

“THE ECONOMIC CRISIS WE FACE IS THE WORST SINCE THE GREAT DEPRESSION”: THE CONTOURS OF LOGOS IN BARACK OBAMA’S PRE-PRESIDENTIAL ECONOMIC RHETORIC

Willie J. HARRELL Jr.¹

¹ Associate Professor of English, PhD, Kent State University (USA)
Corresponding author: wharrell@kent.edu

Abstract

This essay investigates Barack Obama’s pre-presidential economic discourse and seeks to understand how it functions within America’s economic structure. Throughout his economic rhetoric, Obama draws on the urgency of America’s economic crisis to unite Republicans, Democrats and Independents to the common cause of preventing further economic catastrophe. The most pressing task in this essay is to analyze the rhetorical strategies evidenced in Obama’s economic rhetoric by investigating the essential substantive and strategic efforts he initiates when he calls Americans’ attention to the economic crisis facing the nation, and offers ways to restore not only public trust in government, but also trust in the American Dream.

Keywords: *Barack Obama. Economic Rhetoric. Logos. Obamanomics*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE CONTOURS OF LOGOS

On a wintery 2007 February day in Springfield, Illinois, Senator Barack Obama announces his “candidacy for President of the United States.” In his announcement, Obama champions a theme that would be the staple of his candidacy: restoring America’s faltering economy. “Each of us, in our lives, will have to accept responsibility,” he reveals, “for instilling an ethic of achievement in our children, for adapting to a more competitive economy, for strengthening our communities, and sharing some measure of sacrifice” (“Obama’s announcement for president,” 2007, p. 14-15). Suggesting that all Americans have a role to play in this process, Obama attempts to move “toward a new day ever closer to the realization of America’s promise” (Darsey, 2009, p. 89). “Let us transform this nation. Let us be the generation that reshapes our economy to complete in the digital age,” he exhorts, “Let’s be the generation

that ends poverty in America...Let’s be the generation that finally tackles our health care crisis...Let’s be the generation that finally frees America from the tyranny of oil...Let’s be the generation that makes future generations proud of what we did here” (“Obama’s announcement for president,” 2007, p. 14-16). As presidential candidate, it is directives like these that seal Obama’s reputation as one of the most persuasive political orators of modern times. His public engagements and campaign speeches allow him to display his rhetorical skills as a presidential hopeful who could revive America’s interests not only in restoring trust in government but also in restoring America’s decaying economy. The remarkable authorities of his orations on America’s economy derive from his ability to intertwine his use of language with a rhetorical discourse that connects with ordinary Americans. Economic recovery becomes exclusive early in Obama’s agenda. During his presidential campaign, for example, he firmly sets precedence by stressing in his economic rhetoric the problems the nation faced as he relies heavily on his aptitude and ability to shed light on issues concerning the ills of America’s economic status. Ultimately, Obama calls for restoration that would rebuild America’s economy and make it stronger than before.

This essay investigates Obama’s pre-presidential economic discourse and seeks to understand how it functions within America’s economic structure. Examining Obama’s pre-presidential economic rhetoric beginning with his campaign speeches through his president-elect speech, this essay argues that Obama appealed to the American public through

conceptual logos, which refers to the internal consistency of his messages—the clarity of his claims, the logic of his reasons, and the effectiveness of his supporting evidence. Furthermore, Obama’s use of logos *is* speech. His particularly realistic logic finds its ultimate outcome in what his economic speeches sought to accomplish; he calls Americans’ attention to the economic crisis facing the nation and offers ways to restore not only public trust in government, but also trust in the American Dream. His economic discourse further charts his proposal for recovery and restoration, calls for action, and concludes with a strong projection for the future.

2. MEASURING THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE ECONOMY: OBAMA’S ECONOMIC LOGOS

Rhetoric has always been an influential tool used by politicians to influence or persuade audiences. In his definition of rhetoric, Aristotle identifies three “proofs”—ethos, the speaker’s power to display a personal trait that will make his/her speech credible; pathos, the speaker’s power to stimulate the emotions of the audience; and logos, the speaker’s power to evidence a truth, or an apparent truth, by means of persuasive arguments (Aristotle, 1991, 1356a). Although Obama employs all three “proofs”—sometimes unchangeably—in times of economic calamity, logos becomes more suitable for him than ethos and pathos because he is able to speak with great authority. According to Rahe (1994):

For Aristotle, logos is something more refined than the capacity to make private feelings public: it enables the human being to perform as no other animal can; it makes it possible for him to perceive and make clear to others through reasoned discourse the difference between what is advantageous and what is harmful. (p. 21)

Stuart (2005) argues that logos is “commonly associate[d] with logic, reason, rationality” (p. 282). Yet logos, as Haskins (2004) argues, “retains a semiautonomous status, even while it is being molded by the verbal artist.” The possibilities of logos “are predicated on the secular understanding of persuasion and human agency” (p. 16). Through

logos, a speaker can use inductive logic by supplying the audience with analogous examples and then drawing from them a general proposition, or through deductive enthymeme by supplying the audience with a few general propositions and then drawing from them a specific reality (Henning, n.d.). Throughout his “reasoned discourse” Obama employs these methods to address the urgency of America’s economic collapse. According to Herrick (1996), logos also involves “the arguments typical of the reasoning employed in practical decision making” (p. 34). And, as Higgins and Walker (2012) argue, logos “is not just rationality, but the *appearance* of rationality, more like ‘commonsense’ thus not requiring the same verbal proofs as logic for its persuasiveness” (p. 198; emphasis in original).

