

The Rhetoric of Disaster: The Presidential Natural Disaster Address as an Emergent Genre



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In *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, Campbell and Jamieson advance a generic framework that focuses on the distinct features and functions of presidential discourse that is “typified by . . . substantive, stylistic, and strategic similarities.”¹ Looking at the presidency “as it has emerged through rhetorical practices,” they focus on “genres that most clearly illustrate the tie between rhetorical action and the maintenance and development of the presidency.”² Among the genres that Campbell and Jamieson identify are inaugural addresses, special inaugural addresses by ascending Vice Presidents, pardoning statements, state of the union addresses, veto messages, war rhetoric, self-defense or apology, impeachment, farewell addresses, and the national eulogy.³ This analysis complements and extends Campbell and Jamieson’s analysis of the rhetorical presidency to presidential rhetoric regarding natural disasters by looking at how the presidential natural disaster address has “emerged through rhetorical practices,” as a genre that clearly illustrates “the tie between rhetorical action” and the political “maintenance and development of the presidency.”⁴

Natural disasters are surprisingly common events: in 1988 there were 17 major presidential disaster declarations (the lowest number of declarations between 1984 and 1997); and in 1996 there were 72 major presidential disaster declarations.⁵ While not every disaster declaration results in a presidential address, noteworthy presidential addresses on major natural disasters have become commonplace since 1955. With the enactment of the Disaster Relief Act of 1950, the president has had ever increasing administrative and political responsibilities for managing natural disasters coupled with a corresponding increase in public expectations of effectiveness, accountability, and rhetorical engagement in the wake of major natural disasters. More importantly, as Hurricane Katrina demonstrates, major natural disasters can present significant challenges and liabilities to the presidency. In fact, Hurricane Katrina was “one of the worst political crises of . . . [Bush’s] administration.”⁶

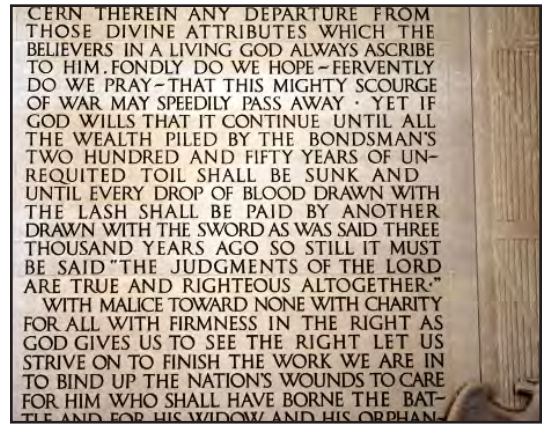
In this essay, then, I identify and describe the unique situational and rhetorical features that distinguish presidential natural disaster addresses as a genre, arguing that natural disasters present unique circumstances and rhetorical challenges that inspire distinct responses. I begin with a critical discussion that considers the unique situational and rhetorical features in presidential natural disaster addresses. Next, I provide a historical synopsis and critical analysis that tracks and discusses the evolutionary progression of presidential discourse on natural disasters that identifies six emergent substantive elements. Finally, I call for further rhetorical engagement with the broader phenomena of rhetoric associated with natural disasters in areas such as the media, politics, and religion.⁷



The Natural Disaster: A Unique Exigent

In order to understand the unique situational and rhetorical aspects of the presidential natural disaster address, I employ Lloyd Bitzer’s concept of an “exigence” from his rhetorical situation model, in which he argues that a “rhetorical situation is a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance.”⁸ Bitzer maintains that “rhetorical discourse obtains its character . . . from the situation that generates it. A work is rhetorical because it is a response to a certain kind of situation.”⁹ Accordingly, Bitzer defines an exigent as “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be.”¹⁰ Bitzer argues that a rhetorical exigent is one that “can be completely or partially removed if” discourse can bring about “human decision or action as to bring about significant modification of the exigence.”¹¹ While rhetorical discourse cannot prevent natural disasters, it certainly can “bring about significant modification” in the rescue, relief, and recovery that follows. Thus, it is the nature of the rhetorical situation engendered by a natural disaster that distinguishes the natural disaster address from other presidential discourses related to crises.

In various types of human-induced attacks, accidents, crises, and disasters, such as the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the September 11th attacks or the BP Oil Spill, identifiable human motives are present in presidential discourse for such events or exigents.¹² In President Clinton’s remarks to the victims of Oklahoma City and President Bush’s comments at the remembrance service for victims of September 11th, both recognize the events as resulting from identifiable human motives that not only challenge presidential



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authority but the ideals and meaning of the nation itself and to “human freedom.”¹³ Clinton remarks, for example, that: “To all my fellow Americans beyond this hall, I say, one thing we owe those who have sacrificed is the duty to purge ourselves of the dark forces which gave rise to this evil. They are forces that threaten our common peace, our freedom, our way of life.”¹⁴ Clinton promises to “to bring to justice those who did this evil”¹⁵ and Bush to “answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.”¹⁶ In President Obama’s address to the nation on the BP Oil Spill, he notes that “We will make BP pay for the damage their company has caused.”¹⁷ As Steinberg argues, “natural disasters have come to be seen as random, morally inert phenomena—chance events that lie beyond the control of human beings.”¹⁸ This view of a natural disaster is reflected in presidential discourse on natural disasters insofar as they are rhetorically constructed, implicitly and explicitly, as acts of nature, events of a violent or destructive natural force, such as volcanoes, floods, or earthquakes that are beyond human power to prevent or control.¹⁹ President Bush’s September 15th address called Hurricane Katrina a “blind and random tragedy,” brought about by the “whims of nature.” Unlike human-induced events, in a natural disaster no one is held directly responsible, there are no promises for justice, and there is little point in calling for retribution. The lack of “direct” human culpability, at least as it is rhetorically absent in presidential addresses on natural disasters, represents an important rhetorical and situational distinction, as an exigent, from presidential addresses that deal with politically motivated terrorist acts or human accidents, and as a result presidential remarks on disasters include unique elements and conventions that distinguish it as a presidential genre.



