Webster UNIVERSITY

Righting Wrongs
A JOURNAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Volume 4, Issue 1 May 2014

Stories of Law and Morality: Examining Bobby Kennedy's Orations on Racial Injustice

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Abstract

This paper critically examines two separate speeches commonly consulted in the historical remembrance of Robert Kennedy. The first is the speech he presented at the University of Georgia School of Law and the second is a plea to bridge racial divides in South Africa. Both speeches share distinct stylistic preferences for narration and moral argument as means of connection. In both cases, Kennedy expresses his desire to create a commonality between humans. This is seen through his identification with the audiences, as well as his moral and legislative reasons for discontinuing racial discrimination. By analyzing these two speeches and examining contextual factors from this period of Robert Kennedy's life in the 1960s, this paper highlights these two orations as successful pieces of rhetoric using Fisher's narrative paradigm.

The American historical landscape has deeply-rooted identifiers and characteristics embedded in its folds. The 1960s, a time acclaimed by many as a resurgence of American Revolution, was a time in which iconic individuals, images, and events made their mark on U.S. history. The country was charged with political energy that not only created conflict, but also gave voice to discontent which had not been heard in decades. The 1950s anxiety and drive to conform was overhauled in a multitude of areas, including the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and the beginnings of the gay rights movement. Though the Cold War still remained a part of everyday life, the '60s represented a time in which otherness no longer held the potential for similar "scares" as seen during the 1950s. Formerly

excluded groups, such as Catholics, found their place in politics. The 1960s introduced the Kennedy family powerhouse, for instance, with John F. Kennedy becoming the nation's first Catholic president.

During this time, Robert Kennedy took his place within the American political scene. Attorney General and eventual presidential candidate, "Bobby" Kennedy represented a real challenge to inequality; a challenge that was rarely seen in mainstream politics and barely embraced by the larger national audience. In two specific speeches, RFK argued for an end to racial discrimination both at home and abroad. The first speech, in 1961, was aimed at a domestic audience at Georgia University and discussed the need for a valid and reformed civil rights movement in the United States. The second speech, in 1966, focused on the global implications of racial discrimination in the context of South African apartheid. When examined together, these speeches not only illustrate the rhetorical transformation of Kennedy throughout his time in the political arena, but they also exemplify the idealism and promise he brought to American politics.

This paper seeks to address content and components of rhetoric by looking briefly at RFK's identity and ideology, followed by an analysis of his 1961 and 1966 speeches that considers his context, content, and strategy. This will facilitate a critical comparison of the messages and rhetorical tropes used by Kennedy in these two instances. After examining the speeches, Fisher's narrative paradigm will be employed to assess the effectiveness of Kennedy's speeches in Georgia and South Africa. I argue that Kennedy successfully utilized narrative as a means of persuasion, and that he added significantly to his persona and speaking reputation through its correct use.

Understanding Bobby: Identity and Ideology in RFK's Rhetoric

It would be impossible to discuss the rhetorical approaches and strategies of Robert Kennedy without first emphasizing his political identity and the influences of his brother's presidency and father's political schemes. While Robert himself was never the front-runner for his father's political aspirations,

there were undoubtedly pressures and expectations that fell to Bobby and those siblings not intended for the presidency. Within the Kennedy tribe, there was a need to support the cause and to devote oneself to the dream of Jack in the White House. New England Democratic ideals reigned within the family, but never at the expense of a political victory. Despite their identity as outsiders (being a Catholic in the political sphere was, after all, uncharted territory), the Jack's 1960 victory heralded in "a new era of confidence in 'The American Way'" which sought to adapt the positives of American identity with modernized social and political frameworks (Stanley, 2009, p. 19). Socially, JFK was committed to reformation that would bring about more equality, but he struggled with Cold War issues that took the forefront during his term. This, however, did not deter Bobby from speaking out about his strong feelings for African American civil rights.

Robert Kennedy's personal beliefs and identity are crucial to understanding his later work, including his speeches related to racial equality. RFK, perhaps more so than any of his politically-inclined family members, was extremely tuned-in to the spiritual and to the idea of strong faith translating to strength overall (Stanley 2009). For Kennedy, belief in God was a means to connect with audiences and, more often than not, identification with Christian values and traditions facilitated a bond between him and listeners. This faith was also the means by which he approached every obstacle, including getting his brother elected to the presidency and then being a member of JKF's cabinet. Early on, it was clear that one of Bobby Kennedy's strongest capabilities "was his ability to grow, to change" and to internalize professional transgressions and amend his outlook. Prior to his involvement in the White House, RFK had worked closely as an aide to a senator involved in the now infamous anti-communist witch-hunts of the 1950s (Mathews, 1993, p. 26.) Throughout his political career, RFK possessed a strong aptitude for emotional flare and sound argument. Trained at the best schools Massachusetts had to offer, his personal speaking abilities would be remembered as remarkable and highly developed (Schlesinger, 1978).