In his pre-presidential economic rhetoric, Obama uses logic to create a material link of unification between Americans devastated around the country, with his keyword being variations on “economy,” and not because one would expect to hear the word “economy” in times of crisis but because it reveals a significant transformation in America’s present circumstance. He feels that the struggling economy is the most critical issue facing the American public. In order to reinforce the gravity of the situation, he begins his economic discourse by stating the facts, as he sees them, concerning America’s economic crisis. For example, one of the most pressing obstacles facing America’s economic stability rests in the ways Republicans and Democrats gauge economic strength. The contours of Obama’s economic rhetoric are clearly visible early on in his rhetorical agenda. Obama (2008) believes “we have a different way of measuring the fundamentals of our economy. We know that the fundamentals that we use to measure economic strength are whether we are living up to that fundamental promise that has made this country great.” Obama (2008a) draws on the urgency of America’s economic crisis to unite Republicans, Democrats and Independents to the common cause of preventing further economic catastrophe. Republicans, for example, espouse a Reaganomics view by giving “more and more to those with the most and hope that prosperity trickles down to everyone else.” Democrats, on the other hand, measure economic strength by whether American

citizens are benefiting from the “fundamental promise that has made this country great” (p. 124, 125). Because this dichotomy exists in measuring the country’s economic strength, Obama (2008)¹ reveals that America is in critical need of a leader who “will change this economy so that it finally works” for all Americans.

What, then, can be a model for logos in Obama’s economic rhetoric? Although the causes of an economic crisis are numerous, it is commonly the president’s—or in Obama’s case the presidential candidate’s—rhetoric that draws attention to the situation, defines the crisis, and gives it consequence. As Erickson (1985) argues, the success of a politician depends largely upon “his ability to solve economic...problems, but even more on his talent for communicating with the electorate” (p. 4). Obama’s logic is not specific to him alone and relies heavily on past events. For example, when faced with the economic crisis of his first presidency, Reagan (1989) asks Americans to recognize that the nation had arrived at a “turning point.” Threatened with an “economic calamity of tremendous proportions,” Reagan reveals “the old business-as-usual treatment can’t save us.” While charting a “different course” than that of the previous administration, Reagan’s apocalyptic rhetoric surfaces: “We stalled the judgment day, but we no longer have that luxury. We’re out of time.” Reagan secures his economic agenda by declaring “we’re in the worst economic mess since the Great Depression.” In his “first appeal to the American people about the economic crisis,” Reagan is convinced that solving America’s economic crisis would require an act of constitutional amendment. He believes, however, that there is no “quick fix” to recovery from economic calamity. America could not, in his views, “delay in implementing an economic program aimed at both reducing tax rates to stimulate productivity and reducing the growth in government spending to reduce unemployment and inflation” (p. 80), he warns.

Obama, operating within a similar urgency Reagan employs, utilizes America’s economic calamity as the core for his economic rhetoric. As he seizes the rhetorical opportunities that are available to him, Obama (2008b) justifies his economic agenda, in a similar fashion to Reagan,

by declaring “the economic crisis we face is the worst since the Great Depression.” Obama echoes this statement continually through his pre-presidential economic speeches. Again and again he reveals America’s economic devastation to the public, but in a less apocalyptic approach: “We are facing a financial crisis as profound as any we have faced since the Great Depression” (2008c). Once more, in his first president-elect speech, Obama (2008d) laments, “Make no mistake: this is the greatest economic challenge of our time” (p. 139). And in his final “Weekly address to the nation” before being sworn in as president, Obama further seeks to appease America’s consciousness concerning the economy: “We start this new year in the midst of an economic crisis unlike any we have seen in our lifetime” (p. 179). The evolution of Obama’s rhetoric points to how cautious he was while presenting the reality of the nation’s faltering economy to the American public. This also indicates that Obama is responding to the Aristotelian declaration that “the duty of rhetoric is to deal with such matters as we deliberate upon...in the hearing of persons who cannot take in at a glance a complicated argument, or follow a long chain of reasoning” (Aristotle, 1991, 1357b). Obama’s use of the term “crisis,” for example, is connected to a particular political tactic. When politicians employ the word “crisis” to secure their rhetorical strategy, they are conceivably utilizing one the most powerful political terms to promote unification toward their goals (Edelman, 1977). Since crisis is primarily a rhetorical term, Obama characterizes the elements of an economic crisis when he, first, announces that the faltering American economy is the most pressing issue facing the nation and, second, depends on public support of his economic agenda. To continually secure his economic agenda during his campaign by stressing the need for economic restoration, for example, Obama (2008f) laments, “760,000 workers have lost their jobs this year. Businesses and families can’t get credit. Home values are falling. Pensions are disappearing. It’s gotten harder and harder to make the mortgage, or fill up your gas tank, or even keep the electricity on at the end of the month.” Obama’s logic here may be classified as “proof by mediate inference.”

In other words, some who are so far removed from this economic pinch may not be able to envision these calamities; and if such calamities do occur in the future, they may easily be seen as "uniformity of causation" (Read, 2006, p. 4). Obama (2008g) assures all constituents, however, that "our time has come, our movement is real." Change, he urges, must come to America.

3. CHANGE IS COMING TO AMERICA: RESTORING TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

But how will that change occur? It is believed that America's present economic crisis occurred because of global inflation, rising unemployment, soaring oil and food prices, a deteriorating dollar value, a declining housing market, and a subprime mortgage crisis. Obama's economic rhetoric is fashioned by these variables and conditioned by ideological underpinnings that direct his economic views. Therefore, the significance of Obama's economic discourse is not only centered on his economic agenda but also on the promise of economic progression. Optimistic that "change is coming to America," Obama (2008g) believes that sacrifices are needed in order to initiate this change. "Change will not come," he reveals, "if we wait for some other person or some other time." Obama repeatedly blames America's economic calamity on the "irresponsibility on Wall Street and [in] Washington" (p. 35, 40).² "It is absolutely imperative," Obama exhorts (2008h), that the country starts to "work immediately on reforming the broken politics and the broken government that allowed this crisis to happen in the first place." He appears to genuinely believe that tax cuts for middle-class Americans and budget cuts in Washington would entice voters more than the recitation of traditionalist tenets his Republican opponents demonstrate. "In an economy like this, the last thing we should do it raise taxes on the middle-class" (Obama, 2008i, p. 127), he reveals. Instead, Obama (2008j) seeks to "restore fairness to our economy by putting a tax cut into the pockets of working" Americans (p. 46).

