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Neo-Aristotelian Analysis of Joe Biden's State of the Union Address

1. Introduction

On February 7th, 2023, former President Joe Biden gives his second State of the Union address (abbreviation, SOUA) in the House chamber of the U.S. Capital Building in Washington, D.C. Biden recognizes the First Lady, Second Gentleman, Madam Vice President and the Speaker of the House, Members of Congress and Members of the Cabinet. The crowd is clapping vibrantly, some faces show excitement, while others appear hesitant but all rise with respect for the commander-in-chief. Biden cuts the tension in the room and jokes with the Chief Justice and his wife, Jill. He continues to crack jokes as he congratulates the new Speaker of the House, Kevin McCarthy and gives special recognition to his predecessor, Nancy Pelosi. A huge round of applause follows and with an optimistic start, Biden begins his speech. He defines America in one word: possibilities (American Rhetoric).

A traditionally celebratory speech, the SOUA works as both a panegyric and deliberative form of communication. The President celebrates his administration's accomplishments and past successes. He also advocates for change and rallies support for his political agenda. This analysis uses a neo-Aristotelian approach, examining the effectiveness of the speech based on audience response. Did Joe Biden use the available means of persuasion to evoke the

intended response from the audience? The five canons of Aristotle in the analysis of this artifact support the argument that Joe Biden's credibility, emotional impact, and compelling evidence prove the answer is: yes.

Until the 1960s, neo-Aristotelian criticism dominated rhetorical studies. In 1925, Herbert A. Wichelns documented it as the first formal method of rhetorical criticism (Foss). This method of criticism is, "not concerned with performance, nor yet beauty" but rather neo-Aristotelian criticism focuses on the effectiveness of rhetoric on the immediate audience (Foss). Neo-Aristotelian criticism's primary function was to analyze speeches. This style of rhetorical criticism introduced the five classical canons of rhetoric: invention, organization, style, memory, and delivery (Foss).

2. Methodology

Neo-Aristotelian criticism focused on single speakers, often highly regarded individuals who made significant contributions to society primarily because these were the only types of speeches made available at the time of its reign (Hill). For this reason, this method of criticism is appropriate for an analysis of the selected artifact: Biden's 2023 State of the Union address. "A critic investigates three major components of the context—the rhetor, the occasion, and the audience" (Foss). The procedures for using this critical approach focus on the speaker's historical significance as well as their character. The most crucial factor is how the speech impacted on the audience (Hill). What was the intent and what was the outcome? Neo-Aristotelian criticism focuses on the immediate and the lasting effects of rhetoric (Hill) like the intention of this celebratory speech. Sillars argues that "intent is not essential," stating that most neoclassical critics focus on the impact made by the message regardless of the speaker's original intention.

3. Historical Background

Joe Biden was born Joe Robinette Biden, Jr. in Scranton, Pennsylvania on November 20th, 1942. His family moved to Claymont, Delaware where he would spend his childhood years. His first introduction to politics was to serve on the City Council for New Castle, Delaware. He was elected to serve as the Democratic Senate representative for Delaware in 1972 at just 29 years old. He went on to serve as Barack Obama's Vice President for both terms in 2009 and 2012. As Vice President of the United States, Biden fought for healthcare issues, more restrictions on firearms, against domestic violence against women, and for better standards amongst the middle class. He had two unsuccessful presidential runs in 1988 and 2008 before elected the 46th president of the United States in 2020. He is also known as the eighteenth longest-serving US senator in American history as of 2021. While as a senator, Biden helped enact the controversial Crime Act of 1994, signed into law by Former President Bill Clinton. This bill is controversial because many felt it focused too heavily on incarceration rather than rehabilitation and unfairly targeted minority groups. The section of the law, Violence Against Women Act or VAWA, "proved more popular," with the public and required stricter protections for victims of domestic abuse and stronger punishment for abusers. The VAWA reduced the number of women subject to domestic abuse and because of this, Biden considered it to be one his proudest political achievements. He even refers to it in his 2023 State of the Union address by recalling the reauthorization of the VAWA while serving as president. During his many years serving as senator, Biden remained, "mostly positive," and continued to push for bipartisan cooperation (Dziak). This call for unity is a recurring theme of his State of the Union address.