Rule of Law: 1961 Appeals to Southern Youth and Policy Makers

At the University of Georgia School of Law, Robert Kennedy was asked to speak about policy concerns within the Kennedy White House and provide students with a speech founded on the ideals of economic and racial equality. Fundamentally, the aim of the speech's introduction was to facilitate a bond between the audience and Kennedy himself. This was achieved (as it is customary in political speeches) through terministic screens that direct individuals to what they have in common with a speaker, rather than their differences. Kennedy put himself on the same level as his audience despite his family's wealth and his own personal pedigree. By evoking thoughts of unity and referring always to the problem as "ours" or "America's", Kennedy was able to tie together to his audience and also provide a means of realistic change. Similarly, Kennedy tied himself to the Kennedy White House using anaphora, or the repetition of phrases, as he assured his audience: "We can and we will do no less…We will not threaten, we will try to help. We will not persecute, we will prosecute" (Kennedy, 1961). The rhetorical goal of the speech was primarily to impress the need for civic engagement, rather than a return to old-school, bigoted policy. It required moral, individual transformations at a more localized level to grow into community reflections and then, hopefully, to reach the national stage so that legislation (and intended civil rights actions) would actually manifest into the daily lives of Americans.

In order to appeal to his audience, Kennedy specifically utilized moral reasoning through imagery, constitutive rhetoric, ideographs, and resignification. He acknowledged the importance of context; while addressing this group of southerners in Georgia, he reiterated that "Southerners have a special respect for candor and plain talk. They certainly don't like hypocrisy" (Kennedy, 1961). This disclaimer, this statement of assent and praise, was small in the scheme of the message but helped create connections and facilitate more likelihood of internalization from the audience. Kennedy managed to remain positive through occasional jokes and continued praise, despite the cloaked censure of stereotypically "Southern" mentalities through a resignification of typically southern ideals. For

example, the desire for states' rights and self-determination that was (and continues to be) valued in conservative states was framed as something acceptable but not superior in importance to the job of the federal government to enforce existing legislation. Kennedy claimed: "We are maintaining order in the courts. We are doing nothing more or less. And if any one of you were in my position you would do likewise, for it would be required of you by oath of office. You might not want to do it, you might not like to do it, but you would do it" (Kennedy, 1961). Knowing that his audience was primarily made up of conservative thinkers, or at least those positioned in a conservative state, Kennedy stressed the need to position law above personal opinion, and the responsibility to uphold the law even if one does not agree with it. Here, the intentional use of language was used to simultaneously lend credibility to claims for states' rights while squashing the more hostile elements that they created for the federal government.

Kennedy maintained this distinctive inspection of Georgian identity and the identity of the larger American people throughout his 1961 speech. While declaring important changes necessary, he reflected upon the already positive steps being taken by the majority in Georgia towards its inevitable future. As a stepping stone for claims about the American people as a whole, he outlined Georgia's reactions to recent civil rights conflict and legislation: "When your moment of truth came, the voices crying force were overridden by the voices pleading for reason. And for this, I pay my respects to your Governor, your legislature and most particularly to you, the students and faculty of the University of Georgia" (Kennedy, 1961). These statements spoke to the character and nature of this audience, and constituted an identity for them rhetorically; the next step was to connect the Georgian spirit of reason to the larger hegemonic American culture. By claiming "I say, you are the wave of the future – not those who cry panic. For the country's future you will and must prevail," Kennedy attributed strength of character and soundness of mind to not only those students in Georgia, but to the upcoming generation of the country (Kennedy, 1961). These acknowledgments thus reflected the importance of and reasons

for the speech as a whole, which was to promote liberal reasoning and dedication to federal legislature in regards to civil rights concerns.

Beyond the chosen language and the dominant meaning of the speech, scholars must also consider Kennedy's means of language, inflection, and tone. By examining stresses, pauses, tone, and volume, it is clear what Kennedy sought to assert to his listeners. He maintained the ability to converse through linguistic subtleties in conjunction with chosen language, in order to impart the whole meaning of his words. These aspects attest further to his public persona and tie into a strategic performance aimed at representing Kennedy's identity, character, practical wisdom, and good will (Palczewski et al., 2012). Within his speech at the University of Georgia, there are numerous instances in which stress, tone, and inflection are utilized; they often fall within only a few categories: moral statements, strong closing statements, and criticisms of oppositional views. Through this vocal emphasis, it is clear that roles were being highlighted (such as the role of those young students leading the country into the future). At the same time, Kennedy asserted himself as an authority with the power to perform and communicate his aims and objectives (Palczewski et al., 2012).