Obama's presidential campaign directive is clear: to rebuild the faltering economy and bring prosperity back to the American people. Although

is political philosophy is camouflaged by his opponents as unrefined and naïve, "Yes we can," his economic agenda is anything but. Believing that the American people "must be able to trust that their government is looking out for all of us – not the special interests that have set the agenda in Washington for eight years" (2008k) and that government "should work for us, not against us... It should ensure opportunity not just for those with the most money and influence, but for every America who's willing to work" (Obama, 2008i, p. 126-127). Obama strikes a receptive chord with those Americans who have been burdened by the lost of homes, jobs, and financial security. Statements like these also serve as points to assuage the public's frustration by advocating communal relief. Therefore, woven throughout his economic discourse are Obama's solutions to solving the crisis: (1) making available more accountability in the housing market; (2) promoting comprehensive, coordinated federal efforts to restore trust in markets; (3) identifying other areas in the market where a lack of precision could lead to similar economic decline; (4) investing additional funds into the science and technology that has already promoted much of America's progress; and (5) modernizing and strengthening America's safety net for working Americans. "It is now my hope and our task," Obama (2008l) reveals, "to set this country on a course that will keep [the American] promise alive in the twenty-first century." However, Obama is hoping to gain something more substantial through his economic rhetoric. While simultaneously arguing that the role of government must be reduced and more decision-making placed into the hands of the American people, Obama (2008l) understands that in order to gain support for his economic agenda, he must first initiate restoring public faith in government. "If we only had a government...as compassionate as the American people," he argues, "there is no obstacle that we can't overcome. There is no destiny that we cannot fulfill" (p. 54). At the same time, however, Obama's communal approach to restoring trust in government places government at the top of the list of the country's economic woes. Early in his campaign, he laments:

Too often the American people don't know who Washington is working for, and when they

find out, they don't like what they hear. . . . We're not going to be able to change America unless we challenge the culture that has dominated Washington for far too long. And that means shining a bright light on how Washington works. (2008m)

For almost four decades public confidence and trust in government have been declining. How does any presidential hopeful begin the process of restoring trust in government when democracy and social order become frail and replaced with corruption and abuse of power? Obama believes that above all Americans must restore the legitimacy of governmental institutions. He trusts that his economic agenda will begin the process of restoring public faith in government because it will "require significant resources from the federal government." Obama (2008n) reassures the American public that reestablishing effective government is not an impossible task. "The road ahead will be long," he warns, "Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even one term, but America—I have never been more hopeful than I am...that we will get there. I promise you—we as a people will get there." In order to instill a "new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility" in government, Obama reminds Americans: "remember that this financial crisis taught us anything, it's that we cannot have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffers—in this country, we rise or fall as one nation; as one people" (p. 148). Obama's (2008o) method, then, of restoring trust in government includes making "government more open and transparent" so that the American public will be more aware of government actions. As Brown (2004) argues, the fundamental idea of trust in government is the belief that government must act to promote the interests and values of its citizens. If government, however, fails to achieve its responsibilities, everything Americans have worked for is at risk. Obama believes that America will not change unless government changes first. In his "Election night victory speech," Obama (2008n) reveals that Americans are beginning to trust in government again, which is evident through his election as America's 44th president. His victory has proven:

Once more that the true strength of our nation comes not the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from the enduring power of our

ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity and unyielding hope. For that is the genius of America—that America can change. Our union can be perfected. And what we have already achieved gives us hope for what we can and must achieve tomorrow. (pp. 149-150)

Rhetorically, Obama's economic discourse is all that he can do to gain passage for his economic program and restore confidence in government. To aid in restoring public faith in government, for example, he outlines his "American recovery and reinvestment plan" on January 8, 2009. Believing that an emergency economic plan to jump-start the economy would provide immediate relief to millions of struggling families, Obama argues "more of the same tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy" (Obama, 2008y, p. 33)³ will not help to rebuild America's torn fabric. Therefore, in the fashion of the jeremiad,⁴ Obama's (2008p) recovery plan recognizes both "the paradox and the promise of the moment." He prophesies that his recovery plan will "immediately jumpstart job creation and long-term growth" (p. 172). Two themes surface in Obama's speech: (1) his unrelenting concern that if America does not act, the economy will continue to decline and recession could linger for generations; and (2) his unyielding confidence that America can restore its wounded economy. The message, however, is meant to propel Obama's objectives regarding the economy. Believing that his stimulus package begins "the essential work of keeping the American Dream alive in our time," Obama (2008q) urges Americans to "act boldly and act now to reverse" the "vicious cycles that are crippling our economy." Representing "not just a new policy, but a whole new approach to meeting our most urgent challenges," Obama argues that in order to end the economic crisis, the nation must "end the culture of anything goes that helped create it—and this change must begin in Washington." Obama believes that the economy must be transformed into one that emphasizes clean energy, good education and reduced health care costs. His proposal includes investing in "priorities like energy and education; health care and a new infrastructure" that are essential to keep America strong and "competitive in the 21st century." Although Obama (2008p)

reveals that his economic plan alone “will not solve all the problems” that caused the national crisis, it will, he believes, “do more to retrofit America for a global economy” than the previous administration. His task, as Kuttner (2008) reminds us “is to reframe the entire conversation and point [Americans] toward a new system of global rules that create better balance both in the permissible practices of trading nations and in the relative protections for property, for labor, and for the environment” (p. 176). According to Obama (2008p), Americans must work “with the same sense of urgency to stabilize and repair the financial system” on a global scale that all Americans have grown to depend on. Obama warns that if a different approach than the one implemented by the Republican Party to solving America’s economic woes is not executed, future generations will continue to pay the cost: “I don’t believe it’s too late to change course, but it will be if we don’t take dramatic action as soon as possible. If nothing is done, this recession could linger for years” causing the nation to “lose the competitive edge that has served as a foundation for our strength and standing in the world” (pp. 176, 169-170).

