

BARACK OBAMA, "UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME COMMENCEMENT"  
(17 May 2009)

Craig Rood  
Pennsylvania State University

**Abstract:** President Barack Obama's commencement address at the University of Notre Dame sparked a controversy over the relationship among politics, religious doctrine, and the character of public discourse. Through strategic organization and appeals to ethos, Obama negotiated his rhetorical constraints and reframed abortion from a moral, legal, and political issue into a *communicative* issue. Implicit in Obama's speech is a theory of rhetorical civility as necessary for sustaining a healthy deliberative democracy.

**Keywords:** Barack Obama, Notre Dame, abortion rhetoric, civil discourse, religion and politics, presidential rhetoric

Two months prior to President Barack Obama's 2009 commencement address at the University of Notre Dame, nearly 65,000 people had signed an online petition protesting his invitation to speak and to receive an honorary doctorate. "It is an outrage and a scandal," the petition complained, "that 'Our Lady's University,' one of the premier Catholic universities in the United States, would bestow such an honor on President Obama given his clear support of policies and laws that directly contradict fundamental Catholic teachings on life and marriage."<sup>1</sup> By the end of April, more than 300,000 people had signed the petition.<sup>2</sup> The Cardinal Newman Society—the Catholic advocacy group behind the petition—called Obama's selection a "travesty," while George Weigel, a Catholic theologian and distinguished senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center at Notre Dame, called the University's decision a mistake and the whole controversy a "colossal mess."<sup>3</sup> Weigel went on to explain that the invitation was not a "neutral act" and predicted that it would "significantly damage Notre Dame's reputation in Catholic circles."<sup>4</sup> Ralph McInery, a philosophy professor at Notre Dame for more than 50 years, even went so far as to say that by inviting Barack Obama to be the 2009 commencement speaker, Notre Dame "forfeited its right to call itself a Catholic university."<sup>5</sup>

In early May, an airplane sponsored by antiabortion groups flew overhead "trailing a giant photograph of a fetus aborted at 10 weeks."<sup>6</sup> On the ground of the South Bend, Indiana, campus, a total of 27 people were arrested.<sup>7</sup> Activists—many of whom were neither students nor affiliated with the university—were "driving trucks around the perimeter of the campus and carrying signs outside the main gate showing images of aborted fetuses."<sup>8</sup> Some protesters were "pushing blood-covered baby dolls in Spongebob strollers."<sup>9</sup> As one activist explained, "My goal is to make such a political mud pit that the president doesn't want to walk through it to do the speech."<sup>10</sup>

Obama used the controversy over his Notre Dame commencement address as an opportunity to elaborate on a theme he had spoken about since at least 2004: the need for

civil, respectful discourse about controversial public issues. In addition, he took the opportunity to clarify his own position on perhaps the most controversial social issue of the last fifty years: the role of government in regulating abortion rights. At the same time, Obama performed all of the generic functions of a typical commencement address by acknowledging the graduates and their achievements, creating identification between the speaker and the graduates, presenting the world and its challenges, and instilling a sense of hope for the graduates' future.<sup>11</sup>

Susan Herbst, a political scientist, reminds us in her book *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics* that appeals to civility can be used for strategic purposes, especially when the speaker is a politician. Her analysis suggests that at Notre Dame "civility" was a safe topic, one that allowed Obama to deflect his own position and get past arguments about the legal and moral dimensions of abortion.<sup>12</sup> According to Herbst, "Obama engages in frame shifting throughout the speech" and "tries to reorient the entire abortion debate to a search for civility."<sup>13</sup> While I agree with Herbst's assessment of the speech, she does not examine how Obama achieves this shift rhetorically. Exploring the ways that presidents exercise their power of naming or defining a situation, David Zarefsky, an expert on argumentation, describes *frame shifting*—a rhetorical technique that postulates "a different frame of reference from the one in which the subject normally is viewed. The effect is that people see the thing 'in a different light' and their attitudes about it therefore change."<sup>14</sup> Since such frame shifts are likely to go unnoticed "as natural reality rather than the product of rhetorical choice," Zarefsky urges rhetorical critics to refine their "understanding of how rhetorical definition is performed" and examine "many more cases of presidential redefinition." The ultimate goal is to ascertain those "factors associated with success or failure."<sup>15</sup> The key point of contention, as Obama framed it, was not the issue of abortion in all its legal, moral, and political intricacy, but a communicative issue: how people might communicate more effectively and ethically about *all* issues, including abortion.

While only a few rhetorical scholars have taken up the theme of civility in Obama's rhetoric,<sup>16</sup> some have explored how he has reframed other issues. Obama's reframing works by placing something controversial (e.g., one's position on abortion or racial inequality) within the context of something seemingly non-controversial (e.g., civility or the American Dream). Obama's keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, for example, recasts the American Dream not as "our individual dreams," but as a communal dream with everyone coming together "as one American family."<sup>17</sup> Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones argue that in his 2008 address, "A More Perfect Union," Obama similarly intertwined problems of race into a broader context of America's failure "to make the American Dream available to all citizens."<sup>18</sup>

My analysis, then, tracks how Obama shifts the frame throughout his Notre Dame speech to reorient the abortion debate into a search for civility. I first contextualize my analysis by providing biographical information on Barack Obama's rise to national political prominence, highlighting the theme of civility in his "politics of hope." Next, I analyze his commencement address at Notre Dame to account for how Obama successfully negotiated the competing demands of the rhetorical situation and defused the controversy over his visit. Focusing on Obama's use of strategic organization and appeals to ethos, I examine how his call for civil discourse allowed him to reframe the abortion issue as part of a timeless struggle to find common ground amidst sharp disagreements. I conclude by considering the legacy of the

speech, including both the immediate reactions and the longer-term implications for Obama, presidential rhetoric, and the ongoing debate over civility in public discourse.

