

# Deciphering Clinton:

An Analysis of Bill Clinton's State of the Union Messages, 1994-2000

by

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## Abstract

Bill Clinton, our nation's 42<sup>nd</sup> president, was a widely popular and controversial president. Some of the greatest obstacles he faced during his presidency, including his impeachment by the House of Representatives, were created by his own actions. An enigma of a man and a magnificent orator, he makes an excellent subject for the study rhetoric.

This analysis focuses on media reaction to Clinton's State of the Union addresses and seeks to uncover the specific reasons for these general reactions. The State of the Union address is a model that is at once constant, (in terms of the time of delivery, the audience, and the set of expectations by which it is governed) but is manipulated by rhetors according to their motivations and desires. As such, it provides us with an excellent model for analysis. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) and rhetorical theory formed the basis of the methodology used to evaluate the speeches. This unique approach allowed for both quantitative and qualitative analysis of Clinton's rhetoric.

Analysis of the speeches lends insight to how specific trends in word use and rhetorical devices created the general impressions voiced by the public. Maybe more importantly it allows definition of Clinton as a rhetor. This particular methodology not only provides a means to explain such reactions, but in itself represents a novel approach to critically analyzing rhetorical texts in terms of public reaction.

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## I. Introduction

*“Every we have acted to heal our environment, pessimists have told us it would hurt the economy. Well, today our economy is the strongest in a generation and our environment is the cleanest in a generation.”*

– Bill Clinton, *State of the Union*, 1998

On January 27, 1998 Bill Clinton delivered the State of the Union address to the members of Congress and to a record TV audience watching at home. The Comeback Kid’s oratory skills were on display and everyone was listening. Only one week earlier, the nation was rocked by the news that the President had been involved in an illicit affair with the young white house intern, Monica Lewinsky. Much was at stake in this State of the Union, and many were watching to see if Clinton could pull it off. Most were impressed.

When the verdict came in, the results were astounding. Clinton’s 1998 State of the Union address increased his popularity in the polls to a record high. The speech was heavily praised in publications across the board, liberal and conservative, inside and outside the Washington beltway. The buzzword of the moment was “compartmentalization,” referring to the fact that Clinton was able to separate his personal and political life rhetorically. Somehow he had managed to take the offensive and emerge a winner in this midst of scandal.

In the quote above, from this remarkable address, is a bit of signifying, or in today’s vernacular “dissing,” which he uses consistently in this speech to put his opponents on the defensive. In a point completely unrelated to scandal or his personal



life, he classifies his opponents (the republicans) as “pessimists,” and in a bold move, directly contradicts them. He asserts himself as a competent, strong leader in a way that is stylistically impressive as well. This jab at his opponents is spoken in a sentence with parallel structure, which creates the impression of elevated, educated rhetoric.

“Signifying” is one of the trends that appears in only two speeches (1998 and 1999). It is possibly one of the reasons that many received the general impression that President Clinton had successfully taken the offensive and emerged a winner from this State of the Union, which was delivered under intense media scrutiny and allegations of infidelity.

Interestingly, in examining public reaction to Clinton’s State of the Union speeches, the reactions were markedly consistent. The media responds to the speeches in way that captures their general impression but fails to uncover the specific reasons for this reaction. These impressions are created through language patterns that Clinton uses throughout the speeches. An analysis of the speeches, utilizing not only traditional rhetorical theory, but also critical discourse analysis (CDA) will highlight patterns and trends that help to explain public reaction to these messages.

Clinton’s presidency began in January of 1993. A self-proclaimed “New Democrat” from the south, former governor of Arkansas, he would prove to be a complex and enigmatic president. There were no great crises that he would be afforded the opportunity to lead through: no great wars, no major disasters, no terrorist attacks would mark this presidency. Indeed, some have argued that he created his own crises through the multiple scandals that emerged as a result of his own shortcomings (Whitewater, Zippergate, the Paula Jones scandal). Whatever the case, many would agree that Clinton’s presidency would be noted for its rhetoric. George Edwards probably phrases it best when he remarks “the Clinton presidency is the ultimate example the

rhetorical presidency,” (33). Clinton’s rhetoric may well be the defining point of his presidency and for this reason, he is an excellent subject for an interesting and complex rhetorical analysis.

On February 17<sup>th</sup> 1993, Bill Clinton took the podium for the first time in front of a joint session of Congress, Supreme Court justices and millions of TV viewers ... and failed to deliver a State of the Union address. The address, dubbed “the economic speech,” by the White House was an unveiling of Clinton’s new plan for economic renewal and revival. It was a segue into the office of the Presidency; a transition from Bush to Clinton and framework for the next several years. The speech represented a turning point into the Presidency and served as an inauguration of sorts for the new democratic president. It is with the following years, 1994 and 1995, that our journey through Clinton’s State of the Union messages begins.

Clinton, a masterful orator who relished the opportunity to speak and considered no speech too important to ad-lib, delivered some of the longest State of the Union addresses in the nation’s history. This analysis will attempt to analyze the six speeches given during the middle years of his presidency. In analyzing the texts themselves, it becomes necessary to understand both the history and expectations governing the State of the Union address, as well as the political context surrounding each event. The following chapters will provide this essential background information.

The 2000 message, delivered in the waning days of Clinton’s last year in office will serve as the conclusion of the paper, much as it served as a conclusion to his presidency. This speech was not about Bill Clinton, nor was it about the State of the Union. It was about a transition in the office of the presidency. It offered the unique opportunity for Clinton to designate his political heirs. At this point it becomes possible to reflect on the characteristics that define Clinton as a rhetor.

## II. State of the Union Address: History and Generic Constraints

*"He shall from time to time give the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient..."*

--Article II, section 3, *U.S. Constitution*

The tradition of the State of the Union address is rooted deep in American history. The founding fathers explicitly mention it in the Constitution as a specific duty of the President. From George Washington to George W. Bush, each Commander in Chief has been obligated to address both houses of Congress by the supreme law of the land. In filling the role of president, Bill Clinton was obligated to perform this speech annually each year, a duty which some say he relished. In order to analyze Bill Clinton's rhetorical strategies throughout these addresses, it becomes at once necessary to understand the history of the speech as well as the generic constraints that have evolved over the past 200 years, which govern its content and presentation.

Perhaps the most comprehensive review of the history of the State of the Union can be found in Wayne Fields' *Union of Words: A History of Presidential Eloquence*, and the following description draws heavily from this valuable text. The State of the Union address was not always performed as we know it today, as a large media event, involving both houses and the general public. In fact, the State of the Union address was not even called by its present day name until 1945. Prior to this, it was known simply as the "annual message." George Washington delivered each of his seven addresses in person. However, the Republican Thomas Jefferson rejected this style of delivery, dismissing it as too kingly and akin to the address before Parliament given by the English monarch. Instead, he substituted written reports to the houses – a precedent that would remain until Woodrow Wilson delivered his first State of the Union address 112 years later.

Throughout the course of history, the themes that the State of the Union addresses have shifted in scope primarily based on the challenges facing the nation.<sup>1</sup> The content of modern State of the Union addresses was largely determined by Harry Truman, who asked six major questions in his 1953 address, in response to the World War II victory:

1. Would there be another depression here—a repetition of 1921 or 1929?
2. Would we take up again, and carry forward, the great projects of social welfare ... that the New Deal had introduced into our national life?
3. What we would do with the Nation's natural resources – its soils and water, forests and grasslands?
4. Would we continue, in peace as well as war, to promote equality of opportunity for all our citizens, seeking ways and means to guarantee for all of them the full enjoyment of their civil rights?
5. Could the machinery of government and politics in this Republic be changed, improved, adapted rapidly enough to carry through, responsibly and well, the vast, new, complicated undertakings called for in our time?

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the following information represents only a generalization about the themes of the State of the Union addresses and serve to provide a sense of larger patterns. In its infancy, Presidents were generally concerned with the fragility of the national union. Another common theme in the early days of the speech was foreign affairs, due in part to the previous involvement of these early presidents with external events. Also, at this time, world events were a priority because America was a weak, new nation in a political landscape of colonizing superpowers. Leading up to the Civil War, slavery, a notable omission in the early presidential annual messages, became a common theme by the 1850's. However, it was considered more "Presidential" to address the African slave trade, which was specifically denied by the Constitution, than to speak of oppression at home. Once states began to secede and civil strife tore the nation asunder, the focus of the annual messages shifted from slavery and to more on inclusion. Discord and disunity were the themes of the Reconstruction era, as the Union sought to heal itself. Following the civil war and reconstruction era, the rhetoric of the first half of the 1900's was concerned primarily with monetary issues. A major concern, beginning with Teddy Roosevelt, was the perception that the disparity between the upper and lower classes was growing as the rich amassed more wealth and the poor grew poorer. A direct response to this observation was the New Deal programs, instituted by FDR. Post-World War II State of the Union addresses have typically addressed the opportunities and services afforded to every citizen regardless of class, on the basis that too great of distinctions between social classes leads to unrest and radicalism.

6. Could there be built in the world a durable structure of security, a lasting peace for all the nations, or would we drift, as after World War I, toward another terrible disaster – a disaster which this time might be the holocaust of the atomic war?  
(Fields, 219)

Fields argues that since this speech, the basic subheadings of the State of the Union address have been issued in direct response to these questions. Economic security, social welfare, conservation, civil rights, political reform and peace provide the framework of modern annual messages.

With the invention of mass media, most notably television, the nature of the State of the Union message has changed dramatically. No longer was the President addressing the largely homogenous population of Congressman in the capitol, he was speaking to a secondary audience, that of the American public. John Kennedy was the nation's first President to use television on any kind of regular basis to address the public (Fiorina, 256). Mass media effectively shifted the role of Congress as an audience for the State of the Union address. Today, some may argue that the citizens of the U.S. comprise the true audience and that Congress takes a more ceremonial role.

The audience (both Congress and the American public) has a set of expectations about the content and the nature of the speech. This set of expectations can be defined as the generic constraints. For example, one constraint is that Americans generally expect that the speech will offer an optimistic view of the current or future economy. Adams once remarked about Washington that he began his annual messages with "flattering prospects of abundance," (Fields, 173). Today, we expect the President to emphasize the prosperity of the nation in a patriotic fashion.

In addition to focusing on the “good” of today’s economic situation, the public expects the speech to be primarily future-oriented. No matter which of the six general subtitles the President is speaking on, the general trend is to speak primarily of proposals and changes for the future. Perhaps the most emphatic example of a modern President fulfilling this constraint is that of Johnson, whose vision of the Great Society led to a speech that was essentially “I propose...” followed by another “I propose...” and so forth.

There are certain expectations associated with the style that one expects to hear the President address the nation. Since mass media has invaded the lives of Americans and brought the President to their own living room, the public has expected the President to address the nation in a specific manner. It is assumed that the President will use Standard English, be optimistic, continually build community and present himself in a dignified and collected fashion. It is perhaps one of the few speeches a President can give that can include God and religious imagery, given the tradition of the speech. Wayne Fields remarks in his book on the history of presidential speeches that “The rhetoric of both Kennedy and Johnson, in contrast to that of either Eisenhower before or Nixon after, was evangelical and homiletic,” (Fields, 222). We can infer that while each President may prefer a particular style, that they fall within the stylistic constraints determined by their successors and the American public.

### **III. Political Context**

Bill Clinton entered politics in 1976 as Attorney General for the state of Arkansas. Eventually he would rise to governor and then to President of the United States. However, before Clinton ever entered the political landscape he had established himself academically. A talented, even brilliant student, he was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford (upon graduation from Georgetown), and received a law degree from Yale. He has cited himself that it was a handshake

from his hero, John F. Kennedy, which inspired him to enter the political arena ("Biography of William J. Clinton," 2003).

It is impossible to examine the rhetorical aspects of a series of speeches without acknowledging the context in which they were delivered. Clinton was a highly controversial president due to his involvement in a number of high-profile scandals. Appendix A (figure 1) provides an abbreviated version adopted from Peter Levy's *Encyclopedia of the Clinton Presidency*, which documents some of the major events of the Clinton presidency.

Out of this long list of controversial policy and scandal, there are about three instances that bear mentioning at this point in time because they occurred immediately before his annual address and would have influenced his speech and the public's evaluation of him. These three events are the midterm elections of 1994; the Lewinsky story, which broke only days prior to the 1998 State of the Union address; and the impeachment trial, which began only two weeks prior to the 1999 State of the Union.

Prior to describing these events, it becomes important to mention one other. An ongoing scandal during Clinton's presidency was that of Whitewater, which began well before the 1992 election and would not be resolved until the impeachment trials in 1999<sup>2</sup> (Levy, 366). 1996 would prove to be "the year of Whitewater" for the Clintons. Dan Froomkin perhaps best summarizes the Whitewater scandal of 1996 in his *Washington Post* article "Untangling Whitewater." He lays out the schedule of trials, the first of which ended in May 1996 and led to

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<sup>2</sup> The Whitewater scandal, which began with a real estate deal in 1978 between the Clintons and James and Susan McDougal to purchase over 200 acres of property in Arkansas (along Whitewater river, hence the name). What began as a probe into McDougal's shady business dealings in 1992 quickly led to an investigation of the funding of Clinton's 1984 gubernatorial campaign. The 1993 apparent suicide of Vince Foster, which was speculated to have grown out of his involvement in the Whitewater scandal brought renewed attention to the case. It was not until 1997 that the case expanded a significant amount, as independent counsel Kenneth Starr announced he would focus on Hillary's relationship to McDougal's company when she was a partner at Rose Law Firm. In 1997, Starr was frustrated with a lack of evidence when he got a huge break – Linda Tripp contacted Starr's office with tape

the conviction of McDougal and Arkansas governor Jim Guy on counts of fraud and conspiracy charges brought against them by Kenneth Starr. The second trial, which ended in August of the same year, resulted in two bankers being cleared of charges related to Clinton's 1990 campaign. The jury remained deadlocked on seven other counts. The tedious, 13 month long Senate hearings ended in June, accomplishing little. Whitewater was a constant in the flux of scandals emerged from Washington during the Clinton presidency.

