the purpose of letting the public in on the fun and to remind their readers and constituents of their proximity to power. The oldest continuing venue for required presidential humor is the Gridiron Club, founded in Washington, DC, in 1885 as a social club for newspaper reporters and modeled after the Clover Club of Philadelphia. Both clubs “combined fancy feasting with heckling and playing practical jokes on prominent speakers” (Free 1985, 2). John W. Kole wrote in the preface to *The First 100 Years! A Casual Chronicle of the Gridiron Club* (Free 1985) that

born in 1885, the year after one of the nastiest presidential campaigns in American history, the Gridiron Club of Washington, D. C., never did get President Grover Cleveland to attend one of its dinners. But starting with President Benjamin Harrison in 1892, every president since Cleveland has attended at least one dinner while in office. (1985, np)

The standing of the club and their dinners have only increased over time. Katz argued that



Except for the president, who spoke every year [in the contemporary version of the dinner], the invitation is usually a once-in-a-lifetime honor, a coming-out party for big-time beltway players who ascended to the top tier of the Washington Establishment . . . An invitation to speak at the Gridiron Club was a very big deal (2003, 166).

Presidents and other figures use their appearances at the dinners as an opportunity to use rhetorical humor in venues that are, marginally, less public than other forums. Speeches at the Gridiron dinner are, by club rules, off the record. Free observed that

This relieves members and their news writer guests of what otherwise might be the burden of covering the dinner program as working reporters. It is designed, also, to encourage the speakers to put more personal bite into their humorous remarks. (1985, 32)

Of course those same reporters who instituted the rules found it difficult to stop leaks of excerpts from speeches, particularly as the attendance at the dinners grew into the hundreds. The dinners are organized by reporters who promise not to reveal what is said, though they impose no sanction upon non-member attendees who choose to pass along highlights. The guideline of a Gridiron Club speech is to “sing, but never burn” (Kole 1985, np). William Safire argued that this “inside-the-establishment stuff works because of the intimacy of a live performance directly in front of a usually adversarial audience” (2000, A23). He goes on to argue that the public quality of the other events of the Silly Season make the speeches far less amusing.

The second oldest event in the Silly Season is the dinner of the Alfalfa Club, held annually since 1913.<sup>3</sup> “The Alfalfa Club is attended not by the press but by a fraternity of corporate CEOs, federal power brokers and other establishment stalwarts all gathered for the event that could easily double as the winter ball of the Trilateral Commission” (Katz 2003, 3). The sole purpose of the Alfalfa Club is to hold an annual dinner at which, much like the Gridiron dinners, the powerful gather to make jokes and perform in humorous skits. The notable differences between the two events are that the Alfalfa Club is open to more professions than just the press and that the group makes a satirical presidential nomination each year. Among those nominated by the club have been Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson (1953), Senator Prescott Bush (1959), Richard Nixon (1965), Ronald Reagan (1974), George H.W. Bush (1996), and George W. Bush (1998) (Notable Names Database).

#### White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner and Radio-Television Correspondents’ Association Dinner

The most recent additions to the Silly Season are the White House Correspondents’ Association (WHCA) and the Radio-Television Correspondents’ Association (RTCA) dinners. These events are similar to the Gridiron and Alfalfa Club dinners in that the participants are expected and required to give humorous speeches. The principle difference is that the WHCA and the RTCA dinners are “on the record.” Anything said at the dinner may be published and since 1993 have also been carried live on C-SPAN cable television. The RTCA was founded in 1944 for “the promotion of the radio and television news gathering fraternity and strives to protect the rights and

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<sup>3</sup> There have been two histories written about the Alfalfa Club, both published by the club itself: Booth (1958) and Booth, Symington, and Platts (2002).

privileges of radio and television news reporters” (Radio-Television Correspondents’ Association). Though there is little substantive difference in the rhetorical expectations for the events, the WHCA, perhaps because it is older, is the more well known of the two.

The White House Correspondents’ Association dinner offers politicians and the press a chance to use humor to entertain and through that, to persuade important audiences. It is similar to other venues of the Silly Season, but in the wake of its wider publicity, the WHCA dinner has become a “star-studded, made-for-TV affair” (Safire 2000, A23) Its origins were more humble. It all started with a leak. A press corps upset with an unverifiable leak in 1914, indicating that the Congressional Standing Committee of Correspondents would select reporters to cover President Woodrow Wilson’s unprecedented press conferences led to the creation of the White House Correspondents’ Association. The leak proved to be unfounded and the Association suspended business until 1920 when it started holding dinners. The dinners were not unlike those of the Gridiron Club and “until World War II, the annual dinner was an entertainment extravaganza, featuring singing between courses, a homemade movie and an hour-long, post-dinner show with big-name performers” (White House Correspondents’ Association 2005, under “History”). William Safire wrote that the two events reflect “a difference in the cultural style of Washington audiences” and “the difference between political wit and political humor” (2000, A23). The difference, as Safire describes it is between the Gridiron’s inside-the-beltway humor of “in jokes” and the broader humor of the WHCA dinner that takes into account the knowledge (or lack of specific knowledge) of a larger audience for a broadcast event.

The traditional attendance of the President began in 1924 with Calvin Coolidge who recognized that the placement of his opportunity to speak “in the middle of a meal before it is anywhere near finished is an invitation to be brief” (quoted in *New York Times* 1924, 1). Coolidge went on to discuss how his relationship with the press changed over the years.

But it was after I became Governor that I came in more intimate touch with the press . . . I used to have a daily conference then, because I was an important individual. Now I have to tell all that I know in a conference that occurs only twice a week. (quoted in *New York Times* 1924, 9)

As the antecedents for the contemporary on-the-record speeches, the Gridiron and Alfalfa Clubs formed part of the expectations for Clinton’s speech at the WHCA dinner. From the long history of those speeches, the expectation was that Clinton would make jokes about himself and his opponents that were pointed but not venomous. The Gridiron and Alfalfa Club speeches present speakers with the opportunity to demonstrate that they are good sports and can take being the target of a joke. Finally, the speeches of the Silly Season established an expectation that the speaker will win the admiration of the audience through a demonstration of cleverness, familiarity with contemporary American culture, and willingness to laugh at oneself.

### *Making Bill Clinton Funny*

Rhetorical humor is a difficult strategy for speakers to employ, particularly for the president whose every word is analyzed. As we have seen, the president’s speech at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner brings with it certain rhetorical expectations, constraints, and opportunities. It is expected that the president will make

jokes about himself, the press, and the opposition. The president must also be judicious in the subjects he chooses, though references may be somewhat obscure for the general audience as the press and those particularly interested in politics are the immediate audience. Such a speech requires skills different from those of the White House speechwriting staff; therefore, Bill Clinton turned to writer Mark Katz as a resource in this endeavor.

That the White House uses speechwriters is hardly a secret. The speechwriters tend to remain out of the public eye, a position especially true for joke writers for the presidents. Mark Katz was the principal writer of the humorous dinner speeches throughout Clinton's presidency. In writing humorous speeches for Clinton, Katz wanted "to find the laughs that would reassure those in the room who wished him well and unnerved those who did not" (8). Katz was not on the full time White House staff, but rather was a humor consultant. He worked with the White House speechwriters, including Michael Waldman, President Clinton's chief speechwriter. "Managing Katz, keeping him happy, keeping his name out of the newspaper, was one of my jobs" wrote Waldman (2000, 165). Katz wrote for Clinton from the 1992 campaign into the presidency, focusing on the ritualized venues for presidential humor. Clinton and his staff did not recognize the significance of this opportunity for humor or its strategic value from the start.

Clinton's first WHCA speech was delivered in 1993. When humor speechwriter Mark Katz went to Washington to help with the speech, Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers and Deputy Communications Director David Dreyer, "went over the topics to concentrate on, such as Clinton's First Hundred Days in office, and others to avoid: gays in the

military, the recent Waco raids and a \$200 haircut on the LAX tarmac” (Katz 2003, 172). The speechwriting team did not take advantage of the opportunity to use self-deprecating rhetorical humor to deflect personal criticism and divert audience attention from mistakes. The drafting of the speech did not come easily, as Katz recounts. Clinton said at the drafting of the speech, “Enough jokes on me—we need to do more jokes on all of them [the media]. I thought this was a press dinner where I get to make fun of the press” (quoted in Katz 2003, 181). In his first attempt to enter into this particular venue for rhetorical humor, Clinton misunderstood the expectations of his audience. Katz wrote that “it is a well-known, practically written rule that the endgame of these ritual humor dinners is to ingratiate oneself to the audience—in this case, the press—and that the speaker is his own primary target” (2003, 181). Katz argued that self-deprecation “did not come naturally to Bill Clinton” (2003, 181) making it difficult to write humorous speeches for a president who seemed so extraordinarily comfortable in other speaking situations. In his 1993 WHCA address, Clinton said of the media’s evaluation of the start of his term:

You know, you hold me to impossible standards. One of you wrote a column the other day comparing this to Genesis, saying God got more done in six days than I did in a hundred. I’d like to point out that his efforts were not preceded by twelve days from another administration . . . I’m not doing so bad. I mean, at this point in his administration, William Henry Harrison had already been dead for sixty-eight days. I mean, my stimulus package lived longer than that. (paragraph 7)

Concerning self-deprecating humor, Katz argued that “it is impossible not to like a person who would make these jokes at his own expense during the moment he makes them. The

contradiction puts a crack in what was hardened opinion; this is the real and not insignificant power of humor” (2003, 192). In reaction to Clinton’s use of self-deprecating humor in the 1993 WHCA dinner speech, Katz argued that it was the “high-water mark of Clinton’s humor that evening. Even his most ardent foes were applauding and/or shaking their heads in bemused admiration” (2003, 192). The arrangement of the rhetorical humor in a speech in one of the Silly Season venues appears to be crucial. In order for the humor to succeed the speaker should be the first target of the humor, creating identification (SD3) with the audience and setting a positive mood (SD2). Through these strategies speakers can demonstrate cleverness (SP1) and secure the good will of the audience (SD1). Then the target of the jokes can be comfortably shifted to others, particularly those in the immediate audience. Essentially, by being the first to drink from the chalice of deprecating humor by mocking himself, the president thereby proves that the intent of such humor is not poisonous but merely a form of sharing and jocularly when directed at others, Thus, the sequence of pointed humor is crucial, with the speaker willing to poke fun at himself as a vital transition to moving on to other targets.

Katz claimed that when Clinton diverted from the prepared script and planned sequence of jokes for the 1993 WHCA speech, the comments moved away from funny and veered toward mean. Not only did Katz think that the selection of jokes was off target, but that they were arranged poorly as well. In the drafted version, Clinton’s first jokes were at his own expense, transitioning to jokes with the media as their target in the middle of the speech. As Clinton began his speech, Katz reported

he settled into the room with some jokes that I'd never heard before, drawing only polite laughs. He was off-script already. Instead of the self-effacing jokes at the top of his draft, Clinton skipped ahead to begin with jokes at the expense of his hosts, the White House press corps. (2003, 189)

One joke that the audience responded to with only “nervous laughter” (Katz 2003, 190) concerned the raid on Waco and John Conyers’ criticism of Attorney General Janet Reno. Clinton said “did you like the way Rush [Limbaugh] took up for Janet Reno the other night on his program? He only did it because she was attacked by a black guy” (1993, paragraph 5). This joke failed on multiple levels. Presumably, Clinton’s goal in this attempt at rhetorical humor was to attack an opponent, Limbaugh, and to deflect criticism of his new administration. In his execution of the joke he grants his opponent power through the implication that Clinton has been listening to Limbaugh’s show and, rather from distancing himself from criticism concerning Waco, he adds an accusation of racism to the joke that seems difficult for many to comfortably accept.

Waldman admits that “in the first year, Clinton had ad-libbed at the dinners and had come off sounding bitter. After that, he worked diligently with Katz and the speechwriters, writing jokes and polishing and memorizing his routine” (2000, 165). This would seem to indicate that the president thought that these speeches were significant. The extensive preparation was necessary, Waldman argued, because the “the President’s sense of humor was not naturally honed for the humor dinners. His strength was long shaggy-dog stories—whimsical tales of colorful characters in Arkansas politics” (2000, 222-223).



After overcoming their initial misjudgment of the value of the dinners in the Silly Season, Waldman claimed that the White House staff found “these dinners were a useful moment to defuse with humor whatever controversy was festering. That spring [1997], we tried to ‘lance the boil’ of the fundraising scandals with humor” (2000, 165). Clinton tried to shift the audience’s attention away from more serious matters, such as the fundraising scandals associated with overnight visits to the Lincoln Bedroom, saying in the speech “The bad news is, our only child is going off to college. The good news is, it opens up another bedroom” (Clinton 1997, 500). In this example Clinton chose to joke about the Lincoln bedroom issue, hoping to minimize its magnitude (ST3).

President Clinton’s experiences speaking each year of his presidency at the WHCA mark an evolution of understanding and eloquence. As I have already suggested, Clinton did not realize the importance of the event in the beginning of his first term, choosing instead to leave the preparation of the speech until the last minute. By the time he delivered his final speech to the WHCA in 2000, Clinton engaged in a full dress rehearsal and used the opportunity to argue for his legacy.

#### *The Context of Clinton’s 2000 WHCA Speech*

Bill Clinton’s presidency was marked by personal and political problems. Under his leadership, the Democrats lost control of the House of Representatives and the Senate in 1994. Clinton was impeached by the House in December 1998 and then acquitted in the Senate the following February for charges of perjury and obstruction of justice stemming from the Monica Lewinsky and Paula Jones scandals. “The public came to regard Clinton as highly competent but sorely lacking in character . . . It is probably safe to say that the Monica Lewinsky scandal and the impeachment process had much to do

with” a stunning 37 percent drop from April 1993 to January 1999 in the share of the people finding the president to be “honest and trustworthy” (Cohen 2001, 737). Surveys in 2000 indicated that the public supported many of Clinton’s policy initiatives, but did not find him credible in terms of character. A Pew Research Center poll in May 2000 found that 48% of Americans approved of Clinton’s job performance while 47% disapproved (Pew Research Center for People and the Press 2001, np). The Pew polling report also found that “the public is clearly conflicted about Clinton’s legacy.” 60% versus 27% of Americans believed that Clinton’s accomplishments would outweigh his failures. But they also reported that the American people believed that Clinton would be remembered for his impeachment and scandals over his accomplishments by a margin of 67% to 28% (Pew Research Center for People and the Press 2001, np). This split in the minds of Americans concerning how Bill Clinton would be remembered created a multi-focused exigence for Clinton’s farewell rhetoric. The situation demanded that Clinton address both the policy accomplishments and personal failures that marked his presidency. It also provided an opportunity to diminish the standing of his opponents so the media might be moved to view Clinton’s legacy on his terms and not the framework of his long-term enemies.

As he acknowledged in paragraph two of the speech, this was his eighth straight year addressing this dinner. While Clinton joked that “looking back, that was probably a mistake” (paragraph 3), the speech afforded him the opportunity to offer a kind of personal farewell address through which he used rhetorical humor to attempt to persuade his audience as to how he should be remembered. Campbell and Jamieson argue that

all presidents to complete their terms of office have an opportunity to deliver a farewell address. If they avail themselves of it, they can, through skillful use of language, address history to influence judgments of their presidencies and to define the meaning of the system of government of which the presidency is a part. (1990, 211)

This opportunity reflects one of the goals of Clinton's farewell address. The speech recognized as Bill Clinton's official farewell address was delivered from the Oval Office on January 18, 2001. Prior to the farewell address, Hendrik Hertzberg, speechwriter for President Carter, observed two competing Bill Clintons:

Smart Bill vs. Warm Bill. With those two sides to his coin, Clinton has managed to overcome formidable obstacles (many of his own making) to mint surprising quantities of political gold. (2000, 89)

Smart Bill, the Clinton of the January farewell address, is the version with "a penetrating mind, the command of the sweep and detail of public policy, and a wide-ranging intellectual curiosity" (Hertzberg 2000, 89). In the speech Clinton argued

I have steered my course by our enduring values. Opportunity for all. Responsibility from all. A community of all Americans. I have sought to give America a new kind of government, smaller, more modern, more effective, full of ideas and policies appropriate to this new time, always putting people first, always focusing on the future. (2001, paragraph 5)

The other Clinton, Warm Bill, "has emotional acuity—a talent for projecting ease and empathy, an ability to size up a person or a group of people, sense the vectors of hope and sentiment or anxiety and resentment rocketing around the room and windsurf the breezes

and gales of feeling toward his goal” (Hertzberg 2000, 89). Warm Bill is largely absent from the official farewell address, but he does make an appearance at the conclusion.

My days in this office are nearly through, but my days of service, I hope, are not.

In the years ahead, I will never hold a position higher or a covenant more sacred than that of President of the United States. But there is no title I will wear more proudly than that of citizen.(2001, paragraph 20)

Clinton concluded this official version of his farewell address by reflecting on the previous eight years, praising both himself and his audience and attempting to secure his legacy. In Clinton’s case he needed to offer a defense of his presidency on two fronts: policy accomplishments and personal character. Both of these elements of Clinton’s presidency are part of his legacy and are addressed through the “official” farewell address and in the speech to the WHCA. Campbell and Jamieson argue that “the accomplishments of an administration, the criteria by which it should be judged, and the lessons it offers for the future are interwoven to create the legacy” are the goals of a farewell address (1990, 195).<sup>4</sup> These were also some of the goals of Clinton’s WHCA speech.

The “official” farewell address was mainly about policy and the “unofficial” WHCA farewell address was mainly about character. There is no identifiable attempt at humor in the January 18 address, but Clinton did use the venue of the White House Correspondents’ Association address to make an argument for his character’s legacy through rhetorical humor. It would not have been appropriate to use much, if any,

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<sup>4</sup> Campbell and Jamieson do not address the objective of character legacy as part of the presidential farewell. Their focus is on the continuity of the presidency, the “institutional function,” and policy legacy of the address (1990, 191). If they argue that legacies are a distinctive feature of farewells, perhaps there should also be a consideration of the president’s character as well.

rhetorical humor in the January 18 address. The public viewed his policy accomplishments as separate from his personal difficulties and Clinton used the opportunity of the official farewell address to offer a policy valedictory. If Clinton had delivered a similar non-humorous address designed to rehabilitate the public image of his character, it might have been viewed as inappropriate. Utilizing humor as a kind of shield, he was able to use the April 29, 2000 speech to implicitly argue that he should be forgiven his lapses and be viewed in a positive light.

### *Structure of the Speech*

By the time Clinton took the stage at the Washington Hilton on April 29, 2000, the audience of reporters, political figures, and other celebrities had sat through several presentations of awards more directly related to the educational mission of the White House Correspondents' Association. Clinton was the main attraction and the audience brought with them an expectation that Clinton would deliver a humorous speech. They were not disappointed, as Clinton used humor from the introduction to near the conclusion of the address.<sup>5</sup> Through an analysis of the rhetorical humor in Clinton's speech, it will become clear that his objective was not simply amusement. As stated above, Clinton used both humorous and non-humorous discourse to argue for his personal character and policy accomplishments, to criticize those who had attacked him, and to shape the public's perceptions of Hillary Clinton and Al Gore. As the requirements of the speech venue made rhetorical humor a necessity, most of the speech was intended to create amusement, though there are several non-humorous discourse strategies woven in as well.

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<sup>5</sup> There is humor in every paragraph except the final one. It is the common arrangement of this speech genre to conclude on a non-humorous point.

The speech can be divided into four sections. Paragraphs 1-3 comprise the introduction and include a slideshow of photographs accompanied by Clinton's humorous narration. In paragraphs 4-13, Clinton used rhetorical humor about the media, his opponents, his accomplishments, and his image. The next section of the speech was the presentation of a comedic film, titled *The Final Days*, produced by the White House. Running 5 minutes and 52 seconds, it was a parodic documentary of a day in the life of Clinton's lame-duck White House. At the conclusion of the film, Clinton returned to the podium to deliver paragraphs 14-16, which are a conclusion in which he takes the opportunity to reflect on his time in office.

As an unusual part of the text, the film requires more explanation. Through this video, Clinton demonstrated primarily self-deprecating humor that took the press's assertion that he had nothing left to do during his term to a ridiculous extreme. Joe Lockhart, President Clinton's press secretary made this argument concerning the intent of the film:

I think the people out in the country might not quite get it, but with that crowd, people knew sort of what the feeling was, and I think most people deep down knew that the president wasn't sitting around doing nothing. So we took it to a completely [*sic*] extreme to make it sort of absurd, it would be funny. (2000, np)

The speech and the film's immediate audience included the guests at the dinner and those watching live coverage of the event on C-SPAN. The film though took on a life of its own and clips were shown on many news and entertainment programs, including CNN's *Larry King Live* and MSNBC's *Equal Time*.

It should also be noted that not every instance of humor in Clinton's speech served a rhetorical purpose. The third photograph in the slide show presented by Clinton (paragraph 2) depicts the president at the White House Easter Egg Roll<sup>6</sup> standing next to a large costumed Easter Bunny. Clinton quips "it made all the papers, but I have tell you something. I am almost certain this is not the real Easter Bunny." This joke, which was met with mild laughter by the audience, sustained the climate of amusement. Even such shallow humor in the speech reinforced the rhetorical humor by upholding a jovial tone with apolitical material, suggesting that the speech's driving purpose was not to score political points (SD2), while preparing them to accept the more directly persuasive appeals.

### *Strategic Use of Humor in Clinton's 2000 WHCA Speech*

#### Clinton's Character

Achieving this rhetorical objective in this setting called on Clinton to employ rhetorical humor to deflect criticism concerning his character and esteem as president. In the slideshow, the fourth photograph depicts an altered version of Mount Rushmore with Bill Clinton's face replacing George Washington's. After facetiously claiming that this photograph is his favorite, the slide zooms in on a portion of the photograph, indicating that "Photo Provided by Greg Craig" (paragraph 2).<sup>7</sup> Clinton then reluctantly admits, "I

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<sup>6</sup> The White House Easter Egg Roll dates to 1878 under President Hayes. According to Potter "Prior to that year, the children of Washington, D.C., would gather each Easter Monday on the grounds of the Capitol to roll brightly colored hard-boiled eggs down the sloping terraces on the west side of the building. This came to an abrupt end just two weeks after Easter in 1876, when Congress approved an act "to prevent any portion of the Capitol Grounds and terraces from being used as playgrounds or otherwise." Hayes moved the event to the White House where it is still an annual tradition (2005, 14).

<sup>7</sup> Greg Craig, served as Special Assistant to the President and Special Counsel at the White House from 1998 to 1999 with the primary responsibility of acting as lead defense counsel in Clinton's impeachment trial.

thought it was too good to be true.” This is an attempt by Clinton to defuse the personal criticism directed against him (SP2). This joke reflects an analysis of the Clinton team’s defense strategy of arguing for the president’s essentially good character and against the hypocrisy his opponents rather than simply points of law. Clinton uses this opportunity to make the case that he has been a great president while undercutting claim with exaggerated egotism (ST2).

A number of stories had been written concerning the president’s mood in the waning days of his presidency.<sup>8</sup> Clinton took this opportunity to use humor to criticize the press’s choice of stories and what he claimed was their baseless speculation regarding his feelings at the end of his eight years in office. Clinton used much of the remainder of the speech to present to the press and the public his state of mind as he reflected on the previous eight years in office and looked to the future. After showing a picture in the slideshow of Clinton smiling and laughing at a different black-tie event, he used topical humor to make light of an argument (ST1) by saying “so maybe I am happy to be here and maybe I’m not. Feel free to speculate” (paragraph 2).

Clinton satirized the journalists’ perception that he would be adrift after leaving the presidency. To demonstrate the absurdity of the idea, *The Final Days* film, depicts Clinton and Stuart<sup>9</sup> going back to the Oval Office where Stuart shows the president how

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<sup>8</sup> At a 1999 press conference, a reporter asked Clinton “how you personally are adjusting to what people might think is an interesting shift in role” (Clinton 1999, 1290). Clinton’s Press Secretary Joe Lockhart commented that “at the beginning of the year, there was a spate of stories from the press about how, with the first lady gone and the vice president gone, the president was somehow all alone in the White House and looking for things to do. The truth couldn’t be further from the truth” (2000, np).

<sup>9</sup> Toward the end of the film, Clinton finds a young man with his face in a photocopier, running off self-portraits. The actor is Michael C. Maronna, who was known at the time for playing the character “Stuart” in a series of television commercials for the online brokerage Ameritrade. Maronna portrays the same character in *The Final Days* film. Melillo and Fromm report that “an ad for the online brokerage, from OgilvyOne, Chicago, was in the right place at the right time when Clinton press secretary Joe Lockhart and adviser Joel Johnson were writing the script for “The Final Days” skits. “The commercial ran on one of



to send email and use eBay to buy a smoked ham. This joke has a double meaning as a self-deprecating reference to Clinton's well-known love of food and his enjoyment of the spotlight. This portrayal of the president as lacking what were fairly basic Internet skills adds to the strategy of self-deprecation in the film, creating identification (SD3) by doing seemingly usual tasks for anyone but the president such as email, buying products on eBay, and answering the telephone. With this use of rhetorical humor, Clinton shows the audience that he is preparing for his return to normal life.

Even in the salutations Clinton attempted to use rhetorical humor to secure the goodwill of his audience (SD2). He began the speech by saying "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen; President Page; President-elect Dillon" (paragraph 1). By referring to the president and president elect of the WHCA by their formal titles he elevated them to his status while lowering himself to theirs. He is immediately attempting to create identification (SD3) and create a comfortable mood (SD2). Clinton went on to say, "I am really happy to be here. Happy to be reunited at long last, with the White House Press Corps" (paragraph 1). It had been some time since his last press conference and some in the press had complained that they had not been given enough access to the president in the final months of his presidency. This is a dispositional strategy that aims to create a positive mood (SD2) with the audience while making light of an opposing argument (ST1). Reagan similarly faced a similar criticism in the final year of his presidency and also used rhetorical humor to deflect it. At the 1988 WHCA dinner, Reagan said "But with so much focus on the presidential election, I've been feeling a little lonely these days. I'm so desperate for attention I almost considered holding a news conference"

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three TVs during a brainstorming session we were having in Lockhart's office," says Johnson. "Someone said, 'Let's get this guy'" (2000, 92).

(paragraph 5). Of the multiple audiences Clinton addresses in the speech, here he is speaking directly to the press by acknowledging his recognition of their concerns.

