THE RHETORIC OF THE EXTRAORDINARY MOMENT:
THE CONCESSION AND ACCEPTANCE SPEECHES OF
AL GORE AND GEORGE W. BUSH
IN THE 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Abstract

The speeches delivered by Al Gore and George W. Bush at the conclusion of the contested 2000 U.S. presidential campaign are of especial interest because they represent a type of political speech that is virtually unique and, because the speakers and their staffs had no previous models to fall back upon, as spontaneous as political utterance currently gets. This paper analyzes those speeches, focusing on the relationships between their forms and what their speakers feel they have to do, and finds interesting similarities as well as differences, in style and content, between them.

Keywords: Cencession, Acceptance, Political speech.

1. Introduction

That human beings achieve some of their most important effects through the use of language is indisputable. Yet the significance of linguistic choices is not well recognized by historians or political scientists. While the latter may resort to focus groups and polls to measure the effects of politiciens’ utterances, they tend to be uninterested in zeroing in on specific linguistic choices and asking how words or grammatical structures might have precipitated the observed effects, and how other, perhaps superficially similar, choices might have produced very different outcomes.

American “core” linguists, often still under the sway of Chomskyan dogma discouraging analyses that treat linguistic form as non-autonomous, have been slow to attempt to build bridges between linguistic form, speaker intent, and political outcome. So it has been left to others – in the U.S., in other fields; in linguistics, in other countries – to do the bridging. (For examples of the first, cf. Duranti (1994) in anthropology, and Fiske (1996) in mass communication.) Elsewhere there is the tradition of critical discourse analysis, as practiced for instance by Fairclough (1995) and recently critiqued by Verschueren (2001). I find all of these approaches valuable, and am making these remarks

1 This is the text of a lecture presented at the Symposium on International Communication Monitoring, held in Brussels on 26 March 2001.
merely to suggest that American linguistics proper could make useful contributions as well, if we could wean ourselves more firmly away from the cult of autonomy.

Laura Nader (1997) has written about “control processes” – the ways in which the powerful, those who control the conduits of language, use linguistic and other devices to get electorates and consumers to believe that they have made a free “choice,” when in fact their behavior and opinions have been manipulated and controlled by forces beneath their awareness. In these ways, language choice legitimizes power, and power permits the blanketing of all conduits with the messages of one group, to the exclusion of others. And the fact that that group has power and social authority means that the form of language in which it communicates (official language or standard dialect, for instance, or chosen slogans or authoritative style) will be accepted by the local speech community without much hesitation as the preferred, authoritative mode of communication; and forms used in non-dominant communities, which might be more comfortable to the speakers and writers, hearers and readers, in those communities, will be excluded from authority and acceptance with the justification that such language is illegitimate, illogical and irrational, and therefore whatever ideas it expresses need not be taken seriously. Thus power provides its possessors with language authority and language authority in turn provides its possessors with power, all outside the consciousness of most of us, most of the time.

Making language creators and consumers more aware of the linkage between language and power is one way to attenuate this language-power relationship in order to offer language users real options. Making explicit the choices that have been made, and the reasons why they have been made, means that they can never function as simply “normal” and “natural” again: They have become marked.2 Once we understand the relation between the forms we encounter and the functions they perform, language that is not obviously persuasive (e.g., forms ostensibly used for education or information) can be properly identified as persuasive and indeed manipulative and controlling, the more so because they masquerade as “innocent” and helpful.

Public language, used to address everyone at once via the mass electronic media, is of particular interest in this regard. The scripted public utterances of those in positions of high power are of especial interest: They represent what those who presumably know how to achieve the rhetorical effects they desire, do, when they have the time and the opportunity to sculpt their protagonists’ utterances as they see fit.

Many utterances produced by contemporary public figures have a boiler-plate feel. Even “spontaneous” utterances like U.S. campaign “debates” follow prefabricated formats. The same is true of other kinds of political addresses: for U.S. presidents, e.g. State of the Union speeches, inaugural addresses, news conferences, speeches on current events. It's hard to tell how much of such utterances is really designed for the circumstance in which the words are being uttered, and how much merely represents the comforting jargon we have come to expect, words intended less for semantic meaning than pragmatic effect, lulling us into the complacency that comes of familiarity, convincing us by their very tediousness that God's in his heaven, all's right with the world. To investigate the

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2 This is the same idea as was expressed by Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967), who noted that in psychotherapy, if behavior formerly defined by clients as “unconscious” or “unintentional” was redefined within the context of therapy as “homework,” it became intentional and could no longer function in its former way.
relationship between form and function in public discourse, we need as examples utterances produced at high political levels, obviously carefully scripted, but designed for one single specific occasion, one that has never arisen before, so that the familiar boiler-plate rhetoric cannot be pressed into service. But such extraordinary moments are naturally rare: One election cycle follows another with very little change.

But very rarely something happens. And when it does, candidates and their creators are forced into spontaneity, or something close to it. They must produce rhetoric without a model, without the guidance of statistics, polls, and focus groups. Under these conditions, public language can truly be a window into the public and political mind. One such case arose serendipitously in America in late 2000, which I will focus on for my analysis.

