

Holly Reed  
Jamie McBeth-Smith  
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## Rhetorical Analysis

### Who Then Will Speak for the Common Good?

In 1976, democrats gathered for their National Convention to nominate a candidate that could—they hoped—restore Democratic leadership to the White House. Their previous convention in 1972 has been described as disastrous and contentious. Like the 1968, convention, it failed to put forth a candidate that could win the presidency. After the Watergate scandal and Nixon's resignation, his successor pardoned him in a widely unpopular move. This series of Republican problems created a space for Democratic succession, if only they could seize their chance.

Into this moment walked Barbara Jordan, a forty-year-old African American Democratic congresswoman, lawyer, and educator. Not only was Jordan the first African American to give the keynote address at the Democratic Convention, she was the first African American woman elected to the US Senate and one of the first to serve in Congress. She had attended the non-integrated Texas Southern University where she had been a champion debater, competing (and winning) against Ivy League schools. She'd come to adulthood during the civil rights movement and fought in her political career for the expansion of civil rights. She'd seen first-hand how people working together can affect legislative change.

Jordan's speech acknowledges the unique moment in which both she and the Democratic party finds themselves. She reflects on the social progress that has been made since the inception

of the party and then touches on the problems the country is facing — an up swell in cynicism, anger and frustration. After touching on the mistakes the Democratic party has made she proposes a solution and argues that Democrats are uniquely suited to lead the way. Jordan's values-based appeal is deceptively simple; full of idealism, directness and inspiring metaphor that invites the audience to cast aside special interests and embrace unity and a shared destiny. In *Who Then Will Speak for the Common Good*, Barbara Jordan makes an elegantly crafted emotional appeal, designed to break through cynicism and restore the audience to a belief in what democracy can be when the people are unified in a shared vision.

One of the strengths of Jordan's speech is what it does *not* contain. There is no blame and there are no excuses which enhances her ethos as a voice of unity and reason. She never disparages the Republican party and doesn't delve into rehashing the country's racist past. Her only allusion to racism is delicate. She simply says, "A lot of years passed since 1832, and during that time it would have been most unusual for any national political party to ask a Barbara Jordan to deliver a keynote address."

Throughout her speech, Jordan is direct when discussing problems and solutions, but not specific. Her purpose is to motivate and inspire. She isn't seeking election, so she has the freedom to touch on the conceptual problems the country is facing but avoid mentioning specific policies. This also allows her to avoid alienating any potential listener or distract them from the line of reason she's building between problem to solution.

When speaking about the failings of elected officials she uses a series of short phrases to describe the solutions, sometimes with alliterative quality: "If we...propose, we must produce." These exhortations to elected officials are partly for the benefit of the officials in her audience but mostly for the benefit of the voters. By choosing to distill complex issues down into a simple

matter of accountability, she appeals to the voter's feeling that integrity *is* a simple matter, or should be. Similarly, she acknowledges the mistakes of the Democratic party without finger-pointing or qualifications, "We have made mistakes. We realize that. We admit our mistakes." Such directness lends ethos to both her and to the Democratic party and clears the air for her to begin to layout out her solution.

Though her argument is primarily a values-based one, its structure is based in logic. Jordan does more than paint an inspirational picture of a utopian government by and for the people. Though her problem and solution are necessarily general, she explains the problem and its causes, then proposes a solution and the steps needed from citizens and public servants if the plan is to succeed.

Part of Jordan's solution is voters putting their collective energy behind the Democratic party. To persuade the audience of the merit of this plan, she first addresses the strengths of the Democratic party with careful word choices and appeals to reason in the form of historical examples. She uses strongly visual phrases like "bedrock," "deeply rooted," and "firmly etched" to describe Democratic concepts. These phrases evoke thoughts of strength, longevity, and commitment. She touches on times in the past when "the people" have relied on Democrats to solve problems and uphold principles. She also outlines democratic ideals of positivity, equality, adaptability and optimism and caps them with the short and powerful maxim, "We believe in equality for all, and privileges for none."

The other half of Jordan's solution requires a unity of purpose from voters and politicians alike, working together. She's begun to make her argument for unity and equality in her opening paragraph. Her own presence as the keynote speaker is a testimony of the inclusiveness and progressiveness of the Democratic party. She goes on to detail this inclusiveness multiple times,

referring to Democrats as “heterogeneous” and asserting that 19th century immigrants largely identified as Democratic.

As the daughter of a minister, Jordan also makes good use of techniques from the African American oratory tradition like repetition, call response, and lyrical language that evokes strong visual and emotional responses. For example, instead of simply stating the Democratic party is best to lead, she asks the question, “What is it about the Democratic Party that makes it the instrument the people use when they search for ways to shape their future?” This is an interesting choice, perhaps based on call response, a unifying technique between speaker and audience. This also allows her to imply her claim—that the Democratic party *is* the people’s engine of change—without stating it as a fact to be argued.

When she begins expanding on her the theme of unity, Jordan’s language becomes more poetic and lyrical with phrases like, “one people bound together by common spirit,” and, “A spirit of harmony will survive in America only if each of us remembers that we share a common destiny.” These words evoke idealistic images of a society where everyone is part of something greater than themselves.

Jordan repeats key phrases and words to emphasize her point and slow down the action, letting the audience absorb the images she’s painting and the sincerity of her words. Near the end of her speech she repeats the words destiny and confidence three times each. When describing the responsibilities of public officials, she says, “More is required of public officials than slogans and handshakes and press releases. More is required.” At other times, she uses synonyms as a repetitive technique, “It’s tough, difficult, not easy,” she says. Anyone who has attended an African American Baptist church can easily visualize the congregation nodding and calling back murmurs of agreement.

But Jordan is speaking to a national, and largely white, audience, so her choice to conclude with a quote from Republican president Abraham Lincoln is another way to give ethos to her message. The quote itself backs up her appeal to equality and idealism: “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of Democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no Democracy.”

An even stronger appeal to ethos is Jordan’s own biography. As someone who has pushed through boundaries of race and gender, and as a politician who has fought to extend civil rights to all races, she comes to the podium with a credibility that would be hard to match. But she never mentions her own record or accomplishments except to say “I, Barbara Jordan, am a keynote speaker.” This self-effacement reinforces her persona at the same time that it reinforces her message about the strength of unity and equality. She isn’t using the opportunity for self-interest, shining a light on her own political record or even putting in a good word for the candidate she’s endorsed.

Forty years later, Jordan’s message is still recognizable in political speeches. The Democratic party met again in 2016 to nominate a candidate that could deliver them to the White House. This convention was again preceded by scandal and overcast by a divisive shadow of corruption. And again, the speaker, Hillary Clinton, called for unity of purpose:

None of us can raise a family, build a business, heal a community, or lift a country totally alone. America needs every one of us to lend our energy, our talents, our ambition to making our nation better and stronger. . . . it’s a guiding principle for the country we’ve always been, and the future we’re going to build.

Wisely, Jordan never narrows her audience by specifying what the common good is, or should be. She implies instead that it's a dynamic thing that evolves with the desires and needs of the people. This choice, along with her use of poetic phrasing and oratory techniques from the African American tradition help her to uplift her audience, and inspire them to renewed faith in the political process. "We must define the common good," she says, "and begin again to shape a common future. Let each person do his or her part." Because of her rhetorical choices, Jordan's speech is timeless and could be given today just as easily as it was in 1976.

Though it was not known to her audience at the time, Jordan was also the first lesbian elected to the Senate. It's a poignant footnote to her argument for her party's inclusiveness that she had to withhold this part of herself from the public eye. But, by examining her words with a rhetorical lens, it's possible to see her hope for a more inclusive future.