Perhaps, too, Obama’s logic aids in not only offering a solution to the economic crisis, but in re-creating it by making it significant enough to influence Congress to immediately get involved. He warns that if Congress does not move quickly and make a straightforward decision concerning his recovery plan, America “will sink deeper into a crisis that, at some point, we may not be able to reverse” (pp. 176, 169-170, 177). Ominous as the warning, Obama (2008p) outlines what his administration will have to accomplish to begin the process of restoring the economy:

It means preventing the catastrophic failure of financial institutions whose collapse could endanger the entire economy, but only with maximum protections for taxpayers and a clear understanding that government support for any company is an extraordinary action that must come with significant restrictions on the firms that receive support. And it means reforming a weak and outdated regulatory system so that we can better withstand financial shocks and better protect consumers, investors, and businesses

from the reckless greed and risk-taking that must never endanger our prosperity again. (p. 176)

Several critical points about Obama’s economic logos are articulated here. First, since rhetoric cannot affect opinion without ingratiating the listener, Obama’s speech reaches its goal by exciting the senses of the listener concerning preventing “catastrophic failure.” Second, it appears that Obama is concerned with civic matters that do not emulate the dramatic style reserved for poetic performances—he does not divert the listener’s intellect from the facts concerning the country’s economy. Obama draws upon the language and assumptions permeating the economic crisis and speaks disparagingly about Wall Street’s and government’s inability to protect the economic stability of the American people. Above all else, Obama’s (2008p) bipartisan economic plan holds out hope that the American people are the real catalyst for this change:

More than any program or policy...[the spirit of the American people] will enable us to confront this challenge with the same spirit that has led previous generations to face down war, depression, and fear itself. And if we do—if we are able to summon that spirit again; if we are able to look out for one another, and listen to one another, and do our part of our nation and for posterity, then I have no doubt that years from now, we will look back on 2009 as one of those years that marked another new and hopeful beginning for the United States of America. (p. 178)

Such authoritative statements seek to restore assurance and optimism to the American public to “rebuild that lost trust and confidence” in government (Obama, 2008p, p. 171). But how does one begin the process?

4. THE WAYS OF WASHINGTON MUST CHANGE: OBAMANOMICS

Obama (2008p) does not believe that the country arrived at this transformative moment “solely by some accident of history or normal turn of the business cycle.” Because the previous administration’s dereliction to protect the economic stability of the American public, the

“result has been a devastating loss of trust and confidence in our economy, our financial markets, and our government” (p. 171). Leading efforts to reform government both in the Illinois State Senate and in the United States Senate, Obama (2008h) makes it clear that government has “tramped our core values of fairness, balance, and responsibility to one another. As a result, your jobs, your savings, and your economic security are now at risk.” By informing his audience that it is their jobs, savings and economic security in jeopardy, Obama emphasizes the urgency of the moment and the challenges that they are facing or will face in the future. Obama also points to the importance of recognizing how Americans are involved in the process of renewal and how government’s reckless actions are directly affecting their values and economic stabilities. He acknowledges, however, that the change Washington needs will contend with the “very powerful, entrenched status quo” of those who will “fight with everything they’ve got to keep things just the way they are.” Change, however, must prevail. The change that America needs, he laments, “doesn’t come from Washington”; on the contrary, the change required “comes to Washington.” The kinds of change needed, he furthers, will entail restoring “prosperity” by regulating the country’s politics and government. Although Obama (2008p) reveals that the economic crisis is fundamentally America’s own making, that does not mean that the economic calamity is “beyond our ability to solve” (p. 170). Obama’s strategy consists of two parts: first, provide assistance for those who needed it most, and, second, provide long-term reform to the nation’s economy.

In his “The change we need in Washington” speech delivered September 22, 2008 in Green Bay, Wisconsin, reform and changing governmental systems are his prevalent thematic concerns. Early in the speech, Obama (2008p) spells out the measures of change that is needed, “To restore prosperity, we must change Washington,” Obama exhorts, “We will not be able to make these changes with the same policies, the same lobbyists, or the same Washington culture that allows politicians and special interests to set their own agenda.”

Therefore, his three-pronged reform approach includes “political reform, government reform, and regulatory reform.” This strategy, *Obamanomics*,⁵ seeks to immediately reform the structure that has allowed America’s economic crisis to occur. Again, Obama (2008h) laments that America has arrived at this moment because an “ethic of irresponsibility has swept through our government.” Carving out a niche for himself as economic restorer, Obama (2008h) reveals the tenets of *Obamanomics*:

If we want a government that puts the needs of middle-class families before the whims of lobbyists and politicians; if we want to grow this economy and prevent a crisis like this from ever happening again, then the ways of Washington must change. We must reform our lobbyist-driven politics. We must reform the waste and abuse in our government. We must reform the rules of the road that let Wall Street run wild and stuck Main Street with the bill. We must change Washington now.