Through this use of rhetorical humor, Clinton sought to reestablish his relationship with the press, to recognize that they think he is a lame duck, and to secure their goodwill by demonstrating that he can laugh at jokes made about him. In an early scene in *The Final Days*, Clinton is shown delivering a speech from the podium of the White House press room. He asks the reporters if they have any questions. In a normal presidential press conference the room would erupt with questions. In *The Final Days* version the press seats are empty, save for Helen Thomas,<sup>10</sup> who wakes up from a nap to ask “Are you still here?” Clinton allows Thomas to make a joke at his expense by incongruously sleeping during a press conference and dismissing the president as irrelevant. Clinton is seen wandering the halls of an empty White House looking for remaining staff members. Edited into the film at this point are cameos by reporters Tim Russert and Sam Donaldson turning down opportunities to interview the president. Finding no one left in the White House, Clinton seeks other ways to occupy his time during the remainder of his lame-duck presidency. Among these activities are answering the White House telephones, practicing origami, having his picture taken with a cardboard cut out of President Clinton. These jokes demonstrate cleverness (SP1) and deflect personal criticism (SP2) by the journalists that he is irrelevant. Clinton satirizes the journalists’ showing the absurdity of their claim that he has nothing left to do.

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas, at the time the White House Correspondent for United Press International, was dean of the White House press corps which is “traditionally a mark of seniority, bestowed upon the reporter who has covered the White House the longest” (Spake 1990, W15). Thomas was known for her tenacious questioning of presidents at their press conferences. With the UPI position comes “The first-question privilege [that] is accorded to the two American wire services, and thus Thomas shares it with her competitors at the Associated Press” as well as the “the right to close the conferences” by saying “Thank you, Mr. President” (Spake 1990, W15).

Clinton used rhetorical humor to make light of the argument (ST1) that he has difficulty telling the truth to serve this goal of character management. In the final section of Clinton's joke sequence concerning his fictional résumé, again taking advice from his staff, said

They tell me I have to use the active voice for the résumé. You know, things like "Commanded U.S. Armed Forces," "Ordered air strikes," "Served three terms as President." [Pause] Everybody embellishes a little. "Designed, built, and painted Bridge to 21st Century." "Supervised Vice-President's invention of the Internet." "Generated, attracted, heightened and maintained controversy." (paragraph 11)

By claiming that "everybody embellishes a little," Clinton seeks to minimize the claim that small lies are of great consequence (certainly not warranting impeachment). Clinton used exaggeration to introduce the issue (ST2) that he would rather not leave the presidency at all. He returned to this theme in the conclusion of the speech:

You know, I read in the history books how other presidents say the White House is like a penitentiary and every motive they have is suspect; even George Washington complained he was treated like a common thief, and they all say they can't wait to get away. I don't know what the heck they're talking about. (paragraph 15)

With this passage, Clinton put himself in the category of former presidents, George Washington specifically. He then turns the tables, an example of incongruity, and seeks to create identification (SD3) with those in the audience who might think it would be wonderful to get to be the president.

An example of rhetorical humor used to deflect criticism (SP2) as well as create identification (SD3) involved the professional comedian at the dinner, Jay Leno. A tradition that predates that of the president delivering a humorous address is humorous entertainment staged for the political and media guests. Jay Leno, a standup comedian and host of NBC's *Tonight Show*, was the featured entertainer at the 2000 WHCA dinner. Clinton commented, "Now, no matter how mean he is to me, I just love this guy. Because, together, together, we give hope to gray-haired, chunky baby boomers everywhere" (paragraph 3). Jay Leno routinely makes jokes at the president's expense during his monologue so there may be some underlying tension that he was now performing in front of the person he is accustomed to criticizing.<sup>11</sup> Clinton removes this concern and demonstrates to the audience that he is a good sport and appreciates humor that is directed at him. This use of rhetorical humor to shape Clinton's personal legacy is similar to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's concept of argument by liaison. By connecting himself with Jay Leno through humor, Clinton is attempting to take some of the goodwill the audience may have for the entertainer for himself. By expressing his affection for Leno, Clinton takes the opportunity to show magnanimity by repaying Leno's meanness with kindness.

Clinton demonstrates that he can laugh at some of the mistakes he has made while trumpeting his accomplishments. His audience likely had this expectation and Clinton exploits an incongruity by starting his comment: "Tonight marks the end of an era" (paragraph 4) which many in the audience would expect to be followed by a reference to the end of his administration. Instead, Clinton refers to the after dinner party hosted by *Vanity Fair* magazine. Attendance at the party was considered, due to its exclusivity, to

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<sup>11</sup> Concerning the political content of late night humor see Niven, Lichter, and Amundson (2003).

be even more prestigious than attendance at the dinner, which has been referred to as “Washington’s Prom” (Hinman 2006, paragraph 2). Clinton jokes that as the party became more exclusive each year, “it has arrived at its inevitable conclusion: this year, no one made the guest list” (paragraph 4). Clinton then makes reference to the party hosted by Bloomberg News Service as being even more difficult to attend. This public recognition of Bloomberg’s sponsorship of the event seemed to give that organization exactly what they wanted, that is, public recognition in connection to the President.<sup>12</sup> Clinton, in an effort to create identification with the rest of the audience (SD3), claimed that even he may not have an invitation to the Bloomberg party, “but I’m not worried, I’m going with Janet Reno” (paragraph 4). This joke may be a way of gaining the audience’s attention by referencing a controversial issue (ST2). Only one week earlier, Attorney General Janet Reno ordered federal troops to forcibly remove Elian Gonzalez<sup>13</sup> and to reunite him with his father, Cuban national Juan Miguel Gonzalez.<sup>14</sup> At the time the press was concerned with Clinton’s feelings at the end of his term in office, Janet Reno was front-page news for her policy decision. In this case, Clinton demonstrates cleverness (SP1) by claiming that his relevance and access is on the coattails of his political subordinate.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Washington Post* report on the dinner noted that “the ratio of celebrities to actual White House correspondents changed dramatically at the exclusive post-party, which was held, as always, at the Russian Trade Building next door [to the Washington Hilton]. With Vanity Fair opting out of its usual duties as host, Michael Bloomberg of Bloomberg News Service picked up the slack, laying out a deluxe spread while George magazine imported a host of celebrities to populate the inner rooms and outer terrace” (Frey 2000, C01).

<sup>13</sup> Elian Gonzalez was a Cuban child who left Cuba on a boat with his mother and stepfather, headed for America. The boat sank, killing his mother and stepfather, but he was rescued on December 8, 1999. Elian was placed with relatives in Miami, though his father was still alive in Cuba setting off legal and rhetorical battles concerning his placement and US-Cuban relations (Perez 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Mr. Gonzalez’s attorney in this matter was Greg Craig, President Clinton’s attorney in his impeachment trial.

Clinton further sought to manage the public perception of his character in a rather unusual way. In the film, *The Final Days*, Clinton is put into familiar situations and then introduces an element of incongruity to demonstrate the quality of his character by being the target of the humor. The film presents an image of a president adrift. Clinton had faced questions about his relevance long before his lame-duck status in 2000. He offered a non-humorous defense during a 1995 press conference, claiming that

The Constitution gives me relevance. The power of our ideas gives me relevance. The record we have built up over the last 2 years and the things we're trying to do to implement it, give it relevance. The President is relevant here, especially an activist President. (1995, under "President's Leadership Role")

In this case, rhetorical humor would not have been the appropriate strategy. Clinton needed to reassert himself for the remainder of his first term in office and work toward reelection two year later. If he had dealt with the criticism through rhetorical humor, the American people might have thought that he did not care enough about advancing his agenda. In the 2000 WHCA, the context had changed. Clinton was able to take the protection that a humorous speech provided one step further by playing a humorous character. If he had tried to counter the perception that he was bored and wondering around an empty White House with non-humorous discourse, he might well have failed in his objective.

Not every rhetorical move made in the speech was successful. In the film, Clinton invokes an unnecessary and unflattering comparison to the lead character in the film *American Beauty*. Clinton is shown standing before a mirror, holding an Academy Award, and practicing an acceptance speech. Actor Kevin Spacey enters the frame and

takes the Oscar back from Clinton.<sup>15</sup> Karlyn (2004) offered a comparison between Bill Clinton and Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey's character in *American Beauty*) observing that

“Monicagate” repelled much of the American public but also provided it with a story containing the fascination, titillation, and high moral stakes of a classical melodrama, infused like *American Beauty* with black comedy. (69)

That Clinton would put himself in the position of being compared to a character who spends much of the movie lusting after his teenage daughter's best friend seems an odd rhetorical choice. At the conclusion of the film, Clinton returned to the podium at the Washington Hilton to accept a fake Oscar statue from the WHCA President Susan Page. He feigned surprise at this award and proclaimed to the audience “You like me. You really like me” (paragraph 14). This is a reference that was familiar to many in his audience; Clinton is parodying Sally Field's Oscar acceptance speech.<sup>16</sup> Clinton's exclamation of the reference, its strange high-pitched vocalization notwithstanding, is further evidence that Clinton's goal in this speech is to secure his personal legacy as he will do in the final paragraph of the speech. Most of the jokes in Clinton speech served one of the three rhetorical objectives discussed above, or at the very least, provided amusement. Clinton's strange bizarre persona in this section of the speech appears to do neither.

In concluding his speech, Clinton offered one notable non-humorous argument for his character in the speech. The final paragraph of his WHCA speech mentions the benefit of humor, though it contains none, and offered the personal vision of his legacy

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<sup>15</sup> Spacey had won the Best Actor award in 1999 for *American Beauty*.

<sup>16</sup> His version misquotes Field, a common error according to Waxman. The original quotation was “I can't deny the fact that you like me, right now, you like me!” (1999, G01).

I've had a wonderful time. It's been an honor to serve and fun to laugh. I only wish that we had even laughed more these last eight years. Because power is not the most important thing in life, and it only counts for what you use it. I thank you for what you do every day, thank you for all the fun times that Hillary and I have had. Keep at it. It's a great country, it deserves our best. (paragraph 16)

While Clinton mentions the benefits of humor and expresses his appreciation for the correspondents' invitation, he intends the final paragraph of his speech as a non-humorous demonstration of his good character. He gave the audience cause to laugh repeatedly throughout the speech, but ends with a note of thoughtful contemplation. This shift in style makes the conclusion stand out and perhaps more memorable for the audience.

#### Clinton's Policies

Although the main purpose of the 2000 WHCA speech was to argue for Clinton's character, he also needed to consider his policy accomplishments as part of his legacy. As discussed above, Clinton would use his official farewell address to argue for the policy success of his two terms. In the WHCA speech Clinton highlights policy successes and failures. Since this speech is not a valedictory in the fashion of the January 2001 address, the arguments below serve the main claim that Clinton's character should be reconsidered in light of his demonstrated ability to laugh at himself.

The management of Clinton's character was not the only objective of his speech which invokes the farewell address genre. As discussed above, Clinton used both his official and unofficial farewell addresses to trumpet the policy accomplishments of his administration. The principal difference between the two speeches is that in the WHCA



Clinton used rhetorical humor to deflect personal criticism (SP2) and to make light of opposition arguments (ST1) concerning the accomplishments of his administration. Looking back, Clinton compared his first year in office to the recently completed first season of the television drama *The West Wing*:

I've got to give them credit; their first season got a lot better ratings than mine did— not to mention the reviews. The critics just hated my travel office episode.<sup>17</sup>

And that David Gergen<sup>18</sup> cameo fell completely flat. (paragraph 5)

In this section, Clinton looks back on decisions made in the first year of his presidency with humor, encouraging his audience to do the same, thereby being, perhaps, less critical of any errors in judgment.

In what is perhaps the most revelatory section of the speech, Clinton used rhetorical humor to acknowledge that though he has been through many difficulties during his term of office, he has come out on top. He says

You know, the clock is running down on the Republicans in Congress, too. I feel for them. I do. They've only got seven more months to investigate me. That's a lot of pressure. So little time, so many unanswered questions. (paragraph 9)

With this statement, Clinton is clearly being ironic about his empathy for the Republicans in Congress. This is a remarkable admission for a President who's faced substantial challenges to his public perception of his veracity, declaring, "So little time, so many unanswered questions" (paragraph 9). With this statement, Clinton used rhetorical humor to secure attention (SD1), create mood (SD2), divert the audience's attention from a

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<sup>17</sup> This comment refers to the controversy involving the firing of seven longtime employees of the White House travel office and the hiring of Clinton's political friends and a cousin (Devroy and Kamen, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Counselor to President Clinton, 1993-94. Gergen, a Republican, worked for three US presidents before his brief and controversial tenure with Clinton.

difficult issue (ST3), and deflect personal criticism (SP2). Clinton was the subject of numerous investigations, including the Independent Counsel Robert Ray's Whitewater investigation which would not conclude until September 2000. Katz (2003) argued that the humor in these speeches can be "a funnier form of conceding the truth" (8). Clinton delivered the line with a smile at the end, a fitting indication for the audience that what he is saying is a joke, while at the same time, expressing his own self-satisfaction at his political survival.

Clinton then goes on to list some of the fictional unanswered questions: "For example, over the last few months I've lost 10 pounds. Where did they go? Why haven't I produced them to the Independent Counsel? How did some of them manage to wind up on Tim Russert?" (paragraph 9). This is another clear example of irony, as it is highly unlikely the audience expected these to be the questions that the Republicans in Congress wish to ask of President Clinton. He also demonstrated cleverness (SP1) by appealing to the press corps by making a joke about one of their own. The movement concerning the subject of the three questions also represents an interesting rhetorical choice. The first question addresses Clinton's well-publicized struggles with weight, the second with his administration's dealings with various independent counsels, and with the third, Clinton creates identification (SD3) with members of the press and the audience by offering a lighthearted critique of NBC News's Tim Russert, who, like the President, is not a small man.

Clinton used an argument by comparison as the form for joke which introduced an issue (ST2). In what is partially an appeal to the media elites gathered in his immediate audience as well as a set up for the joke about McCain as Bush's running

mate, Clinton lists his “experience repairing the breach. . . . I’ve worked with Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, I’ve worked with Israelis and Palestinians, with Joe Lockhart and David Westin”<sup>19</sup> (paragraph 7). This list allows Clinton to remind the audience of his efforts on behalf of peace around the world furthering the goal of establishing his legacy in this farewell address. Clearly, the differences between President Clinton’s press secretary and the president of ABC News are hardly comparable to long-standing political and religious strife, but Clinton is able to exploit the incongruity by attempting to equate them. Without seeming egotistical, he thus can remind the audience of some important achievements by linking them to a trivial one. The humor comes in with the punch line (i.e., Joe Lockhart and David Westin) that undermines the rhetorical significance of the joke. Although there are instances in the speech, where Clinton uses humor for non-rhetorical purposes, I do not believe that his intention in the above passage was only to amuse. However, by making the subject of the humor a somewhat obscure reference that only his immediate audience would find funny, Clinton missed out on the opportunity to make the policy claim, with or without humor.

Clinton consistently used rhetorical humor to deflect personal criticism (SP2) as well as to demonstrate cleverness (SP1) and, as I argue above, illustrates that he is using the speech as a kind of farewell address. In an attempt to deflect criticism that he had been using his remaining months in office worrying about his legacy, Clinton replied “now, some of you might think I’ve been busy writing my memoirs. I’m not concerned about my memoirs, I’m concerned about my résumé.” With this comment, Clinton is able to remind his audience that he will be young for an ex-president and looking forward

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<sup>19</sup> Joe Lockhart was Clinton’s Press Secretary from 1998-2000 and David Westin was the president of ABC News.

to his next challenge. Clinton creates identification (SD3) in paragraphs 10 and 11 by discussing the preparation of his résumé for his post-presidential career. Preparing a résumé is a task most of his audience have presumably engaged in, certainly including current members of his administration. Clinton claimed that he had been “getting a lot of tips on how to write it, mostly from my staff. They really seem to be up on this stuff” (paragraph 10). This use of understatement about staffers’ job-hunting is a means of rhetorical humor that serves to create a positive mood (SD2) and perhaps to introduce something of a difficult issue (ST2), that of the impending unemployment of hundreds of political appointees. Clinton uses this joke to rehabilitate his image as a caring person.

In his recitation of the fictional résumé, Clinton is also able, perhaps, to be more honest about his true feelings than he could be in a non-humorous speech by stating his “Career objective: to stay president” (paragraph 10). In his official farewell address delivered on January 18, 2001, Clinton discussed his pride in having served as president, but did not tell the American people that he would rather not leave. Under the protection of humor in the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner address Clinton can offer a complementary, if not competing, version of his feelings at the end of his term in office.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In his July 21, 1999, press conference, Clinton said “I love this job. I love it. Even on the bad days you can do something good for the country; you can do something good for the future. I have loved doing this. And I have given it every ounce of my energy and ability and judgment. And I feel very fortunate. But we have a system that I, frankly, agree with, even though I’m in pretty good shape. We have a system that says a President gets two terms, and then the President has to go find something else to do with his life” (1290-1291).

## Clinton's Criticism of Political Opponents

The utility of rhetorical humor to level an attack has been long recognized.<sup>21</sup> Clinton had the opportunity in the WHCA address to criticize others while maintaining the good will of his audience. Such a rhetorical strategy is difficult to accomplish without recourse to humor. An important feature of successful rhetorical humor is demonstrated in the following examples. Clinton makes fun of the GOP's treatment of Senator McCain, Congressional Republicans, Governor George W. Bush and political operative Dick Morris, but he also makes fun of himself for mistakes he has made.

In one of the strongest examples of rhetorical humor in the speech, Clinton is able to use incongruity as a means to attack his Republican opponents in Congress (SP3). He said

Speaking of real-life drama, I'm so glad that Senator McCain is back tonight; I welcome him, especially. As you all know, he just made a difficult journey back to a place where he endured unspeakable abuse at the hands of his oppressors—the Senate Republican Caucus. (paragraph 6)

The expected completion of the final sentence was "Vietnam." John McCain, a Republican Senator from Arizona, traveled the previous week to Vietnam, to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war in which he spent five and one half years in prisoner of war camps (Myre 2000, 3A). Clinton is able to use the joke to compare the political torture of the Senate Republicans to the physical torture of the North Vietnamese Army. He also makes the argument that the Republicans, who viewed McCain as a "maverick" (Mallon 2000, 15), lack astute political judgment for their criticism of

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<sup>21</sup> See Cicero, *De oratore* (2.281).

McCain and their selection of George W. Bush as their party's nominee over McCain in the 2000 primary elections.

Clinton does not utter the word "Vietnam," but this joke may have been impossible for him to make earlier in his presidency.<sup>22</sup> The enthymematic quality of the joke lies in the audience knowing both that Senator McCain was a POW during the Vietnam War as well as the controversy surrounding Clinton's protesting of and lack of service in the war. It seems unlikely that Clinton would make a joke that involved Vietnam early in his presidency, but he is willing to take such a risk near its completion. Clinton continues the theme of the previous joke by offering to help McCain and George W. Bush mend their relationship. "But the differences between Bush and McCain may be just too vast. I mean, McCain as Bush's running mate? Hasn't the man suffered enough?" (paragraph 7). Here again, Clinton uses humor concerning John McCain's experience as a POW in Vietnam to make the claim that the Republicans have made the wrong choice for their presidential nominee. This example fits within the expectations for the WHCA speech and is reminiscent of a joke made by Reagan in his final WHCA address with a critique of the 1988 Democratic presidential candidate:

I'm afraid that Dukakis' foreign policy views are a little too far left for me. He wants no U.S. military presence in Korea anymore, no U.S. military presence in Central America, and no U.S. military presence at the Pentagon. Dukakis got great news today, though, about the Jimmy Carter endorsement—he isn't getting it. (paragraph 4)

Clinton attempted to deflect personal criticism (SP2) and attack an opponent (SP3) with a reference to political strategist Dick Morris, Clinton's campaign strategist for the 1996

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<sup>22</sup> See Snee's 2001 article "Clinton and Vietnam: A Case for *Amnestic* Rhetoric."

election who turned against the Clintons with an unusually intense degree of vituperation.

Clinton said

George W. Bush has got a brand-spanking-new campaign strategy. He's moving toward the political center, distancing himself from his own party, stealing ideas from the other party. I'm so glad Dick Morris has finally found work again.  
(paragraph 8)

This example of rhetorical humor is multilayered. First, Clinton makes a joke at Dick Morris's expense based on political consultant's previous disloyalty. Morris resigned two months before the general election in 1996 due to the revelation of an extramarital affair. He subsequently became an outspoken critic of the Clintons after persuading Bill Clinton to undertake the highly controversial strategy of "triangulation": simultaneously picking fights with conservative Republicans and the demoralized liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Second, Clinton criticizes George W. Bush for not adhering to political principles, but rather changing in the hopes of being elected. Again, Clinton is employing the device of self-mockery, implicitly joking about criticisms of his own political inconsistency. Clinton used rhetorical humor in this instance to argue that George W. Bush is making the same mistakes that Clinton once made, but that Bush's failure as a candidate lies in not learning from the mistakes of others. Clinton places himself in opposition to Bush because he has apologized for the errors he has made.

Clinton's Character Management of Hillary Clinton and Al Gore

As Bill Clinton was preparing to leave office, two of his closest supporters were running in campaigns of their own. At the time of the speech, Al Gore was the presumptive presidential nominee of the Democratic Party and Hillary Clinton was an

announced candidate for the United States Senate from New York. Known for his love of campaigning, Clinton used this speech to assist Hillary Clinton and Al Gore in their respective campaigns.

Hillary Clinton, at the time both First Lady and Democratic senatorial candidate in New York, makes a brief appearance in the film. She is seen getting into a limousine at the White House and comments “I wish I could be here more. But I really think Bill has everything under control” (2:03) As the limousine pulls away from the White House, the president is seen running out with Hillary’s brown bag lunch yelling “Honey, wait, wait, wait, wait! You forgot your lunch!” This is an interesting example of perceived role reversal in domestic humor<sup>23</sup> which serves President Clinton by making light of the argument (ST1) that Hillary Clinton was either the co-president or the one really in charge. Edwards and Chen (2000) in their discussion of the depiction of First Ladies in political cartoons, argue that political power in presidential couples is a zero-sum game, where the ascendance of one partner diminishes the other. “Cartoonists who discipline the First Lady for her prominence in the public affection (Betty Ford, Barbara Bush) or in White House affairs (Nancy Reagan, Hillary Rodham Clinton), also emasculated the husband, by implication” (374). Edwards and Chen’s analysis of political cartoons can be extended to *The Final Days*, itself a kind of caricature. The image of the limousine driving away represents the gaining of power by Hillary at the expense of Bill.

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<sup>23</sup> See Walker (1985) for a discussion of domestic humor. Concerning gender roles in humor, Walker concludes that “the target or object in women’s domestic humor of midcentury is usually the speaker (and, by autobiographical implication, the author) herself. The agent causing her sense of inferiority is suggested rather than named; the humor is directed inward at the self, not outward at a specific social evil. However, a sensitive reading of these works makes it clear that there are specific causes for these women’s feelings of inferiority and uneasiness, located in social norms and attitudes that decreed woman’s separate sphere” (1985, 101).



Al Gore, at the time the frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination, also makes an appearance in the film. This serves to deflect personal criticism (SP2) and counter the argument (ST1) that the relationship between Clinton and Gore had been strained. Although Clinton and Gore do not appear together in the film, they participate in the same humorous setup. Gore creates identification (SD3) and deflects personal criticism (SP2) that his sole focus is on environmental issues by commenting that Clinton's "legacy is going to be the natural environment" (2:16). Clinton is then seen mowing the lawn of the White House and trimming the hedges. The positioning of Clinton at this point is similar to the scene with Hillary Clinton. In both cases, the soon-to-be former president is subordinate to those who will be in power in the future. Clinton concedes later in the speech "I'll really be burned up when Al Gore turns out to be funnier than me" (paragraph 14) with the implication that Gore, as the next president, will deliver the speech next year. Through these examples, Clinton seeks to create a positive mood with his audience (SD2) and advance the argument that he is a good sport (ST2), while mocking the perception that Gore is wooden and humorless. Clinton's remarks in this section can be interpreted as a means of using rhetorical humor to remind the audience that Clinton's time in office is almost up and demonstrates that he is accepting of his return to private life and his belief that his vice president will follow in his footsteps. Interestingly, Clinton does not make the claim that Gore will be a better president, only that he will be funnier. If one of Clinton's major objectives in the speech was to help Gore to become president, he seems to have missed his chance to make a stronger statement.

Clinton does not make the WHCA address a campaign speech in support of Gore and he even used rhetorical humor to rib his vice president against charges of exaggeration. Clinton claimed that he “Supervised [the] Vice-President’s invention of the Internet”<sup>24</sup> (paragraph 11). With this joke, Clinton attempted to take away some of the seriousness of the claim that Gore embellished his reputation by making light of the opposing argument (ST1) and deflecting criticism of Gore (SP2) and even as he reminds the audience of Gore’s supposed claim.

Clinton’s slideshow included a picture of the president addressing a joint session of Congress, likely a State of the Union address, with Vice President Al Gore seated behind him and applauding. Clinton’s asked his audience to “look a little closer. Those are not his real hands” (paragraph 2). This use of rhetorical humor addresses Al Gore’s campaign strategy of distancing himself from Clinton by introducing the issue (ST2) and demonstrating cleverness (SP1). Williams argued in November 1999 that “Al Gore, lately intent on distancing himself as much as possible from the president, appears to be the number-one believer in the existence of what pollsters call “Clinton fatigue” (1999, B07). Here Clinton could use humor to address Gore’s criticism in such a way that Clinton could save face and that would not really hurt Al Gore’s chances in the upcoming presidential election. Clinton may have wanted to criticize the vice president, but he likely also realized that his successor’s election in 2000 would be a positive addition to his legacy. With his support for Gore in the upcoming election, Clinton used rhetorical humor to make a light criticism of Al Gore’s perceived disloyalty while maintaining his

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<sup>24</sup> “Although Al Gore never claimed to have invented the Internet, he did discuss his role in Internet development in an interview with Wolf Blitzer of Cable News Network. The interview took place on March 9, 1999 during CNN’s ‘Late Edition’ show. Specifically, what Gore said was ‘I took the initiative in creating the Internet’” (Wiggins 2000).

positive ethos with the audience. Even as Clinton recognizes that the presidency will pass out of his hands soon, he still takes this opportunity to make the case that he was a better president than Gore might become.

### *Conclusion*

Reaction to Clinton's speech was generally positive and much of the news coverage focused on the film segment. Deborah Orin of *The New York Post* reported that "President Clinton brought down the house last night in his last hurrah in front of the White House Correspondents' Association" (2000, 018). E.J. Dionne wrote in *The Washington Post*

He [Clinton] owned the place that night. The audience, including many who have savaged him, couldn't stop laughing. There was so much applause that some journalists, fearing they had committed a terrible breach of objectivity, said afterward that they hadn't been applauding Clinton, but the presidency. (2000, B03)

A reporter wrote after the speech that "It was part of a charm offensive designed to suffuse his legacy in the same sort of rose-coloured glow that has been shone on Ronald Reagan's equally controversial tenure" (Borger 2000, 5). Jennifer Frey of *The Washington Post* wrote "The video was a triumph: Filmed in the real White House—some final scenes were shot as late as Saturday morning—the clip focused on Clinton's attempts to cope with the loneliness and boredom of his lame-duck political life" (2000, C01). Borger commented directly on the issue of Clinton's legacy with his review of the speech

As a commander-in-chief and social reformer Bill Clinton has won mixed reviews. As a role model and family man, he has of course been panned. But in the last months of his presidential term, it looks as if he might be most fondly remembered in Washington as a great performer. (2000, 5)

There was, of course, criticism of Clinton's performance.<sup>25</sup> Some raised the question of the appropriateness of the president delivering a comedy routine. This criticism is historically shortsighted and unfounded. As discussed above, there is a long history of presidential humor, especially so at the events of the Silly Season. The venue of the White House Correspondents' Association dinner gives the president the mandate and the liberty to use rhetorical humor to persuade.