2. The background

The U.S. Presidential election of 2000 remained officially undecided\(^3\) for five weeks between election day, November 7, and December 12. Election night media coverage was problematic: Television network news organizations called the state of Florida for Gore, then retracted it, then called it for Bush, then retracted it. As a result, Gore first conceded defeat, then retracted the concession. (Florida's electoral votes were crucial for victory.)\(^4\) The fact that the governor of Florida, Jeb Bush, was the brother of one of the candidates exacerbated the controversy over the legitimacy of the results. For the next five weeks, the state of Florida was contested, with recounts proceeding in some cases, being challenged in the Florida and U.S. Supreme Court in others, and Florida's secretary of state (a Jeb Bush appointee), Katherine Harris, refusing to certify recounts. While at first the media generally supported the Democrats' arguments of voting irregularities and uncounted or miscounted ballots, and therefore their demand for a recount in Florida, about two weeks into the standoff news broadcasts began to speak ominously about "chaos," "dissension," loss of control, anarchy, and other terrible results that would ensue without a speedy decision,\(^5\) and began to press for a quick resolution and for the Democrats to give up on their quest. (They did not.) There were tremulous speculations about what might happen if the election remained undecided: It might go to the Senate or the House of Representatives, in which case it would split the country even further apart and raise intriguing possibilities of horsetrading above and beyond the norm among members of Congress. Or perhaps the decision would wind up in the electoral college, in which case "faithless electors" might be persuaded to vote otherwise than they had been elected to do.

\(^3\) Unofficially, some people don't consider it decided even now, but rather stolen.

\(^4\) Indeed, although Bush was of course eventually declared the winner on the basis of a plurality of Electoral College votes, Gore won the popular vote.

\(^5\) According to a recent book review (Bronner 2001), Richard Posner (2001) argues that the Supreme Court's decision, *even if it was incorrect*, was worth it in order to avert a constitutional crisis. This argument is reminiscent of the media's determination that a constitutional crisis was so dangerous that averting it took precedence over anything else. It should be noted, though, that the United States had weathered three constitutional crises over the last 25 years (Watergate, Iran-Contragate, and Monicaagate), and still manages to be the world's only remaining superpower.
The case eventually went to the U.S. Supreme Court which decided, on December 12, by a 5-4 vote strictly along political lines not to permit the recount that the Democrats were requesting. As a result, on that day Bush became the 43rd President. The next evening both Bush and Gore delivered addresses on television, Bush's accepting the presidency and Gore's conceding defeat. It is these speeches that I will examine in the remainder of this paper.

3. The speeches

The speeches were delivered consecutively, Bush's from the podium of the Texas House of Representatives, Gore's from the Vice President's "ceremonial" office (the symbolism of both choices is apparent). Each was about ten minutes in length, Bush's 1283 words long, Gore's 999. (See Appendix for the full texts.)

4. The extraordinary moment

While it is usual for winners and losers to deliver speeches as soon as the election results are in, there has never before in American history been a Presidential election quite like this one. While the candidates could have relied on historical guidance in preparing normal acceptance and concession speeches, there was no model for these. The audience to which their remarks were addressed was unique: An American public variously upset with the electoral process and the candidates themselves, their emotions at the election's conclusion ranging from rage to delight.

Acceptance and concession speeches in American politics, like others, tend to follow a pattern. They tend to be on the short side, ten minutes or so, like the examples under examination. Both concession and acceptance speeches devote much of that time to thanking those who helped — families (often standing on stage beside the candidate), campaign workers, and voters. Both often remark on how challenging, yet rewarding, the process has been. Both talk about the worthiness of the opponent. The winner says a bit about how (s)he will change the world and fulfill his or her campaign promises, and the loser stresses what a good fight it was and how it isn't over, there's always next time. Nowadays there may be tears, from both winner and loser, especially if male. While male competitive crying has become a full-fledged political sport, it's still dangerous for a woman in politics to be seen shedding tears: It marks her as weak.

But in the present case, time-tested boiler-plate remarks would have fallen flat. The situation called for something else, something unique to mark a unique historical moment; something with an emotion resonance corresponding to the audience's strong feelings;

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6 During the campaign, he had stressed his ability to govern Texas as governor by cooperating in a "bipartisan" spirit with a Democratic legislature.

7 While male competitive crying has become a full-fledged political sport, it's still dangerous for a woman in politics to be seen shedding tears: It marks her as weak.
words to calm everyone down and “bring us together.” How does a politician find the right voice for such a situation? How could the candidates, each acting independently, decide on “the” one message? The speeches had to provide a new American narrative, a story the electorate could adopt as its own, about what had happened to the candidates, the country, and the voters, and what they had become as a result of the contested election. They had to fuse together into a unified whole a disunited populace, by offering them a single narrative that would work for everyone.

While no one would suggest that either speech was truly “spontaneous” (the odds are, rather, that both candidates had been working clandestinely on winning and losing versions for several weeks), still in the absence of appropriate past models they and their staffs had to consider a variety of possibilities themes, styles, and ideas. The resolutions by both candidates of these questions illustrate a response to a unique dilemma, one unlikely to recur.

5. General remarks

Considering that both speeches had to attain their final form quickly, and that the two sides certainly did not confer with each other over their form, the two are remarkably similar in both general and specific content. (It is true that, for the preceding several days, media pundits had been offering advice to both parties over the air waves about how the speeches ought to be.) But despite their similarity, they expressed their ideas in different ways (what Deborah Tannen and I (1984) have called “pragmatic synonymy”). Both speeches were considered very successful by the punditry, especially Gore’s: It had been widely suggested beforehand that he had a difficult task ahead of him, and afterwards some called his concession the “speech of his life,” contrasting it with his less-successful efforts during the campaign.9

6. What the speeches were “about.”

Another subtitle for this paper might be, “The Politics of Nice; or, The Return to Business as Usual.” The major theme of both speeches can be paraphrased as, “We really want us to get along, we want the dangerous divisiveness of the last five weeks to vanish.” Both place a heavy emphasis on unity, asserted or presupposed, though they achieve this point in different ways. I am reminded here of Laura Nader’s (1995) notion of “coerced harmony” - the ways in which the powerful force those with less power to agree to a consensus, or the appearance of it, although it may not be in the latter’s interests. It is true that in this case consensus is not exactly coerced - the winning speaker is not in a strong enough position for that - but we might, looking at the covert cajoling that forms a great part of both speeches, want to speak of “seduced harmony” instead. Certainly, though, the audience is

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8 See Lakoff and Tannen 1979.