Within the landscape of Kennedy's rhetorical life, his 1961 speech was a stepping stone towards his eventual identity as a civil rights activist and supporter. Prior to this declaration, there had been supporting statements and conversations within his brother's cabinet and campaign initiatives, but nothing as public as this. It embodied a critical change within Kennedy's public image from the brother of the president to a political advocate outside of his family, uninhibited and ready to assert a more liberal social understanding than his conservative contemporaries. As a wealthy white man, this blatant show of support was something that would take consumers by surprise and mold Kennedy's image differently. For white individuals who valued the continuation of separation and white superiority by law, Kennedy's remarks further removed him from their camp (as he was already an outsider given his faith and origin). However, the 1961 statements further supported his relationship with the African

American community, as well as other minority groups, liberal Americans, and international communities. The speech was a means of gaining exposure not only for the White House, but for RFK as well. It helped place him on a path towards self-identity as a dreamer, reformer, and man of all people.

Fueling the Fire: Kennedy's Day of Affirmation Speech in 1966

Over the course of the next few years, Bobby Kennedy would undergo a time of intense self-reflection and tragedy-induced transformation. After the assassination of his brother and a number of other upsetting family matters, he set forth to continue his family's legacy in politics. Integral to his initiative, however, was his continued dedication to civil rights. As a Christian, Bobby believed there was no justification for allowing some people to be more equal than others, and he criticized the assumption that God would conform to race. His continued devotion to the black community was one that would help develop large support on the national level, but distance him from more conservative ideologies. Through the years following JFK's death and into Robert Kennedy's own campaign for the presidency, he would play on the fundamental idea of human worth, as well as the rights to equality and freedom. These sentiments were not purely domestic, either. Indeed, Kennedy articulated his support for the overthrow of apartheid and his distaste for the hierarchical system of human value based on race that reigned in South Africa. His previous censure of the regime created hostilities and deliberate actions from the South African government that provided an extended context for Kennedy's 1966 speech and its internalized meanings (Thomas, 2000).

There arose the question of Kennedy's true motivations; both prior to and after its oration, critics (especially those involved with the South African government) likened the effort to a "publicity junket" unworthy of praise (Thomas, 2000, p. 22). In order to thwart Kennedy's goal to censure apartheid, the South African government attacked certain means of communication and the mobility of Kennedy's host group, the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). More than 40 members of

the press who were following Kennedy were denied visas, limiting exposure of the speech on a massive scale, as was intended. The only foreign press allowed to capture the speech had to already be within South Africa, and even then they still had to apply for new permits. The South African government explained that denial of access was because it was “not prepared to allow such a visit to be transformed into a publicity stunt, whether as a buildup for future presidential election or for other reasons" (*The New Republic*, 1966). No doubt there was also the belief that Kennedy's speech would promote American "hypocrisy" over the South African government’s apartheid rule and prevent a continued sense of legitimacy for officials in the country. Furthermore, the head of the NUSAS was banned from meeting with certain political figures for five years, in hopes of preventing the event or at least deterring open approval among students in South Africa (*The New Republic*, 1966).

The controversy over the speech boosted American and South African interest in Kennedy’s civil rights rhetoric. What the South African government protested as a "private affair" erupted into overtly political stances, something that could have had negative consequences on Kennedy. Being an American Democrat (and thus "an advocate of the left") was straining, especially since South African perceptions of the left went hand-in-hand with communism (*The New Republic*, 1966). Understanding this, Kennedy used intentional and strategic behaviors and linguistic usage to steer the conversation to his own desired location. This was enacted through claims of similarity between the two nations, narration and storytelling to foster identification, testaments to popular ideals of liberty, freedom and knowledge, and through terministic screens.

Gayatri Spivak’s scholarship on strategic essentialism corresponds readily with analysis of Kennedy’s rhetorical actions. Strategic essentialism is defined as “the process of making an identity ingredient the core part of one’s persona that legitimizes the right to speak,” and for Bobby Kennedy this was critical to establishing his own rhetorical power (Palczewski et al., 2012, p. 162). In order to make a substantial declaration, Kennedy needed to establish an identity that would encompass himself

and individuals from the far-away nation and culture of South Africa. This was illustrated when he took the time to define focal points of human interest and consciously created identity for a political purpose. Parallels between the United States and South Africa were purposely drawn and accentuated throughout the entirety of the first paragraph of his 1966 speech, revolving around a shared sense of history:

> I came here because of my deep interest and affection for a land settled by the Dutch in the mid seventeenth century, then taken over by the British and at last independent; a land in which native inhabitants were at first subdued, but relations with whom remain a problem to this day; a land which defined itself on a hostile frontier; a land which has tamed rich natural resources through the energetic application of modern technology; a land which once imported slaves and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage… (Kennedy, 1966).

