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PWR 1SN: The Rhetoric of Containment

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Osama Bin Laden Dead

Ground Zero. Twin Towers. Terror. Terrorists. Hijackers. A series of words so strongly embedded into the minds of the American people that they evoke vivid images of great loss and suffering. Across generations, the events of September 11th, 2001 have found a way to personally affect each and every inhabitant of this self-proclaimed united nation. In an attempt to both literally and figuratively pick up the shattered remains of 9/11, the United States government had one primary goal in mind, from which many other secondary goals eventually emerged: maintain the public’s obedience by containing their fears and distress. A number of tangible changes were made in these efforts, from TSA regulation to an increase in troops throughout the Middle East. More substantial, however, were the intangible changes. The government saw a return to the containment culture that prevailed during the Cold War, from the use of rhetoric as a means to define what is American and un-American to the manipulation of mass media. A decade later, three words still hung in the air, and continued to hold the same heart-wrenching, bitter taste as that frightful September morning. Those words are ‘Osama bin Laden’. Otherwise known as the leader of al-Qaeda, and mastermind behind the events of 9/11, his survival and existence in the Middle East for years following the Twin Tower attacks symbolized one of the great failures of post-9/11 America. On May 2nd, 2011, President Barack Obama announced to the world in a televised address that Osama bin Laden had been killed by U.S. officials. With the previously stated goal in mind, in this speech, Obama attempts to restore authority and legitimacy to the United States government in the eye of the public. He does so by appealing to the grueling emotions of people regarding the tragedies of 9/11, evoking a dichotomy of American and un-American ideals that was present during the immediate post-9/11 world under Bush, and reminding the people of this achievement as one that can be credited to his leadership.

Obama begins his speech with a single-line announcement of the death of Osama bin Laden, the man “responsible for the murder of thousands of innocent men, women, and children” (Obama). This brief announcement is followed by a long slew of scenes that remind the people of the atrocities of 9/11, deeming it “the worst attack on the American people in [our] history” (Obama). Graphic images of “Twin Towers collapsing” and “black smoke billowing” quickly switch the tone from one of celebration – the good news about Bin Laden’s death – to that of sad and somber remembrance – the horrors of 9/11 (Obama). These images evoke empathy, as they are ones that each and every American has had to experience in one way or another. However, Obama then takes this one step further, discussing images that were experienced by few, and “unseen to the world,” such as the “empty seat at the dinner table… [and those] parents who would never know the feeling of their child’s embrace” (Obama). He hopes to evoke the same, overwhelming emotion as that of “September 11, 2001, [when], in [the country’s] time of grief, the American people came together” (Obama). In the same way that the country “united as one American family” immediately after 9/11, Obama hopes that the death of Osama bin Laden can lead to this same sort of unity (Obama).

More than just unity, Obama also expresses a desire for the people to give full support to the U.S. government. In particular, he hopes that people not only stop fighting against the U.S.’s military efforts against al Qaeda, but support them. He initially expresses this hope by pointing to the war against al Qaeda as the best means to “protect our citizens, our friends, and our allies” (Obama). This is an alternate way of saying that disagreeing with the war against al Qaeda is the same as putting these same citizens, friends, and allies in harm’s way, an inherently ‘un-American’ belief. More overtly, he later acknowledges that “the American people did not choose this fight,” and that these issues “came to our shores” and were all-in-all, unprovoked (Obama). He is essentially restating the idea that not defending against or retaliating towards such attacks to the American people would be against our most fundamental American ideals. This is because, “as a country, we [are meant] never tolerate our security being threatened, nor stand idly…when our people have been killed” (Obama). Specifying these conditions to the case of al Qaeda, Obama drives home the idea that taking any actions other than those of the U.S. government in the years between 2001 and 2011 would be allowing for security threats and the death of innocent Americans. In order to appeal even to those people who oppose U.S. involvement in the Middle East, Obama goes on to relate himself to these people – for the “efforts [that] weigh on [him] every time [he]…sign[s] a letter to a family that has lost a loved one, or look[s] into the eyes of a service member who’s been gravely wounded” (Obama). Not only does he understand their struggle, but he emphasizes that it weighs on him just as much as everyone else, if not more.