### *Obama's Biography*

Barack Obama was born on August 4, 1961. His father was from Kenya and mother was from Kansas, but after the age of six, he lived primarily with his maternal grandparents in Honolulu, Hawaii. He faced racial prejudice early in life, getting "teased for his unusual name and discriminated against by other black students for having a white family."<sup>19</sup> In 1983, he graduated from Columbia University with a bachelor's degree in political science and international relations. According to one biographer, it was in New York that Obama "developed his capacity for self-control, self-creation, and self-confidence."<sup>20</sup> Obama regularly wrote in journals to learn the craft of narrative, which, as political commentator and biographer Richard Wolffe notes, would become "one of his most powerful tools as a politician and orator."<sup>21</sup> Wolff elaborates that he "found his mentors in books—Baldwin, Ellison, Hughes, Wright, DuBois—and locked himself away as he tried 'to reconcile the world as I'd found it with the terms of my birth.'"<sup>22</sup>

Obama moved to Chicago in 1985 to work as a community organizer but left a few years later to study law. In his first book, *Dreams from My Father*, Obama explained that he wanted to study law "to learn power's currency in all its intricacy and detail" and to make systematic change.<sup>23</sup> At Harvard Law School, he flourished, becoming the first African-American president of the *Harvard Law Review* in 1990.<sup>24</sup> After graduation, Obama worked at a small public-interest law office and lectured on constitutional law at the University of Chicago.

His political career gained traction in 1996 when he was elected to the Illinois State Senate, where he served until his 2004 election to the U.S. Senate. His rise to national prominence can be attributed largely to his performance at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston. In his keynote address, Obama described how "the pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into Red States and Blue States." In response to the "spin masters, the negative ad peddlers" who attempt to divide our country, Obama called for "a politics of hope."<sup>25</sup> To change how we do politics, Obama argued, we have to seek common ground and communicate with fairness and respect.<sup>26</sup> *Time* magazine called the speech "one of the best in convention history" and claimed that the performance "put Obama on the national political radar."<sup>27</sup>

On February 10th, 2007, standing in front of the old Illinois State House, Obama launched his presidential campaign. Hinting at the theme of civility, he told the audience that Illinois was where he learned "to disagree without being disagreeable."<sup>28</sup> Campaigning on the themes of "change" and "hope," Obama defeated U.S. Senator from New York and former First Lady Hillary Clinton in the 2008 Democratic primaries. After securing the Democratic nomination, Obama chose fellow Democrat Joseph Biden, the long-time U.S. Senator from Delaware and 2008 presidential primary contestant, as his running mate. Biden's experience helped bolster Obama's credibility, but Republican presidential nominee John McCain continued to question whether Obama had the experience and the judgment necessary to serve as commander-in-chief.

Although Obama ran a successful campaign, it remained to be seen how he would translate into practice his promise of a new kind of politics. In his inaugural address, he reiterated many themes from his campaign rhetoric: "On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord." Foreshadowing his remarks at Notre Dame, he spoke of a politics that was mature and characterized by thoughtful and respectful discourse: "On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn out dogmas, that for far too long have strangled our politics. We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things."<sup>29</sup> Less than four months later, Obama would have the opportunity to elaborate on his vision of politics without "recriminations and worn out dogmas" during his speech at Notre Dame.

### *Contextualizing the University of Notre Dame Address*

Responding to the outcry over President Obama's visit, Notre Dame's president, Reverend John Jenkins, introduced the Obama by defending the invitation and by describing Obama as an "inspiring leader."<sup>30</sup> Jenkins explained that the invitation "should not be taken as condoning or endorsing his positions on specific issues regarding the protection of human life, including abortion and embryonic stem cell research." Jenkins also called the visit "a basis for further positive engagement."<sup>31</sup>

When introducing Obama, Jenkins anticipated the president's theme by cautioning the audience against letting their differences divide them. He described the balance between faith and reason, between the gospel and culture; and he urged his listeners to engage in dialogue and to show respect for all people of good will, regardless of their opinions on specific political issues. Halfway through his remarks, Jenkins spoke directly about the controversy. "Most of the debate has centered on Notre Dame's decision to invite and honor the President," Jenkins noted. "Less attention has been focused on the *President's* decision to accept."<sup>32</sup> Following the applause, Jenkins went on to acknowledge that Catholic teachings did seem to contradict many of President Obama's positions and policies. Jenkins made clear that while some politicians might have declined the invitation given such controversy, Obama accepted. Jenkins praised him for *not* being one of those people "who stops talking to those who differ with him."<sup>33</sup> After more applause, Jenkins looked across the stage directly at Obama and declared: "Mr. President, this is a principle we share."<sup>34</sup>