The standard view of rhetorical humor would not have revealed the ways in which Clinton employed it to achieve his non-humorous objectives. The "three theories" approach would have led to the identification of some instances of superiority, relief, and incongruity humor, but not to the strategic functions of the humor. Meyer (1990) identifies the "three theories" as rhetorical strategies, but it should be clear from this chapter that they function only to identify the mechanisms by which statements are humorous. The theory of rhetorical humor at the center of this project allows us to move beyond the identification of humorous discourse to examine its strategic functions.

The application of the theory of rhetorical humor developed in Chapter Two allows us to see through the humor in Clinton's speech to find the means by which he

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<sup>25</sup> Oliver North, convicted felon and talk show host, asked on MSNBC's *Equal Time* "it seems to me that somebody at some point needs to—I'm not trying to be the POTUS [President of the United States] party pooper here or trying to be a curmudgeon. But hasn't he taken the presidency to a brand new low? Can you imagine FDR, Harry Truman, Ronald Reagan, any other president making fun of the office this way?" (North and Begala 2000, np). Of course, each of the above mentioned presidents had appeared at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner as well as other venues for political humor.

accomplished his objectives. The theory helps us to identify those examples of humor with and without rhetorical significance. Once found, the application of the nine strategies provides the means by which Clinton sought to produce his rhetorical objectives. Clinton created identification (SD3), deflected criticism (SP2), and made light of opposing arguments to manage his personal and policy legacy. He further sought to attack opponents (SP3) and demonstrate cleverness (SP1) while also managing the character perceptions of Hillary Clinton and Al Gore by countering opposing arguments (ST1) and deflecting criticism (SP2). Clinton could have given a speech that addressed the same objectives (i.e., managing his character and policy legacy, criticizing opponents, and managing the character perceptions of Hillary Clinton and Al Gore) without recourse to rhetorical humor. If he had delivered such a speech, it seems likely that the audience would have been more critical of the arguments that he made. The analysis of Clinton's speech demonstrates that one of the advantages of rhetorical humor in political discourse is that its deployment hampers the ability of the speaker's opponents to respond with serious criticism. Such a response is made difficult due to the rapidity with which speakers can make arguments and the risk of the respondent seeming like a bad sport for responding to laughter with seriousness. This interpretation applies to the humor directed at the press (page 109), Senator McCain and the Republican Caucus (page 121), and Congressional Republicans (page 118). Through his use of rhetorical humor Clinton gave his audience a performance of the legacy that he wished to leave. Playing the part of the good-natured, forgiving statesman, Clinton had the last laugh on his critics.

## Chapter Four

“Born with a Silver Foot in His Mouth”:

Ann Richards and the Risks and Rewards of Rhetorical Humor

On July 19, 1988, the State Treasurer of Texas stepped to the podium at the Democratic National Convention in Atlanta. Prior to this speech, few people outside of Texas knew who Ann Richards was, but after its delivery she started on a path to national political fame as well as the Texas governor’s mansion. In a political convention keynote address rhetorical humor as a persuasive strategy is by no means required though hardly unexpected. The selection of Ann Richards as speaker nearly guaranteed that rhetorical humor would be a major strategy of this keynote address. Lloyd Bentsen, the Texas senator and 1988 vice presidential nominee said “I don’t think any political figure in America can use humor as effectively” (quoted in Romano 1988, July 18, B1). As state treasurer, she was popular speaker on the political roast circuit, giving humorous speeches two or three nights every week and turning down many invitations to speak (Richards and Knobler 1989, 239).

In this chapter, I will provide background on Ann Richards, the context of the speech and the reaction to it, and explain how Richards sought the adherence of her audience, often through the use of rhetorical humor, concerning her character, the Democratic agenda, and George H. W. Bush’s fitness to be president. In the speech, Richards sought to accomplish three objectives. First, Richards introduces herself to the audience and sets the stage for future political success. Second, she contrasts the beliefs of the Democratic Party with her perceived failures of the Republicans. Her third objective was to attack George H. W. Bush in personal and policy terms.

## Context

Ann Richards's selection as the keynote speaker was not an obvious one, but she was what the Democrats were looking for. Romano reported

The Democrats have made no secret of the fact that they chose Richards as much for her Southern address and middle-class background as for her ability to deliver a verbal wallop. They wanted a gifted orator with a low national profile, a Texan and, preferably, a woman. (1988, B1)

Richards was not a national political figure nor did she wield great influence inside the party. Those who had the good fortune to hear her speak knew that she had great ability to hold an audience, often through her humor. In her memoir, Richards recounts her participation in a roast for Ben Barnes, the Lieutenant Governor of Texas. Though she was the State Treasurer, it was unusual for a woman to be invited to speak at a Texas political roast and Richards wrote that "to be invited to participate was a fun prospect" (Richards and Knobler 1989, 238). Among her remarks that night, she said

He is probably the most affable, likable, charming guy you would ever hope to meet, but with all the round-and-round and back-and-forth and blowing hot air, it's kind of like dealing with an oscillating fan. (1989, 238)

Richards's speech was well received and she recounts that

suddenly I was invited to speak at any number of roasts. I enjoyed doing them, but I was always worried because there is a general feeling that if you are funny you're not serious. People don't know how many brain cells it takes to be funny. (Richards and Knobler 1989, 239)

Richards received dozens of speaking requests a day, mainly to address meetings on the convention circuit (Richards and Knobler 1989, 239). She gave one of three nominating speeches for Walter Mondale at the 1984 Democratic National Convention. In that speech, as she would in the 1988 Keynote, Richards used rhetorical humor to attack President Reagan (SP3).

Someone said he lived in a fairyland. Well isn't that the truth. His is an administration that leaves silos full of grain and leaves cattle to starve and tells women that ketchup is a vegetable to feed their children. (quoted in MacPherson July 19, 1984, D1)

Richards used an issue that highlighted what her audience believed to be Reagan's lack of concern for working families. This example may not produce great laughter, but it does highlight Richard's exploitation of incongruity to generate amusement. In 1981, Reagan's administration briefly considered counting ketchup as a vegetable for the school lunch program (Baker Sept 12, 1981, 23). Richards displayed an ability and habit to use humor to point out the failings of her political opponents.

Ron Brown, an aide to the Democratic National Committee Chairman, went to the Texas State Democratic Convention in 1988 and "became convinced that Richards could become a Democratic star on a national scale" after listening to her speak for only 10 minutes (Shropshire and Schaefer 1994, 175). A more obvious choice for a keynote speaker may have been Bill Clinton.<sup>1</sup> In 1984 he was a 37 year old two term governor of Arkansas. Richards was little known outside of Texas. Her only national exposure came

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<sup>1</sup> Clinton delivered a long nominating speech for Michael Dukakis at the 1988 DNC. Mary McGrory reported "the only time he was applauded with any fervor was when, after what seemed an eternity, he finally spoke the words 'In closing . . .'" (1988, C01).



in her speech at the 1984 DNC which received little press attention. Richards expressed her concern about being able to present a speech that she thought lived up to the standards of a national convention keynote. Richards watched Mario Cuomo and Barbara Jordan's Keynotes and reacted by asking "what they had had to say was so substantive, so powerful. What did I have to say?" (Richards and Knobler 1989, 19).

Richards said that her intention was to deliver a speech that would be "different from anything anyone had ever heard as a Keynote" (Richards and Knobler 1989, 28). Her goal was to speak colloquially and there was an expectation that humor would be a central part of her rhetorical strategy. Richards said of the speech "I'm going to talk Texas" (Richards and Knobler 1989, 29) and observed that "this situation does not call for a stand-up comic. Oh, I'll start off with a little humor. But, we're not dealing with a roast here" (quoted in Romano 1988, B1). Lloyd Bentsen said "She'll make light of herself, make fun of her party, and then she'll lambaste the opposition until the rafters are ringing with laughter and tears" (quoted in Romano 1988, B1). Part of Richards's ability and desire to be funny, came from her father, Cecil Willis, who Cook describes as "a gifted and bawdy raconteur" (1993, 27). Willis spoke of trading humorous stories with Ann (whose first name is Dorothy),

I was a salesman, you know, so I pick up a few everyday and bring 'em home, tell 'em to Dorothy Ann. Before long, she'd start bringin' 'em home from school. So we'd swap. I'd give her a couple to take back to school, and she'd give me some to go to work with. (quoted in *Vogue* 1991, 249)

Richards said she "learned early that people liked you if you told stories, if you made them laugh" (quoted in Cook 1993, 27). She also said that "humor is a powerful tool. It

clears the air. Once you laugh, your mind opens and then you are able to hear the other things that are being said to you” (Richards and Knobler 1989, 239). These quotations suggest that Richards considered the role of humor in her public speaking, but did not express a fully nuanced appreciation for its strategic possibilities. She mainly associates humor with amusement and ingratiation. This does not mean that she did not see other strategic possibilities for humor, such as those offered in the theory in Chapter Two. Richards had developed a persona in Texas politics as a funny, outspoken woman but there was no guarantee that such a persona would instantly translate to the national stage. Anderson and Sheeler (2005) argue that in Texas, Richards “had a tendency to come off as brash, and this could backfire if she is seen as devaluing women’s traditional roles” (60). Tolleson-Rinehart and Stanley describe Richards as “tough [and] quite intimidating” (1994, 81). Even during Richards’s tenure as a Travis County Commissioner “some complained that she spent more time during the county court meetings ‘wisecracking’ with Precinct 4 commissioner Moya than paying attention to details” (Shropshire and Schaefer 1994, 121).

The benefit of Richards’s employment of rhetorical humor as a strategy was that she would be able to secure the attention of an audience unfamiliar with her (SD1) and allow her to demonstrate cleverness (SP1). It would further serve to distract the audience from her inexperience and to make her claims with greater speed. In an analysis of Richards’s DNC speech, Martin (2004) found that

the frequent and multifaceted incidence of Ann Richards’ humor is an illustration of how humor allows women to successfully negotiate gendered political marginalization and a variety of conflicting and competing public roles. (274)

This is a helpful analysis of Richards's use of rhetorical humor, as it demonstrates how her humor broke barriers through her delivery of the speech. However, Dow and Tonn (1993) observe that

Richards' humorous jibes both reaffirm sex roles ("high heels," "side-saddle," "immodest woman") and critique them. . . . The humor functions to underscore the fact that women have performed on a level equal to men despite the added obstacles of sex roles. (292)

This approach to Richards's humor allows the critic to consider in what ways Richards uses rhetorical humor as a strategy. That Dow and Tonn argue that Richards's humor was central to her speech is difficult to question (292). What remains is to examine the rhetorical strategies Richards used to achieve her rhetorical objectives and the extent and effectiveness of rhetorical humor as one of those strategies.

In regard to her speaking experience and preparation, Richards said that the week she learned that she would deliver the national keynote address she had delivered "major addresses" to the Madisonville Cattleman's Association in rural Central Texas and the McAllen Mexican-American Democratic symposium in the Rio Grande Valley" (Shropshire and Schaefer 1994, 175). In spite of this lack of high level political engagement, Richards had given thought to further political ambitions. She was considering a run for governorship of Texas before she delivered her speech at the DNC in 1988. Shropshire and Schaefer (1994) report that in the spring of 1988 "Ann Richards retained pollster Harrison Hickman, to research Texans' feelings about the possibility of a woman in the governor's office" (1).<sup>2</sup> This polling indicates that Richards was in the

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<sup>2</sup> In an article on Richards's use of humor, Martin (2004) claimed that "by the time Richards took the podium at the DNC, she had formally announced her candidacy for governor" and that Richards's speech at

exploratory, if not actual planning, stages for a gubernatorial campaign. The opportunity to speak at the DNC provided an excellent platform for Richards to gain name recognition and fundraising support. She said

The Keynote Address is the first major statement of purpose and direction at the Democratic National Convention. It's a speaker's dream. Everybody who cares even the slightest bit about politics can be counted on to watch, or at least will hear about what you have to say. I had never even considered giving it. (Richards and Knobler 1989, 14)

At the time of Richards's acceptance of the offer to speak at the DNC, "the talk of my making the governor's race was pretty much an open case" (Richards and Knobler 1989, 15). Her presumed opponent in the Texas Democratic primary, Jim Mattox, attempted to get the national party not to make the invitation.<sup>3</sup> The combination of Jim Mattox's efforts and Richards's acceptance is evidence that the participants believed that this speech would have an effect on the 1990 governor's race.

#### *Writing the 1988 Keynote Address*

The Democratic National Convention speech was an event of enough significance that Richards brought in a writing team to help. She said "I have a general notion of how I want the speech to go and what we need to say. I think I know how to open and close it,

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the Democratic National Convention was "an opportunity to kickstart her gubernatorial campaign" (279). The DNC speech has some markings of a campaign address, but Martin is wrong in claiming that Richards had begun her gubernatorial campaign. Shropshire and Schaefer (1994) indicate that Richards "made a formal announcement to run in a ceremony on the South lawn of the [Texas] capitol building on Saturday afternoon, June 10, 1989" (182). The 1989 date is confirmed by an Associated Press article published in the *Christian Science Monitor* (June 13, 1989, 7).

<sup>3</sup> Richards wrote in her memoir, "Over the weekend I was told that Jim Mattox, my likely primary opponent, had tried to dissuade Paul Kirk from extending the invitation to speak. The reply from the national office was, 'Well, the governor's race is a long way off, and we have no intention of getting involved in it, but the decision is made'" (Richards and Knobler 1989, 15).

which are the two tough parts. But we need a wordsmith” (Richards and Knobler 1989, 17). She sought the help of her friend, comedian Lily Tomlin, who “would phone in suggestions . . . about every hour on the hour” (Spelce, quoted in Shropshire and Schaefer 1994, 176). That Richards would seek the help of a professional comedian makes it likely that she believed humor would be an important feature of her speech. In the process of writing, Richards was concerned that early drafts “didn’t have the flow, the feeling that I knew it needed. There wasn’t a conversational tone” (Richards and Knobler 1989, 21). Two days before the speech, Richards still did not like the draft. The computer crashed the day before Richards left for Atlanta, so she got on the plane without a speech. When Richards arrived for the convention, she was given a speech text prepared by the national committee. Neal Spelce, an Austin television journalist and speech coach, said “When I read that speech, I thought it should be included in some book of the greatest speeches ever presented. It rang out like the Gettysburg Address. There was only one problem. It was a great speech for anybody but Ann Richards” (quoted in Shropshire and Schaefer 1994, 176). A speech that fit a formula was not going to work for Ann Richards. The requirements of the event needed to recognize Richards’s position as a speaker, one element of which was that she was only the second woman to deliver this speech. Richards and her team wrote a speech they believed would allow Richards to both inspire and persuade.

A feature of Richards’s speech that has drawn scholarly attention was the significance of her role as a woman delivering a political convention keynote address. Dow and Tonn (1993) argue that Richards’s “nontraditional style, which made use of frequent colloquialisms, personal anecdotes, sharp humor, and family values” (289) was

the product of contemporary feminine style rather than regional influence. They argue that

the synthesis of formal qualities of feminine style evident in Richards' rhetoric (use of narrative, concrete examples, analogies, and anecdotes as primary evidence sources; personal tone, and encouragement, of audience participation) with an alternative political philosophy reflecting feminine ideals of care, nurturance, and family relationships functions as a critique of traditional political reasoning that offers alternative grounds for political judgment. (289)

I argue that the strategic objectives sought after, through the use of rhetorical humor, are not gender dependant. Several of the "formal qualities of feminine style" mentioned by Dow and Tonn (1993, 289) are to be found in discussions of humor and rhetoric that do not consider the gendered aspects of speech. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca identify argumentation by example a prime feature of relations establishing the structure of reality (1969, 350). In *De oratore*, Cicero also identifies the utility of "witticisms derived from allegory or from metaphor or from irony" (2.261) and one of the forms of joking

is telling a story, and this is quite difficult. For you must describe in place before the audience's eyes such things as are both plausible (one of the requirements of the story) and somewhat dishonorable (one of the requirements of humor). (2.264)

Ann Richards used humor for many of the same strategies as Bill Clinton did in the 2000 White House Correspondents' Association address. In both speeches, rhetorical humor was used to create identification (SD3), make light of an opposing argument (ST1), demonstrate cleverness (SP1), deflect criticism (SP2), and attack opponents (SP3).

Another issue concerns Dow and Tonn's claim that the feminine style reflects an "alternative political philosophy reflecting feminine ideals of care, nurturance, and family relationships" (289). The subjects of Ann Richards's humor in the DNC speech certainly intersect with this aspect of feminine style. She makes jokes based in the subjects of parents and children, body image and self-esteem, and family relationships. By way of comparison, Bill Clinton's humor in the 2000 WHCA speech is mainly about political rivalries and professional accomplishments. It could be argued, though, that in the most recognized part of the speech, *The Final Days* film depicts Clinton engaged in stereotypically feminine activities: taking care of the house, doing the shopping, preparing lunch for the working spouse, and gardening. That the film was intended to be ironic may have been the reason for the invocation of the feminine style, though it has been argued that the use of the feminine style is not limited to women. Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (1996) examine how male presidential candidate use the feminine style in campaign films. They define the feminine style

as personal, organized in inductive or non-linear patterns, stylized and ornamental, reliant on anecdotes and examples, and likely to encourage identification between a speaker and audience. (339)

The above definition could describe rhetorical humor as well as feminine style. Rhetorical humor can be employed to persuade in place of "formal evidence, deductive structure, and linear modes of reasoning," what Dow and Tonn identify as "masculine" forms of argument (288). There is a similar relationship between rhetorical humor and informal reasoning. Both strategies exploit the personal and consider audience over the demand for logical coherence. Cohen argued that "the point in telling a joke is the

attainment of community. There is special intimacy in shared laughter, and a mastering aim of joke-telling is the purveyance of this instance” (1983, 124). He goes on to identify a category of jokes, which he terms affective jokes, in which the community must share an attitude or prejudice. Ann Richards’s uses humor to build community and expand the idea of “the personal is political” to “the personal can be amusing and the amusing can be political.” This use of rhetorical humor cannot be limited to a feminine or masculine style. As I shall argue in the analysis section of this chapter, Richards uses rhetorical humor throughout the DNC speech to argue that her views, derived from her personal experience, better represent the interests and needs of the country than do those of George Bush and the Republicans.

*Ann Richards’s Use of Rhetorical Humor in the  
1988 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address*

Ann Richards had three major objectives for this speech: to introduce herself to a nationwide audience and establish her political image in the hopes of future political advancement; to argue that the Democratic Party best reflected the views of the nation; and to persuade her audience George H. W. Bush was not fit, either as a politician or as a person, to serve as the next president. In what follows, I shall argue that Richards used rhetorical humor to win the goodwill of her audience and to attack her opponents, though not with equal efficacy. In the sections where Richards does not use humor, I argue that this represents a strategic decision not to undermine the perceived seriousness of her claims.



## Introducing Ann Richards

Ann Richards's first objective in her keynote speech was to introduce herself to both the Democratic Party and the national audience watching at home. Richards had a reputation in Texas politics that she needed to establish on the national stage. Richards said

Right from the beginning of the speech I wanted to make it clear that "We're about to have some fun." I wanted an overall feeling that made people know that politics does not have to be all gloom and doom and lofty rhetoric, that it is really personal, and that it's fun. That it is, next to baseball and football, the All-American pastime. So I sat there at the table and said, "We're going to tell how the cow ate the cabbage." (Richards and Knobler 1989, 23)

The DNC speech gave Richards the opportunity to display stature, astuteness, and the image of a citizen and familial Texas leader. In the introductory section of the speech she established herself as a Texan first, as a woman second, and specifically as Ann Richards third. To position herself as an authentic Texan she compares herself to a figure that the audience is already familiar with. "I'm delighted to be here with you this evening, because after listening to George Bush all these years, I figured you needed to know what a real Texas accent sounds like" (paragraph 3). This is an effective strategy by Richards, to make a joke in which the subject of the humor is germane to the central arguments of her speech (i.e., introducing herself (SP1) and attacking George Bush (SP3)), the target of the humor is familiar to the audience, and the immediate audience is well disposed to support her criticism. Of the comment, Richards said

I knew several things that had to be done in the speech. I wanted to say, from the beginning, that I know that my accent is different from yours, and for the majority of you in that television audience I know I don't sound like you. And I wanted to say it in a way that would be funny so that they would accept me and my accent. (Richards and Knobler 1989, 23)

She used the remark to expose Bush's inauthentic claim to be a son of Texas. Bush, born in Massachusetts and raised in Connecticut, moved to Texas when he was 24 years old to go into the oil business. Mere seconds into her speech, Richards offered the audience the opportunity to view her as an honest speaker in contrast to the duplicitous Bush.<sup>4</sup> She continues this line of argument by creating an association with another Texas figure well known to her audience, though one with whom at least her partisan audience will undoubtedly respond favorably. Richards observed that

Twelve years ago Barbara Jordan, another Texas woman, Barbara made the keynote address to this convention, and two women in a hundred and sixty years is about par for the course. (paragraph 4)

This early example of rhetorical humor is comprised of a germane subject, a personal target, and an immediate audience, whose disposition to the joke is likely positive.

Richards addressed the this strategy when she later said

I wanted to say, also right away, I realize that I am female, and that not many females get to do what I am doing, but I hope you will listen to me. And I wanted to say something that would make the women feel good about me being there, and

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<sup>4</sup> At the Texas State Society Inaugural Ball in 1989, President George Bush showed off his black, grey, and red cowboy boots by saying "I don't want Ann Richards to think I'm not a Texan" (quoted in McCombs et al. 1989, F1).

get that issue settled so that I did not focus on women's issues again in the speech.  
(Richards 1989, 23)

Martin (2004) argued that this unexpected critique of the Democratic Party's lack of diversity is an instance in which Richards "employed incongruity humor to soften, but not undermine, her feminist critique of her own political party's leadership" (280). This is not to say that humor was required for Richards to make this point. Barbara Jordan, in her 1976 DNC keynote address, said "There is something different about tonight. There is something special about tonight. What is different? What is special? I, Barbara Jordan, am a keynote speaker" (paragraph 2).<sup>5</sup> Richards's humor captures the significance of her role as keynote speaker, even as she acknowledged that she is not a groundbreaker in this position. A feminist critique of the Democratic Party does not appear to be a major objective of Richards's speech. She does criticize the Republicans for failing to grasp women's issues, but she restricts the comments about her own party to this one line which uses dispositional, topical, and personal strategies. She establishes identification (SP2) between Barbara Jordan and herself while employing the topical strategy of introducing a potentially divisive issue to her audience (ST2). She further employs the personal strategy of deflecting criticism by shifting any perceived critique of her inexperience on the national political stage to a critique of her own party's near total failure to include women on that stage (SP2).

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<sup>5</sup> The 1976 keynote address was not the only time that Barbara Jordan spoke about her groundbreaking activities. In her speech on the articles of impeachment against President Richard Nixon, Jordan used rhetorical humor to make a similar point when she said "Earlier today, we heard the beginning of the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States: 'We, the people.' It's a very eloquent beginning. But when that document was completed on the seventeenth of September in 1787, I was not included in that 'We, the people.' I felt somehow for many years that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton just left me out by mistake. But through the process of amendment, interpretation, and court decision, I have finally been included in 'We, the people'" (1974, paragraph 2).

Richards needed to walk a delicate line between establishing her independence and value as a speaker with support and praise for the values of the Democratic Party. Richards was not the only convention speaker in recent history to criticize her own party. Jesse Jackson's speech at the 1984 DNC was notable for his direct recognition of the differences within the Democratic Party. Di Mare (1987) argued that speeches like Jackson's display "how conflict can be *functionalized* rather than reduced or eliminated" (218). By addressing, however briefly, the issue of gender disparity in the party, Richards is able to acknowledge a possible division and move on to unite the party behind a common goal: the election of Michael Dukakis and the defeat of George Bush.

On the soundtrack of a video recording of Richards's speech, her audience can be heard responding to some of Richards's statements (i.e., ". . . what a real Texas accent sounds like," and ". . . par for the course.") with loud laughter. Building to a crescendo, she delivers the following line, with her arms outstretched as if dancing with a partner. "But if you give us a chance, we can perform. After all, Ginger Rogers did everything that Fred Astaire did. She just did it backwards and in high heels" (paragraph 5).<sup>6</sup> The strategy of this example of rhetorical humor served to establish Richards's identification (SP1), primarily with women in the audience. Dow and Tonn argue that Richards's claims are "less threatening couched in humor, but the humor functions to underscore the fact that women have performed on a level equal to men despite the added obstacles of sex roles" (292). Richards's comments are "less threatening" and in this case more effective, because her use of humor garners the goodwill of her audience, making it more

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<sup>6</sup> Although this statement is often attributed to Richards, it first appeared in a 1982 *Frank and Ernest* comic strip written by Bob Thaves. The original caption read "Sure he was great, but don't forget that Ginger Rogers did everything he did, backwards . . . and in high heels" (quoted in Carter 2002, np). Richards said "I've used that line in speeches for years and years, and I have no idea of the real origin of it" (Richards and Knobler 1989, 24).

likely that they will accept her future claims. Having used rhetorical humor to establish her presence as a Texan and as a woman, Richards concluded her first objective in the speech by introducing Ann Richards, the individual. Richards's shared a personal anecdote with the audience

You know, tonight I feel a little like I did when I played basketball in the 8th grade. I thought I looked real cute in my uniform. And then I heard a boy yell from the bleachers, "Make that basket, Birdlegs." And my greatest fear is that same guy is somewhere out there in the audience tonight, and he's going to cut me down to size. (paragraph 7)

Martin (2004) claimed that Richards's "decision to include this past humiliation in the keynote address and relate it to current fear ridicule is an example of her relief humor" (281). Classifying this as an example of relief humor seemed to miss the essential feature of the anecdote. The two factors that may have created tension in the introduction of the speech were that Ann Richards was a political unknown and that it was unusual for a woman to give the speech. Richards addressed these concerns, through rhetorical humor, with her attack on George Bush's authenticity, her invocation of Barbara Jordan, and her Ginger Rogers joke. If anything, the "birdlegs" story might serve to *create* tension. The "birdlegs" joke is an example of self-deprecating humor. It is not unusual for politicians to make themselves the target of humor, though some scholars question the efficacy of women's use of self-deprecating humor. Barreca argued

If women make fun of themselves in such a way that we devalue our own experiences, then we are harming ourselves—subtly and insidiously—in ways that may come back to haunt us. When we recognize the many sources of humor

that are open to us, and that don't depend on self-deprecation or deprecation of other women, we open ourselves to whole new avenues of power and delight.  
(1991, 67)

Richards's self-deprecating humor may not be a devaluing of her experience. As a woman giving the keynote address, she has the opportunity to give voice to the real fear caused by her experience of sexism. It is not clear that the choice to include this anecdote was a useful one for Richards. As a story about overcoming fear, this story is somewhat strange in that she does not tell the audience if she made the basket. The story might have functioned better if she could demonstrate to the audience that she succeeded in spite of her doubters. There seems to have been an element of habit in telling the story, in that Richards said "I used the line about the guy who yelled out from the bleachers . . . which I have used in speeches many times before—because it says 'I am imperfect and I have some sense of myself'" (Richards and Knobler 1989, 24). Fearing that someone will "cut her down to size" is not the same thing as having "some sense of myself" (paragraph 7). It is unlikely that she would face immediate vocal opposition in such a partisan setting. With the use of the "bird legs" anecdote, she also ran the risk of revealing to the audience that she had a lack of confidence in her ability to deliver the speech.

