

Uniting Trump's America: Rhetorical constructions in Donald Trump's 2017 inaugural address

by

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## **Abstract**

The diversity present within the United States presents a crucial question for its populace: what does it mean to be an American? No one is better positioned to answer this query than the president, who does so through rhetorical constructions of national identity. A functional polity requires some measure of common identity and constructing it is an important task for the country's only nationally elected and most visible representative. Yet scholars well identify Trump and his rhetoric as dangerously divisive. This paradox forces one to wonder: how did Trump attempt the task of rhetorically constructing an American national identity? The thesis that follows attends to this question with an analysis of Trump's attempts to rhetorically construct the American people via his inaugural address. In addition to the how of Trump's attempts at construction, I also consider who these attempts identify as true Americans and the effects that these attempts may induce in the American people.

I first place this question within the context of previous research on presidential rhetoric and national identity. Scholars identify the tasks of generating, re-articulating, and maintaining national identity as key features of the modern U.S. presidency. Audiences are rhetorical constructs and these constructions involve rhetors creating groups and identities. National identity is one such construction. It is discursively created, distinct from concrete markers of inclusion (such as legally granted citizenship), and perpetually contested in the public sphere.

Next, I explicate why a rhetorical criticism of the 2017 inaugural address is the best way to conduct my investigation. Presidents traditionally use their inaugurals to propose a message of unity that reaches beyond their supporters and establishes a binding vision of national identity. Given this and their epideictic characteristics, inaugurals are fertile fields for harvesting

rhetorical propositions of American identity. This critical analysis focuses on three areas of Trump's inaugural: 1) the type of imagery Trump employs, 2) the ideas and ideographs Trump invokes and utilizes, and 3) how Trump constructs through the use of delineation and divisiveness.

I then proceed with my analysis. I argue Trump did forward a consistent though exclusionary vision of American identity. My analysis shows this identity is America as a white Christian nation, a definition formed through Trump's utilization of a religious-based rhetoric of white Christian nationalism. I define the contours of that white Christian nationalism and its rhetoric. I then elucidate how its presence in Trump's inaugural is revealed through his rhetorically invoking themes of blood, apocalypticism, and nostalgia.

Lastly, I place my findings in context and discuss their broader implications. Ultimately, this progresses along two lines. First, Trump's inaugural represents an aberration in presidential constructions of national identity. Specifically, Trump constructs national identity more narrowly than other contemporary office holders and his articulation of American-ness is less based in shared ideations and values. Second, the propagation of white Christian nationalist rhetoric is deleterious to American liberalism and pluralism. I argue for the importance of considering religious themes in political discourse and that failure to do so may result in scholars missing valuable context and nuance into events such as those that took place at the U.S. Capital on January 6, 2021.

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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my wife Hannah, whose wisdom and sacrifice made completing this thesis possible, and to my father Jamie, whose support and advice were an invaluable life raft through both graduate school and the writing of this manuscript.

## **Chapter 1 - The National Identity of Trump's America**

On the 16th of June 2015, businessman and reality television star Donald J. Trump officially began his bid for president of the United States with a slow descent down a golden escalator in his eponymous New York tower. From there, Trump would go on to secure the 2016 Republican nomination and, eventually, the presidency. During his campaign and presidency, Trump's rhetoric was a source of special attention from scholars and journalists alike. Presidential historian Gil Troy called Trump's discourse historic (Jackson, 2016). In the words of MSNBC reporter Katy Tur, "he broke all the long-established rules" (Mitchell, 2017, 48:43). Love him or hate him, everyone seemed to agree that modern politics had never before seen someone quite like Donald J. Trump. He was uniquely divisive and unifying with different audiences as a candidate and continued to be so as president, an office in which an occupant's ability to unify the country has traditionally been of great import.

The diversity present within the United States presents a crucial question for its populace: what does it mean to be an American? No one is better positioned to answer this query than the president, who does so through rhetorical constructions of national identity. Scholars agree the construction of the American people is one of the, if not the most important, applications of a president's rhetorical power (Beasley, 2004; Bruner, 2002; Dorsey, 2007; Stuckey, 2004). Campbell and Jamieson (2008, p. 8) observe that "all presidents have the opportunity to persuade us to perceive of ourselves as compatible with their views of government and the world." Scholars including Charland (1987) and McGee (1975) describe how rhetors perform this task. Through the construction of American national identity, the rhetorical representation of Americans' lived experiences, and the articulation of shared values, presidents hail constituents into being American, a status they "always already" inhabit (Althusser, 1970/2009, p. 308).

Moving the American populace into a shared national identity is both an opportunity and a responsibility. Each president is tasked with this construction and each does so in slightly different ways based on the needs of the American public they are constructing and their personal imprint as rhetors. Trump's willingness to be unconventional and divisive augurs intriguing results for inquiries into how he performed this deeply traditional and unifying task.

In the years since he became America's 45th president, scholars have worked to discern and explicate Trump's unique rhetorical style. Bostdorff (2017) and Ivie (2017) note the allure of his rhetoric of change to voters desirous of a disruption to the political system. They and Melling (2018) contend his political incorrectness earned him the perception of authenticity amongst his voters. Kayam (2017, 2018) identifies Trump's language as simpler than his political contemporaries and argues this simplicity helped him employ anti-political rhetoric, a rhetorical style defined by the use of hyperbole, negativity, and the extensive inclusion of first-person singular pronouns. Hart (2020, 2021) points to Trump's use of Hofstadter's paranoid style, which "galvanizes audiences by describing how malign forces are working behind the scenes to subvert their will" (Hart, 2020, p. 1). Terrill (2017) argues Trump unburdens his supporters of the social obligations constraining the sole pursuit of self-interest. These obligations include empathy, equality, and other democratic virtues which require citizens to acknowledge racism's legacy and its role in America's inability to create a truly democratic public culture. Gunn (2020) adds that Trump's political style is perverse, meaning he is aware of these social conventions, but violates them anyway. His reliance on *paralepsis* and *occultatio*, his transgressions, and his denial of consensus reality are all products of and undergirded by a perverse enjoyment in convention dismantlement. This perversity additionally signals to his

supporters that they should not accept legal, rhetorical, or psychic animadversion for their own convention violations.

Scholars have taken the analysis further, putting particular focus on the consequences of Trump's rhetoric. They identify how Trump's rhetoric uses and is emblematic of white supremacy (Hartzell, 2018; McHendry, 2018; Sanchez, 2018). Samuel P. Perry (2018) offers a focused analysis of this trait by concentrating his examination on a specific instance of Trump rhetoric. In the wake of the violence in Charlottesville, Trump eschewed the opportunity to embrace the values of those protesting white supremacy. Rather than lead Americans in collective mourning for Heather Hyer at the hands of a white supremacist, Trump's presidential address "mourned the mythical loss of whiteness" (p. 71). Gunn (2020) additionally situates Trump and his rhetoric as part of a broader trend in American political discourse, namely trading in playfulness and compromise for spite and selfish demand. Mercieca (2020) delineates the rhetoric of heroic demagogues from dangerous demagogues (which she identifies Trump as) based on the use of weaponized communication. Once they are in power, the use of weaponized communication makes it difficult to hold dangerous demagogues to the kind of leadership accountability necessary in a liberal democracy. Others corroborate the deleterious effects of Trump's rhetoric on America's liberal democracy and its democratic norms (G. C. Edwards, 2020; J. A. Edwards, 2018; Jamieson & Taussig, 2017).

While much of the aforementioned research finds its locus in either how Trump deviates from previous candidates and office holders or in the pernicious nature of his discourse, empirical evidence suggests that, in spite of his clear divisiveness, Trump engages in some form of unification. Early vote totals from the 2020 presidential election show Trump acquired more votes in his bid for re-election than he did in his initial bid (Riccardi & Kastanis, 2020). In

counties where vote totals rose compared to 2016, Trump increased his previous margins more than his Democratic opponent improved upon the vote of 2016 nominee Hillary Clinton. He garnered more votes than any previous presidential candidate, with his total second only to his 2020 opponent Joe Biden.

This odd paradox of Trump – that he attempts to unite as he divides – has not been lost on scholars. Johnson (2017, p. 247) argues Trump’s brand of demagoguery “represents a constitutive challenge to liberal democracy by converting the undecidability inherent to politics into an apparent threat to individual personhood.” Stuckey (2020) sees it as debatable that Trump offers any discernable rhetorical vision of national identity at all. To the extent he does, she argues his rhetoric induces Americans to “see national belonging as a limited resource” and, consequently, “see ourselves not as tenuously united members of a shared community, but as competitors” (p. 382).

Whether or not Trump ever successfully constructed national unity, the evidence does not suggest it is because he was incapable of rhetorically uniting audiences. Observers have noted, if sometimes begrudgingly, the ways in which Trump has succeeded in his rhetorical deployments. In an otherwise scathing denunciation of Trump in *The New Yorker*, David Denby acknowledged the appeal of Trump’s methods, writing that he “invites the audience to join him in the adventure of delivering his act” (Denby, 2015, para. 5). Political commentator Lou Dobbs noted the persuasive power in Trump’s persistent usage of “our,” “us,” and “we” (Dobbs, 2016). They are, as Burke (1969) would note, implicitly and mutually identifying expressions that rhetorically bond Trump to his audience. Johnson (2017) argues Trump’s demagoguery holds particular appeal for those who espouse an ideology of victimized, white, toxic masculinity, particularly due to its ability to cast well-off ideologues as heroic protectors. In defending downtrodden

members of the white working class, prosperous groups are united with less prosperous groups and share in the aggrievement without experiencing the same economic and cultural tribulations. Additionally, Trump consolidated the Republican party behind his candidacy by projecting a conservative political identity. In Trump and his rhetoric, conservatives recognized “a performance of conservatism” (Lee, 2017, p. 726); a new and specific constitution of an ideology in “constant reenactment” (Mouffe, 1992, p. 31). Put another way, Irish polemicist Fintan O’Toole (2021) argues Trump is:

...a great unifier. He brought together people who would not previously have recognized their mutual affinity—bankers and neo-Nazi thugs, tech bros and the peddlers of deranged conspiracy theories. His movement is generous and inclusive—anyone who acknowledges him as the leader has found a sense of belonging in Trump’s big tent.  
(para. 6)

These insights complicate assertions of Trump as a solely divisive force who is unable to rhetorically construct shared identities.

Queries of how the traditional role of the president as unifier-in-chief would be enacted by an unconventional and divisive president like Trump was the genesis of this project. Some measure of common identity is necessary for a functional polity and constructing it is an important task for the country’s only nationally elected and most visible representative. Yet Trump and his rhetoric as dangerously divisive. This paradox forces one to wonder how Trump will complete this task. Some, including Stuckey (2020), argue he never did.

Trump’s overtures toward national identity in the inaugural are potentially telling scenes in the larger drama of American political culture. Currently marked by historically low levels of public trust in political leaders, institutions, and persons of the other party, American politics

seems more bitterly dysfunctional than usual. Learning if and how Trump sought to counteract political division via his speech could reveal much about the causes, consequences, and corrections for the current U.S. political malaise. Did Trump attempt to rhetorically construct American national identity, and if so, how? According to this construction, who is an American? And how does this national identity invite various Americans to understand themselves and each other? Addressing such questions will clarify understanding of presidential communication's power to unite and divide and suggest what audiences found appealing in these constructions. Without insights of this nature, Americans face the prospect of generation-spanning cleavage from one another and their government.

This project explicates Trump's attempts to rhetorically construct the American people through an analysis of his inaugural address. I find that Trump did forward a form of national unity and American identity, though one that obviously excludes many, violates longstanding U.S. principles of religious freedom, and harkens a nationalism conflating racial purity with divine providence. Namely, Trump constitutes America as a white Christian nation. The presence of Trump's rhetorical construction is revealed through the themes of blood, apocalypticism, and nostalgia present in his rhetoric. Ultimately, I assert this is both a deviation from traditional attempts at national unity and deleterious to American liberalism and pluralism.

I proceed with this analysis as follows. In chapter 2, I attend to the previous literature on presidential rhetoric and national identity. This establishes the power of a president's words, the historical import of these words in establishing national identity, and the means by which these rhetorical constructions occur. In chapter 3, I identify the rationale of my chosen artifact and method of analysis. In so doing, I demonstrate the crucial role of inaugural addresses in national identity construction and explicate the specific questions that will guide my interrogation of the

artifact. In chapter 4, I undertake my analysis. It is here that I define the contours of white Christian nationalism and its rhetoric and then indicate and elucidate their presence in Trump's inaugural. Lastly in chapter 5, I place my findings in context and discuss their broader implications.

## **Chapter 2 - Unifier-in-Chief: The Knowns and Unknowns**

To appreciate the import of Trump's articulations of American national identity, we must first explicate how presidents discursively call forth a national identity from a diverse citizenry. Toward this end, I review the scholarship of constitutive rhetoric as well as Kenneth Burke's writings on identification/division. Additionally, I investigate how scholars have understood national identity and how it is generated, as well as the role some of them say civil religion plays in that creation. However, we must first begin with the central role played by presidents and their rhetoric in this process.

### **Presidential Rhetoric**

Presidents have strong voices. Campbell and Jamieson (2008) observe that "the presidency" scholars study is a phrase and idea never explicitly mentioned in the U.S. Constitution. It is a concept born "into being as the result of actions of all our presidents" (pp. 1-2). When presidents act rhetorically, they do so as a "decisive executive, spokesperson for the nation, and a national priest" (p. 88). The existence of their rhetorical power, the way presidents use it, and the effects it has on other Americans has been the focus of scholars in multiple disciplines. Ultimately, this kind of research into presidential discourse seeks the ever-changing answer to the following question: What are presidents doing with their words and why does it matter?

Attempts to answer this question are almost inevitably interdisciplinary. The answers uncovered and the methods by which those answers are arrived at vary depending on the orientation of the scholar. This variance can be understood through the distinction between the terms rhetorical presidency and presidential rhetoric. The rhetorical presidency, a product of political science, is an attempt to describe a change in the exercise of the U.S. presidency as an

institution. Presidential rhetoric, the purview of rhetoricians, is inclusive of and singularly concerned with all forms of presidential discourse. The extent to which the institution of the presidency matters to presidential rhetoric is largely limited to the weight, power, and reach with which it imbues the office holder's rhetoric. While my analysis is predominantly concerned with presidential rhetoric, a brief explication of the rhetorical presidency's origins and tenants is worthwhile in that it provides context for the modern environment in which presidential rhetoric is produced and delivered.

What does it mean, in a rhetorical sense, to perform the presidency and to discharge those duties assigned to the executive branch of government by the U.S. Constitution? Scholars, particularly political scientists, have found the answer to this question to be far from simple or singular. Tulis (1987) identified individual decisions of specific office holders and situated those decisions and rhetorical actions as part of a transformation of the presidency ongoing since its inception. He comprehensively termed this the rhetorical presidency - a collection of public interpretations and standards for how a president should work, look, act, and sound.

The standards by which presidents are judged, the roles they are expected to play, and the actions they undertake to fulfill these roles have drastically changed over time. The modern office and the performance of its duties would be nigh unrecognizable to previous office holders such as James K. Polk and Franklin Pierce. Tulis broke the history of the presidency into three periods: the Old Way, the Middle Way, and the New Way. The distinction between these periods is the degree to which presidents "went public," which is to say more modern presidents began using the rhetorical powers of their office to exert pressure on the legislature through direct appeals to voters. In this way, presidents could step beyond the executive powers explicitly granted by the Constitution and actuate public pressure to see their preferred policies enacted.