Jenkins went on to emphasize how Catholic teachings encouraged dialogue characterized by "courtesy, respect, and love."<sup>35</sup> Rather than focus only on the divisive issues, such as abortion and stem-cell research, he urged the audience to reflect on the areas of common ground between the Catholic Church and Obama's policies: his commitment to affordable health care, education, renewable energy, arms reduction, reducing poverty, fair immigration policies, and disease prevention. When finally calling Obama to the podium, Jenkins introduced him by his formal titles while praising his personal qualities: "As commander-in-chief and as chief executive, he embraces with confidence both the burdens of leadership and the hopes of the country."<sup>36</sup> Thus, Jenkins established a warm and welcoming climate for Obama, embodying the spirit of civility that Obama would champion.

### *The University of Notre Dame Commencement Address*

More than 11,000 people greeted President Barack Obama with a standing ovation as he rose to deliver his address inside the Joyce Center, Notre Dame's basketball arena. "Thank you very much. Thank you, Notre Dame. Thank you," Obama began.<sup>37</sup> After the 13th "thank you," the crowd finally settled down and waited for the president to begin his remarks. The warm reception seemed in complete contrast to the media reports of the many protestors on campus prior to Obama's visit. On one level, this suggests that Obama had no reason to address the topic of abortion because there was no real controversy. On a deeper level, however, the warm reception masked tensions within the Notre Dame community and beyond. Appearances aside, there remained deep divisions over the issue of abortion and related "pro-life" causes.

My analysis tracks how Obama shifted the frame of the controversy throughout his speech. Through strategic organization and appeals to ethos, Obama reoriented the abortion debate into a discussion of civility. He began by ingratiating himself with his audience, as many commencement speakers do. Next, he talked about disagreement in general terms—including disputes about the economy and foreign policy—to show how such disagreements were common in American politics. Third, Obama mentioned the abortion issue, but only after establishing that larger context of political conflict and debate. This arrangement helped to downplay the abortion issue's importance, making it just one of many issues that divide Americans. Fourth, Obama moved quickly beyond the issue of abortion to offer his vision of civil discourse. Finally, he framed his vision of civil discourse within a broader historical context by talking about the long struggle over race relations in the United States, thereby suggesting that even the bitterest disagreements could be overcome.

#### *Obama Ingratiates Himself with His Audience*

Obama began his remarks at Notre Dame by displaying insider knowledge, praising the history and traditions of Notre Dame, and establishing common ground through humor. Although these strategies are typical of commencement addresses, this approach seemed particularly fitting given the controversy surrounding his visit: it allowed Obama to humanize himself and identify with his audience. He congratulated the class of 2009, along with their families, and he used self-deprecating humor in acknowledging Jenkins' support: "Thank you so much to Father Jenkins for that extraordinary introduction, even though you said what I want to say much more elegantly" (1). He mentioned lesser known details about Notre Dame, focusing on the university's accomplishments in competitive athletics. While acknowledging the university's "proud and storied football team," he placed more focus on the university's sponsorship of the "largest outdoor 5-on-5 basketball tournament in the world" (7). Congratulating the winners of that year's tournament, the team named "Hallelujah Holla Back," Obama drew laughter and applause when he confessed to rooting for one of the losers: "Well done. Though I have to say, I'm personally disappointed that the 'Barack O'Ballers' did not pull it out this year" (8). Then came the punch line, with the president using his own love of basketball to establish common ground: "So next year, if you need a 6'2" forward with a decent jumper, you know where I live" (8).

Obama continued to affirm his own humanity and ethos throughout the speech, particularly with references to Notre Dame and religion, and thereby sought to create identification—what Kenneth Burke describes as an audience and a speaker's shared "sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes."<sup>38</sup> Obama's attempt to establish identification was not merely adherence to the rituals of the commencement address; it was central to his vision of civil discourse. For Obama, an emphasis on commonalities rather than differences was essential if Americans were to come together to meet the nation's most difficult challenges.

### *Disagreements Are Everywhere and We All Must Work Together*

Obama began his more substantive remarks by describing the major problems facing the world today. While some of the 163 graduating classes in Notre Dame's history came of age during a time "of relative peace and prosperity that required little by way of sacrifice or struggle" (9), the class of 2009 was different. The present moment was a "rare inflection point in history" for "our nation and for the world," Obama declared; it was a time "where the size and scope of the challenges before us require that we remake our world to renew its promise" (10). Those challenges included an increasingly global economy, climate change, and numerous threats to world peace. These challenges affected everyone, Obama pointed out; they did not "discriminate," "recognize borders," "see color," or "target specific ethnic groups" (14). In a nation and a world with "diversity of thought, diversity of culture, and diversity of belief," everyone must "find a way to live together as one human family" (12-13). This could not be done alone, Obama said as he concluded this point on an urgent note: "Our very survival has never required greater cooperation and greater understanding among all people from all places than at this moment in history" (15). Obama quoted Martin Luther King, Jr.—"our fates are tied up in 'a single garment of destiny'"—and thereby calling forth the need for King's non-violent approach to conflict resolution (16).

