

The Messages of Content and Form Present in John F. Kennedy's Address to the Nation on the Cuban Missile Crisis

Introduction

_____The Cold War was a trying time of high tensions over the anxiety of possible nuclear war between the United States of America and the Soviet Union and the fear that there were communist spies scattered throughout the United States. By 1962, the Red Scare had already passed with careers being ruined over (mostly) false accusations of being a communist. When the Soviet Union began working with communist Cuba in the early 1960's, already high tensions rocketed in the U.S.. The Soviet Union began emplacing land-to-land missiles on the island as well as building airfields capable of supporting airplanes with nuclear payloads. People in the United States were living in a constant state of fear. K-12 schools were routinely practicing "duck and cover" drills, as if hiding under a desk would protect someone from a nuclear blast. President John F. Kennedy was stuck in a historically unique position, being the first president who was forced to consider seriously the potential impact of nuclear war in the United States. Faced with these life-threatening possibilities, Kennedy gave an address to the American people on the Soviet arms buildup in Cuba on October 22, 1962, which was broadcasted over radio and television from coast-to-coast. This address outlined Kennedy's plan to ease tensions between the countries and walk the world off the ledge that was nuclear war. Kennedy was ultimately successful in easing tensions. This address was successful, I will argue, because it created two

simultaneous messages to two unique audiences, and neither audience was aware of the message being sent to the other audience. The first message was based on the content of the address and was aimed at the United States. This was a message of peace. The second message was actually conveyed via the form of the speech, which was aimed at the Soviet Union, specifically at Khrushchev. This message implied that the United States was ready to commit to war. This dual message allowed Kennedy to keep the people of the United States relatively calm while simultaneously demonstrating strength and decisiveness to the Soviet Union.

Historical Understandings of the Crisis

Historians hold conflicting views of President Kennedy's handling of Cuban Missile Crisis as well as what truly brought about resolution of the ordeal. Some argue that the crisis "provides a case study of how John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev (First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) almost blundered into a nuclear war through crisis management approaches of their advisory systems," and that a private handling of the situation could have yielded a less dramatic yet equally successful result.¹ Countering this idea, James Giglio argued that Kennedy understood what he was doing when he delivered the surprise address, saying "more likely, Kennedy believed that the element of surprise placed him in the most advantageous position to eliminate the missiles; otherwise, a wily Khrushchev could have used private notification to his own advantage", and this is why Kennedy waited to inform

¹ Richard M. Pious, "The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Limits of Crisis Management," *Political Science Quarterly* 116, no. 1 (2001): 81.

Khrushchev of U.S. intervention and made it a public announcement instead of keeping the crisis private.²

Revealed decades after the crisis, President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchev exchanged multiple telegrams after Kennedy's initial public address. Many scholars agree that these negotiations certainly contributed to the conflict resolution, to include the message that Kennedy's threats in these telegrams caused Khrushchev to withdraw "the Soviet missiles not because of the blockade, not because of the implicit threat of "further action," but because of an explicit threat of air strike or invasion...unless he served immediate notice that the missiles would be withdrawn."³ These private conversations, some historians believe, are more vital to the resolution than any public statement or action Kennedy took over the course of the thirteen day conflict.

Being on the brink of full scale war left scholars wondering what prevented the United States from taking formal military action against the Soviet Union, like sending an air strike to destroy the missile silos as was suggested. Some scholars believe it was President Kennedy alone who kept the U.S. out of war. Sheldon Stern argued that "a Cold War hawk in public, he distrusted the military, was skeptical about military solutions to political problems, and horrified by the prospect of global nuclear war" and that it was his experiences in World War II that kept him from going over the edge into war.⁴ Sterns gives Kennedy much credit, saying that " President Kennedy used his intellectual and political skill to steer his advisers and the two superpowers away from

² James Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 199.

³ Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 65.