This introduction was meant to create identification with the audience and its delivery was intentionally critical of South Africa. Through this collective critique, Kennedy was able to establish a common bond and proceed to discuss the goal he saw as right, moral, and necessary. Beyond this introduction, however, was an assertion of not only South African and American ideals, but of global interests and liberal values overall. The idea that liberal democracy was the answer, and that the actualization of human rights was mandated played a large role throughout Kennedy's advocacy. Certain core human liberties were stressed, including freedom of speech, the "power to be heard," and "government by consent of the governed" (Kennedy, 1966). These ideals were constructed, deconstructed, and rebuilt to encompass the aims of the argument and were most aptly applied with inflated language and extreme examples. For instance, Kennedy stated: "These are the sacred rights of Western society. These were the essential differences between us and Nazi Germany, as they were between Athens and Persia" (Kennedy 1966). And so here we see Kennedy logically direct the audience through historical, ethical, and moral reasoning – but all the while leaving himself some room to dull the offensive. After minutes of decrying the state of apartheid and racial discrimination, he paused and made statements such as: "All do not develop in the same manner, or at the same pace. Nations, like

men, often march to the beat of different drummers, and the precise solutions of the United States can neither be dictated nor transplanted to others" (Kennedy, 1966). Disclaimers such as this popped up throughout the speech, yet they were not matched with adequate evidence; the aims of the speech were indeed to convince South African listeners to heed the call of a transcendent humanity.

As in his 1961 speech in Georgia, Kennedy understood the benefits of creating shared bonds while remaining critical of differences. While his message was biting and his critiques were real, there were still valid and recurring instances of appeasement and a reassignment of blame from the South African nation to a stunted government. This was put forth through means of narrative that were tactical and purposeful in their aesthetics of plot and character development. Perhaps the most moving and the most meaningful character development in the speech was not seen as identifying one person, but a group within society. This group was the youth of society who were learning and receiving wide social and academic educations. The amount of power that he metaphorically entrusted to the younger generations was large and created a story appealing to the audience and desirous to youth, whom were more liberally inclined. Throughout the talk, as with the speech in Georgia, Kennedy discussed and reiterated points about the potentialities of young people: "The cruelties and obstacles of this swiftly changing planet will not yield to obsolete dogmas and outworn slogans. It cannot be moved by those who cling to a present which is already dying, who prefer the illusion of security to the excitement and danger which comes with even the most peaceful progress" (Kennedy, 1966). Characterizations of this upcoming generation were positive; the youth were painted as open-minded, adventurous, imaginative, and courageous. These were all attributes that humans place value on socially, but students still had to overcome their greatest obstacle: previous generations, including the one in power.

Undoubtedly there was a camp of villainy depicted by Kennedy. As amiable as his language was, there remained harsh censure of those set in "the old ways," unmoving and uninterested in extending human rights to those based on race and other characteristics. Most concretely, Kennedy pointed the

finger at the current governmental administration and those in support of it. Those people in power were described as stubborn and unhelpful and, through a reconstruction of language, were demoted from the power they actually held into a sort of cancerous oppressor. Hegemony was redirected in the rhetoric because it did not feed in with the proposed argument and solution to racial discrimination. Kennedy was able then to introduce personal schemas of right and wrong while deflating rebuttals on American hypocrisy, evident when he claimed that "In the last five years we have done more to assure equality to our Negro citizens, and to help the deprived both white and black, than in the hundred years before. But much more remains to be done" (Kennedy, 1966). For this reason, we must acknowledge the success and achievement of Kennedy's Day of Affirmation Speech in 1966. Though imperfect and not a cure-all for the issues at hand, the speech played a powerful part in reassigning public discourse on race.