Within his optimistic diagnosis exists an encouraging message for economic growth. Once a more respectable government is achieved, Americans will then be able to restore faith in the economy.

Descriptive of America’s economic crisis, Obama (2008h) advocates several solutions to economic recovery:

We can start by ending a war in Iraq that is costing us \$10 billion a month when the Iraqi government is sitting on a \$79 billion surplus. We should also stop sending fifteen billion dollars a year in overpayments to insurance companies for Medicare and go after tens of billions of dollars in Medicare and Medicaid fraud. We need to stop sending three billion a year to banks that provide student loans the government could provide for less, and hundreds of millions a year in subsidies to agribusiness that can survive just fine without your tax dollars and use some of the money to help family farmers who are struggling.

America’s ideological economic strain clearly surfaces as Obama chastises government for its irresponsible spending spree. Urging a “new course for [America’s] economy,” Obama (2008p) maintains “change must begin now” (p. 177). To

replace anguish with optimism while attempting to begin the process of renewal, Obama (2008r) frequently alludes to his mythic vision of America throughout his economic rhetoric. “For that is our unyielding faith,” he mourns, “that in the face of impossible odds, people who love their country can change it” (p. 13). He appeals to the mythopoeic tradition in a way that both illuminates his economic discourse and produces a serious critique of its political and ethical shortcomings. He accomplishes this not through a laundry list of technical advice about the economy but through his own performance.

In his revelation, a resilient economy exists that provides affordable health care a world-class education, financial security and prosperity to all American citizens. Obama believes that America can “prosper and revive the economy” (Harrell, 2011, p. 315). Therefore, Obama adopts a “bottom-up” philosophy of creating a “bottom-up growth that empowers hardworking families to climb the ladder of success and raise their children with security, opportunity, and hope for a better future” (Talbot, 2008, p. 29). Obama (2008s) argues that since the economy is “undergoing a fundamental shift, carried along by the swift currents of technological change and globalization,” Obama encourages the “kind of bottom up growth and innovation that will advance the American economy by advancing the dreams of all Americans.” The authority of his “bottom-up” philosophy encourages Americans to work hard, to educate themselves, and to be their most productive in order to achieve the American Dream.

5. OPTIMISM ABOUT ECONOMIC RENEWAL: OBAMA ADDRESSES AMERICA

Elected in November 2008, while Americans struggle amidst the nation’s economic regression, Obama (2008e) delivers his first president-elect “First weekly address to the nation” November 15, 2008 in which he highlights an optimistic future concerning the country’s economic stability. Seeking to unify Americans behind his economic stimulus package, Obama laments, “We can steer ourselves out of this crisis...Here

in America we always rise to the moment, no matter how hard. And I am more hopeful than ever before that America will rise once again.” Again Obama exhorts Americans to move with a sense of urgency concerning rebuilding a prosperous economy. The theme of restoration is interlaced with themes of saving America, “We must also recognize that out of this economic crisis comes an opportunity to create new jobs, strengthen our middle class, and keep our economy competitive in the 21st century” (p. 153, 154). Obama seeks to build a consensus that his economic agenda will give America the boost it needs to restore its markets and revitalize its deteriorating economy.

In his second weekly address, delivered Thanksgiving Day, November 27, 2008, Obama (2008t) continues to evaluate America’s economic crisis. Promoting efforts to jump-start economic recovery, Obama urges “bold and immediate action” to confront the economic crisis, he laments “we face an economic crisis of historic proportions.” Reminding America that “the road ahead will be long, and the work will be hard,” Obama venerates the spirit of the American people: “The renewal of our economy won’t come from policies and plans alone – it will take the hard work, innovation, service, and strength of the American people.” Optimistic that his renewal can take place if the American people have faith, Obama ends the short address with the sanguinity that has sustained his economic agenda throughout his presidential campaign: “We can renew our nation the same way that we have” in the past, “by coming together to overcome adversity; by reaching for—and working for—new horizons of opportunity for all Americans” (p. 156, 157, 158).

Turning his attention toward the housing crisis, Obama’s confronts the surging foreclosures, sinking property values, vanishing home equity and mounting job losses it has posed for Americans. Although there are numerous causes that can be attributed to the housing crisis, the immediate cause was the bursting of the “housing bubble,” which, according to Lahart (2007), peaked in 2005–2006. By July 2008, 272,171 foreclosures were recorded, a 55% increase from the previous year (Kuttner, 2008). As Obama (2008u) contextualizes it, the housing crisis has

exposed weaknesses in the financial industry's regulation and the global financial systems. "To end this economic crisis," he mourns, "we must end the mortgage crisis where it began." Obama believes that plunging housing values have contributed to the downward spiral of economic activity: the mortgage crisis "not only shakes the foundation of our economy, but the foundation of the American Dream," he reveals. Obama maintains a firm stance that in order to get through the economic crisis, "we need to act with the urgency this moment depends."

Entering the White House at a time when American optimism about economic renewal is at an all time low, Obama's inaugural address encourages America to "play its role in ushering in a new era of peace" (Olive, 2008, p. 61). The inaugural address, as Kiewe and Houck (1991) notes, makes a somewhat "strong rhetorical precedent embedded in tradition." Characteristically, the presidential inaugural address includes "notes for an optimistic future, serves as a launching pad for the president's political agenda, and affords the president the opportunity to appear 'presidential' before the constituents" (p. 137). In his inaugural address, for example, Reagan (2004) was optimistic that the economic ills Americans suffered would "not go away in days, weeks, or months, but they will go away." Reagan, as does Obama, believes in the spirit of the American people. American's economic problems, Reagan believes, would diminish because "we as Americans have the capacity now, as we've had in the past, to do whatever needs to be done to preserve this last and greatest bastion of freedom" (p. 59). As in Reagan's inaugural address, the message of Obama's (2008) "Inaugural address" is centered on America's "badly weakened" economy. In the opening paragraphs of the address, Obama calls the nation's attention to its common creed: "We the People have remained faithful to the ideals of our forefathers, and true to our founding documents" (p. 326-327). Of special interest is how Obama (2008v) represents the status of the economy as damaged and in dire need of restoration, which draws attention to the gravity of the situation:

That we are in the midst of crisis is not well understood. Our nation is at war, against a

far-reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age. (p. 327)

According to Obama's (2008v) assessment, America's faltering economy weakens the country's status as the world's most powerful nation. Loss of jobs, homes, healthcare and businesses, he continues, "has reminded us that without a watchful eye, the market can spin out of control – the nation cannot prosper long when it favors only the prosperous" (p. 327). Obama then acknowledges the previous administration's failures:

We come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn out dogmas, that for far too long have strangled our politics...The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward the precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness. (p. 331)

Obama highlights the conventional, individualistic values that lie at the core of the American Dream and endorses the belief that America should act decisively to solve the nation's economic problems. As with previous presidents,⁶ Obama (2008v) does not directly pledge to fulfill his campaign promises in his inaugural address; instead amongst his optimism that Americans will overcome the present crisis, there exists an ominous warning in his address: "I say to you that the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this, America – they will be met." Obama believes that in order to completely renew America's economy, two things must occur: first, there must be a new foundation laid for the nation's economy and, second, changes must be made in the nation's political landscape. He makes it clear that America must dictate an end "to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas, that for far too long have strangled our politics." By "reaffirming the greatness of our nation," he continues, "we understand that greatness is

never a given. It must be earned.” Faith and optimism draws his address to a close as Obama reminds Americans that “with hope and virtue,” the nation can “once more...endure what storms may come” (p. 327, 333).

Obama enters the White House with a clear and definite course to boost the economy. However, he inherits the fiscal disaster of the Bush Administration: a declining economy, a war with Iraq, an increasing unemployment rate, a mortgage crisis, and a trillion-dollar national deficit. Obama (2009) laments, “We begin this year and this administration in the midst of an unprecedented crisis that calls for unprecedented action...if we do not act boldly and swiftly, a bad situation could become dramatically worse.” The Obama Administration quickly launches the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) that is previously introduced on January 8, 2009, and accumulates in a \$787 billion stimulus package. According to Obama, ARRA “is the most sweeping economic recovery package in our history” because it includes a “balanced plan with a mix of tax cuts and investments.” ARRA aims to create new jobs, provide relief for struggling families, increase assistance available to homeowners, provide assistance for business owners, and increase funding for programs like government grants. Balancing the budget and enacting tax cuts are essential for ARRA to succeed. Obama (2008q) believes it is absurd to continue ignoring these problems until they become “full-blown crises,” as the Bush Administration has done. “We need to begin restoring fiscal discipline and taming our exploding deficits over the long-term,” Obama argues, in order to “get our economy moving again.”

What makes ARRA so crucial to recovery and renewal, Obama (2008q) believes, is that it will put “Americans to work doing the work that America needs done in critical areas that have been neglected for too long, work that will bring real and lasting change for generations to come.” Obama trusts that his “balanced plan with a mix of tax cuts and investments...is a plan that’s been put together without earmarks or the usual pork-barrel spending.” He hopes to implement the plan “with an unprecedented level of transparency and accountability.” Obama assures Americans

that with “a recovery package of this scale comes a responsibility to assure every taxpayer that we are being careful with the money they work so hard to earn.” Implementing his stimulus package signifies only the first part of the all-encompassing plan that America needs to address its economic crisis. To address this crisis, Obama (2008v) exhorts:

We will need to end a culture where we ignore problems until they become full-blown crises instead of recognizing that the only way to build a thriving economy is to set and enforce firm rules of the road. We must stem the spread of foreclosures and falling home values for all Americans and do everything we can to help responsible homeowners stay in their homes, something I will talk more about tomorrow. (2008v)

Although Obama (2008v) acknowledges that while boosting the “short-term” economy is imperative, he also believes that Americans need to “recognize that having inherited a trillion-dollar deficit, we need to begin restoring fiscal discipline and taming our exploding deficits over the long-term.” Believing that the execution of his stimulus package “does not mark the end of our economic troubles, nor does it constitute all of what we must do to turn our economy around,” Obama remains optimistic that if all Americans persist at doing the difficult work that must be done, “we will leave this struggling economy behind us, and come out on the other side, more prosperous as a people.”

To a joint session of Congress on February 24, 2009, Obama delivers his a nationally televised speech, “Address to joint session of Congress,” in which he opens with the declaration that “state of our economy is a concern that rises above all others.” Obama (2009a) decides to face the issues of the economic crisis squarely by speaking directly to the American public. Americans, he reveals, should be concerned about the state of the economy:

If you haven’t been personally affected by this recession, you probably know someone who has—a friend; a neighbor; a member of your family. You don’t need to hear another list of statistics to know that our economy is in crisis, because you live it every day...The impact of this recession is real, and it is everywhere. (2009a)

Obama chooses, however, not to blame the economic crisis on the Bush Administration. Government recklessness was undoubtedly a cause but the faltering economy is also a political issue. In his assessment, the economic crisis is an American crisis not caused by any single political group. Obama (2009a) assures "Our economy did not fall into decline overnight, nor did all of our problems begin when the housing market collapsed or the stock market sank." Again calling for immediate action to finding viable solutions to the economic crisis, Obama reveals that failing to act "would have worsened our long-term deficit by assuring weak economic growth for years." However, he envisions "no real recovery unless we clean up the credit crisis that has severely weakened our financial system." Speaking plainly and candidly about the economic crisis, Obama reveals that his administration is "moving aggressively to break" the destructive cycle and "to restore confidence" in the American public. As he sees it, the priority to solve the economic crisis lies on everyone's shoulders, not just government's. Obama (2009a) exhorts, "Our job is to govern with a sense of responsibility." Obama ends his speech with optimism:

If we come together and lift this Nation from the depths of this crisis, if we put our people back to work and restart the engine of our prosperity, if we confront without fear the challenges of our time and summon that enduring spirit of an America that does not quit, then someday years from now our children can tell their children that this was the time when we performed, in the words that are carved into this very Chamber, 'something worthy to be remembered.'⁷

He then places the present economic crisis into historical analysis in order to evaluate the role government has to play in laying the foundation for our common prosperity:

History reminds us that at every moment of economic upheaval and transformation, this Nation has responded with bold action and big ideas. In the midst of Civil War, we laid railroad tracks from one coast to another that spurred commerce and industry. From the turmoil of the Industrial Revolution came a system of public high schools that prepared our citizens for a new

age. In the wake of war and depression, the GI bill sent a generation to college and created the largest middle class in history. And a twilight struggle for freedom led to a nation of highways, an American on the Moon, and an explosion of technology that still shapes our world. In each case, Government didn't supplant private enterprise; it catalyzed private enterprise. It created the conditions for thousands of entrepreneurs and new businesses to adapt and to thrive. (2009a)

It is evident here how Obama's use of logos as speech is crucial to understanding the overall hermeneutics of facticity. For example, recognizing historical significance as the grounds for progressing his economic stimulus plan, Obama (2009a) declares that the weight "of this crisis will not determine the destiny of this Nation. The answers to our problems don't lie beyond our reach."

Faced with the calamity of the faltering economy, Obama moves with extraordinary resilience to address the problem in his "First 100 Days" speech delivered April 29, 2009. He reiterates many of the arguments he had previously used to demonstrate that America was in dire need of his economic policies in order to renew and strengthen the economy. On economic issues, for example, Obama (2008s) reveals how his administration has concentrated its efforts to "serve as an economic blueprint for this nation's future." The economic values Obama (2009b) stresses in the speech coincide with the policies his administration had previously pushed through Congress. Believing that what Americans need most of all is assurance that under his direction the economy will reach its potential and reestablish America as a powerhouse in the global market, Obama's (2009b) "budget builds on the steps...taken over the last 100 days to move [America's] economy from recession to recovery and ultimately to prosperity." Although Obama (2008v) believes that "our challenges may be new," the circumstances his administration face are not unique. The economic woes of the Great Depression plagued Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration, and Americans faced similar economic despair when Ronald Reagan took office. However, amid devastating rates of

unemployment, bank failures, and decreasing home values, Obama (2009b) deftly strikes a balance between emphasizing economic growth and highlighting the continued challenges that America faces: “We have to lay a new foundation for growth, a foundation that will strengthen our economy and help us compete in the 21st century.”

6. CONCLUSION: OBAMA REMAINS OPTIMISTIC ABOUT AMERICA’S FUTURE

Obama’s economic discourse attempts to persuade Americans that intervention would be essential to national and personal security. His rhetorical approach throughout his pre-presidential campaign and president-elect speeches is remarkably optimistic and celebratory. His logic is simple: Obama (2009a) remains optimistic that America will rise from its present economic catastrophe. “We will rebuild,” he assures the American public, “we will recover, and the United States of America will emerge stronger than before.” Obama explains what conditions must be fulfilled in order to change America’s economic woes. A careful reading of his early economic discourse reveals a distinctive calculated approach and reasoning. The foremost and persistent argument repeated in his early speeches is that the American government has failed its citizens; economic justice, therefore, is of utmost importance. Obama realizes that if he is to truly “change this country and keep this country’s promise alive in the twenty-first century” (p. 90) while successfully implementing his economic and stimulus programs, he has to restore the conventional coalition politics “to reaffirm that fundamental belief—I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper—that makes us one people, and one nation” (Obama, 2008j, p. 47).

References

1. Aristotle. (1991). *The Art of Rhetoric*. Trans. H. C. Lawson-Tancred. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
2. Brown, P. G. (1994). *Restoring the Public Trust: A Fresh Vision for Progressive Government in America*. Boston: Beacon Press.
3. Darsey, J. (2009). Barack Obama and America’s journey. *The Southern Communication Journal*, 74(1), pp. 88-103.
4. Erickson P D (1985). *Reagan Speaks: The Making of an American Myth*. New York: New York University Press.
5. Edelman, M. J. (1977). *Political Language: Words That Succeed and Policies That Fail*. New York: Academic Press.
6. Haskins, E. V. (2004). *Logos and Power in Isocrates and Aristotle*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
7. Harrell, W. J. (2011). A ‘21st century economic agenda for America’: Barack Obama’s pre-presidential economic jeremiads. *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 41(1), pp. 299-324.
8. Henning M (n.d.). Friendly persuasion: Classical rhetoric – now! Retrieved from <http://courses.durhamtech.edu/perkins/aris.html>.
9. Herrick, J. A. (1996). *The History and Theory of Rhetoric*. Boston: Pearson Allyn and Beacon.
10. Higgins, C, and Walker, R. (2012) Ethos, logos, pathos: Strategies of persuasion in social/environmental reports. *Account Forum*, 36(3), pp. 194-208.
11. Kiewe, A. and Houck, D. W. (1991). *A Shining City on a Hill: Ronald Reagan’s Economic Rhetoric, 1951-1989*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
12. Kuttner, R. (2008). *Obama’s Challenge: America’s Economic Crisis and the Power of a Transformative Presidency*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing.
13. Lahart, L. (2007). Eggs cracks differ in housing, finance shells. *Wall Street Journal Online*.
14. Obama, B. (2008). Remarks of Senator Barack Obama – as prepared for delivery, Westminster, Colorado.
15. ---. (2008a). The American Promise: Acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention.
16. ---. (2008b). Remarks of Senator Barack Obama – as prepared for delivery, St. Louis Missouri.
17. ---. (2008c). Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: The change we need in Washington.
18. ---. (2008d). First week address to the nation. In J. Easton (Ed.) *Inspire a Nation: Barack Obama’s Most Electrifying Speeches from Day one of His Campaign Through His Inauguration* Hull, MA: Publishing 180. pp. 139-161.
19. ---. (2008e). First weekly address to the nation. In J. Easton (Ed.) *Inspire a Nation* pp. 153-155.
20. ---. (2008f). Remarks of Senator Barack Obama, Jacksonville, FL.
21. ---. (2008g). Super Tuesday. In J. Easton (Ed.) *Inspire a Nation*. pp. 35-41.
22. ---. (2008h). The change we need in Washington.
23. ---. (2008i). The American promise. Acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention.

24. ---. (2008j). Potomac primary night. In J. Easton (Ed.) *Inspire a Nation*. pp. 42-48.
25. ---. (2008k). Remarks of Senator Barack Obama – as prepared for delivery confronting an economic crisis.
26. ---. (2008l). Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: March 4th primary night.
27. ---. (2008m). Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Speech in New Hampshire.
28. --- (2008n). Election night victory speech. In J. Easton (Ed.) *Inspire a Nation*. pp. 145-152.
29. ---. (2008o). Restoring trust in government and improving transparency.
30. ---. (2008p). American recovery and reinvestment.
31. ---. (2008q). Obama’s remarks on signing the Stimulus Plan.
32. ---. (2008r). Obama’s announcement for president. In J. Easton (Ed.) *Inspire a Nation*. pp. 10-19.
33. ---. (2008s). Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Renewing the American economy.
34. ---. (2008t). Thanksgiving Address to the Nation. In J. Easton (Ed.) *Inspire a Nation*. pp. 156- 158.
35. ---. (2008u). Weekly Address. In J. Easton (Ed.) *Inspire a Nation*. pp. 162-165.
36. ---. (2008v). Inaugural address. In D. Olive (Ed.) *An American Story*. pp. 325-334.
37. ---. (2008w). Remarks of Senator Barack Obama (as prepared for delivery) Grand Rapids, Michigan.
38. ---. (2008x). Pennsylvania primary night. In J. Easton (Ed.) *Inspire a Nation*. pp. 83-90.
39. ---. (2008y). *Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama’s Plan to Renew America’s Promise*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
40. ---. (2009). Unprecedented crisis requires unprecedented action.
41. ---. (2009a). Address to joint session of Congress.
42. ---. (2009b). First 100 days.
43. Olive, D. (2008). *An American Story: The Speeches of Barack Obama: A Primer*. Toronto: ECW Press.
44. Rahe, P. (1994). *Republics Ancient and Modern: The Ancient Régime in Classical Greece*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
45. Read, C. (2006). *Logic: Deductive and Inductive*. London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co. LTD.
46. Reagan, R. (1989). Inaugural address. In R Reagan (Ed.): *Speaking my Mind: Roland Reagan, Selected Speeches*. New York: Simon & Schuster. pp. 59-67.
47. ---. Address to the nation on the economy. (1989). In R Reagan (Ed.): *Speaking my Mind*. pp. 74-78.
48. Stuart, E. (2005). Reading *logos* as speech: Heidegger, Aristotle and rhetorical politics. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 38(4), pp. 281-301.
49. Talbott, J. R. (2008). *Obamanomics: How Bottom-up Economic Prosperity will Replace Trickle-Down Economics*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

Endnotes

- ¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Obama speeches were accessed from <https://www.barackobama.com/>.
- ² See “Abington, Pennsylvania (Friday, October 3, 2008),” “Grand Rapids, Michigan (Thursday, October 2, 2008),” “La Crosse, Wisconsin (Wednesday, October 1, 2008),” “Reno, Nevada (Tuesday, September 30, 2008),” “Westminster, Colorado (Monday, September 29, 2008),” “Dunedin, Florida (Wednesday, September 24, 2008),” “The Change We Need in Washington (Monday, September 22, 2008),” and “Fed/Treasury Plan (Friday, September 19, 2008),” all of which are accessed from <https://www.barackobama.com/>.
- ³ For more on Obama’s immediate economy plan, see: Obama B 2008. *Change We Can Believe in: Barack Obama’s Plan to Renew America’s Promise*. New York: Three River Books.
- ⁴ For more on Obama’s pre-presidential economic jeremiads, see: Harrell W 2011. A “21st century economic agenda for America”: Barack Obama’s re-presidential economic jeremiads. *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 41:1 299-324.
- ⁵ For more on Obamanomics, see: Talbott J R 2008. *Obamanomics: How bottom-up Economic Prosperity Will Replace Trickle-Down Economics*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- ⁶ See Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States for Jimmy Carter’s, Ronald Reagan’s, and both of Bill Clinton’s inaugural addresses at bartley.com.
- ⁷ This quote comes from Daniel Webster’s Bunker Hill Monument speech of 1825: “Let us develop the resources of our land, call forth its powers, build up its institutions, promote all its great interests, and see whether we also, in our day and generation, may not perform something worthy to be remembered.” Obama’s references to the phrase “something worthy to be remembered,” which is also carved into the marble on the wall directly behind the Speaker’s chair of the U.S. House of Representatives chamber (*Respectfully Quoted*, 5), where Obama delivers the address.