⁴ Sheldon M. Stern, *Stern, The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012) 155.

an apocalyptic nuclear conflict.”⁵ The following analysis will not try to disprove other scholars beliefs about what was a contributing factor to the peaceful resolution, but rather will show that President Kennedy’s address played a positive and productive role in finding a peaceful resolution because JFK was able to send a different message to two different audiences in the same speech.

President Kennedy and the Cold War

In order to understand President Kennedy’s address to the nation regarding the Soviet Union involvement in Cuba, one must first understand the greater issue at hand. First, this situation was referred to as the Cuban Missile Crisis and began on October 16, 1962 and ended thirteen days later, on October 28, 1962. The United States of America and the Soviet Union had been engaged in a “cold war” since the late 1940’s/early 1950’s, meaning while no physical fighting occurred, there was a fighting of ideologies. The U.S. wanted democracy to reign supreme throughout the world, while the Soviet Union wanted their version of socialism (often referred to as communism at the time) to be the government standard. This resulted in both countries actively trying to persuade unstable countries to choose their preference of a government system. East and West Berlin are a perfect example of Cold War implications, with West Berlin being assisted by democratic U.S. agencies, while East Berlin was run by Soviet agencies. Other countries also felt the consequences of the Cold War. Both the Korean and Vietnam Wars were considered in the United States as wars against communism and fought as proxy wars between the United States and the Soviet Union. A proxy war

⁵ Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 155.

is a war where two countries do not directly fight each other, but rather provide resources to either side of a war with the hopes that their side would win. The communist parties in each country were backed by the Soviet Union. In Korea, “it became a testing ground in the renewed battle between Russia and the United States.”⁶ “North Korea and the Soviets signed an agreement for economic cooperation” and “American military advisers also remained in the south.”⁷ Korea was a prime opportunity for the Cold War to draw blood through a third party war. The Cold War was even fought in space, with the Soviet Union claiming victory in the race to space with the satellite Sputnik, but the United States claiming victory in the race to the moon. Sputnik also “demonstrated the skill of Soviet missile science”, which indicated nuclear missiles in the United States’ mind.⁸ While the Cold War was “fought” between only two countries, they were both considered to be the most powerful countries in the world at the time and therefore their influence was felt globally.

One specific location and incident where the effects of the Cold War played out was in Cuba. The island of Cuba, a mere 90 miles off the Florida coast, was an unstable country controlled by a communist dictator, Fidel Castro. Backed by the Soviet Union, Cuba was a concern to the U.S. due to its proximity to the country, and was a point of concern for President Kennedy throughout his presidency. Kennedy’s involvement in Cuba started early and poorly in his presidency with a botched invasion attempt known as the Bay of Pigs incident. In this incident, WWII era American bombers, painted like Cuban air force planes, conducted poorly executed bombing missions on Cuba. Shortly

⁶ Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1966*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967), 95.

⁷ Lafeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 95.

⁸ Lafeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 201.

after, a Cuban exile army, trained by the U.S., landed at the Bay of Pigs, where they were immediately stopped in their tracks with many being killed or captured in the ensuing counterattack.⁹ All in all, it was seen as a huge American failure, and it was a moment that President Kennedy would no doubt have on his mind throughout the entire Cuban missile crisis when it came to deciding how to intervene.

Beginning in 1962, the Soviet Union began to use Cuba as a strategic post to be able to threaten the United States more directly. The Soviet government began transporting nuclear capable missiles to the island of Cuba and building missile silos on the island as well as runways capable of flying bombers big enough to carry a nuclear payload. While the Soviet Union maintained a defensive tone rhetorically, their actions were clearly offensive. The disbelief by some American advisors at the idea of the Soviet Union building missile launch pads in Cuba came from "Khrushchev's repeated assurances that he would not jiggle East-West relations during the American congressional campaign."¹⁰ For the first time in the history of nuclear warfare, the United States was directly being threatened, along with most of the rest of the Western Hemisphere. It is understandable why Kennedy would have an issue with this, because it counters American foreign policy dating all the way back to the Monroe Doctrine, which stated that the Western Hemisphere would be left alone by European (and other) world powers and the United States would be the sole world power to operate in the hemisphere.¹¹

⁹ "The Bay of Pigs," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Accessed December 11, 2018, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/the-bay-of-pigs>.