Clinton accomplished little in terms of policy in his first 100 days of office. His highest priority policy item, healthcare reform, received no attention until almost eight months into the term (Edwards, 37). In his first two terms in office, Clinton was able to accomplish little, and found it difficult to gain credit for what he had accomplished. Clinton's popularity ratings averaged less than 50% for these first two years in office. The midterm elections in were seen as a backlash against the president (Edwards, 39). The republicans gained a majority of seats in Congress, creating a tough opposition for Clinton to face in the last two years of his first term.

In 1998, almost immediately following what seemed to be a stalemate, and maybe some sort of closure on the ongoing Whitewater case, came an unexpected turn of events. Independent counsel Kenneth Starr's office was contacted by Linda Tripp, a close confidante of Monica Lewinsky, who had taped conversations indicating that Lewinsky and Clinton had engaged in some sort of affair (Levy, 368). The scandal broke to media sources on January 20, 1998 – the President was set to give his State of the Union address on the 27<sup>th</sup> (Ishikoff, 1998). At this point, the Clinton administration had constructed a list of initiatives that would help Clinton regain leadership and climb back up to the bully pulpit (Campbell, 65). Colin Campbell, in an article on Clinton's rhetoric posits "The scandal so seized Washington that it placed a dark cloud

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recordings of her telephone conversations with Lewinsky implying a sexual relationship between her and the president (Levy 366-368).



over the State of the Union address ... too often it found the president's efforts to advance this agenda drowned out by the Lewinsky matter," (64-65). In evaluating the 1998 State of the Union address, one needs to keep in mind the audience: what is the American public going to be thinking, after hearing this latest scandal?

Almost exactly one year after the scandal broke and crushed the Clinton administrations hopes for increasing the agenda-setting and policy making power of the presidency, the impeachment trials began. On December 19, 1998 the U.S. House of Representatives voted to impeach the 42<sup>nd</sup> president on Article I and Article II<sup>3</sup> recommended by the House Judiciary Committee. Article I charged the president with lying to the grand jury in his testimony over intern Monica Lewinsky and Article II convicted him of obstruction of justice in the Paula Jones case (Levy, 194). The Senate trial began on January 7<sup>th</sup> and ended many votes short of a conviction on February 12<sup>th</sup>. President Clinton delivered the State of the Union address on January 19, in the midst of the senate hearings and media frenzy. In terms of credibility, Clinton had almost hit rock bottom. Political cartoons (see Appendix B), published in the *Washington Post* on January 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, respectively, summarized the American public's feelings on Clinton's morality.<sup>4</sup>

The State of the Union speech in 1999 may well have come at the culmination of Clinton's character woes. In examining this text, it is impossible not to remember the concurrent events in the Senate and the repercussions they were having on Clinton's character. Perhaps the most amazing fact of all is that Clinton rebounded from both the 1998 and 1999 State of the

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<sup>3</sup> There were originally four articles recommended by the House Judiciary Committee. The two that did not pass were Article III, which charged the president of lying to the grand jury in the Paula Jones case and Article IV which charged him with power abuse in providing "false and misleading responses to written questions posed to him by the Judiciary Committee," (Levy, 194).

<sup>4</sup> Figures 2 and 3 (Herblock, 1998).

Union addresses with the highest popularity ratings he had ever experienced in both terms in office. Analysis of the speeches themselves will lend insight as to the cause of this phenomenon.

#### **IV. Methodology**

This analysis of President Clinton's State of the Union addresses was conducted in a quantitative and qualitative fashion. Trends within the speeches and in the reactions by the American public and news reporters were correlated in a discourse level analysis of the speeches. The result is five sections of analysis: 1994 and 1995 "The Modal Years"; 1996 "The Challenge Speech"; 1997 "Re-election and Return to the Modals"; 1998 and 1999 "The State of the Scandal" and 2000 "Leaving a Legacy."

To gauge trends in audience reaction it was necessary to have reliable sources that reflected a wide range of the American public. Major newspapers, as a readily available, diverse, and respected media resource, represent one reliable source for gauging trends in audience reaction. The networked electronic resource, LexisNexis Academic, was accessed via the University of Michigan's library website ([www.lib.umich.edu](http://www.lib.umich.edu)). A guided news search was performed of approximately 50 major newspapers using the terms "Clinton" and "State of the Union" for each year he gave the address (1994-2000). The articles were screened and trends in reactions were noted. As a control for reactions inside and outside the Washington beltway, both *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* were used consistently in the analysis for every speech. The liberal newspapers were balanced with reactions from more conservative publications like *The Christian Science Monitor*. Only major papers printed in the United States were used. The reactions were drawn from the following list of publications available on LexisNexis:

Asian Wall Street Journal	Journal of Commerce
Atlanta Journal and Constitution, The	New Straits Times (Malaysia)
Boston Globe, The	New York Times, The
Boston Herald, The	Observer, The
Buffalo News, The	Omaha World Herald
Chicago Sun-Times	Plain Dealer, The
Christian Science Monitor, The	San Diego Union-Tribune
Columbus Dispatch, The	San Francisco Chronicle, The
Daily News (New York)	Scotsman & Scotland on Sunday, The
Daily Yomiuri (Tokyo), The	Seattle Times, The
Daily/Sunday Telegraph (London), The	South China Morning Post
Denver Post, The	Southland Times (New Zealand), The
Dominion (Wellington), The	St. Louis Post-Dispatch
Dominion Post (Wellington), The	St. Petersburg Times
Evening Post (Wellington), The	Star Tribune (Minneapolis MN)
Financial Times (London)	Straits Times (Singapore), The
Gazeta Mercantil Online	Tampa Tribune, The
Guardian (London), The	Times and Sunday Times (London), The
Herald (Glasgow), The	Times-Picayune, The
Houston Chronicle, The	Toronto Star, The
Independent and Independent on Sunday (London), The	Toronto Sun, The
Irish Times, The	USA Today
Jerusalem Post, The	Washington Post, The

**Figure 4.** Full list of newspapers available on LexisNexis Academic.

Critical discourse analysis provided the quantitative basis for the methodology. This methodology relies on the observation, sampling and counting of rich features. Rich features, as defined by Ellen Barton, are “those features that are meaningful across the texts and their contexts.” (24). Rich features were noted on the word/phrase level, sentence/utterance level, and text-level. Special attention was paid to two rich features in particular, those concerning modality and performative verbs. These features will be defined and discussed as applicable in the following sections.

Critical discourse analysis was used in conjunction with rhetorical theory, which allowed for a richer qualitative analysis of the speeches. Rhetorical theory was particularly useful in explanation of stylistic devices used by Clinton and in exploring the issue of ethos in respect to the 1998 and 1999 speeches. This particular combination of critical discourse analysis and rhetorical theory allows a comprehensive, insightful analysis of the State of the Union addresses.

## V. Analysis

### 1994 and 1995: The Modal Years<sup>5</sup>

*"No matter how hard he pushed for dramatic emphasis... Bill Clinton came up short. It wasn't just as if Elvis had left the building; it was more as if he'd never really entered,"* -Tom Shales, *The Washington Post*, 24 January 1994

Public reaction to President Clinton's 1994 and 1995 State of the Union speeches was remarkable, although many may argue that the addresses themselves were not. Response to Clinton's oratory remained consistent across many publications. Op/ed pieces carried the same general theme: Clinton's message was weak, ineffective, and predictable. A close analysis of elements of African American verbal tradition (AVT) and of rich features, including modals and performative verbs, explains some of the reasons why the speeches elicited these critical responses in the media.

In delivering the 1994 State of the Union, Clinton had not yet faced the backlash of the voters; he was an energetic President only halfway into his first term. His speech, however, was

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<sup>5</sup> An rich feature not discussed in detail in this chapter, but of notable interest is colloquial language. His use of colloquialisms may have made it sound entertaining while lacking substantial content. Throughout his speech he injects a number of clichés that would have broken up the political rhetoric for his secondary audience watching at home: "But I am persuaded that the real credit belongs to the people who sent us here, who pay our salaries, *who hold our feet to the fire*." "And once again, *the buck stops here*." "And those who commit repeated, violent crimes should be told, when you commit a third violent crime, you will be put away, and put away for good. *Three strikes and you are out*." (Clinton, 1994) Without exception, Clinton uses these clichés at the end of a passage to drive home a point. They add forcefulness to his speech while projecting the image of a President that is an ordinary man.

In this passage from 1995 he uses a cliché that worked well for him in the previous year, adding force and personality to his speech:

I know that members of Congress are concerned about crime, as are all the citizens of our country. And I remind you that last year, we passed a very tough crime bill – longer sentences, *three strikes and you're out*, almost 60 new capital punishment offenses, more prisons, more prevention, 100,000 more police. And we paid for it all by reducing the size of the federal bureaucracy and giving the money back to local communities to lower the crime rate. (Clinton, 1995)

In both speeches "three strikes and you're out" refers to the same initiative. In 1994, in his drive to get it passed, he put the colloquialism at the end of his paragraph, ending his message with a succinct note that wrapped it up into a baseball analogy that most of his secondary audience could identify with. Here, it is lost in the litany of accomplishments he seems intent on delivering in a style almost as exciting as a grocery list.

greeted with only minutely more enthusiasm than the 1995 State of the Union. The praise he garnered for this speech may, in part be due to the style with which he delivered it. “It was a steadfastly unremarkable State of the Union speech,” commented *Washington Post* reporter Tom Shales, “but Bill Clinton delivered it with a robust evangelical fervor that made it seem not only better than it was, but shorter than it was” (Shales, D1). Indeed, the praise concerning his delivery often mentioned his evangelical style. For example, Anna Quinlan, in her analysis of the speech, commented, “Bill Clinton gives a good speech. There is in him a bit of the preacher, some of the earnest high school orator, a little carnival barker and some door-to-door salesman” (Quinlan, B7). It showed up in more subtle ways as well, as in *The Boston Herald’s* editorial: “It was vintage Bill Clinton. For more than an hour Tuesday night, the president delivered his sermon on the state of the union” (“A speech to Please Everyone,” 034). Clearly Clinton’s stylistic devices elicited reactions that detected an element of evangelical rhetoric.

While Clinton’s style received praise in 1994, the message was perceived as bland and boring. In Andy Rooney’s analysis of the speech, he complains about the “worn out and tired phrases,” which, when combined with the length of the speech, made it seem exceptionally bland (Rooney, 3). A reporter from the *Denver Mountain Rocky News* claimed that Clinton needed “a good editor ... someone to cut his rhetoric down to size” (Amole, 5A). The speech focused on the theme of economic renewal – a theme that has been prevalent in about half of the last 32 State of the Union addresses (Wines, A15). It was, as some may say, “[a] speech that seemed doomed to be forgotten within 24 hours” (Shales, D1).

It might seem strange that President Clinton, who thrived in the public limelight and has been known to speak with Reagan-esque finesse (Sperling, 19), may come across as weak and ineffective. This was especially evident in responses to the 1995 speech, in which Clinton was

recovering from the backlash of the mid-term elections. The reactions to this speech generally focused on dissatisfaction with a perceived indecisiveness, lack of focus, and weakness on the President's part. Mary McGror, in summarizing the general response to the speech observed, "The general criticism was that the speech was a dismayingly accurate reflection of Clinton's worst character flaw: an inability to choose" (McGror, 3). Echoing this theme of indecisiveness, in the *Christian Science Monitor*, reporter Daniel Schorr conjectured, "Maybe Clinton should have made two speeches ... if the president did not succeed fully in redefining himself for the public, it is because he has not quite defined himself to himself" (Schorr, 20). Criticism that tended to the unfocused quality of the 1995 address is perhaps exemplified best by Frank Rich's comment: "Long as it was, the State of the Union was weightless. The speech that many hoped might start refocusing his presidency is already a blur" (Rich, B3). It seems that no one could tell what the president's theme was or what exactly it was he wanted to do. "Occasionally he was forthright ... on too many other issues he chose to speak obliquely," stated a *Washington Post* editorial on his 1995 speech ("The State of the Union," A24).

Many critics found the speech weak. A news analysis in *The New York Times* said his message was "notably short on demands for action" (Apple, A1). Frank Rich asked, "If Clinton can't command a speech, how can he lead the country?" He continued, observing that "Almost his entire message was passive ..." (Rich, B3). An Op/Ed piece in *The Washington Post* claimed that Clinton "managed to obscure his themes, trample on his rhetorical high spots and weary his audience" ("All Mush and no Message," A25). Clearly, there was widespread sentiment among the public that this speech was indicative of weak leadership.

Voters echoed this theme of weakness as well. In an article special to the *New York Times*, one of the interviewed voters is quoted as saying, "... he'd do a lot better if he'd present a

clear plan, not 'we should, we should.' He doesn't present it like he has any control over things. He sounds more like he's giving the rebuttal speech" (Mydans, A19). It is interesting to note that even those watching noticed the prevalence of modals in his speech and were able to correlate that with a weak leadership style. This idea that the speech sounded less like a call for action and more like a rebuttal is a concept that may well be explained by a discursive analysis of the texts. Shales' critique of the 1995 State of the Union effectively sums up the general reaction to both speeches – it really was as if Elvis had never entered the building.

So why was there this general feeling of dissatisfaction with the speeches – as if Clinton was weak while on the surface, giving a great speech? Two important discourse features in the speeches, when combined, may very well help to account for many of the reactions concerning these speeches. These two speeches contain a high number of modals and relatively low number of performative verbs. If we examine the trend across all of his speeches, it becomes immediately obvious that 1994, 1995 and 1997 differ markedly from the remainder of the speeches:

YEAR	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Modals	54	75	53	93	56	71
Performatives	11	4	37	14	35	45

**Figure 5.**

The number of modals is very high in proportion to the number of performative verbs in these two speeches compared to the others, with the exception of 1997. The following analysis will first examine stylistic devices pertaining to AVT and then examine these two features. In examining AVT first, it becomes possible to examine how rhetorical force is built through the use of stylistic devices, which is imperative to the understanding of how modals and performative verbs function in these speeches.

In evaluating President Clinton's 1994 State of the Union address, it is important to remember that even though the content was poorly regarded, in many cases he was praised for his delivery. The consistent referral by members of the press to Clinton's "evangelical" rhetoric can be attributed to a particular style he employs, which is similar to those of the African American Verbal tradition.