 While this speech is an announcement of the death of Osama bin Laden, Obama also uses it as an opportunity to propagandize himself as an extremely achieved, one-of-a-kind President, whose legacy should be continued in order to achieve more successes such as this. In order to see this, it will be effective to look directly at two simple words, and how they are deliberately used interchangeably: ‘we’ and ‘I’. When introducing the process by which the U.S. had spent the post-9/11 years, Obama states that “*we’ve* disrupted terrorist attacks” and that “*we* worked with *our* friends and allies to capture or kill scores of al Qaeda terrorists,” (Obama). It is important to note that none of these actions described under the umbrella term ‘we’ are milestones of success. He immediately follows up by stating that despite these *collective* efforts – ones that he alone cannot be solely responsible for – “Osama bin Laden avoided capture and escaped,” which quite literally shows the failure of the U.S. to eliminate the biggest symbol of terrorism to the United States (Obama). However, the turning point from ‘we’ to ‘I’ lines up with the shift from failure to success in the war against al Qaeda.

Obama outlines the steps that took place in the location and assassination of bin Laden, which all happened to begin “shortly after [he took] office” (Obama). He states, “I was briefed on a possible lead,” in August 2010; “I met repeatedly with my national security team…[until] I determined that we had enough intelligence to take action” (Obama). When describing the nitty gritty details of Osama bin Laden’s death that had occurred earlier on the day that this speech was delivered, he is very purposeful in stating that these all took place “under [*his*] direction”; another way of stating that without his direction, a number of things could have made it so that the outcome was not Osama bin Laden’s death (Obama). In beginning this variety of statements with ‘I’ and pointing to himself, he shows two things. First, that he, as the President, holds an extraordinary amount of power and decision-making ability, and second, that he has been able to use this power to instill a great deal of positive change and protection to the American people. Here, he uses logic to assert that the person who should be trusted with the safety and lives of the American people should be the same person who is responsible for “the most significant achievement to date in [the] effort to defeat al Qaeda” (Obama). After an exhaustive repetition of ‘I’ and ‘my’ statements, he makes himself the obvious choice in this mission.

 In legitimizing and promoting himself, Obama also makes note of addressing the international community, which doubles over as yet another method of garnering domestic support. History has shown, time and time again, that not only do a President’s greatest powers exist in foreign affairs, but that their individual actions in foreign affairs define much of their presidential legacy. At the time of this announcement, Obama was in the midst of his re-election campaign. President Obama spent much of his first term under scrutiny about his actions in the Middle East, with distrust stemming from both within and beyond the U.S. Obama begins by addressing the hesitant demographic of foreigners, specifically in the Middle East, bluntly stating that the “war [in the Middle East] is not against Islam,” and in fact, that “cooperation with Pakistan helped lead [the U.S.] to bin Laden” (Obama). He backs this statement with concrete actions, revealing that prior to this announcement, “[he] called President Zardari, and [his] team ha[d] also spoken with their Pakistani counterparts,” and they all “agree[d] that [the death of Osama bin Laden marks] a good and historic day for both…nations” (Obama). His credibility greatly increases with these few lines: now, not only has he taken away one of the biggest perceived threats to U.S. safety – Osama bin Laden – he is able to attract positive feedback from the national and international communities. He encourages the international community to support U.S. actions that take place under his instruction, as they are evidently backed by other foreign nations, and also shows U.S. citizens that he is the person directly responsible for maintaining positive foreign relations.

 In this speech, Obama recounts the death of Osama bin Laden in a way that doubles as a call to action; one that informs the people of their safety, security, and need to remain united under the rule of the government. This is his way of rationalizing American action in the Middle East, and using this rationale as a way to motivate both domestic and foreign powers to support these exactions. He continually reinforces the idea that going against these actions is not only illogical, but would lead to great consequences for all involved parties. The action is simple: abide by and lend all discretion to the government under Obama’s rule; it has worked thus far, so there is no reason it will not continue to. Obama creates a one-to-one linkage between bin Laden and the agony that accompanied 9/11, which serves to remind the American people of the pain they felt during this time; a pain that has now since been subdued because of Obama’s hard work. Obama’s appeal to the universal ideals of justice, unity, and progress insured that he would be re-elected and further imprint his legacy upon the world.

Works Cited

Obama, Barack. “Osama bin Laden Dead.” 2 May 2011. White House, East Room. Washington

D.C. Address.