Successful Stories: Fisher's Narrative Paradigm in RFK's Speeches

It is critical to examine Robert Kennedy's 1961 and 1966 speeches through the lens of established theory in order to truly defend his rhetorical ability and success. Fisher's Narrative Paradigm provides the language and structure that help us interpret our own or other's experiences, and likewise provides a critical lens to understand the construction of meaning in rhetoric. According to Fisher, there are five major aspects of narrative: abstract, evaluation, (focal) actors, voice/perspective, and action. These elements lay down the foundations of a narrative and then facilitate criticism and analysis for persuasive pieces that play on storytelling (Jones, 2003). As this was a highlighted and fundamental part of Bobby Kennedy's speeches in both Georgia and South Africa, it is fitting to examine both oral pieces through this theoretical lens.

In Georgia, Kennedy began his narrative after his praise and assessment of Southern identity (which was discussed previously at length). Pinpoints of collective memory were illustrated to tie together the North and South, but the beginning of Kennedy's story really begins with a court verdict in

1954 related to racial equality. The abstract of this narrative revolved around the verdict and how the federal government would respond and support the decisions that were made. Within the introduction and beyond, the actors in this narrative were identified: Black Americans, White Americans, the U.S. federal government, the government of the state of Virginia, the North, and the South. These groups and institutions were the means through which the narrative was brought to life and Kennedy did not break from that, refraining from singling out specific individuals. The action throughout his story was that of the legal sphere, in which there remained inconsistency in the upholding of civil liberties and civil rights statutes for all people. Different assessments of laws across the country and by the federal government were the driving plot of the story, and the responses from different groups based on location, race, and opportunity promoted continued action throughout the narrative.

The development of characters and connections helped with an eventual evaluation, which was that the integration of African Americans and their ascension to equality was not the threat it was so widely perceived to be by Southern society. The evaluation, according to Fisher, is something that is typically seeped in morality, and for Kennedy this was evident and readily visible: “My firm belief is that is we are to make progress in this area – if we are to be truly great as a nation, then we must make sure that nobody is denied an opportunity because of race, creed or color" (Kennedy, 1961). His sense of right and wrong was transparent, and despite earlier disclaimers it was not entirely based on the current schema of law. His morals, and thus evaluation, empowered Kennedy to stake a claim which was then advocated for with "reason and rule of law" (Kennedy, 1961). It is also important to remember that because this was a speech, the voice through which the narrative was told belonged to Kennedy and was formulated with a purpose, deliberately directing the audience to a specific conclusion and a desired way of thinking.

That voice was later consistent in Kennedy's 1966 speech in South Africa. In that speech, the narrative no longer revolved around a united calling based on nationality, but rather a humanitarian

identity. This is to say that the actors in the piece were no longer members of one identified nation, but were members of different nations and identity groups who could not solely be defined by geography. Kennedy, as a product of the Cold War and an administration opposed to communism, also examined the divide between these actors on the world stage. He understood the South African aversion to communism and played on the South African government's hypocrisy by pointing out that "the way of opposition to communism is not to imitate its dictatorship, but to enlarge individual freedom, in our countries and all over the globe" (Kennedy, 1966). The point to be made, and thus the crux of this speech's argument, was that South Africa denied its responsibilities and had to align with "the rights of Western society" to rectify this oversight (Kennedy, 1966). Government actions (which included oppression based on skin color, economic disenfranchisement, and so on) were scattered throughout the narrative; though not always blatantly criticized, the South African government's positions were grouped together and identified as undesirable from Kennedy's perspective.

Kennedy's evaluation of South African apartheid, though slightly altered from his assertions in 1961, were in line with his reputation as a civil rights supporter and advocate. There is no doubt that Kennedy viewed racial discrimination as malignant and unwarranted. However, there were multiple points where he agreed with critics about the abundance of "problems and obstacles before the fulfillment of these ideals in the United States" and in other nations (Kennedy, 1966). These obstacles, nevertheless, were seen as man-made and necessitating deconstruction from strong-minded and morally-inclined people – particularly the youth of South Africa. In Kennedy's story-telling, youth provided the hero framework that would redeem the missteps of past and present administrations, both in South Africa and the United States.

There can be no denying, when confronted with the evidence above, that Robert Kennedy had specific aims in mind when imparting these speeches in 1961 and 1966. The aims of this rhetoric was to call on open-minded people to critically examine authorities in power and to oppose racial inequality. In

both the United States and South Africa, Kennedy saw inequalities that did not sit well with his politics or official objectives. In Georgia, Kennedy represented not only of his own opinions, but also his brother's presidential administration. This created a need for emphasis on law and policy, rather than RKF's opinion alone. In South Africa, however, those constraints no longer existed; as a result, he was more vocal about the religious and moral implications of racial discrimination. All of these approaches support the historical remembrance of Robert Kennedy as a civil rights advocate, and they provide historical rhetorical scholars with a stimulating look at the transformation of RFK from a policy representative to a political authority.

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