### *AVT Tonal Semantics*

President Clinton has long been regarded as a masterful speaker; capable of switching registers, dialects and styles. A style he is especially good at employing is that of African-American verbal tradition, also known as AVT.<sup>6</sup> I will argue that in this 1994 speech, he employs aspects of tonal semantics unique to AVT that garner responses like Shales'. Two components that comprise AVT tonal semantics investigated in this section include repetition of key statements and repetition of sounds (alliteration) (Smitherman, 258-259). Clinton is masterful in his use of alliteration, as in the following excerpt from the beginning of the 1994 State of the Union: "A year ago I asked all of you to join me in accepting responsibility for the future of country. Well we did. We replaced *drift* and *deadlock* with *renewal* and *reform*" (Clinton, 1994). The rhythm he creates with "drift and deadlock" and "renewal and reform," does not seem like a linguistic trick, awkwardly placed in the middle of a passage by inept speechwriters, but as a natural speech pattern. The fact that the alliteration is in pairs of words makes the sentence symmetrical and balanced, making Clinton seem balanced as well – it lends the perception that this is a man who is in control of his thoughts as well as his speech. It helps to

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<sup>6</sup> In her work, Geneva Smitherman coins the term AVT, or "African-American Verbal Tradition" defined by four characteristics: signification, personalization, tonal semantics, and sermonic tone. The bulk of the analysis in this thesis concerning AVT relies on Smitherman's research.



promote Clinton as a polished speaker, at the same time evoking memories of evangelical sermons.

Clinton employs alliteration not only in establishing ethos (as seen in the previous example), but also in crafting pathetic appeals, as shown by this example of enargia:

... when I saw the *Mississippi* deluge the farmlands of the *Midwest*  
in a 500-year flood, when the century's bitterest cold swept from  
*North Dakota* to *Newport News*, it seemed as though the world  
itself was coming apart at the seams. But the American people –  
they just came together. They rose to the occasion, *neighbor*  
helping *neighbor*, strangers risking *life* and *limb* to *save* total  
*strangers* – showing the better angels of our nature. Let us not  
reserve the better angels only for natural disasters, leaving our  
deepest and most *profound problems* to *petty political* fighting.

(Clinton, 1994)

The alliteration in this passage is perhaps less symmetrical than the previous example, but nevertheless, it retains the same pairing pattern. The rhythmic pattern created by such oratorical style serves to enhance his description. “North Dakota to Newport News” creates a more vivid picture than a non-alliterating pair (i.e. “the Dakotas to Virginia”) because the alliteration adds rhetorical force. The pairing of terms is not as obvious, preventing the description from coming off as stale or rehearsed.

In the previous passage, Clinton employs not only alliteration, but repetition as well, with “neighbor helping neighbor.” The use of repetition, especially on the word level, is a device he employs often throughout the speech:

But we’re paying *more and more money* for *less and less* care. Every year *fewer* and *fewer* Americans even get to choose their *doctors*. Every year *doctors* and nurses spend more time on paperwork and less time with patients because of the absolute bureaucratic nightmare the present *system* has become. This *system* is riddled *with* inefficiency, *with* abuse, *with* fraud, and everybody knows it.

(Clinton, 1994)

This passage offers several examples of repetition that serve to enhance the style of Clinton’s oratory. The first we might notice is the repetition of “more and more,” “less and less,” and “fewer and fewer.” These words, like those in the previous example, carry a theme – they are related. Also through repeating these words in pairs, he creates a degree of iconicity; the words mimic the action they are creating. For example, the meaning of the sentence would be changed if he said “more care” instead of “more and more care.” He carries this use of repetition through to the end of the passage, with the repeated use of “with.” The constancy of this preposition paired with a new descriptor each time provides a jarring picture of the system. The particular use of this word creates a rhythmical speech pattern that places the emphasis on the word following “with” in each case (the emphasis is on the words “inefficiency,” “abuse” and “fraud.”). When the staccato-like rhythm is interrupted at the end after the third repetition, our attention is forcibly drawn to the final phrase; it represents a break from the syntactical pattern and alliteration that we have become accustomed to throughout the passage.

Another rhetorical strategy common to black ministers and utilized by Clinton is the repetition of these phrases followed by a counterstatement, which gives the speech a “punch” (Smitherman, 259). We find many examples of this stylistic device in Clinton’s 1994 State of the Union. Perhaps the best one can be found near the end of the speech:

The American people have got to want to change from within if we’re going to bring back work and family and community. *We cannot renew our country* when within a decade more than half of the children will be born into families where there has been no marriage. *We cannot renew this country* when 13-year-old boys get semi-automatic weapons to shoot 9-year-olds for kicks. *We can’t renew our country* when children are having children and the fathers walk away as if the kids don’t amount to anything. *We can’t renew the country* when our businesses eagerly look for new investments and new customers abroad, but ignore those people right here at home who would give anything to have their jobs and would gladly buy their products if they had the money to do it. *We can’t renew our country* unless more of us – I mean all of us – are willing to join the churches and the other good citizens – people like the black ministers I’ve worked with over the years, or the priests and the nuns ... *We can’t renew our country* until we realize that governments don’t raise children, parents do. (Clinton, 1994)

This passage is remarkable in its similarity to the style of black rhetors like Martin Luther King Jr. and Clarence Thomas. The repetition of one key phrase at the beginning of the sentence lends an evangelical quality to the speech as he settles into a rhythm reminiscent of black ministers’ sermonizing. The rhetorical force of this passage is heightened by his use of descriptive detail.

When he says “13 year old boys get semi-automatic weapons to shoot 9-year olds for kicks,” he captures the attention of the audience. The repetition of “we can’t renew our country,” becomes familiar to the audience, making each successive sentence seem more agreeable, or “right” in the minds of the reader/viewer, because he or she can predict the next sentence (it will always begin with the same few words). He repeats the key phrase five times, enough for the listener to predict its presence after the second time, but not long enough to become monotonous. He ends the last line with a punch: “governments don’t raise children, parents do.” This is extremely effective because in the predicate of the previous four sentences he has provided us with lengthy description of what is wrong and what needs to be done. This last line is a short, forceful statement that brings all the other points to a head. It echoes in the minds of the audience and we realize at once that this is the climax that we have been waiting for throughout the passage. This stylistic device, when Clinton chooses to use it, provides strong rhetorical force and gives him magnificent stage presence.

President Clinton tries to use the AVT style of rhythmic repetition to drive home his point several times in the 1995 State of the Union, but falls short each time, causing him to come off sounding weak and unfocused. He also tries to use some of the colloquial language that appeals to the American public, but falls short here as well. In the following excerpt, Clinton sets himself up for a climatic ending by repeating a key phrase, but then loses the momentum:

And *the cold hard fact is that*, since last year, since I was here, another 1.1 million Americans in working families have lost their health care. *And the cold hard fact is that* many millions more, most of them farmers and small businesspeople and self-employed people, have seen their premiums skyrocket, their co-pays and deductibles go up. There’s a whole bunch of people in this country that, in the

statistics have health insurance, but really what they've got is a piece of paper that says they won't lose their home if they get sick. (Clinton, 1995)

Clinton raises our expectations when we hear "the cold hard fact is that," repeated at the beginning of two sentences in a row. Given his usual oratorical style, we expect there to be a third, perhaps more, and then some sort of climax – a statement that ends the sequence of repetition forcefully and with closure. However, he loses the rhetorical momentum in the third sentence. "A whole bunch of people" sounds awkward, especially when we are expecting the repetition of that key phrase. The sentence meanders to its end, with vague phrases like "piece of paper." In this passage, as in so many others, he is close to achieving the style that won him praise for his delivery in 1994, but fails at the most critical part.

#### *Modals*

The 1994 State of the Union speech garnered a somewhat contradictory response. Some criticized its banality, some found it boring, but most could not find fault with the President's competent and enthusiastic delivery. This perceived banality can be explained through President Clinton's usage of modals and performatives. Unlike performatives, modals do not themselves perform an act. In fact, they undermine the strength of his proposals by oftentimes omitting a responsible agent. The repetition of multiple modals not only weakens the strength of his proposals, but they also create a predictable pattern. In the section below, the presence of many modals creates a dull, predictable style:

Why do we want guaranteed private insurance? Because right now nine out of 10 people who have insurance get it through their employers. And that *should* continue. And if your employer is

providing good benefits at reasonable prices, that *should* continue,  
too. That *ought* to make the Congress and the President feel better.

(Clinton, 1994)

There are several items of interest in this passage. First, the lack of an animate subject before the modal is glaring. He assigns no agent to accept responsibility for his goals and his proposal seems to float about, undirected and unanchored. At the end of this passage, he also addresses himself in the third person as “the President.” This last sentence is unique in that it shifts the whole meaning of the previous sentences. By addressing himself in the third person, he shifts the implied responsibility. While there is no agent in the previous lines, the last line lets us know that he is not the one who is assuming responsibility. If the goal is to make him feel better, then it is obviously neither Congress nor the President who must be responsible for continuing private insurance. It is someone else’s responsibility to make President Clinton and Congress feel better, and who that agent is remains unspecified. In this particular section of the 1994 State of the Union, President Clinton projects the image of a weak leader through a use of modals, which specifically denies him leadership and responsibility and assigns it to no one.

President Clinton almost never uses modals with the first person singular subject. Instead, he either assigns no responsibility (as shown in the passage above) or likes to make everyone responsible:

Our approach protects older Americans. Every plan before the  
Congress proposes to slow the growth of Medicare. The difference  
is this: We believe those savings *should* be used to improve health  
care for senior citizens. Medicare *must* be protected, and it *should*

cover prescription drugs, and we *should* take the first steps in  
covering long term care. (Clinton, 1994)

This passage utilizes modals in a different way from the previous excerpt. Here, President Clinton actually assigns responsibility; using the first person plural “we” as the nominative subject, he places himself and some unknown others as the responsible agents. We do not know, however, if the “we” refers to himself and Hillary Clinton, who originally proposed the healthcare plan together, or whether it refers to himself and the primary audience (Congress), or to himself and the secondary audience (the general public watching the speech on television). The sense of weakness that viewers may get in a sentence like this comes not from what he says but what he doesn’t say. What is lacking from the last sentence is the agent. He says Medicare must be protected. By whom or what mechanism? Does long-term care have anything to do with Medicare? We do not know if he is referring back to this previous statement or whether this last clause is a new and separate idea. This sort of ambiguity combined with the use of modals, makes the speech sound unsure and undirected.

In the 1995 speech, Clinton tends to use modals repetitively, which consistently undermines the force of his message:

We have to help those on welfare move to work as quickly as possible, to provide childcare and teach them skills if that’s what they need for up to two years. And after that, there *ought* to be a simple hard rule: anyone who can work *must* go to work. If a parent isn’t paying child support, they *should* be forced to pay. We *should* suspend drivers’ licenses, track them across state lines, make them work off what they owe. That is what we *should* do.

Governments do not raise children, people do. And the parents  
*must* take responsibility for the children they bring into this world.

(Clinton, 1995)

At every point Clinton has the opportunity to make a definitive statement; he chooses to insert a modal instead. Clinton's use of modals in this passage serves to weaken the message by failing to assign a responsible agent or a method to accomplish these proposals. Also notable in this paragraph is the excerpt from the 1994 State of the Union, "Governments don't raise children, parents do." Then, it served to add a "punch" to his rhetoric, and provide a climatic ending to the paragraph. Here, it loses its impact, overshadowed by modals. It does not have the repetition of key phrases leading up to a climatic ending. It is followed by another sentence instead of a pause, thereby weakening its force further. Such use of what was a powerful phrase in 1994, well-exemplifies what critics noted that Clinton "trampled on his rhetorical high spots," ("All Mush and No Message," A25).

### *Performative verbs*

Performative verbs are verbs that function to perform an action themselves, and thereby alter the context of the situation. They must be used in with the first person pronoun. For example, when Clinton says "I challenge" to Congress, a common phrase in the 1996 speech, he is actually performing the deed of "challenging." Performative verbs are often perceived as a more forceful because of the directness and activity on the rhetor's part. Intuitively, "I challenge" sounds much more forceful than "we should challenge," which is not a performative because it lacks the appropriate pronoun and includes a modal. This lack of modals and abundance of performatives perhaps led to some of the negative criticism garnered by the 1994



and 1995 addresses. Following is a table listing the performative verbs in the President's address:

Performative Verb	Number of times used in 1994 address	Number of times used in 1995 address
Applaud	1	1
Ask	3	1
Call	1	2
Say	2	0
Urge	4	0

Figure 6.

It is interesting to note that there is little variation in the verbs he uses. There is also little variation in the way he uses the verbs. The following passage illustrates President Clinton's use of performatives:

My fellow Americans, the problem of violence is an American problem. It has no partisan or philosophical element. Therefore, I *urge* you to find ways as quickly as possible to set aside partisan differences and pass a strong, smart, tough crime bill. But further, I *urge* you to consider this: As you demand tougher penalties for those who choose violence, let us also remember how we came to this sad point.

(Clinton, 1994)

The way Clinton uses performatives in these first two speeches contrasts dramatically with his use later on. In this passage, he places a conjunction or conjunctive adverb before each performative. He never directly calls on the American people, but must qualify it first. The use of "therefore," and "but further" before these two verbs reduces the impact they have on the audience. In qualifying his statement, he creates the impression that he does not have the power to simply "urge" the audience; he must first have a reason. The impact of the first performative

verb sentence is reduced by the fact that the already lengthy predicate of the sentence is drawn out further by the adjective list at the end. The rhetorical force is dampened as the performative becomes more distant and the direct object refuses to appear. The point that Clinton is urging Congress to pass a new tough crime bill is somewhat obscured by the clause concerning partisanship. In the second usage of “urge” the rhetorical force of the verb is dampened not by a long interjection, but by the following infinitive. Instead of using an action-oriented infinitive like “to pass” or “to vote,” he urges the audience “to consider,” an activity that is more contemplative than active. The forcefulness that performatives can carry is reduced by such syntactical constructions and word choice throughout his speech.