In addition to rhetorical humor, Richards used non-humorous storytelling to create an image of home and nostalgia for her audience. In the following passage, she weaves humorous Texas expressions into a story about the values of her childhood:

because where I grew up there really wasn't much tolerance for self-importance, people who put on airs. I can still hear the laughter of the men telling jokes you weren't supposed to hear—talkin' about how big that old buck deer was, laughin'

about mama puttin' Clorox in the well when the frog fell in. They talked about war and Washington and what this country needed. They talked straight talk. And it came from people who were living their lives as best they could. And that's what we're gonna do tonight. We're gonna tell how the cow ate the cabbage. (paragraphs 8-9)<sup>7</sup>

Richards places considerable emphasis on the final sentence of this quotation. The effect of this punctuation in her delivery would likely lead the audience to conclude that it has significance. Through this colloquialism, Richards tells her audience that she is going to tell them the truth. Perhaps Richards realized that the inclusion of a relatively obscure phrase would not be persuasive to the audience at large so she prefaced it by explaining that she was going to talk "straight talk" (paragraph 9). What is not clear from the section of Richards's speech quoted above is if she was relating a story about being female or being a child. I believe the main position Richards takes in the example is that of a child eavesdropping on her father and laughing at her mother. Richards is able to take the identification and goodwill that she has established with the audience in the introduction to move into the first non-humorous section of the speech.

#### Arguments for Democratic Leadership

The second major goal of Richards's speech was to persuade the audience that the Democratic Party represented the values and ideals that were best for the country. Again,

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<sup>7</sup> "How the cow ate the cabbage": "An expression to indicate the speaker is laying it on the line, telling it like it is, getting down to brass tacks—with the connotation of telling someone what he or she needs to know but probably doesn't want to hear. According to Little Rock attorney Alston Jennings, who submitted this southernism to Richard Allen's February 2, 1991, 'Our Town' column in the *Arkansas Gazette*, the expression has its roots in a story about an elephant that escaped from the zoo and wandered into a woman's cabbage patch. The woman observed the elephant pulling up her cabbages with its trunk and eating them. She called the police to report that there was a cow in her cabbage patch pulling up cabbages with its tail. When the surprised police officer inquired as to what the cow was doing with the cabbages, the woman replied, 'You wouldn't believe me if I told you!'" (Hendrickson 2004, 715).

she made arguments supporting this claim using both humorous and non-humorous discourse. She contrasts Democratic ideas with Republican ones, a strategy that seems reasonable, given that the Republicans had been in office for the past eight years. Richards needed to consider that some members of her television audience<sup>8</sup> would be happy with the status quo while others would be ready for change after the Reagan years. George Will argued that “the role of [the] natural governing party may be up for grabs in 1988” (1988, 93). The Democratic Party was on the defensive in 1988 having won only one presidential election since 1968. The bright side for them was that the 1986 congressional elections resulted in an extension of the Democrats majority in the House by five seats and returned control of the Senate to the Democrats for the first time in six years. As for the concerns of the voters, Buchanan reported that the changes the electorate believed the next president should make in 1988 were

attack the drug problem . . . force educational policy down to the local level . . .  
concentrate on early education . . . give us back the jobs and benefits we used to  
have . . . encourage a revitalization of family . . . put criminals to work . . . do  
something for those without medical coverage. (1988, 119-120)

Richards addressed many of these concerns in the speech through non-humorous arguments. Concerning the desire of the voters for a return to better economic times Richards read a letter she had received from a woman in Texas detailing her family’s difficulty in making ends meet. The letter ends with “I believe that people like us are forgotten in America” (paragraph 11). Richards responds by placing the blame on the

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<sup>8</sup> One of Richards’s speech advisors, Neil Spelce said that they considered the these two audiences and concluded “The millions out there, sitting in their underwear with their feet propped up on a coffee table and sipping a beer. These are the folks that you have to win over” (quoted in Shropshire and Schaefer 1994, 177).



Republican Party. “Well of course you believe you’re forgotten, because you have been” (paragraph 12). Richards details the failures of the Reagan administration through the repetition of the phrase “that’s wrong!” She argued that the Republicans “treat us as if we were pieces of a puzzle that can’t fit together” (paragraph 13). Richards expressed dismay as she “watched farms go on the auction block while we bought food from foreign countries” (paragraph 13) and listened as the Republicans “told working mothers it’s all their fault” (paragraph 14). She further argued that the Republicans “told American labor they were trying to ruin free enterprise by asking for 60 days’ notice of plant closings” (paragraph 14) while they “belittle us for demanding clean air and clean water” (paragraph 14). She concludes this recital with the following call to action:

No wonder we feel isolated and confused. We want answers and their answer is that “something is wrong with you.” Well nothing’s wrong with you. Nothing’s wrong with you that you can’t fix in November! (paragraph 15)

Richards continued this section of the speech by addressing the beliefs of the Democrats, again using parallelism by beginning each paragraph with a variation of “we believe.” She argued that the Democratic Party believes in equal opportunity, “good daycare and public schools” (paragraph 18). She said that “social security is a pact that can not be broken” (paragraph 15), and that Americans can “overcome any problem, including the dreaded disease called AIDS” (paragraph 19). That Richards would specifically mention AIDS was an significant rhetorical choice. Although the disease had been identified in 1981, Reagan did not speak of it publicly until 1987.<sup>9</sup> To use rhetorical humor to discuss AIDS or its victims would have been, quite clearly, inappropriate. Richards used the

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<sup>9</sup> For an examination of Reagan’s rhetoric about AIDS see Perez and Dionisopoulos, “Presidential silence, C. Everett Koop, and the Surgeon General’s Report on AIDS” (1995).

opportunity of this speech to demonstrate that the Democrats were more in touch with the realities of America. She was building up her audience to identify themselves with the Democratic Party. The people in the convention hall were already convinced and their applause registered their approval. For the audience at home, Richards's claims were designed to quickly and forcefully lay out the Democrats priorities. To use humor in support of these positions would have detracted from the serious emotional impact of her claims.

National defense had been a cornerstone of the Reagan administration policy and was expected to continue with a Bush presidency. Richards needed to make the case that the Democrats were also concerned about national security and that they would bring a more common sense approach to the execution of defense policy. Through her folksy, down-home persona, Richards said

We Democrats are committed to a strong America, and, quite frankly, when our leaders say to us, "We need a new weapons system," our inclination is to say, "Well, they must be right." But when we pay billions for planes that won't fly, billions for tanks that won't fire, and billions for systems that won't work, "that old dog won't hunt." (paragraph 26)

By using a regional colloquial phrase ("that old dog won't hunt")<sup>10</sup> Richards reconnects to the persona she created in the introduction of the speech to criticize her opponent's argument using rhetorical humor (ST1) that is germane to a major argument of the speech. Richards uses this claim to belittle her opponents by casting the Republican arguments concerning their record on defense as "old dogs," sent out time and again without regard to success. This creates an image of the Republicans as disconnected from

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<sup>10</sup> The expression indicates that "an excuse offered will not serve" (Brewster 1939, 266).

the country and not concerned with what she sees as the obviousness of their failure. Richards expands her critique to conclude that anyone looking at the evidence should reach the same conclusion. In paragraph 26, she says “you don’t have to be from Waco<sup>11</sup> to know when the Pentagon makes crooks rich and doesn’t make America strong, that it’s a bum deal.” By putting the Republicans in opposition to making American strong, Richards advances her claim that the Democrats will provide for the national defense, but only in a way that makes sense. The second part of her argument (i.e., “it’s a bum deal”) is not rhetorical humor, but a continuation of the colloquial Texas style of her “old dog” humor.

Though a principal goal of a keynote address at a national party conference would be for the speaker to advance the candidacy of the party’s nominee, Richards speaks infrequently of Michael Dukakis. She did not completely ignore this requirement of the keynote address, but what is unusual is that Richards only mentioned Dukakis twice in the speech and even then only toward its conclusion. Her praise of the Democratic nominee is hardly effusive and reflected none of the rhetorical humor to be found throughout the rest of her speech. She told the audience of “his calm” and that “his instincts are deeply American” and that she has “never met a man who had a more remarkable sense of what is really important in life” (paragraph 28). While these comments are positive, their style does not match that of the rest of the speech. This endorsement lacks the authenticity that Richards sought in the rest of the speech, and not speaking of her candidate in the same voice and folksy style of so many of her other claims is to draw attention to her lack of enthusiasm. Richards mentions Jesse Jackson, winner of eleven Democratic primaries in 1988, saying “Jesse Jackson is a leader and a

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<sup>11</sup> Richards was born in Lakeview, Texas, a suburb of Waco.

teacher who can open our hearts and open our minds and stir our very souls” (paragraph 20). Richards reserves her most supportive comments, and returned to her “voice,” for the vice presidential nominee and her fellow Texan:

And then there’s my friend and my teacher for many years, Senator Lloyd Bentsen. And I couldn’t be prouder, both as a Texan and as a Democrat, because Lloyd Bentsen understands America. From the barrio to the boardroom, he knows how to bring us together, by regions, by economics, and by example. And he’s already beaten George Bush once. (paragraph 29)

The language she uses in support of Bentsen shows more feeling and consideration than that used to describe Dukakis. In addition, she again uses rhetorical humor to attack George Bush (SP3) by reminding the audience of Bentsen’s 1970 senatorial victory.

#### Arguments against George H. W. Bush

Ann Richards’s attacks against George H. W. Bush are perhaps the most famous sections of the speech, but it is not clear that they are the most successful. Throughout the speech, Richards uses rhetorical humor to attack George Bush’s character and policy positions. Bush, while well known because of his two terms as vice president, faced several vulnerabilities in the 1988 election. He was running as a sitting vice president, a position no candidate had used as a successful route to the presidency since Martin Van Buren in 1836.<sup>12</sup> Bush also faced an image problem known as “the wimp factor.” Warner reported just before his formal campaign announcement that Bush entered

the nomination fight with enviable advantages—high name recognition and stronger voter ratings for experience and competence . . . yet Bush suffers from a

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<sup>12</sup> During this time, nine vice presidents became president, though none through election while holding the Vice Presidency.

potentially crippling handicap—a perception that he isn’t strong enough or tough enough for the challenges of the Oval Office. That he is, in a single mean word, a wimp. (1987, 28)

Bush also had a reputation as a less than stellar campaigner who would be a directionless leader. Finally, Bush faced lingering exposure from the unresolved Iran-Contra scandal. Richards offered her party faithful a prediction that change was coming by arguing that Bush was the heir to a long string of scoundrels.

I want to announce to this Nation that in a little more than 100 days, the Reagan-Meese-Deaver-Nofziger-Poindexter-North-Weinberger-Watt-Gorsuch-Lavelle-Stockman-Haig-Bork-Noriega-George Bush [era] will be over!” (paragraph 6).<sup>13</sup>

Richards finishes the list with a large smile and outstretched arms. The local audience responded with laughter and applause. This could not have been a particularly easy line to deliver; Richards forgot to say the word “era.” While this omission is not a glaring error, it does point to likelihood that the focus of the argument was on creating associations among the names in Richards’s list, particularly between Reagan and Bush, the first and last names mentioned. The length of the list may have been an attempt to demonstrate the numerous problems that plagued the Reagan-Bush administration, but the difficulty in its delivery undermined its effectiveness. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) point out that arguments concerning the relationship between a group and its members can be particularly strong as “individuals influence our impression of the group to which they belong, and, conversely, what we think of the group predisposes us to a particular impression of those [who] form it” (322). Reagan and Bush appear at the beginning and end of the list of infamous Reagan era administration rogues and

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix B for the identification of the political figures listed in this quotation.

wrongdoers. The entanglements of the people on the list included no fewer than seven indictments, six convictions, seven resignations forced by scandal, and one former CIA informant turned Central American strongman. Richards use rhetorical humor to secure the attention of the audience (SD1) through the recitation of this list early in the speech and informs the audience (ST2) that a major goal of the speech will be to attack George Bush (SP3). By placing Bush at the end of this long list, Richards is able to associate him with the misdeeds of others. The advantage of using humor to connect all these people is that it allows Richards bring them up with great rapidity and limits the ability of the audience to judge critically her claim about each person. That she offered this line with an animated delivery and a smile on her face helps to highlight her argument that electing someone from this company would be absurd.

Richards adds further claims that George Bush is the wrong leader for the country because of his association with Ronald Reagan. She focuses this attack on what she regards as flaws in Bush's character and competence by looking at two issues, the national debt and Reagan administration scandals. The difficulty with making this case is that the focus of her criticism is on the current president and not the nominee. Of course Bush had been Reagan's vice president for nearly eight years, but prior to that time he had been critical of Reagan's policies. Richards makes her claim concerning the record-setting national debt, not with numbers, but with an analogy that her audience could relate to.

The debt of this nation is greater than it has ever been in our history. We fought a world war on less debt than the Republicans have built up in the last eight

years. You know, it's kind of like that brother-in-law who drives a flashy new car, but he's always borrowing money from you to make the payments. (paragraph 25)

With this example of rhetorical humor, Richards creates identification (SD3), introduces the complex issue of the national debt (ST2), and attacks her opponents (SP3). By the end of Reagan's term in office, the national debt stood at \$2.6 trillion. Instead of trying to explain the significance of the number, Richards seeks for the audience to understand how they should feel about Reagan and Bush running up the debt. In this instance, she compares the Republicans to a feckless brother-in-law. Dow and Tonn (1993) claim that Richards's rhetoric exhibits "a pattern that privileges concrete experience over traditional deductive reasoning and creates standards for political judgment in which claims are tested against private experience" (290). This analysis of Richards's use of contemporary feminine style is similar to my analysis of Richards's use of humor. The use of rhetorical humor to make an argument is a strategy that places the personal over the strictly logical. For rhetorical humor to succeed as both amusement and persuasion, the speaker and the audience must share common experiences and common attitudes. This was not the only time in the speech where Richards used a domestic analogy to advance her claim concerning the incompetence of the Republican administration. In regard to Reagan's lack of candor concerning many scandals in his administration, especially the Iran-Contra affair, Richards said that:

The greatest nation of the free world has had a leader for eight straight years that has pretended that he can not hear our questions over the noise of the helicopters. And we know he doesn't wanna answer. But we have a lot of questions. And when we get our questions asked, or there is a leak, or an investigation the only

answer we get is, “I don’t know,” or “I forgot.” But you wouldn’t accept that answer from your children. I wouldn’t. Don’t tell me “you don’t know” or “you forgot.” (paragraph 21)

Dow and Tonn (1993) observe that “reducing a complex issue such as the Iran-Contra affair to a judgment based in parental experience promotes the validity of practical wisdom in testing claims” (290). Ann Richards’s analogy asks her audience to use judgment from their private lives to draw a conclusion about a public issue and she does so through humor. She argued that if you would not accept such an excuse, even from your children, then surely you should not accept it from someone who is supposed to be in greater control of his abilities. With this example of rhetorical humor that was germane to the subject of the speech, targeted at a person, and aimed at a mixed audience, Richards created identification (SD3), introduced a complex issue (ST2), and attacked her opponent (SP3). Not only does Richards use an example of parental experience with which most of her audience could identify, but she uses belittling humor to make it clear which side is in the wrong. Even if an audience member knew none of the details of the Iran-Contra scandal, it seems reasonable that they would take the side of the parent against the child, who claimed “‘I don’t know’ or ‘I forgot’” (paragraph 21). Although this criticism is aimed at Reagan’s actions, “the trials of the principles in the Iran-Contra scandal carried the potential for serious embarrassment” for Bush (Kalb and Hertzberg 1988, 284).<sup>14</sup> As Richards links Bush to Reagan’s involvement in the scandal, she plays the role of the scolding mother and used humor as a rhetorical strategy to create a feminine identity for herself and a masculine, though infantilized, persona of Reagan and,

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<sup>14</sup> The investigation into Iran-Contra was in progress at the time of the 1988 DNC. The trials of National Security Council member Lt. Col. Oliver North and National Security Advisor John Poindexter, key figures in the scandal were in pre-trial motions (Walsh 1993, under Chronology of Key Public Developments).



by extension, Bush. The persuasiveness of this example is dependant on the extant to which the audience associates Bush and Reagan. This particular example of criticism through rhetorical humor (SP3) might not have been as effective delivered by a male politician. Crawford (2003) argued that women's humor "seems to be not self-deprecation, but the construction of a community of shared understanding about life's absurdities" (1421). Richards uses this example to create the image of a wise mother who knows better than to accept weak excuses from her children. In a study of partisan perceptions of political cartoons, Weise found

that disparaging the opposition political party [was] judged as more humorous by each political group. . . . Members of both parties indicated a greater preference for cartoons that spoofed the alternate party. (1996, 205)

Those who shared Richards's perspective may have found the humor amusing and persuasive while those who did not may have recognized that Richards was trying to use humor but failed to find it funny.

Anderson and Van Atta argued in that "Bush's advisers tell him his campaign needs a vision for America—what Bush refers to as "the vision thing" (53). Concerning Bush's lack of vision, Richards commented:

And for eight straight years George Bush hasn't displayed the slightest interest in anything we care about. And now that he's after a job that he can't get appointed to, he's like Columbus discovering America. He's found child care. He's found education. (paragraph 22)

The comparison of Bush to the modern image of Columbus naively discovering America is an effective use of rhetorical humor that demonstrates cleverness (SP1), attacks an

opponent (SP3), and introduces the audience to the argument (ST2) that Bush is out of touch with their interests. Richards is able to attack Bush's considerable resume without engaging its details.<sup>15</sup> Her humorous argument positions Bush as opportunistically discussing issues she believes are important (e.g., child care and education) only because he is seeking election.

The 1988 DNC speech, and perhaps Ann Richards herself, are best known for the line that follows the quotation above: "Poor George. He can't help it. He was born with a silver foot in his mouth" (paragraph 22). Many of the obituaries that ran for Ann Richards in 2006 referenced the "silver foot in his mouth" joke.<sup>16</sup>

With this catachresis involving an intentionally mixed metaphor,<sup>17</sup> Richards delivered not only the most famous line in the speech but arguably of her entire political career. While there has been great admiration for this jab, less attention has been paid to either its origin or effectiveness.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of questions concerning the origin of the phrase, "Ann Richards was the one who brought it to life, and that was what counted" (Shropshire and Schaefer 1994, 177). There was some discussion among her

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<sup>15</sup> Bush had spent 12 years in two elected positions at the time of the 1988 campaign: US Representative from Texas and the Vice Presidency. Seven years were spent in non elective political positions including Ambassador to the United Nations, Chairman of the Republican National Committee, the chief US diplomat in China, and Director of Central Intelligence (Levy 1996, 63).

<sup>16</sup> For example: Ratcliffe, Kilday, Robison, and Minaya (2006), Kennedy and Silverstein (2006), and Lyman (2006).

<sup>17</sup> The metaphor is a combination of "born with a silver spoon in his mouth" and "he puts his foot in his mouth," indicating wealth and inarticulateness, respectively.

<sup>18</sup> Although the origin of the phrase is not definitive, it apparently was not written by Richards. Washington columnist and former Walter Mondale speech writer, David Kusnet, used wrote of Bush that recent verbal gaffs were "only the latest in a series of remarks suggesting he was born with a silver foot in his mouth" (quoted in Conconi 1988, D03). The June 1988 column "appeared in *The Houston Post*, among other newspapers. In Houston that ran under the headline 'Bush seemingly was born with silver foot in mouth'" (Conconi D03). Neil Spelce claimed that he did not know the origin of the "silver foot" joke. "In all honesty, I'm not sure who gets credit for that line. It's been broadly mentioned that it came from Lily Tomlin, but I don't think that's the case" (quoted in Shropshire and Schaefer 1994, 177). Even Richards was not sure where the line came from. Spelce reports that "Ann credits Linda Ellerbee with that one, but Linda told me that she heard one woman say that on a bus while having an argument with her husband" (quoted in Shropshire and Schaefer 1994, 177).

speechwriting team concerning the appropriateness of the “silver foot” joke. In her book, Richards wrote

There was some question about whether to keep the “silver foot” line. I think maybe Harrison Hickman said it was an old line, everybody knew it. I said, “Well, I don’t know it. And if I don’t know it, Mama in Waco doesn’t know it either.” Kirk came to me and said, “Don’t let them talk you into taking that line out. It’s too good.” So I said okay. (Richards and Knobler 1989, 26)

Anderson and Sheeler (2005) argue that “sometimes Richards’s humor was more harmful than helpful” (60). The attack may have bothered Bush,<sup>19</sup> but it is unclear how effective it was in supporting Richards’s other claims. The lines preceding the “silver foot” comment offer perhaps a stronger attack on Bush, in terms of both character and policy, but were overshadowed by the cleverness of the joke. Richards’s other comments in this section were attacks on Bush’s beliefs and policies, not personal attacks. Of the speech, Richards said

There was never any intention in that speech to slam George Bush or Ronald Reagan. I think negative speeches are very hard to carry off, and they leave you with a bad taste. I felt that line was good because it’s a lampoon line, like a newspaper editorial cartoonist’s line. And it’s also very funny. (Richards and Knobler 1989, 26)

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<sup>19</sup> The initial reaction from the target of the joke was on a fishing trip during the Democratic National Convention and claimed he did not hear any of the attacks sent his way from the podium (Peterson 1988, A25). Comments later that week by Bush indicated that it had received some attention from the Republican camp. Peterson claimed that Richards’s “silver foot” remarks “seemed to get under Bush’s skin” (A25). “When he was asked about the remark today, Bush initially shrugged it off. But he referred to Richards several times during the next 15 minutes. At one point, he boasted that he had voted more times in Texas than had Richards. At another, he said, “I employed 400 people in her state, my state. I’ll carry Texas” (quoted in Peterson A25). Bush tried to minimize the force of the attacks by claiming he was “‘really at a loss’ to respond because ‘I had not benefited from this criticism . . . by listening to it’” (quoted in Peterson A25).

This claim by Richards seems far fetched. Clearly a major objective of the speech was to show the American people why Reagan was a bad president and Bush would be as well. I have discussed that one of the benefits of using rhetorical humor to attack an opponent is that it may allow the speaker to maintain the positive admiration of the audience. This only works if the audience continues to hold the speaker in high esteem after the joke. Richards's further claim that the joke was similar to an editorial cartoon also misses the mark. The cartoonist does not have the immediacy of audience reaction, or even their face behind the words, when offering a critique. The cartoonist is not, presumably preparing to run for office. Richards perceived the line to be funny, as did her immediate audience, but it would be difficult to claim that the statement was simply raillery. Bush predicted that "maybe it will backfire on them. Maybe people won't like just tearing down the other guy. I have a feeling, I always have, but if you just go nasty, go ugly, it isn't an effective way to do business" (quoted in Peterson A25). Bush attempted to take the moral high ground as a way to defend himself against Richards's criticism. It did backfire on the Democrats in that the Republicans conducted a campaign full of attack, most notable the Willie Horton television ad.

While this attack was certainly memorable, it did not prevent George H. W. Bush from winning election in 1988. In her attacks against Bush, Richards needed to be cautious not to come across as mean to audience members without a preconception or disposition toward her. By way of example, consider Reagan's attack on Mondale in the 1984 presidential debate (see page 1). The audience was already disposed to like Reagan. When he used rhetorical humor to criticize Mondale's "youth and inexperience" many in the audience likely found the criticism itself to be amusing, if not ironic, as the 56 year

old two term senator and former vice president was neither young nor inexperienced. The attempt at rhetorical humor was successful because it moved the debate away from Reagan's age and ability while casting no ill will toward him for its delivery. Richards's criticism of Bush is sharper than Reagan's mock-attack on Mondale. Richards's line, while certainly memorable, may have come across to those audience members not in the convention hall as unnecessary and classist. The criticisms that precede the "silver foot" remark are persuasive and humorous attacks on George Bush's lack of awareness of the concerns of the American people. Although it can be argued that the "silver foot" joke is the final punch line in a series of humorous statements in paragraphs 21 and 22, I believe that it ultimately does a disservice to Richards's otherwise effective deployment of rhetorical humor. The use of humor to criticize Bush's policy positions advances her speech objective that he is not fit to serve as president. Making fun of Bush's inarticulateness may be funny, but it does not support her larger argumentative appeals.

#### *Reaction to the speech*

It is easy to look back and assume that Richards's speech was a universally acknowledged success. Indeed, many observers at the time realized that the speech was impressive. Many of those who commented on Richards's speech, both positively and negatively, focused on her use of humor. Shropshire and Schaefer observed

The audience loved her, loved that Texas drawl that dripped with sarcasm. Loved the smile, and the personality that seem to speak to each person there. . . . The entire convention, electrified, rose to its feet and roared its approval. The Democratic Party had fallen in love with Ann Richards. (1994, 178)

Tom Shales wrote of the “the down-home rouser keynote speech by feisty Ann Richards” (1998, D1). Mary McGrory argued in the week after Richards’ speech that Richards and Senator Edward Kennedy’s use of humor in their convention speeches “suggest that the Democrats may decide to have fun with George Bush rather than hitting him over the head with a blunt instrument in the months to come” (1988, C01).

Not all opinion at the time considered Richards’s speech a triumph. McGrory also wrote that “Ann Richards did the silver-foot piece but she didn’t offer much by way of substance. Her Ethel Mermanesque delivery was deeply appreciated, as was her appearance—she could be mistaken for a Republican” (1988, C01). Richard Cohen wrote that Richards “turned the keynote address into a Minnie Pearl routine—a succession of one-liners so devoid of a message that even Patrick Buchanan could summon no bile for it” (1988, A23).