9 One could argue from this observation that the loss was actually a relief to Gore, allowing him to relax and be, at last, spontaneous and expressive.
being seduced in the nicest possible way.

That is important because above all Americans want to be nice, and even more to appear nice. Niceness entails the avoidance of division or dissension. Our interests are all the same, we need to say. We care about one another. Our tendency, sometimes seen by foreigners as hypocrisy, to overuse social formulae like “please,” “thank you,” and “how are you?”, is another expression of this need. It's true that, like any other culture, we can be abrasive and agonistic, but when our politicians overtly behave that way, their numbers shoot down in the polls. Hence we get nervous when politesse seems to be wearing thin: Consider the amount of media attention in recent years to concerns about the growth of “incivility” and “coarseness” in American discourse.

So these speeches both address an American concern that the events of the prior five weeks have been divisive, could suggest we do not share common ground, are separate (rather than, as we like to have it in our Pledge of Allegiance, One Nation Indivisible). Perhaps, then, we are no longer one country, one culture, and can no longer work together. We may even have shown ourselves, at times, not to be nice. That would be threatening indeed, in a country that has neither a long shared history nor a common ethnicity to fall back on.

The speeches work to deny the reality of those fears. Both reflect the purported voices and personae of the candidates: Bush, the simple man, the regular guy (who happens to come of a three-generation-long political dynasty); Gore, the more standoffish intellectual (who got “gentleman's C’s” at Harvard). Yet they both say much the same thing, if in different ways.

It is interesting that the New York Times, in the headlines it provides for the transcripts of both speeches, calls them remarks, as if to de-emphasize their solemnity and the seriousness of the occasion.

7. Examining the speeches: Bush

Paragraphs 1 and 2 can be paraphrased as follows: Vice President Gore and I feel the same way – so much so that I feel comfortable speaking for him. “We shared similar emotions.” And if we can feel so much alike, you all can too. We have been through a long and trying period: The very divisiveness that made it trying paradoxically brings us together, for we have lived through it together. Both candidates “gave it our all.” Via the first person plural, the connectedness of the candidates is stressed.

So unity is achieved via claimed identity: Rather than the explicit call to resolve our differences and make up (common in typical acceptance speeches), unity here is predicated implicitly on an assertion of common ground.

Paragraph 3. “I understand how difficult this moment must be...” That is, I am in his mind, I know his thoughts: We are united. At the same time, though, the speaker puts himself in a superior, even condescending, position: He is the one to understand Gore, as parents say they understand children, not vice versa. Bush gives Gore a soupçon of praise:

10 Both speeches are reproduced in full in the Appendix to this paper. The texts are based on transcripts of the speeches printed in The New York Times on December 14, 2001, and available on Lexis-Nexis.
His career is *distinguished*. Bush shows that he can be generous – at once modeling appropriate behavior for us, and displaying his magnanimity for our admiration.

**Paragraph 4.** Bush uses “agreed” twice, modeling consensus. What they “agreed” to do was to “heal our country” – another none-too-subtle reminder that we are in trouble and had better do as he is suggesting. The medical metaphor also elevates the speaker: The country is wounded or ill, and must be *healed* by someone with the special skills to do so.

From the outset, the speech sets the tone and indicates the way to feel: We need to be worried, but not too much: There is (finally) someone in charge who can be trusted to make it all right, as long as we can get together, as indeed he and his former adversary have already done.

Certain words recur throughout the speech:

- bipartisan ................................................................. 3
- cooperat(ion) .............................................................. 2
- consensus ................................................................. 3
- together ........................................................................ 12
- common ................................................................. 4
- reconcil(iation) ............................................................ 2
- we, us, our : exclusive (Gore and I; my friends/family/etc. and I) ......................... 16
  inclusive (you, the American people, and I) ................................. 41
- unite(d), unity ........................................................... 3

Total: ............................................................................... 86

It is true that the great preponderance of these words occur in the form of the personal pronouns *we, us, our*, which would be frequent in any speech of this type. But the total number of words suggestive of unity in a speech of only about 1200 words is still unusually high. The repeated words resemble a chant or mantra: *We can* get together, *we will* get together, *we are* together.

Another set of words that occurs with special frequency is *thank/thanks/thankful*. These words suggest both humility on the part of the new President, and a sense that he is not alone, he needs *us*, another way of presupposing unity and commonality of interests. In one form or another, *thank* occurs a total of 12 times. Again, expressions of gratitude are common in the typical acceptance speech, but 12 instances in 1200 words is more than normal.

The overt (and covert) expression of unity between the candidates, and between candidate and voters, is only one way of implicitly creating consensus (or seducing harmony). The same result can also be achieved by reminding hearers that, however we may differ contemporaneously – ethnically or politically – we share a common heritage, a common history as *Americans*. That can be done by invoking canonical names and events in the nation’s history, particularly the very obvious ones that don’t require a deep knowledge of history. These stories remind us that we are a “we”: They are being told *because* they are common to us all. Especially stories that evoke recollections of times in

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11 Cf. Bush’s virtual slogan in his Texas gubernatorial campaign (the state of Texas has a high percentage of speakers of Spanish): *juntos podemos*, “together we can.”
which we had to fight for our right to be a united country remind us of how important that unity is, how we should forget our individual quarrels in order to achieve consensus.

Hence Bush tells a story about Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers and the author of the nation’s basic document, the Declaration of Independence (Paragraph 23). If Jefferson could voice his concerns for both “freedom and harmony,” we should echo those concerns today. As if to bring the point home and make that conclusion unavoidable, Bush refers back to the anecdote at Paragraph 28, very near the end.

Now that we have had some time in which to observe his actual style of governance, I am tempted to say that George W. Bush, the man from Austin, is a true believer in the potency of the performative speech act. He appears to believe that by talking about unification you achieve it. You don’t have to do anything conciliatory – you just say “bipartisan” a lot.

8. Examining the speeches: Gore

Bush, widely considered a hail-fellow-well-met but an intellectual lightweight who didn’t take either the campaign or the presidency seriously, delivered a perfectly solemn speech. Gore, widely considered stiff and humorless, bracketed his speech with jokes at the beginning and end. Both are sardonic, and both are at his own expense, as if to show that not only is he a regular guy, but a good loser. We might also see his self-effacement as a kind of mea culpa or obeisance toward the victorious Bushes, père et fils, both of whom he had made fun of, the elder in 1992 and the younger in 2000. The joke in the first paragraph refers to the confusions of Election Night 2000. As Florida swung back and forth between Democrat and Republican that night, at one point the networks declared Bush the winner and Gore sent word to the Bush camp that he was ready to make his concession speech. But en route to his office to make that statement he received word from his staff that the situation was more complicated than it appeared, and the victory was by no means Bush’s. So he called Bush back and retracted his offer. The joke therefore reminds us that Gore was right the first time, that now he must eat the crow that had been in preparation for five weeks: George W. Bush gets the last word.

The joke at the end recalls a slogan Gore used to great effect in the 1992 campaign in which he was Bill Clinton’s vice presidential candidate running against the elder Bush. He would introduce a slogan, and as he used it in speech after speech, before long the audience would be aware of where he was going, and finish the sentence for him. “It’s time...for them [George H.W. Bush and Dan Quayle] ... to go” was perhaps the most successful of the lot. For Gore to be applying it to himself here is multiply self-effacing: It reminds us, coming at the end as it does, that Gore has often been criticized for talking too long: It’s literally time for him to end his speech (although his is a few minutes shorter than Bush’s – but then, he is the loser). And in re-activating the phrase under these conditions, Gore is implying that he was wrong in using it eight years before – they aren’t going anywhere, he is. So Gore is showing that he is really a pretty funny guy, one who can take it as well as he could dish it out, and that he humbly accepts his demise.

12 The capital of Texas.
At the same time, the content of the speech, short as it is, is as ambivalent and complex as Bush's was straightforward and simple. Certainly in a couple of ways Gore had the harder job. The winner gets to crow; but what is appropriate for the loser in a protracted and indeterminate contest like this one? He cannot express too much pride, but cannot appear totally crushed and humiliated; cannot be seen as refusing to bring the protracted dispute to a close, but should not preclude future possibilities. And even as he must bow to the will of the Supreme Court (or be seen as an outlaw as well as a sore loser), he should indicate that he is not entirely sure that the right thing was done. He must, as the loser always must, indicate his willingness to support the victor in any way possible, to join together for the good of the country. But he also must present himself as the loyal opposition, waiting in the wings until his chance comes again. So Gore's speech is complexly coded. While he, like Bush, takes his major theme to be unification, he expresses that theme in more roundabout ways. After all, absolute unity benefits Bush much more than it does him.

But unification he must somehow express. The self-effacing jokes in the first and last paragraphs establish commonality as well as humility. Like you, they convey, I accept Al Gore as a loser. We have that point of view in common; and just as you naturally want to poke fun at the loser (a tendency in the aftermath of all recent American elections), I am willing and able to lead you in the funfest. We all see the outcome of the election in the same way. The joke's on me and I get it, like you.

He then segues into the “unification” theme more explicitly, sometimes (a bit eerily) almost echoing his counterpart. Just as Bush mentions in Paragraph 4 his desire to meet with Al Gore, so in Paragraph 2, Gore talks about his offer to meet with Bush. Like Bush, he expresses a need to “heal” the country. Many of the significant words, or close synonyms, occur in both passages:

**Gore’s Paragraph 2:**

I offered to meet with him as soon as possible so that we can start to heal the divisions of the campaign and the contest through which we've just passed.

**Bush’s Paragraph 4:**

This evening I received a gracious call from the vice president. We agreed to meet early next week in Washington, and we agreed to do our best to heal our country after this hard-fought campaign.

Compare the two:

1. **as soon as possible:** early next week. Both express their understanding of the urgency of the meeting.

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13 By being the first to twit himself as the loser, Gore also deprives stand-up comics of much of the opportunity to make fun of him.
2. **heal**: heal. Both see themselves as physicians, specialists, compassionate persons dealing with a country that is *sick*.

3. **campaign and contest**: hard-fought campaign. Both recall the unusual divisiveness of this election, the reason why cooperation and "healing" are necessary.

4. Both make significant use of the *first-person plural pronoun* (Gore twice, Bush four times). Both move between (unambiguous) exclusive *we* and (somewhat ambiguous but probably) inclusive *we*, as though to cement the identification between themselves and their audience – another move in the direction of unity.

   But where Bush stresses the explicit expression of unity (he says "agreed" twice) as if unity were a fait accompli, and says that "we" have agreed to "do our best," an expression that connotes strong optimism about the chances of success, Gore merely says that they will attempt to "start to heal" the divisions – no promises of success and lighter on the expression of togetherness.

   In the latter half of his speech Bush invoked America's common history as an oblique move toward unification. His example was Thomas Jefferson, who as a Revolutionary figure is perceived as an unambiguous representation of American unity: *Us* (Americans) versus *them* (the British), at a point in our history when we saw ourselves as more strongly, clearly, and necessarily united than we have at most times since. Gore does something analogous in Paragraph 3, invoking a similarly familiar and similarly perilous moment in U.S. history – the onset of the Civil War. But at that point, significantly, consensus had broken down irrevocably. Like Bush, Gore uses shared history and revered figures to create commonality of background and feeling in his audience. But his anecdote, by recalling America's greatest schism, suggests that unity cannot be assumed. (While Bush implicitly identifies with the successful candidate, Jefferson, Gore, continuing his self-effacement, puts himself in the position of the loser in the 1860 election, Stephen Douglas.)

14 This is an example of *pragmatic homonymy* (cf. Lakoff and Tannen 1984) – the superficially similar use of the utterances of venerated statesmen, but for significantly different purposes: One to suggest that all is well, Americans really are united; the other to imply that while we had better get together, we can't count on it, and the current dissension is based on something real (as Gore goes on to suggest still more strongly in Paragraph 5), just as the dissension (over slavery – no trivial issue) to which Douglas referred in 1860 led to the Civil War. So while Bush is urging an unproblematic reuniting of the country, Gore says that it's not that easy: Words are not enough. Moreover (Paragraph 5), he is not conceding because concession is right or inevitable: He is doing so "for the sake of our unity as a people and the strength of our democracy": He, as opposed to Bush, is *doing* something, performing a deliberately unifying action – not uttering mere words – at his own expense. Indeed, that sub-theme – that Gore is willing to work toward unity, but that his effort is at his own expense, and done with some reluctance – occurs at several points in his speech, in particular Paragraphs 9 and 15.

14 Bush also makes oblique reference to Lincoln in his reference (Paragraph 9) to "a house divided," a very familiar phrase from one of Lincoln's most famous speeches, uttered during his debates with Douglas.
Bush invokes a unity that already exists, merely needing to be mentioned to be brought to life. That “unity” is in fact mantra-like for him is suggested by the frequency with which he uses it. While Gore talks about unity too, he doesn’t resort to the same kind of hypnotic repetition. In virtually every case Gore uses those words much less than Bush, if at all:

- bipartisan: .............................................................. 0
- cooperation: .............................................................. 0
- reconciliation: ............................................................. 1
- consensus: ................................................................. 0
- together: ........................................................................ 3
- we (inclusive and exclusive): ........................................... 11
- us (inclusive and exclusive): .......................................... 10
- our(s) (inclusive and exclusive): ..................................... 20
- unity, united: ............................................................... 3
- common: ........................................................................... 2
- thank, thanks, thankful: .................................................. 1

When Gore discusses unity, then, he tends to do so by discussing explicitly those things that unify us — things to which he and Bush can lay equal claim, not actions only the victor can instantiate. In a way this strategy is even more manipulative than Bush’s: Rather than offering unity as a future achievement, Gore assumes it already exists and implies that we can and should make use of this pre-existing consensus. If we can all agree on the “honored institutions of our democracy (Paragraph 4),” then we automatically come to share the common bond of our agreement. So, for instance, he speaks (Paragraph 5) of our great law schools and our democratic liberties. And in Paragraph 6, he refers to our Declaration of Independence (as Bush did much more obliquely by citing Jefferson), and our Constitution.

Interestingly, although the Republicans are usually thought to be the party more sympathetic to established religion, it is Gore who makes the most references to God (Bush: 2; Gore 6). One can see this as an attempt to deny the Godlessness Republicans sometimes attribute to Democrats; perhaps to as a nod to the piety of his running mate, Joseph Lieberman; or maybe as another means of suggesting unity: God is something in which all of us believe: By repeatedly invoking God, Gore repeatedly reminds us of the religious faith we purportedly share, and therefore another way in which we are unified as a nation.

While it is not to Bush’s advantage to stress or even refer explicitly to the closeness of the election, it is of course advantageous for Gore. But to do so in a negative way (e.g., “I almost won!”) would be seen as the act of a sore loser. Gore does a rather ingenious twist in Paragraph 8, in which he links a problematic reminder of the election’s closeness with the virtuous theme of unity: “[the election’s] very closeness can serve to remind us that we are one people with a shared history and a shared destiny.” This argument sounds logical (the closeness of the votes suggests that we are evenly matched, the same on either side); but in fact the logic is flawed: The closeness of the vote suggests a deep division. If we
were really one, the election would have been a landslide.  

And Gore immediately segues not into what we might expect, extending or reinforcing the argument that we are really united, despite current appearances, but the reverse: There have been many “hotly debated” contests which have “dragged on for weeks,” resolved only because the both parties accepted the results peacefully. “So let it be with us,” he says, a phrase that calls to mind Marc Antony’s words in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar: “So let it be with Caesar.” His words also remind hearers that this contest was hotly debated, and that the debate had historical analogs (making it more respectable).

In the next paragraph (9), Gore again covertly suggests that his – our – “disappointment” is normal and not bad, as long as we can get over it.

The next paragraph (10) seems a bit strange, especially coming from the loser: It warns other countries, especially our once and future enemies; and “some” pessimists presumably within the U.S. – perhaps the media punditry – not to take the electoral confusion as a sign that America is in trouble and capitalize on that. The next two paragraphs (11) – (13) make that message more explicitly. “We close ranks and come together when the contest is done.” Gore is positioning himself as still an actor, and not leaving the picture: He’ll be around for the next four years: “I personally will be at his disposal.” While this may appear at first glance as a promise to Bush – “I’m here to help you” – it mutates readily into a threat, or at least a warning: “I’m not going anywhere.” The offer of consensus carries the hidden message that we, not you, will be at the helm in the future. In these paragraphs Gore sounds very presidential: He is speaking in the voice of America; metonymically he is America. “This is America and we put country before party.” While the next line reiterates his willingness to support the winner, his cooptation of the presidential “we” indicates that he has not given up that role for himself.

But very quickly, in paragraphs (14) – (17), he reframes himself as a non-public person, a civilian, by returning to the singular “I” and talking about his own private plans. This is a way of reminding people that he isn’t the stiff, arrogant, standoffish Gore of the late-night talk show comics; he’s Al the regular guy planning like any of us to spend the holidays with his family, sharing that private glimpse with us. Perhaps too, in that act of self-revelation he is trying to suggest his unity with people: You are interested in me, I want to bring you into my life – we have in common an interest in you and me. And as quickly as the “we” in (13) raised the spectre of the loser who won’t quit, “I” in (14) lays it to rest.

The personal quickly turns political. From his family plans, in (15) Gore moves seamlessly (almost) to his political plans."I" is poised once more on the brink of “we.” He regrets that he didn’t “get the chance to stay and fight for the American people.” Get the chance strikes me as an opaque suggestion that he (and we) were robbed – that his loss was not really legitimate. It was a toss of the coin – a chance that could have been otherwise. And – taking leave for the moment at least of the carefully cobbled-together unanimity of his earlier we – he seems also to be inserting a veiled hint that he and the Democrats are

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15 Neither candidate offers what might be a truer argument to this point: The fact that the two candidates are so very similar in so many of their political positions would suggest unity - or, perhaps, coerced harmony.

16 And we all know what happened next.
truly the party of the people, for whom now there will be no one around to fight.

For someone whose speech up until this point has been at least superficially conciliatory and pacific, Gore suddenly becomes pugnacious in (15) – (17). The words *fight, battle, defeat, victory, loss* each occur at least once, *fight* three times and twice more if we include the two instances of deletion under identity in (15): “… *fight* especially for those who need burdens lifted and barriers removed, *fight* especially for those who feel their voices have not been heard.” Again in (16) there is a mixed message: He has seen America and *likes* what he sees (togetherness via expression of approval for *you*, liking the same things *you* like) but at the same time, he likes it so much that he wants it to be *all his* (not Bush’s).

In the penultimate paragraph (20), he does something parallel to what Bush did in his Paragraph (13) with the phrase, “a house divided.” There as in Gore’s “crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea,” the candidates both invoke phrases that have become deeply familiar to Americans, catch-phrases or near-mottoes. Again he appeals to American unity by familiarity: We all know these words, we all share a reverence for them: We are one.

9. Summary

These speeches, in their different ways, are means toward the same end (at least in part), of creating the appearance of unity and thereby seducing harmony. By their insistence, explicit and implicit, on the Americaanness of togetherness, on the assumption that all of us want to and can manage to come together as a people, they make the public expression of any other emotion, such as concern about the fairness or rationality of the election's outcome, less possible and certainly less likely to be received favorably. While Gore does inject a word or two of caution, any such expression is very quickly over and ambiguously and covertly stated. But neither candidate goes beyond, as they might say, “mere rhetoric” in their insistence on unification: Both try to achieve it performatively, by the word alone. Neither is willing or able to mention any actual behavior that would create true consensus, even less to initiate such behavior.

Yet (or perhaps therefore) both were highly successful speeches. They allowed America to put a period to five stressful weeks. They allowed the election to vanish from our collective minds – an astonishing feat when you consider that the O. J. Simpson debacle was with us for well over a year, every day, and a contested election is arguably more important than even the most notorious crime. They made everybody (who is anybody) happy: Next day, the pundits were ecstatic. Harmony had been seduced, we could go back to business as usual. Everybody (who is anybody) does not include the intellectuals, but that doesn't matter because, in the U.S. – unlike many European countries – the intelligentsia plays a minimal role at best in the shaping of public opinion.\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^{17}\) Gore's phrase is taken from a favorite patriotic song, “America the Beautiful.”

\(^{18}\) On the other hand, at least two books have appeared taking issue with the conduct and outcome of the election: Alan Dershowitz's *Supreme Injustice* (2001) and Vincent Bugliosi's *The Betrayal of America* (2001). Both were on the *New York Times Book Review* best-seller list as of July, 2001.
10. Conclusions

Examining these two speeches produced at a moment of crisis offers insight into the way America works, why its political system remains so remarkably stable (note that I do not say, “effective”). For all the talk about the possibility of a constitutional crisis, the candidates, working together though separately, managed to head off such a conclusion. When prestigious speakers tell us what we want to hear and make us feel good by going along with calls to inaction, we will, it seems, go along with them, returning as soon as we can to business as usual. The fact that the speeches worked as well as they did suggests, to this linguist in any case, that language is still important: Had the speeches not been made, had their messages not been similar and soothing, had they not been composed to appeal to our need for both comforting and self-aggrandizing, the outcome might have been otherwise.

Of course, we cannot credit the speakers alone for the achievement of seduced harmony. The fact that the pundits fell into line immediately, declaring both speeches not only appropriate but even brilliant, certainly helped establish their message as the right one, their proposals as the only way to think and act. Finally, it’s a bit scary how predictably Americans can be massaged into falling behind a message of *be nice, whatever it takes and whatever the outcome.*

One thinks, reflecting on these speeches and their aftermath, of one of American children’s favorite television characters, Barney the purple plush dinosaur, who has children all over America singing his song:

I love you,
You love me,
We're as happy as can be....

As, according to the polls, we currently are.

References


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19 Which might in fact have been a salutary outcome.
The rhetoric of the extraordinary moment


APPENDIX. The Bush and Gore Speeches

I. GEORGE W. BUSH'S SPEECH

1. Thank you very much. Good evening, my fellow Americans. I appreciate so very much the opportunity to speak with you tonight.

2. Mr. Speaker, Lieutenant Governor, friends, distinguished guests, our country has been through a long and trying period, with the outcome of the presidential election not finalized for longer than any of us could ever imagine. Vice President Gore and I put our hearts and hopes into our campaigns; we both gave it our all. We shared similar emotions.

3. So I understand how difficult this moment must be for Vice President Gore and his family. He has a distinguished record of service to our country as a congressman, a senator and a vice president.

4. This evening I received a gracious call from the vice president. We agreed to meet early next week in Washington, and we agreed to do our best to heal our country after this hard-fought contest.

5. Tonight, I want to thank all the thousands of volunteers and campaign workers who worked so hard on my behalf. I also salute the vice president and his supporters for waging a spirited campaign, and I thank him for a call that I know was difficult to make. Laura and I wish the vice president and Senator Lieberman and their families the very best.

6. I have a lot to be thankful for tonight. I am thankful for America and thankful that we are able to resolve our electoral differences in a peaceful way. I'm thankful to the American people for the great privilege of being able to serve as your next president. I want to thank my wife and our daughters for their love. Laura's active involvement as first lady has made Texas a better place, and she will be a wonderful first lady of America.

7. I am proud to have Dick Cheney by my side, and America will be proud to have him as our next vice president.
8. Tonight, I chose to speak from the chamber of the Texas House of Representatives because it has been a home to bipartisan cooperation. Here, in a place where Democrats have the majority, Republicans and Democrats have worked together to do what is right for the people we represent.

9. We've had spirited disagreements, and in the end, we found constructive consensus. It is an experience I will always carry with me, an example I will always follow.

10. I want to thank my friend, House Speaker Pete Laney, a Democrat, who introduced me today. I want to thank the legislators from both political parties with whom I've worked. Across the hall in our Texas Capitol is the State Senate, and I cannot help but think of our mutual friend, the former Democrat lieutenant governor, Bob Bullock. His love for Texas and his ability to work in a bipartisan way continue to be a model for all of us.

11. The spirit of cooperation I have seen in this hall is what is needed in Washington, D.C. It is the challenge of our moment. After a difficult election, we must put politics behind us and work together to make the promise of America available for every one of our citizens.

12. I am optimistic that we can change the tone in Washington, D.C. I believe things happen for a reason, and I hope the long wait of the last five weeks will heighten a desire to move beyond the bitterness and partisanship of the recent past.

13. Our nation must rise above a house divided. Americans share hopes and goals and values far more important than any political disagreements. Republicans want the best for our nation. And so do Democrats. Our votes may differ, but not our hopes.

14. I know America wants reconciliation and unity. I know Americans want progress. And we must seize this moment and deliver. Together, guided by a spirit of common sense, common courtesy and common goals, we can unite and inspire the American citizens.

15. Together, we will work to make all our public schools excellent, teaching every student of every background and every accent, so that no child is left behind.

16. Together, we will save Social Security and renew its promise of a secure retirement for generations to come.

17. Together, we will strengthen Medicare and offer prescription drug coverage to all of our seniors.

18. Together, we will give Americans the broad, fair and fiscally responsible tax relief they deserve.

19. Together, we'll have a bipartisan foreign policy true to our values and true to our friends. And we will have a military equal to every challenge, and superior to every adversary.

20. Together, we will address some of society's deepest problems, one person at a time, by encouraging and empowering the good hearts and good works of the American people. This is the essence of compassionate conservatism, and it will be a foundation of my administration.

21. These priorities are not merely Republican concerns or Democratic concerns; they are American responsibilities.

22. During the fall campaign, we differed about the details of these proposals, but there was remarkable consensus about the important issues before us: Excellent schools, retirement and health security, tax relief, a strong military, a more civil society. We have discussed our differences. Now it is time to find common ground.
and build consensus to make America a beacon of opportunity in the 21st century.

23. I'm optimistic this can happen. Our future demands it, and our history proves it. Two hundred years ago, in the election of 1800, America faced another close presidential election. A tie in the Electoral College put the outcome into the hands of Congress. After six days of voting, and 36 ballots, the House of Representatives elected Thomas Jefferson the third president of the United States. That election brought the first transfer of power from one party to another in our new democracy. Shortly after the election, Jefferson, in a letter titled "Reconciliation and Reform," wrote this: "The steady character of our countrymen is a rock to which we may safely moor. Unequivocal in principle, reasonable in manner, we shall be able to hope to do a great deal of good to the cause of freedom and harmony."

24. Two hundred years have only strengthened the steady character of America. And so as we begin the work of healing our nation, tonight I call upon that character: Respect for each other, respect for our differences, generosity of spirit and a willingness to work hard and work together to solve any problem.

25. I have something else to ask you, to ask every American. I ask for you to pray for this great nation. I ask your prayers for leaders from both parties. I thank you for your prayers for me and my family, and I ask you to pray for Vice President Gore and his family.

26. I have faith that with God's help we as a nation will move forward together, as one nation, indivisible. And together we will create an America that is open, so every citizen has access to the American dream; an America that is educated, so every child has the keys to realize that dream; and an America that is united in our diversity and our shared American values that are larger than race or party.

27. I was not elected to serve one party, but to serve one nation. The president of the United States is the president of every single American, of every race and every background. Whether you voted for me or not, I will do my best to serve your interests, and I will work to earn your respect.

28. I will be guided by President Jefferson's sense of purpose, to stand for principle, to be reasonable in manner, and, above all, to do great good for the cause of freedom and harmony.

29. The presidency is more than an honor. It is more than an office. It is a charge to keep, and I will give it my all.

30. Thank you very much, and God bless America,

II. AL GORE'S SPEECH

In His Remarks, Gore Says He Will Help Bush ‘Bring American [sic] Together’

1. Good evening. Just moments ago I spoke with George W. Bush and congratulated him on becoming the 43rd president of the United States. And I promised him that I wouldn't call him back this time.

2. I offered to meet with him as soon as possible so that we can start to heal the divisions of the campaign and the contest through which we've just passed.

3. Almost a century and a half ago, Senator Stephen Douglas told Abraham Lincoln, who had just defeated him for the presidency, "Partisan feeling must yield to patriotism. I'm with you, Mr. President, and God bless you.” Well, in that same spirit, I say to President-elect Bush that what remains of partisan rancor must now be put
4. Neither he nor I anticipated this long and difficult road. Certainly neither of us wanted it to happen. Yet it came, and now it has ended, resolved, as it must be resolved, through the honored institutions of our democracy.

5. Over the library of one of our great law schools is inscribed the motto: "Not under man, but under God and law." That's the ruling principle of American freedom, the source of our democratic liberties. I've tried to make it my guide throughout this contest, as it has guided America's deliberations of all the complex issues of the past five weeks. Now the U.S. Supreme Court has spoken. Let there be no doubt, while I strongly disagree with the court's decision, I accept it. I accept the finality of this outcome, which will be ratified next Monday in the Electoral College. And tonight, for the sake of our unity as a people and the strength of our democracy, I offer my concession.

6. I also accept my responsibility, which I will discharge unconditionally, to honor the new president-elect and do everything possible to help him bring Americans together in fulfillment of the great vision that our Declaration of Independence defines and that our Constitution affirms and defends.

7. Let me say how grateful I am to all those who've supported me and supported the cause for which we have fought. Tipper and I feel a deep gratitude to Joe and Hadassah Lieberman, who brought passion and high purpose to our partnership, and opened new doors, not just for our campaign, but for our country.

8. This has been an extraordinary election, but in one of God's unforeseen paths, this belatedly broken impasse can point us all to a new common ground, for its very closeness can serve to remind us that we are one people with a shared history and a shared destiny. Indeed, that history gives us many examples of contests as hotly debated, as fiercely fought, with their own challenges to the popular will. Other disputes have dragged on for weeks before reaching resolution, and each time, both the victor and the vanquished have accepted the result peacefully and in a spirit of reconciliation. So let it be with us.

9. I know that many of my supporters are disappointed. I am too. But our disappointment must be overcome by our love of country.

10. And I say to our fellow members of the world community: Let no one see this contest as a sign of American weakness. The strength of American democracy is shown most clearly through the difficulties it can overcome.

11. Some have expressed concern that the unusual nature of this election might hamper the next president in the conduct of his office. I do not believe it need be so.

12. President-elect Bush inherits a nation whose citizens will be ready to assist him in the conduct of his large responsibilities. I personally will be at his disposal and I call on all Americans -- I particularly urge all who stood with us - to unite behind our next president.

13. This is America. Just as we fight hard when the stakes are high, we close ranks and come together when the contest is done. And while there will be time enough to debate our continuing differences, now is the time to recognize that that which unites us is greater than that which divides us.

14. While we yet hold and do not yield our opposing beliefs, there is a higher duty than the one we owe to political party. This is America and we put country before party. We will stand together behind our new president.

15. As for what I'll do next, I don't know the answer to that one yet. Like many of you, I'm looking forward to spending the holidays with family and old friends. I know I'll spend time in Tennessee and mend some
fences, literally and figuratively.

16. Some have asked whether I have any regrets. And I do have one regret – that I didn't get the chance to stay and fight for the American people over the next four years, especially for those who need burdens lifted and barriers removed, especially for those who feel their voices have not been heard. I heard you and I will not forget.

17. I've seen America in this campaign and I like what I see. It's worth fighting for and that's a fight I'll never stop.

18. As for the battle that ends tonight, I do believe, as my father once said, that no matter how hard the loss, defeat may serve as well as victory to shake the soul and let the glory out.

19. So for me this campaign ends as it began: With the love of Tipper and our family, with faith in God and in the country I have been so proud to serve, from Vietnam to the vice presidency, and with gratitude to our truly tireless campaign staff and volunteers including all those who worked so hard in Florida for the last 36 days.

20. Now the political struggle is over and we turn again to the unending struggle for the common good of all Americans and for those multitudes around the world who look to us for leadership in the cause of freedom.

21. In the words of our great hymn, "America, America," let us crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.

22. And now, my friends, in a phrase I once addressed to others, it's time for me to go. Thank you and good night and God bless America.