In the 1995 State of the Union Address, Clinton employs performative verbs only five times. This is in stark contrast to the 1996 speech, which as we shall see, employed many performatives and garnered much praise for being forceful and focused. Perhaps the 1995 can be seen as a plethora of lost opportunities, like this one: “So I want to challenge you to have honest hearings...” (Clinton, 1995). Instead of directly challenging the audience by saying “I challenge,” he uses what would be the performative verb as an infinitive. Therefore, the word “challenge” does not perform an act, but rather fills a syntactical role. Challenging is lost to the rhetoric of desire and intention.

Even when Clinton does use performative verbs, they do not come across as particularly strong: “I applaud your desire to get rid of costly and unnecessary regulations,” (Clinton, 1995). Instead of using the performative as a call to action, he uses it to qualify the next sentence, which begins with “But when we deregulate ...” (Clinton, 1995). The verb in this context fails to have much force.

In summary, the 1994 and 1995 State of the Union addresses were remarkably similar in their abundance of modals and noticeable lack of performative verbs. This led the speeches to seem to both the public and the press to be weak. The 1994 State of the Union gained praise for its delivery, primarily because Clinton successfully employed aspects of AVT and used colloquial language in a forceful way that lent personality to his speech. The 1995 speech failed to achieve much praise for its style because Clinton failed to engage the stylistic devices he used the previous year to a degree that would elevate his rhetoric. His use of colloquial language further weakened the speech, as he used it in such a way that obscured his themes and made it sound more like a rebuttal and less like an address to a joint session of Congress.

### **1996: The Challenge Speech**

Critics greeted Clinton's 1996 State of the Union speech with almost unanimous approval. It was as if a different man spoke in 1996 than in 1994 and 1995. It was a dramatic, perhaps even brilliant turnaround from his previous two State of the Unions. This abrupt transformation of public opinion is examined in more detail before an analysis of the speeches is presented.

A common response was that Clinton appeared confident, competent and a strong candidate. In 1995, a critic was quoted by the *Washington Post* as saying "Bill Clinton needs a miracle, not a comeback, to win in 1996" ("All Mush and No Message," A25). In 1996, *The Washington Post* published an article that praised, "The presentation was terrific ... it's hard to imagine that this Clinton speech won't go down in the record books as a winner" (Shales, B1). Reiterating this theme, *The New York Times* published an article that lauded the speech: "President Clinton gave a front-runner's speech tonight, the speech of a candidate confident that he is ahead" (Apple, A1). More specifically, admiration of the speech focused on Clinton's

direct style and forceful delivery. "Clinton appeared robust ... and forceful, qualities people like in a leader," commented Tom Shales of *The Washington Post* (Shales, B1). *The San Francisco Chronicle* called the speech "well-delivered" and "forceful," mentioning as well, that it had an "impact" ("Clinton Sets Tone for Presidential Race," A20). Dan Rather was quoted on Clinton's appearance, saying he "certainly delivered it smoothly and competently" (Shales, B1).

Voters echoed the praise of the speech as being focused and forceful. In an interview conducted by *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* staff writer Jill Vejnaska, one woman was quoted as saying; "He's really articulating the success and accomplishments of his administration and communicating his challenges and goals for the future." Another voter, referring to the previous speeches, claimed, "... he's been criticized over the years for being too general. Tonight he gave facts to support everything. He was very focused" (Vejnoska, 1996).

One interesting component of the speech that surfaced in scores of reviews was Clinton's campaign-like style. One journalist remarked "President Clinton used the yearly State of the Union address Tuesday night to begin his 1996 re-election campaign" (Foster, 14). Another remarked that the message was "intended far more for voters than for the Republican-controlled Congress" (Mitchell, A1). Finally, an article in *The Times-Picayune* asserted, "President Clinton followed his standard practice in his State of the Union address: When in trouble, make a campaign speech" ("Shots Across the Bow," B6). Analysis of the text itself will help us determine which features were contributing to the perceived campaign-like style.

Of course, the speech was not regarded without some negative criticism. Unlike his previous State of the Union messages, the criticism was not focused on any perception of weakness, or ineffectiveness, but with other aspects of style. Shales critiqued the speech as, "blandly written, too long and heavy on gimmicks" (Shales, B1). Apple remarked that, "At

times there was almost a me, too, quality to the speech” (Apple, A1). However, the overwhelming general response seemed to hail this particular State of the Union as a bold and confident speech given by a strong leader with a good chance of reelection.

The following sections will first examine the rich feature performative verbs, which were discussed also in the previous chapter. The prolific use of the verb in this speech created impact and focus. The second part of this analysis will be devoted to campaign rhetoric.

### *Performatives*

In the 1996 speech, Clinton used more performative verbs than in any other State of the Union he gave. The performative verb “challenge” was used 24 times – more times than all the performatives combined in the 1994, 1995 and 1997 speeches.

Perhaps one of the reasons the “challenge” theme was so effective in earning praise from the press was because it was carried throughout the speech. The word “challenge” is not only used as a performative verb, but in other ways as well. Before the word “challenge” is used as a performative, it is used seven times as a noun in the speech, creating a theme:

Now it is time for us to look also to the *challenges* of today and tomorrow, beyond the burdens of yesterday. The *challenges* are significant. But America was built on *challenges*, not promises.

(Clinton, 1996)

Tonight I want to speak to you about the *challenges* we all face as people. Our first *challenge* is to cherish our children and strengthen America’s families.

(Clinton, 1996)

The use of “challenge” as a noun provides some general framework for his speech – the turning point of his speech, comes with the line “Tonight I want to speak to you about the challenges we all face as people” (Clinton, 1996). Following this line, the speech assumes a pattern of the stating of a challenge (as a noun) followed by the use of “challenge” as a performative. So, when just a few minutes later he switches from speaking of challenges to challenging people, the speech remains cohesive and consistent.

The theme of challenges is carried out in the speech when he lists a challenge, and then in his proposed solution, uses the performative “challenge:”

Our third *challenge* is to help every American who is willing to work for it, achieve economic security in this new age ... So I *challenge* Congress to consolidate 70 overlapping, antiquated job-training programs into a simple voucher worth \$2,600 for unemployed or underemployed workers to use as they please for community college tuition or other training. (Clinton, 1996)

The use of the term “challenge” as a performative verb marks the change from general (as a noun) to specific. As a noun, “challenges” do not have to be specific; however, when Clinton begins using “challenge” as a performative verb, he is forced into being specific. He must challenge a group of people to a defined action, which therefore adds focus and specificity to his rhetoric (arguably lacking in the 1994 and 1995 State of the Unions).

This early passage exemplifies how the use of a performative verb focuses the rhetoric and creates impact:

To make the V-chip work, I *challenge* the broadcast industry to do what movies have done – to identify your programming in ways that help parents to protect their children. And I invite the leaders of major media corporations in the entertainment industry to come to the White House next month to work with us ... (Clinton, 1996)

The verb itself performs a deed – challenging the broadcast industry. The construction of the sentence (like every other sentence constructed with a performative verb), names an agent (direct object “the broadcast industry”) and an action (indirect object “to identify the programming”), which focuses the sentence. For example, if we eliminate the performative and insert a modal (with the first person plural pronoun, as Clinton is inclined to use), the passage loses its rhetorical force: “To make the V-chip work, we should have the broadcast industry do what movies have done – to identify your programming in ways that help parents to protect their children.” Neither the agent nor the action has changed but the sentence has somehow lost its forcefulness. Another aspect of this particular passage, not ubiquitous with all performatives, is the dependent purpose clause initiating the sentence. In giving a reason for the challenge (“to make the V-chip work”), he adds further focus to his rhetoric.

Another tactic that is effective in adding impact is the repetition on the part of the rhetor himself. Many times Clinton will start a series of sentences with “I challenge...” creating a rhythmical repetition that serves to draw attention to the performative:

I *challenge* people on welfare to make the most of this opportunity for independence. I *challenge* American businesses to give people on welfare the chance to move into the workforce. I applaud the

work of religious groups and others who care for the poor.

(Clinton, 1996)

I *challenge* every state to give all parents the right to choose which public school their children will attend; and to let teachers form new schools with a charter they can keep only if they do a good job. I *challenge* all our schools to teach character education, to teach good values and good citizenship... I *challenge* our parents to become their children's first teachers. (Clinton, 1996)

The repetition of a performative several times in a row serves to draw attention to the act it is performing. In "challenging" several times in a row, Clinton draws attention to the fact that he is performing a forceful act – and this forcefulness implies that he is indeed a strong leader.

### *A Campaign-Like Style*

Campaign rhetoric can be in part be characterized by clever sound bites, oversimplification of problems, promises and an undercurrent of implied responsibility (or promotion of a particular party or individual or criticism of competing parties). In this section we will look at the various ways Clinton used the 1996 State of the Union speech to further his own political ambitions. With a chance to become the first two-term democratic president in over two decades, it is difficult not to imagine that this speech would not be utilized to the maximum to promote the New Democrat platform.

In an example of these characteristics listed above, Clinton takes credit for the creation of new jobs:



The state of the Union is strong. Our economy is the healthiest it has been in three decades. We have the lowest combined rates of unemployment and inflation in 27 years. We have created 8 million new jobs ... (Clinton, 1996)

In his article on campaign rhetoric for *Fortune* magazine, critic Rob Norton makes an observation about the above statement:

The idea that Presidents create jobs is one of those casual distortions of reality that's been repeated so often it sounds true. The economy is what creates jobs, and it creates them with almost monotonous regularity ... President Clinton in fact has little reason to crow about his job-creation record. Since he took office, U.S. employment has risen by 2.4% per year on average, a little better than the long-term trend but slightly less than it grew during the Regan expansion. All that proves is that there has been no Clinton recession ... (Norton, 51)

Returning to Clinton's rhetoric, it at once becomes obvious that Norton's observations about long-term trends in employment and the overall big picture are absent from Clinton's oratory. Indeed, giving only a large round figure with no basis for comparison is more effective rhetorically than pointing out that it is not much better than average. The recitation of this fact implies that Bill Clinton and the Democratic Party, the ones responsible for these eight million,

will continue to create opportunities in the American workforce. The recitation of this “fact” is promotion for the Democratic Party.

In another bit of promotion, Clinton criticizes his opponents while promoting himself in a bit of campaign rhetoric:

The most significant environmental gains in the last 30 years were made under a Democratic Congress and President Richard Nixon.

We can work together. We have to believe some basic things. Do you believe we can expand the economy without hurting the environment? I do. Do you believe we can create more jobs over the long run by cleaning the environment up? I know we can.

(Clinton, 1996)

The very first sentence begins with a promotion for the democrats, and is followed by a systematic criticism of the GOP. The questions, which are strategic rhetorically because they call for audience participation, are a thinly veiled attack on the opposing party. The use of stereotypes as a basis of criticism is not uncommon in campaign rhetoric (in this case, the republicans as anti-environment and pro-private businesses). In these two questions, he neatly categorizes the GOP as anti-environment and pro-corporate America. It is also interesting that the republican he mentions is Richard Nixon – who resigned from office in disgrace following the Watergate scandal. Indeed, Nixon’s name has a negative connotation that frames republicans in an unfavorable light before he even goes on to ask these questions.

In another example of campaign rhetoric, and one that is common for Clinton throughout the speeches is the oversimplification of problems. In the following example, he uses children to state a problem:

Our first challenge is to cherish our children and strengthen America's families ... All strong families begin with taking more responsibility for our children. I have hear Mrs. Gore say *that it's hard to be a parent today, but it's even harder to be a child*. So all of us, not just as parents, but all of us in businesses, our governments – all of us have a responsibility to help our children to make it and to make the most of their lives and their God-given capacities.

(Clinton, 1996)

In this passage, there it is hard to pinpoint a problem, but he certainly offers a solution (to be more responsible for our children). The problem seems to lie with responsibility. He offers no specific solutions for this ambiguous problem. Also characteristic of campaign-rhetoric, he uses the clever sound bite quoted from none other than Mrs. Gore. This sentence (in italics) is catchy because of its brevity, parallelism and rhythm. Of course, by quoting Mrs. Gore, he also implies that it is the democrats who care about children. This implied responsibility is another characteristic of campaign rhetoric.

In a final example, Clinton implies responsibility through the use of statistics while simultaneously promoting the Democratic Party:

The Brady Bill has already stopped 44,000 people with criminal records from buying guns. The assault weapons ban is keeping 19 kinds of assault weapons out of the hands of violent gangs. I challenge the Congress to keep those laws on the books.

(Clinton, 1996)

He quotes statistics on gun control in a one-sided fashion. He is keeping assault rifles away from “violent gangs.” Implied here is that the NRA (a mostly republican group) would advocate just the opposite. This point emphasized by the use of the performative in the last sentence. When he “challenges” Congress to keep the laws, he sounds forceful and direct, through the use of the performative verb. However, the rhetoric is not necessary – it is Congresses job to mainly pass laws, it takes no effort on their behalf to keep one. The rhetoric merely functions to highlight the good that he (and the democrats) have done while warning the secondary audience of the harm that the republicans could do.

In this section we examined aspects of both performative verbs and campaign rhetoric, which gained a mostly positive response. In the following months he gained a positive response directly from the American people, winning the fall election and becoming a two-term democrat. The following section will examine his first State of the Union from the second term of the presidency, which again showed a marked change in public reaction.

### **1997: Re-election and Return to the Modals**

President Clinton won reelection in the fall of 1996, earning the chance to establish a legacy in a second term. The 1997 State of the Union speech had the potential to set an agenda for the next four years. However, according to the majority of critics, the speech fell short of such a goal. *The New York Times* editorial staff called it a “laundry-list” and “pedestrian” (“Changing History – On a Budget,” A22). The editorial staff of *The Washington Post* found major discrepancy between Clinton’s political position and his rhetoric: “Mr. Clinton is currently in about as strong a position as he is ever likely to be to achieve important results,” they pointed out (“The State of the Union,” A22). They said it was a “feel-good speech,” characterized by the

attitude, "Together we'll do it later. Next slide, please" ("The State of the Union," A22). *The Washington Post* observed he had nothing to offer the public, "but a toothache," and called it "a disappointing speech" ("The State of the Union," A22).