### *Conclusion*

The application of my theory of rhetorical humor to Richards’s speech illuminates several topics about the role of humor in political discourse. First, rhetorical humor is not always the best strategy to use to support each argument. Second, the issue of gender differences in the employment of rhetorical humor does not necessarily extend to the strategic goals of the speaker. Third, using rhetorical humor to attack opponents without having established a positive reputation is a difficult strategy to employ.

Rhetorical humor is almost never the only strategy speakers have at their disposal. The day after Richards’s speech, former President Jimmy Carter asked about Bush

Who is he? What does he stand for? What role did he play in the Reagan Administration? What was his participation in the Iran-contra scandal? What is his relationship to Noriega in Panama? (quoted in Clymer 1988, A21)

Richards's humor made Bush out to be absurd; Carter's questions constructed Bush as a mystery. These questions bring up many of the same issues address by Richards: Bush's authenticity, his connections to Reagan, his role in scandals. Richards's use of rhetorical humor to bring up these issues may not have been as effective as Carter's list of questions. Richards's humor would likely be effective to reinforce the beliefs of those who had a negative impression of Bush while Carter's comments might lead others who were positive or undecided to reconsider their views.

Considering the role of gender and humor, Martin (2004) and Dow and Tonn (1993) both examine Richards's humor in the speech, though the questions they ask are different. Dow and Tonn's analysis develops a more complex understanding of the feminine style and "the analysis of rhetoric such as Richards' demonstrates the declining usefulness of distinctions between public and private modes of discourse and thought" (299). While their focus is not solely on Richards's humor, the principle issues they raise are certainly relevant to a consideration of the rhetorical functions of humor. They rightly point out that criticism can be "less threatening couched in humor" (292). Martin's article looked at Richard's use of humor throughout her career. In her analysis of the 1988 DNC speech, specifically Richards's attacks on Bush, Martin concludes

In the end, the risk of initiating other-deprecating humor was worth it. It propelled her to national attention. Before the Democratic keynote address Richards was at a disadvantage to her rivals: men with long political resumes. Media focus on her

humor gave her a national audience and the name recognition to win her race and serve as the second woman Governor of Texas. (2004, 282)

Martin's approach to humor analysis uses the "three theories" method and largely does not consider the strategic functions of rhetorical humor. Martin's critique of Ann Richards's use of humor to build her own reputation is accurate, but it does not consider the effectiveness of the other requirements of a keynote speaker: supporting the party and candidate.

Without an established national reputation, Ann Richards's use of humor to attack George Bush would be accepted by her immediate partisan audience in the convention hall, but may not have been as persuasive to the wider audience watching on television. Although there is a possible benefit to using rhetorical humor as a way to relieve tension when introducing a difficult issue or trying to win over an audience whose beliefs differ from the speaker's, there is also potential risk involved. Richards succeeds where she uses rhetorical humor to create a sense of community concerning her image and beliefs. Her attacks on George Bush and the Republican Party were certainly reflective of a sense of community among the partisans in the convention hall, but for those watching at home, who were undecided or predisposed to disagree with her, Richards's rhetorical humor gave them little reason to join in her community.

The analysis of Ann Richards's use of humor in the 1988 Democratic National Convention address put forward in this chapter may lead to a reconsideration of the effectiveness of the speech. Richards did not always use humor to positive effect; it did not always support her strategic objectives, and left her open to the criticisms of McGroarty and Cohen that she was delivering a comedy routine and not a keynote address. Ann



Richards delivered a speech that was well regarded by those in her partisan audience and likely helped in her gubernatorial victory in 1990, but a closer examination of her use of rhetorical humor reveals the complexity and risk of this delicate rhetorical strategy.

## Chapter Five

### Sojourner Truth's "Little Pint Full" of Rhetorical Humor

When we think of mid-19th century American history, from slavery to abolition and the civil war to the movements for equality of rights, the first thought is not likely to be how humor helped to bring about such change. Nonetheless, even in this extraordinarily difficult time, humor played a significant role in American society and in its politics. Abraham Lincoln, perhaps the most frequent joke teller in the American presidency, read a humorous story by Artemus Ward to his cabinet before presenting them with the Emancipation Proclamation (Pullen 1986, 255).<sup>1</sup> Other speakers of the era frequently used humor to advocate for their chosen causes.<sup>2</sup> Of these, perhaps none better demonstrates the use of rhetorical humor than Sojourner Truth. She used rhetorical humor to advance her arguments about race, class, gender, and religion. Truth takes on all of these issues in her discourse, not always with humor, though always with passion. For the purposes of this project, Truth's rhetoric serves as an example of the use of rhetorical humor where it is neither required nor expected. This chapter is not the first attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Farrar Browne was the creator of Artemus Ward "a just barely literate old side-showman who wrote hilarious letters describing his bizarre adventures with a traveling exhibition of 'wild beests, snaiks and wax figgers'" (Pullen 1986, 255). The story was titled *High-Handed Outrage at Utica*. Pullen offered this summary of the story read by Lincoln:

In this story—of an incident purportedly taking place in Utica in 1856—a young man who must have belonged to the Moral Majority of his day comes into Artemus Ward's tent show, walks up to the waxworks display of the Lord's Last Supper, drags out the figure of Judas Iscariot, and flings it upon the ground. Then he beats it with his fists until the figure is smashed to pieces. When Artemus protests, the fellow says, "I tell you, old man, that Judas Iscarrot can't show hisself in Utiky with impunerty by a darn site!" (255)

<sup>2</sup> For Abraham Lincoln see Swank (1996), for Frederick Douglass see Ganter (2003) and for an analysis of women's literary humor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century see Carlson (1988).

analyze Sojourner Truth's strategic use of humor. Fitch and Mandziuk (1997) devote a chapter of their book to Truth's humor. Peterson (1995) discussed Truth's use of humor to unify her audiences and to demonstrate racial identity. It is the objective of this chapter to bring the theoretical understanding developed in Chapter Two to discourses of Sojourner Truth in order demonstrate the utility of rhetorical humor and Truth's mastery of the strategies.

Unlike the examples in Chapters Three and Four, Truth's corpus does not allow a single speech to stand in for the whole. Truth's speeches are shorter and no single speech is representative of the range of her use of humor as a rhetorical strategy. In this chapter, examples of Truth's humor shall be drawn from her speeches to the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio (commonly known as the "A'n't I a Woman?" speech)<sup>3</sup> and the 1867 First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association in New York City. Although Truth never learned to read or write, she did have a kind of autobiography. The *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A Bondswoman of Olden Time: With a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from Her "Book of Life"* (1878/1991, hereafter cited as the *Narrative*),<sup>4</sup> copies of which she sold at her public appearances. The *Narrative* is not simply a transcription of the speech of Sojourner Truth, but a historical and dramatic literary creation by Truth's friend Olive Gilbert. The texts that we have to

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<sup>3</sup> There are three common versions of this question: "Ar'n't ," "A'n't," and "Ain't" I a woman? In this chapter I will refer to the question as A'n't I a woman? (the most common spelling), unless quoting from a particular version.

<sup>4</sup> The first edition of the *Narrative* was published privately in 1850 by William Lloyd Garrison and edited by Olive Gilbert. The title was *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*. Frances Titus made several changes for the 1878 edition of the *Narrative*, that "were designed to enhance Truth's public image. She left out derogatory remarks, changed the dialect passages into standard English and exaggerated public reaction to Truth's speeches" (Ashley 1997, np). The title of this edition was *Narrative of Sojourner Truth; a Bonds-Woman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century; with a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from Her "Book of Life."*

examine are not manuscripts from Truth's own hand. The lack of documents composed directly by the central figure in the study presents some challenges. Fitch and Mandziuk observed that

as an illiterate, Truth had to rely on others taking down her thoughts as she presented them in public. What is available is a collection of partial transcriptions and reports that often are a combination of the words of the reporter and Truth. (1997, 6)

Although Truth did agree to the publication of the *Narrative*, and sold it as her primary means of support, Truth's very illiteracy made it impossible for her to give informed consent to the language found in the *Narrative*.

#### *Sojourner Truth's Background and Speaking Style*

Sojourner Truth was born around 1797 in Ulster County, New York. Truth's given slave name was Isabella Bomefree. Her first spoken language was Dutch and she "did not learn English until she was about nine or 10 years of age and had been sold to her third master" (Fitch and Mandziuk 1997, 10). Truth's life as a slave in New York was typical of the time. She received no education, never learned to read or write, and had no formal religious training, other than learning to recite the Lord's Prayer in Dutch from her mother (Fitch and Mandziuk 12). Hodges records that "by the 1740s many slaves in New York and New Jersey spoke good English and Dutch" (1999, 117). In 1817, New York passed a law ordering that all slaves born before 1799 were to be set free on July 4, 1827. Truth's fifth owner, John J. Dumont promised he would release Truth one year early. When the time came, Dumont reneged on his promise. Truth, finding this decision

unacceptable, took her youngest child and left in the fall of 1826 (Truth and Gilbert 1878, 41).

Following her escape from slavery, Truth moved to New York City where she took on domestic employment. During this time she also developed her strong religious beliefs, joining the Methodist and then the African church. Truth led a life in which she was not only separated from large segments of society due to the period's attitudes concerning gender and race, but "her adult life was marked by a relative isolation from the black community" (Peterson 1995, 24). Truth lived in several communitarian societies in New York and Massachusetts that were largely populated by whites.

The deliberate choice of the name Sojourner Truth did not take place until after she left New York City in 1843. According to the *Narrative*, Truth decided that she would travel and that

Her mission was . . . to "lecture," as she designated it; "testifying of the hope that was in her exhorting the people to embrace Jesus, and refrain from sin, the nature and origin of which she explained to them in accordance with her own most curious and original views. (1878, 101)

Starting in the late 1840s and continuing after the publication of the *Narrative* in 1850, Truth "joined the antislavery lecture circuit," traveling the country speaking to meetings concerning abolition, women's rights, and religion (Painter 1994a, 147). Truth was often the only female African-American speaker at these events. As Truth spoke about abolition and women's rights she addressed audiences that were often mixed in their disposition toward her and her beliefs. Peterson reported that "in accounts of her public speaking, most especially, emphasis was frequently placed on Truth's grotesque

appearance and behavior” (1995, 46). From a description of Sojourner Truth in the *Democrat and Chronicle* (reproduced in the *Narrative*):

Her appearance reminds one vividly of Dinah in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” A white handkerchief was tied closely about her head and she wore spectacles, but this was the only indication of her extreme age. Her voice is strong, has no touch of shrillness, and she walked about as hale and hearty as a person of half her years. (225)

Although white women orators found hostility in the antebellum period,

these women generally found themselves cushioned by their race, class affiliation, family ties, and secure economic status. In contrast, the speaking often led to greater social and economic uncertainty for black women. In making the decision to engage in such activities, they often left their employment as teachers, seamstresses, or domestics to live on their own, separated from family and community; public lecturing became their chief means of livelihood, frequently rendering them dependent on the generosity of their audiences and hosts. (Peterson 1995, 18)

Peterson argued that Truth and other female orators of the postbellum period “recognized the extent to which their efforts to ‘elevate the race’ and achieve ‘racial uplift’ lay not only in their engagement in specific political and social activities but also in their faith in the performative power of the word—both spoken and written” (3).

### *The 1851 Akron Speech*

Sojourner Truth attended the Women's Rights Convention held in Akron, Ohio from May 28-29, 1851. She spoke on the second day<sup>5</sup> and was the only former slave to do so. What she said that day is the subject of much debate and the best known version of the speech may be the least accurate. This is the version known as "A'n't I a Woman?" To find the most accurate speech text of Truth's 1851 Akron speech, there are several questions to consider. How do the words ascribed to Truth and the descriptions of the context vary among the versions? What written version best captures the quality of Truth's delivery, particularly concerning the accuracy of eye dialectal indicators? What was the motivation for the writers in constructing their version? In the examination of the available versions of the speech, special consideration will be given to texts published by Marius Robinson (*Anti-Slavery Bugle* 1851), Frances Gage (1863), and Karyln Kors Campbell (1989b).<sup>6</sup> In addition to the longer versions of the speech, there were several newspaper accounts. The *New York Tribune* published an article about the Akron speech that included Truth's words in the third person and indicated the reaction of the audience (June 6, 1851, 7). The Boston *Liberator* ran a brief mention of the speech on June 13, 1851, in which the author conveyed his or her wish to "report every word she said, but I cannot" (4). In the following section I shall argue that scholars are not well served using

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<sup>5</sup> There is some controversy as to the date on which Truth gave the speech. Those sources that indicate that the speech was delivered on May 29 include: Gage in the *Narrative* (1878, 131-135). Fitch and Mandziuk (1997, 103-108) indicate May 28. Other sources omit the date and indicate May 1851 or simply 1851: Campbell (1986, 1989, 2005) and Logan (1995).

<sup>6</sup> The Proceedings of the convention only mention Truth once and then for a different speech in the morning session of the second day (*The Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention, held at Akron, Ohio, May 28 and 29, 1851*, 7).

any version of the Gage text and should instead turn to the account of the speech written by Marius Robinson.<sup>7</sup>

The oldest complete version of the speech that is extant was published by Marius Robinson and first printed in the Salem *Anti-Slavery Bugle* on June 21, 1851. Stetson and David identify Marius Robinson as “a passionate abolitionist who had been injured by proslavery mob violence during the 1830s. He had just taken over editorship of the Salem *Anti-Slavery Bugle*” in April 1850 (1994, 111). During the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Robinson was one of three official Secretaries of the convention (*The Proceedings of the Woman’s Rights Convention, held at Akron, Ohio, May 28 and 29, 1851*, 1). Marius Robinson’s version was the first published text of the Akron speech and the second earliest extant speech by Sojourner Truth.<sup>8</sup> Robinson’s function at the Women’s Rights Convention was to record the events and speeches although Truth’s speech was not included in the Proceedings of the convention. Robinson’s text is written in standard English, containing no dialectal indicators. We do not know if Sojourner Truth spoke in the language of Robinson’s version and Stetson and David argue that

the white male newspaper reporters who composed the third-person standardized English accounts of the substance of Truth’s speech at Akron . . . had their own agendas, dominated by their determination to employ Truth in their campaign to elevate the antislavery cause. (1994, 112)

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<sup>7</sup> The Robinson version is reprinted in whole or in part in Fitch and Mandziuk (1997, 107-108), Painter (1994b, 489-490), Painter (1996, 125-126), Ripley (1991, 81-83), Smith and Watson (2006, 177-179), Stetson and David (1994, 114-118), and Stewart (1991, xxxiii). The Gage versions are reprinted, in whole or in part in the *Narrative* (1878), Logan (1995), Rywell (1974), Sargent (1997, 235-236). Campbell’s version appears in Logan (1995).

<sup>8</sup> The oldest speech text that is longer than a few words is Truth’s 1843 “Specimens of Religious Talk to Second Adventists” published in the *Narrative* (1878, 111). The Robinson text of the Akron speech is the first full speech text concerning women’s rights.



The text most commonly found of Truth's 1851 Akron speech was constructed nearly 12 years after its delivery by Frances Gage, the presiding officer of the Convention and was first published in the New York *Independent* on April 23, 1863. Gage's version was reprinted in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* on May 2, 1863, Truth's *Narrative* (1878 edition), and in a slightly different form in Stanton, Anthony, and M. Gage's *History of Woman Suffrage* (1887, 115-117).<sup>9</sup> None of the three later versions indicate Gage's original publication or that she admitted she had "given but a faint sketch of her speech" (*Independent* 1863). Gage's version is the most widely known and anthologized, though the popularity of it was not immediate. The context of her publication of the speech often is not discussed. Mabee and Mabee Newhouse (1993) contend that Gage's reason for publishing was the April 1863 appearance of Harriet Beecher Stowe's article in the *Atlantic Monthly* about Truth titled "The Libyan Sybil." Gage's report of Truth's speech was little noticed at the time, plausibly because it arrived at the same time as the much better known Stowe's article.

There are three main features of the Gage text that distinguish it from Robinson's 1851 version. First, the text differs from Robinson's because it is written in an eighteenth-century southern black dialect. Second, Gage describes a more confrontational context for Truth's speech. The third issue is the inclusion of the famous question "A'n't I a woman?"

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<sup>9</sup> The principle difference is that "ar'n't I a woman?" is changed to "a'n't I a woman?" in the Stanton, Anthony, and Gage version (1887).

The dialect that Gage's version, as well as many other speeches in the *Narrative*, was presented in the southern black "eye dialect."<sup>10</sup> For example, in Gage's *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (May 2, 1863, 4) version, Truth said

Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place eberywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gives me any best place.

Stetson and David observe that "Frances Gage followed Stowe in modeling Truth's idiom on a conception of Southern black plantation speech to which readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had become accustomed" (1994, 112). This dialect is highly unlikely to have been the speech of Sojourner Truth. Stewart observed that

other written transcriptions<sup>11</sup> of Sojourner's speaking voice, such as that in the *Narrative*, are not written in dialect. Indeed if Sojourner, a New York-born, former slave who was bilingual in English and Dutch, had any dialect at all, it surely would not have been the halting, almost unreadable southern speech of Gage's version. (1993, xxxiv)

Stetson and David claim that "no one attempting an orthographic transcription of her sound tried to account for black speech patterns in the Ulster County area, the Dutch language she spoke until she was ten or eleven, and the New York and New England

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<sup>10</sup> Eye dialectal indicators are "visual devices to indicate a spoken dialect. . . . The dialogue is suffused with spelling substitutions that do not change at all the pronunciation of the words themselves. Far from even trying to approximate black speech . . . eye dialect functions to mark the speaker, invidiously, as ignorant and of low class. Examples of such spellings are "sed" for 'said,' 'kum' for 'come,' and 'kase' for 'case.'" (Tricomi 2006, 622).

<sup>11</sup> None of the existing versions of the speech claim to be transcriptions, though Stetson and David argue that "Stowe and Gage used colonialist transcription techniques that emphasized what they heard as the deviant aspects of Truth's speech without conveying any very good sense of its autonomy, and stereotypical assumptions doubtless lie behind many of their distortions of Truth's speech" (1994, 112). Stetson and David fail to mention that Gage did not transcribe Truth's speech, but composed a version of it 12 years later.

speech patterns that surrounded her afterward” (1994, 112). Mabee and Mabee Newhouse (1993) wonder if Gage took notes during Truth’s speech “especially since, she said she was presiding over the convention at the very time Truth was speaking, her presiding could have limited her ability to record Truth’s words in accurate detail” (69). There is not much in the historical record that includes attempts to capture the sound of eighteenth-century black New York English-Dutch language patterns in writing. One of the few comes from a travelogue composed by Dr. Alexander Hamilton, a physician in Maryland. Hamilton traveled to New York in 1744 with his slave, Dromo who spoke an eighteenth-century southern black English. Dromo tried to speak to a black woman in New York who spoke in a Dutch-English hybrid:

“Dis de way to York?” says Dromo. “Yaw, dat is Yarikee,” said the wench, pointing to the steeples. “What devil you day?” replies Dromo. “Yaw, mynheer.” said the wench. “Damme you, what you say?” said Dromo again. “Yaw, yaw,” said the girl. “You a damn black bitch,” said Dromo, and so rid on. (Hamilton 1948, 40-41)

The speech of the New Yorker sounded very different from the southern dialect. There is no evidence that Sojourner Truth’s speech sounded the same as the woman’s but it is likely that they were closer in sound than Truth was to Dromo.

Although there is no audio recording of Truth speaking, the historical record does provide some clues about the qualities of her delivery. In an account in the *New York Tribune* on September 7, 1853, it was observed that “Mrs. Truth, in consequence of her unhappy situation in early life, is totally uneducated, but speaks very fluently in tolerably correct and certainly very forcible style” (1853b, 5). There is evidence that Truth did not

approve of the construction of her speeches in print.<sup>12</sup> An 1879 newspaper article claimed that

Sojourner also prides herself on a fairly correct English, which is in all senses a foreign tongue to her, she having spent her early years among people speaking “Low Dutch.” People who report her often exaggerate her expressions, putting into her mouth the most marked southern dialect, which Sojourner feels is rather taking an unfair advantage of her. (*Kalamazoo Daily Telegraph* 1879, 1)

The language of the Gage texts is a peculiar creation in which, Stetson and David argue, “Stowe and Gage produced framed stories, subordinating her ‘inimitable patois’ to their standard English, creating an effect of exoticism and simplicity that could be interpreted as inferiority” (112). Peterson offered a somewhat more charitable explanation for this language, that “Gage wrote her account . . . while living on the South Carolina Sea Islands. . . . [and] the speech itself seems to assimilate her [Truth] to the South Carolina slave characterized by a heavy black dialect” (45).

Not only is it not certain what Truth said that day, it is similarly unclear what the conditions in which she spoke were like. Contradicting Gage’s description of her bravery at letting Truth speak, Painter observed that the call for the convention published in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*

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<sup>12</sup> In addition, the letters Truth “dictated to transcribers in the IAPFP [Issac and Amy Post Family Collection] collection, from November 3, 1864, to August 26, 1873—which include, #1455, #331, #1303, #1511, #1562, #1639, #1657, #1661, #1761, #1764, and #1927—are all written in Standard English, not dialect. The point speaks to Truth’s self-representation in her private correspondence as a speaker of Standard English” (Tricomi 2006, 632n1).

cited four evils that women's rights would combat: war, intemperance, sensuality, and slavery. Rather than fearing contamination by the antislavery cause, as Gage asserts, the organizers deliberately reached out to abolitionists. (1994a, 151)

In the introduction to Gage's version of Truth's speech, she recounts a tense scene in Akron, with opposition speakers and people shouting at the women. Gage, in the *New York Independent*, recalled that the women at the convention met open hostility and counter-arguments.<sup>13</sup> According to Gage, "I have never in my life seen anything like the magical influence [of Truth] that subdued the mobbish spirit of the day, and turned the jibes and sneers of an excited crowd into notes of respect and admiration." Truth "had taken us up in her great, strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty, turning the whole tide in our favor." (quoted in Mabee and Mabee Newhouse 1993, 78). Gage's was not the only account of the speech that mentions disruptions. Activist Sallie Holley, while still in college at Oberlin, attended the Akron convention. She wrote a letter about the experience which was summarized in a book about her life and letters in 1899.

They went to Akron to a Woman's Rights convention meeting there, and heard Aunt Fanny Gage, Sojourner Truth, Caroline M. Severance, and other champions

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<sup>13</sup> Gage wrote "The second day the work waxed warm. Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Universalist ministers came in to hear and discuss the resolutions presented. One claimed superior rights and privileges for man, on the grounds of 'superior intellect'; another, because of the 'manhood of Christ; if God had desired the equality of woman, He would have given some token of His will through the birth, life and death of the Saviour.' Another gave us a theological view of the 'sin of the first mother.' There were very few women in those days who dared to 'speak in meeting' and the august teachers of the people were seemingly getting the best of us, while the boys in the galleries, and the sneerers among the pews, were hugely enjoying the discomfiture, as they supposed of the 'strong-minded' ... When, slowly from her seat in the corner rose Sojourner Truth, who till now had scarcely lifted her head. 'Don't let her speak!' gasped half a dozen in my ear. She moved slowly and solemnly to the front, laid her old bonnet at her feet, and turned her great speaking eyes to me. There was a hissing sound of disapprobation above and below. I rose and announced 'Sojourner Truth,' and begged the audience to keep silence for a few moments" (*New York Independent* 1863, np).

of the faith, and were vastly entertained, especially by Sojourner's discomfiture and rout of a young preacher who had the temerity to come up against her. (57)<sup>14</sup>

This summary of Holley's letter is the only source, other than Gage, that supports the idea that the convention was rowdy and included clergy vocalizing their opposition.<sup>15</sup> The *Proceedings* (1851) of the convention make no mention of vocal opposition. Mabee and Mabee Newhouse found twenty-seven reports of the convention written soon after its conclusion. They claimed that the reports offer a very different version of the context for the Akron speech than does Gage. Mabee and Mabee Newhouse contend that

If Truth really had such a "magical influence" that she "turned the whole tide" in the convention from "mobbish" hostility to support of women's rights, is it not likely that Truth herself, in her letter in which she reported attending the convention, would at least have hinted so? Or that Gage, in her comments on the convention published soon after it was held, brief though they were, would have suggested so?" (1993, 78)

Many in Akron, including those in the audience, were both hospitable and sympathetic to the cause for women's rights. The other reports of the speech fail to mention the hostility of the crowd. Mabee and Mabee Newhouse claim that

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<sup>14</sup> It is possible that the words in the book about Holley's letters are not hers. Chadwick wrote the book in 1899 and may have been influenced by Gage's version of the events. In the preface to the book, the editor Chadwick wrote, "In editing the letters I have not been at pains to indicate omissions. . . . In a few instances I have done as I would be done by in substituting other words for those betraying the carelessness of rapid composition, spelling proper names in full where only initials were given, and so on. It is not as if I were editing the Shakespeare folio of 1623 and were bound to preserve every inaccuracy of whatever kind" (Holley 1899, iv).

<sup>15</sup> Stanton's *History of Woman Suffrage*, in a report based on Gage, states "the reports of this Convention are so meager that we can not tell who were in the opposition; but from Sojourner Truth's speech, we fear that the clergy, as usual, were averse to enlarging the boundaries of freedom" (1887, 114). Other sources which feature this account of the context rely on either Gage or Holley. See Painter (1994a, 141), Logan (1995, 18), Foner and Branham (1998, 226), and Stetson and David (1994, 114).

none of these twenty-seven descriptions published at the time, despite their many different points of view, gives the impression, as Gage did twelve years later, that there were “mobbish” opponents of women’s rights present, much less that the convention or its leaders were ever “staggering,” or about to panic, or about to be overwhelmed by these opponents. (1993, 71)

Gage herself contradicts her own 1863 version of the events with a much earlier statement. In 1853, Gage reported to the National Women’s Rights Convention in Cleveland that although some people opposed their cause “no one has had a word to say against us at the time” (quoted in *Proceedings* 1854, 7). In a speech in 1867, Frances Gage changed her report of Truth’s Akron speech once again when she said

As old Sojourner Truth said twenty years ago, at the first Women’s Rights Convention in Ohio, “Leave them where God left them, with their inalienable rights,” and they will adjust themselves to their convictions of their duties, their responsibilities, and their powers, and society will find harmony within itself. (Proceedings 1867, 50)

It is not clear what Gage’s motives were for offering this version of the convention. It is possible that with the passage of time she remembered the event to be fraught with hostility. It is also possible that she aggrandized her courage and foresight in allowing Truth to speak. Such a persona would put her in a better position to claim the control of the story that was going to the much more famous Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The evidence presented above supports the view that the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, was a peaceful gathering at which women and men spoke in

favor of women's rights before a friendly, or at the very least quietly oppositional, audience.