Obama conceded that "finding that common ground" was "not easy" (16). The "imperfections of man" rooted in original sin were part of the problem, as was the tendency to "cling to outworn prejudice and fear those who are unfamiliar" (16). Obama acknowledged that it was extremely difficult to "promote greater understanding and cooperation," even among people of good will, people "of principle and purpose" (17). To illustrate his point, Obama described three different scenarios of potential conflict: the soldier and lawyer who "both love this country" but disagree about how best to protect it; the gay activist and the evangelical pastor who "may both deplore the ravages of HIV/AIDS" but are unable to "bridge the cultural divide"; and advocates and opponents of stem cell research "who both seek to protect the 'sacredness of life'" (18). These hypothetical examples helped to clarify and concretize the type of divisions that Obama hoped to transcend by moving beyond "either-or" thinking to find common ground. Rather than frame issues in polarized terms, like conservative versus liberal, religious versus secular, right versus wrong, he encouraged his audience to recognize that both sides in such controversies might have good reasons for their beliefs. Moreover, in a democratic society, both sides also needed to look for common ground.

Obama then arrived at the central question of his speech: "How do we work through these conflicts?" In other words, "As citizens of a vibrant and varied democracy, how do we engage in vigorous debate? How does each of us remain firm in our principles, and fight for

what we consider right, without, as Father John [Jenkins] said, demonizing those with just as strongly held convictions on the other side" (19)? By establishing a broader context and acknowledging the challenge of overcoming all deep differences, Obama shifted the debate away from the abortion issue and encouraged the audience to focus instead on the *process* of overcoming differences. This organizational strategy allowed him to transcend the moral and legal controversies about abortion and to frame the issue as part of a larger problem of deliberating across differences.

### *Minimizing the Abortion Issue*

It is significant that Obama's prepared text did not mention abortion until half way through the speech.<sup>39</sup> This arrangement downplayed the issue's importance and also allowed him to frame the issue on his own terms. When Obama finally came to the part of his prepared text where he discussed abortion, he seemed to represent both the pro-choice and pro-life views fairly. While he did not retreat from his own beliefs, he also did not criticize those who disagreed with his position. This approach suggests that Obama was trying to model the form of civil discourse that he was advocating. "Maybe we won't agree on abortion," he began, "but we can still agree that this is a heart-wrenching decision for any woman to make, with both moral and spiritual dimensions" (24). After trying to establish that common ground, he suggested that everyone work together "to reduce the number of women seeking abortions by reducing unintended pregnancies, and making adoption more available, and providing care and support for women who do carry their child to term" (25).

After the audience applauded, Obama continued in a frank tone. "Now, understand—understand, Class of 2009, that I do not suggest that the debate surrounding abortion can or should go away" (26). He then conceded that perhaps the controversy would never be resolved to the satisfaction of everybody. "No matter how much we may want to fudge it . . . the fact is that at some level, the views of the two camps are irreconcilable" (26). Thus, the debate would continue: "Each side will continue to make its case to the public with passion and conviction." Then shifting the focus to *how* we talk about such issues, Obama urged both sides in the debate to avoid demonizing the other. As the nation continued to debate the issue, he encouraged his listeners do so "without reducing those with differing views to caricature" (26).

Obama supported his framing of the abortion issue as a communicative problem by recalling an email he received from a doctor. The doctor, a pro-life Christian, voted for Obama in the Illinois primary because he thought him a reasonable man and because he agreed with his policies for education and the poor. However, the doctor was troubled by reading that Obama had promised to fight "right-wing ideologues who want to take away a woman's right to choose." Surely, the doctor wrote, people could oppose abortion without being "right-wing ideologues" (22). Rather than call people names and demonize them, the doctor urged Obama to use "fair-minded words" (22). Obama continued, "I didn't change my position, but I did tell my staff to change the words on my website" (23). Obama thus made the point that one could moderate the tone of one's rhetoric without changing one's mind. And changing how we talk about such issues could create an environment where respect, understanding, and deliberation became possible. When we "open our hearts and minds" Obama concluded, "that's when we discover at least the possibility of common ground" (23).

Situating the abortion issue within his broader vision of civil discourse accomplished several things for Obama. First, it downplayed the legal, moral, and political intricacy of the abortion issue. Spending little time discussing abortion itself and then framing it as a communicative issue, helped make abortion just another matter that people disagree about rather than a matter of life or death. At the same time, this rhetorical choice seemingly acknowledged that we are unlikely to change anybody's mind on such a persistent and seemingly irresolvable issue. Focusing instead on the *ways* in which we talked about the issue and on the norms of communication thus seemed the more productive course for Obama to pursue in his speech—and especially so for this occasion.

### *Obama's Vision of Civil Discourse*

After discussing disagreements in general and abortion in particular, Obama moved on to describe his vision of civil discourse, which he deemed necessary for resolving *all* divisive issues. Finding common ground and using "fair minded words" was central to this vision. More than urging people to "just get along," Obama made a more nuanced point: he encouraged his audience to "have confidence in the values with which you've been raised and educated. Be unafraid to speak your mind when those values are at stake" (35). He consequently challenged his listeners to advocate their positions without becoming over-bearing.