The 1997 speech was unique in a way specific to the era of mass media and sensationalism. The State of the Union happened to fall on the eve of the civil verdict in the sensational O.J. Simpson trial. The President's message was overshadowed greatly by this media event, as is evidenced in this comment made in *The Buffalo News*: "The Associated Press has reported that the New York Times, the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Salt Lake Tribune were in the minority of large papers that featured the president's speech more prominently than the verdict" (Light, 1B).

While there was some praise for the President's appearance, as in this item from the National Desk of *The New York Times*, "the President was ... speaking to his audience ... with a certain virtuoso's glow." (Clines, 1997) The Boston Globe called the speech "superbly crafted speech, delivered flawlessly" (Nyhan, D4). *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* lauded the speech as "first-rate" (Eagleton, 3B). However, there was mostly disappointment voiced. In short, the reception that the 1997 speech received was dismal: most thought Clinton offered a weak speech that merely listed objectives and proposed no solutions. Perhaps David Broder put it best in his article, which stated "represent a lost opportunity to mobilize public opinion to support the actions that must be taken if the government is to do anything more than mark time until the millennium" (Broder, 3B).

The general disappointment voiced over the 1997 speech, as well as some of the specific criticism, can perhaps be traced back to a feature that was a common theme throughout the 1994 and 1995 State of the Union addresses; a remarkable lack of performative verbs and large

number of modals. Prior to examining these rich features, the analysis will focus on the qualities that earned Clinton praise. It will end with a discussion of the list-like style that dominated the speech.

#### *A Virtuoso's Glow: Parallelism and Homoioteleuton*

Despite the multitude of instances where the 1997 State of the Union fails rhetorically, Clinton has his high points as well. Though most of the stylistic devices he employs in this speech fail to add much rhetorical force, some certainly add flair and panache to his rhetoric.

For instance, as we have seen in previous speeches, uses alliteration to pair words and balance the syntax of a sentence:

Already, we have dismantled many of the *blocs* and *barriers* that divided our parents' world. For the first time, more people live under *democracy* than *dictatorship*, including every nation in our own hemisphere, but one – and its day, too, will come.

(Clinton, 1997)

The result is a phrase that sounds balanced, pleasing to the ear, and has a rhythmic flair to it.

This sort of balanced syntax is used with alliteration, and another stylistic device, *homoioteleuton*, meaning “same ending,” (Crowley 244). In the following passage, Clinton again uses the same structure as seen in the previous passage, but the first set of words are paired through alliteration, while the second set is paired through homoioteleuton: “Now we stand at another moment of *change* and *choice* – and another time to be farsighted, to bring America 50 more years of *security* and *prosperity*” (Clinton, 1997). This time, the pair of words is at the end

of each phrase, but the effect remains the same. Using a combination of parallelism, alliteration and homioteleution, Clinton projects the image of a polished speaker.

Parallelism, in the traditional sense, is when sentence structure is adjusted such that each part of speech is mirrored in exactly the same position in the parallel construction (Crowley 247). Parallel structures occur several times in this text. In the example below, the parallel structure of the text is emphasized by the brevity of the sentences, the exact repetition of two of the four words, and homioteleution:

Second, American must look to the East no less than to the West.

*Our security demands it.* Americans fought three wars in Asia in this century. *Our prosperity requires it.* More than two million

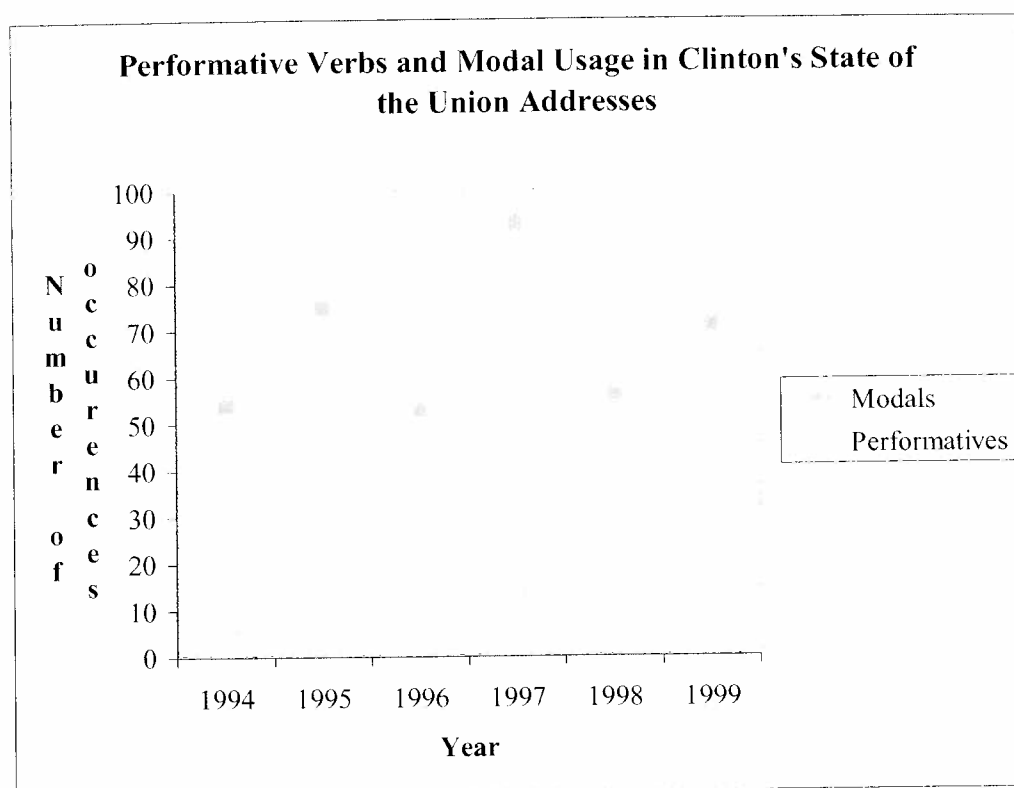
American jobs depend upon trade with Asia. (Clinton, 1997)

The parallel sentences are very short – eight syllables each, and are alternated with three longer sentences. The theme of parallel structure embodied by the two nearly identical sentences thereby is carried out further by the structure of the remaining passage. The balanced structure of the passage along with the strategic repetition of “security” and prosperity” pulls the speech together as well as enhancing Clinton’s image as a masterful rhetor.

In a final example of parallelism, absent of all other devices, proves stylistically effective: “No child should be without a doctor just because a parent is without a job” (Clinton, 1997). This example, although it lacks any other devices remains effective in elevating the style of Clinton’s speech because the syntax is tight, and the parallelism is nearly perfect. Through masterful manipulation of structure, Clinton projects the image of a balanced and polished orator.

### *Modals and Missing Performatives*

Below is a graph diagramming modal and performative usage in Clinton's speeches:



**Figure 7.**

This graph shows 1997 to be a striking year in terms of modal and performative usage: this speech shows the greatest disparity between the two discourse features. It is interesting that 1994 and 1995 are the only other two speeches that also exhibit this large difference, and garnered similar criticism on being weak and disappointing.

What perhaps is more intriguing than the large number of modals present in this speech, is the method in which they are presented. In a feature unique, thus far, to any of Clinton's State of the Union addresses, he uses a long list -- about one-fifth of the entire speech -- to enumerate his plan for "a Call to Action for American Education." Each new point generally begins with a number: "First," he says "a national crusade for education standard ..." (Clinton, 1997). Ten



points in all, the list spans almost two of nine and a half pages of the transcript of the speech. In seven out of the ten points he employs modals multiple times; in describing only one point of the plan does he abstain from using any modals at all. Contrasted with the fact that performative verbs were used multiple times in only one out of the ten points, and it becomes apparent that there is a pattern in this list that is echoed throughout the speech. In the following paragraphs, this list serves as a convenient model of the text, pointing out features that occur both throughout the speech and specifically within the list itself that elicited such responses from the press.

In the second point to his proposal, Clinton employs a string of modals without any performative verbs and relatively few stylistic devices:

Second, to have the best schools, we *must* have the best teachers ...

We *should* reward and recognize our best teachers. And as we reward them, we *should* quickly and fairly remove those few who don't measure up, and we *should* challenge more of our finest young people to consider teaching as a career. (Clinton, 1997)

A distinguishing feature of this passage, and one that is carried throughout the text is the placement of the modals. In this paragraph, each modal occurs after a natural break in the speech pattern, usually following a comma or period. Modals in the 1997 address nearly always begin a new sentence, or new phrase in a sentence. In the other speeches, modals occur in a variety of places within the sentence structure, like in these examples from the 1995 State of the Union (which also had a high number of modals):

Taking power away from federal bureaucracies and giving it back to communities and individuals is something everyone *should* be

able to be for ... And when we give more flexibility to the states,  
 let us remember that there are certain fundamental national needs  
 that *should* be addressed in every state ... (Clinton, 1995)

Only about ten percent of all modals in the 1997 speech are employed later than the first two or three words after a pause (like the examples from 1995), indicating a definite pattern. The “should’s” in the previous example (from 1997) are emphasized not only because they are at the beginning of a sentence or a phrase, but also because they fill the spot where a performative verb might be placed. In the performative-rich 1996 State of the Union, almost every placement of a performative verb was in the exact location that the modals now occupy in the 1997 speech – within one to three words after a natural pause. The modals in the 1997 speech are emphasized in terms of their abundance, their placement, and what they replace<sup>7</sup>.

#### *List-like Style: Use of the Membrum and Articulus*

Long before Clinton gave his 1997 State of the Union address, ancient rhetoricians had developed names for the complex and compound sentences that would dominate this speech. Quintilian described what is now known as a subordinate clause was a *membrum* (“part” or “limb”), which was signaled by a colon. Similarly, commas signaled an *articulus* or “part

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<sup>7</sup> A feature of some modals, that does not necessarily warrant full discussion in this section is the creation of a “list within a list:”

Sixth: Character education *must* be taught in our schools. We *must* teach out children to be good citizens. And we *must* continue to promote order and discipline, supporting communities that introduce school uniforms, impose curfews, enforce truancy laws, remove disruptive students from the classroom , and have zero tolerance for guns and drugs in school. (Clinton, 1997)

Within the sixth point of the macroscopic list, which is evident from the very first word of the paragraph, each occurrence of the modal “must” signals another item in a list that makes up point number six. In this particular passage, the list created by the modals is followed by another list, marked by commas. This list within a list is thus far unique to the 1997 speech. The modals are performing two important functions. First, they signal the beginning of a list, creating a style that was noticed by members of the press. Second, in their placement (at the beginning of

jointed on,” in what we would now simply call a phrase. Clinton’s extensive use of these structures creates a list-like style.

In the following passage, Clinton uses repetition of key words at the beginning of phrases, or *membri*, a characteristic of his rhetorical style:

We face no imminent threat, but we do have an *enemy* – the *enemy* of our time is inaction. So, tonight, I issue a call to *action* – *action by this Congress, action by our states, by our people*, to prepare America for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. [*Action* to keep our economy and our democracy strong and working for all our people; *action* to strengthen education and harness the forces of technology and science; *action* to build *stronger* families and *stronger* communities and a safer environment; *action* to keep America the world’s strongest force for peace, freedom and prosperity. ] And above all, *action* to build a more perfect union here at home.

(Clinton, 1997)

The brackets enclose the sentence exhibiting *anaphora*, or as defined by Crowley, “words repeated at the beginning of successive colons” (Crowley, 245). To the listener, this anaphora signals the building of rhetorical force that is created by a counterstatement following the long list of phrases beginning with a key word. However, this passage, as many others in this speech do, fails rhetorically. The semantics seem right: the speech pattern is rhythmical, the repetition is played out flawlessly, and the style is elevated further by the addition of repetition of “by our ..”

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the sentence) and their replacement (of modals) highlights their usage, establishing the image of a weak and list-like style.

after the first two instances of “action.” On the surface, it seems like Clinton, the masterful rhetor he is, is going to come to a powerful climax. He does not. In the place of a counterstatement is just another piece of the list. The end of the passage is somewhat anticlimactic, given the audience’s expectations of Clinton as a rhetor.

The previous passage fails in another way, besides just lacking a powerful counterstatement. As shown in the again in the passage below, he also fails to build rhetorical force within the list itself:

In two days, I will propose a detailed plan to balance the budget by 2002. This plan *will balance the budget* and invest in our people while protecting Medicare, Medicaid, education and the environment. *It will balance the budget* and build on the Vice President’s efforts to make out government work better, even as it costs less. *It will balance the budget* and provide middle class tax relief to pay for education and health care, to help raise a child, to buy and sell a home. (Clinton, 1997)

This passage, much like the one before, fails rhetorically. It also lacks a counterstatement. However, both share another feature: the list fails to build upon itself. The repetition of “action” in the first passage, and “will balance the budget,” in this passage signal the beginning of a new phrase. However, the phrases themselves, besides the repetition of key words at the beginning are not linked to each other at all. The phrases do not build on each other, creating rhetorical force. To illustrate, take this passage from 1995, which fails rhetorically at the end, but builds force within the list itself:

And *the cold hard fact is that*, since last year, since I was here, another 1.1 million Americans in working families have lost their healthcare. *And the cold hard fact is that* many millions more, most of them farmers and small businesspeople and self-employed people, have seen their premiums skyrocket, their co-pays and deductibles go up ...

(Clinton, 1995)

The difference between this passage from 1995, and the previous passages from 1997, is that the sentences or phrases begun with the key word or phrase can be rearranged in the 1997 passages and still make complete sense. However, the sentences from 1995 cannot, indicating that they build on each other, thereby making each sentence dependent on the previous one for meaning. These passages from 1997 fail in two ways: through lack of a counterstatement and through lack of rhetorical force in the list itself.

The following example is another list, which exhibits key repetition of key phrases and builds upon itself rhetorically:

Lets work together to meet these three goals: *Every 8-year-old must be able to read; every 12-year-old must be able to log on to the internet; every 18-year old must be able to go to college; every adult American must be able to keep on learning for a lifetime.*

(Clinton, 1997)

In contrast to the previous two passages, the sentences in this one are dependent on their order. This passage fails again at the point where we might expect a counterstatement. However, since the last sentence is finishes with alliteration, the let down is not great. It is passages like these,

that fail rhetorically through a minor flaw, but otherwise let Clinton show off his talent with semantics, that perhaps earns him praise for his style.