Of particular concern in authenticating the text for Truth's Akron speech is the legitimacy of the famous question "A'n't I a woman?"<sup>16</sup> In Frances Gage's version of the speech published in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (May 2, 1863, 4), Truth said

Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place eberywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gives me any best place, [and, raising herself to her full height, and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked] And ar'n't I a woman?

Look at me. Look at my arm [and she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing its tremendous muscular power]. I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ar'n't I a woman?

I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it) and bear de lash as well—and ar'n't I a woman?

I have borne thirteen chillen, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and ar'n't I a woman?

There are several features of this rendering of the speech that raise questions about its authenticity. Robinson's text lacks anything similar to the question "Ar'n't I a Woman?"

The articles in the *Liberator* (1851) and the *New York Tribune* (1851) make no mention

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<sup>16</sup> The question's origin does not lay with Gage's version of the speech. According to Mabee and Mabee Newhouse,

The motto "Am I not a Woman and a Sister?" was a reversed sex version of the motto, "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" which was used as early as 1787 in Britain by the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade.<sup>16</sup> The motto "Am I not a Woman and a Sister?" appeared in 1832, along with a picture of a female slave in chains, as the heading of the Boston *Liberator's* Ladies Department. (1993, 257n17)



of it either. It seems unlikely that if Truth asked the question repeatedly (three times in Gage's 1863 version and four times in her 1882 text) that the other versions would leave out such an important structural and stylistic component. Mabee and Mabee Newhouse found that "an examination of available reports of Truth's other speeches, indicates that Truth was not given to such rhythmic repetition. On the other hand, an examination of Gage's speeches and writings indicates that Gage was indeed given to it" (1993, 77). Robinson's version quotes Truth as declaring "I am a woman's rights," followed by examples of Truth's abilities similar to Gage's version (e.g., plowing, carrying, and eating). The article in the New York Tribune reported "She said she was a woman" (1851, 7). Truth's statement about her children in the Gage version similarly lacks corroboration. Gage claimed that Sojourner Truth said she had thirteen children and saw most of them sold into slavery. The 1878 edition of the *Narrative* indicated that Truth had five children,<sup>17</sup> perhaps none of whom were sold away from her (Mabee and Mabee Newhouse 1993, 20).

The third version of importance, particularly for rhetorical scholars, is that of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1989b). Published in *Man Cannot Speak for Her*, Campbell bases her speech text on Gage's version that was included in the *Narrative* (1878). Campbell's text follows Gage's except that she "removed all purely dialectical indicators" (1989b, 99). Campbell has authored several pieces that engage Truth's Akron speech and she directly addressed the dialectal issue in three of them (1986, 1989, and

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<sup>17</sup> Painter (1996) wrote of the historical evidence of Truth's five children the names and birthdays of only four of them, who are named after her mother and siblings, are known: Diana, born about 1815; Peter, 1821; Elizabeth, 1825; and Sophia, about 1826. The fifth, perhaps named Thomas, may have died in infancy or childhood and may have been born between Diana and Peter. (19)

2005). In the 1986 article Campbell argued that given Truth's northern upbringing "there is little reason to believe that she spoke in substandard southern dialect. . . . As a result, I have rendered the text in standard English" (444n5) as she did in the version found in *Man Cannot Speak for Her* (1989a, 35n5 and 1898b, 99). Campbell cites only Gage's 1878 version in her 1986 and 1989 works. Rewriting the speech seems to be a drastic step within scholarship that seeks to discuss the style and content of early Afro-American feminists, especially given that an edition in standard English was available (Robinson 1851, 4). Campbell seems to come around on her expurgation in a 2005 article about the Akron speech by admitting that "it was wrong to do so" (2005, 14). In the same article, Campbell returned to using the Gage text as the basis for her analysis, but she does recognize that the text is a fiction. Although aware of the Robinson version, Campbell argued that Gage's text should be the one to use because

we can never recover the authentic voice of the illiterate; inevitably that voice is transformed by those who record it as they hear it, and everyone who heard Truth heard something different. We can never hear the originary moment of the living voice; we can only struggle to recreate its immediacy, and in its dramatic form, Gage's fiction allows us to sense what it must have been like to hear Truth speak. We can quote descriptions of Truth's skill as a speaker, her wit, her clever repartee, her courage in the face of hostility, and her skill in argument; but Gage's text allows us to experience them; in literary terms, it is the difference between showing and telling. (2005, 13)

Campbell's argument that Gage's fiction brings us closer to the experience does not hold up to scrutiny. Campbell argued that Gage's text should be used because it "reflects the

hostility encountered by woman's rights activists, abolitionists, and by Truth herself" (2005, 12). It is true that there was enmity directed at some of those seeking abolition and women's rights, but the enactment of that hostility does not seem to have been a feature of the May 1851 conventions. Campbell argued that we can never recover Truth's authentic voice and so we should choose the text that feels right. Her approach leads to the acceptance of the Gage text due to its appeal to modern scholars rather than based on the consideration of the evidence available from 19<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars have not typically sought to render other nonstandard English speech in dialects<sup>18</sup> and Campbell herself has noted "the failure to record the words of women" (2005, 17n28). Logan observed that "Campbell's editing, published over 125 years later, removes all dialectical indicators and ungrammatical constructions. Certainly the 'authenticity' of such a version could also be questioned" (1995, 20).

There is no clear agreement among scholars as to which text should be canonical. There is no way to know how the printed text differs from Truth's spoken discourse, though Fitch and Mandziuk argue that "it is not truly important whether or not the material in this story is actual or fictionalized; what is important is that it is the story Truth agreed to have told" (9). This may be accurate for examining the historical impact of Gage's versions of the speech, but the issue is important for an analysis of Truth's discourse at the time. Stetson and David (1994) acknowledge the controversy surrounding the accuracy of the Gage text, but conclude, for reasons unstated, that the version is accurate (125n79). Fitch and Mandziuk argue that the dialectal versions of the

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<sup>18</sup> Tricomi argued that "to transcribe the dialects of slaves or ex-slaves while neglecting to render that of whites in dialect as well—whether by region, class or ethnicity, or all three—is to make another inequitable, problematic "literary" decision" (2006, 619).

text “represent how the transcriber either heard the speech or thought it should be” (6). This is a charitable assignment of motive to the authors of the dialectal versions as there is the Robinson text written in standard English. Logan concludes

In the case of Truth, since textual authenticity is virtually impossible to achieve, examining various representations seems a reasonable compromise and one that alerts readers to the transcriptive problems and possibilities. In the final analysis, what makes Truth’s speech important, after all, are the forceful and compelling arguments she offers in rebuttal to the objections of the ministers, arguments that were clearly effective, however they were vocalized. (1995, 21)

It is likely that Gage’s description of the context was, like the words she attributed to Truth, a fiction. Given the evidence concerning the length of time and uncorroborated features of Gage’s text, we should not use it as the basis for a scholarly inquiry into Truth’s strategic discourse. Stewart (1991) contends that “although it is possible that the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* might have cleaned up its version and that Mrs. Gage’s is the accurate one, that seems unlikely” (xxxiv). I contend that the version of the Akron speech published by Marius Robinson in 1851 is a better basis on which to consider the rhetorical strategies of Sojourner Truth. The Robinson text offered a fuller treatment of the speech than the two other articles published in 1851 and contains each argument, although with some in slightly different language, that is found in the *Liberator* and the *New York Tribune*. Therefore, I believe that the following text, reprinted in whole from Robinson’s version is the most acceptable based on available evidence.

*Sojourner Truth's Speech to the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio on May 29, 1851*<sup>19</sup>

[One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the Convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gestures, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. She came forward to the platform and addressing the President said with great simplicity:]

[1] May I say a few words? [Receiving an affirmative answer, she proceeded;]

[2] I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights.

[3] I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now.

[4] As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint and man a quart—why cant she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much,--for we cant take more than our pint'll hold. [Roars of Laughter.]<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This text is from the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* of Salem, Ohio, published on June 21, 1851 (4), with the exception of the audience reaction in paragraph 4. The comments in brackets are those of the author, Marius Robinson.

<sup>20</sup> NYT indicates audience reaction, ASB does not.

[5] The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and dont know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they wont be so much trouble.

[6] I cant read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again.

[7] The lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept—and Lazarus came forth.

[8] And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and woman who bore him. Man, where is your part?

[9] But the women are coming up blessed by God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.

### *Analysis of Truth's Akron Speech*

The main objective for Truth's speech was to advocate for women's rights. She makes reference to her experiences as a slave and a freed black (paragraphs 4 and 9), but her comments are mainly confined to issues of gender equality. Fitch and Mandziuk argue that "this speech is important because it brings together the two causes for which Truth spent her life's work, antislavery and women's rights" (1997, 18). Truth claimed that women should be accorded the same rights as men based on arguments concerning body, mind, and spirit. In the first section of the speech (paragraph 3), Truth argued that

women are physically equal to men. In the middle section (paragraph 4) Truth argued that women should have rights that equal their intellectual capacities. In the third section (paragraphs 6-8), Truth uses Biblical arguments to provide the basis for her claim to equal rights.

Truth used both humorous and non-humorous elements in each section of the speech to support each of her major arguments. This era marked a changing space for women's public discourse and use of humor. Carlson (1988) argued that witty women writers of the 19th-century reflected "a continuing search for the appropriate rhetorical perspective from which to pursue social change" (318). Fitch and Mandziuk claim that "humor helped women speakers and writers of the 1800s to ingratiate themselves to their audiences, thus helping them to narrow the line between acceptance and rejection of their liberal ideas" (31). This is a significant argument given that women often met resistance to their public oratory leading to an expectation that their use of humorous discourse that might be seen as inappropriate. "As with all other public speakers—male or female, white or black—Truth needed carefully to assess the rhetorical context of her lecturing and to negotiate the complex relationship between self, situation, subject, and audience, a task particularly problematic . . . for black women" (Peterson 1995, 46).

For Truth, a key part of her performative power, was her strategic use of rhetorical humor. Fitch and Mandziuk identify Truth's humor strategies as "quick wit, sarcasm, and the retort" (5). Several of her contemporaries commented on this aspect of Truth's oratorical style. One described her as "Keen and quick-witted, with a memory that never dropped a single thread, she was always ready with an answer that went straight to the mark, and often withered her opponent into silence" (quoted in Fitch and

Mandziuk 3). A report on her speaking style in the *Narrative* comments “Her matter and manner were simply indescribable, often straying far away from the starting point; but each digression was fraught with telling logic, rough humor, or effective sarcasm” (1878, 242).

Laughter is one possible indicator that the speaker may have intended the discourse to be humorous. The *New York Tribune* said the audience in Akron exhibited “roars of laughter” (1851, 7). The Boston *Liberator* reported that “Sojourner Truth spoke in her own peculiar style, showing that she was a match for most men. The power and wit of this remarkable woman convulsed the audience with laughter” (1851, 4). Gage reported that Truth’s speech was “pointed and witty and solemn; eliciting at almost every sentence deafening applause” (1863, 4). Given that Truth was recognized for employing rhetorical humor, that several parts of the speech appear to be ironic, and that the sympathetic audience laughed at appropriate times, I contend that she used rhetorical humor as a strategy in the Akron speech.

In the Robinson text of the speech Sojourner Truth identified herself by saying “I am a woman’s rights” (paragraph 2).<sup>21</sup> This is perhaps an even more powerful rhetorical figure than the than the famed question “A’n’t I a Woman?,” that Gage attributed to Sojourner Truth. Instead of asking the audience to confirm her gender, she makes the stronger declarative statement through the personal embodiment of her cause. With her statement “I am a women’s rights” Truth positions herself as a physical, intellectual, and spiritual manifestation of the objective of her speech and her cause. This statement previews the three argumentative sections of the speech in which Truth explicates her claim for women’s rights. The bold statement is not humorous. To make her central claim

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<sup>21</sup> The *New York Tribune* reported “she said she was a woman” (June 6, 1851, 7).



a humorous one would be to delivery a speech only for entertainment. Truth's objective is non-humorous, though she uses rhetorical humor to support it.

Truth makes the case that she is physically equal to any man, in terms of strength, work,<sup>22</sup> and appetite. The one example of humor in this section is an aside in which Truth says that she "can eat as much too, if I can get it" (paragraph 4). This instance of rhetorical humor creates identification with the audience (SD3) and introduces a difficult issue (ST2). Truth reminded her audience that not every woman advocating for her rights came from a position of racial or economic privilege.<sup>23</sup> Many of Truth's contemporaries had means to support themselves, enabling them to participate in the movement. Truth, though a true believer in her cause, needed to use the movement to acquire support. As mentioned above, Truth sold copies of the *Narrative* wherever she spoke; of this work Truth said "I have got a narrative of one part of my life, and I take that part to support the other" (quoted in *New York Tribune* 1853, 5). By delivering her argument with the assistance of rhetorical humor, Truth is able to engage the class differences in the movement without alienating her audience.

Having dispensed with arguments concerning the body, Truth turns to question of intellect. She framed her argument as a counterpoint to the claim of those who argued that women should not enjoy comparable rights because of their limited mental capacity. In the most fully developed example of rhetorical humor in the Akron speech, Truth argued

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<sup>22</sup> "This idea appears in all four of the other reports, though in language very different from that Gage's report. Thus we can be reasonably sure that Truth included these particular key ideas in her speech, if not expressing them in the manner that Gage reported" (Mabee and Mabee Newhouse 1993, 75).

<sup>23</sup> Terborg-Penn (1995) observed that many of Truth's "African American sisters in the movement were literate, privileged women who had been born free" (138).

As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint and man a quart—why cant she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much,—for we cant take more than our pint'll hold. (paragraph 5)<sup>24</sup>

The *New York Tribune* reported that the audience responded with “roars of laughter” (paragraph 4). Truth exploits the expected hierarchy of her time, assuming the persona of an overly courteous woman asking men for just a little consideration. Her strategic humor is used to demonstrate cleverness (SP1) and to make light of the opposing argument (ST1). Through her clever statement, Truth demonstrates that women are intellectually equal to men, even while playing upon the fear that some men had in light of the women’s rights movement. This rhetorical move allows Truth to play a character, the woman subordinate in intellect who will not demand anything. She pretends that she is a supplicant even though four paragraphs above she made it clear that she “is a women’s rights.” Truth is being ironic in her statement that women have less intellect than men. Her apt use of rhetorical humor to support her argument demonstrates her intelligence.

Truth then moves on to the final section of the speech and her arguments that use Biblical evidence. A notable feature of the Akron speech, and Truth’s rhetoric in general, is her use of humor about religious subjects. Gage (1878) claimed that ministers in opposition to the goals of the convention spoke before Truth on the second day. Gage wrote that they

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<sup>24</sup> In Gage’s version, Truth does not know the word intellect when she says, “Den dey talks ‘bout dis ting in de head. What dis dey call it” “Intellect,” whispered some one near. “Dat’s it, honey. What’s dat got to do with woman’s rights or niggers’ rights?” This version has less rhetorical force than the Robinson text. There would be no advantage to Truth pretending not to know the word or using uncharacteristic language concerning her people. Campbell (2005) observed that “this is the only extant text or fragment in which Truth uses the n-word” (13). This is further evidence that Gage’s speech text is unreliable .

claimed superior rights and privileges for man, on the grounds of “superior intellect”; another, because of the “manhood of Christ; if God had desired the equality of woman, He would have given some token of His will through the birth, life and death of the Saviour.” Another gave us a theological view of the “sin of the first mother.” (quoted in Gilbert and Truth 1878, 132-133)

The other accounts of the speech did not mention the ministers, but the arguments they were purported to have made may have been voiced at another time. In the Akron speech, Truth said, “I cant read, but I can hear” (paragraph 6). She then offered rebuttals to the arguments Gage claimed preceded Truth’s speech.<sup>25</sup> Truth critiqued the claim that Christ’s gender carried implications for the differing rights of men and women. Truth said, “And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and woman who bore him. Man, where is your part?” (paragraph 9). In Truth’s strategy of using rhetorical humor to make light of an opposing argument (ST1) she does not argue that Christ’s gender is the source of men’s rights or that women should be denied theirs by the same account. She argued that earthly men did not participate in the conception of Christ, and should therefore not claim special benefit from their gender. Truth’s other humorous argument using religion to support her objective concerned Eve’s role in history. Here Truth simultaneously addresses issues of religion and gender through rhetorical humor.

I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again.  
(paragraph 7)

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<sup>25</sup> In the 1878 Gage text, Truth says “Den dat little man in black dar, he say women can’t have as much rights as man, cause Christ want a woman. Whar did your Christ come fion?” (134).

This example displays a clever inversion by Truth, in which she transforms Eve's perceived sin into an opportunity and a challenge for the women of her day to bring about positive change in the world. Through this admission, Truth demonstrated cleverness (SP1) and made light of an opposing argument (ST1). That she offered this argument through rhetorical humor allows her to make the point more quickly than with a long logical demonstration. This example displays one of the advantages of rhetorical humor over non-humorous argument: the rapidity of delivery which is designed to frustrate analysis and opposition. Fitch and Mandziuk argue that "Truth never thought of herself as an outsider, even though as a black woman she suffered what Kathleen Hall Jamieson called the double bind" (4), subjugated by both whites and men. This double bind also applies to women's use of humor as noted by Jamieson (1995, 5) and Walker (1988, 142) in that women were not expected to be funny or to use humor, but still to respond positively to humor in which they were the targets. It is not clear that those who claimed women were responsible for sin intended for their argument to be humorous, but it is clearly meant to be derisive. Truth's reply to their argument through rhetorical humor serves to dismiss their point while demonstrating cleverness.

This ability to criticize her opponents (SP3) while demonstrating cleverness (SP1), allowed Truth to be a powerful advocate for her causes. The 1851 Akron speech, a blend of humorous and non-humorous elements, demonstrates that Truth's humor worked best when dealing with abstract subjects (i.e., Christ's gender and measuring the perceived intellectual difference between the sexes) and her non-humorous arguments were reserved for those instances in which she offered more personal examples and sought to move the audience through graver emotional appeals. This speech was not an

isolated incident of rhetorical humor in Truth's discourse. By examining an 1867 speech in which Truth used rhetorical humor in different ways than in the Akron speech, I shall demonstrate that Truth not only used rhetorical humor as a strategy, but possessed superior control over it.

### *1867 American Equal Rights Association Speech*

In the 1851 Akron speech Truth argued that women possessed the same strength as men and should, therefore, have the same rights and benefits of citizenship (paragraph 3). She made this argument without recourse to rhetorical humor. She continued to make the case, sometimes turning to rhetorical humor to help her cause. In a speech in 1867, Truth argued for women's suffrage at the first annual meeting of the American Equal Rights Association. The AERA had been established the previous year at the Eleventh National Woman's Rights Convention with the goal to "secure Equal Rights to all American citizens, especially the Right of Suffrage, irrespective of race, color or sex" (*Proceedings* 1867, 3). Truth delivered three speeches over the course of the convention. Of interest for this project is Truth's third speech, delivered in the evening session of the second day. There are two versions of the speech and two newspaper accounts.<sup>26</sup> All of the available texts are composed in standard English. The first version of the speech was published in the *Proceedings of the First Anniversary of the American Equal Rights Convention* (1867, 66-68) and the second in Stanton's *History of Woman Suffrage*, Volume 2 (1882, 224-225). The *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (June 1, 1867, 3) and the *New York Times* (May 11, 1867, 8) published short items on Truth's third speech. Both articles mentioned that Truth wanted to vote and that the audience laughed with and

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<sup>26</sup> These texts can be found in Appendix C.

applauded her speech. There is not the same great difference between the speech texts that was observed with the Akron address. The version published in the *Proceedings* adds two paragraphs at the beginning and two paragraphs at the end to the *History of Woman Suffrage* text. The differences in the sections that coincide are minor and do not significantly alter the style or substance of the speech. For the analysis in this chapter I will use the version found in the *Proceedings*.

The setting for the speech was similar to that of the Akron address. She delivered each speech to an audience that was likely to be well disposed to her and she used both humorous and non-humorous strategies. The AERA convention featured many of the great speakers who advocated women's rights: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Parker Pillsbury, Frederick Douglass, Lucy Stone, and Lucretia Mott. Truth was a featured speaker in the call for the meeting, identified as "Sojourner Truth (Mrs. Stone's 'Libyan Sybil')" (*Proceedings* 1867, 4). Sojourner Truth was not the only speaker at the convention to employ rhetorical humor. Major James Haggerty delivered a brief address in which he said

I have seen the effect of the suffrage. In the District of Columbia, during the election, I saw men who had been called doughfaces walk up to black men and profess to be so much more Anti-Slavery than the best Anti-Slavery men, that I have got the idea that it will not be five years before the northern Democrat will be swearing to the black man that he has negro blood in his veins. (Laughter.)  
(47)

As the delegates to the convention returned for the evening session on May 10, 1867, Frances Gage gave the first speech. She spoke of the improvements in women's rights

since the end of the civil war. Declaring that now was the time for universal suffrage, Gage declared

I honestly and conscientiously believe that we ought to make the rights of humanity equal for all classes of the community of adult years and of sound mind.

I do not ask that the girl should vote at eighteen, because she should not be her own woman until she is twenty-one—at the same age with the boy; and having raised both boys and girls, I think I have a right to say that. (*Proceedings*, 64-66).

In her 1867 speech, Truth used rhetorical humor to argue that she should have the right to vote by juxtaposing the activities of the sexes as they engage in similar actions (i.e., working, paying taxes, home ownership). She made a similar argument, without recourse to rhetorical humor in the 1851 Akron speech (paragraph 4). In that speech Truth was arguing for women's rights, but within the context of still legal slavery. As a black woman and a former slave, Truth was arguing for the recognition of her very humanity. When Truth said "I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that?" (paragraph 4) she was making the conditions of slavery evident for her audience. She was arguing that through her hard work, and that of her race and gender, she should be afforded the rights of citizenship.

In the 1867 speech Truth makes the same argument, but this time she frames it within the image of citizenship that has been given to her in the postbellum period. She does not take the persona of a former slave; now she is a taxpayer and a homeowner. She says that she must pay a "road tax, school tax, and all these things" (paragraph 3). She extends her argument concerning her abilities and responsibilities by speaking of the

women who not only paid the taxes for the road, but helped to build it. The women dug up a tree stump to make way for the road and Truth argued “Now, that shows that women can work. If they can dig up stumps they can vote. (Laughter). It is easier to vote than dig stumps. (Laughter)” (paragraph 3). With this use of rhetorical humor, Truth creates identification (SD3) and makes light of an opposing argument (ST1) by claiming that voting is easier than hard physical labor and that women should be allowed any rights that follow from their abilities.

Truth continues her argument by making fun of the claim (ST1) that men have a greater intellectual capacity to vote. Truth uses rhetorical humor to make two criticisms of men’s voting behavior, one physical and one intellectual. By claiming that voting “doesn’t seem hard work” (paragraph 3), Truth is arguing that women have the equal intellectual capacity to vote. She extends the arguments by saying “though I have seen some men that had a hard time of it. (Laughter). But I believe that when women can vote there won’t be so many men that have a rough time gettin’ to the polls. (Great laughter)” (paragraph 3). This use of rhetorical humor could have several interpretations. It could mean that women will make sure that men go to the polls and vote correctly. It could mean that men would go to where women were, even to the voting booth. Given the common practice of political party sponsored consumption of alcohol on voting day, Truth may have been arguing that women will encourage sober voting practices.<sup>27</sup> Part of the power of rhetorical humor is that the audience has to fill in part of the meaning for themselves. While not any interpretation is valid for Truth’s rhetorical humor to be considered successful, the limited ambiguity allows for a wider audience to be persuaded.

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<sup>27</sup> The women’s rights movement of the eighteenth century was closely tied to the temperance movement. For a discussion of nineteenth-century voting practices, including those involving alcohol, see Bensel (2003).



## *Conclusion*

It is not commonly thought that the discourse surrounding the abolition and women's rights movements are fertile ground for the study of rhetorical humor. In this chapter I have shown that one orator, Sojourner Truth, used rhetorical humor as an element of political discourse to advance her causes. She turned to rhetorical humor as a strategy when the point she wanted to make could withstand humorous treatment in the eyes of the audience. What is significant about Truth's humor is that she employed rhetorical humor in a fashion that reveals a high degree of control and awareness of the appropriateness of its employment. This conclusion is particularly striking given her lack of education and literacy. The small corpus that survives of her speeches<sup>28</sup> provide examples of rhetorical humor used to support Truth's arguments. What is also valuable about Truth's speeches is that we can observe her intentional use of humorous and non-humorous approaches to the same strategic objective, especially in terms of her ability to manage those strategies as an effective emotional appeal.

As discussed above, this chapter is not the first to recognize Truth's use of humor. Ryan (1997) argued that Fitch and Mandziuk "explicate Truth's rhetorical use of humor, a subject that is underappreciated in persuasive theory" (xvii). To be sure, Fitch and Mandziuk discuss Truth's use of humor (1994, 31-49), but they do so without benefit of a theory that shows how rhetorical humor is used to achieve multiple strategic objectives. Fitch and Mandziuk limit their discussion to Truth's employment of superiority and incongruity, a lens of analysis shown to concern laughter more than strategic rhetorical humor. Their analysis comes closer to a treatment of Truth's humor as a rhetorical

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<sup>28</sup> The collection in Fitch and Mandziuk (1997) identifies no more than 32 speeches.

strategy, but does not give Truth adequate credit for her mastery of the persuasive power of rhetorical humor. Fitch and Mandziuk's work is highly impressive in its historical and archival detail, but a fuller treatment of the strategic uses of humor is necessary to appreciate Sojourner Truth's formidable talent in its deployment.

Through the analysis of these texts using my theory of rhetorical humor, we now have a richer understanding of Truth's humor. The analysis found in this chapter offered an alternative reading of Truth's speeches to demonstrate how she used rhetorical humor to advance her rhetorical objectives. In this chapter I have also shown that using more accurate historical texts allows us to have a better understanding of what Truth might have said and observe the excellence of her practice of rhetorical humor. If any of the other versions had been used as the basis for this analysis, some of Sojourner Truth's command of humor would have been lost. In the Akron speech, Truth said "But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard" (paragraph 9). With the concluding statement of her speech, Truth used rhetorical humor to show the audience that not only did she observe the current state of affairs, but was claiming the power to change it.

## Afterword

Since ancient times, scholars have wondered about the relationship between humor and persuasion. In the last century there has been a shift among philosophers to emphasize the linguistic features of humor leading to renewed interest by other scholars, including rhetoricians. The psychologists have focused on laughter and humor at the intersection of personality, aggression, and social interaction. Communication scholars have considered issues of humor and pedagogy, conversation, and organizational communication. As their thoughts on humor, laughter, and rhetoric developed over the centuries, three approaches have dominated the research. Superiority considered laughter as the emotional response to one's feeling greater than the person or thing observed. In the relief approach, laughter provides either psychological or physiological relief from a tense or nervous situation. Incongruity views laughter and humor as the result of the exploitation of uncertainty. Each of these perspectives can explain specific instances of humor; however, they do not offer a universal theory of humor.