Obama illustrated his vision of civil discourse with personal memories that also enhanced his ethos with his Catholic audience. Describing his work as a community organizer with "a group of Catholic churches in Chicago" (29), Obama recalled how the people he worked with came from different backgrounds and had different beliefs: "Catholic and Protestant churches, Jewish and African American organizers, working-class black, white, and Hispanic residents" (30). If they too chose to be public servants, he told the graduates, or even if they chose to be active citizens, they would "be exposed to more opinions and ideas broadcast through more means of communication than ever existed before" (34). This diversity was good, he suggested, but only if people could overcome their differences and find common ground. Reflecting on his work in Chicago, Obama recalled that "all of us learned to work side by side because all of us saw in these neighborhoods other human beings who needed our help—to find jobs and improve schools" (30). Moreover, they lived by the law that bound all people together—"people of all faiths and no faith" (38): the Golden Rule, or that "call to treat one another as we wish to be treated" (38). In addition to that ethical principle of recognizing and humanizing others, Obama urged his listeners to heed Father Jenkins' call for grounding deliberation and debates in reason and to "appeal whenever we can to universal rather than parochial principles" (37).

Civility was not just a matter of convenience, according to Obama; in a diverse democracy, it had to become "a way of life" (40). Invoking former Notre Dame President Theodore Hesburgh's vision of the university as *both* a lighthouse and a crossroads, Obama described a balance of reason and passion.<sup>40</sup> The lighthouse symbolizes a life of intellectual and moral vision; commitment to these ideals can guide one's own life and serve as a model for others. At the same time, however, there must be a crossroads, a place of practice and reasonable compromise, where "differences of culture and religion and conviction" could "co-exist with friendship, civility, and hospitality, and especially love" (27). Obama described

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago—the city where Obama had worked and lived—as someone who "stood as both a lighthouse and a crossroads," someone who was "unafraid to speak his mind on moral issues" but was "always trying to bring people together" (32). While this language has religious overtones (e.g., lighthouse as moral vision and guide), the pairing of the lighthouse and the crossroads suggested broader qualities that must also be combined: reason and passion, idealism and practice, conviction and cooperation. Without the lighthouse, people would lack moral conviction and the clarity of reasoned argument, and without the crossroads, people could not express passions, negotiate disagreements, nor do the work required of a healthy democracy. By invoking the lighthouse and crossroads, Obama thus appeals to imagery that at once has secular appeal, yet also taps into his Catholic audience's shared knowledge and esteem for leaders like Hesburgh.

### *Civil Discourse and Race Relations*

In the last section of the speech, Obama moved from his abstract vision of civility back to a more specific political and cultural dispute—not abortion this time, but instead race relations. Talking about race allowed Obama to again reframe the speech and refocus on an issue seemingly less controversial in 2009. Talking about race also allowed him to illustrate the importance of communication in addressing perhaps the toughest challenge in American history. Obama began by calling attention to the historical significance of his own presidency, noting how unlikely it would have seemed just a few years earlier that he would be standing before this crowd "as President and as an African American" (41). In addition, he noted that May 17th marked the "55th anniversary of the day that the Supreme Court handed down the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*" which was "the first major step in dismantling the 'separate but equal' doctrine" (41). Obama then reflected on how "the dream of civil rights" (41) became a reality, and he identified civil discourse as an important part of the explanation.

Obama recounted a story about Hesburgh, who celebrated his 92nd birthday by attending the commencement. As a member of the six-person U.S. Civil Rights Commission from 1957 to 1972, Hesburgh had to work with both whites and blacks, both Democrats and Republicans, to bridge the nation's racial divide. When the Commission reached an impasse on one occasion, Hesburgh had them all fly to Notre Dame's retreat in Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin, to work out their differences. Once there, Hesburgh—or, as Obama called him, Father Ted—was able to find a solution, and the committee members "overcame their differences and hammered out a final deal" (42). How was this possible? How did they manage to overcome their differences? Realizing that all six members of the group were fishermen, Hesburgh got a boat and took them all out on the lake: "They fished, and they talked, and they changed the course of history" (43). By finding common ground, Hesburgh did not merely enhance communication within the group; he helped change the course of history. Obama explained that "it was the 12 resolutions recommended by this commission that would ultimately become law in the Civil Rights Act of 1964" (41)—the act that helped alleviate discrimination in education, voting, and employment opportunities.

By shifting the focus to race relations near the end of his speech, Obama showed how differences even more profound than the controversy over abortion were gradually overcome through civil discourse. The example was poignant on the 55th anniversary of *Brown v. Board*

*of Education*, and the role of Hesburgh in advancing the cause of racial equality gave the example special relevance. The fishing story proved that civility was not an unobtainable ideal, but rather a practical and productive resource, one capable of bringing about major social change without violence. By thus framing the civil rights struggle as primarily a rhetorical struggle, Obama suggested that even deeply divisive issues like abortion could benefit from civil discourse. Obama's physical presence—his status as the first African-American president—gave even more credence and power to his argument that civility works.