Contemporary scholars continue to argue the effect of this change on the presidency. Zug (2018), for example, argues against modern interpretations of the rhetorical presidency as inevitable and therefore acceptable. He encourages scholars not to rob presidents of autonomy in their message production and the responsibility and accountability that accompanies that autonomy.

Scholars of presidential rhetoric have taken pains to delineate their study of presidential discourse from the work of political scientists (Medhurst, 1996). They have outlined an area of rhetorical scholarship both wide and deep (Windt, 1986; Zarefsky, 2019) that, while distinct from the institutional change the rhetorical presidency attempts to describe, has still seen a concomitant increase in attention to the office holder, the frequency of presidential communications, and the content of that discourse. For one, media coverage of modern presidents has increased exponentially (Schaefer, 1999). As a result of this increased coverage and interest, citizens have developed a cultural understanding of what the presidency is through both news and pop culture. In other words, news coverage and different presidential depictions in pop culture, such as in television shows *The West Wing*, *House of Cards*, and *Veep*, create expectations of what the office is and does that may diverge from what the office *actually* is and does. Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2006) identified and termed this “presidentiality” — “an ideological rhetoric that helps shape the cultural meaning of the institution of the presidency” (p. 209).

Scholars have also used the rhetoric of specific office holders to investigate both how presidents rhetorically respond to exigencies of the presidency and how they utilize rhetorical tactics in their discourse. Examples of the former include examinations of response to international crisis through the rhetoric of John F. Kennedy (Windt, 1973), justification for war through the rhetoric of Lyndon B. Johnson (Cherwitz, 1978), and presidential apology through

the rhetoric of Richard Nixon (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Harrell et al., 1975; King, 1985; Prash, 2015). Examples of the latter include analyses of presidential narrative construction through the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan (Lewis, 1987, 1988; Moore, 1991), the use of demonic anthropomorphism in George Bush's response to 9/11 (Gunn, 2004), and the use of irony in Barack Obama's eulogy for Clementa C. Pinckney (Anderson, 2019).

Contemporary scholars have further built upon this work by focusing on the ways modern presidential rhetoric is studied and identifying areas for improvement and expansion. In one such example, Stuckey (2010) argues for presidential rhetoricians to better grapple with dimensions of class, race, and gender as well as the mediated nature of modern presidential messages. Scholars have also attempted this improvement and expansion through endeavors to classify and organize presidential addresses. In one notable example, Campbell and Jamieson (2008) label and examine specific genres of presidential rhetoric. Genres they identify include the inaugural address, national eulogies, the state of the union, and the farewell address. In another example, Coe and Neumann (2011) identify which presidential addresses should be studied such that future analyses could be standardized, allowing for "more meaningful generalizations and more precise replications" (p. 727). Their detailed examination argues scholars should focus on "major presidential addresses," which they define as "a president's spoken communication that is addressed to the American people, broadcast to the nation, and controlled by the president" (p. 731).

Attempts to improve rhetorical studies of the presidency also include questions on the efficacy, import, and relevance of contemporary presidential discourse. Harnett and Mercieca (2007) proclaim us in an age of post-rhetorical presidency due to the increasing inclination of modern presidents to engage in deception and misdirection. Lim (2008) contends that, as a result

of the rhetorical presidency incentivizing messages that appeal to the masses, presidential rhetoric has become progressively less intellectual. This anti-intellectualism is characterized by limited references to cognitive and evaluative processes and less formal choice of wording in public address. Edwards (2003) claims that, although “[engaging] in a prominent campaign for the public’s support” has become a president’s “core strategy for governing,” in most instances presidents “fail in their efforts to move the public to support them and their policies” (p. ix). In concert, journalist and political commentator Ezra Klein (2012) argues the presidency has experienced a diminishment in its political persuasive power, particularly in terms of its ability to whip up votes or use speeches to establish government or national focuses.

In response to such criticism, scholars such as Zarefsky have defended the power and import of presidential rhetoric. In a direct response to Edwards, Zarefsky (2004) criticizes Edwards’ findings as failing to properly address all the aspects in which presidential rhetoric can change attitudes or opinions. In looking for answers to “what does presidential rhetoric do,” Zarefsky encourages not only “searching for factors associated with success or failure,” but claims presidential rhetoric is better understood as invitation for response (p. 619). He posits that one of the most powerful tools a president can employ is that of definition, noting that characterizations of social reality are, rather than preordained, “chosen from among multiple possibilities and hence always could have been otherwise” (p. 611). To articulate a definition is to make an argument, even in the absence of explicitly forwarded claims or provided supporting evidence. Zarefsky notes that, in many cases presidential definitions are “offered as if they were natural and uncontroversial rather than chosen and contestable” (p. 612). Jones and Rowland (2015) provide an exemplar of this rhetorical tactic in their analysis of Reagan’s first inaugural address as does Zarefsky (2000) in his analysis of Lincoln’s 1862 annual message.

## **Rhetorical Construction**

The ability of presidents to forward seemingly uncontested definitions is the method by which presidents rhetorically construct national identity through assertions of what America is and what it is to be American. These definitions are invitations, offered up for acceptance or rejection. In that choice, an audience and its antithesis are rhetorically constructed.

All academics interested in the formation and motivation of audiences by way of constitutive rhetoric must acknowledge the fundamental role played by Kenneth Burke and his theory of identification. Burke (1969) posits audiences of a rhetorical act cannot be entirely distinguished from the act itself. Instead, audience members are “participants in the very discourse by which they might be persuaded” (Tate, 2005, p. 6). Through the process of identification, speaker and audience form a union based on shared values, beliefs, and experiences. It is through identification that disparate individuals come to conceive of themselves as a socially and politically motivated collective capable of encouraging action and enacting change.

Identification should be viewed as a persuasive method. If a rhetor can induce an audience to believe the interests of both are aligned, the audience will be more amenable to persuasive appeals to collective action. It is also a concept centered around the ideas of collection and division as a group unites based on commonality and therefore necessarily separates itself from others based on differences. Once identification has occurred, consubstantiality follows. Consubstantiality is a way of acting together in which a person “is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself, but at the same time remaining unique. “He is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (Burke, 1969, p. 545).

As noted above, an equally important aspect of Burke's theory is the division that identification both attempts to salve and inevitably creates. "Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to claim their unity" (Burke, 1969, p. 22). Division is, however, not limited to the beginning of identification. "It is the beginning and the end, as the dis-ease with division creates a need for identification with one group or individual, which then simultaneously divides out others. Thus, the borders of human relationships and community identities are broken and reformed continuously as ideologies and historical contexts shift" (Borrowman & Kmetz, 2011, p. 281). In this, Burke draws from and echoes the work of Sigmund Freud, who noted an example of this polarity in the works of the Apostle Paul. Paul positing "universal love between men and women as the foundation of his Christian community" necessitated "extreme intolerance on the part of Christendom toward those who remained outside it" as an "inevitable consequence" (Freud, 1930/2005, p. 108). In essence, identification of church members as lovers compelled their division from nonlovers and delineated the lines of inclusion into the community.

Notably, division is not inherently adversarial. It is negative in the Burkean sense – identification as one thing negates the possibility of being identified as something else (Burke, 1964). To identify someone as tall delineates them from those identified as short. However, that division does not necessitate a confrontational relationship. This stipulated, it is often the case that *deliberate* division results in othering - individuals securing a positive personal identity through favorable comparison with another group (Boréus, 2006).

Burke (1939) addressed a form of deliberate division, which he termed scapegoating, in his famed analysis of Hitler's programmatic manifesto *Mein Kampf*. In it, Burke identifies four

components of Hitler's "unification device," of which the second is most germane. Burke isolates Hitler's creation of a common enemy (the Jews) and terms it a "projection device." Burke argues the success of this device hinges on how welcoming individuals are to the idea that they alone are not responsible for their condition. Burke writes that this device was "especially appealing to the middle class who were encouraged to feel that they could conduct their business without any basic change whatever, once the businessmen of a different race were eliminated" (p. 194). In this example, Burke shows how, through the creation of a sacrificial scapegoat, Hitler was able to rhetorically construct a unified and oppositional identity.

Using Burke as a foundation, McGee (1975) addresses a "general failure fully to exploit the organic conception of human existence presupposed in nearly all rhetorical documents" (p. 236). He observes many rhetorical works assume an audience as a given entity to which speakers and writers choose and tailor the different methods of persuasion without devoting attention to how these audiences are created in the first place. McGee asserts the following:

... "the people" are more process than phenomenon. That is, they are conjured into objective reality, remain so long as the rhetoric which defined them has force, and in the end wilt away, becoming once again merely a collection of individuals. (p. 242)

This explains the premise behind constitutive rhetoric: audiences do not simply exist, and instead are formed through a series of persuasive rhetorical acts that call them into being.

Similar to McGee, Charland (1987) also identifies a problem in how traditional approaches to rhetoric conceive of and address audiences. Charland builds upon the work of Burke and McGee to argue audiences are never given, nor are they "extra-rhetorical" (p. 133). Instead, the very existence of subjects in an audience is already a rhetorical effect – that any audience exists is itself proof that rhetorical actions have already taken place. "Much of what we

as rhetorical critics consider to be a product or consequence of discourse, including social identity, religious faith, sexuality, and ideology is beyond the realm of rational or even free choice, beyond the realm of persuasion" (p. 133). He argues audiences are called into being by way of being hailed and become the audience to whom a rhetor addresses with specific appeals.

To make this claim, Charland draws upon the work of Edwin Black and Louis Althusser. Black (1970) discusses the invitation to an audience contained within discourse. "What equally well solicits our attention is that there is a second persona also implied by a discourse, and that persona is its implied auditor" (p. 111). Black posits that the individuals in an audience take on another identity over the course of the speech, one that the speaker convinces them to inhabit. "It seems a useful methodological assumption to hold that rhetorical discourses, either singly or cumulatively in a persuasive movement, will imply an auditor, and that in most cases the implication will be sufficiently suggestive as to enable the critic to link this implied auditor to an ideology" (p. 112). Ultimately, while Black hints at the idea of constitutive rhetoric, he fails to consider what happens when an audience accepts the invitation and embodies the discursively constructed identity.

The work of Louis Althusser (1970/2009) addresses this gap of audience acceptance. His concept of interpellation begins with ideology, "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (1970/2009, p. 304). It is "not the system of real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live" (p. 306). But while the relationship is imaginary, Althusser insists that ideology is materialized into existence through the concrete and material practices adopted by its followers. This gives rise to Althusser's concept of interpellation—the ability of all ideologies to call or hail individuals and turn them into subjects of that ideology. The individual

recognizes in themselves the identity that corresponds to the ideology that has hailed them. In this way, Althusser asserts that individuals are “always already” subjects (p. 308). One cannot be addressed unless one is already a subject, but one is also not truly a subject until interpellation has taken place, transforming them from individual to subject.

Charland extends the applicability of Althusser’s theory beyond ideology by identifying a narrative with ideological effects, rather than a particular ideology, as the source of the interpellation. This narrative is very similar to McGee’s (1980) idea of a political myth — a story conjured by a leader or group of leaders with whom individuals are encouraged to identify. Charland (1987) argues this narrative is both historical and transhistorical because while comprised of actual historical events, it is a narrative in which “time is collapsed” and “the past is presented as an extension of the present” (p. 140). Subjects are encouraged to identify with ideological similarities embedded within the distinct historical acts and, thus, with the narrative entire. The narrative, once established, “both reveals the [audience] and makes it real. This making real is part of the ontological function of narratives” (p. 138).

### **National Identity**

National identity is an example of the kind of narrative Charland identifies based in no small part on the illusory nature inherent to the concept of a nation. It is important not to conflate nationhood with statehood. A state is a “sovereign political entity” while a nation is a “group of people who share – or believe they share – a common culture, ethnic origin, language, historical experience, artifacts, or symbols” (Woodard, 2011, pp. 8-9). Key in this distinction is that nations can exist without (and within) a state, as is the case with the Palestinian, Kurdish, and Québécois nations. In nation-states like the United States, membership in the state must be understood as distinct from membership in the nation. Rather than being assembled through the

government granting of legal citizenship, the nation and national unity is constructed through rhetoric and discourse in the public sphere.

Anderson (1983/2006) claims nations are “imagined communities.” Citizens will “never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear from them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). Waltzer (1992, pp. 6-7), in concert with Burke, McGee, and Charland, suggests that the concept of the “the people” is only symbolic, with “no palpable shape or substance.” Thus, rather than a static concept, national identity is a “never-ending and politically consequential rhetorical struggle,” and, as struggles and negotiations have become more frequent due to an increasingly diverse electorate and citizenry, “nation building continually requires the services of advocates offering accounts of national character” (Bruner, 2002, p. 1). Competition over how this national identity is conceived and defined is a necessary and permanent fixture in any nation’s domestic politics.

Theiss-Morse (2009, p. 3) argues this competition is based on how inclusion within and exclusion from national identity can have “serious implications for how [citizens] are treated by their fellow Americans.” She continues:

When Americans are considered “true Americans,” fully included in the group “the American people,” they have the opportunity to enjoy all of the benefits of group membership: being helped by fellow Americans during times of need, being treated fairly in the distribution of resources, and being listened to when they are critical of the group and its actions. Americans not accepted as fully part of the group...are not given the same benefits of group membership. They are offered help only grudgingly, if at all, and their criticisms are rejected by those who consider themselves fully American. (p. 3)

While all citizens discursively and culturally contribute to the formation of national identity by way of participation in the national conversation, the task of articulating the American collective culture falls under the purview of the president. Presidents articulate national identity and, when successful, do so in ways that are “accepted as obvious, even inevitable” (Stuckey, 2004, p. 2). They must “unite contemporaneous occasions with appropriate traditions and innovations,” ensuring citizens will continue to see themselves as American subjects and, thus, be interpellated by the narrative of America (p. 2). Not all people will see themselves in every articulation of American national identity, but a certain level of shared national identity resonance is needed for a citizenry to form the bonds required for a functional country.

The need to birth and maintain a large coalition amongst a culturally and ethnically diverse electorate makes the institution of the presidency and presidential rhetoric inherently conservative (Riley, 1999). This conservatism is prudential rather than ideological, recalling, in a certain sense, the Alexandre Ledru-Rollin quotation: “There go the people. I must follow them, for I am their leader” (Platt, 1993, p. 194). Due in no small part to this conservatism, the presidency has traditionally been “the repository of a certain amount of cultural consensus” (Stuckey, 2004, p. 8). The values most broadly and least controversially held tend to drive the rhetoric of presidents and determine which ideals they forward in their rhetorical constructions. This eases the task of constructing unity for homogenous electorates who broadly share values. Conversely, it is more difficult to rhetorically construct diversified electorates due to greater variation in experiences and expectations leading to fewer instances of broadly shared and uncontroversial values.

Further complicating this dynamic is nation building's inevitable requirement of reduction. Per Burke's identification/division (1969), every case of a rhetorically constructed "us" subsequently and necessarily forms a "them." Thus, the creation of national identity implies inclusion *and* exclusion. Any articulation of what citizens should support and value carries pronouncements of who they were, who they are, and who they hope to be. An inevitable implication of these definitions is the delineation between who these citizens 'are' and who they 'are not' (Edelman, 1988). Through rhetorical constructions of national unity, presidents make these delineations - explicitly and implicitly, consciously and unconsciously.