¹⁰ Lafeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 232.

¹¹ "Monroe Doctrine, 1823," U.S. Department of State, Accessed December 11, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/monroe>.

This caused mass hysteria in the United States. There was true fear that nuclear war was imminent, with many people believing that nuclear war would result in the end of the world as we know it, certainly for the United States and Soviet Union. “It has been estimated that as many as 10 million Americans left the nation’s urban areas, taking “vacations” in rural areas far away from nuclear targets.”¹² At the time, both countries had a plethora of nuclear missiles, but the missile defense systems for both countries were lacking, meaning nuclear war would have most likely resulted in mutual destruction.

The origins of the Cuban Missile Crisis can be traced back “to Khrushchev’s ICBM-oriented foreign policies after 1957 and his intense concern with removing NATO power from West Berlin.”¹³ As previously mentioned, Germany was a hot spot for Cold War drama. The U.S. military had amassed military resources in West Berlin, much to the frustration of the Soviet Union. President Kennedy only furthered their frustration by claiming the U.S. would strike first in any potential war.¹⁴ In an attempt to regain the strategic initiative in 1962, Khrushchev began the military build-up in Cuba.¹⁵ President Kennedy had reported on the increasing relationship between Cuba in the Soviet Union for over a month before the crisis began. On September 13, 1962, President Kennedy announced in a press conference about the unstable conditions in Cuba and the observation of Soviet technicians transporting unknown material into Cuba. Kennedy announced that the United States if Cuba should ever “become an offensive military

¹² Alice L. George, *Awaiting Armageddon: How Americans Faced the Cuban Missile Crisis*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 68.

¹³ Lafeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 231.

¹⁴ Lafeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 231.

¹⁵ Lafeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 232.

base...for the Soviet Union” the United States “will do whatever must be done.”¹⁶ When further intelligence showed nuclear capabilities in Cuba, the United States was forced to make a decision how to respond to this situation. The two options presented were a blockade of Cuba or air strikes on the military installations.¹⁷ The decision to blockade Cuba was ultimately decided upon because there was a concern that air strikes would “probably kill Soviet technicians working on the sites” and almost certainly devolve into war.¹⁸ Further, the airstrike option could still be used if the blockade failed.¹⁹ On October 22, “the President broke the well-kept secret to the American People” and provided the address to the nation that is the subject of this analysis.²⁰

As explained earlier, this analysis will solely focus on Kennedy’s address on October 22, and therefore has a limited focus. Anything that occurred after this date will not be used for analytical purposes during my analysis.

Use of Generic Criticism

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson pioneered the field of generic criticism in their article “Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction”. This article outlines what constitutes a rhetorical genre and how to conduct generic criticism. Campbell and Jamieson explain how a genre is developed through the formation of a constellation that share “substantive, stylistic, and situational

¹⁶ John F. Kennedy *Press Conference*, 13 September 1962. (JFK Library. Accessed November 20, 2018) Press conference

¹⁷ Lafeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 232.

¹⁸ Lafeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 232.

¹⁹ Lafeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 233.

²⁰ Lafeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 233.

characteristics.”²¹ This “internal dynamic” is what composes a genre.²² Campbell and Jamieson develop guidelines for generic critics to follow in order to be successful and avoid merely classifying genres, which they believe is not the intended purpose of generic criticism.²³

More importantly, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have a chapter in their book, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words*, that is titled “Presidential War Rhetoric”. This chapter identifies the genre of presidential war rhetoric. It explains that “rhetorical genres are linked to purposes; that is, they arise to perform certain functions, to accomplish certain ends in certain kinds of situations.”²⁴ The purpose of presidential war rhetoric as a genre is to ask for, or justify military actions taken by a president by acting as Commander in Chief. Campbell and Jamieson identify five characteristics present in the genre, the constellation of the genre, as Campbell and Jamieson might say. These characteristics include