Originally referred to as the President's "Annual Message" to Congress, the State of the Union address is a ceremonial speech given by the President to address the Members of Congress on the current state of the United States and upcoming legislation proposals. It is also an opportunity for the President to gain supporters for his upcoming agenda and inspire the American people with his vision for the nation's future (Shogan). Sillars argues that to the "contemporary communicator," an audience is not a whole nation, but a "target audience." It is difficult to decipher the target audience in a speech broadcast on national television to a diverse group of viewers. When Biden addresses the camera, he speaks directly to the viewer. When he responds to heckling from the crowd, he speaks directly to Republicans. Biden tailors his response to his target audience. "Thus, a neoclassical critic could find communication effective with one target audience but ineffective with others." (Sillars).

Like most, Joe Biden's mid-term State of the Union address began in the evening (usually 9pm EST) in February during a joint session of Congress in the U.S. Capital Building in Washington, D.C. His address came at what felt like aprecedented time for Biden. With issues like rising inflation costs, police reform, and the fentanyl crisis this speech was of high importance for the President. With his hope of winning a second presidential election on the line, Biden needed his vision for the future of America and the American people heard.

4. Analysis: Five Canons of Aristotle:

4.1 Invention

The first of the five canons is invention. Invention, "consists of arguments, evidence, and reasoning patterns" [PowerPoint slides]. It is, "adapted to the audience, addresses major issues, and relies on accurate and consistent information" [PowerPoint slides]. The evidence is both external or in-artistic proofs collected by

the rhetor, and artistic proofs created by the rhetor (Hill). The artistic proofs are ethos, pathos, and logos. Ethos represents credibility (Foss). It is how the audience interprets the rhetor's character. Are they intelligent, honest, or charismatic? Ethos builds trust with the audience. "The meaning of the term *trusted* is not absolute, but a matter of common sense interpretation" (Sillars). If an argument is presented as reasonable, then it can persuade its target audience (Sillars). Biden uses the results of his actions to gain credibility with his audience and shares the numbers to back it up. For example, he states, "Two years ago, the economy was reeling. I stand here tonight, after we've created, with the help of many people in this room, 12 million new jobs -- more jobs created in two years than any President has created in four years -- because of you all, because of the American people," and, "And, in fact, I signed over 300 bipartisan pieces of legislation since becoming President..." (American Rhetoric).

Pathos represents emotional appeal. "The speaker's words will invite us to feel a particular way" (Hill). Biden builds emotional appeal with his audience by appealing to the "heart" [PowerPoint slides]. He introduces the parents of Tyre Nichols, a 29-year-old man with a bright future, brutally murdered by police officers in Memphis, TN. He acknowledges the struggles African American citizens face every day with laws enforcement. Biden quotes Tyre's mother and says, "Something good must come of this" and uses this tragedy to stress the need for police reform. He also tells a story about a couple and their daughter Ava—age four, who is battling a rare form of cancer. He describes the parents as "kindred spirits," recalling his own grief from losing his son, Beau to brain cancer. Biden reveals that Ava is now four years old, representing a story of resilience and never giving up hope. Again, Biden paints an

idealistic picture of unity and democracy. To quote, "...let this be a truly American moment that rallies the country and the world together and prove that we can still do big things." (American Rhetoric).

Logos represents logic. The rhetor uses the process of reasoning to present sound evidence for their argument (Foss). Patterns of reasoning support the rhetor's ethos, pathos, and logos. Example, cause and effect, or analogy form reasoning [PowerPoint slides]. Biden uses analogy in his speech to support his argument against junk fees when he says, "Airlines can't treat your child like a piece of baggage." He uses reasoning by example for why he believes business should pay workers better wages: "For example, I -- I should have known this, but I didn't until two years ago: Thirty million workers have to sign non-compete agreements for the jobs they take. Thirty million. So a cashier at a burger place can't walk across town and take the same job at another burger place and make a few bucks more."

Classical forms of reasoning are enthymeme and syllogism (Sillars). Enthymeme is when the rhetor supplies the premise, but leaves the minor unstated, allowing the audience to draw their own conclusion [PowerPoint slides]. The previous example also demonstrates enthymeme. He concludes his argument with the statement, "Not anymore. We're banning those agreements so companies have to compete for workers and pay them what they're worth". The unstated premise is that businesses should support healthy competition and fair wages, while the government should protect the workers' rights to each. People do not usual speak in syllogism [PowerPoint slides] and Biden does not specifically in his address either. He implies the premise that billionaires need to pay their fair share of taxes when he says, "No billionaire should

pay a lower tax rate than a school teacher or a firefighter". Using hypothetical syllogism Biden suggests that if the American tax system should be fair, then those with less income should not pay higher rates than the one percent.

4.2 Arrangement:

Every SOUA consists of common elements that define its purpose: public mediation on values, assessments of information and issues, and policy recommendations (Shogan). SOUAs follow a predictable pattern starting with the pressing issues followed by practical solutions (new policies). In his speech, Biden uses repetition, repeating phrases such as, "Come together," representing unity and bipartisanship; and "I will veto it," a clear message to the opposition. He emphasizes, "— in America" filling in the blank with action, "Begins, Invented, or Made," revitalizing the American industrial spirit. Biden spends a considerable amount of time addressing current issues pressing the nation. He uses guest speakers who have experienced hardship firsthand, adding weight to the meaning behind his message. Beginning and ending on an optimistic note, Biden ends his speech by reminding the American people why democracy matters and why, "We the People," must defend it. "We're facing the test of our time. We have to be the nation we've always been in our best: optimistic, hopeful, forward-looking. A nation that embraces light over dark, hope over fear, unity over division, stability over chaos." He reminds the audience that they have a choice, but they also know what they must do. – Joe Biden

4.3 Style

Style refers to the rhetor's language use, vocabulary choices, and tone of voice. The style of speech helps to create the intended response (Foss) and it must adapt to the audience (Hill). Plain language or clarity can help the audience understand the meaning behind the message. "Clarity is achieved with factors such as using common words, avoiding jargon, creating metaphors that make matters vivid, using active verbs, and avoiding more than the minimum of adjectives" (Hill). Style may leave an impression or easily forgotten. Reinforcing ideas with sentence structure, such as alliteration, can change the effectiveness of rhetoric (Hill).

Biden fires up the crowd with a booming voice and emphasis on words like, "NOT, STOP, and BAN," and the crowd boos, chants, and cheers in response. He repeats this phrase, "Lets finish the job," multiple times throughout the evening, reminding the American people that he needs their support.

4.4 Memory and Delivery

Memory is one of the five canons of rhetoric but not commonly used in neo-Aristotelian criticism (Foss). Memory combines with delivery as it relates to the rhetor's selected, "mode of presentation" (Foss). Delivery describes how the speaker presented the speech—is it recited from memory or prepared? Body language, articulation, and even eye contact relates to delivery (Hill). The SOUA broadcast on national television for millions of viewers at home to hear the president speak (Shogan). Biden does not repeat his speech from memory but refers to the written words in a large binder that rests on the podium before him. He maintains good eye contact, even looking directly into the camera to connect with the viewers at home. By the end of the seventy-five minutes, he must catch himself as he starts to stumble

up on his words. Taken directly from the transcript, "...And here is my -- my report: Because the soul of this nation is strong, because the backboken [sic] -- backbone of this nation is strong, because the people of this nation are strong, the state of the Union is strong" (American Rhetoric). Tripping here and there, the President continues his address without ever skipping a beat. He smiles when it is appropriate, applauds during introductions, and even clenches his fists in frustration.

5. Conclusion

The State of the Union Address evolved over time and "may be considered the most important presidential speech of the year" (Shogan). Joe Biden's words 2023 State of the Union Address echoed through the house chamber of the Capital Building as a stark reminder to the American people and members of Congress despite their accomplishments, that there is still much more work to do.

"Let's finish the job." – Joe Biden

Neo-Aristotelian criticism researches the rhetor's historical background, the "artifact" or speech, and its effect on the target audience. Receptiveness is dependent on both the demographic of the audience and if the speaker used all available means of persuasion to illicit the intended response.

Biden's second SOUA inspired hope in the American dream, bipartisanship, equality for all people, and stood to right the wrong. The audience was not homogenous but diverse resulting in a mixed review. Speaking to both Democrats and Republicans, Biden met with applause and heckling, remained firm in his belief. In the aftermath of the covid pandemic, Biden hoped to bring the country back together.

“We have to see each other not as enemies, but as fellow Americans. We’re a good people” – Joe Biden

Biden used all available means of persuasion to rally his supporters. He told anecdotes about his father and his family life making him more relatable. He used examples of his administration’s success to prove his credibility. The State of the Union address is a reminder of the checks and balances within democracy. The President uses the speech to reach a wide audience and gain public support for his proposals. Evolution over time and advancements in technology now allow the President to give his address to a divided public. The persuasion of the public vote is a powerful tool to influence congressional decisions. Neo-Aristotelian critical analysis of this artifact demonstrates how verbal and non-verbal cues, inclusive language, and reason collaborate to convey a message. The five canons of Aristotle: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery affect the effectiveness of communication and its intended response. As a career politician, Joe Biden knows how to appeal to congress and the American people. Regardless of opinion, he was successful in conveying a sense of unity—the very idea that nation was built on.

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