While unwilling division is a necessary consequence of identification, presidents also find themselves employing deliberate forms of division. Political leaders have a long, and often terrible, history of defining other groups or collectives of groups as deviant, antithetical, and incapable of admittance and incorporation into the American project. In contemporary politics, overt divisiveness can have deleterious effects on a president and their presidency. Instead, presidents often employ a rhetoric of universal inclusion that still maintains implied hierarchies among the included. Stuckey (2004, p. 6) terms this "celebratory othering" due to its appearance of being "inclusive, even laudatory" while continuing "existing stratifications and exclusions." Its inclusion is not one of difference tolerance, but rather one that attempts to domesticate that difference into forms preferable to the hegemonic culture. Noting the same rhetorical function, Beasley (2014) describes the citizenship offered as allegedly available to any and all who accept these ideational definitions of national identity. After citizenship is gained, citizens may become highly individualistic while other non-citizens work to prove their own citizenship. Beasley notes that "urging citizens to overlook difference," as celebratory othering does, prompts Americans to "see diversity as either someone else's problem or as an affliction that must be purged." (p. 164).

The historical displacement of America's indigenous people and the country's subsequent identity as a nation of immigrants creates both restrictions and opportunities for national identity construction. Citizens of any polity have multiple sets of identities, some existing in tension with one another, that they are forced to juggle and prioritize. This is especially true in America, where citizens infrequently share the unifying characteristics of homogenous nations, such as broad hereditary, historical, or biological bonds. In India, for example, all citizens are legally welcomed into the electorate, but the inability of many to escape the historic confinement of the caste system proves deleterious to attempts at national unity construction. American presidents must reduce complex and conflicting identities to simple points of broad commonality and use this as the locus for national identity. Traditionally, presidents have accomplished this by defining American nationalism as an ideational standard for American identity. The "notion that American identity comes from holding certain viewpoints" makes it able to "easily accommodate diverse constituents" and "available to all comers—at least in theory" (Beasley, 2014, p. 15).

A prominent, if not the most prominent, way presidents invite audiences to accept their ideations and ideology is through the deployment of ideographs. McGee (1980) offers the foundational, and perhaps most complete, definition of ideograph, defining it as an "ordinary-language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal" (p. 15). Ideographs "signify and 'contain'" a "unique ideological commitment.... [They] are one-term sums of an orientation" (p. 7). Robertson (1995) more succinctly defined them as "political slogans or labels that encapsulate ideology in political discourse" (p. 93). Condit and Lucaites (1993) observed that ideographs "represent in condensed form the normative, collective commitments of the members of a public, and they typically appear in public argumentation as the necessary

motivations or justifications for action performed in the name of the public” (pp. xii-xiii). In practice, ideographs are defined predominately through their function, which is the exertion of social control through the shaping of political consciousness. Examples include liberty, religion, freedom of speech, rule of law, and right to privacy to name but a paltry few. In essence, ideographs constitute a structure of “public motives” (McGee, 1980, p. 5); they are the terms we use to impart value, justify decisions, motivate behavior, and debate policy initiatives (McGee & Martin, 1983).

In addition to the deployment of ideographs, Beasley (2014) notes that the main tactic past presidents used for inviting citizen assent to American-ness was the designation of a palatable foe. She observes that “chief executives from Cleveland to Bush repeatedly implied that the nation’s most pressing threats came from outside the citizenry, including both foreign nations and foreign ideologies (e.g. communism)” (p. 159). Even in dealing with domestic issues, presidents framed them around impersonal, structural forces that could still be portrayed as external agencies. Reagan, for example, cast government as the threat to which Americans could and must unite in opposition. Beasley argues the ability of presidents to unite citizens around a shared enemy seems to have greatly dissipated by the time Bill Clinton took office in 1993, leading to disagreement on what in meant to be a modern American. “With little certainty about who or what their mutual enemies might be, the American people appeared less confident about what they had in common. Indeed, many seemed convinced that their main adversaries were their fellow citizens” (p. 160).

A final and crucial, albeit tangential, concept necessitating inclusion in this discussion of national identity is nationalism. Theorists of nationalism disagree strongly about what nationalism is and why it came into being. Some see nationalism as an ideology (Brass, 1991;

Hroch, 1985), others as an identity (Anderson, 1983/2006; Balibar, 1991), and still others as a movement (Breuilly, 1982). While the explanations are as diverse as the definitions, most scholars appear to agree on some broad strokes. Nationalism starts with the belief that humanity is divisible into distinct cultural groups defined by shared traits, including language, religion, ethnicity, or culture. Nationalists believe that each group should have its own government to promote and protect the group's cultural identity. Ultimately, nationalists argue, these sovereign national groups provide meaning and purpose to their members. Beasley (2014) cautions presidents constructing national identity should be wary of appealing "too blatantly to [citizens] existing prejudices and fears" lest presidents "risk encouraging a dangerous brand of nationalism that lionized intolerance and thus repudiated the allegedly American ideals of equality and individualism" (p. 14).

### ***Civil Religion as National Unifier***

For scholars like Robert Bellah (1967, p. 1), America's key resource for finding a common identity is civil religion, which "exists alongside of and [is] rather clearly differentiated from the churches." Ultimately, Bellah suggests there is a religious foundation for our bond as a people. He defines this civil religion as "a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals" exercised in the public sphere (Bellah, 1967, p. 4). He argues that the Constitutional clause separating church from state and forbidding the establishment of a state religion "certainly does not mean nor has ever meant that the American state has no interest in religion, and it certainly does not mean that religion and politics have nothing to do with each other" (Bellah, 1998, p. 195). Religious principles may be used to guide and legitimize political dealings as well as to foster unity among constituents. When successfully deployed, these beliefs, symbols, and rituals, substantiate the America's moral fabric and the bond between representatives and those they represent.

Bellah attributes the foundation of civil religion to Jean Jacques Rousseau. According to Gail Gehrig (1981, p. 6), Rousseau's conception was that "civil religion would legitimize the political order without establishing a competing religious authority" and "would perform the social functions of insuring political legitimacy and social cohesion."

In *The Political Pulpit* (1977), Roderick Hart begins with the idea of civil religion, informed by the ideas of Kenneth Burke, as "a system of symbolic, dramatic action" that fulfills the emotional needs of the nation (p. 2). He argues the balance between religious and political power is maintained through a rhetorical contract between organized religion and government. Hart claims that while religious overtones are commonplace and perhaps necessary in presidential address, even ostensibly benign religious rhetoric risks upsetting the tenuous balance.

The central role played by civil religion's rhetorical component is what differentiates Hart's approach. Hart argues the majority of civil religion research focuses on its "macro-sociological or macro-theological dimensions," leaving the "specific verbal details of civic piety to go unexamined" (1977, p. 3). As a means of addressing these verbal details, Hart introduces the concept of the rhetorical contract. He asserts the two key elements of the contract are "its rhetoricalness and its flexibility" (p. 48). The emphasis upon the contract's rhetorical element derives from Hart's focus on the verbal aspect of civil religion. The importance of flexibility stems from each rhetor's ability to employ their own approach to civil religion with varying levels of deviation from their predecessor given "each incoming president has to revisit the contract" (p. 44). As Lee (2002, p. 7) puts it, the "sacred-secular line is a matter of constant renegotiation." As a rhetorical instrument, the contract is pliable, and can be tweaked in accordance with whatever exigency the rhetor seeks to address. Notably, while the contract may

be flexible, it can still be broken, and scholars have educed both an increase in “God-talk” (Domke & Coe, 2007) and “a shift toward religious nationalism” in post-Reagan presidential rhetoric (Roof, 2009, p. 1; see also: Gorski, 2019; Whitehead & Perry, 2020).

### **The Trump Presidency and National Identity: The Past Prologue?**

An understanding of how presidents rhetorically construct audiences and the import of that task is crucial for understanding the analysis that follows. Scholars such as Burke, McGee, and Charland show us that audiences are rhetorical constructs and that these constructions involve rhetors creating groups and identities to which audience members feel drawn. National identity is one such construction. It is discursively created and perpetually contested in the public sphere. Heads of state in particular are well situated to rhetorically construct national identity, and the United States presidency is especially so given it is the only office all American citizens have a say in electing and receives immense attention as a result. One of the ways in which they do this is by inhabiting the role of national priest who unifies the American people in a civil religion.

What presidents say is consequential and has consequences. Previous research demonstrates that the generation, re-articulation, and maintenance of national identity are key features of the modern U.S. presidency. Though these constructions may frequently fail to interpolate the entire citizenry, modern office holders attempt to interpose potential disunity and conflict through tactics such as celebratory othering. As previously noted, Zarefsky (2004) encourages us to understand presidential rhetoric as invitation for response. One of the responses presidential rhetoric invites is audience assent or dissent. Through this process of acquiescence or rejection to invitation, presidential rhetoric establishes how audiences conceive of America, Americans, and a person’s placement within or outside of those definitions.

Despite the peril it poses, Trump saturates his rhetorical constructions with divisiveness. Previous research suggests this path is one past office holders have largely avoided as it is fraught with peril for both the success of the constructions and the health of citizens' bonds to one another. What would a rhetorical construction built along this trajectory look like? Trump's commitment to this course ultimately made him one of America's most unpopular presidents and endeared him to the second largest coalition in presidential election history. The paradoxical nature of these results hints at an answer and demands greater examination. I will conduct this investigation through an analysis of Trump's inaugural address which, as we will see in the next chapter, is a prime place to do this work.

### Chapter 3 - Rhetorical Criticism and the 2017 Inaugural Address

Most presidents assume the office in the wake of an at least somewhat contentious presidential election, but observers note that the 2016 election was particularly divisive (Balz, 2016; Vick, 2016). In its 2016 end-of-year issue, *TIME*, as it has with other past presidential election victors, named Donald Trump its “Person of the Year” (Scherer, 2016). Under Trump’s cover photo was included the subtitle, “President of the Divided States of America.” Interestingly, in recognizing George W. Bush and Bill Clinton with its “Person of the Year” designation (in 2000 and 1992, respectively) *TIME* did not include any comparable subtitles despite their wins coming via Bush’s slim margin in the Electoral College or Clinton’s less than 50% of the vote (Rothman, 2015).

In the wake of his election victory, Trump made attempts to address this disunity. In his election victory speech, he implored Americans to “bind the wounds of division,” calling “all Republicans and Democrats and independents across this nation...to come together as one united people” (Trump, 2016, para. 8). In an address the night before his inauguration, Trump, speaking from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, vowed to “unify our country,” claiming America would be made great for “all our people” (Ellis et al., 2017).

Yet the words of a candidate, even a victorious one, and those of a president are not equivalent. This is a distinction both legal and symbolic. Legally, candidates become presidents through their oath of office. Symbolically, candidates become presidents through the inaugural address – “an essential element in a ritual of transition in which the covenant between the citizenry and their leaders is renewed” (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008, p. 29). Previous to taking the oath of office, presidents-elect are not invested with the awesome constitutional powers of the American presidency. By the same token, their rhetoric is not imbued with the voice of the

presidency until the citizenry is able to “witness and ratify their ascent to power” (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008, p. 32). In short, the words of Trump the president-elect are inequitable to the words of Trump the president, the latter of which could not be spoken until his inaugural address.

Trump’s victory, as victory has for all presidents-elect before him, presented Trump with a rhetorical exigency for constructing a national identity with which the people could be unified. His statements as a victorious candidate reveal he had some understanding of the expectations and responsibility of a newly elected president, but the history of his candidacy made some skeptical. Dan Balz (2017) of *The Washington Post* summarized it well. He wrote:

The question is how important binding a divided nation will be to Trump once he becomes president? Will he seek to unify the country, and if so how? Or will he decide there is little he can do and then govern a divided nation the way he sought and won the presidency — by accentuating those differences? (para. 23)

In the chapter that follows, I explain why a rhetorical analysis of Trump’s inaugural address is the best means to both examine Trump’s efforts to address the rhetorical exigency of his new presidency and elucidate the national identity he attempted to construct.

## **Text**

The presidential task of national identity construction and maintenance could quite possibly be analyzed in every public instance of presidential rhetoric. To narrow my field of study and in keeping with Coe and Neumann’s (2011) logic, I restricted my artifact to one delivered with the unambiguous intent to address a national audience. This assures the rhetoric within was meant to be consumed and understood by the entire nation.

Specifically, I analyze Donald J. Trump’s 2017 presidential inauguration address. Through this rhetorical criticism, I will identify the constitutive rhetoric Trump is employing and

attempt to ascertain the dimensions of the constructed identity and whom this identity is hailing. Given their epideictic characteristics, presidential inaugural addresses make particularly fertile fields for harvesting rhetorical propositions of American identity.

Inaugurals are acts of rhetorical becoming—a transition from mere citizen and candidate to president. All inaugurals take place after an oath of office. Almost all take place after presidential elections and the exceptions take place in the wake of transitions due to death, removal, or resignation. In all cases, a sizable portion of the country’s voters must grapple with having a head of state for whom they did not vote. Campbell and Jamieson (2008) note that the audience of the inaugural address “must be unified and constructed as “the people”” (p. 33). Trump’s 2017 inaugural was no different. Given this, presidents traditionally use their inaugurals to propose a message of unity that interpolates beyond their supporters and establishes a binding vision of national identity (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008). In so doing, they transcend their status as representative of some to become president of all.

This transition requires both a president and an American people. “Inauguration is a rite of passage, a ritual of transition in which a newly elected president is invested with the office of the presidency” (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008, p.30). Campbell and Jamieson evoke Hoban (1980) when describing this investiture as necessitating:

...participation in a formal ceremony in which a duly constituted authority, before appropriate witnesses, confirms the right to play a certain role or take a certain position.  
(p. 357)

This investiture of the presidency cannot take place without the presence of “the people” as it is they who invest presidents with the presidency. Thus, presidents must use the inaugural address to construct the people who will then invest them with the presidency. Therefore, investiture of a

president as leader of all people necessitates constitutive rhetoric. While scholars argue presidents can both fail to receive this investiture during their inauguration and can attain it in other speeches (Bostdorff, 2003), the vast majority of presidents have recognized the prudence of achieving it in their inaugural address.

## **Method**

Every artifact bears the imprint of contextual characteristics that must be considered as a part of a rhetorical analysis. It is vital we understand the context that surrounds texts and inform their presentation and interpretation. Rhetorical acts are attempts to respond to particular sets of circumstances. These circumstances are made up of both the immediate and historical, both of which create the need for a rhetorical act and limit the ways a rhetor might respond to it. Campbell & Burkholder (1996, p. 50) refer to the latter as the rhetorical problem—“the barriers, the limitations, and the sources of resistance that might prevent the [rhetorical] act from achieving its ends.”

One element of the rhetorical problem is the historical-cultural context of the speech which principally consists of two components. The first is “the particular events that motivated the rhetor to engage in rhetorical action and also the particular occasion, which may entail audience expectations about the function of an act and about what choices are appropriate to it” (Campbell & Burkholder, 1996, p. 51). In the case of Trump’s inaugural, this would include the limitations placed upon Trump’s construction and performance of his rhetorical act by the generic conventions of past inaugurals, the rhetorical choices made by previous rhetors in those inaugurals, and the audience expectations those choices and conventions have bred.

The second component of the historical-cultural context is “the cultural milieu and the climate of opinion in which the rhetorical act appears...the place of the discourse in an ongoing

dialogue” (Campbell & Burkholder, 1996, p. 50). For any rhetorical act or specific issue addressed within that act, the history of the rhetor’s past choices and of the issue discussed “exert a powerful influence” on the rhetor, their choices, and audience perceptions of and reaction to both those choices and the rhetor (p. 50). In short, almost no rhetorical act is performed within a vacuum. Thus, a thorough analysis of Trump’s rhetorical act and his choices necessitates an understanding of the history of Trump as a rhetor, his previous rhetorical choices when addressing an issue, the history of said issue, and the perceptions of all three the audience carried with them previous to the rhetorical act.