(1) every element in it proclaims that the momentous decision to resort to force is deliberate, the product of thoughtful consideration; (2) forceful intervention is justified through a chronicle or narrative from which argumentative claims are drawn; (3) the audience is exhorted to unanimity of purpose and total commitment; (4) the rhetoric not only justifies the use of force, but also seeks to legitimize presidential assumption of the extraordinary powers of the commander

²¹ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. "Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction." In *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, 422-39. (5th ed. State College, PA: Strata Publishing, 2017), 430.

²² Campbell and Jamieson, “An Introduction”, 430.

²³ Campbell and Jamieson, “An Introduction”, 433.

²⁴Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall. Jamieson. “Presidential War Rhetoric.” In *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 221.

in chief; and, as a function of these other characteristics, (5) strategic misrepresentations play an unusually significant role in its appeals.²⁵

Campbell and Jamieson, through their analysis of what they identified as the constellation of presidential war rhetoric, found that these five characteristics were present in almost every instance. Campbell and Jamieson use these characteristics to analyze key pieces of discourse throughout history by U.S. Presidents that they identify as aligning with the genre of presidential war rhetoric. Campbell and Jamieson further explain that presidential war rhetoric has developed into a justificatory genre of rhetoric, meaning that its main function is to justify actions that the President of the United States already has or intends to do.

_____ I will use generic criticism for my approach to the analysis of John F. Kennedy's address on the Cuban Missile Crisis. In Campbell and Jamieson's article from 1978, they identify certain "noteworthy constants" found in genre criticism, three of which I will specifically use to conduct genre criticism of President Kennedy's address to the nation on the Cuban Missile Crisis. The first is "Classification [of a genre] is justified only by the critical illumination it produces, not by the neatness of a classificatory schema."²⁶ This is important to genre criticism because merely classifying a genre is not enough to be considered criticism.. While I will no doubt have to prove classification of presidential war rhetoric, I will not solely conduct classification. Next, "generic criticism is taken as a means toward systematic, close textual analysis."²⁷ This systematic process will occur through analyzing the text to identify which of the five characteristics of presidential war rhetoric are present in Kennedy's address. Last, "generic analysis...uncovers the unique

²⁵ Campbell and Jamieson, "Presidential War Rhetoric", 221.

²⁶ Campbell and Jamieson, "An Introduction", 429.

²⁷ Campbell and Jamieson, "An Introduction", 429.

elements in the rhetorical act, the particular means by which a genre is individuated in a given case.”²⁸ This means that conducting genre criticism will uncover these “unique elements” which will provide new scholarship to the field. I will also show that the content of the address develops an message of peace and is directed at the United States, while the form of the address, which is in the form of presidential war rhetoric, creates the message of a threat of war and is directed at the Soviet Union.

Presidential War Rhetoric and President Kennedy’s Address to the Nation on the Cuban Missile Crisis

Understanding the Address

President Kennedy gave the address four days after U.S. intelligence first spotted evidence of Soviet missile capabilities in Cuba. Prior to the address, the crisis had been a well kept secret. Up to that point, “the only stories written...were reports that a major speech was to be given by the President and that the country faced a serious crisis.”²⁹ This meant that Kennedy’s speech would be the first detailed understanding most Americans would have of the situation at hand. Kennedy begins the address by

²⁸ Campbell and Jamieson, “An Introduction”, 422.

²⁹ Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. (W.W. Norton & Company, 1969), 51.

explaining that the United States government has maintained its promise to keep surveillance on the island of Cuba. He explains that in this surveillance they have found evidence of nuclear capabilities being developed on the island by the Soviet Union. After this point is when President Kennedy truly develops his role as commander in chief when he says that “neither the United States of America nor the world community of nations can tolerate deliberate deception and offensive threats on the part of any nation, large or small.”³⁰ He continues, laying out the seven-step plan designed to reduce tensions and end the nuclear threat in the western hemisphere.