Obama's speech thus began and ended with specific examples that both connected with his audience at Notre Dame and enhanced his own ethos. His use of three anecdotes—the doctor's email, Obama's community organizing, and Hesburgh's fishing trip—focused not on the abortion issue, but on working together, communicating through difference, and promoting civility. By invoking and praising Cardinal Bernardin and Father Hesburgh, he identified with his audience; by showing how closely their teachings and work were bound up with his own life story, he also collapsed the distance between himself and his religious audience. By positioning himself in the larger historical narrative of racial progress in America, and by linking his story with those of Bernardin and Hesburgh, Obama became the living embodiment of the progress that he deemed possible when individuals attempt to overcome differences through cooperation, mutual respect, and civil discourse.

### *Legacy of the Speech*

Judging by the audience's applause throughout the speech and the standing ovation at the end, we might conclude that Obama's message was well received by its immediate audience. However, it is also important not to ignore the silences. Some students actually opted out of the ceremony, including a theology major who instead decided to "attend a prayer service for the unborn."<sup>41</sup> Others protested against Obama's visit by "wearing an image of a golden cross between two baby feet on top of their mortarboards."<sup>42</sup> Still others vowed to remain silent while the audience applauded Obama.<sup>43</sup> Such reactions did not detract from the importance of Obama's message or the quality of his speech, but they remind us of the limits of discourse in bringing people together, no matter how civil that discourse might be.

In her analysis of the American Presidency Project archives, Susan Herbst identified 129 mentions of civility by presidents up through 2010 but only one direct reference prior to President John F. Kennedy.<sup>44</sup> While explicit references to civility are thus fairly recent, presidents commonly call for unity and careful deliberation during times of division. After a contentious 1800 election pushed John Adams out of office after only one term, Thomas Jefferson sought common ground in his first inaugural address by proclaiming that "every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle."<sup>45</sup> At the start of the twentieth century, Woodrow Wilson likewise called for "common counsel" and "cool deliberation" during his first term as president.<sup>46</sup> At a commencement in 1997, Clinton sounded a similar theme when he spoke about the problem of race relations in America: "We have talked at each other and about each other for a long time. It's high time we all began talking *with* each other."<sup>47</sup>

Obama thus continued a larger presidential tradition, yet he has gone beyond most of his predecessors by speaking explicitly and extensively about civility on several occasions. On January 12, 2011, at a public memorial service following the shooting of U.S. Representative

Gabrielle Giffords and 18 others in Tucson, Arizona, Obama eulogized the six who were killed. Trying to make sense of what had happened, he cautioned his audience against "simple explanations" by saying that "it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we're talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds." Urging his audience to strive to do better and "to be better in our private lives," he concluded:

And if, as has been discussed in recent days, their death helps usher in more civility in our public discourse, let us remember it is not because a simple lack of civility caused this tragedy—it did not—but rather because only a more civil and honest public discourse can help us face up to the challenges of our nation in a way that would make them proud.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, Obama was not alone in talking about civility following the Tucson shooting. And while he rejected the news media narrative that the violence was at least partially connected to incivility in public discourse, he nevertheless claimed that civil discourse could help secure a brighter future.

Obama also spoke about civility in May 2010 during his commencement address at the University of Michigan. In this speech, Obama used civility less as a strategic device to reframe or transcend a controversial issue and more as a reflection on the health of our democracy. Obama's health care reform legislation had recently passed, and many Americans were still stunned from the contentiousness of the debates, including a series of rowdy town-hall forums. Obama's commencement address at Michigan thus focused on the need for civil debate about the great challenges facing the nation. He asked, "At a moment when our challenges seem so big and our politics seem so small, how will you keep our democracy alive and vibrant; how will you keep it well in this century?" He then offered his own answer to the question, calling for discourse focusing on issues rather than personal attacks. He also urged his listeners to broaden their intellectual exposure to different sources of information and different types of people.<sup>49</sup>

Read together, Obama's speeches offer an implicit theory of rhetorical civility. While most might agree with Obama about the value and need for civility, that theory also raises several possible concerns. First, communication alone—civil or otherwise—cannot solve problems that are fundamentally material or systemic; some worry that focusing only on communication can placate or distract us from ever getting to larger problems.

A second challenge is the assumption that civility is equally easy to practice, that people have the same cultural and political power and their opinions carry the same weight. However, rhetorical theorist and critic Sharon Crowley has noted in her book *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*, that different epistemologies (or ways of knowing) between religious fundamentalists and post-modern thinkers make it difficult for people from the two camps to communicate and really understand one another. A religious fundamentalist might prefer clear, literal truths, while doubt and nuance are integral to the post-modernist's identity and values. While Obama urged his audience to "persuade through reason" and "to appeal whenever we can to universal rather than parochial principles" (37), Crowley's analysis highlights that not everyone values "reason" or recognizes the same principles as "universal" rather than "parochial."<sup>50</sup> Obama offered a partial answer at Notre Dame by stating that we can get beyond divisions if we "admit doubt" and are humble—or, in religious terms, if we trust that

God's "wisdom is greater than our own" (36). However, for "true believers" of any type, being civil to everyone—moving between the lighthouse and crossroads—might be viewed as a sign of moral weakness or corruption, a charge some leveled at Notre Dame for inviting Obama to speak. Obama also claimed that the Golden Rule—which exists in "Christianity and Judaism; in Islam and Hinduism; in Buddhism and humanism"—requires us to recognize and respect others for their humanity, and can thus help us communicate across differences (38). Inclusive as the Golden Rule may be, some do not accept it; moreover, for those who do, transitioning from theory to practice is neither simple nor easy.