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There are similarities among presidential responses to natural disasters and presidential crisis rhetoric related to political and foreign affairs.²⁰ However, categorically these studies define a crisis (the exigent) as being “rhetorically created by the president,” like the Cuban Missile Crisis, and that “outside of military attack, the situation does not create the crisis; the president’s response does.”²¹ Windt’s analysis of presidential crisis communication also includes lines of argument that dramatize the crisis as a conflict between good and evil, and includes articulations of national policies that require public support.²² As I will demonstrate, none of these primary *topoi* of crisis are present in

presidential responses to natural disasters. Another important distinction to be made is with presidential crisis communication that relates to image restoration. In crisis rhetoric, the emphasis is upon defense and/or a response to anticipated or perceived rhetorical attacks on the president. In a natural disaster address, the rhetoric is about the issues related to the disaster and those affected by it. Typically, natural disasters are crises for the individuals, locals, states, and regions impacted, and not the president. Rather, natural disasters have been opportunities for modern presidents to demonstrate leadership, compassion, and effectiveness. Nevertheless, presidents have been increasingly held accountable for adequate preparation, effective responses in rescue, relief, and recovery, and for appropriate and timely rhetorical engagement. Only on rare occasions, Hurricane Katrina for example, has the president had to employ crisis rhetoric because of criticism of the Federal response or for failing to respond rhetorically in a timely and fitting manner to a natural disaster.²³

In the critical historical synopsis below, the following six emergent substantive elements in presidential natural disaster addresses are identified:

<i>Emergent Elements of Presidential Natural Disaster Addresses</i>	
1.	the president provides a brief description of the events that have transpired, including the loss of life and the extent of damage, assuring the nation and the victims that the president, as chief executive, is aware of the situation and responding
2.	the president details actions taken by responders and the Federal government and outlines a list of actions that will be taken, which provides assurances to the nation and those affected that relief and rescue operations are ongoing and timely, and that the president is actively engaged
3.	the president expresses the nation's sympathy for the loss of life and the material losses of those affected and displaced by the disaster, which acts to underscore the president as a compassionate and caring figure
4.	the president provides assurances of Federal support in the relief and rescue efforts, which functions to console those suffering and often in shock from the ordeal
5.	the president praises the efforts of the local community, volunteers, charities, and political officials, and requests public donations and contributions, which functions to encourage the spirits and moral of those providing aid and comfort, while affording the public a means for helping
6.	the president provides a promise of restoration and renewal that is typically coupled with a recognition that renewal will depend upon and test the spirit and character of the states, communities, and individuals affected by the disaster

The historical synopsis is employed not only to identify these emerging elements of the genre but also to chart the expansion of presidential involvement in natural disasters and to explain the growing importance of presidential rhetorical engagement. Like other presidential genres, the progression and evolution of presidential discourse on natural disasters parallels developments in and adaptations to legislation, the necessities of managing public perceptions of executive leadership and competence in the age of television, the growing responsibilities of the presidency for public safety that emerged during the cold war and civil defense, and the escalating damages and loss of life in natural disasters from growth and development.

In *Disasters and Democracy*, Platt identifies three historic periods of Federal involvement in response to natural disasters: the early period (1889-1944), when Federal assistance was negligible and provided in an ad hoc manner; the transitional period (1950-1982), when Federal assistance was more limited in scope but includes the 1979 establishment of FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency); and the recent period (1988-present) of abundant Federal assistance that followed from the Strafford Disaster and Relief and Emergency Assistance Act of 1988.²⁴ Using Platt's periods of Federal involvement as a heuristic that reflects the developing administrative and rhetorical role of the presidency, what follows is a history of exemplary presidential responses to natural disasters that traces the emergence and progression of the presidential natural disaster address.

Presidential Rhetoric and Natural Disasters: A Critical Synopsis

The Early Period: 1889-1944

In the early period Federal policies were a patch-work of improvisations in the form of special relief acts by Congress with relief and recovery left to private entities, such as the American Red Cross.²⁵ After the Chicago Fire of 1871 and the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, Federal assistance was refused for fear of the Federal government's interference in local and state affairs. The Johnstown Flood of 1889, with its unprecedented newspaper coverage of the horrors suffered by its victims, stirred President Harrison to make a brief but impassioned public plea for donations and aid for the relief efforts that elicited extraordinary donations made to various private organizations that provided the area with funds for relief and recovery.²⁶ During the Great



Johnstown Flood Still from Johnstown Flood Museum Website (www.jaha.org)

Mississippi Flood of 1927, President Coolidge, “Silent Cal,” flatly refused repeated requests to visit the affected areas by state and local politicians, refused to make an appeal on behalf of the Red Cross (despite the fact that he was the titular head of the Red Cross), and refused an NBC radio request to make a national appeal or some kind of a public statement or appearance. While President Coolidge did little, Herbert Hoover, the then Secretary of Commerce, “did everything,” and his work during the flood helped propel him into the presidency in 1928.²⁷ During the early period, few presidential remarks on natural disasters exist and little political and social pressure for the president to rhetorically engage the public was evident. However, as the example of Coolidge makes clear, growing social and political pressure on the president to directly respond to natural disasters existed and, as the actions of Hoover make equally clear, effective executive action could bolster a politician’s reputation and popularity.