While these studies have taught us much about the connection between rhetoric and humor, the current state of knowledge lacks cohesion and applicability to contemporary political discourse. Fundamental topics that remain for us to consider include how to identify instances of humor, how to distinguish between mere amusement and humorous persuasion, the conditions under which rhetorical humor may be an appropriate strategy, and finally, in what ways humor functions in persuasion.

The theory presented in this dissertation is not a wholesale departure from the work of the past. Like Cicero, I chose to leave aside the question of the nature of humor

to focus on the ways that political figures use humor to persuade audiences. To identify instances of rhetorical humor I developed three nested categories: the risible, humor, and rhetorical humor. These categories subsume all things we laugh at, discourse intended to amuse, and amusing discourse intended to persuade. This treatment allows us to distinguish more sharply among mere amusement, discursive mistakes, and rhetorical speech designed to persuade through amusement. A further step in the development of my account was a consideration of the relationship between humor and pragmatics. The theory of speech activities allow us to consider the process of a humorous interaction, from the utterance to understanding to consequential effect. In order for humor to succeed it need not arouse laughter or amusement. Through the application of the concepts of illocutionary acts and perlocutionary effects, we can locate the difference between getting a joke and finding it funny, just as there is a difference between understanding an argument and finding it persuasive.

In addition to the classification of humorous utterances, an important and long neglected topic of consideration is the relation of the subject of the humor to the central argument of the speech. The consideration of the target and the audience will also serve the critic who is attempting to uncover the strategic purposes of a humorous example. There are three levels of the relation of the subject matter of rhetorical humor to the argument of the speech: germane, tangential, or unrelated. Rhetorical humor that is germane is tied directly to the central argument of the speech. Tangential rhetorical humor will have some relation to the central argument but will be less about trying to advance the argument through humor than about other strategic functions, though the subject must still bear some relation to the central argument of the discourse. Rhetorical

humor that is unrelated may still function strategically but the focus is on rhetorical purposes not related to the central argument of the speech. The direction or targets of rhetorical humor can be persons, actions, or things. The audience for rhetorical humor in politics can be made up of those previously well disposed to the speaker, those hostile to the speaker, or an audience with mixed sympathies.

Having established the contextual factors of rhetorical humor, I offer nine strategies, grouped under the categories of dispositional, topical, and personal objectives that connect rhetorical humor to the non-humorous purposes of political discourse. Three broad functional categories allow for a grouping of the strategies into a system reflective of traditional means of artistic proof. While these categories are distinct, a speaker may accomplish multiple strategic functions with a single instance of rhetorical humor. Dispositional strategies are used to influence the audience's feelings about the speaker and situation. Rhetorical humor that seeks to use the subject matter of the humor to achieve strategic goals is the second category. In these instances, rhetorical humor is used to make an argument about or distance the speaker from the issue at hand. Rhetorical humor can be employed topically to make light of an argument, to introduce a topic, or to divert the audience's attention away from a particular issue. The third category comprises personal strategies by which speakers maintain or create an image of themselves or their opponents with the audience. The three types of personal strategies of rhetorical humor are demonstrating cleverness, deflecting personal criticism, and attacking an opponent personally while maintaining the esteem of the audience. Taken together these nine rhetorical strategies provide a structure for the consideration of the function of rhetorical humor in political discourse.

A good theory of rhetorical humor in political discourse may be used to critique attempts at political humor. Some rhetorical humor appears in brief quips while in other texts rhetorical humor is a primary means of appeal. This dissertation sought to apply the theory to both kinds of discourse, but focused primarily on those examples where rhetorical humor represented a significant part of the rhetorical strategy. I considered three rhetorical situations in which humor could be employed as a rhetorical strategy: (1) a rhetorical situation in which humor is both welcome and required of the speaker, (2) a rhetorical situation in which humor is welcome, common, but not required, and (3) a rhetorical situation in which humor is neither required nor even common. Through the criticism of humorous political discourse, my theory provides for the examination of rhetorical strategies in various circumstances. Further, it was designed to evaluate the appropriateness of a speaker's choice of a humorous as opposed to a non-humorous strategy. The theory also leads to insight concerning the level of control over rhetorical humor expressed by the speaker.

In examining President Bill Clinton's 2000 White House Correspondents' Association address in Chapter Three, I showed how a speech that may have been written off as "merely funny" was in fact a rich example of the use of humor to advance rhetorical objectives. The analysis revealed an accomplished rhetor who developed his skills with rhetorical humor over time. On the occasion of the speech in question, Clinton charmed his audience while he argued for his personal and political legacy, exploited a final chance to deride his opponents from the pulpit of the presidency, and participated in the one occupation that he loved more than governing—campaigning. More specifically, Clinton used humor in the speech to provide an informal valediction to the presidency, to

take political swipes at his opponents, and to promote the respective candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Al Gore. Certainly, there are other lenses by which a critic could consider this speech, but without recourse to the theory of rhetorical humor advanced in this dissertation, nearly all the strategic value of the speech would be inaccessible. Applying the wrong theory of rhetorical humor would not allow for a full understanding of Clinton's rhetorical strategies.

The keynote address by Ann Richards at the 1988 Democratic National Convention is recognized as one of the great moments in American political life. Reporters and scholars alike have considered Richards's use of humor to be a defining element of the success of the speech. That the speech is filled with humor is without question. The analysis in Chapter Four was concerned with the strategic value of that humor. Richards did not seek to deliver a speech that was only amusing. As the keynote speaker, she had specific rhetorical constraints and opportunities to consider. She sought to establish her political character for a run at the Texas governor's mansion in 1990, and she needed to support the Democratic Party and its presidential nominee, Michael Dukakis. Finally, and seemingly most important, she used the speech to criticize the Republican candidate, George H. W. Bush. Richards's attempts at using rhetorical humor to meet these objectives succeeded with many in her immediate, partisan audience and likely with many others watching at home. Her engagement of self-deprecatory rhetorical humor largely served to introduce Richards to an audience that had little, if any, preconception of her. She did not use much rhetorical humor to support her arguments concerning the strengths of the Democratic agenda or candidates. The real focus of her rhetorical humor is found in her attacks on Bush. Application of my theory

of rhetorical humor leads to a reevaluation of the suitability of Richards's strategy. Although some of the jokes served her strategic goals by introducing issues that would cast Bush and the Republicans in a bad light, her personal attacks were not the most effective use of rhetorical humor. Coverage of the speech highlighted the "silver foot" line, though the joke seems to serve little strategic purpose. Humorous personal attacks are not to be avoided in political speech, but my theory reveals that unless they serve the rhetorical objectives of the speech, they have the potential to impact the speaker's perceived character in a negative way. The analysis of Ann Richards's speech underlines the distinction between humor and rhetorical humor by showing that sometimes humor is meant to amuse and at other times meant to persuade.

Chapters Three and Four considered the role of humor in contemporary American political rhetoric by speakers who enjoyed relatively high levels of political power and economic privilege. In Chapter Five I sought to examine the power of rhetorical humor in the discourse of Sojourner Truth. She held no elective office and could neither read nor write. But she could hear and she could exploit rhetorical humor as well as, if not better than, any rhetorical descendant or contemporary. Sojourner Truth's rhetoric has been the subject of numerous books and articles. Nearly all mention her humor and a few even seek to explain it. Through my theory, we have the opportunity to consider Truth's use of humor over time, in different contexts, and with different subjects. In her speeches, Truth did not always use rhetorical humor, but when she did, it almost always seemed to support the central argument of her speech and perhaps even won over some doubters in the audience. She demonstrated a sophisticated appreciation of the emotional needs of her audience, using rhetorical humor only when the subject and context could countenance it.



In light of the theory of rhetorical humor in political discourse that has been presented here, there would appear to be several new lines of inquiry to open and some older ones to reconsider. So far, the theory is largely concerned with the identification, classification, and explanation of the role of humor in strategic political discourse. What needs to be more fully considered is the wisdom or prudential value of the humor strategies contemplated in the theory. Simply put, in a particular political context and for a particular purpose, is the use of rhetorical humor a good idea or not? Is there strategic value to the use humor, or should any attempt at humor be avoided by the speaker? A useful extension of the theory might be to explicate its role in discourse construction. Through a better understanding of the strategic capabilities of rhetorical humor, political speakers and speechwriters could better employ humor to meet their rhetorical objectives.

While this dissertation applied the theory of rhetorical humor to American political discourse, questions arise about its wider applicability. First, does this theory hold true for political discourse from countries other than America? For example, would it explain the frequent use of humor in the British House of Commons? What about in other--especially non-Western--countries? I believe that such an examination of political humor would be a valuable addition to our understanding of humor and rhetoric. It would also be interesting to test the theory on rhetorical discourse venues other than the political. Would this theory hold for forensic or visual rhetoric? While there are still many answers in the shadows, it is hoped that the *homines ridiculi* will illuminate our unfinished inquiry.

## Appendix A

### Remarks by President Clinton at the Annual Dinner

of the White House Correspondents' Association

[1] Good evening, ladies and gentlemen; President Page; President-elect Dillon; distinguished guests. I am really happy to be here. Happy to be reunited at long last with the White House Press Corps. [Laughter.]

[2] If I may, let me direct your attention to a photograph. [Laughter.] Taken just moments ago, it proves beyond a doubt that I am indeed happy to be here. [Laughter.] Now, wait a minute. It seems that my hair in that photo -- [Laughter.] -- is a little longer than it is tonight. [Applause.] So maybe I am happy to be here and maybe I'm not. Feel free to speculate. [Laughter.] Admittedly, looks and photos can be deceiving. Now, look at this photo. It's a recent one of the Vice-President applauding one of my policy initiatives. [Laughter.] But look a little closer. Those are not his real hands. [Laughter.] Now, this photo. [Laughter.] It made all the papers, but I have to tell you something. I am almost certain this is not the real Easter Bunny. [Laughter.] The next one is my favorite. I really like it. Let's see the next photo. [Laughter and applause.] Isn't it grand? [Laughter.] I thought it was too good to be true. But there is one thing beyond dispute tonight. This is really me. I am really here. And the record on that count is clear, in good days and bad, in times of great confidence or great controversy, I have actually shown up here for eight straight years. [Applause.]

[3] Looking back, that was probably a mistake. [Laughter.] In just eight years, I've given you enough material for 20 years. [Laughter.] This is a special night for me for a lot of reasons. Jay Leno is here. [Applause.] Now, no matter how mean he is to me, I just love this guy. [Laughter.] Because, together, together, we give hope to grey-haired, chunky baby boomers everywhere. [Laughter and applause.]

[4] Tonight marks the end of an era—the after-dinner party hosted by *Vanity Fair*. [Laughter.] As you may have heard, it's been cancelled. Every year, for eight years, the Vanity Fair party became more and more and more exclusive. So tonight, it has arrived at its inevitable conclusion: This year, no one made the guest list. [Laughter.] Actually, I hear the Bloomberg party will be even harder to get into than the Vanity Fair party was. But I'm not worried, I'm going with Janet Reno. [Laughter and applause.]

[5] Now, the Bloomberg party is also a cast party for the stars of "The West Wing," who are celebrating the end of their first season. You'll have to forgive me if I'm not as excited as everyone else is at the thought of a West Wing finale party. But I've got to give them credit; their first season got a lot better ratings than mine did -- [laughter] -- not to mention the reviews. The critics just hated my travel office episode. [Laughter and applause.] And that David Gergen cameo fell completely flat. [Laughter.]

[6] Speaking of real-life drama, I'm so glad that Senator McCain is back tonight; I welcome him, especially. [Applause.] As you all know, he just made a difficult journey back to a place where he endured unspeakable abuse at the hands of his oppressors—the Senate Republican Caucus. [Laughter.]

[7] I am glad to see that Senator McCain and Governor Bush are talking about healing their rift. Actually, they're thinking about talking about healing their rift. And you know,

I would really like to help them. I mean, I've got a lot of experience repairing the breach. I've worked with Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, I've worked with Israelis and Palestinians, with Joe Lockhart and David Westin. [Laughter.] But the differences between Bush and McCain may be just too vast. I mean, McCain as Bush's running mate? Hasn't the man suffered enough? [Laughter and applause.]

[8] George W. Bush has got a brand-spanking-new campaign strategy. He's moving toward the political center, distancing himself from his own party, stealing ideas from the other party. I'm so glad Dick Morris has finally found work again. [Laughter and applause.]

[9] You know, the clock is running down on the Republicans in Congress, too. I feel for them. I do. They've only got seven more months to investigate me. [Laughter.] That's a lot of pressure. So little time, so many unanswered questions. [Laughter and applause.] For example, over the last few months I've lost 10 pounds. Where did they go? [Laughter.] Why haven't I produced them to the Independent Counsel? How did some of them manage to wind up on Tim Russert? [Laughter and applause.]

[10] Now, some of you might think I've been busy writing my memoirs. I'm not concerned about my memoirs, I'm concerned about my resume. Here's what I've got so far. Career objective: To stay President. [Laughter.] But being realistic, I would consider an executive position with another country. [Laughter.] Of course, I would prefer to stay within the G-8. [Laughter.] I'm working hard on this resume deal. I've been getting a lot of tips on how to write it, mostly from my staff. They really seem to be up on this stuff. [Laughter.]

[11] They tell me I have to use the active voice for the resume. You know, things like “Commanded U.S. Armed Forces,” “Ordered air strikes,” “Served three terms as President.” Everybody embellishes a little. [Laughter.] Designed, built, and painted Bridge to 21st Century. [Laughter and applause.] Supervised Vice-President’s invention of the Internet. [Laughter and applause.] Generated, attracted, heightened and maintained controversy. [Laughter.]

[12] Now, I know lately I haven’t done a very good job at creating controversy, and I’m sorry for that. You all have so much less to report. I guess that’s why you’re covering and commenting on my mood—my quiet, contemplative moments; my feelings during these final months in office. [Laughter.] In that case, you might be interested to know that a film crew has been following me around the White House, documenting my remaining time there.

[13] This is a strange time in the life of any administration, but I think this short film will show that I have come to terms with it. Can we see the film?  
[The bracketed numbers below indicate the timing of the film.]

[0.00] Joe Lockhart [interviewed in his office]: Well, with the Vice President and the First Lady out on the campaign trail, things aren’t as exciting as they used to be around here. In fact, it’s really starting to wind down.

[0.09] Clinton [speaking at the podium in the White House briefing room]: There is bipartisan support for it in Congress. And it meets the principles I set out in my State of the Union. If they send me the bill in its present form, I will sign it. OK, any questions?

[The camera cuts to the reporter’s chairs revealing that the room is empty except for Helen Thomas, sleeping in the front row center seat.]

Clinton: Helen?

Helen Thomas: Are you still here? [Laughter.]

[0.33] [Clinton hangs his head and walks out of the briefing room. The Frank Sinatra version of the Mercer and Arlen classic *One for My Baby (and One More for the Road)* plays in the background.]

[0.40] Peter Maer [from his office in the White House Press offices]: Radio just doesn't capture the sadness, the isolation of it all. So I've just stopped reporting it.

[0.48] Clinton [looking into empty offices]: Joe? Anybody home? [Laughter.] John? Maria? [Laughter.]

[1.10] [The camera cuts to Tim Russert and Sam Donaldson, in their separate television studios.]

Tim Russert [talking on the phone]: What am I going to ask the guy? I have nothing to ask him. I pass, pass. [Russert hangs up the phone.]

Sam Donaldson [to the camera]: He's yesterday's news. Who's next?

[1.18] Clinton [sitting at his desk in the Oval Office answers the phone as if he was a switchboard operator]: Hello, White House, hold please. Hello, White House, please hold. Hello, White House, White House, hello, hold please, please hold. No, Mr. Podesta is not here now. Would you like his voice mail?

[1.38] Unidentified cab driver: I've feel bad for him. It looks like he has nothing to do.

[1.41] [The camera cuts to Clinton sitting in the Oval Office, practicing origami, with several paper swans on the table.]

[1.46] John Podesta: I'm a little bit worried about him. This morning, for example, he came into the Oval Office for our meeting. And I said, "Mr. President, is everything all

right?” And he said, “Yeah, what’s the matter?” And I said, “Mr. President, you’re wearing your pajama bottoms.”

[1.59] Unidentified man [Perhaps a Secret Service agent, walking outside the White House]: I really have nothing to say about that.

[2.03] Hillary Clinton [sitting in a limousine about to pull away from the White House]: I wish I could be here more. But I really think Bill has everything under control.

Clinton [runs out of the White House holding a brown paper bag with “Hillary” written on it only to watch the limousine pull away]: Honey, wait, wait, wait, wait! You forgot your lunch!

[2.16] Al Gore: Well, I think his legacy is going to be the natural environment . . . [The camera cuts to Bill Clinton pushing a lawnmower and placing a sprinkler on the White House lawn.] . . . improving the green spaces of our country. I’ve urged him to spend more time on that. [The camera cuts to Clinton, trimming the hedges outside the White House.]

[2.34] Betty Currie [seated at her desk next to the Oval Office]: The president’s schedule is just as busy as ever. He’s just doing different things.

[The camera cuts to Clinton, washing his limousine, then sitting in front of a clothes dryer watching the clothes spin around and reading the magazine *Entertainment Weekly*.]

[3.00] [Clinton is then seen walking down a hallway at the White House and finding young man photocopying his face. Clinton then attempted to buy ice cream from a vending machine only to have his dollar repeatedly rejected.]

[3.15] Donna Shalala: I feel really bad for him. I wish there was something that would cheer him up.

[The camera then cuts back to Clinton standing in front of a vending machine. This time, he is hitting and kicking the machine and is successful in acquiring an ice cream sandwich. The music now changes from *One for My Baby* to a version of George and Ira Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm*. The camera cuts to Clinton sitting in the White House movie theater, sharing a bag of popcorn with his dog, Buddy, watching the animated film, *101 Dalmatians*. The camera cuts to Clinton hitting a golf ball off a tee. The ball lands on the hood of a car parked in front of a sign that reads "Reserved for Chairman Burton."]

[3.49] Clinton: Yes! [Clinton displays happiness at hitting the Chairman's car.]

[Clinton is next seen back in the White House where he approaches "Stuart" who is still photocopying his face.]

Clinton: Hey, there you are. Come with me.

[3.56] [The camera cuts back to the Oval Office, where Clinton is sitting at his desk in front of a laptop computer and the actor standing to his right.]

Stuart: All right, Mr. P, you ready to start?

Clinton: Show me e-mail.

Stuart: OK, let's light this candle.

Clinton: I want to see eBay.

Stuart: Yeah, yeah, yeah, just like that. You're riding the wave of the future, my man.

Now what do you feel like buyin'?

Clinton: I want to buy a smoked ham.

Stuart: Excellent choice. Right, you're there. You're almost there. How many you gonna buy?

Clinton: Wait a minute...



Stuart: What's the problem? Chicken? [making chicken noises]

Clinton: What does it cost?

Stuart: Name your own price, my man.

Clinton: Well, we're stocking for winter.

Stuart: Let's do it.

Clinton: Yahtzee!

Stuart: All right, you did it, my man. [Laughter.]

[The camera cuts to a sign which reads "White House Situation Room." Clinton is seen in playing the board game Battleship.]

[4.24] Clinton: B-9.

General Henry Shelton: You sunk my battleship. [Laughter.]

Clinton: Yes!

[4.37] [The camera cuts to Clinton standing in front of a mirror of holding an Oscar statue.]

[4.47] Clinton: I want to thank the academy for this tremendous honor. This may be the greatest moment of my life. I mean, ever since I was a little boy, I wanted to be a real actor.

[Kevin Spacey enters the frames and takes the Oscar from Clinton. Spacey leaves the room shaking his head at Clinton.] [Laughter.]

[5.09] [Clinton is seen riding a bicycle in side the Old Executive Office Building. The camera cuts back to the ice cream vending machine and shows Clinton and Stuart attempting to get a free ice cream.]

[5.29] Clinton: No, no, just leave your money in your pocket.

Stuart: Sweet.

Clinton: Pretty good, huh? Get all you want.

[5.52] [End of film.] [Applause.]

[Back on the dais, Susan Page presents Clinton with an Oscar statuette.]

[14] You like me. You really like me. [Laughter.] Now, you know, I may complain about coming here. But a year from now, I'll have to watch someone else give this speech. And I will feel an onset of that rare affliction, unique to former presidents. AGDD—Attention-Getting Deficit Disorder. [Laughter.] Plus, which I'll really be burned up when Al Gore turns out to be funnier than me. [Laughter and applause.]

[15] But let me say to all of you, I have loved these eight years. You know, I read in the history books how other presidents say the White House is like a penitentiary and every motive they have is suspect; even George Washington complained he was treated like a common thief, and they all say they can't wait to get away. I don't know what the heck they're talking about. [Laughter.]

[16] I've had a wonderful time. It's been an honor to serve and fun to laugh. I only wish that we had even laughed more these last eight years. Because power is not the most important thing in life, and it only counts for what you use it. I thank you for what you do every day, thank you for all the fun times that Hillary and I have had. Keep at it. It's a great country, it deserves our best. Thank you and God bless you. [Applause.]

Notes

**Remarks by President Clinton at the Annual Dinner of the White House**

**Correspondents' Association:** Clinton's speech was delivered at 10:06 PM on April 29, 2000 at the Washington Hilton. This version of the text is based on the text of the *Public Papers of the Presidents: William J. Clinton*. (2000, 792-794). All parenthetical comments concerning "Applause" and "Laughter" were indicated on that version. The transcript and other parenthetical remarks of the film portion of the speech were transcribed from a video tape version as broadcast on C-SPAN (2000).

**1 President Page:** Susan Page, Correspondent, USA Today, 2000 president of the White House Correspondents' Association.

**1 President-elect Dillon:** Arlene Dillon, Correspondent, CBS, 2000 president-elect of the White House Correspondents' Association.

**2 photograph:** A photograph of President Clinton laughing at a different event.

**2 this photo:** A photograph of Vice President Al Gore sitting behind President Clinton as he addresses a joint session of Congress.

**2 Now, this photo:** A photograph of President Clinton with a costumed Easter Bunny from the White House Egg Roll.

**2 next photo:** A rendering of Mount Rushmore in which President Clinton's face has been inserted in George Washington's place.

**2 too good to be true:** A caption is shown from the Mount Rushmore parody reading "Photo Provided by Greg Craig." Mr. Craig was Assistant to the President and Special Counsel, The White House, 1998-1999 and served as President Clinton's lead defense counsel in the impeachment trial.

- 3 Jay Leno:** Comedian and Host, “The Tonight Show,” NBC.
- 4 *Vanity Fair*:** The magazine, *Vanity Fair*, sponsored a dinner after-party from 1993-1999 (Dowd 1993).
- 4 Bloomberg:** Bloomberg Communications headed by Michael Bloomberg sponsored an after-party at Russian Trade Building (Frey 2000).
- 4 Janet Reno:** Attorney General of the United States, 1993-2001.
- 5 “The West Wing”:** NBC television show about a fictional Democratic president. The show premiered in 1999.
- 5 travel office:** Controversy involving the firing of seven longtime employees of the White House travel office and the hiring of Clinton’s political friends and a cousin (Devroy and Kamen, 1993, A1).
- 5 David Gergen:** Counselor to President Clinton, 1993-94. Gergen, a Republican, worked for four US presidents.
- 6 John McCain:** Republican Senator from Arizona, traveled the previous week to Vietnam, where he spent five and one half years in prisoner of war camps, to mark the 25th anniversary of the end of the war (Myre, 2000, 3A). McCain was also known as a “maverick” in Republican Party politics (Mallon 2000, 15).
- 7 healing their rift:** Bush defeated McCain for the 2000 Republican Party presidential nomination and was reaching out to win the backing of McCain and his supporters (Kurtz 2000).
- 7 Joe Lockhart:** Clinton’s Press Secretary 1998-2000.
- 7 David Westin:** president, ABC News.

**8 Dick Morris:** Campaign strategist for Clinton's 1996 reelection effort (News Hour 1996, np).

**9 Tim Russert:** NBC News, moderator, "Meet the Press," senior vice president, and Washington bureau chief.

**10 G8:** Group of Eight, an international economic summit among Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States (US Department of State 2006, np).

**11 Bridge to 21<sup>st</sup> Century:** Theme of Clinton's 1996 presidential campaign. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, Clinton said "So tonight, let us resolve to build that bridge to the 21st century, to meet our challenges and protect our values" (paragraph 25).

**11 Supervised Vice-President's invention of the Internet:** "Although Al Gore never claimed to have invented the Internet, he did discuss his role in Internet development in an interview with Wolf Blitzer of Cable News Network. The interview took place on March 9, 1999 during CNN's 'Late Edition' show. Specifically, what Gore said was 'I took the initiative in creating the Internet'" (Wiggins 2000, under "What Gore Said.").

**0.00 Film is shown:** The film was show on large screens in the ballroom. It runs approximately 5 minutes 52 seconds. The credits, according to the Internet Movie Database are: Director: Philips Rosenthal, Producer: Peter Hutchins, Cinematography: Al Hainle and Michael Mayers, Film Editing: David Cornman (imdb.com). The film is available online (<http://politicalhumor.about.com/library/blclintonfinaldaysvideo.htm>).

**0.00 Vice President:** Al Gore, Democratic presidential nominee, 2000.

**0.00 First Lady:** Hillary Rodham Clinton, Democratic candidate, United States Senate for New York.

**0.09 Helen Thomas:** White House Correspondent, United Press International.

**0.33 *One for My Baby (and One More for the Road)*:** The lyrics of *One for My Baby* that are heard in the background of the video are

Its quarter to three/There's no one in the place/except you and me/So set em up  
Joe/I got a little story I think you outta know/ Were drinking my friend/To the end  
of a brief episode/So make it one for my baby And one more for the road/I know  
the routine/Put another nickel in that there machine/I'm feeling so bad/Won't you  
make the music easy and sad/I could tell you a lot/But you gotta to be true to your  
code/So make it one for my baby/And one more for the road/You'd never know  
it/But buddy I'm a kind of poet/And I've got a lot of things I wanna say/And if  
I'm gloomy, please listen to me/Till its all, all talked away/Well, that's how it  
goes/And Joe I know you're getting' anxious to close/So thanks for the cheer I  
hope you didn't mind/My bending your ear/But this torch that I found/Its gotta be  
drowned/Or it soon might explode/So make it one for my baby/And one more for  
the road. (quoted in Lees 2006, 190-191)

**0.40 Peter Maer:** White House Correspondent, CBS Radio.

**1.10 Sam Donaldson:** Co-Anchor, "This Week With Sam Donaldson & Cokie Roberts,"  
ABC News.

**1.18 Mr. Podesta:** John Podesta, White House Chief of Staff, 1998-2001.

**2.34 Betty Currie:** Personal Secretary to President Clinton.

**3.15 Donna Shalala:** Secretary, Department of Health & Human Services, 1993-2001.

**George and Ira Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm*:** "*I got rhythm* was introduced by Ethel Merman in the musical *Girl Crazy*. Its pattern of circulation shows that once a popular song enters the public marketplace, there is no predicting how it will be used. From the early 1930s into the 1950s *I got rhythm* was widely performed and recorded by popular singers and pianists, by swing bands and 'pops' orchestra leaders, and by jazz performers" (Crawford 2007, under "Gershwin as a songwriter").