Therefore, attention will be paid to the historical-cultural context in which the speech occurred. Thanks to media coverage and the power the modern U.S. presidency, presidents never speak to a narrow audience. Rather, public presidential speech is always “heard” by everyone, meaning it impacts future rhetorical situations in the broadest sense possible. Additionally, Trump and his rhetoric received greater media attention than any other politician of the 2016 election cycle, making both an almost inescapable aspect of that election (The Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, 2016). Thus, as I read Trump’s inaugural, I will do so in consideration of his campaign messaging to interpret how this context likely shaped audience perceptions. Questions I will look to address include: What, at the time of the speech, were the social, economic, and political pressures on Trump and the American people? What previous events or discourse served to focus the American people’s attention on aspects of Trump’s rhetoric? Given each president often faces analogous rhetorical problems in their respective inaugural addresses, what additional insight into Trump’s rhetorical choices are revealed through the similar and dissimilar ways this speech addresses comparable rhetorical

problems? How do these past events or discourse inform and constrain Trump's rhetorical choices?

The critical analysis of the speech itself will focus on three means of rhetoric: imagery, ideas, and division. The first area of critical analysis will be the type of imagery Trump employs in his descriptions of America, Americans, and American experiences. Imagery here is meant to describe the creative use of language by a rhetor to expand the range of ideas and thoughts in an artifact. Examples include metaphors, hyperbole, and metonymy. Traditionally, presidents are cautious in their rhetoric and conservative in their image deployment (Hart et al., 1990/2017). Divergence from this tradition is another area in which Trump differentiates himself. While this might not be a particular fertile field in a traditional president's inaugural, Trump's unconventionality implies the potential for an unusually bountiful harvest. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) tell us imagery is both the result of and itself results in thought. Interrogation of an artifact's imagery can identify ideas the rhetor is attempting to foreground as well as ideas they are attempting to downplay. It will illuminate attempts to stimulate audience imagination and satiate a hunger for both the new and the old. Finally, since rhetorical analysis always recognizes a rhetor's choices exist alongside an almost infinite could-have-been-instead, what imagery does and does not exist implies things about the rhetor themselves, their worldview, and their assumptions. Questions I ask of this text include: What imagery, particularly metaphors, does Trump employ in this speech? What preferences and underlying beliefs does this imagery make visible? What greater picture of America is suggested by these images? How are they used to persuade audience members to accept his interpretations of the American experience?

The second area of inquiry will be the ideations and ideographs Trump invokes and employs. The United States has been a nation-state with a diverse population since its inception.

As addressed in the previous chapter, rhetorical unification of the American populace is most often attempted based on shared ideations. Thus, we should expect the presence of recurring and obvious ideographs of America and American in an inaugural address due to the speech's epideictic and ritualistic qualities. However, as this document has exhaustively noted, Trump is unconventional in his rhetorical deployments, which potentially portends an abandonment of the usual script. Analysis of the ideographs present in this artifact will show which ideas are and (perhaps more interestingly) are not present, reveal rhetorical patterns present within the artifact, and help with explicating the speech's overall tone. Questions I ask of this text include: What ideographs does Trump employ or not employ? Which ideographs are framed as desirable? Which are framed as undesirable? Collectively, what sort of nation and American do these ideographs preference?

Lastly, the third major area of inquiry focuses on the division in Trump's rhetoric. Per Burke (1969), rhetorical constructions, of national identity or otherwise, create division by necessity. As these constructions cannot be and are not all encompassing there must be a means, method, or descriptor to distinguish who is from who is not. One cannot be distinct from another without an Other being, at least implicitly, identified. Per Stuckey (2020, p. 380), "All language is both inclusive and exclusive; every attempt to define a community will leave someone on the outside."

Given Trump's penchant for overt divisiveness, a study of how his rhetoric unifies would be incomplete without an examination of how that divisiveness operates within the artifact. Questions I ask of this text include: Who does Trump's rhetoric delineate as non- or lesser Americans? How is this delineation achieved? Are these divisions adversarial in nature? Who

does the delineation identify as included as American? Is a unifying threat identified? If yes, is the threat internal or external?

Collectively, these three lines of analysis feed a common thread of inquiry based on Althusser's theory of interpellation. Rhetorical constructions must hail audiences in a way that invites them to see themselves as subjects of the construction. Who is it that Trump is hailing? Who would see themselves interpellated as an American by these constructions? Who would be unable to see themselves as an American subject within these constructions?

This analysis presumes that in his speech Trump embraces divisiveness (Gunn, 2020; Johnson, 2017; S.P. Perry, 2018; Stuckey, 2020). With this in mind, I seek to find what if any common identity for the nation Trump constructs. What are the contours of Trump's American nation and who are the Americans it is interpolating? In the next chapter, I detail Trump's rather surprising answer to this question.

## Chapter 4 - The Constitutive Rhetoric of Donald J. Trump

The inaugural ceremony did not begin with the usual invocation. Instead, Trump, who invited “the largest lineup of faith leaders at an inauguration in decades” (Lovett, 2017, para. 1), chose to begin with three prayers of invocation. The first, by Cardinal Dolan, the Catholic Archbishop of New York, typified the non-sectarian, civil religious rhetoric of previous inaugurations (PBS NewsHour, 2017a). He never referred to Jesus directly and recited a passage from the Wisdom of Solomon. The second, by Samuel Rodriguez, broke with tradition by quoting from the Sermon on the Mount at length, complete with a clearly Christian version of civil religious tropes, such as “ye shall be as a city upon a hill” and “shall not hide your lamp under a basket” (PBS NewsHour, 2017c). Notably, his invocation concluded, “respectfully in Jesus’ name. Amen.” The final invocation, by pastor Paula White, explicitly called the United States a blessed nation, a gift from God, one nation under God, and a beacon of hope for all men (PBS NewsHour, 2017b). In it, White asked God to bestow wisdom, justice, righteousness, and compassion on the nation and its new president. She concluded, “Glory to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.” These invocations, in their content, aberration from inaugural tradition, and lack of non-Christian religious diversity, are a fitting introduction for and preview of the inaugural address Trump would deliver and the nation he would rhetorically construct.

As this analysis will show, the identity of the nation Trump is rhetorically constructing is revealed in the contours and anthesis of the citizenry it hails. In the inaugural of Donald Trump, Americans are not the people and representatives of “other countries.” Nor are they the political and cultural elites whose gains must be reversed for America to win again. Instead, they and theirs are the progenitors of political and cultural power. They are those who sense the cultural

and legal gains of others are not to be communally celebrated but, instead, necessitate American loss. They are those who are hailed by references to the Bible, an almighty God, and reinforced borders—physical and metaphorical—between Americans and others. They are appealed to with themes of restoration and zero-sum loss based not in the sacrifice of generations striving to achieve what has yet to be, but rather a victimhood steeped in efforts to regain what has been taken in a modernizing, diversifying, and globalizing society.

In sum, Trump’s Americans are white Christians, appealed to through distinctly White Christian nationalist rhetoric, constituting a white Christian nation. In what follows, I will support this claim by first explicating white Christian nationalism and identifying the dimensions of white Christian nationalist rhetoric. I will then analyze Trump’s 2017 inaugural address, demonstrating how Trump interpolates an American national identity synonymous with whiteness and Christianity.

### **Defining White Christian Nationalism (WCN)**

Christian nationalism describes an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a Christian identity and culture. This is similar to what sociologist Rogers Brubaker (2017) termed “Christianism,” a commitment to a vision of American civic life and polity intertwined with an identarian, politically conservative strain of Christianity. Sociologists Samuel L. Perry and Andrew L. Whitehead have done extensive and essential work on WCN, both in operationalizing its presence and identifying its effects (2015a, 2015b, 2021; see also: S. L. Perry et al., 2021a, 2021b; Whitehead & S. L. Perry, 2015, 2020; Whitehead et al., 2018). They describe Christian nationalism thusly:

The explicit ideological content of Christian nationalism comprises beliefs about historical identity, cultural preeminence, and political influence. But just as important, it

also contains ideological content that is often implicit. This includes symbolic boundaries that conceptually blur and conflate religious identity (Christian, preferably Protestant) with race (white), nativity (born in the United States), citizenship (American), and political ideology (social and fiscal conservative). Christian nationalism, then, provides a complex of explicit and implicit ideals, values, and myths—what we call a “cultural framework”—through which Americans perceive and navigate their social world.

(Whitehead & S. L. Perry, 2020, p. x)

Christian nationalism is a movement, the ultimate goal of which is not the propagation of religious faith but the acquisition of political and cultural power. Rather than solely reflecting the religious identity it purports to champion, it constructs and promotes new varieties of religion to accumulate this power (Stewart, 2020). It sanctions the perpetuation of inequitable and racialized societal structures of privilege and opportunity (Haddigan, 2010; Kruse, 2015; Lynerd, 2014; Martí, 2019).

Christian nationalists are not content to be one of many voices in an American pluralistic democracy. They would replace democratic principles and institutions with a state grounded on a version of Christianity. In this state, legitimate government would rest not on the consent of the governed but on adherence to the doctrines of a specific religious, ethnic, and cultural heritage. Its laws would be based not on reasoned deliberation, but on idiosyncratic interpretations of the Bible (Seidel, 2019).

The narrative of the United States as a Christian nation began as an attempt to manufacture national identity during turmoil and change (Braunstein, 2018; Haselby, 2014; Kruse, 2015). The perpetuation of modern Christian nationalism is defined by a fear that America has strayed from the truths that once made it great. It looks longingly backward on a

history of America's allegedly Christian founding. It looks forward to a future in which its versions of the Christian religion and its followers hold positions of privilege and power in government and in law. Those with different belief systems would still be free to worship as they choose, so long as they knew their place within the WCN defined hierarchical structure.

Notably, despite being a core tenet of Christian nationalism, the persuasive appeal of the United States as a historically Christian nation does not hinge on the claim's truthfulness. Many scholars have interrogated claims about the United States' Christian heritage, attempting to ascertain the claim's truth value (Cherry, 1971/1988; Harris & Kidd, 2011; Prothero, 2012). But practically, the stance people take on this issue is strongly associated with how they see the world, as well as how they act to preserve or change that world. Therefore, the contention that the United States is a Christian nation has implications even for those Americans who reject such interpretations (Whitehead & S. L. Perry, 2020).

A critical distinction must be made between Christian nationalism and white evangelicalism. While a large percentage of Christian nationalists are affiliated with evangelical Protestant denominations and hold characteristically evangelical beliefs, many non-evangelicals and non-Christians also hold strong Christian nationalist beliefs. Conversely, many white evangelicals unequivocally reject Christian nationalism. In the wake of the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol in Washington on January 6, 2021, more than 100 prominent evangelical Christian pastors and church leaders joined to issue an open letter against what they call the "perversion" of Christian nationalism and the role it played in enabling the event (Statement Signatories, 2021). They called on all church leaders and parishioners to clarify Christianity's incompatibility with "calls to violence, support of white Christian nationalism, conspiracy theories, and all religious and racial prejudice" (para. 12). The signatories noted that American

evangelicalism had long been susceptible to the “heresy” of Christian nationalism and blamed this susceptibility on the tendency of church leaders to accommodate white supremacy over many years. Ultimately, the distinction rests in Christianity, evangelism or otherwise, being a theology and Christian nationalism being a framework that orients Americans’ perspectives on national identity, belonging, and social hierarchies.

Modern examples of WCN rhetoric abound, though they are more traditionally found in the words of religious leaders than presidents. In one notable example, George Grant (1995), former executive director of D. James Kennedy’s Coral Ridge Ministries, wrote:

Christians have an obligation, a mandate, a commission, a holy responsibility to reclaim the land for Jesus Christ — to have dominion in civil structures, just as in every other aspect of life and godliness.

But it is dominion we are after. Not just a voice.

It is dominion we are after. Not just influence.

It is dominion we are after. Not just equal time.

It is dominion we are after.

World conquest. That’s what Christ has commissioned us to accomplish. (pp. 50-51)

Another notable example surfaced during the controversy that ensued when Venkatachalapathi Samuldrala became the first Hindu priest to offer an invocation before Congress. Soon after, the Family Research Council issued a Q&A posted to their website and sent in a weekly Culture Facts newsletter. In it, Robert E. Regier and Timothy J. Dailey (2000) responded to the event thusly:

While it is true that the United States of America was founded on the sacred principle of religious freedom for all, that liberty was never intended to exalt other religions to the

level that Christianity holds in our country’s heritage...Our founders expected that Christianity — and no other religion — would receive support from the government as long as that support did not violate peoples’ consciences and their right to worship. They would have found utterly incredible the idea that all religions, including paganism, be treated with equal deference.

The Q&A was removed from the Family Research Council’s website after the piece was subject to public backlash (Robinson, 2000).

Politicians who utilize this rhetoric do so less overtly than religious leaders. In a 2021 speech, former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum declared America as “settled predominantly by people...mostly from Europe” to “set up a country that was based on Judeo-Christian principles” (Santorum, 2021, para. 3). Least “Judeo-Christian principles” be misunderstood as referencing a broad American civil religion, Santorum clarified his reference was to the “10 Commandments and the teachings of Jesus Christ,” an ideology he described as both “what our founding documents are based upon” and “in our DNA” (para. 4). Santorum went on to utilize a delineation of American-ness and American heritage from non-Christians to bolster his point.

We came here and created a blank slate. We birthed a nation from nothing. I mean, there was nothing here. I mean, yes, we have Native Americans but candidly there isn’t much Native American culture in American culture. (para. 6)

In closing, he described the this “Judeo-Christian” faith and the freedom to practice that faith as “the two bulwarks of America” (para. 7).

As this example shows, the conflation of Christianity and American nationalism is exclusionary, particularly for religious minorities and non-religious people. To the extent that such views become reflected in public policy, the growing percentage of Americans who are not

Christian will be ostracized as not fully American. A 2019 Morning Consult poll found that 47% of registered voters considered Christian nationalism a threat (Piacenza, 2019). These groups fear an explicit privileging of Christian identity, symbols, and doctrines will threaten their access to civil society in both symbolic and tangible ways. Additionally, Christians who maintain their private faith while recognizing the role of government and secular argumentation in the public square are forced to either endorse a WCN ideology or find their American-ness similarly devalued (Johnson, 2021).

It is crucial to note, and as the Santorum comments on Native American cultural illustrate, Christian nationalism's religiosity is, and always has been, inextricably tied to its whiteness. One could not say Christian nationalist rhetoric is constituting a Christian nation in which religious devotion to God melts away racial division. While Christian theologies variously emphasize the shared goodness and fallibility of all peoples, American denominations of Christianity are clearly segregated along racial lines. Some 76% of evangelical protestants and 86% of mainline protestants are white compared to the denominations' minority of Black (6% and 3% respectively), Asian (2% and 1% respectively), and Latino (11% and 6% respectively) parishioners (Pew Research Center, 2015). Historically Black protestant denominations are the only in Christian denominations in America with a non-white majority (94% Black with no other race/ethnicity above 3%). These disparities maintain the historical space for religious rhetorics to delineate along racial lines while, on the surface, maintaining the appearance of being based in similarities shared across Christian denominations (such as appeals to God, the Bible, or prayer). Though modernization may have purged some of American Christianity's more overt racism, Christianity's racial divisions are far from antediluvian and "11 o'clock on Sunday morning" remains the "most segregated hour of Christian America" (King, 1960).

Indeed, Christian nationalism in Trump's inaugural is inexorably tied to whiteness. That said, WCN is neither synonymous with whiteness nor exclusive to white Christians (S. L. Perry & Whitehead, 2019). Thus, it is important to clarify the Christian nationalism identified here *is* one of whiteness. This, as we will see, can be found in Trump's explicit approach to race, support of traditional hierarchical structures, and assumption of "whiteness as the norm" (Guess, 2006; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Trump's rhetorical appeals were not so much directed to Christians as they were to *white* Christianity.

### **White Christian Nationalism in the Constitutive Rhetoric of Donald J. Trump**

Gorski (2017) argues white Christian nationalism has four key elements: (1) apocalypticism; (2) racism; (3) sacrificialism; and (4) nostalgia. I contend Trump's iteration of WCN rhetoric can be condensed into three themes: (1) apocalypticism; (2) blood; and (3) nostalgia. I proceed first with a view of each tenant and how other scholars explicated it and second with a review of how Trump utilizes each in the artifact.

#### ***Apocalypticism in WCN Rhetoric***

Biblical scholar Roland Boer (2009) defines apocalypticism as "both a means of interpretation and a body of revealed knowledge, acquired by divine message or on a journey to the heavens" (p. 19). There are two dominant approaches to apocalypticism within Christianity writ large (Boyer, 1992; Weber, 1999). One approach, known as premillennialism, proposes Jesus Christ will return at the end of a seven-year tribulation period to eradicate all forms of evil and establish a millennial kingdom on Earth. The other, known as postmillennialism, proposes the saints of God will, over time, convert, conquer, and Christianize the world. The end result is the establishment of a millennial kingdom of peace and prosperity on Earth, the conclusion of which will herald Christ's return to claim it. A notable difference between these narratives is the

agency and responsibility of Christians in Jesus's return which, subsequently, creates disparities in the imminence of each narrative's concluding events. Postmillennialism was the dominant narrative of the nineteenth century, in no small part due to its compatibility with the idea of an imperialistic American and Christian empire. Over the course of the twentieth century, however, the popularity of postmillennialism has steadily declined, and premillennialism has seen a concomitant rise in adoption, particularly amongst evangelicals (National Association of Evangelicals, 2011). As a consequence of this shift, Christians have moved from a belief that mass conversion is needed to invoke heaven on Earth to a belief that the end times are already, or soon will be, upon them. For contemporary premillennial Christians, this imbues theological, cultural, and political debates with urgent and apocalyptic stakes as each becomes a battle to save themselves from the wrath of Revelation and prove themselves worthy of the millennial kingdom paradise to come.

Boer (2009) notes that these apocalyptic narratives are characterized by dualisms and are "usually a sign and an expression of intense political and social oppression" (p. 19). O'Leary (1994) similarly argues that the apocalyptic impulse is often driven by acute perceptions of a nation or community in crisis. It is a dramatic and conclusive response to societal evils. Apocalyptic language challenges national sanctity and immortality by reference to a transcendent timeline. The "apocalyptic functions as a symbolic theodicy, a mythical and rhetorical solution to the problem of evil" which "is accomplished through discursive construction of temporality" (p. 14). The need for deliverance coupled with dualisms results in a dependence on an external, divine intervention, replicating the problems of messianism. These issues are exacerbated by the fact that the predictions of the immanent end of the world have thus far proven incorrect (Boer, 2009).

WCN rhetoric supplies adherents with a vocabulary and narrative suggesting that unless white Christian nationals control the state, the state will attack or suppress Christianity. WCN is relegated not only to preserving the boundaries of a geopolitical entity, but also (and more importantly) to the preservation of a white Christian nation as a haven for a dominant white Christian culture. Wilson (2017) observes that when this haven is threatened, “the secular expressions of apocalyptic belief are invariably phrased in terms of superconspiracies” which situate those who perceive themselves threatened “in the heroic role of countering the civilization-threatening plots of the conspirators” (p. 426). These “superconspiracies” generally take the form of meta-narratives that parallel Biblical apocalypticism: an apocalyptic story in which non-white and non-Christian outsiders are prophesied threats to the nation and white Christian nationals are its God-blessed and heroic defenders.

### ***Beginning a Presidency with the End of Days***

As I will elucidate, Christian apocalypticism pervades Trump’s inaugural, manifesting itself through defensive warrior rhetoric and zero-sum framing. While Trump is not the first president to imbue his rhetoric with religiously apocalyptic tendencies, the approach Trump adopts makes his stylings uniquely WCN when compared to his predecessors.

Trump’s inaugural is replete with warrior rhetoric. Trump positions Americans as warriors on a battlefield, extolling his them to “remember that old wisdom our soldiers will never forget” and promising unity will be discovered when our blood runs freely and comingles together as “all bleed the same red blood of patriots.” He promises Americans will be protected by the government’s agents of violence, namely “the great men and women of our military and law enforcement,” a promise many Americans, from Briana Taylor to George Floyd, would later find unfilled. He promises that a “united America” is “totally unstoppable,” foregrounding a

need to overcome some implied oppositional force bent on stopping or harming America and Americans.

Trump's rhetoric adopts a premillennial version of apocalypticism. Trump promises America will not "seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather let it shine as an example... for everyone to follow." This is in contrast to the rhetoric of the last Republican president, George W. Bush. Bush advocated a forceful export of Christianity and Western values (Cady, 2008; Lincoln, 2004; Suskind, 2004). In doing so, Bush implied the ideological, theological, and ultimately, physical battlefield was in the places in need of Christianizing and Westernizing. This is a rhetorical styling more indicative of postmillennialism. In contrast, Trump's warrior rhetoric is plied for conservative ends. This is a protective, circle-the-wagons posture that places the battlefield on American soil, shoring up the faithful and fighting defensively against those who would threaten "our way of life."

In addition to its premillennialism, the speech's overarching theme of WCN apocalypticism is best exemplified by Trump's deployment of zero-sum frames. In this observation, I find myself in agreement with Stuckey's (2020) characterization of Trump's national identity as inducing Americans to "see national belonging as a limited resource" and, consequently, "see ourselves not as tenuously united members of a shared community, but as competitors" (p. 382). A notable example of zero-sum logic is the speech's lack of acknowledgement or attempted inclusivity for people who did not vote for Trump. In his victory speech, victorious candidate Trump pledged:

...I will be president for all Americans... For those who have chosen not to support me in the past...I'm reaching out to you for your guidance and your help so that we can work together and unify our great country. (2016a, para. 9-11)

In contrast, newly inaugurated Trump at no point explicitly acknowledges either the citizens who did not vote for him or that a contentious and competitive election had preceded his presidency. This absence is an aberration for inaugural addresses, though not an unprecedented one. George W. Bush's 2001 inaugural also failed to acknowledge the contentiousness of his election (though he did explicitly acknowledge his opponent, Al Gore), leading Bostdorff (2003) to argue Bush did not truly achieve his investiture as president of all people until his post-9-11 speech at the National Cathedral. Trump's similar lack of acknowledgment is made all the more obvious and odder by the notable presence of Hillary Clinton, Trump's main election opponent, in the crowd behind him (whom Trump also, in contrast to Bush, did not acknowledge). To the extent Trump acknowledged the election at all, he, referencing "the people," noted that "you came by the tens of millions to become part of a historic movement, the likes of which the world has never seen before." In this, Trump goes a step beyond a decision not to mention non-Trump voters and into a rhetorical erasure of their existence through the inference that all of "the people," of "Americans," of Trump's hailed audience were part of the movement to elect Trump. To acknowledge anything else would offer representation and inclusion to non-WCN audiences—a violation of the speech's commitment to a winner-take-all America.

The result of Trump defining "you" as people who "came by the tens of millions to become part of a historic movement, the likes of which the world has never seen before" is a speech in which the audience being addressed rhetorically is restricted to those who supported Trump in 2016. This subtle rhetorical act of divisiveness cleaves non-Trump supporters from Trump's rhetorical definition of "you," a term he linguistically conflates with "the people," "Americans," and "America" throughout the speech.

When referencing Washington politicians early in the speech, Trump claims “a small group in our nation’s capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth.” In the historical-cultural context of Trump’s campaign rhetoric, this appears to echo Trump’s campaign promise to “drain the swamp in Washington, D.C.” by “proposing a package of ethics reforms to make our government honest once again” (CNN Video, 2016). Yet countless reports in the subsequent years of his presidency sow doubt on the likelihood that either he or his supporters actually envisioned draining the swamp as a message of anti-government graft (Bierman, 2018; Friedersdorf, 2019; Lardner, 2020; Woodward & Pace, 2018). The use of “cost” and “wealth” make far more sense when uncoupled from their material grounding.

Rather than a focus on anti-corruption, “drain the swamp” and similar slogans are ultimately about the reallocation of political and cultural power. Washington D.C. has long been a target of populist politicians, particularly modern Conservatives who employ it as representative of both a political elite and a coastal, Liberal elite (Lee, 2006). Implicitly referencing both these meanings, Trump declares that “their victories have not been your victories. Their triumphs have not been your triumphs.” To what victories is Trump referring? To be sure, some level of financial gain is being referenced, but these victories run deeper. The victories to which Trump refers are of cultural and political power taken from and wielded against “the people.” The wielding of this power came in the form of legislation (such as the Affordable Care Act’s mandate of contraceptive coverage), executive orders (such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), and federal court rulings (such as *Obergefell v. Hodges*). Through Trump and his presidency, this cultural and political clout will be returned to its historical and rightful owners.

The internal narrative of this speech depicts Trump's defined "America" as engaged in a winner-take-all battle. Trump's description of prosperity throughout the speech is entirely zero sum. Profit necessitates loss. If others win, Americans inexorably lose. Trump declares that:

For many decades we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry, subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military. We've defended other nations' borders while refusing to defend our own and spent trillions and trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay. We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has dissipated over the horizon.

While these explicit examples of zero-sum losses relate to issues of wealth and jobs, it is important to understand that Trump references these losses as in addition to and inseparable from non-material deprivations. This zero-sum framing transcends tangible issues and is equally applied to topics of intangible cultural power. In this way, it continues the Trump's decoupling of "profit" from material wealth Trump implies when he argues that "a small group in our nation's capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth," a claim more in line with "rewards" and "wealth" in the form of cultural and political power gain than material gain.

A sense grievance amongst WCN adherents fuels Trump's ability to frame the present and future as zero-sum for them. Not only did a sizeable portion of white Christians (specifically including, but not limited to, WCN adherents) feel excluded during the Barack Obama presidency (Parker & Barreto, 2013), but their exclusion coincides with the legalization of gay marriage, the open welcome of gays and transgender persons into the military, government mandating of contraceptive coverage, and a lack of white of prioritization in the economic

recovery from the Great Recession. Through this zero-sum framing, Trump anoints political and civic issues, such as wealth, employment, representation, and inclusion, as sites of spiritual and cultural conflict; the battlefields upon which white Christian nationalists will fight a divinely ordained war for the reclamation and preservation of white Christian America.

A consequence of seeing inclusion and representation as limited and zero-sum is that it privileges the individualistic ideation over the communal ideation. As a result, the speech overflows with appeals to individual desires and values while lacking appeals to communal desires and values. As an example, Trump explains that “Americans want great schools for their children, safe neighborhoods for their families, and good jobs for themselves.” The idea that Americans want what is theirs for themselves is not balanced elsewhere in the speech by any arguments for what Americans want for others, American or otherwise. Instead, the people are encouraged to acquire for themselves because, before Trump, everyone else was gaining at the people’s expense. To the extent the speech makes any mention of or appeals to values such as charity, respect, forgiveness, inclusivity, empathy, or justice, they are made in the context of what is owed to the “forgotten people.” Any notion of their broader applicability is left unaddressed.

Worthy of greater examination is the aforementioned lack of appeals to or mentions of traditional Christian character values (i.e., charity, respect, forgiveness, inclusivity, empathy, or justice). In this, Trump’s rhetoric and articulation of Christianity greatly differs from those of Republican presidential precursors like George W. Bush. Bush’s rhetoric was also infused with a multitude of appeals to religion, appeals that, like Trump, transgress Hart’s rhetorical contract (Hart, 1977; Curry, 2007). However, what separates the rhetoric of Bush from the rhetoric of Trump is what separates Christianity from WCN. This distinction, as Michelle Goldberg (2006)

puts it, is that “Christianity is a religion. Christian nationalism is a political program, and there is nothing sacred about it” (para. 11). In short, Bush’s religiosity is one of theology and is deeply deferential to what these theological tenants call believers to do, while Trump’s is merely one of political and cultural ideology.

In contrast to Trump, Bush grounds the religiosity of his first inaugural heavily in personal ethics and the character the religious tenants of Christianity calls for its believers to adhere to. In this, it is an extension of what he and his political advisors termed “compassionate conservatism,” Bush’s interpretation of a political philosophy which advocates for intervention policies designed to help the disadvantaged and alleviate poverty through the free market (George W. Bush Institute, 2018). Bush’s rhetorical advocacy for this came largely via appeals to God’s expectation for Americans to live out traditional Christian character values personally and through governance. In his inaugural, Bush (2001) references the Biblical parable of the good Samaritan when he claims that “When we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side.” He later builds upon the import of religious character, noting “Sometimes in life we are called to do great things. But as a saint of our times has said, every day we are called to do small things with great love. The most important tasks of a democracy are done by everyone.” Finally, he connects personal religiosity to governance, stating that “Our public interest depends on private character, on civic duty and family bonds and basic fairness, on uncounted, unhonored acts of decency which give direction to our freedom.”

A second important instance in which Bush’s religious rhetoric differs from Trump’s is that Bush is more overtly inclusive. In his inaugural, Bush speaks to the import of religion in American life, but that religion is not solely tied to Christianity. Instead, he notes that “Church and charity, synagogue and mosque lend our communities their humanity, and they will have an

honored place in our plans and in our laws.” While WCN adherents would surely find appealing both the desire for religion’s privileged legal treatment and a preferential location for “church” within this articulation, they would perhaps find less appealing the idea that a “synagogue and mosque” might be offered similar placement in the eyes of American culture and law. It should also be noted, while Bush was far from shy about his personal religiosity (making it a key part of his rhetorical stylings and his governance), he did not, as Trump did, choose to start his inaugural with blatantly Christian introductory invocations, potentially framing all subsequent articulations of religiosity and God as synonymous with Christianity and a Christian God.

The evocation of imagery related to death and destruction is another apocalyptic characteristic of this speech. Trump claims his new administration is inheriting “American carnage” in which:

mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system flush with cash but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge; and the crime and the gangs and the drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.

It is a place without opportunity, without prosperity, and without hope. It is a place where “Washington politicians” and undeserving others prosper as Americans, their dreams, desires, and values, are “forgotten” and abandoned. It is place where “their victories” and “their triumphs” are antithetical to and cannot be shared by true, forgotten Americans.

A final element of zero-sum rhetoric is the speech’s theme of restoration, a theme rhetorically chosen over themes implying shared gains. Trump begins his speech by claiming America is “joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and restore its promise for all

of our people.” He later links people being on welfare with degradation of the country by promising to “get our people off of welfare and back to work rebuilding our country with American hands and American labor.” The speech contains two sections in which multiple sentences with a literary structure of repetition are used to emphasize a core idea. In the first,

We will bring back our jobs.

We will bring back our borders.

We will bring back our wealth.

And we will bring back our dreams.

And in the second,

Together we will make America strong again.

We will make America wealthy again.

We will make America proud again.

We will make America safe again.

And, yes, together, we will make America great again!

Notably, the core ideation being emphasized in both is that of renewal and restoration.

Restoration and renewal must be divisive when deployed contextually to America and Americanness. The Oxford English Dictionary (2021) defines restore as an act to “return (someone or something) to a former condition, place, or position.” An additional understanding of restore is as an act to “give (something stolen, taken away, or lost) back to the original owner or recipient.” It is impossible for something never gained to be restored. For something to be restored, it must first have been had. Subsequent to its possession, the possessed is lost, taken, or stolen. Through restoration, that which has been lost will be returned to its original and rightful owners. Notably then, this restoration cannot be inclusive of citizens still in pursuit of societal

equality and, in zero-sum fashion, will be fueled by the taking from those whom have recently gained greater societal equality and greater cultural and political power. This is the cost of WCN restoration and nostalgia.

### ***The Symbolism of Blood in WCN Rhetoric***

Contemporary American Christian nationalism is predominantly born of two sources, both Biblical. The first is the “conquest narrative” (Akenson, 1992; Hutchison & Lehmann, 1994). In the conquest narrative, “the Israelite nation is formed, not through acts of covenanting, but through acts of violence and exclusion” (Gorski, 2017, p. 341). The second is the apocalyptic literalist and premillennialist interpretation of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that was widely adopted by white American Christians in early 20th century (Sutton, 2009, 2014). The unifying element that binds these interpretations is blood - “blood spilled on the battlefield, blood spattered on the altars, and blood passed on from parents to children” (Gorski, 2017, p. 341). Through a metaphor of blood, religious boundaries collapse into and intermingle with racial ones. This amalgamation allows the synthesis between religion and ethnic nationalism.

The emblemizing of blood as signifier of race is affirmed within Christian scripture, legal structures, government institutions, and popular culture (Burke, 1941/1974; Montagu, 1942/1997) and has been weaponized as justification for establishing restrictionist social and legal constructions. Whites have historically asserted that God divined them with “pure” or “full” blood, which made them an exclusive, superior, and elevated or civilized racial tribe (Montagu, 1942/1997, p. 362). Specific to the construction of national identities, radicalized blood has a history of use denying full national status and legitimacy to ethnic others (Jacobson, 1998; Pieterse, 1990/1995). Once established, anti-Black racism became the foundational blueprint for oppressing new, “not yet white” immigrants arriving in the United States (Roediger, 1994). Fears

of blood impurities and contamination fueled broad public resistance against granting citizenship to 19th century Chinese laborers who constructed America's railroads, culminating in the Exclusion Act of 1882 and laws which banned Asian immigration, interracial marriage, and miscegenation until the mid-20th century (Lee, 1996; Takaki, 1979/2000). The rhetoric of the time, displayed in media coverage and the statements of government officials, bespoke a prevailing opinion that "only Whites could be true Americans," culminating in the Supreme Court rhetorically defining whiteness as a criterion for American citizenship in their 1923 decision of *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (Shah, 1999, p. 259).

An undercurrent of racial animus based in blood purity is the key component in the whiteness of WCN. American religious nationalism was birthed in this racial animus (Jacobson, 1998; Roediger, 1991/2007). The colonial-era delineations between "Christians" and "heathens" were both religious and racial. 19th-century boundaries were similarly divided with two distinct variants on each coast: Protestants, Catholics, Anglo-Saxons, and other Europeans in the East; white Protestants, Chinese, and Latino Americans in the West. In spite of modernization and changes in societal norms, this animus remains perniciously persistent in contemporary Christendom, as exemplified by the convergence of religious and national identities present in WCN strengthening desires for white purity and aversions to race-mixing (S. L. Perry & Whitehead, 2015a).

Specific to the rhetor behind this artifact, Trump's rhetoric broadly displays a peculiar fixation he has for both blood and purity. A prominent example of this fascination is exemplified by Trump's repeated resuscitations of an apocryphal story in which U.S. General John Pershing executed Muslim prisoners of war using bullets dipped in pig's blood to ensure the prisoners could not, per their religious beliefs, enter heaven (Nakamura, 2017). In another example, Trump

posted a plaque on a golf course he owned in Lowes Island, Virginia to commemorate a Civil War battle he dubiously claims took place there (Fandos, 2015). He titled the plaque “River of Blood” since so many soldiers died there that “the water would turn red” (para. 4). Notably both examples entail the spilling of liquid blood and that blood’s destruction of purity (a Muslim’s body and soul in the former, clear and clean water in the latter).

### ***Blood as Sacred and Profane***

Trump’s inaugural promise to “bring back our borders” is an example of divisive deployment and a clear reference to anti-immigration policies he outlined as a candidate. In the context of his discourse entire, Trump’s rhetorical deployment of borders often evokes a sense of impurity prevention and cleansing. In this way, they are similar to the purification received through a Christian’s supplication for and acceptance of God’s grace and forgiveness of sin, as well as the assiduous warding off of future sin. Trump modernizes WCN rhetoric by focusing his racial animus on non-traditional WCN others. Historically, WCN’s preferred racial and religious others have been Blacks, Catholics, and Jews (Gorski, 2019). In Trump’s re-telling, WCN’s traditional targets have been pushed to the background in favor of “Mexicans” and Muslims. As a candidate, Trump’s 2016 presidential run was based heavily on issues of immigration and restrictions on immigration. In framing these issues, “Mexicans” and Muslims were portrayed as impurities the body needed to expel. In policy terms, the solution was purification and separation through “Muslim travel bans,” deportation squads, and draconian immigration policies.

When Trump proclaims in his inaugural that America “must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, destroying our jobs,” he specifies no countries. It may well be that the decision to exclude direct callouts was a geopolitical and diplomatic one (although, with the Cold War as precedent, it would not have

been norm violating or unheard of to do so). Regardless of intent, the rhetorical result is a faceless, antagonizing force-shaped hole that audiences are encouraged to fill themselves. When the inaugural is viewed in the context of the months of Latino-baiting immigration rhetoric that preceded it (particularly given the inaugural reference to borders), it is difficult not to see “Mexicans” as the prime candidates to fill this hole. Trump’s historical use of “Mexicans” crystalizes the faceless threat of global competition and modernizing job market with a tangible target with a tangible solution that Trump explicates in the inaugural through a promise that America will “bring back our borders.”

In his inaugural, Trump’s explicit usage of the phrase “radical Islamic terrorism” identifies the threat as both religious and physical - a belief ‘they’ want to kill you because of their religion and yours. Trump states that America will “unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth.” It is worth noting the delivery of the words “radical Islamic terrorism” is emphasized with both noticeable pauses between and expressive hand gestures for each of the three words. The inclusion of these words and emphasis of their inclusion is a conscious choice to depart from the rhetoric of the previous two office holders (Holley, 2017). It is a phrase Trump and his supporters relish, but many foreign policy experts and some of his advisors have recommended against, particularly because it conflates terrorists, who pervert the teachings of Islam, with all Muslims (Perez, 2017). Its continued use and emphasis is based less in a desire to signal a policy shift against terrorists who claim to be Muslim. Instead, its use represents a type of divisiveness: the signaling that Islam and its adherents are apart from Americanness due to a belief that Western democracy is at war with Islam.

While less focused on Blacks than traditional WCN rhetoric, Trump's inaugural is certainly not devoid of divisive references to Black Americans. In the tradition of Reagan's welfare queen, Trump infuses his call for a resurgent, economically prosperous America with a promise to "get people off of welfare and back to work." Additionally, his allusions to American apocolyptism includes references to "mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities" and "the crime and the gangs and the drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential." He also employs the image of a child "born in the urban sprawl of Detroit," a city used as rhetorical shorthand by Republicans to imply Blacks are trapped in poverty by liberal policies rather than systemic racism (Sugrue, 2014; Badger, 2016). Each example employs imagery drawing upon stereotypes of Black poverty in America's inner city "ghettos" while the former additionally conjures stereotypes of absent fathers in Black families. As Gorski (2017) notes, this is a rhetorical strategy Trump employs often. It links Blackness to the ghetto, and vice versa. The problems of the ghettos are downstream of Blackness and Black culture while the problems of Blackness and Black culture are downstream of ghettos and their violence. As these problems are the consequence of Blacks and Black culture, Trump's government and WCN have neither the ability nor the responsibility to solve or ameliorate them.

While predominately based in unification by means of antithesis and exclusion, WCN rhetoric is not without broader unifying forms. One such form, based in blood rhetoric, is a soldier's spilt blood and battlefield sacrifice. Trump invokes this longstanding American trope for racial inclusion when he says that:

It's time to remember that old wisdom our soldiers will never forget — that whether we are black or brown or white, we all bleed the same red blood of patriots. We all enjoy the same glorious freedoms. And we all salute the same great American flag.

Notably, this gory commixture's invocation is tied to a proclamation that we “all enjoy the same glorious freedoms.” A description these freedoms is never detailed. Nor are any of America's founding documents invoked, which would suggest a civil source of these freedoms. Trump asserts that these freedoms are bestowed by God upon “God's people.”

A theme of warrior defenders is inexorably tied to WCN blood rhetoric through a willing sacrifice of blood and life to appease and in defense of God. Trump invokes these themes when he claims America is “protected” and “will always be protected” because we are “protected by the great men and women of our military and law enforcement and most importantly, we will be protected by God.” Further, blood sacrifice tethers this warrior rhetoric on contemporary issues to Biblical conquest narratives in which God's people defended their God and land from the existential threat of outsiders and non-believers. In this way, invocations of war and soldiers in WCN rhetoric allow for the concretization of existential threats, such as modernization, globalization, and secularization, into battles being waged for and in defense of God and a God-ordained way of life.

Particular to Trump's WCN warrior rhetoric is the intense focus on borders. Trump argues America has “defended other nations' borders while refusing to defend our own.” Obvious is the reference to what was arguably Trump's core 2016 campaign issue: immigration that bypasses America's immigration laws. However, Trump, as both candidate and president, additionally pushed for restrictions to legal immigration, as in the case of the Muslim travel ban and his confusion on why America should “allow immigrants from ‘shithole’ countries” (Fram &

Lemire, 2018). Notably, Trump did not, as other U.S. presidents have done in their inaugurals, take the opportunity to puff America's chest as a place of inclusion, prosperity, and opportunity to which people would want to immigrate, caveating these immigrants must do so by legal means.

Trump's proclamation in the inaugural that "we must protect our borders" from the "ravages of other countries" that are "stealing" and "destroying" takes an intangible issue of international law and makes it tangible through the use of physical imagery and descriptors. Additionally, it frames these issues less as violations of law (i.e., an intangible "government" system as the aggrieved party) requiring governmental response (such as deportation) and instead frames them more as personal slights against American citizens which inflict tangible harm. Put another way, rather than an illegal immigration being a crime against an intangible "government" system necessitating government response in the form of deportation, the immigrant is hurting the citizenry on an individual level that can be tangibly felt when a citizen has trouble maintaining or acquiring employment. Tangible "attacks" on American borders through immigration receive a tangible response through civil policies and enforcement. Framing the threat to intangible borders in terms of tangible harm and war implies the need for warriors who will fight the good fight in defense of themselves and their fellow citizens. The government is empowered to physically remove an immigrant from the country as a salve to their aggrievement. It is far from ridiculous to believe citizens rhetorically empowered to feel their own personal aggrievement would feel called to take the country's defense into their own hands, as some ultimately would (Carranza, 2017; Grandin, 2019). In sum, others and outsiders are dangerous and must be defended against by all means, including violence if necessary.

*WCN Rhetoric's Nostalgia for a Golden Age*

Nostalgic yearning amongst American Christians for a golden age in response to fears of modern, national decline is almost as old as American Christianity itself (Bercovitch, 1978/2012). Eighteenth century New Englanders lionized their Puritan forerunners (McKenna, 2007). Nineteenth century Americans consecrated the Founding Fathers (Albanese, 1976). Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority romanticized the small-towns and neighborly communities of the mid-twentieth century (Harding, 2000). Ultimately, this national nostalgia for a white Christian American is based upon a mythology of sympathy and destruction, facilitating regeneration of the dominant through violence to suppress the subordinate.

Nostalgia, more than mere physiological response or emotional feeling, is based in a concrete set of circumstances. It is a dislocation resulting from physical or emotional separation from a specific time and place. The temporal element is key. A location may be revisited, but a temporal moment is irrevocable. The inability to satiate this dislocation through recapture or recreation makes nostalgia nigh impossible to ameliorate. Additionally, it makes nostalgic impulses and desires highly exploitable.

Attempting the impossible task of reproduction results in fragmenting the experience that would be replicated. This fragmentation occurs because of social norms and expectations that ultimately control and dictate an individual's nostalgia. Fundamentally, nostalgia serves the communal needs of a society instead of the individual. It "entrenches an individual even more deeply into the constructions of their society. In this manner, nostalgia acts as a mechanism of restraint in society, and history based upon or associated with nostalgia becomes a history of containment" (Day, 2009, p. 20).

National nostalgia is similar to what Renato Rosaldo calls "imperialistic nostalgia." Rosaldo (1989) observes that "a mood of nostalgia makes racial domination appear innocent and

pure” (p. 107). He argues nostalgia has the ability to, when invoked, address what one has destroyed while concurrently establishing one’s innocence. Much of imperialist nostalgia’s efficacy resides in its association with and guise as genuinely innocent recollections of an earlier era and phase of life. Therefore, “imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination” (p. 108).

National nostalgia is dangerous due, in addition to its whitewashing of cultural domination, to its justification of victimization by rationale of attaining a greater good or succeeding in a larger mission. Rosaldo argues a paradox arises from nostalgic yearning in that “agents of colonialism long for the very forms of life that they intentionally altered or destroyed” (p. 108). Thus, the dominant culture is allowed to both destroy or substantively alter a culture and purge itself of responsibility for the acts their nostalgic pursuits produced. In practice, this results in “civilized nations” who “stand duty-bound to uplift so-called savage ones” (p. 108). The relationship between nostalgia and greater good results in the linkage between the persistence of an individual’s nostalgic sentiments and the righteousness of that individual. The production of this righteousness is paid for with the marginalization and oppression of other peoples and cultures. Acknowledging the marginalized other would inevitably destroy both the nostalgia and righteousness. The remembering of one thing necessitates the suppression of another. Thus, satiation of nostalgia preserves hegemonic relationships in the present. In essence, nostalgia compels depredation.

Richard Slotkin (1973/2000) Americanizes Rosaldo’s imperialist nostalgia through the concept of regeneration through violence. To best understand regeneration through violence, it is necessary to understand the nature of myth and mythic hero. A hero is the protagonist of a myth

and it is expected that the audience will identify with this hero. Within the mythic narrative, the “relationship of hero to universe and of man to God” is defined both explicitly and implicitly. The myth “establishes the laws of cause and effect, of natural process, and of morality” (pp. 8-9). Through identification with the hero, individuals access the world of the myth and, through the hero’s actions, learn social rules of morality and ethical behavior.

Slotkin explains that the hero’s mode for interacting with the less dominant is that of the hunt. In response to wilderness creatures, the hero “tracks them, learns from them the secrets of their skill, and brings to the surface that latent sympathy or consonance of spirit that connects him with his prey” (p. 551). But integral to the hero’s intention is the intent “always to use the acquired skill against the teacher, to kill or assert his dominance over them. The consummation of his hunting quest in the killing of the quarry confirms him in his new and higher character and gives him full possession of the powers of the wilderness” (p. 551). The significance here is that the American origin mythology for which Americans, and white Christian nationalists in particular, have communal nostalgia models mythic hunt behaviors. The hero sympathizes with, learns from, and then destroys or alters the less dominant only to subsequently long for a reproduction of the initial interaction. Thus, the nostalgia of white Christian America is sated via a regeneration of the dominant facilitated through a mythology of violent sympathy and destruction against the subordinate.

### ***Looking Back at the Beginning***

Trump begins his inaugural by identifying Americans as “joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and restore its promise for all of our people.” The speech’s warrior rhetoric posture itself as defensive and protective, as opposed to assertive and liberating. The speech ends on a repetitive structure in which he specifies the things that will make America

again: strong, wealthy, proud, safe. We also cannot forget to think of this speech within the context of Trump as a candidate who explicitly ran on the promise to “make America great again.” This theme of renewal and restoration is, in addition to being noteworthy to creating national identity, the overarching theme of this speech.

WCN nostalgia resonates in this theme. The dark clouds of apocalypticism and “American carnage” part in response to Trump’s proposed solution: a promise that “Our country will thrive and prosper again.” It is a backward-looking promise in which a mythical golden age when all was right with the world and America was great is reclaimed. It is the promise for a time that once was and will be again. It is an America where white Christians and their values were ubiquitous, hierarchy was established, and everyone knew their place. This is the restoration at the core of the speech: a great America Trump will make again.

The distinction between restoration and acquisition is noteworthy due to the latter’s relative nonexistence in the speech. In contrast to the permeating theme of restoration, only a single sentence is devoted to new and future-oriented procurement. Trump declares America at the “birth of a new millennium” in which Americans will “unlock the mysteries of space,” “free the Earth from the miseries of disease,” and “harness the energies, industries, and technologies of tomorrow.” Excepting this single statement, all gains in the speech are framed as re-gains. Trump’s projected vision of America does not look to gain, improve, change, or otherwise provide something new.

In spite of restoration’s prominence as a theme, appeal, and explicit promise, the speech is sparse in its precise prescriptions for how restoration can and will be achieved. The relative exception to this is the speech’s economic prescriptions. Trump asserts that decisions in his administration will be made with the “vision” of “only America first” achieved, in large part, by

a commitment to “buy American” and “hire American.” America will “start winning again, winning like never before.” This winning will “bring back our jobs,” “our borders,” “our wealth,” and “our dreams.” Inaugurals have never been policy-heavy speeches and a prescription like this is akin to the policy-lacking but still understandable prescriptions of past inaugurals such as Reagan’s declaration that “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.”

In contrast to the economic prescription is Trump’s promise of “transferring power from Washington D.C. and giving it back to you, the people.” Absent is an explication of what this “power” is and the means by which it will be transferred back to the people. This lack of clarity is also seen in Trump’s famous campaign slogan of “make America great again.” Trump never specifies when this golden age occurred. Was it the founding? The late 1800s? The 1920s? The 1950s? It is both none and all of these: It was when America was winning, and the American people had the power. While Trump does not explicate what this power is, it is contextually clear that this power is the cultural ubiquity and political supremacy conveyed by what Slotkin (2000) identified as America’s WCN’s regeneration of dominance through violence against the subordinate. These promises invite interpolation provided the audience has a nostalgic time to which to return—a time in which they were winning and possessed cultural ubiquity and political supremacy. In other words, it interpolates a time of Biblical values, Christian ubiquity, and an unchallenged white supremacy while not interpolating minority groups who have never experienced a similar cultural ubiquity and political supremacy.

Trump invokes a mainstay of a WCN golden age, the Bible, in the speech as a call for unity: “The Bible tells us how good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity... When America is united, America is totally unstoppable.” Note this articulation assumes the

interchangeability of America with the Christian Bible's people of God. While in the Hebrew Bible, the people of God were those of Abrahamic descent, the New Testament offered inclusion to gentiles who converted, the definition it maintains in modern Christianity (Barth, 1983; Stegemann, 2006). The conflagration of God's people with America furthers an Americanness synonymous with belief in a Christian God. When paired with the speech's decoupling of Christianity from religion as a personal relationship with one's God, it further cements a sense of Americanness as belief in a particular Christian political ideology than a Christian theology.

Another striking aspect is the presence of the Bible when juxtaposed with the lack of explicit invocation for either the founders or foundation documents, such as the Constitution or Declaration of Independence. While "God talk" is by no means an uncommon aspect of post-Reagan presidential rhetoric (Domke & Coe, 2007), it is only the seventh time the Bible has ever been uttered in a presidential inauguration address. In five of the six previous instances, it was utilized as a way to connect themselves to themselves to George Washington, making it less an appeal to Christian religiosity and more about establishing their rhetorical link to the history of the office. Carter and Bush would do so nearly identically, noting "Here before me is the Bible used in the inauguration of our first President, in 1789" (Carter, 1977) and "I've just repeated word for word the oath taken by George Washington 200 years ago, and the Bible on which I placed my hand is the Bible on which he placed his" (G. H. W. Bush, 1989), respectively. Reagan's (1985) iteration, while more literary in its imagery ("When the first President, George Washington, placed his hand upon the Bible, he stood less than a single day's journey by horseback from raw, untamed wilderness") was in concert with Carter and Bush in its coupling of American civic history to religiosity. In so doing, the Christianity of these references is blunted, keeping them within Hart's (1977) rhetorical contract of civil religion. In contrast,

Trump's lack of clear reference to the founders or founding documents abandons a unique part of civil religion's symbolism, what Coleman (1970) called the identification of "the civil saints" such as Washington, making his articulation more Christian and less civil religion.

Trump's reference to the Bible is without any corresponding connection to civil history, making it an aberration amongst its relatively conservative usage modern usage. In the absence of any connection to or explicit mention of America's foundational figures or documents, the Bible is left as the speech's oldest foundational ideograph. This position invokes the enduring myth of the religious right that America is first and foremost a Christian nation founded on Christian values. In this act, Trump ignores the civil documentation altogether, rhetorically foregrounding the Bible in a position of absolute supremacy.

## **Conclusion**

Trump's definition of 'Americans' reveals its contours by way of an apparent contradiction. Early in the speech, he describes the successes that others have had at the expense of the "forgotten people." As outlined earlier in this analysis, these others are themselves American citizens, explicitly politicians and implicitly U.S. citizens who made gains culturally and economically under the Obama presidency. In regard to the relationship these others have with "the forgotten people" - 'true' Americans - Trump pronounces that "their victories have not been your victories. Their triumphs have not been your triumphs." Later in the speech, while describing the "American carnage" in which the "forgotten people" find themselves, Trump declares:

We are one nation, and their pain is our pain. Their dreams are our dreams. And their success will be our success. We share one heart, one home, and one glorious destiny.

While this may seem a contradiction, it is complementary within the context of Trump's implicit argument that 'the people,' 'Americans,' and 'white Christians' are one in the same. It should be thought of as paired with the speech's rhetorical implication that all Americans are supporters of Trump. Both this declaration and contradiction construct an American identity in which support of Trump and WCN rhetoric is a pre-requisite of true American-ness. Agreement is the metric by which an implied citizenship test is passed or failed. Those who agree are "one nation" with shared successes, dreams, and victories, as well as a shared home. The victories and success of those not hailed, not constituted, not in agreement, are not shared. These 'others' and their victories are unwelcome and come at the expense of American victory. They are, as the speech argues, not a part of a white Christian America. They are not a part of Trump's America. They are not true and full Americans.

Like all of Trump's rhetoric, while this artifact's exclusions run counter to modern methods of presidential unification, it still finds a way, albeit an onerous way, to construct identity and unify an audience into that shared identity. It is this disconnect between what Trump is doing and traditional definitions of national unity that causes dissonance as to whether Trump is, in fact, constructing a national identity. I argue Trump is constructing a national identity and point principally to the distinction between country and nation to make that claim.

As discussed in chapter two, a country is grounded in a physical territory with a government that bestows and denies membership through legal citizenship. A nation is a community of people formed discursively based on commonalities including language, territory, ethnicity, religion, and ideology. A nation can be either more expansive or more reductive than a country's legal citizenry. Presidential rhetoric historically, and perhaps inevitably, constitutes a nation that is both distinct from and not entirely inclusive of its citizenry. Efforts of national

unity bear the same stain as America itself: an inability to live up to a foundational principle of inclusion and equality for all. National identity is, has always been, and perhaps always will be at least partially exclusionary. Thus, the fact that Trump's definition of America and Americans is exclusionary does not exclude the definition from being an articulation of national identity. Instead, it is the explicitness with which it articulates white and Christian as synonymous with full American-ness and delineates everything else as less than fully American that makes it distinct in the context of modern presidential rhetoric. In the next and final chapter, I consider the strategic and critical implications of Trump's inaugural statement of the United States as a WCN for electoral politics and ongoing U.S. democratic experiment.

## **Chapter 5 - In the Wake of American Carnage**

Trump's 2017 inaugural and his use of WCN rhetoric present several avenues worthy of further discussion. The speech and Trump's constitutive tactics diverge from the precedent of other modern office holders and inaugurals. Additionally, the WCN rhetoric this work identifies has broader implications for presidential rhetoric and political rhetoric in the public square. In what follows I consider each in turn.

### **An Unprecedented Inaugural**

This speech notably deviates from previous presidential rhetoric generally and inaugurals specifically in two notable ways. First, while full inclusion is linguistically impossible, presidents generally recognize the prudentiality of interpolating an American national identity as broadly as possible. The reasons for this are twofold. The first is that doing so is a matter of statesmanship and fulfills the responsibilities of the office. As the only nationally elected official, it is implicit that a president is and should be a representative of all. The second is that doing so is a matter of political expedience. Painting a picture of American that includes the entire actual electorate is a method of voter expansion for a president (or a future candidate relatively sympathetic to the president's achievements) who will attempt to win a future presidential term. Thus, broad interpolation is in both the civic and electoral best interests of a president.

Trump's inaugural is a deviation from modern inaugurals in how explicitly it lacks broad electorate unification. The speech never acknowledges the 2016 election, his opponents in that election, the contentiousness of that election, or citizens who did not vote for him which, it should be noted, comprised a majority of Americans. In so doing, I echo Bostdorf's (2003) claim concerning George W. Bush and argue Trump never truly attained investiture as president of all the people. Trump's promise to be a president for "all Americans," while present, comes later in

the speech, after the definition of what an American is has been rhetorically thrown into question at best and decided in an exclusionary way at worst.

Early evidence augurs Trump's choice to narrowly create his inaugural's rhetorical constructions may prove more of a notable aberration than the genesis of a new tradition. It is impossible to read the return to a rhetorical principle of national unity in Joseph Biden's 2021 inaugural address, and the abnormal level of explicit devotion paid to that principle, as anything other than a direct response to both Trump's inaugural address and his presidency overall (Biden, 2021; *The Economist*, 2021). While the unorthodox nature of Trump's inaugural likely ingratiated him to his supporters, Trump's absence at the 2021 inaugural address is perhaps some testament to the wisdom behind the traditional approach to inaugurals and presidential rhetoric.

The speech also deviates from traditional presidential rhetoric in how it conceives of and frames the basis for American national identity. To achieve broad unity, American presidents traditionally ground their national identity in America as an idea. This is done through appeals utilizing ideographs (including patriotism, founding fathers, founding documents) and myths (such as the American Dream, American exceptionalism, and the idea of America as being founded by immigrants). This is an opportunity fairly distinct to America and Americans (Beasley, 2004; Stuckey, 2004). Similar appeals from leaders in other democracies find themselves grappling with generation-spanning classism and blood-and-soil lineage. These can manifestly fixate a nation's identity in its country and people's long geographical and societal history. In contrast, America as an idea unifies broadly because it attempts to decouple American identity from overt grounding in race, place, and class, thus making inclusion theoretically available to all.

Trump's rejects the concept of America as an idea. This analysis has previously noted the importance of borders to Trump's WCN rhetoric with particular attention paid to how the focus on the protecting of physical borders transcends into the protection of metaphysical (such as cultural) borders. This focus does, in both iterations, abandon the rhetorical framing of American identity as an idea. Instead, Trump grounds national identity in race and place, something that brings it more in line with how national identity is framed elsewhere in the world and, subsequently, robs American-ness of its distinctiveness and exceptionalism. It also brings American national identity more in line with a nationalist belief of humanity as divisible into distinct cultural groups that governments exist to promote and protect.

The popularity of and devotion to Trump amongst his supporters presents a strong argument that this rhetorical narrowing and specificity of American-ness presents presidents with an opportunity to engender powerful support amongst those who are singled out. What is difficult to untangle is whether this support derives more from who is singled out or more from whom is excluded. Additionally, it appears part of the appeal of Trump's rhetorical strategy is that it runs against the modern direction of presidential rhetoric to be equally inclusive of America's growing diversity in race, gender, ethnicity, and religion. While the sense of historic loss of hegemony makes the appeal of this strategy to Christian whites explicable, it is not necessarily the case that this set of identities are the only ones on which presidents could use this strategy. The power it has had on Trump supporters certainly augurs the benefits of succeeding in such attempts.

Many analyses of Trump's lack of broad unification of American citizens look at these tactics as a product of ineptitude at best and nefarious purposefulness at worst. At either end of the spectrum or somewhere in-between, most agree the effects are deleterious to American

society and speak to, even when purposeful, a lacking in Trump's rhetorical and political abilities as a unifier-in-chief. What is less investigated is the admittedly terrifying prospect that these tactics, while still deleterious, are perhaps a calculated understanding that modern America is too fractured and lacking in shared elements to be unified. It has always been the case, as previously addressed, that rhetorical efforts to create a unified American identity are not all encompassing and doomed to failure. However, the hegemonic power of white Americans and the inability of minorities to exercise their full participatory rights as Americans allowed for a relatively stable, if egregiously bigoted and unfair, articulation of "American"-ness. As the electorate became more diverse, presidents have attempted to rhetorically smooth over the dividing lines using ideographs of greater and greater abstraction with mixed results. The last two winning presidential campaigns have arguably found their greater success in uniting around what they are not than what they are (2017's rejection of a non-white, globalizing, secularist nation; 2021's rejection of a Trump nation). Therefore, scholars should investigate whether Trump's choice to explicitly double down on a single or small group of sub-identities is less a reflection on his own inabilities and more a shrewd understanding of how divided modern America is. Rhetoricians may want to devote attention to if and when modern rhetors utilize nationalist worldviews that constitute nations delineated by shared culture under the guise of constituting nations delineated by geographical boundaries, legal citizenship, and privileged sub-cultures.

In sum, Trump's inaugural represents an aberration in presidential constructions of national identity. Specifically, Trump constructs national identity more narrowly than other contemporary office holders and his articulation of American-ness is less based in shared ideations and values.

## **The Deleteriousness of a White Christian America**

Since Trump brought this rhetoric into more overt and consistent mainstream discourse, white Christian nationalism has risen as a more noticeably widespread and dangerous force (Stanton, 2021). Rhetoricians have shown the rhetorical link between Trump and white nationalism (Hartzell, 2018; McHendry, 2018). Additionally, evidence for a causal relationship between Trump's presidency and this rise has continued to build (Confronting White Supremacy, 2019; Miller, 2021; Neiwert, 2017; Reilly, 2016; Rushin & Edwards, 2018). Future work must not overlook the religious aspect of this rhetoric and these movements. Specifically, the work must be expanded to include the role politicians and media organizations share in creating and propagating WCN narratives and messages—a task to which rhetorical, media, and political communication scholars would bring relevant expertise.

Through the preferencing of a religious culture, Trump's WCN rhetoric proposes a favored place both for Christians amongst Americans and for Americans amongst other nations. WCN ideology preaches that the Christian God plays a central role in the maintenance of the United States because America and its citizens play a central role in God's plan and revelation. This implies two things. First, even if one were Christian, to be American is to be more favored by God than one would be if Afghani, English, or Japanese. Second, full membership in Christianity and America become inexorably tied; to be a true Christian one must be American and to be a true American one must be Christian. Pertinent to rhetorical constructions of American national identity, Trump's rhetoric implies that, even in this America devoid of a nationally recognized religion, spiritual citizenship is a necessary condition of complete national citizenship.

Two of Trump's rhetorical moves deserve special attention. The first is Trump's discursive abandonment of America's founding documents in favor of the Bible. Preferencing the Bible over America's civil founding documents saves Christian nationalists the work of justifying America as founded in Christianity and Christian values. Adherents of Christian nationalism have reimagined America's founding and its founders. Traditionally this has been done through exaggerations of the founders' religiosity and arguments that, like the Bible, the United States' founding documents are works of divine inspiration (Cherry, 1971/1988; Harris & Kidd, 2011; Whitehead & S. L. Perry, 2020). Christian nationalists forward these claims because they know those same founders enshrined a truth in those founding documents that is fatal to their cause. The wall of separation between church and state is not, as Christian nationalists would have Americans believe, a secular Liberal invention or some latter-day fiction. It is a concept inscribed into the Constitution as a core achievement of America's founding and a principle essential to the continued existence of a liberal and pluralistic society. Rhetoricians should monitor if this tactic of bypassing both America's foundational pluralism and discursive battles over American heritage through rhetorical implications of Biblical supremacy is a move future rhetors, particularly those engaged in politics, attempt to replicate.

The second rhetorical decision deserving of special attention, though full appreciation of its deployment extends beyond the confines of the 2017 inaugural address, is Trump's reconfiguration of traditional WCN targets. Specifically, I refer to substituting Muslims and "Mexicans" in for the traditionally scapegoated Catholics and Jews. This innovation distinguishes WCN rhetoric and the rhetoric of white nationalism. While many white nationalists still view Jews as a prominent scapegoat and threat, white Christian nationalists have become staunch supporters of Jews in America and abroad. This may well be because many white

Christian nationalists look enviously across the globe at Israel, a Jewish version of the Christian nation-state many of them wish to establish. The change additionally exemplifies a restructuring of traditional alliances based on electoral expediency. The history of antagonism between white Protestants and white Catholics is long and bloody, spanning vast swathes of geography and time. Protestantism's largely successful campaign to segregate Catholics from inclusion in the colloquial definition of "American Christian" is one example. Despite this mutual antipathy and distrust, the early 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a détente and integration of efforts in the face of significant and mutual threats, particularly abortion rights, gay marriage, and perceptions of religious liberty infringements (Clarkson, 2013). Some 64% of white Catholics (Cox & Jones, 2016) joined Trump's coalition of religious right voters, necessitating WCN engagement in a rhetorical, even if Laodicean, ceasefire.

As the above illustrates, while white Christian nationalism is certainly religious in orientation, it is not predominantly based in that religiosity. Calls to make America great again for God are not primarily about mobilizing the faithful toward religious ends. Rather, Christian nationalists use religious theology as the basis for seeking or retaining power in the public sphere—political, social, and religious. Thus, white Christian nationalism is, at its core, ultimately about securing social privilege. It pursues political or social ends under the guise of moral and religious symbolism. It co-opts Christian language and iconography to fortify a white Christian culture against shifts toward equality for groups that have historically lacked access to power, such as women and minorities of sex, religion, ethnicity, and race. It is undeniably concerned with maintaining cultural and political boundaries and hierarchical relationships between "us" and "them." It encourages Christians to rally behind someone like Trump who will

“punch the bully” and not ask them to be “a welcome mat which people can stomp their feet on” (Perkins, 2018).

Yet, while not predominantly based in religiosity, the religiosity of WCN rhetoric has profound and deleterious effects on public discourse. Because the embrace of Christian nationalism fuses national and religious symbols and identities, WCN rhetoric grounds and legitimates its prescriptions for the country and its polity in the will of the Christian God. In so doing, it brings the transcendent to bear on the material, inhibiting and eliminating the potential for compromise or disagreement. The inevitability of this is the devaluation of the democratic and pluralistic process. This inevitability may be a factor in the recent willingness of many white Christians to abandon democracy and favor illiberalism (Serwer, 2019). Additionally, one need not take a particularly large imaginative leap to sense the pressure and discrimination, both rhetorical and material, a WCN-based government would exert on certain identities (LGBTQI being prominent examples). The very existence of these identities becomes tentative (at best) in a nation explicitly dominated by WCN rhetoric and values.

Americans who embrace the rhetoric and beliefs of white Christian nationalism are much more likely to erect, support, and maintain symbolic and social boundaries and restrictions designed to exclude non-Christians from full inclusion in American civic life. The America advocated by Trump and this WCN version of American-ness is one where non-Christians must continually justify their right to exist and participate in the public square. Take, for example, the federal government’s 2019 move to grant federally funded South Carolina foster agencies permission to deny services to same-sex and non-Christian couples (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2019). The non-conformity of non-Christians makes them fundamentally

deficient in their abilities to perform appropriately in the public sphere and, subsequently, less American than the Christians who can.

While this work criticizes the 2017 inaugural and Trump's rhetoric for lacking attempts toward and appeals to broad unification of American citizens and voters, from a strategic perspective it is important to note that WCN's rhetoric and narratives (through rhetorical metonymies such as Make America Great Again) unify a sizable portion of Americans and do so powerfully. If those who oppose white Christian nationalists are unable to espouse a coherent narrative that taps into a salient and transcendent national identity, they will have a difficult time defeating its proponents. In their attempts to pitch a bigger and bigger tent, Democrats and progressive coalitions have become less consistent in their experiences, worldviews, and preferred narratives (Gorski, 2019; Braunstein, 2018). As Braunstein notes, this lack of a unified narrative, particularly when juxtaposed to the unifying WCN narrative offered by Trump, played a major role in Trump's 2016 victory. While Trump immediately settled on Make America Great Again, Clinton's 2016 campaign struggled to find a slogan and rhetorical metonymy of its own, with examples like "I'm with her" and "breaking down barriers" more rhetorically focused on a narrative of her candidacy than a narrative of unity. As is the case with most successful attempts to unseat an incumbent president (Fairbanks, 2020; Mayhew, 2008), Biden's win over Trump is perhaps more indicative of Trump's ability to unite others against his candidacy than Democrats' success in creating a unifying narrative that will work outside a campaign against Trump. These findings further evidence the significance of unifying narratives and testify to the importance religion plays in American iterations of them.

As I conducted this investigation, I noticed a gap in the current rhetorical literature on Trump. While crucial scholarship has been offered on Trump's relationship to white nationalism,

little attention has been paid to religion's role in this relationship. Sociologists, anthropologists, and religious scholars have made valuable contributions in this space (Berry, 2017; Dentice, 2017; Gorski, 2019; S. L. Perry & Whitehead, 2020), but little appears to have been supplied by rhetoricians. Therefore, my findings extend and enrich existing rhetorical analyses, demonstrating the importance of considering appeals to a religious worldview. Especially in the U.S. context, attending to religious themes in political discourse is likely needed for a full understanding of persuasion and meaning-making.

Rhetorical analysis distinct from and inclusive of both white nationalist rhetoric and religious rhetoric may add explanatory value to the voices and ideas behind instances such as Ruby Ridge, Waco, and the January 6, 2021 insurrection. Andrew Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry's (2020) research shows us the worldviews of white Christian nationalists are dependent less on whether one is religious or white as much as the degree to which a person views the world through the prism of Christian nationalism and wishes to institutionalize Christian cultural ideologies into America's polity and self-identity. They argue that, while this white Christian nationalism is closely tied to other dogmas and social statuses, it is not interchangeable with, reducible to, or a consequence of any of them. In other words, while white Christian nationalism is deeply linked to white nationalism, political conservatism, and evangelicalism, it is neither identical to nor a manifestation of any one of them.

The fruitful findings of sociologists in this space pose the possibility that rhetorical scholars miss important context if they conflate white Christian nationalism with other important influences and, thus, fail to account for its presence in addition to and alongside these other influences. For example, much has been made of the 81% of white evangelical Protestants who voted for Trump, but less attention has been paid to the fact that sizable majorities of white

Catholics (64%) and white mainline Protestants (57%) also backed him (Cox & Jones, 2016). In a 2016 nationwide survey, 86% of white evangelical Protestants and 70% of both white mainline Protestants and white Catholics said that the “Confederate flag is more a symbol of Southern pride than of racism;” two-thirds of white Christians believed killings of African American men by the police are isolated incidents rather than part of a broader pattern of mistreatment; six in ten white Christians disagreed with the statement that “generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class” (Jones et al., 2016). Robert P. Jones (2020), head of the Public Religion Research Institute, points to these data to argue that “the more racist attitudes a person holds, the more likely he or she is to identify as a white Christian” (p. 175). Indeed, worthwhile knowledge may exist at the meeting place between scholarship of race and scholarship of religion. An ability to fluently speak both dialects will empower researchers to discover greater context and nuance at their crossroads. Much of the existing research which at first appears to reside at this intersection could more appropriately be described as either primarily a work of religious scholarship or primarily a work of race scholarship rather than a true synthesis of the two. While integrative rhetorical research is not non-existent (Banjo & Williams, 2017; O'Rourke & Lehn, 2019; S.P. Perry, 2019), more discoveries may well await greater and continued analysis of this juncture.

Given Trump’s ongoing appeal, it stands to reason politicians will continue to utilize this brand of WCN-infused rhetoric in the future, be they Trump or other candidates attempting to mimic or slightly alter his rhetorical stylings. As large portions of Americans continue to reject the country’s growing diversity and globalizing economy, rhetors will surely continue to find tapping into this narrative of shared religion and identity to be an effective method of rhetorical construction. Scholars should continue to monitor WCN rhetoric’s usage in politics. Notably, a

dearth of research currently exists on the usage of WCN rhetoric in local politics and its usage by political organizations (such as the messaging of political parties and political action committees).

Astute observers of American Christianity may point to its recent decline (Brenan, 2021) and argue this lessens the long-term value of these findings. Pew Research Center (2019) found American adults who describe themselves as Christian dropped 12% while the population's share of religiously unaffiliated increased by 9% over the past decade. With a Trump loss in 2020 and religious identification continuing its current trajectory, it might appear as though time is the only salve needed to address an American WCN rhetoric and narrative. This is why it is essential to emphasize that while the relative size of WCN adherents may decrease in the coming years, the importance of this group and the rhetoric it employs will not. In fact, a slow decline in the number of those Americans who fully embrace white Christian nationalism will likely serve to increase the relevance of that position. Historian John Fea (2018) notes that fear of waning cultural influence was instrumental in evangelical Protestants supporting Trump and this fear of waning cultural influence expands far beyond the denominational boundaries of evangelicalism. As Christians across the country begin to see 'their' country disappear, their identities as 'Christian Americans' will likely grow even more salient. Thus, the relevance of white Christian nationalism, its rhetoric, and its narrative will likely continue despite shifts in the number of adherents.

In sum, the propagation of white Christian nationalist rhetoric is deleterious to American liberalism and pluralism. Additionally, scholars should not overlook importance of considering religious themes in political discourse. Failure to do so may result in scholars missing valuable context and nuance as WCN-based appeals from politicians are unlikely to soon disappear.

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## **Appendix A - Transcript of President Donald J. Trump's 2017**

### **Inaugural Address**

Chief Justice Roberts, President Carter, President Clinton, President Bush, President Obama, fellow Americans, and people of the world: Thank you.

We, the citizens of America, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and restore its promise for all of our people. Together we will determine the course of America and the world for many, many years to come. We will face challenges. We will confront hardships, but we will get the job done.

Every four years we gather on these steps to carry out the orderly and peaceful transfer of power; and we are grateful to President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama for their gracious aid throughout this transition. They have been magnificent. Thank you.

Today's ceremony, however, has very special meaning because today we are not merely transferring power from one Administration to another, or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the people.

For too long, a small group in our nation's capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth.

Politicians prospered, but the jobs left and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories. Their triumphs have not been your triumphs. And while they celebrated in our nation's capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land.

That all changes starting right here and right now — because this moment is your moment. It belongs to you. It belongs to everyone gathered here today and everyone watching all across America. This is your day. This is your celebration. And this, the United States of America, is your country.

What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people. January 20th, 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again. The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer.

Everyone is listening to you now. You came by the tens of millions to become part of a historic movement, the likes of which the world has never seen before. At the center of this movement is a crucial conviction that a nation exists to serve its citizens. Americans want great schools for their children, safe neighborhoods for their families, and good jobs for themselves.

These are just and reasonable demands of righteous people and a righteous public, but for too many of our citizens, a different reality exists: mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system flush with cash but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge; and the crime and the gangs and the drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.

This American carnage stops right here and stops right now. We are one nation, and their pain is our pain. Their dreams are our dreams. And their success will be our success. We share one heart, one home, and one glorious destiny. The oath of office I take today is an oath of allegiance to all Americans.

For many decades we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry, subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military. We've defended other nations' borders while refusing to defend our own, and spent trillions and trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay.

We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has dissipated over the horizon. One by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores with not even a thought about the millions and millions of American workers that were left behind. The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed all across the world. But that is the past and now we are looking only to the future.

We assembled here today are issuing a new decree to be heard in every city, in every foreign capital, and in every hall of power: From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it's going to be only America first.

America first.

Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs will be made to benefit American workers and American families. We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength.

I will fight for you with every breath in my body, and I will never, ever let you down. America will start winning again, winning like never before.

We will bring back our jobs.

We will bring back our borders.

We will bring back our wealth.

And we will bring back our dreams.

We will build new roads and highways and bridges and airports and tunnels and railways all across our wonderful nation. We will get our people off of welfare and back to work rebuilding our country with American hands and American labor.

We will follow two simple rules: Buy American; and hire American. We will seek friendship and good will with the nations of the world, but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first.

We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example — we will shine — for everyone to follow. We will reinforce old alliances and form new ones and unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the earth.

At the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America, and through our loyalty to our country, we will rediscover our loyalty to each other. When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice.

The Bible tells us how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity. We must speak our minds openly, debate our disagreements honestly, but always pursue solidarity. When America is united, America is totally unstoppable. There should be no fear. We are protected, and we will always be protected. We will be protected by the great men and women of our military and law enforcement and most importantly, we will be protected by God.

Finally, we must think big and dream even bigger. In America, we understand that a nation is only living as long as it is striving. We will no longer accept politicians, who are all talk and no action, constantly complaining but never doing anything about it.

The time for empty talk is over. Now arrives the hour of action. Do not allow anyone to tell you that it cannot be done. No challenge can match the heart and fight and spirit of America. We will not fail. Our country will thrive and prosper again.

We stand at the birth of a new millennium ready to unlock the mysteries of space, to free the earth from the miseries of disease, and to harness the energies, industries, and technologies of tomorrow. A new national pride will stir our souls, lift our sights, and heal our divisions.

It's time to remember that old wisdom our soldiers will never forget — that whether we are black or brown or white, we all bleed the same red blood of patriots. We all enjoy the same glorious freedoms. And we all salute the same great American flag.

And whether a child is born in the urban sprawl of Detroit or the wind-swept plains of Nebraska, they look up at the same night sky. They fill their heart with the same dreams. And they are infused with the breath of life by the same Almighty Creator.

So to all Americans in every city near and far, small and large, from mountain to mountain, from ocean to ocean, hear these words: You will never be ignored again. Your voice, your hopes and your dreams will define our American destiny. And your courage and goodness and love will forever guide us along the way.

Together we will make America strong again.

We will make America wealthy again.

We will make America proud again.

We will make America safe again.

And, yes, together, we will make America great again!

Thank you. God bless you and God bless America!

Thank you. God bless America.