Third, appeals to civility can sometimes wrongly harness passion and stifle dissent. Claims to civility—and charges of incivility—can be misused strategically to silence opposition. Moreover, civil discourse may not be the best or even an available option in the face of oppression. In the Notre Dame speech, for instance, Obama rightly pointed out that finding common ground brought some people together during the civil rights movement. Yet his reliance on the civility frame ignored that other individuals, such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, effectively used more confrontational styles of rhetoric to focus attention on the persistent problem of racism in America. Civility might work to bring people together, but it is not necessarily the only or even the best way to respond to situations that demand more vigorous or immediate action.<sup>51</sup>

Obama's speech thus leaves us with several questions about the relationship between personal conviction and public policy, as well as about the viability of civil discourse for communicating effectively and ethically about and across religious, economic, political, and cultural differences. Would Obama still have framed abortion as merely a problem of communication if the law were on the opposite side of his position? Is civility really a viable option when one considers the issue a matter of life-or-death, as pro-life advocates view the abortion issue? Extending beyond the issue of abortion, what are the obligations of citizens in a democracy when their personal convictions (religious or not) clash with public policy? When and under what circumstances is civility really a viable option? What is the most fitting balance between reason and passion? How do we know when appeals to civility are being used to dismiss or silence certain people and positions? More broadly, how is civil discourse even possible between people with fundamentally different values or ways of viewing the world?

Obama's speech at Notre Dame provides no final answer to these questions, nor should we ever expect those questions to be answered definitively. Obama's speech contributed to a debate about civility that dates back to the ancient rhetoricians, and this conversation will continue long after Obama leaves office.

*Author's Note:* Craig Rood is a doctoral candidate in Communication Arts and Sciences at Pennsylvania State University. I first want to thank J. Michael Hogan for his feedback on this project from the brainstorming stage through the final editing. John Duffy, Rosa Eberly, Kathryn Hume, and the members of Professor Hogan's public address course all read and offered helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay. I am also indebted to Shawn J. Parry-Giles for her help and the two anonymous reviewers for their feedback on an earlier version of this essay.

---

Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Petition to Fr. Jenkins," *Cardinal Newman Society*, 2009, <http://notredamescandal.com/PetitiontoFrJenkins/tabid/454/Default.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> "Petition."

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Rhett Miller, "Critics Blast Obama's Scheduled Notre Dame Commencement Address," *Foxnews.com*, March 24, 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/03/24/critics-blast-obamas-scheduled-notre-dame-commencement-address/>.

<sup>4</sup> Miller, "Critics Blast."

<sup>5</sup> Miller, "Critics Blast."

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Belkin, "Notre Dame's Invitation to Obama Sparks Protests and Soul-Searching," *Wall Street Journal*, May 9, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124182829629302479.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "Obama Calls for 'Fair-Minded' Abortion Debate," *Associated Press*, May 17, 2009, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/30782728/ns/politics/t/obama-calls-fair-minded-abortion-debate/#.Tsvf4eaN4-k>.

<sup>8</sup> Belkin, "Notre Dame's Invitation."

<sup>9</sup> Amy Sullivan, "The Pope's Stand in Obama's Notre Dame Controversy," *Time.com*, May 16, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1898756,00.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Belkin, "Notre Dame's Invitation."

<sup>11</sup> Kristal Hartman Gault, "The Development of a Genre: Commencement Address Delivered by Popular Cultural Icons," *Theses and Dissertations-Communication Studies*, December 1, 2008, <http://ecommons.txstate.edu/comstad/3>, Paper 3, 37.

<sup>12</sup> For one account of how the abortion debate has changed since the 1960s, see Celeste Michelle Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric: Communicating Social Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Susan Herbst, *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010), 79.

<sup>14</sup> David Zarefsky, "Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34 (2004): 613. Highlighting the importance of how situations are framed, Zarefsky points out that "The definition of the situation affects what counts as data for or against a proposal, highlights certain elements of the situation for use in arguments and obscures others, influences whether people will notice the situation and how they will handle it, describes causes and identifies remedies, and invites moral judgments about circumstances or individuals" (612).

<sup>15</sup> Zarefsky, "Presidential Rhetoric," 618-619.

<sup>16</sup> See especially Ronald C. Arnett, "Civic Rhetoric—Meeting the Communal Interplay of the Provincial and the Cosmopolitan: Barack Obama's Notre Dame Speech, May 17, 2009," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14 (2011): 631-71. Arnett's essay focuses on the context leading up to the speech—what he refers to as "communal readiness." Beginning with the March 22nd announcement of Obama's invitation, he traces local and media reactions, often day by day, through March, April, and May. Arnett then uses his analysis of the context to better