**3.49 Chairman Burton:** Representative Dan Burton, Republican of Indiana, Chairman of the House Committee on Government Reform and outspoken Clinton critic.

**3.49 Stuart:** The character "Stuart" was feature in television commercials for the online brokerage Ameritrade (Melillo and Fromm 2000, 92).

**3.56 eBay:** An online auction company, <<http://www.ebay.com>>.

General Henry Shelton: Chairman, Joints Chiefs of Staff.

**4.47 Kevin Spacey:** Actor who won Academy Awards for *The Usual Suspects* in 1996 and *American Beauty* in 1999.

**14 You like me. You really like me.:** Clinton is parodying Sally Field's Oscar acceptance speech. His version misquotes Field, a common error according to Waxman. The original quotation was "I can't deny the fact that you like me, right now, you like me!" (1999. G01).

**14 AGDD:** A pun on ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder).

## Appendix B

### Ann Richards's Keynote Address to the 1988 Democratic National Convention

[1] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, very much.

[2] Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Buenas noches, mis amigos.

[3] I'm delighted to be here with you this evening, because after listening to George Bush all these years, I figured you needed to know what a real Texas accent sounds like.

[4] Twelve years ago Barbara Jordan, another Texas woman, Barbara made the keynote address to this convention, and two women in a hundred and sixty years is about par for the course.

[5] But if you give us a chance, we can perform. After all, Ginger Rogers did everything that Fred Astaire did. She just did it backwards and in high heels.

[6] I want to announce to this Nation that in a little more than 100 days, the Reagan-Meese-Deaver-Nofziger-Poindexter-North-Weinberger-Watt-Gorsuch-Lavelle - Stockman-Haig-Bork-Noriega-George Bush [era] will be over!

[7] You know, tonight I feel a little like I did when I played basketball in the 8th grade. I thought I looked real cute in my uniform. And then I heard a boy yell from the bleachers, "Make that basket, Birdlegs." And my greatest fear is that same guy is somewhere out there in the audience tonight, and he's going to cut me down to size, because where I grew up there really wasn't much tolerance for self-importance, people who put on airs.

[8] I was born during the Depression in a little community just outside Waco, and I grew up listening to Franklin Roosevelt on the radio. Well, it was back then that I came to understand the small truths and the hardships that bind neighbors together. Those were real people with real problems and they had real dreams about getting out of the



Depression. I can remember summer nights when we'd put down what we called the Baptist pallet, and we listened to the grown-ups talk. I can still hear the sound of the dominoes clicking on the marble slab my daddy had found for a tabletop. I can still hear the laughter of the men telling jokes you weren't supposed to hear—talkin' about how big that old buck deer was, laughin' about mama puttin' Clorox in the well when the frog fell in.

[9] They talked about war and Washington and what this country needed. They talked straight talk. And it came from people who were living their lives as best they could. And that's what we're gonna do tonight. We're gonna tell how the cow ate the cabbage.

[10] I got a letter last week from a young mother in Lorena, Texas, and I wanna read part of it to you. She wrote,

[11] "Our worries go from pay day to pay day, just like millions of others. And we have two fairly decent incomes, but I worry how I'm going to pay the rising car insurance and food. I pray my kids don't have a growth spurt from August to December, so I don't have to buy new jeans. We buy clothes at the budget stores and we have them fray and fade and stretch in the first wash. We ponder and try to figure out how we're gonna pay for college and braces and tennis shoes. We don't take vacations and we don't go out to eat. Please don't think me ungrateful. We have jobs and a nice place to live, and we're healthy. We're the people you see every day in the grocery stores, and we obey the laws. We pay our taxes. We fly our flags on holidays and we plod along trying to make it better for ourselves and our children and our parents. We aren't vocal any more. I think maybe we're too tired. I believe that people like us are forgotten in America."

[12] Well of course you believe you're forgotten, because you have been.

[13] This Republican Administration treats us as if we were pieces of a puzzle that can't fit together. They've tried to put us into compartments and separate us from each other. Their political theory is "divide and conquer." They've suggested time and time again that what is of interest to one group of Americans is not of interest to any one else. We've been isolated. We've been lumped into that sad phraseology called "special interests." They've told farmers that they were selfish, that they would drive up food prices if they asked the government to intervene on behalf of the family farm, and we watched farms go on the auction block while we bought food from foreign countries. Well, that's wrong!

[14] They told working mothers it's all their fault—their families are falling apart because they had to go to work to keep their kids in jeans and tennis shoes and college. And they're wrong!! They told American labor they were trying to ruin free enterprise by asking for 60 days' notice of plant closings, and that's wrong. And they told the auto industry and the steel industry and the timber industry and the oil industry, companies being threatened by foreign products flooding this country, that you're "protectionist" if you think the government should enforce our trade laws. And that is wrong. When they belittle us for demanding clean air and clean water for trying to save the oceans and the ozone layer, that's wrong.

[15] No wonder we feel isolated and confused. We want answers and their answer is that "something is wrong with you." Well nothing's wrong with you. Nothing's wrong with you that you can't fix in November!

[16] We've been told—We've been told that the interests of the South and the Southwest are not the same interests as the North and the Northeast. They pit one group against the

other. They've divided this country and in our isolation we think government isn't gonna help us, and we're alone in our feelings. We feel forgotten. Well, the fact is that we are not an isolated piece of their puzzle. We are one nation. We are the United States of America.

[17] Now we Democrats believe that America is still the county of fair play, that we can come out of a small town or a poor neighborhood and have the same chance as anyone else; and it doesn't matter whether we are black or Hispanic or disabled or a women. We believe that America is a country where small business owners must succeed, because they are the bedrock, backbone of our economy.

[18] We believe that our kids deserve good daycare and public schools. We believe our kids deserve public schools where students can learn and teachers can teach. And we wanna believe that our parents will have a good retirement and that we will too. We Democrats believe that social security is a pact that can not be broken.

[19] We wanna believe that we can live out our lives without the terrible fear that an illness is going to bankrupt us and our children. We Democrats believe that America can overcome any problem, including the dreaded disease called AIDS. We believe that America is still a country where there is more to life than just a constant struggle for money. And we believe that America must have leaders who show us that our struggles amount to something and contribute to something larger—leaders who want us to be all that we can be.

[20] We want leaders like Jesse Jackson. Jesse Jackson is a leader and a teacher who can open our hearts and open our minds and stir our very souls. And he has taught us that we

are as good as our capacity for caring, caring about the drug problem, caring about crime, caring about education, and caring about each other.

[21] Now, in contrast, the greatest nation of the free world has had a leader for eight straight years that has pretended that he can not hear our questions over the noise of the helicopters. And we know he doesn't wanna answer. But we have a lot of questions. And when we get our questions asked, or there is a leak, or an investigation the only answer we get is, "I don't know," or "I forgot."

[22] But you wouldn't accept that answer from your children. I wouldn't. Don't tell me "you don't know" or "you forgot." We're not going to have the America that we want until we elect leaders who are gonna tell the truth; not most days but every day; leaders who don't forget what they don't want to remember. And for eight straight years George Bush hasn't displayed the slightest interest in anything we care about. And now that he's after a job that he can't get appointed to, he's like Columbus discovering America. He's found child care. He's found education. Poor George. He can't help it. He was born with a silver foot in his mouth.

[23] Well, no wonder. No wonder we can't figure it out. Because the leadership of this nation is telling us one thing on TV and doing something entirely different. They tell us—They tell us that they're fighting a war against terrorists. And then we find out that the White House is selling arms to the Ayatollah. They—They tell us that they're fighting a war on drugs and then people come on TV and testify that the CIA and the DEA and the FBI knew they were flying drugs into America all along. And they're negotiating with a dictator who is shoveling cocaine into this country like crazy. I guess that's their Central American strategy.

[24] Now they tell us that employment rates are great, and that they're for equal opportunity. But we know it takes two paychecks to make ends meet today, when it used to take one. And the opportunity they're so proud of is low-wage, dead-end jobs. And there is no major city in America where you cannot see homeless men sitting in parking lots holding signs that say, "I will work for food."

[25] Now my friends, we really are at a crucial point in American history. Under this Administration we have devoted our resources into making this country a military colossus. But we've let our economic lines of defense fall into disrepair. The debt of this nation is greater than it has ever been in our history. We fought a world war on less debt than the Republicans have built up in the last eight years. You know, it's kind of like that brother-in-law who drives a flashy new car, but he's always borrowing money from you to make the payments.

[26] Well, but let's take what they are most proudest of—that is their stand of defense. We Democrats are committed to a strong America, and, quite frankly, when our leaders say to us, "We need a new weapons system," our inclination is to say, "Well, they must be right." But when we pay billions for planes that won't fly, billions for tanks that won't fire, and billions for systems that won't work, "that old dog won't hunt." And you don't have to be from Waco to know that when the Pentagon makes crooks rich and doesn't make America strong, that it's a bum deal.

[27] Now I'm going to tell you, I'm really glad that our young people missed the Depression and missed the great Big War. But I do regret that they missed the leaders that I knew, leaders who told us when things were tough, and that we'd have to sacrifice, and that these difficulties might last for a while. They didn't tell us things were hard for

us because we were different, or isolated, or special interests. They brought us together and they gave us a sense of national purpose. They gave us Social Security and they told us they were setting up a system where we could pay our own money in, and when the time came for our retirement we could take the money out. People in the rural areas were told that we deserved to have electric lights, and they were gonna harness the energy that was necessary to give us electricity so my grandmamma didn't have to carry that old coal oil lamp around. And they told us that they were gonna guarant[ee] when we put our money in the bank, that the money was going to be there, and it was going to be insured. They did not lie to us.

[28] And I think one of the saving graces of Democrats is that we are candid. We talk straight talk. We tell people what we think. And that tradition and those values live today in Michael Dukakis from Massachusetts. Michael Dukakis knows that this country is on the edge of a great new era, that we're not afraid of change, that we're for thoughtful, truthful, strong leadership. Behind his calm there's an impatience to unify this country and to get on with the future. His instincts are deeply American. They're tough and they're generous. And personally, I have to tell you that I have never met a man who had a more remarkable sense about what is really important in life.

[29] And then there's my friend and my teacher for many years, Senator Lloyd Bentsen. And I couldn't be prouder, both as a Texan and as a Democrat, because Lloyd Bentsen understands America. From the barrio to the boardroom, he knows how to bring us together, by regions, by economics, and by example. And he's already beaten George Bush once.

[30] So, when it comes right down to it, this election is a contest between those who are satisfied with what they have and those who know we can do better. That's what this election is really all about. It's about the American dream—those who want to keep it for the few and those who know it must be nurtured and passed along.

[31] I'm a grandmother now. And I have one nearly perfect granddaughter named Lily. And when I hold that grandbaby, I feel the continuity of life that unites us, that binds generation to generation, that ties us with each other. And sometimes I spread that Baptist pallet out on the floor, and Lily and I roll a ball back and forth. And I think of all the families like mine, like the one in Lorena, Texas, like the ones that nurture children all across America. And as I look at Lily, I know that it is within families that we learn both the need to respect individual human dignity and to work together for our common good. Within our families, within our nation, it is the same.

[32] And as I sit there, I wonder if she'll ever grasp the changes I've seen in my life—if she'll ever believe that there was a time when blacks could not drink from public water fountains, when Hispanic children were punished for speaking Spanish in the public schools, and women couldn't vote.

[33] I think of all the political fights I've fought, and all the compromises I've had to accept as part payment. And I think of all the small victories that have added up to national triumphs and all the things that would never have happened and all the people who would've been left behind if we had not reasoned and fought and won those battles together. And I will tell Lily that those triumphs were Democratic Party triumphs.

[34] I want so much to tell Lily how far we've come, you and I. And as the ball rolls back and forth, I want to tell her how very lucky she is that for all our difference, we are still

the greatest nation on this good earth. And our strength lies in the men and women who go to work every day, who struggle to balance their family and their jobs, and who should never, ever be forgotten.

[35] I just hope that like her grandparents and her great-grandparents before that Lily goes on to raise her kids with the promise that echoes in homes all across America: that we can do better, and that's what this election is all about.

[36] Thank you very much.

Notes

**Ann Richards's Keynote Address to the 1988 Democratic National Convention:** Ann Richards delivered the speech on July 19, 1988 at The Omni in Atlanta, Georgia. The text of the speech is from AmericanRhetoric.com and was reconciled with a video version from Great speeches, Volume VIII (2005).

**1 George Bush:** George Herbert Walker Bush, Vice President of the United States and 1988 Republican presidential nominee.

**4 Barbara Jordan:** Democratic member of Congress from Texas. First African-American woman from the south elected to Congress. She delivered the keynote address at the 1976 Democratic National Convention.

**5 Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire:** Dancers who starred in films in the 1930s. Corliss argued that "someone (many people) noted that Ginger did everything Fred did, only backward and in high heels. That's not quite true. She didn't choreograph; she didn't drive the movie and the performers. And even I can see that, though Rogers was in Astaire's dancing class (as a precocious student), she wasn't in his dancing class (as an equal). His gestures are indeed larger, more precise and graceful, than hers" (2002).



She just did it backwards and in high heels: Although this statement is often attributed to Richards, it first appeared in a 1982 Frank and Earnest comic strip written by Bob Thaves. The original caption read ““Sure he was great, but don’t forget that Ginger Rogers did everything he did, backwards... and in high heels” (Ginger Rogers Official Website).

**6 Meese:** Edwin Meese, III, Advisor to President Reagan, 1981-1985; US Attorney General, 1985-1988. Meese was one of Reagan’s most conservative advisors. As Attorney General he came under criticism for resisting calls to appoint a special prosecutor in the Iran-Contra affair (Levy 1996, 241).

**6 Deaver:** Michael Deaver. Deputy Chief of Staff, 1981-1985. Deaver was a key advisor to President Reagan. After leaving office, he set up a lobbying firm. In 1987 Deaver was “indicted for violating federal ethics laws that limit lobbying for former top government officials. Shortly thereafter, he was convicted of lying about his lobbying activities to Congress” (Levy 1996, 104).

**6 Nofziger:** Lyn Nofziger, Assistant to the President for Political Affairs, 1981-1982. Nofziger worked as a press secretary and communications director for Reagan as Governor of California and during the 1980 presidential campaign. He was indicted for “illegally lobbying senior White House officials in connection with the Wedtech scandal” (Levy 1996, 260). The Wedtech scandal concerned illegal lobbying for a no-bid contract with the Army (Levy 1996, 386).

**6 Poindexter:** John Poindexter, National Security Advisor, 1985-1987. Poindexter resigned as National Security Advisor after admitting his direction of the Iran-Contra Affair. He was convicted of conspiracy, obstruction of justice, perjury, defrauding the

government, and the alteration and destruction of evidence. Those convictions were later overturned (Levy 1996, 286-287).

**6 North:** Oliver North, Lieutenant Colonel, US Marine Corps and staff member of the National Security Council. North was the public face of the Iran-Contra Affair. He testified for six days before Congress in July 1987. He would be convicted in 1989 on three charges, though they would later be overturned (Levy 1996, 263-265).

**6 Weinberger:** Casper Weinberger, Secretary of Defense, 1981-1987. Weinberger oversaw the massive military expansion of the Reagan presidency. He resigned during the Iran-Contra Affair, was indicted on five felony counts in June 1992 and pardoned in December 1992 by President George Bush (Levy 1996, 387-389).

**6 Watt:** James Watt, Secretary of the Interior, 1981-1983. Watt brought a pro-business approach to President Reagan's environmental policies and resigned after stating that on his coal pricing commission "I have a black, a woman, two Jews and a cripple. And we have talent." ("Mr. Watt Does It Again" 1983, A20).

**6 Gorsuch:** Anne Gorsuch Burford, Administrator, Environmental Protection Agency, 1981-1983. The first woman to head the EPA, Gorsuch was forced to resign after being cited for contempt of Congress for not releasing documents concerning the Superfund toxic waste cleanup program (Levy 1996, 58-59).

**6 Lavelle:** Rita Marie Lavelle, Assistant Administrator, Environmental Protection Agency, 1981-1983. Lavelle was fired by Gorsuch in the midst of the Superfund scandal. She refused to turn over documents. Under the direction of Gorsuch who was acting under the orders of President Reagan. Lavelle was charged with perjury and conflict of interest and was later convicted on perjury charges (Levy 1996, 231-232).

**6 Stockman:** David Stockman, Director, Office of Management and Budget, 1981-1985. A strong public supporter of Reaganomics, or supply-side economics, Stockman was a controversial OMB Director. According to Levy, “Stockman contended that the Reagan program would not work because it did not go far enough, that the failure to cut entitlement programs and insistence on increased defense spending and decreased taxes would lead to a mounting budget deficit” (342). In spite of these comments, Reagan kept Stockman at his position until 1985.

**6 Haig:** Alexander Haig, Secretary of State, 1981-1982. Haig’s tenure as Secretary of State was marked by his strong anti-Communist positions. He clashed with other members of the Reagan administration, notably Weinberger and CIA Director Casey. Haig, famously and incorrectly, implied that he was in charge of the government following the assassination attempt on President Reagan in 1981 (Levy 1996, 183-184).

**6 Bork:** Judge Robert Bork, Nominee to be Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, 1987. Before his nomination to the court, Bork was principally known for firing Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox in the “Saturday Night Massacre.” An opponent of abortion and gay rights, the conservative judge’s nomination was defeated in the Senate, 58-42. Reagan would then nominate, and have confirmed, Anthony Kennedy (Levy 1996, 46-47).

**6 Noriega:** General Manuel Noriega, leader of Panama. A former CIA informant, Noriega drew criticism from the Bush administration after voiding a 1989 election that did not select his candidate. Bush ordered an invasion of Panama, on December 20, 1989. Noriega was arrested, extradited to the United States, convicted of drug smuggling, and sent to a US federal prison. The invasion was criticized due to possible violations of

international law and Noriega's previously close relationship with the US government (Levy 1996, 243-275).

**20 Jesse Jackson:** Minister, civil rights leader, and two time candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination. In 1988, Jackson won 11 primaries.

**23 Ayatollah:** Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ruhollah Mosavi Khomeini, Iranian political leader and Shi'a cleric.

**28 Michael Dukakis:** Governor of Massachusetts and 1988 Democratic presidential nominee.

**29 Lloyd Bentsen:** Democratic United States Senator from Texas and 1988 vice presidential nominee. Bentsen defeated George Bush in a 1970 US Senate race (Levy 1996, 37).

## Appendix C

### Sojourner Truth's Speeches

#### Sojourner Truth's Speech to the Women's Rights Convention

in Akron, Ohio on May 29, 1851

[One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the Convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gestures, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. She came forward to the platform and addressing the President said with great simplicity:]

[1] May I say a few words? [Receiving an affirmative answer, she proceeded;]

[2] I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights.

[3] I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now.

[4] As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint and man a quart—why cant she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much,--for we cant take more than our pint'll hold. [Roars of Laughter.]<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> NYT indicates audience reaction, ASB does not.

[5] The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and dont know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they wont be so much trouble.

[6] I cant read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again.

[7] The lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept—and Lazarus came forth.

[8] And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and woman who bore him. Man, where is your part?

[9] But the women are coming up blessed by God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.

Notes

**Sojourner Truth's Speech to the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio on May 29, 1851:** This speech text was first published in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* of Salem, Ohio on June 21, 1851. The only change I have made to the text is the indication of laughter found in the *New York Times* version. For a discussion of the authenticity of the text, see page 171

Sojourner Truth's Third Speech at the First Annual Meeting  
of the American Equal Rights Association (Version A)

[Miss Anthony announced that they would have another opportunity to hear Sojourner Truth, and, for the information of those who did not know, she would say that Sojourner was for forty years a slave in this State. She is not a product of the barbarism of South Carolina, but of the barbarism of New York, and one of her fingers was chopped off by her cruel master in a moment of anger.]

[Sojourner, having deposited her hood and likewise the miraculous bag containing her rations, "shadows," and other "traps," came forward good naturedly and said:]

[1] Well, things that past a good while, there's no use over-calling them again. Old things is passed away, and all things are become new, [Applause and laughter.] I was sitting and looking around here—I've been to a great many conventions, a great many meetin's in the course of my life-time—in eighty years, and I've heard a great many speeches, but I've heard a great many answers in the anti-slavery meetin's. A half dozen would pop up, some pop up here, some there. But in this meetin' there has been nobody to pop up. [Laughter and applause.] Nobody to gainsay.

[2] I havn't seen any one grumblin'. I never heard a meetin' before but there was great grumblin' and mutterin' goin' on. [Laughter.] Now, I say we are gainin' ground. Haven't you noticed; here is antislavery women—a great many kinds; and did you ever behold a meetin' and see so many people together—both male and female; the body of the church full; and every one's countenance looks pleasin', looks pleasant. [Laughter.] It seems to me it's all coming right. Every one feels it's right and good. Why, I've been in meetin's and heard men gabble, gabble, gabble; but now it seems to me all pleasant. Why, this war

has done a great deal of good, besides doing a great deal of harm. [Laughter.] People seem to feel more for one another. Certainly I never saw so many people together and nobody tryin' to hurt anybody's feelin's. [Applause and laughter.] I guess there's those here that's been to meetin's and heard it. Women has been here talkin', and throwin' out arrows—there was nobody gettin' mad, or if they was they didn't let us know it. [Laughter.]

[3] Well, Sojourner has lived on through all the scenes that have taken place these forty years in the anti-slavery cause, and I have plead with all the force I had that the day might come that the colored people might own their soul and body. Well, the day has come, although it came through blood. It makes no difference how it came—it did come. [Applause.] I am sorry it came in that way. We are now trying for liberty that requires no blood—that women shall have their rights—not rights from you. Give them what belongs to them; they ask it kindly too. [Laughter.] I ask it kindly.

[4] Now, I want it done very quick. It can be done in a few years. How good it would be. I would like to go up to the polls myself. [Laughter.] I own a little house in Battle Creek, Michigan. Well, every year I got a tax to pay. Taxes, you see, be taxes. Well, a road tax sounds large. Road tax, school tax, and all these things.

[5] Well, there was women there had a house as well as I. They taxed them to build a road, and they went on the road and worked. It took 'em a good while to get a stump up. [Laughter.] Now, that shows that women can work. If they can dig up stumps they can vote. [Laughter.] It is easier to vote than dig stumps. [Laughter.] It doesn't seem hard work to vote, though I have seen some men that had a hard of it. [Laughter.] But I believe that when women can vote there won't be so many men that have a rough time gettin' to



the polls. [Great laughter]. There is danger of their life sometimes, I guess in this city. I lived fourteen years in this city. I don't want to take up time but I calculate to live. Now if you want me to get out of the world, you had better get the women votin' soon. [Laughter.] I shan't go 'till I can do that. I think it will come along pretty soon. [Laughter.] Now I think I will sing a little bit. I sung the other night, and my singin'—well, they can't put things down on paper as we speak, though I speak in an unknown tongue. [Laughter.] Now, what I sing they ain't got it in the right way—not in the way I meant it. I am king of poet—what do you call it that makes poetry? I can't read it, but I can make it.

[6] You see I have sung in the anti-slavery meetin's and in the religious meetin's. We, they didn't call anti-slavery religious, and so I didn't call my song an anti-slavery song—called it religious, so I could make it answer for both. [Great laughter.] Now I want the editors to put it down right. I heard it read from the 'paper, but it don't sound as if they had it right.

[Sojourner then sang her song.]

#### Notes

**Sojourner Truth's Third Speech at the First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association:** The speech was delivered at the Church of the Puritans, New York City on May 10, 1867 in the evening session of the American Equal Rights Association convention. This text was found in the *Proceedings of the First Anniversary of the American Equal Rights Convention*, Phonographic Report by H. M. Parkhurst. New York: Robert J. Johnston, Printer: 66-68. Indications of differences with the *History of*

*Woman Suffrage, Volume II (HWS)* (1896, 224-225) version of the speech are in the notes.

**3 Well, Sojourner has lived on through all the scenes that have taken place these forty years:** *HWS* starts here: “I have lived on through all that has taken place these forty years.”

**5 women there had a house:** *HWS*: “women there that had a house,”

**5 I shan’t go ‘till I can do that:** *HWS* ends here.

Sojourner Truth's Third Speech at the First Annual Meeting  
of the American Equal Rights Association (Version B)

[SOJOURNER TRUTH said:]

[1] I have lived on through all that has taken place these forty years in the anti-slavery cause, and I have plead with all the force I had that the day might come that the colored people might own their soul and body. Well, the day has come, although it came through blood. It makes no difference how it came-it did come. (Applause).

[2] I am sorry it came in that way. We are now trying for liberty that requires no blood-that women shall have their rights-not rights from you. Give them what belongs to them; they ask it kindly too. (Laughter). I ask it kindly. Now, I want it done very quick. It can be done in a few years. How good it would be. I would like to go up to the polls myself. (Laughter).

[3] I own a little house in Battle Creek, Michigan. Well, every year I got a tax to pay. Taxes, you see, be taxes. Well, a road tax sounds large. Road tax, school tax, and all these things. Well, there was women there that had a house as well as I. They taxed them to build a road, and they went on the road and worked. It took 'em a good while to get a stump up. (Laughter). Now, that shows that women can work. If they can dig up stumps they can vote. (Laughter). It is easier to vote than dig stumps. (Laughter). It doesn't seem hard work to vote, though I have seen some men that had a hard time of it. (Laughter). But I believe that when women can vote there won't be so many men that have a rough time gettin' to the polls. (Great laughter).

[4] There is danger of their life sometimes. I guess many have seen it in this city. I lived fourteen years in this city. I don't want to take up time, but I calculate to live. Now, if

you want me to get out of the world, you had better get the women votin' soon.  
(Laughter). I shan't go till I can do that.

Notes

**Sojourner Truth's Third Speech at the First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association (Version B):** The speech was delivered at the Church of the Puritans, New York City on May 10, 1867 in the evening session of the AERA convention. This text was found in Stanton, Anthony and Gage. 1896. *History of woman suffrage*. Vol. II (1861-1876). New York: Source Book Press, 224-25.

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