The Transitional Period: 1950-1982

The necessity of a political and rhetorical response by the president to natural disasters changed significantly after the enactment of the Disaster Relief Act of 1950. The Disaster Relief Act laid the groundwork for Federal emergency response and relief efforts and changed the role of the Federal government from distant observer to direct involvement in response and costs, and it provided the president with the authority to declare a disaster. The Disaster Relief Act was initially limited in scope—it required a formal request from governors, regarded Federal assistance be supplemental to the resources of local and state governments, and did not cover private losses to businesses or individuals. Nevertheless, it provided the legislative framework for the Federal government to establish policies in regard to disasters.²⁸ The Relief Act coupled with the advent of television and its ability to bring disasters into living rooms across the nation, as well as the increasing exercise of executive power during the Second World War and the Cold War, when nuclear catastrophe became a preoccupation of many Americans, all contributed to the necessity of the president to be responsive to the visual spectacles of disaster that directly affected the sympathies of the public.



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Television by Plusverde, SXU License

President Eisenhower became the first president to craft a systematic rhetorical response to a natural disaster when Hurricanes Connie and Diane struck the Northeast in 1955 and caused widespread flooding, loss of life, and property damage. Ike gave two addresses to the nation broadcast over radio and television on the Northeast disaster, one on August 22, and the other on August 23.²⁹ These two speeches, as well as a carefully crafted Warner Brothers newsreel that shows Eisenhower in a favorable light as a “modern man of action and compassion,”³⁰ contain many of the prototypical rhetorical features and substantive elements that contributed to the emerging genre of the presidential natural disaster address.

In his August 22nd address Eisenhower begins with a brief description of the events and the damages. “All of us know, of course, that there has been a very disastrous flood and hurricane in the East. There is much suffering in that region.”³¹ Eisenhower then read excerpts of a telegram from Roland Harriman, the Chair of the American Red Cross, in which Harriman recounts the relief actions that the Red Cross has already taken and assures the President that the “entire resources of this organization in people, supplies, and money are being fully utilized to bring assistance to all those who are in need,” and that he has launched an appeal to Americans to support a Red Cross disaster fund “earmarked entirely for flood sufferers.”³² The letter ends with Harriman requesting that the President “urge support” for the Red Cross appeal. Eisenhower replies to Harriman’s request with both sympathy and a commitment from the Federal government to help: “My reaction is, of course, we will pitch in and help. . . . The heart of America is not going to stand still while other Americans are in distress and in need of help.”³³ Following the reading of the letter, Eisenhower recounts the actions of the Federal government “since the beginning of this disaster . . . cooperating with the Red Cross . . . to relieve the suffering and to carry on the work of rescue.”³⁴ Eisenhower then praises the work of the Defense Department, which has “been busily engaged in this work and from all States I have had reports of the marvelous work they have done.”³⁵ Eisenhower concludes his address by demonstrating his commitment to “make sure everything is being done” by meeting with Harriman and the governors of the affected states the next day in Hartford, Connecticut so as to cooperate “effectively in this regard, leaving no opportunity amiss in order that we may be helpful.”³⁶

In the August 23rd address Eisenhower, after taking an aerial tour of the flooded areas and meeting with Governors, outlines the effects of the flooding, noting that: “You can have no conception of what has happened until you come and listen



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to these Governors . . . industries flattened, cities paralyzed, communications halted, people out of work, suffering—in certain instances missing members of their families, not knowing where they are.”³⁷ Eisenhower then underscores the “great value” of the Red Cross insofar as their monies are not “limited,” as is the case with Federal monies, followed by an appeal for donations. “In my opinion everybody in America within the sound of my voice will sleep better tonight if he turns in everything that he can spare to meet this great disaster that has happened to our fellow Americans.”³⁸ He then reiterates his pledge “to do everything possible to alleviate this situation” and to see “whether we can prevent these floods in the future on a long-range basis, whether we can get insurance through some cooperation between insurance companies and State and Federal governments to prevent the kind of losses that have been suffered by our industries.”³⁹ He concludes by underscoring that: “We’re going to do

everything that’s possible and won’t you do your part right away-quickly?”⁴⁰ In these two brief speeches, Eisenhower provides a number of the substantive touchstones that become hallmarks of future presidential disaster speeches: he recounts the events; he provides a brief description of losses and the damages; he underscores and praises the rescue and relief efforts of responders, both private and governmental; he expresses his sympathy and that of the nation; he pledges to do everything possible to aid in rescue and relief efforts; he makes an appeal for charitable contributions; and he details a list of actions that he will take including efforts to prevent extensive damages in future recurrences (mitigation).

Eisenhower’s addresses focused on rescue, relief, and mitigation but excluded any guarantees of restoration and renewal, which was in keeping with the limits of Federal assistance in the 1950 Disaster Relief Act. Commitments to restoration and renewal during the transitional period were simply beyond the authority of the president. Rather, restoration and renewal were concerns and challenges for state and local governments and rhetorically framed as indices of the spirit and character of individuals and communities. President Nixon’s comments in Gulfport, Mississippi, following an aerial tour of Mississippi in the aftermath of Hurricane Camille in 1969, reflect both the limits of Federal assistance and what Rozario describes as the characteristic American attitude toward disasters: as opportunities for progress, as sources for moral, political, and economic renewal, and as blessings in disguise.⁴¹



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*I do not want to sound now as if all that has happened to you could turn out to be for the best. But could I for a moment remind this great audience of some of the lessons of history? Throughout history we have found that great natural disasters have either made or broken civilization, and the same can be said of a man or a woman, a disaster can make or break him.*⁴²