These lists, although they fail rhetorically, still encompass stylistic devices that display Clinton's talents as a rhetor. However, for every example like this in the 1997 State of the Union, there is a list that employs none of these devices that showcase Clinton's ability, but draw attention to the list-like style that characterizes this speech:

Here is my plan: tax credits and other incentives for businesses that hire people off welfare; incentives for job placement firms and states to create more jobs for welfare recipients; training, transportation, and child care to help people go to work.

(Clinton, 1997)

In the last four years, we strengthened our nation's safe food and clean drinking water laws; we protected some of America's rarest, most beautiful land in Utah's Red Rocks region; created three new national parks in the California desert; and began to restore the Florida Everglades.

(Clinton, 1997)

These are just a few of the lists in the speech that employ no stylistic devices; none of the repetition, alliteration or parallelism that is so typical of Clinton speech. What draws attention to these passages is exactly what is missing.

The 1997 State of the Union message was unique in all respects: in the reception it received, the intrusion of the OJ Simpson case and the mixture of rhetorical failures and stylistic triumphs it yielded. During the next two years of Clinton's presidency, the situation reversed

itself from the 1997 State of the Union: in 1998 and 1999 the president was under media scrutiny, in a weak position politically, and yet he managed to get rave reviews for his State of the Union address. The following section will examine how scandal affected the speeches.

### **1998 and 1999: The State of the Scandal**

The 1998 and 1999 State of the Unions saw the President in the midst of personal and political scandal. Only seven days prior to the 1998 speech, the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke to the press. With his Presidency seemingly at its peak, he was poised to make a giant step from the lectern to the bully pulpit (Campbell, 65). The scandal created a dark cloud over the State of the Union, only to reveal clear skies when Clinton's approval ratings soared to 63% -- the highest they had ever reached in his presidency (Edwards, 42). The 1998 State of the Union was delivered under another black cloud; Clinton was forced to address Congress in the same room where the House had voted to impeach him a few weeks earlier. Remarkably, it was met with a similar response; Clinton received praise for this address as well and his popularity with the public increased. How did the President manage to pull off such astounding victories in the face of scandal? We will first examine the specific reactions to his texts before completing an analysis of the 1998 and 1999 State of the Union addresses.

The 1998 State of the Union was greeted with intense media-coverage and overwhelming approval both on the part of the scandal-loving American public and the same cynical reporters that bashed Clinton's 1997 oration. The situation was reversed politically: in 1997 the president had the power at his fingertips to establish a progressive agenda for his second term and create a Clinton legacy, while in 1998, his involvement in the alleged "Zippergate," had the word "impeachment" on the tip of everyone's tongues. An editorial published in *The Washington Post*

noted the Comeback Kid's ability to compartmentalize issues that weren't really separate (i.e. his ability to perform his duties and defend himself), ("State of the Union" A18). Reporter Linda Feldmann wrote, "He has delivered a polished State of the Union address ... diverting national attention for an evening away from talk of scandal to talk of issues" (Feldmann, 1). She also quoted Sam Popkin, a political scientist, who commented, "he pulled off the compartmentalization necessary to keep people looking the other way" (Feldmann, 1). *The New York Times* said he spoke "eloquently and forcefully ... a polished performance," ("A Speech in the Eye of the Storm," A24), and lauded, "As is his wont, he performed brilliantly in the midst of extraordinary adversity. He sounded a note of dignity and sobriety ..." (Stanley, A1). This was a theme echoed, it seemed, by everyone. The references to Clinton's rhetoric as dignified, eloquent or elevated are too numerous to recount. *The Chicago Sun-Times* called the speech "eloquent," (Rowan 35) while *The Washington Post* labeled his rhetoric "lofty," (Broder, A01) and the *Times-Picayune* described it as "superior," ("Clinton is a Great Leader," B06).

In fact, there were very few that thought that the speech was anything less than incredible<sup>8</sup>. Richard Cohen of *The Washington Post* offered some negative criticism, calling the speech "timid" and "about as controversial and risky as the Boy Scout pledge" (Cohen, A19). On the whole, the speech was highly regarded and praises for Clinton's eloquence and dignity abounded.

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<sup>8</sup> More articles lauded the speech, which are too numerous to recount in this limited space. Mary McGory pointed out in her column, "Clinton left the never-never land of the House chamber wrapped in huzzas. The country gave him another standing ovation in the overnight polls ..." (McGrory, A02). Also, many reporters heralded the speech as the turning point. David Rowan of *The Chicago Sun-Times* wrote, "A week ago I thought that Bill Clinton's presidency would evaporate in the heat of revelations about a stupid sexual affair with a White House intern. Today I am almost sure that the Comeback Kid will survive this scandal with minimal damage. My reasons for thinking this are: Clinton's State of the Union address" (Rowan, 35). He goes on to call the speech "an eloquent exposition," (Rowan, 35). *The Washington Post* quoted independent pollster Tim Hibbits as saying "He looked like a guy who is still in charge," and republican representative J.C. Watts calling his performance, "very presidential ... I think he performed very well," (Broder, A01).



By the time the 1999 State of the Union address approached, Clinton was one year farther away from the scandal, but was ever nearer the hovering threat of impeachment. The House had already impeached him on two of the four articles drawn up by the House Judiciary Committee. The impeachment trial had begun in the Senate a mere twelve days earlier. William Jefferson Clinton had already become the first president to be impeached in over a century, since Andrew Johnson was impeached and then acquitted by the Senate in 1868. If convicted, he would become the only President in U.S. History to be forcibly ousted from office. This was not a State of the Union address to be taken lightly, and Clinton persevered and performed well under fire.

Once, again the buzzword “compartmentalization” was ubiquitous in reviews of the State of the Union speech. Bennett Roth, from *The Houston Chronicle* defined the word as “a term Clinton’s advisers have used to describe his ability to deal with the scandal and the nation’s problems without one muddying the other” (Roth, A18). He also mentioned that the term was “the buzzword in the halls of the Capitol” (Roth, A18)<sup>9</sup>. Along with this notion of compartmentalization was the theme of Clinton arguing his defense by blatantly omitting any mention of the proceedings in the Senate (just as he had forgotten to mention the Lewinsky scandal 12 months earlier). In an editorial entitled “The Defense Rests,” *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* said concerning the State of the Union speech “...President Bill Clinton went a long way toward winning his impeachment case” (“The Defense Rests,” C16). *The St. Petersburg Times* called the State of the Union “the turning point in the ... Clinton impeachment saga” (“Clinton makes his case,” 16A). PBS’s Tom Oliphant elaborated “We may have a world record

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<sup>9</sup> More responses dealing with compartmentalization include an article written by Drew Jubera from *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. He quoted NBC’s Jonathon Alter, who suggest that “people take a cue from the Clinton playbook: hold two conflicting notions, then deal with them one at a time” (Jubera, 12A). He went on to say that

for buttering up a jury. ‘You da man!’ is really what he was saying” (Jubera, 12A). The general consensus concerning Clinton’s case, as reiterated by the conservative Clinton foe, TV evangelist Pat Robertson, was that “from a public relations standpoint, he’s won. They might as well dismiss this impeachment hearing and get one with something else” (Mercer, 7).

If Clinton had done a good job defending his position through the State of the Union, he had done it with style and in a myriad of different ways. Several reporters mentioned his recognizing ordinary American heroes throughout the speech as a tactic (one which he had employed before, but not to such an extent). *The St. Louis Dispatch* said the message behind Clinton’s tactic was unmistakable: “These people stand by me, as I stand by them” (“The Defense Rests,” C16). Another tactic noticed by many, was his enormous list of initiatives. James Bennet of *The New York Times* said he presented “a legislative shopping list” (Bennett, A1). *The St. Petersburg Times* said Clinton pushed “a long list of initiatives that would directly affect people’s lives” (“Clinton makes his case,” 16A). *The Tampa Tribune* called this list of initiatives “giving away candy” (Mercer, 7); while *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* said that “his laundry-list was generally predictable” (“The Defense Rests,” C16).

As for style, Clinton received as much praise as he did for 1998, albeit with a little different spin. Gone were the praises for his eloquence, dignity and lofty rhetoric. In was acclaim for his “sizzling presentation,” as the *Journal of Commerce* lauded. The article continued with praise like “brilliant ... confident, assertive, upbeat, Mr. Clinton radiated leadership” (“A Sizzling Presentation,” 4A). Tom Shales from *The Washington Post* commented “Clinton put forth an image of a vigorous, still youthful, resilient and defiantly optimistic president” (Shales, C01). He went on to praise Clinton for “his natural flow” and called him

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“The whole country is being asked to compartmentalize which Clinton counts more: the man who helped construct the economy, or the man accused of obstructing justice” (Jubera, 12A).

“boyishly enthusiastic, fearlessly confident” (Shales, C01). *The New York Times* called the speech “a virtuoso ... performance,” and claimed, “It was all a vintage display of Mr. Clinton’s oratorical and political gifts, a masterly show ...” (Broder, A1). One paper commented that “It was a tour de force performance by a man struggling for his political life,” and went on to say, “...and it worked” (“The Defense Rests,” C16).

A common theme throughout the responses to both speeches was the notion that Clinton went a long way towards overcoming the opposition and redeeming himself while avoiding mentioning the scandals at hand. The bulk of this analysis will examine how this perception is created through Clinton’s rhetoric. I propose that his establishment of ethos, use of AVT signification, and change from colloquial language to elevated metaphors was the basis for these reactions.

#### *Stating His Case – Establishing Ethos*

Throughout all of the State of the Union addresses, Clinton strives to establish ethos. This section is included because the 1998 and 1999 speeches contain significant deviations from his appeals in previous speeches, which are important to stating his case. Making ethical appeals allows Clinton to take the offensive by establishing himself as the “good guy.”

A rhetor can establish ethos three different ways: through good will, good sense and good moral character. In both the 1998 and 1999 State of the Union addresses, Clinton works hard to establish ethos in all three of these categories. The first we will explore, good will, is based on the assumption that rhetors will improve their standing with the audience if they appear to have their (the audience’s) best interests at heart. Throughout both speeches, Clinton establishes good will to appeal mostly to his secondary audience, the American public.

Clinton establishes good will a multitude of times in this speech<sup>10</sup>, however, there is an instance where he makes an appeal in a unique fashion. In this example of establishing good will, Clinton uses several key words to illustrate how much effort he has put into wrestling with the dilemmas facing the American people:

*I know* there is opposition to more comprehensive trade agreements. *I have listened carefully* and *I believe* that the opposition is rooted in two fears: first, that our trading partners will have lower environmental and labor standards which will give

<sup>10</sup> Clinton establishes good will in two different ways: by reminding people how he has previously kept their best interests at heart, and how he wishes to help them in the future. The following examples illustrate these two different methods and provide examples from the text. In nearly identical passages from the 1998 and 1999 speeches, Clinton establishes good will by reminding the people how they have been affected by his legislation:

The Family and Medical Leave Act was the first bill I was privileged to sign into law as President in 1993. Since then, about 15 million people have taken advantage of it ... (Clinton, 1998).

Now, the Family and Medical Leave Act – the very first bill I signed into law – has now, since 1993, helped millions and millions of Americans to care for a newborn baby or an ailing relative without risking their jobs. (Clinton, 1999)

In both cases, he is able to establish good ethos by implying that the *only* reason he signed the bill into law was for the benefit of the American people (he cites no other reason). The 1999 appeal is arguably more effective (it is important to keep in mind that he was very close to impeachment at this point) because it introduces specific images. Unlike the 1998 appeal, where millions of people have merely “taken advantage” of his bill, in the 1999 appeal, the millions of Americans took advantage to care for “a newborn baby” or “an ailing relative.” Again, by inducing images that appeal to the audience’s emotions, he makes the appeal more effective allows that pathetic imagery do some of the work (of establishing ethos) for him.

The second way Clinton establishes good will is by showing that he is concerned about the American people’s current problems and wants to help fix them. In the following passage, Clinton cleverly uses facts, a component of logical appeal, as a lead-in to his ethical appeal:

You know, our children are doing better. SAT scores are up; math scores have risen in nearly all grades. But there’s a problem. While our 4<sup>th</sup> graders outperform their peers in other countries in math and science, our 8<sup>th</sup> graders are around average, and out 12<sup>th</sup> graders are near bottom. We must do better. Now, each year the national government invests more than \$15 billion in our public schools. I believe we must change the way we invest that money, to support what works and to stop supporting what does not work. (Clinton 1999)

The use of statistics at the beginning of the passage, serves to create a problem that the audience may not have realized they had. By establishing the problem (as our kids get older, they fall behind the rest of the world in education), he is able to propose a solution that establishes his good will. It is important to note, in this passage as well as others, he omits any specific proposal, in this case to improve the quality of education for 12<sup>th</sup> graders. He does not say that we should invest the money in teacher education or after-school programs. By using a simple phrase, he is able to make it memorable (in part because of its parallelism and alliteration) and make it appeal to a wide range of people, some of who might reject more specific proposals.

them an unfair advantage in our market and do their own people no favors, even if there's more business; and second, that if we have more trade, more of our workers will lose their jobs and have to start over. *I think* we should see to advance worker and environmental standards around the world. (Clinton, 1998)

This passage is unique in the plethora of first person pronouns it presents. By using the word "I" multiple times, he draws attention to it (especially in the third repetition, where it is not syntactically necessary) and subsequently, the words that follow. The combination of the first person pronoun with verbs like "know," "think," "believe," and "listened," create the impression of a man who has not taken this matter lightly, but rather has invested a lot of personal effort into finding a solution.

Good sense, or the ethical appeal based on how informed or intelligent the rhetor is, is an appeal used many times by Clinton. The former Rhodes scholar and master orator commonly quotes people such as former Presidents or the founders<sup>11</sup>, elaborates on his personal experiences<sup>12</sup> pertaining to policy issues or states facts to exhibit his intelligence to the audience.

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<sup>11</sup> Clinton quotes the founders in nearly every speech. The following example from 1998, illustrates how this sort of appeal functions:

Our founders set America on a permanent course toward "a more perfect union."  
To all of you I say it is a journey we can only make together – living as one  
community (Clinton, 1998)

Given the constraints of the genre (traditional political address), his audience (American public) and the fact that the founders were the ones to originally write in the constitution that the President should report on the state of the union "from time to time," this choice could hardly be more appropriate. In quoting one of our nation's most revered historical documents, he shows his knowledge of history and patriotism. This quote is appealing, because it is one many will instantly recognize and identify with. In identifying with the quote, the audience at once becomes more likely to agree with the rhetor.

<sup>12</sup> Clinton shows the audience he is informed by describing his personal experiences that pertain to current policies. The following is an example of how Clinton makes this appeal in the 1998 speech. In this first example, he elaborates on his trip to Bosnia:

Next, I will ask Congress to continue its support for our troops and their mission in Bosnia. This Christmas, Hillary and I traveled to Sarajevo with Senator and

In the following example, Clinton uses a less well-known quote, which demonstrate more thoroughly his knowledge concerning his office and American history:

A century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt defined out “great, central task” as “leaving this land even a better land for our descendants than it is for us.” Today, we’re restoring the Florida Everglades, saving Yellowstone, preserving the red rock canyons of Utah, protecting California’s redwoods and our precious coasts.

(Clinton, 1999)

Clinton mention of Teddy Roosevelt demonstrates his knowledge of his office: he knows what previous presidents have done and will model his actions to preserve their legacy. Teddy Roosevelt was the nation’s youngest President, extremely charismatic, a progressive who expanded the powers of the executive branch and established strong foreign policy (“Theodore Roosevelt,” 2003). He is a vivid, vibrant figure of American history and one of the few Presidents that many would be able to envision upon utterance of his name. Quoting Teddy Roosevelt is strategic on Clinton’s part because the very name creates an image in the minds of many, and the image is one that would be favorable for Clinton himself to project.

The last of the three ethical appeals, good moral character, refers to the ability of the rhetor to demonstrate elements of his character that are admirable and identifiable by members of

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Mrs. Dole and a bipartisan congressional delegation. We saw children playing in the streets, where two years ago they were hiding from snipers and shells. The shops are filled with food; the cafes were alive with conversation. The progress there is unmistakable – but it is not yet irreversible. (Clinton 1998)

He first states his proposal (to ask Congress to continue to support the mission in Bosnia) and then delves into an ethical appeal, essentially giving the audience a reason to support his plea. The word “bipartisan” in the second sentence implies that he is working across party lines. The imagery he uses, especially of the children and snipers and shells, create a vivid picture. Given that the president has taken the time to visit the place (with a bipartisan delegation no less) and provide a detailed description it becomes hard to doubt him as qualified to make those

the audience. Good moral character can be established by quoting a moral source (like the Bible), extolling their own virtues or elaborating on misfortunes or hardships they have faced. Fitting with the theory of compartmentalization, appeals of his good moral character were the scarcest of all the appeals in these two speeches.

In this first example, Clinton talks about the difficulties he faced as a child, which many people may be able to relate to:

I think this is such a big issue with me because of my own personal experience. I have often wondered how my mother, when she was a young widow, would have been able to go away to school and get an education and come back and support me if my grandparents hadn't been able to take care of me. She and I were really very lucky. How many other families have never had that same opportunity? The truth is, we don't know the answer to that question. But we do know what the answer should be: Not a single American family should ever have to choose between the job they need and the child they love. (Clinton, 1998)

Given the constraints of the speech, it may seem unusual that he chooses to tell the nation about his childhood (isn't he supposed to be reporting on the state of the union?). However, strategically this bit of rhetoric is invaluable. By telling a story that many can identify with and most everyone can imagine, he allows the audience to place themselves in his shoes and sympathize and admire him. In telling a personal tidbit he changes his persona from the

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decisions. By taking the time out to visit the country he demonstrates to the American people that he is, indeed, informed.

untouchable, distant leader of the free world to a real human being whose experiences they can compare with his or her own.

This passage is significant in that it also represents one of only two times that he discusses his childhood in a State of the Union address. The disclosure of his childhood experiences allows Clinton to assume the role of “loving son.” He has already been stigmatized by the media as a “cheating husband.” In making this appeal, Clinton takes the offensive in determining in which role the audience should view him. In relation to this concept of role filling, it is also of interest that he quotes Teddy Roosevelt, but not his hero, John Kennedy. Kennedy is a somewhat common figure in Clinton’s rhetoric, and his absence perhaps signals Clinton’s eagerness to separate himself from the role of the cheating husband, (Kennedy was a notorious philanderer), and establish himself as the loving son.

In a second example, Clinton specifically reaches out to members of his generation by perpetuating an ideology:

I was born in 1946, the first year of the baby boom. I can tell you that one of the greatest concerns of our generation is our absolute determination not to let our growing old place an intolerable burden on our children and their ability to raise our grandchildren. Our economic success and our fiscal discipline now give us an opportunity to lift that burden from their shoulders, and we should take it.

(Clinton, 1999)

He first places himself within a generation, using the first person singular pronoun, and then goes on to describe a commonly held belief of that generation, using the first person plural pronoun.



By switching the pronoun use, he builds community by grouping himself with the baby boomers while simultaneously allowing them to identify with him through vocalization of the shared ideology. Even to others outside his generation, this ideology represents values that can be recognized as admirable people of any age.

### *Stating his Case – Binaries and Building Community*

Within the rhetoric of the 1998 and 1999 speeches, Clinton strives to build community with both his primary and secondary audiences. Through the creation of binaries or the clever use of pronouns, he often includes himself in a grouping with his audience. By establishing himself a member of the audience's community he gives them reason to identify, and therefore agree or sympathize with him.

In this example from the 1998 speech, he creates a binary of republicans vs. democrats and then invites the American people to join a third characterization of community with him: "We have moved past the sterile debate between those who say government is the enemy and those who say government is the answer. My fellow Americans, we have found a third way" (Clinton, 1998). In this passage, Clinton defines only three different political communities his audience can choose to place themselves in: those who say the government is the enemy (republicans), those who say it is the answer (democrats), and the others. The terms "democrat" and "republican" are defined in uncomfortable terms (who wants to name the government as the enemy?) yet, he only defines one alternative. Given no middle ground, the audience must place themselves in one of the three categories, the most appealing and most positive the one characterized by the "third way," which he includes himself in through insertion of the pronoun "we." Also, by naming the secondary audience at the beginning of the second sentence, he implies that he is one of the Americans, not one of "those," who are the petty politicians. In

establishing this binary, he characterizes himself as one of the American people and resists grouping himself with the congressmen.

In a different way, Clinton builds community by comparing himself to the American people: “Like every taxpayer, I’m outraged by reports of abuses by the IRS” (Clinton, 1998). The use of a simile in the section of his speech concerning the IRS is strategic, given that almost without exception, every eligible voter watching this address is a taxpayer as well. So when he compares himself to the taxpayers, he groups himself with the vast majority of those watching. Indeed, this simile is impressive in the number of people it includes in the secondary audience.

Clinton refrains from building community solely with members of his secondary audience; he often tries to include himself within the primary audience as well. In the following passage, the first eight words of the first sentence establish the community he is placing himself within:

Let us say to all Americans watching tonight – whether you’re 70  
or 50, or whether you just started paying into the system – Social  
Security will be there when you need it. Let us make this  
commitment: Social Security first. Let’s do that together.

(Clinton, 1998).

Given that there are only two audiences, the members of Congress sitting in front of him and the Americans watching on TV, he is able to establish which “us” he is including himself in by excluding the secondary audience immediately. Clinton places himself within the community of congressmen staring at him, urging them with him, to save social security. He implies that they must work as a community to save social security. The placement of “together” at the end of this passage emphasis his attempt to build community and identify with the congressmen.

In a final example, Clinton cleverly thanks the congressmen that have passed praiseworthy legislation and then groups himself with them:

Already, the response has been remarkable. And *I* want to say a special word of thanks to our private sector partners and to *members in Congress* of both parties for their support. Just one example: *Because of you*, the Star-Spangled Banner will be preserved for the ages. In ways large and small, as *we* look to the millennium *we* are keeping alive what George Washington called “the sacred fire of liberty.” (Clinton, 1999)

In the beginning of this passage, he extends thanks to two groups. In the middle he credits them, “because of you,” he says, and then elaborates on the good they have done. At the end, he includes himself in their community, with the use of the pronoun “we.” The inclusion of “we” at the end serves to reflect the good deeds of others on his persona, but also serves to lessen resentment with those whom he is striving to build community with. Since he is offering praise, the community they are more likely to accept him as one than to reject his attempt.

To a man whose personal character and conduct is on trial, the importance of building community with those who judge him cannot be overestimated. By placing himself within their community he allows the audience to at once identify, sympathize and agree with him. It is more difficult to reject the arguments of one within your community than an outsider. So without employing any logic, Clinton is able to convince many people to side with him.

*Stating His Case – Signification and the African American Verbal Tradition*

It has been said by some that Bill Clinton has the ability to talk in the African-American Verbal Tradition and be extremely persuasive. It should then come as no surprise that in composing his defense in the 1998 and 1999 State of the Union addresses, that he employed aspects of this tradition. The most notable, which Clarence Thomas extensively used during the Thomas–Hill hearings was signification. Defined by Geneva Smitherman in her article “Talkin That Talk,” signification is the equivalent of “dissin” in today’s vernacular. It is a way for one to discredit his opponents or emphasize a serious message, without sounding preachy or lecturing (Smitherman, 255). As we will see in the following examples, Clinton uses signification to discredit his opponents in Congress and plead his case to the American public.

In the following passage from the 1998, Clinton signifies by taking a jab at the Republicans in Congress holding up his judicial nominations, while indirectly extolling his own virtue:

Police, prosecutors and prevention programs, as good as they are, they can’t work if our court system doesn’t work. Today there are a large number of vacancies in the federal courts. Here is what the Chief Justice of the United States wrote: “Judicial vacancies cannot remain at such high levels indefinitely without eroding the quality of justice.” I simply ask the United States Senate to heed this plea and vote on the highly qualified judicial nominees before you, up or down.

(Clinton, 1998)

He relies on Chief Justice Rehnquist quote to discredit the hindering conservatives, so it does not appear as if he is preaching or lecturing – he is just reiterating a point made by the highest ranking member of the judicial branch of government. Also, he eliminates himself as a target by using “police, prosecutors and prevention programs” as the subject of the first sentence. He simply states that they can’t work, not that he doesn’t believe they can or that some other expert believes; rather he states it as an obvious fact. Finally, by “asking” the senate to vote up or down, he portrays them as the obstructers as justice, while painting himself as the representative looking out for the best interests of the American people. This piece of signifying illuminates the Senate conservatives as small-minded, petty, politicians.

In another piece of signifying, Clinton takes a direct jab at Republicans:

Every time we have acted to heal our environment, pessimists have told us it would hurt the economy. Well, today our economy is the strongest in a generation and our environment is the cleanest in a generation.

(Clinton, 1998)

Of course, the word “pessimist” in this context is an obvious euphemism for “republican.” By taking this jab at republicans, but not naming them directly, Clinton manages to promote himself as savior of both environment and economy while discrediting his conservative foes. In making a case for himself, this bit of signifying goes a long way towards scoring points for his cause. The underlying message of both of these passages seems to be that “while my opponents are worrying about stupid scandals and political pettiness, I am working hard to help you, the American people.”

In one last final example, from the 1999 speech<sup>13</sup>, Clinton takes a more frontal approach to “dissin” his congressional opponents:

And I am ready to work with lawmakers of both parties to create a farm safety net that will include crop insurance reform and farm income assistance. I ask you to join with me and do this. This should not be a political issue. Everyone knows what an economic problem is going on out there in rural America today, and we need appropriate means to address it. (Clinton, 1999)

The first three words of the first couple of sentences imply that it is expressly not Clinton who is at fault. “I am ready ...” and “I ask you,” indicate a readiness for action on his part. The reason why he has not taken any action is revealed in the third sentence. It is a “political issue.” Even though the subject here is economic problems in rural America, the topic in the forefront of the audience’s minds is Clinton’s impeachment trial. By reducing this problem down to a “political issue” that serves as a metaphor for the context surrounding this state of the union speech – the impeachment trial is a political issue, conspired by his republican foes who do not care about the welfare of the people.

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<sup>13</sup> In 1999, Clinton using signifying many times in this speech to discredit his opponents, including many examples, in which he points out “missed opportunities” by Congress:

Now, let’s do one more thing for our children. Today, too many of our schools are so old they’re falling apart, or so over-crowded students are learning in trailers. Last fall, Congress missed the opportunity to change that. This year, with 53 million children in our schools, Congress must not miss that opportunity again. I ask you to help our communities build or modernize 5,000 schools (Clinton 1999).

The phrase “missed opportunity,” can be translated as “deliberately blocked passage of.” By using the polite “missed opportunity,” Clinton forces the audience to translate it internally (how did Congress “miss” an opportunity?) and once again portrays the conservative congressional majority as petty-minded policy blockers. By asking them to reconsider he once again places himself in the position of ambassador of the American people. This theme of “missed opportunities” is prevalent throughout the speech.

### *Compartmentalization*

The issue of compartmentalization is one that resurfaced over and over again in reviews of both the 1998 and 1999 State of the Union addresses. This buzzword refers to the ability of Clinton to separate the leader of the free world from the man who is on trial as a philanderer and maybe even a liar. In this section, I set forth the argument that this perception is created in part by the change in Clinton's diction. Gone are the colloquialisms that abounded in earlier speeches (see footnote 4). In their place is more elevated speech, in the form of lofty metaphors. The use of these metaphors instead of colloquialisms, serves to characterize Clinton more as a leader and less as a fallible, common man.

Notice the language and nature of the metaphors in these examples from the 1998 speech:

Quietly, but with gathering force, the ground has shifted beneath  
our feet as we have moved into the information age, a global  
economy, a truly new world. (Clinton, 1998)

...I call on Congress to renew America's commitment to the  
International Monetary Fund. And I think we should say to all the  
people we're trying to represent here that preparing for a far-off  
storm that may reach our shores is far wiser than ignoring the  
thunder until the clouds are just overhead. A strong nation rests on  
the rock of responsibility. (Clinton, 1998)

Beginning this year, 1998, men and women from 16 countries  
will build a foothold in the heavens – the international space

station. With its vast expanses, scientists and engineers will actually set sail on an uncharted sea of limitless mystery and unlimited potential. (Clinton, 1998)

Word choices like “limitless mystery and unlimited potential” are a far cry from 1994’s “the buck stops here.” The imagery created in these passages, “a truly new world,” “rock of responsibility,” and “foothold in the heavens,” create a very different picture than the baseball metaphor “three strikes and you’re out,” that Clinton was fond of early in his presidency. The elevated speech and elaborate imagery reflect back on the man who is speaking. He comes off as polished, scholarly and dignified, a perception that separates this man from the one who only hours earlier was defending his moral transgressions.

In relation to the lack of the colloquialisms is the somewhat surprising presence of the idiom “you know,” a common phrase in today’s vernacular. “You know” shows up only once or twice, if at all in every other State of the Union address. Both 1998 and 1999 are unique in that they exhibit multiple occurrences of this phrase. Through the use of “you know” Clinton is able to relate to the audience and invite them to participate. The juxtaposition of eloquent language with this idiom (as well as a complete lack of colloquialisms) is an interesting feature unique to these two speeches.

In these examples from 1999, Clinton again uses metaphors and imagery to distance himself the president, from the man on trial in the senate earlier today:

Once again, a government that is a progressive instrument of the common good, rooted in our oldest values of opportunity, responsibility and community; devoted to fiscal responsibility;



determined to give our people the tools they need to make the most  
of their own lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Clinton, 1999)

We must do more to do more to bring the spark of private  
enterprise to every corner of America – to build a bridge from Wall  
Street to Appalachia to the Mississippi Delta, to our Native  
American communities ... (Clinton, 1999)

Again, the uses of key words, like “responsibility” in the first passage, give an impression of the rhetor. In this first passage, “opportunity,” “responsibility” and “community” are further emphasized by their identical endings, or homoioteleuton, which was explored in the 1997 speech. In total, the metaphors create the image of a well-educated, mature leader.

### *A Polished performance*

In the final section of this chapter, we will explore one aspect of Clinton’s style that has not been exceptionally prevalent in earlier State of the Union addresses, but may have helped him win some of those rave reviews for his style. This device, called *asyndeton*, occurs when normal connectors between words (like “and”) are omitted (Crowley, 368). This figure can give the impression of haste and vigor (Crowley, 243), and slim the bulk of the oratory down, giving the language a more pleasing sound.

In the following passages, the use of repetition of key phrases combined with asyndeton, serves to emphasize each of the members of the *articuli*: “My plan to balance the budget next year includes both new investments and new tax cuts targeted to the needs of working families: *for* education, *for* childcare, *for* the environment” (Clinton, 1998). We must work *together*, learn *together*, live *together*, serve *together*” (Clinton, 1998). The unvarying repetition of “for” in the

first passage and “together” in the second, serves to emphasize the words that are changing, and therefore add force to his rhetoric. This combination also creates a rhythmical speech pattern which is pleasing to the ear and more rhetorically effective than just listing the elements with the word “and.” The asyndeton performs a very important function in these passages; it allows equal emphasis on every word. The lack of “and” prevents the status of the first two elements to be privileged over the last; thereby allowing each word to receive equal force.

In these examples from 1999, once again the use of asyndeton with repetition of key words and phrases creates a rhythmical pattern that is effective and forceful:

So with *our* budget surplus *growing*, *our* economy *expanding*, *our* confidence *rising*, now is the moment for this generation to meet our historic responsibility to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Clinton, 1999)

You know, no nation in history has had the opportunity and the responsibility we now have to shape a world that is *more* peaceful, *more* secure, *more* free. (Clinton, 1999)

Our new immigrants must be part of our One America. After all, *they're revitalizing our cities*, *they're energizing our culture*, *they're building up our economy*. (Clinton, 1999)

Once again, the lack of any connectors allows each word to receive equal force. This cleverly used stylistic device enhances Clinton's rhetoric.

In the next chapter of this paper, we will explore Clinton's last State of the Union address. We will examine how the masterful rhetor spoke not only to his audience of 2000, but to the audience of the future, in a chapter entitled “Leaving a Legacy.”

## 2000: Leaving a Legacy

*"Maybe his speeches have been too long, but they've often been highly effective. He covers all the bases, then covers them again, then runs them one more time and then, hey, just for the heck of it, let's run 'em backward."* --Tom Shales, *The Washington Post*, 28 January 2000

The 2000 State of the Union address was Clinton's last and lengthiest. For a President that had less than 12 months left in office, he had many, many things to tell Congress and the American public. The speech was met with two separate criticisms. One major theme centered on Clinton's speech as a campaign speech, the other around the 2000 address as a speech meant for history and the legacy of the Clinton presidency. Nevertheless, both themes dealt with Clinton leaving his rhetorical mark on the presidency.

Specific criticism that labeled Clinton's speech as a campaign platform surprisingly came from a wide range of publications. *The Washington Post* called the speech "political at its core" and said it "sounded like a Democratic pep rally" (Harris, A1). *The Plain Dealer* said "Vice President Al Gore...presidential campaign was the obvious intended beneficiary of Clinton's craft" ("The Artist at Work," 2G). Sandy Grady from *The Denver Post* called it "the most rip-roaring Al Gore campaign speech," and went on to say, "it was about the State of Al's Campaign - a 90-minute Gore pep rally geared for national TV cameras" (Grady, B05). This notion of left-wing promotion was echoed by *The New York Times*, which called it "a bold attempt to anoint the vice president and the first lady as Mr. Clinton's political heirs and shape the political terrain to their advantage" ("A Political State of the Union," A22). The editorial proclaimed, "The staging of the speech was unapologetically promotional" ("A Political State of the Union," A22).

The second school of thought surrounding this State of the Union saw it primarily as a legacy text. *The Journal of Commerce* observed that it was “a speech that tried to stake out his position in the history books and at the same time campaign for the electoral efforts of his vice president and his wife” (“The Central Reality,” 7). *The Plain Dealer* elaborated, “It was the product of a man who, realizing he had squandered the most productive years of his presidency, sought in one huge swoop to leave a legacy of positive accomplishment for the ages” (“The Artist at Work,” 2G). Tom Shales’ critique of the speech framed Clinton in the light of a man trying to establish his place in history. He remarked “there was an unmistakable poignancy in President Clinton’s latest and last State of the Union message last night” (Shales, C1). Apple’s critique focused on the same themes, providing some entertaining analogies of Clinton’s style: “as unabashedly as a salesman hawking his ware ... Mr. Clinton spoke with all the expansiveness of a man who had hit the lottery or answered Regis Philbin’s million dollar question” (Apple, A1). Of course, Clinton’s style was met with its usual praise, “it was delivered with tremendous relaxed forcefulness,” was one of a slew of typical reactions (Shales, C1).

#### *Campaigning for the next generation*

Ineligible for a third term, Clinton focused his efforts in a different sort of campaign rhetoric than we saw in 1996. Vice President Gore, who in every other State of the Union address was mentioned sometimes once or twice, was praised no less than a half-dozen times in 2000. Clinton also praised his wife, Tipper, who had previously never been mentioned. Indeed, the speech was a speech for Al Gore, a speech for the future.

Just as the 1993 speech, the speech that was not really a State of the Union, but more like a road map to a legacy, this speech was Clinton’s legacy. The rhetoric in this speech functioned to designate Clinton’s political heirs. This was not a speech for himself, as in 1996 to become

re-elected, nor as we saw in 1998 and 1999 to recover from scandal. As Clinton dedicates this speech to the next generation, we shall designate this speech as an ending point of the analysis and an opportunity for reflection.

This analysis has been limited to the examination of speeches given in the most formal context, the State of the Union. While this context has been both helpful and necessary as a constant in examining trends, it is also somewhat limiting. For example, it might be interesting to see how Clinton's rhetoric functioned during the impeachment hearings or during a more informal occasion. It would be interesting to note what characteristics of his rhetoric that emerged during the State of the Union addresses are preserved across the different genres of speeches.

However, the use of the State of the Union speeches as a model for the analysis has proved that it is at once possible to uncover specifics in the text that account for the general impressions voiced by the public. Quantitative evaluation have proven that it is possible to reduce a text down to the repetition of words and devices and discover trends that influence the audience's perception of the speech. This sort of reductionist approach, not necessarily yet widely accepted, has proven to be extremely useful for this sort of analysis, especially combined with a more qualitative approach. I propose that the merging of rhetorical theory and discourse level analysis provides an efficient, balanced methodology to accurately correlate public reaction with rhetorical texts.

Analysis of President Clinton's State of the Union addresses has uncovered many interesting discursive and rhetorical features that lent themselves to the perceptions vocalized by members of the American press. These features have given insight to the function of certain rich features and stylistic devices in the context of the State of the Union address. Among these rich

features a style has emerged that typifies Clinton. Although he uses different stylistic devices at appropriate times, a pattern emerges from his speeches is undeniably "Clinton." A combination of everyday clichés pooled with eloquent metaphors spoken like a Rhodes scholar, a bit of African-American vernacular tradition, an assortment of modals mixed in with performative verbs, and, of course, those good-natured ad-libs, define his style. In reducing aspects of his rhetoric to words and patterns we have in the process, defined Clinton as a rhetor. Armed with this knowledge, it is possible to glance at a text and immediately see the trademarks of Clinton's style and rhetorical flair. Anne Quinlan perhaps summarized it best: "Bill Clinton gives a good speech. There is in him a bit of the preacher, some of the earnest high school orator, a little carnival barker and some door-to-door salesman."

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## APPENDIX A

### KEY EVENTS IN THE CLINTON PRESIDENCY: POLICY AND SCANDAL \*\*The First Term\*\*

#### 1993

- Jan. 20 William Jefferson Clinton inaugurated as the 42<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States.
- Jan. 27 Clinton announces “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy on gays in the military.
- Aug. 10 Clinton signs budget deficit reduction plan, which passed Congress with no Republican support.
- Sept. 22 President Clinton officially unveils official plan for national health care insurance.
- Nov. 30 President Clinton signs “Brady bill.”

#### 1994

- May 6 Paula Jones files sexual harassment lawsuit against President Clinton for his alleged misconduct in 1991.
- Sept. 26 Health care reform package dies in Congress.
- Nov. 8 Republicans win control of both houses of Congress in midterm elections.

#### 1995

- April 19 Oklahoma City bombing occurs, killing 168.
- Sept. 19 President Clinton defends Affirmative action, stating that the country needs to “mend it” rather than “end it.”
- Nov. 15 Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky’s sexual relationship begins.

#### 1996

- Jan. 23 *In State of the Union Address, President Clinton declares that the “era of big government is over.” The president also pays tribute to his wife, whose appearance before a grand jury is pending.*
- Jan. 25 Hillary Clinton testifies before federal grand jury that is examining the Whitewater matter.
- Aug. 22 President Clinton signs welfare-reform law.
- Nov. 5 Clinton defeats Senator Robert Dole to become the first Democrat elected to two consecutive presidential terms since FDR.

## APPENDIX A

### KEY EVENTS IN THE CLINTON PRESIDENCY: POLICY AND SCANDAL \*\*The Second Term\*\*

#### 1997

- Aug. 5 President Clinton signs legislation promising to balance federal budget by 2002. Budget allows for \$125 billion in tax cuts, a hike in the minimum wage, restoration of welfare benefits to legal immigrants, and health care coverage for uninsured children.
- Oct. 3 Justice Department concludes that President Clinton did not violate any laws during 1996 campaign fund-raising efforts in so-called Chinagate scandal.

#### 1998

- Jan 12-21 *Linda Tripp meets with independent counsel Kenneth Starr. News stories of relationship between President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky break. Clinton is deposed in Paula Jones's suit. Clinton denies in an interview of having had a "sexual relationship" with Lewinsky.*
- Jan. 27 In State of the Union Address, President Clinton calls for using budget surplus to "save social security first."
- Apr. 1 Paula Jones's sexual harassment suit against President Clinton is dismissed.
- Aug. 17 President Clinton testifies before grand jury regarding his relationship with Monica Lewinsky; in televised address, Clinton admits improper relationship with former intern.
- Nov. 3 Democrats make gains in midterm election, although Republicans maintain control of both houses of Congress.
- Nov. 19 Paula Jones settles suit with President Clinton for \$850,000.
- Dec. 19 House of Representatives impeaches President Clinton on two of four articles drawn up by House Judiciary Committee.

#### 1999

- Jan. 7 *Impeachment trial of President Clinton begins in the U.S. Senate.*
- Feb. 12 President Clinton is acquitted by U.S. Senate of all impeachment charges.
- Mar. 24 NATO begins air war on Serbia.
- Mar. 29 Dow Jones industrial average closes above 10,000 for the first time.
- Oct. 13 President Clinton fails to gain two-thirds majority vote in the U.S. Senate in favor of nuclear test ban treaty.

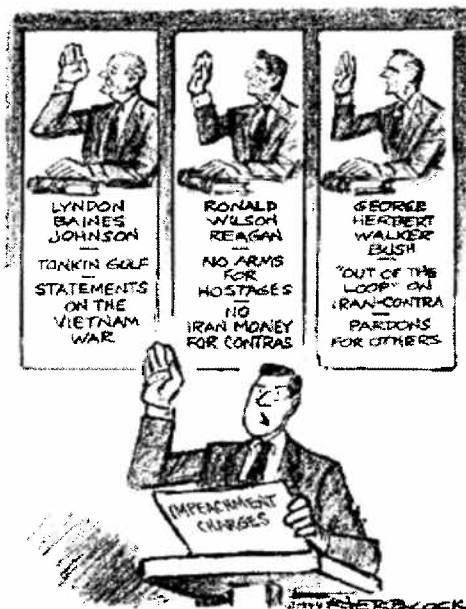
#### 2000

- Jan. 27 President Clinton delivers his last State of the Union address.

## APPENDIX B

**\*\*Political Cartoons from *The Washington Post*\*\***

**"WILLIAM JEFFERSON CLINTON TOOK A SOLEMN OATH—AND LIED"**



**"LARRY FLYNT GOING AFTER POLITICIANS! WHERE ARE STANDARDS?"**