This address to the nation was seen as a major victory for President Kennedy, who was ultimately successful in getting the Soviet Union to remove nuclear capabilities from Cuba, and the Cuban Missile Crisis was seen in hindsight as the peak of the Cold War tensions between the U.S. and Soviet Union.

Characteristics of Presidential War Rhetoric Present in the Address

The Deliberate Decision

Campbell and Jamieson first identify that presidential war rhetoric requires a deliberate decision to be made.³¹ When lives are being put at risk, a president must prove that this decision has been well examined and all possibilities analyzed in order to prove to the public that the choice presented is the best choice. In his address to the

³⁰ John F. Kennedy, "Radio and Television Address to the American People on the Soviet Arms Build-up in Cuba." (Address, October 22, 1962. Accessed November 11, 2018. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkcubanmissilecrisis.html>.)

³¹ Campbell and Jamieson, "Presidential War Rhetoric", 221.

American people on the Soviet arms buildup in Cuba on October 22, 1962, President Kennedy comes to the decision that America must act as defenders of the Western Hemisphere against nuclear war. Kennedy begins his address by reporting on the current conditions in Cuba and actions being taken by the Soviet Union in Cuba. After detailing the situation at hand, including the fact that the Soviet Union has missiles stationed in Cuba capable of “striking Washington, D.C., the Panama Canal, Cape Canaveral, Mexico City” and more, with even more cities being threatened in the near future, Kennedy comes to the deliberate decision to “prevent the use of these missiles against this or any other country, and to secure their withdrawal or elimination from the Western Hemisphere.”³² Kennedy does not provide specific details yet regarding how this will be conducted, but he understands that the American public would be worried that American action against the Soviet Union could result in severe military actions, up to and including nuclear war. Kennedy addresses this concern by further proving that he came to the deliberate decision to intervene by stating “we [the United States] will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of worldwide nuclear war in which even the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouth”.³³ He is further proving that he has deliberately come to the decision to intervene and has weighed the costs of potential war with the Soviet Union and is not acting in a rash manner.

Use of Narrative

³² Kennedy, “Address to the Nation”.

³³ Kennedy, “Address to the Nation”.

The second characteristic of presidential war rhetoric is that narrative is used to justify military intervention.³⁴ Campbell and Jamieson note that narrative in presidential war rhetoric tends to “recast the conflict as aggression by the enemy, which legitimized presidential initiatives as actions to defend the nation”.³⁵ President Kennedy accomplished this argumentation through narrative by explaining how the Soviet Union lied to the United States regarding their involvement in Cuba. Kennedy tells that:

Only last Thursday, as evidence of this rapid offensive buildup was already in my hand, Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko told me in my office that he was instructed to make it clear once again, as he said his government had already done, that Soviet assistance to Cuba, and I quote, "pursued solely the purpose of contributing to the the defense capabilities of Cuba," that, and I quote him, "training by Soviet specialists of Cuban nationals in handling defensive armaments was by no means offensive, and if it were otherwise," Mr. Gromyko went on, "the Soviet Government would never become involved in rendering such assistance." That statement also was false. ³⁶

Kennedy used narrative to describe his interaction with the Soviet Foreign Minister and how the Soviet Union deceived the United States on their involvement in Cuba. This narrative creates the argument that the Soviet Union is acting as the aggressors in the conflict not only because they are building nuclear capabilities in Cuba, but because they are being deceptive about the entire situation. This deception by the Soviet Union in Cuba, explained through narrative by President Kennedy, develops his argument that the Soviet Union is the aggressor in the situation.

³⁴ Campbell and Jamieson, “Presidential War Rhetoric”, 224.

³⁵ Campbell and Jamieson, “Presidential War Rhetoric”, 224.

³⁶ Kennedy, “Address to the Nation”

Exhortation to Intense Commitment

President Kennedy meets the third characteristic of presidential war rhetoric, which is “an exhortation to intense commitment”, or creating unified action, by using unifying pronouns throughout his address.³⁷ Throughout his address, Kennedy continually uses the pronoun “we” to imply that the decisions being made and the actions being taken are being done by all. Kennedy’s address was broadcasted on radio and television, so when he uses the pronoun “we” he identifies with every American watching and listening, creating a unifying tone. Most importantly, however, Kennedy unifies his audience at the end of his address to be committed to protecting the Western Hemisphere against nuclear war despite the potential danger by saying,

The path we have chosen for the present is full of hazards, as all paths are--but it is the one most consistent with our character and courage as a nation and our commitments around the world. The cost of freedom is always high--and Americans have always paid it. And one path we shall never choose, and that is the path of surrender or submission.³⁸

Kennedy used statements such as “we have chosen” and “we shall never choose” to unify Americans and commit the audience to fighting against nuclear threats by the Soviet Union.

Investiture as Commander in Chief

³⁷ Campbell and Jamieson, “Presidential War Rhetoric”, 231.

³⁸ Kennedy, “Address to the Nation”.

Characteristic four of five, as explained by Campbell and Jamieson, is “investiture as commander in chief.”³⁹ They explain that in presidential war rhetoric, “presidents implicitly argue that now is the appropriate time for them to assume the office of commander in chief.”⁴⁰ Kennedy set up his role as Commander in Chief by arguing that the United States “must prevent the use of these missiles against this or any other country” and continued by saying that “further action is required--and it is under way; and these actions may only be the beginning.”⁴¹ It is at this point that Kennedy outright stated he is assuming his role as commander in chief by stating “in the defense of our own security and of the entire Western Hemisphere, and under the authority entrusted to me by the Constitution as endorsed by the resolution of the Congress, I have directed that the following initial steps be taken immediately...”⁴² Kennedy displayed authority in this statement and followed it up with his seven step plan outline to quell the Soviet Union nuclear aggression occurring in Cuba. His authoritative tone is key to presidential war rhetoric because the president must assume overall authority of the situation.

Strategic Misrepresentation

The final characteristic of presidential war rhetoric is also the most difficult to identify. Presidential war rhetoric includes strategic misrepresentation in its message,

³⁹ Campbell and Jamieson, “Presidential War Rhetoric”, 234.

⁴⁰ Campbell and Jamieson, “Presidential War Rhetoric”, 234.

⁴¹ Kennedy, “Address to the Nation”.

⁴² Kennedy, “Address to the Nation”.

according to Campbell and Jamieson. They say, “presidential war rhetoric...evinces an unusual tendency to misrepresent the events described therein in ways strategically related to the president’s desire to stifle dissent and unify the nation for immediate and sustained action.”⁴³ This characteristic of presidential war rhetoric is perhaps the most interesting characteristic in Kennedy’s address because there is so little of it present but it is also what helps Kennedy create the dual message in the address.. Kennedy’s strategic misrepresentation occurs through omission of the status of the crisis in regards to potential military intervention. While Kennedy does admit that hostile actions “will be met by whatever action is needed”, he never addresses what this action could be.⁴⁴ Kennedy implies that this action is the blockade he states will be enforced on Cuba, but he does not mention the fact that as the speech is occurring, there is mass mobilization of military assets all along southeastern United States. As President Kennedy’s brother, Robert Kennedy, acknowledged after the fact, “missile crews were placed on maximum alert. Troops were moved into Florida and the southeastern part of the United States...the First Armored Division began to move out of Texas into Georgia, and five more divisions were placed on high alert.”⁴⁵ Had President Kennedy mentioned these facts, mass hysteria might have ensued, with many civilians being convinced that war was imminent. Kennedy strategically omits his decision to mobilize these units to not only keep his audience as calm as possible, but also to further appear that the United States is on the side of peace. If Kennedy had claimed that “we have no wish to war with the Soviet Union--for we are a peaceful people who desire to live in peace with all other peoples”, while simultaneously admitting to mass military mobilization, his moral

⁴³ Campbell and Jamieson, “Presidential War Rhetoric”, 242.

⁴⁴ Kennedy, “Address to the Nation”.

⁴⁵ Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 52.

stand would have not held up in the eyes of the audience, and certainly would have been picked apart by Soviet adversaries.

Content versus Form: The Two Messages Present in Kennedy's Address

It is clear based on the above analysis that the address has the typical characteristics found present in Presidential War Rhetoric. However, there is still a key issue that has to be dealt with in Kennedy's address and that is the fact that Kennedy is not explicitly requesting or justifying military actions to be taken against the Soviet Union. In fact, Kennedy generally has a message advocating for peace throughout his address, or so it would seem. However, upon closer evaluation, it can be seen that there are actually two opposing messages present in the address, each intended for a different and distinct audience.

In Kennedy's address, two distinct messages are present. One message is created by the content of the speech, while the second message is created by the form of the speech. What is crucial to understand is that these two messages are directed at opposing audiences. The content message is directed at the United States (and its allies) and is a plea for peace, while the form message is directed at the Soviet Union and is a threat of war. This dual message sets the stage for the remainder of the crisis and helps to manage the situation as best as one could given the circumstances.

The Message of Content

_____The content message found in the address is rather straightforward and can be observed by analyzing individual sentences of Kennedy's address. Kennedy explains that the United States had "no desire to dominate or conquer any other nation or impose our system upon its people."⁴⁶ He is setting up the idea to the audience (The United States and allies) that the United States is the country of peace in this conflict. He directly stated that "this nation is opposed to war" and that the U.S. policy "has been one of patience and restraint, as befits a peaceful and powerful nation, which leads a worldwide alliance."⁴⁷ Kennedy's most explicit message for peace within the content is when he says that the United States had "no wish to war with the Soviet Union--for we are a peaceful people who desire to live in peace with all other peoples."⁴⁸ These examples of content show Kennedy's attempt to make the message that the United States is focused on finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict. This is also what supports his plan to conduct a blockade against Cuba. It appears to be a peaceful solution to the United States' audience. This message is more easily accepted by the United States and its allies because of their desire for a peaceful resolution.

The Message of Form

The other message present in Kennedy's address is developed through the form of the speech, which is the genre of Presidential War Rhetoric. This form has clearly been explained as the five typical characteristics being a deliberate decision, intervention justified through narrative, unification of audience, legitimization of actions

⁴⁶ Kennedy, "Address to the Nation."

⁴⁷ Kennedy, "Address to the Nation."

⁴⁸ Kennedy, "Address to the Nation."

as Commander in Chief, and strategic misrepresentations.⁴⁹ These five characteristics have been proven to be present in the address. The important thing to understand is that in order for this message to be understood, the audience has to be prepared for it. The Soviet Union realized that by placing nuclear missiles in Cuba, they would illicit a response from the United States and it would raise already high tensions. When Kennedy structures his address in the format of Presidential War Rhetoric, he structures the address to be familiar to an explicit declaration of war on the Soviet Union. While it is clear that this is not what he is doing, a Soviet audience would nevertheless hear some formal similarities to typical war messages.

This can best be seen by Chairman Khrushchev's response to Kennedy's address found in private telegrams sent between Khrushchev and Kennedy in the days immediately following the address. On October 23, 1962, Khrushchev sends Kennedy a response to the address to air his grievances. In this he said that the "measures outlined in your statement represent a serious threat to peace and security of peoples."⁵⁰ He further explains that he hoped "Government of United States will show prudence and renounce actions pursued by you, which could lead to catastrophic consequences for peace throughout world."⁵¹ This response, a threat to the United States, proves that Khrushchev took Kennedy's address to be a threat, if not an actual declaration, of war with the Soviet Union, despite explicit examples of the content of the speech saying the United States was a nation opposed to war.⁵²

⁴⁹ Campbell and Jamieson, "Presidential War Rhetoric", 221.

⁵⁰ Nikita Khrushchev, Telegram to John F. Kennedy, October 23, 1962.

⁵¹ Nikita Khrushchev, Telegram to John F. Kennedy, October 23, 1962.

⁵² Kennedy, "Address to the Nation."

Two days later, Khrushchev responded again, this time saying that “You, Mr. President, are not declaring a quarantine, but rather are setting forth an ultimatum and threatening that if we do not give in to your demands you will use force.”⁵³ There is absolutely no doubt after this response that Khrushchev, and the Soviet Union, regarded Kennedy’s address as a threat of war, which was created through Kennedy’s use of the genre form of presidential war rhetoric.

Implications

President Kennedy’s address to the nation on the Cuban missile crisis set the stage for thirteen days of negotiations and tensions both in the United States, the Soviet Union, and Cuba. Questions over whether or not war would break out were being asked by everyone. In the United States, people had a mixed reaction to the situation. After the address, “Americans responded patriotically and fearfully to the crisis. In independent polls 84 percent backed the blockade and only 4 percent opposed it; but 20 percent thought World War III was inevitable, and 60 percent feared that ‘some shooting’ would soon occur.”⁵⁴ Alice George explains that across the country people responded fearfully. “Some Americans responded with drastic action-leaving their homes behind to find relative safety in areas distant from likely Soviet targets.”⁵⁵ However, she also explains that “some Americans apparently did not act because they did not expect the crisis to expand into war.”⁵⁶ While Kennedy’s address obviously

⁵³ Nikita Khrushchev, Letter to John F. Kennedy, October 24, 1962.

⁵⁴ Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 205.

⁵⁵ George, *Awaiting Armageddon*, 68.

⁵⁶ George, *Awaiting Armageddon*, 71.

caused some concern across America, it is clear that his message of peace resonated with many Americans.

Kennedy's message to the Soviet Union also proved to resonate as seen in Khrushchev's responses to Kennedy. His message set the stage for negotiations with the Soviet Union and thirteen days later Khrushchev and the Soviet Union finally backed down and tore down the missile silos in Cuba.

Perhaps more important from this analysis is the realization that formal components derived from well-known rhetorical genres, such as war declarations, can be used as an message. Kennedy's address proves that form can create an message on its own, as seen by the reaction by the Soviet Union.

What is also significant is that the presidential war rhetoric used in Kennedy's address has a different audience than what was assumed by Campbell in Jamieson. They understandably assume that the genre's audience would be Congress and the citizens of the United States because the request or justification of war has to be accepted by that audience. The idea that Presidential War Rhetoric can be addressed to different audiences, specifically the "enemy" audience has significant implications. It means that presidents can structure their addresses towards the enemy as a show of force. The dual message that can occur during presidential war rhetoric, and realistically many other genres, allows speakers to reach a wider audience and thus be more impactful.

Conclusion

Typically reserved for times when the president, acting as commander in chief, requests or justifies foreign military involvement, Kennedy used both content and the structural dimensions of presidential war rhetoric to create a dual message with his content and his form to address the United States and the Soviet Union, advocating for peace to the former and threatening war to the latter. Campbell and Jamieson's genre, with the use of genre criticism examined by them as well, shows the true genius of President Kennedy in ensuring the safety not only of the United States, but the entire western hemisphere, by preventing nuclear war.

His address sparked a thirteen day crisis that finally came to resolution on October 28, 1962 when the Soviet Union withdrew its nuclear weapons from Cuba. Kennedy's address presented a message of peace to the United States and its allies, and a threat of war to the Soviet Union, and set the stage for negotiations that would be considered the peak of the Cold War, with tensions slowly dying after Kennedy and Khrushchev walked the world off the edge of nuclear war.

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