Nixon compared the events and the opportunity for reconstruction on the Gulf Coast with the rebuilding that occurred after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and the 1964 Alaskan earthquake, in which they came back “more beautiful than ever” and “greater than ever.”⁴³ Nixon’s comments included the themes of renewal and restoration in order to lift the spirits, as a form of consolation, for those struggling with the impacts

of the storm, but it included no promise of extensive Federal monies for rebuilding: “I predict today that the people of Mississippi and particularly those that have suffered damage will come from this destruction and you will rise from it and be a greater people than was the case before.”⁴⁴

With the exception of Nixon’s historical parallelism on the possibilities and challenges of restoration and renewal, the rest of Nixon’s address closely follows the substantive elements of Eisenhower’s addresses: he begins by noting that “this is the worst storm that has been recorded in 100 years of recording storms in the United States” and that “thousands have been made homeless, hundreds are dead, hundreds of millions of dollars in property damage”; he underscores the support of the Federal government, “I can certainly pledge to you a continuation of the interest that we have already shown”; he expresses his sympathy, and by extension that of nation, for the loss of life and property damage, noting that the disaster “has touched the heart of the Nation and volunteer organizations are making their contributions”; and he praises the efforts of the local community, volunteers, charities, and political officials to work together “not just to rebuild as it was, what was old, but in which you will rebuild a new area, not only new buildings, but new ideas and new opportunities for all of the people of this great State. What a challenge that is.”⁴⁵



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Ten years later the people of the Gulf Coast would have another “opportunity” at renewal and restoration and another “test” of their character and spirit, when Hurricane Frederick made landfall on September 12, 1979 and became the newest storm to become the “costliest” to hit the United States.⁴⁶ When Hurricane Frederick struck the Gulf Coast, FEMA had just been established as an independent agency as an amalgam of civilian and military programs in April of 1979. Moreover, in the aftermath of Camille, legislation rapidly expanded the scope of Federal assistance to both states and individuals: “A watershed in the Federal role was crossed around 1969 with the authorization of benefits to individuals.”⁴⁷ President Carter’s remarks following an inspection tour of the areas damaged by Hurricane Frederick reflect the expanding Federal assistance that allows him to provide a firmer commitment to renewal and restoration than those before him. “The damage is extremely severe, and the Federal commitment to helping all of you and all those who were damaged repair what has been done and restore the quality of your lives is complete and it’s permanent.”⁴⁸

Carter’s statement of Federal assistance comes immediately after he consoles the audience noting that despite the fact that Frederick was “one of the most severe hurricanes which has ever hit our nation” because of the “close working cooperation between local and state and Federal officials” and the “many volunteers and citizens who came forward, that the loss of life has been minimal.”⁴⁹ Carter also includes elements of lament and sympathy stating that “Our hearts go out to those who have suffered so much” and that “the damage is severe.”⁵⁰ Despite Carter’s firm statement of Federal assistance, he recognizes that “Government can do just a limited amount. The vast contributions of repair and human care must come from volunteers.”⁵¹ Carter’s comments of exhortation and praise to those affected are exemplary: “I’d like to point out that after a few days the intense concern and unselfish attitude and cooperative spirit might tend to fall away. I hope you all won’t let that happen.”⁵²



Like Nixon before him Carter’s comments reveal a view that the disaster is a challenge to the spirit and character of the individual, the community, and the nation: “This is the character of our nation, when we are tested as a country, we always respond successfully.”⁵³

Carter, in a similar fashion to Eisenhower, voices a concern about mitigation for future storms: “I hope that as we rebuild . . . that we’ll be looking forward to the future with caution, building on our experiences. Camille was 10 years ago, and we don’t know whether a year from now or 10 years from now we’ll have another severe hurricane. As we do rebuild and repair, we ought to have in mind how we can minimize damage in the future.”⁵⁴ Carter’s remarks include substantive elements of praise for the efforts of the local communities, volunteers, and political officials, lists specific actions that will be taken, assures the audience that everything possible is being done, “that we’ve done a good job so far, and I have no doubt that in the future we’ll continue to do so.”⁵⁵

The increasing costs, damages to lives and property by ever more destructive natural disasters, coupled with expanding media coverage and public sympathy and interest in calamity, the CNN syndrome, all stimulated a potent combination of spectacle, compassion, and politics that resulted in an ever greater Federal role in disasters and increasing public accountability for presidents with a corresponding requirement for rhetorical engagement. Taken together there was an emerging “tie between rhetorical action and the maintenance and development of the presidency”⁵⁶ that would continue to progress.



Broken Bridge by Chris Metcalf, Creative Commons Attribution

Following the enactment of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Act of the 1988 the scope of individual and public assistance was broadened considerably.⁵⁷ With the creation of FEMA in 1979, Carter had hoped to both quell criticism of and improve the Federal response to disasters; however, “under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush” FEMA was increasingly criticized as being a “dumping ground for political hacks,” for focusing most of its resources on safeguarding the government during a nuclear attack, and for being “caught off-guard in 1989 when the United States began to experience a rise in mega-calamities.”⁵⁸ Moreover, criticisms regarding the effectiveness of FEMA were easily associated with presidential effectiveness and concern.



Cavalry by soldiersmediacenter, Creative Commons Attribution

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Hugo and Andrew, President George Bush was dogged by criticism for problems in relief and rescue. In the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew, in particular, significant criticism of “Federal efforts” that were “inadequate and often confused and that four days after Hurricane Andrew . . . thousands of residents still lacked food, water and shelter”⁵⁹ were leveled against President Bush. Kate Hale, a Dade County official, who made an angry plea for help three days after the hurricane that was widely covered by the national media, exclaimed: “Where in the hell is the cavalry on this one? They keep saying we’re going to get supplies. For God’s sake, where are they?”⁶⁰ Clearly significant problems in the Federal response were real but some of the criticisms of the Bush administration’s effectiveness and “slowness of response,” both real and imagined, may be linked to a piecemeal rhetorical response and because Bush did not deliver a speech from Florida in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

Hurricane Andrew, a Category 4 on the Saffir-Simpson Scale, struck south Florida on August 24, 1992; it was the third most powerful storm to ever hit the U.S. and the costliest prior to Katrina.⁶¹ Between August 24 and August 29, Bush gave a series of brief statements and exchanges with reporters that largely discussed the events that had transpired and the actions he was taking, but by August 28, he was in a position of having to do damage control and responding to criticisms of not “acting fast enough.”⁶² Bush did not deliver a fully developed speech on the disaster during the days immediately following the event, and while he toured Florida in the immediate wake of the storm, he did not speak in Florida until after criticisms about the response had surfaced; together these helped fuel the criticism that he was not responsive quickly enough.



On September 1, in a set of remarks and an exchange with reporters, this time from Homestead Middle School following a tour of south Florida, and in a live nationwide speech later that evening, Bush finally gave two speeches that collected together all of the typical substantive elements, which included praise for the efforts of the local community, volunteers, charities, and political officials, that outlined additional actions that were being taken, that expressed his sympathy and that of the country, that provided assurances of continuing support, and that promised hope for restoration. Bush then made a commitment to rebuild Homestead Air Force Base and the strongest statement and commitment of Federal monies and aid in restoration that had ever been made:



Mattress by Bolleanspilt, Creative Commons Attribution

*And to ease the financial burden, today I am authorizing under the Stafford Act full Federal reimbursement for 100 percent of all eligible public assistance, including projects such as debris removal, to eliminate immediate threats to public health and safety, and repair and reconstruction of nonprofit facilities. . . . Temporary housing and mortgage assistance, crisis counseling, disaster unemployment assistance will continue to be 100 percent Federally funded where permitted under the law.*⁶³

President Bush continued by praising the “real heroes of Hurricane Andrew . . . the people of south Florida,” noting that “they could count on the continued support of the American people,” and that they were going to succeed: “We will succeed because the people of south Florida, because of their spirit.”⁶⁴ While there were questions about Bush’s political motives regarding the extent of the Federal commitment made

to Florida (the 1992 presidential campaign was underway), Bush did eventually manage to convey a message of responsiveness, compassion, and engagement in the relief, rescue, and restoration in the wake of Hurricane Andrew. Nevertheless, lingering questions about the preparedness and effectiveness of FEMA remained, while public expectations for presidential effectiveness, accountability, and engagement continued to increase, as did the necessity for timely and adroit rhetorical action by the president. By 1989 massive Federal assistance had become a norm, which in turn heightened public expectations for Federal involvement while also increasing the possibility for disappointment and failure. Failure to effectively respond in rescues and relief services could damage a president's reputation, a situation made all the more likely by staffing FEMA with political appointees.

In 1993, President Clinton appointed James Lee Witt as the new director of FEMA and elevated it to a cabinet level position. Witt was the first director to have experience as a state emergency manager and he initiated comprehensive reforms that streamlined operations of relief and recovery, and he placed an emphasis on preparedness and mitigation programs.⁶⁵ The emphasis upon improving preparedness and responsiveness would eventually help to reverse the low opinion of FEMA, and during the 1993 Great Flood of the Mississippi so would Clinton's rhetorical responses; like Hoover before him, he "did everything."

The flood of 1993 devastated the Midwest. The 1993 flood was distinctive from other floods in terms of its magnitude, severity, the resulting damage, and the season in which it occurred (all summer). At Hannibal, Missouri, the Mississippi River remained above flood stage for more than six months, while portions of the Missouri River were above flood stage for several months; the entire state of Iowa was declared a disaster area, as were portions of eight other states.⁶⁶

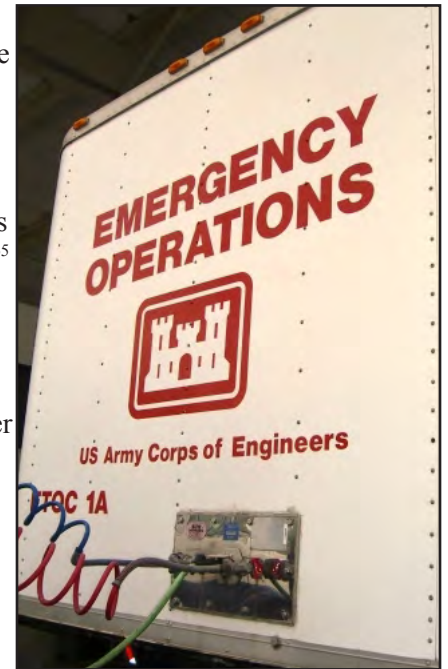
During the flooding Clinton toured flooded areas and engaged in a number of town hall meetings, held a "flood summit" in St. Louis on July 17, held press conferences and exchanges with reporters, and gave three addresses on the flooding (July 4, 1993; July 8, 1993; and August 12, 1993).⁶⁷ The July 8th radio address was exemplary of the emergent natural disaster speech. In the address Clinton begins with sympathy and concern: "I'm deeply concerned about the disaster hitting many of you in the Midwest . . . I want the services you need to be delivered responsibly, efficiently, and without delay. And most of all, I want you to be treated the way every American would ask to be treated . . . with compassion and effectiveness as neighbors and friends."⁶⁸ In Clinton's closing comments he encouraged the victims "to take heart and have faith," consoled them with hope that "as hard as these times are, you know that the water will soon recede and the work of recovery will begin," and he offered assurances of the support of the American people that "you can depend on us for support at this critical moment in your lives. For that is the American way."⁶⁹ In an exchange with reporters in Des Moines on July 14, Clinton reiterated the characteristic American attitude that disasters are a challenge to the inner strength of Americans and that this strength would be the basis of renewal and restoration: "in the end, it is the inner strength of people and the support of communities and families that will bring us through."⁷⁰



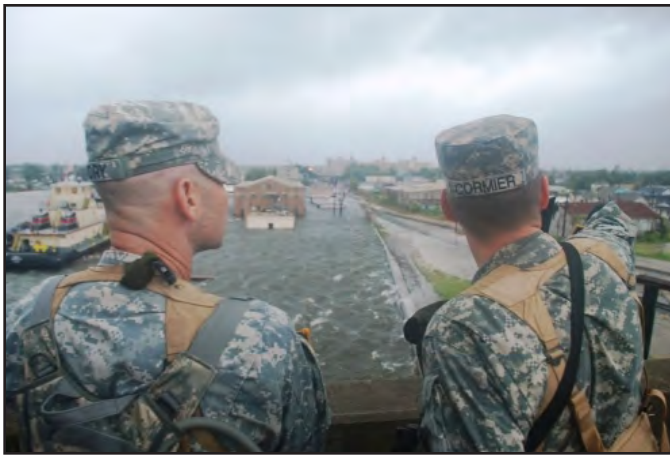
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Clinton's sustained and timely rhetorical efforts as well as James Witt's comprehensive reforms at FEMA resulted in a much more effective response to the 1993 flood.⁷¹ FEMA was eventually folded into the Department of Homeland Security during President George W. Bush's administration, and when Hurricane Katrina struck the Federal government's capacity to effectively respond would be challenged as would the President's compassion and rhetorical abilities.

Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast on the morning of August 29, 2005 as a Category 3 storm and became the costliest storm in American history, one of the five deadliest, and perhaps the worst natural disaster. While many believed the storm had spared New Orleans of the worse-case scenario, by the afternoon of August 29th the levee system buckled and then failed causing severe flooding. In all, Katrina's destructive path stretched from the Florida panhandle to Texas.⁷² In New Orleans rescue and relief efforts were completely overwhelmed by the sheer devastation; it took until Friday September 2nd (four days) for survivors to be rescued from the Super Dome and the Convention Center and as each day passed without rescue and relief, criticisms of the Bush Administration escalated. On August 30, the day after Katrina, Bush attended a V-J Day event in California, where he opened with his concern for the people of the Gulf Coast noting how "we are still in the midst of search and rescue operation."⁷³



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He also underscored how the “Federal, State and local governments are working side by side,”⁷⁴ and requested donations to charities for those that wanted to help.

The following day, August 31, Bush did a flyover of the Gulf Coast on his way back to Washington from his ranch in Texas. Later that day he made his first Rose Garden address on Katrina that included the characteristic elements of the natural disaster speech: he began by describing the extent of damages, noting that “we are dealing with one of the worst natural disasters in our nation’s history”; he detailed the actions that were being taken by his administration outlining the immediate goals to “save lives,” to “sustain lives,” and to “execute a comprehensive recovery effort”; and he praised the efforts of “communities,” “neighbors,” the “Red Cross,” and “all other members

of the armies of compassion,” involved in rescue and relief efforts.⁷⁵ He concluded with an exemplary statement that assured support and hope for restoration and renewal:

The folks on the Gulf Coast are going to need the help of this country for a long time. This is going to be a difficult road. The challenges that we face on the ground are unprecedented. But there’s no doubt in my mind we’re going to succeed. Right now the days seem awfully dark for those affected. I understand that. But I’m confident that, with time, you can get your life back in order, new communities will flourish, the great city of New Orleans will be back on its feet, and America will be a stronger place for it.⁷⁶



The following day President Bush requested an emergency appropriation of \$10.5 billion, met with former presidents Clinton and Bush, and delivered yet another set of remarks that reiterated the typical elements of the natural disaster speech with updates on the rescue and relief efforts. The remarks included a request for donations to the charity drive that the former presidents would be leading, and closed by asking the people of the Gulf Coast for “continued patience as recovery operations unfold.”⁷⁷ By the next day, September 2nd even the President’s patience was wearing thin as the problems in rescue and relief deepened.



Katrina Donations Sign by Dale Leschnitzer, Creative Commons Attribution

On the morning of Friday, September 2nd Bush, speaking on the South Lawn prior to his departure to tour the Gulf Coast, commented that he had just met with administration officials on the situation in the Super Dome and the Convention Center, he updated the actions that were being taken, and noted that they were still “trying to get food and medicine,” and the military police to those sites for security.⁷⁸ Bush’s own impatience with the situation was evident when he noted that “A lot of people are working hard to help those who have been affected, and I want to thank the people for their efforts. The results are not acceptable.”⁷⁹ He concluded by remarking that “I’m looking . . . forward to thanking those on the ground and . . . to assure people that we’ll get on top of this situation, and we’re going to help people who need help.”⁸⁰

Later that day in Mobile, Alabama, Bush delivered another set of remarks that reiterated elements of his earlier statements. It was in Mobile that Bush praised the work of Michael Brown, noting that “Brownie, you’re doing a heck of a job.”⁸¹ Still later that day, following a walking tour in Biloxi, Mississippi, in an exchange with reporters that followed, he was asked what he meant when he said “the results are not acceptable.”⁸² In response Bush said: “this is a huge task that we’re dealing with. And our jobs, as people in positions of responsibility, is not to be satisfied until the job is done as good as it can possibly be done. And that’s what I was referring to. I’m certainly not denigrating the efforts of anybody. But the results can be better in New Orleans, and I intend to work with the folks to make it better.”⁸³ That evening, in remarks in Kenner, Louisiana, Bush informed the audience that “the convention center is secure,” and then reassured his audience that he was “not going to forget what I’ve seen,” and that he looked forward to continuing “to do our duty to help the good folks of this part of the world get back on their feet.”⁸⁴ He concluded with a promise of restoration and renewal, noting that “I believe that the great city of New Orleans will rise again and be a greater city of New Orleans.”⁸⁵

Despite Bush's addresses and tour of the stricken areas, criticisms of local, State, and Federal officials continued to emerge regarding problems in rescue and relief; these criticisms focused on preparedness, management, and the reasons for the delayed response in New Orleans, but also on issues of race and class.⁸⁶ As more information about the crisis in rescue and relief became public and one problem followed another, the criticism between and among political officials at local, State, and Federal levels deepened and played out publicly in the media; the Bush administration quickly found itself embroiled in a political crisis in which "the possibility for very serious damage to the administration exists."⁸⁷

By September 3rd a potent combination of critical media coverage, public sympathy and horror at the spectacle of calamity, politics, the ever greater Federal responsibility in disasters, coupled with the increased public accountability for presidents, and an immense natural disaster all combined to create "one of the worst political crises of his [Bush's] administration."⁸⁸ The crisis focused on the Bush administration's ability to effectively respond to the disaster and the president's compassion. Significant problems existed in coordinating the Federal response with local and state governments, and insofar as Bush had not toured the affected areas in the immediate aftermath of the storm, it fueled the impression, like his father before him, that he was slow to respond.⁸⁹

At this point, President Bush's rhetorical efforts began to shift toward managing the emerging political crisis. In order to quell the criticism, President Bush "overhauled his schedule for the month of September," planned a second tour of the Gulf Coast, and he made a "rare Saturday appearance in the Rose Garden" that "struck a more somber tone than he had on Friday" when he toured the Gulf Coast and had been "joking" and seemed "buoyant and optimistic" about the effectiveness of the rescue and relief efforts.⁹⁰ While Bush's second Rose Garden statement effectively delivers many of the substantive elements of the natural disaster address, including a long list of additional actions that the administration was taking to ensure the effectiveness of rescue and relief efforts, it also expresses a recognition on the part of the president that "all of us agree that more can be done to improve our ability to restore order and deliver relief in a timely and effective manner."⁹¹ This aspect of *apologia* in the address provides an indication and a realization on the president's part that the tragedy in the Gulf Coast involved human failings, and represents a departure from the typically elements of the natural disaster address as the exigent shifted from the rescue and relief in the Gulf to the ineffectiveness of the Bush administration.⁹²



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As the sheer enormity of the disaster in loss of life, suffering, and property damage became more evident, President Bush, on September 4th in recognition of the enormity of the disaster, issued a proclamation honoring the victims of Hurricane Katrina and ordered the flag to fly at half-staff. While the president's actions and statements ought to have been sufficient to counter the criticisms that he lacked compassion and was not effectively engaged, efforts on the ground continued to prove "inadequate" to the immensity of the disaster and yet another major controversy was about to break regarding the head of FEMA, Michael Brown.



Stars and Stripes from Library of Congress, Public Domain

On Tuesday September 6th the *Washington Post* ran an article that focused on Michael Brown's qualifications, his resume, and his performance during the disaster.⁹³ On Friday, September 9th, Brown was recalled to Washington and on Monday, September 12th, he resigned. The natural disaster had become a full blown political crisis.⁹⁴ Three days later, on September 15, President Bush delivered the Jackson Square speech. As the full extent of the damage, loss of life, and mismanagement became known, the president was compelled to go beyond the natural disaster address. In fact, the incongruence between the administration's failures and Bush's rhetorical representations in delivering the natural disaster speeches contributed to the political necessity of the Jackson Square address, adroitly described by Campbell and Jamieson in their analysis of the national eulogy and by Benoit in his analysis of Bush's image restoration.⁹⁵

Conclusion

This essay extends and complements Campbell and Jamieson's generic framework of the rhetorical presidency by describing the unique situational challenges and rhetorical features that distinguish presidential discourse on natural disasters by identifying the unique substantive elements that characterize the emergent genre. The critical analysis



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demonstrates that like other presidential genres, the progression and evolution of presidential discourse on natural disasters parallels developments in and adaptations to legislation, the necessities of managing public perceptions of executive leadership and competence in the age of television, the growing responsibilities of the presidency for public safety that emerged during the cold war and civil defense, and the escalating damages and loss of life in natural disasters from growth and development. With the increasing role of the presidency in natural disasters there also has been escalating political and administrative accountability for presidents with a corresponding need for timely rhetorical engagement. This increasing public accountability, for the reasons discussed above, can be seen insofar as the natural disaster speech “has emerged through rhetorical practices,” as a genre that illustrates “the tie between rhetorical action and the maintenance and development of the presidency.”⁹⁶

As the critical analysis above reveals, six substantive rhetorical elements distinguish the presidential natural disaster speech as a genre within the broader framework of the rhetorical presidency. The six elements identified include: (1) a brief description of the events and the extent of the damage (or potential damage) and loss of life, which assures the nation and the victims that the president, as chief executive, is aware of the situation; (2) a detailed list of the actions taken and to be taken by the president, which provides assurances to the nation and those affected that relief and rescue operations are ongoing and timely and that the president is fully engaged; (3) expressions of sympathy and lament for loss of life and property by those affected by the disaster, which acts to underscore the president as a compassionate and caring figure; (4) assurances of the continuing and expanding Federal support in the relief and rescue efforts, which functions as a form of consolation; (5) praise for the efforts of local communities, volunteers, charities, political officials and Federal agencies, which attempts to raise the spirits and morale of those providing aid and comfort, and those who are suffering and often in shock from the ordeal; and (6) a promise of Federal support for restoration and renewal that is coupled with a challenge to the communities and individuals that renewal will depend upon, and test, the spirit and character of the states, communities, and individuals affected by the disaster.

The elements of the natural disaster address function to assuage the losses, suffering, and fears for those impacted by natural disasters. When delivered in a timely and fitting manner, presidents can demonstrate leadership, competence, and compassion, and thereby bolster their reputations and popularity, while also providing hope, support, and recognition to those affected by a natural disaster. However, a president's rhetorical representations of hope and support must be consistent with actions on the ground in order to avoid the political crises that can arise when administrations fail to satisfy the public's expectations of effectiveness, accountability, and engagement that have emerged in the recent period.

While this essay is limited to presidential natural disaster rhetoric, natural disasters are potent exigents that engender a complex field of rhetorical activity that ripples across broad discursive spaces of American culture. Theoretically and methodologically the sheer range of the rhetorical phenomena engendered by significant natural disasters represents an opportunity for rhetorical scholarship that can be launched from a variety of perspectives and methods with an array of possible social, political, religious, and scientific discourses and media coverage for analysis. It is hoped that this essay provides the impetus for further rhetorical engagement with the broader phenomena of the rhetoric of disaster.



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(Endnotes)

¹ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 9. For two comprehensive review essays on the history and use of generic criticism and theory see William Benoit, "Generic Elements in Rhetoric, in *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action*, ed. J. A. Kuypers (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 77-95; and Sonja Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, 3rd ed. (Prospect Heights, IL., Waveland, 2004), 193-204.

² Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 6.

³ Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 80. Although similarities with the genre of the "national eulogy" are present, the primary difference is that the president takes a position either implicitly or explicitly that the events are simply an act of nature that could not be foreseen or prevented. Working inductively Campbell and Jamieson examine Ronald Reagan's January 28, 1986 address on the *Challenger* tragedy, George W. Bush's February 1, 2003 *Columbia* tragedy speech, William Clinton's April 23, 1995 remarks at the memorial service for the bombing victims of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, George W. Bush's September 14, 2001 speech at National Cathedral service in honor of victims of the September 11th World Trade Center terrorist attacks, and George W. Bush's speeches and remarks in response to Hurricane Katrina in August and September 2005, particularly his September 15, speech in Jackson Square, New Orleans. While Campbell and Jamieson adroitly describe the broad rhetorical functions of the national eulogy, their analysis elides unique situational aspects of presidential rhetorical responses to natural disasters by conflating presidential responses to human-induced events, such as the *Challenger* explosion, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the terrorist attacks on 9/11 with natural disasters.

⁴ Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 6.

⁵ Rutherford Platt, *Disasters and Democracy: The Politics of Extreme Natural Events* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999), 23.

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⁸ Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 1-14.

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¹² The rhetorical analysis of disasters has largely has been limited to specific case studies that typically are not natural disasters but rather political events, crises, technological disasters, and accidents such as the Space Shuttle *Challenger*, or Waco. See Michael Bernard-Donais, "The Rhetoric of Disaster and the Imperative of Writing," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31, (2001): 73-94; Jeffery Courtright and Gerard Slaughter, "Remembering Disaster: Since the Media Do, So Must Public Relations," *Public Relations Review* 33 (2007): 313-18; Alan Gross and Arthur Walzer, "The *Challenger* Disaster and the Revival of Rhetoric in Organizational Life," *Argumentation* 11(1997): 75-93; Stan Lindsay, "Waco and Andover: An Application of Kenneth Burke's Concept of Psychotic Entelechy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85 (1999): 268-84; Jack Lule, "The Political Use of Victims: The Shaping of the *Challenger* Disaster," *Political Communication and Persuasion* 7 (1990): 115-28; and Damion Waymer and Robert Heath, "Emergent Agents: The Forgotten Publics in Crisis Communication and Issues Management Research," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 35 (2007): 88-108.

¹³ George W. Bush, "Remarks at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance Service," September 14, 2001, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=63645&st=&st1>.

¹⁴ William Clinton, "Remarks at a Memorial Service for the Bombing Victims in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma," April 23, 1995, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=51265&st=&st1>.

¹⁵ Clinton, "Remarks at a Memorial Service for the Bombing Victims in Oklahoma City."

¹⁶ Bush, "Remarks at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance Service."

¹⁷ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President to the Nation on the BP Oil Spill," June 15, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-nation-bp-oil-spill>.

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²⁰ See Amos Kiewe, ed., *The Modern Presidency and Crisis Rhetoric*, (Westport, CT: Praeger 1994); James Kuypers, *Presidential Crisis Rhetoric and the Press in the Post-Cold War World* (Westport, Ct: Praeger, 1997); and Theodor Windt, "The Presidency and Speeches on International Crises: Repeating the Rhetorical Past," in *Essays in Presidential Rhetoric*, eds. T. Windt and B. Ingold (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1983) 61-70.

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