understand how Obama balances provincial concerns and needs with cosmopolitan ones. He argues: "I suggest that civic rhetoric, situated and attentive to a human community, functions as a temporal and acknowledged fragile bridge between the local and the cosmopolitan" (632). Blending Obama's view and his own, Arnett concludes, "Civic rhetoric seeks out other persons and opinions of difference, working forever within an existential hope that reasoned consideration will never omit the depth of insight coming from opposing positions, both aligned at times in contentiousness against a rhetoric that ceases to omit the recognition and reality of difference" (659). Another example of scholarship focused on civility and Obama is Jeffrey B. Kurtz, "Civility, American Style," *Relevant Rhetoric* 3 (2012): 2-23. Kurtz focuses on Obama's 2011 Tucson speech, which eulogized the six who were killed a few days earlier at a "Congress on Your Corner" event for U.S. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. Kurtz interprets this speech as demonstrating a "politics of theodicy." He writes, "Concerned with reconciling pain spurred by unimaginable violence and loss, the text demonstrates how citizens might embrace the urgent, difficult necessity of shared sacrifice throughout symbolically constructing the rhetorical, civic, and theological foundations on which such sacrifices might be built. A provocative locus of violence, politics, and faith, the address reimagines civility as a collection of habits forged from suffering and tempered by humility, courage, and moral generosity" (16).

<sup>17</sup> Barack Obama, "2004 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address," July 27, 2004, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/convention2004/barackobama2004dnc.htm>. This theme is pointed out in Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, "Recasting the American Dream and American Politics: Barack Obama's Keynote Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93 (2007): 425-48.

<sup>18</sup> Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, "One Dream: Barack Obama, Race, and the American Dream," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14 (2011): 136.

<sup>19</sup> "Barack Obama," *Contemporary Black Biography: Biography in Context*, <http://ic.galegroup.com>.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Wolffe, *Renegade: The Making of a President* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2010), 30.

<sup>21</sup> Wolffe, *Renegade*, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Wolffe, *Renegade*, 30-31.

<sup>23</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995; reprint 2004), 276.

<sup>24</sup> "Barack Obama," *Contemporary*.

<sup>25</sup> Barack Obama, "2004 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address," July 27, 2004, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/convention2004/barackobama2004dnc.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> "Barack Obama," *Contemporary*.

<sup>27</sup> "Barack Obama," *Contemporary*.

<sup>28</sup> Barack Obama, "Obama Kicks Off Presidential Campaign," February 10, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHaKrC8K84A>.

<sup>29</sup> Barack Obama "Inaugural Address," January 20, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/01/20/archives-inauguration-president-barack-obama>

---

<sup>30</sup> Miller, "Critics Blast."

<sup>31</sup> Miller, "Critics Blast."

<sup>32</sup> John Jenkins, "Commencement 2009: Rev. John I. Jenkins, C.S.C., Notre Dame president's commencement address," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqwfNBOC-Fl..> Emphasis in original.

<sup>33</sup> Jenkins, "Commencement."

<sup>34</sup> Jenkins, "Commencement."

<sup>35</sup> Jenkins, "Commencement."

<sup>36</sup> Jenkins, "Commencement."

<sup>37</sup> All of the remaining passages from Obama's May 17, 2009 speech at Notre Dame are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the authenticated speech text that accompanies this essay.

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 21.

<sup>39</sup> Early in the speech, an audience member interrupted the President, yelling "Abortion is murder! Stop killing children!" Notably, the audience was behind Obama from the start. First, they booed the protester, and then, after Obama remarked "That's all right" (5), the students began chanting "We are ND!" and "Yes, we can!"—and they thus showed solidarity to both the university and Obama.

<sup>40</sup> Jay P. Childers also highlights this in his forthcoming essay, "A Lighthouse at the Crossroads: Barack Obama's Call for Agnostic Democracy," in *The Rhetoric of Expectations: Establishing the Obama Presidency*, ed. Jennifer Mercieca and Justin Vaughn (College Station: Texas A&M University Press).

<sup>41</sup> "Pomp and Circumstance: Obama to Speak at Notre Dame Graduation, Stirring Controversy on Campus," *Chicago Tribune*, May 14, 2009, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2009-05-14/news/0905140288\\_1\\_prayer-service-commencement-president-obama](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2009-05-14/news/0905140288_1_prayer-service-commencement-president-obama).

<sup>42</sup> Belkin, "Notre Dame's Invitation."

<sup>43</sup> "Pomp and Circumstance."

<sup>44</sup> Herbst, *Rude Democracy*, 70.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "First Inaugural Address," in *Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History*, ed. William Safire (New York: Norton, 2004), 874.

<sup>46</sup> J. Michael Hogan, *Woodrow Wilson's Western Tour: Rhetoric, Public Opinion, and the League of Nations* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2006), 51.

<sup>47</sup> William J. Clinton, "Remarks at the University of California at San Diego Commencement Ceremony," June 14, 1997, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, 23, June, 1997b, 33:25, 876-882. Italics added.

<sup>48</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at a Memorial Service for the Victims of the Shooting in Tucson, Arizona," January 12, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-memorial-service-victims-shooting-tucson>.

<sup>49</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at University of Michigan Spring Commencement," May 1, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-university-michigan-spring-commencement>.

---

<sup>50</sup> Sharon Crowley, *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 196.

<sup>51</sup> In other places, such as his 2009 acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>, Obama acknowledges the need for both civility and incivility in the much broader terms of non-violence and violence. He argues, for instance, "the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace." He further explains, "A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason."