

Obama argues for peace at Hiroshima

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Barack Obama traveled to Hiroshima, Japan in the final year of his presidency to participate in a wreath laying ceremony and deliver a speech about the potential for a world without nuclear weapons. In the following paper, I argue that Obama's case for peace was strengthened by his performance at the ceremony and his use of self-evident truths. Overall, the president argued that war memorials, such as those at Hiroshima, have the potential to change the way we view each other as humans by harnessing rhetorical resources as old as Athens. He urges other leaders like himself to visit and comprehend the potential violence humanity can unleash, and demands they pursue a moral awakening to correct our course.

1. INTRODUCTION

United States President Barack Obama travelled to Hiroshima in May 2016 to participate in a ceremony with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and became the first sitting American president to visit the site of first atomic bomb attack. As Obama neared the end of his tenure, he faced significant constraints in the weeks approaching the ceremony. Service members at home would feel alienated if the president chose to apologize during the ceremony and many in the Japanese public felt that an apology would be appropriate (Donnelly & Vinograd 2016). Obama could not reinforce a narrative of victimization without causing political trouble both at home and abroad (Sneider 2016). Obama expressed that he felt "imprisoned by history" and feared the trip would fail to negotiate the difficult constraints he and the White House communications team faced (Labott 2016). In the weeks leading up to the ceremony, the presidents' staff indicated that the president would not offer an apology, but instead would focus on his foreign policy priorities of nuclear nonproliferation and global disarmament (McCurry, Smith, & Yuhas 2016). Given the visit was six years in the making, the president clearly understood the risks of a failed visit.

In what follows, I examine the speech that President Obama delivered at the ceremony and outline the arguments the president made for global disarmament. During the speech, the president constructed an argument in support of war memorials, examined the role of narrative and history in human morality, and articulated a method for enacting transformations of attitudes

towards weapons of war and violence at large. First, I provide a brief background on the political situation in 2016 facing president Obama as he headed to Japan. Second, I posit that the arguments developed in the speech were magnified by Obama's performance at the ceremony and outline the ways in which his solemnity and dignity enacted a form of reconciliation and model for future world leaders. Third, I argue that Obama articulated war memorials as positive historical instruments of education and the development of a world without war. Finally, I examine how Obama situates narrative form as the primary method by which humanity can articulate universal principles of empathy and non-violence. At Hiroshima, Obama argued for a world without nuclear weapons and violence writ large. He did so by envisioning the transformation of how we treat our global family and demonstrated how leaders can enact reconciliation.

2. FOREIGN RELATIONS UNDER OBAMA

When Barack Obama entered office in 2009, the economy was in freefall, two wars lingered on overseas with no exit strategy, the world's most wanted terrorist remained at large, and relations with many United States allies, especially those in the Pacific region, has frayed measurably since the turn of the millennium. The Bush administration's approach to North Korean nuclearization was primarily to blame for the erosion of the Japanese-American Security Alliance (Bush 2009). Given the proximity of the

Japanese people and territory to nuclear armed dictatorship, the prioritization of the War on Terror understandably destabilized the alliance. Obama's election in 2008, especially in the context of his promises to scale back overseas counter terrorism operations and begin withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, encouraged leaders in Japan that a new administration would be more amenable to reprioritize politics in the Pacific. Obama's personal biography as a product of both American and Pacific Islander cultures further deepened this hope and led one Brookings Institute senior scholar to note that "American soft power...can be replenished, and our postwar record, the goodwill of friends in the region, and the special character of the 2008 presidential election create a basis on which to restore it" (Bush 2009). Overall, the situation in 2009 looked promising for a renewal of relations between Japan and the United States and the new administration offered hope that the alliance would begin to restore its role in maintaining the security order in the region.

Early indicators from the administration were promising too. Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize, in large part because of his nuclear disarmament agenda. In his speech accepting the prize, Obama argued directly for a world with significant reductions in nuclear armaments and committed himself and his administration to the principles of global disarmament:

One urgent example is the effort to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, and to seek a world without them ... I'm working with President Medvedev to reduce America and Russia's nuclear stockpiles. But it is also incumbent upon all of us to insist that nations like Iran and North Korea do not game the system. Those who claim to respect international law cannot avert their eyes when those laws are flouted. Those who care for their own security cannot ignore the danger of an arms race in the Middle East or East Asia. Those who seek peace cannot stand idly by as nations arm themselves for nuclear war. (Obama 2009)

Obama not only argues for a world without nuclear weapons, but clearly implies that countries like China and Israel who destabilize their regions either by abetting potential proliferators (China in the case of North Korea) or by sabre rattling so much a regional rival over-

securitizes (Israel in the case of Iran). Chinese complicity in North Korean proliferation disrupted the relative balance of power in the region and held millions of people hostage to a nuclear armed Pyongyang. In addition to his commitment to nuclear disarmament, Obama announced his grand strategic shift and redefinition, the Asia Pivot. In a speech to the Australian parliament, Obama made the case that American influence and power was needed in the Pacific more than the Middle East and Central Asia. He stated that he "made a deliberate and strategic decision – as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with our allies and friends" (Obama 2011). Far from the "what have you done for me lately" attitude of the Bush administration, the tone struck by Obama in his grand strategy speech indicated that he would prioritize, diplomatic, economic, and military engagement in Asia. His commitments in Oslo guaranteed that non-proliferation on the Korean peninsula would play a central role in this strategy shift. Obama would complete the restoration of foreign relations with Japan by constructing the Trans Pacific Partnership trade deal and completing one final visit to Japan, to visit the war memorial and museum in Hiroshima.

3. THE CEREMONY AS HYBRID

The ceremony at Hiroshima took place less than a year before Obama would leave office, and involved a short wreath laying, speeches from President Obama and Prime Minister Abe, and a short reconciliation gesture from the president. Importantly, the ceremony was attended by political figures of both nations and survivors of the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (*hibakusha*). The ceremony was broadcast around the world on news networks and is available to watch on multiple digital platforms. Clearly, the speech delivered by the president took place within the framework of an epideictic ceremony, so understanding the effect of those situational and occasional elements will help illuminate why congruently constructed arguments are magnified. As Jamieson and Campbell (1982) note in their work on rhetorical hybrids, deliberative elements of epideictic ceremonies are reinforced when the epideictic elements are enacted in a way consonant with the tone and style of the argumentative content. The

situation and occasion direct Obama to strategically construct arguments in concert with the values and attitudes reflected by the audience, the scene, the ceremony, and the purpose of the visit. Jamieson and Campbell note that fusing elements of deliberative argumentation into ceremonial situations can present significant problems for the speaker. If the ceremony seems out of touch the tone of the speech or if the deliberative elements are not congruent with the tone of the epideictic elements, then the fusion can become imbalanced and subvert the intended effect. Fortunately for the president, his particular skill at solemnity and gravity at times of emotional catharsis is self-evident from his speeches to mourning citizens throughout his career (see for example his speeches at Charleston and Newtown). Overall, the speech itself and the arguments contained within it felt well attuned to the occasion and reflected the pacifist attitudes among many members of the audience.

The ceremonial or epideictic aspects of the event implicates the argument analysis in two ways. Primarily, it elevates the importance of sensory and affective elements of Obama's argument. In the course of making his case for disarmament, he references emotion, memory, imagination, feeling, fear, understanding, sensation, listening, crying, silence, looking, and remembrance. Seeing the speech on video makes clear the affective elements of the moment and ceremony. He looked solemn and dignified throughout the event, his face portrayed a sense of thoughtfulness and contemplation, and his overall demeanor was extremely well suited for the moment. When laying the wreath down, Obama made certain to perform the ceremony without error. Holistically, the elements of the ceremony were perfectly calibrated to support the arguments in the speech. Following the speech, Obama enacted the reconciliation and empathy that he argued for in his discourse. He embraced one of the *hibakusha* as Abe and the audience looked on, and despite his indication that an apology was not forthcoming, the symbolic gesture offered by Obama after the speech functioned to reinforce his arguments. Through enactment, Obama became a model for other leaders to emulate. In a proper bookend to the speech and wreath-laying, the gesture of peace and friendship invited the audience to witness the potential transformative power of empathy. Both the gravity displayed by Obama during the ceremony and the embrace afterwards

strengthened the case made by the president in his speech. As I show in the next section, Obama built an argument for how war memorials and ceremonies of remembrance can build momentum for reconciliation and generate resources towards a global mindset of non-violence.

4. BUILDING AN ARGUMENT FOR PEACE

Obama delivered his speech (Obama 2016) directly following the wreath laying ceremony, and before Prime Minister Abe. Public memory, and the debate over its meaning, remains "partial, partisan, and thus frequently contested," and arguments over the utility and meaning of memorials and museums has been the frequent object of public debate (Dickinson, Blair, & Ott 2010). The investment in, political and public support for, and construction of a museum, or memorial, also forwards an argument about *how* to read and understand the past. Statues to great and wicked men have been the center of controversy for millennia, and every commitment to interpretation of events forwards an argument about *what* those events *should* represent. Recently, the United States has begun a reckoning with the meaning and significance of memorials to confederate war heroes. Given the controversy surrounding these places, it is only fitting that the president constructed an argument that advocated for the use of war memorials for the purposes of peaceful coexistence. In his speech, Obama made the argument that war memorials have the capacity to generate resources for new narratives about humanity. Stories we learn from places like Hiroshima and the survivors like the *hibakusha* can teach us to become more empathetic and just as a species.

He began with a self-evident premise for the arguments, that humanity's capacity for organization and technological advancement has also been the primary avenue through which dehumanization and violence occur. The president pointed out that this capacity allows us to apply these principles on a mass scale to cause suffering to millions. What Obama called "humanity's core contradiction" is self-evident to the audience because the ground they sit on was once the site of such suffering. The "very spark that marks us as a species," he said, "our ability to set ourselves apart from nature and bend it to our will...also give[s] us the capacity for unmatched destruction." Second, Obama situated

his argument as common knowledge or popular wisdom. “Ordinary people know this” he stated plainly. They consistently reject the war impulse time and time again throughout history and it is not those who suffered in war who need an education on the violence that industrialized technology, xenophobia, profit motive, and ignorance can cause in the right admixtures. If leaders understood what their people clearly have for millennia (and by the way, written down in basically every holy book ever), then war, Obama argued, would disappear. Leaders, however, are not easily persuaded or reasoned with, and so Obama needed to show how places like the Hiroshima memorial can generate the emotional fortitude necessary to forgive ones enemies and build empathetic connections necessary around the globe.

The first argument that Obama constructed around this premise is that war memorials serve a socially and politically productive purpose. Hiroshima, he argued, teaches us about the horrors of war by activating our sensory experiences of the place and infusing those experiences with the memories and recollections of survivors. Former presidents also argued for the utility of war memorials and commemoration of the dead, including Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg and Reagan in Germany. Constructing memorials, conducting remembrances, and mourning the loss of our fellow global citizens is a productive activity for producing empathetic citizens. Obama told the audience how the memorial forces one to “imagine” the bomb falling from the sky and to “feel the dread” of the children who ran for safety as their world ended. He called upon the audience to think about a paradox and “listen” to the “silent cry” of the dead who call out from the past. In doing so, he said, we “remember” the “innocents” who did there at Hiroshima, and in turn, we also think of all those dead, unnamed and unfound, on battlefields stretching back to the dawn of civilization. In articulating this experience of the memorial, Obama made a case for why the memorial should exist. He supported his case with warrants about how the memorial works on humans through memory and sensory experience to justify why people should visit it. “Why do we come to this place?” he asked, “We come ponder a terrible force unleashed in a not so distant past. We come to mourn the dead...Their souls speak to us. They ask us to look inward, to take stock of who we are and what we might become.” President Obama pointed to the souls of the dead

as audible agents of rhetorical effect, something not dissimilar to the warrant of the dead (Rood 2017) but involving more affective presence for the visitor. What do the dead have to teach us, then? They teach us self-evident truths about the nature of humankind that Obama used to start his argument. “Hiroshima teaches us this truth. Technological progress without an equivalent progress in human institutions can doom us.” War memorials have intrinsic value, his case stated, because they teach us self-evident truths about humankind that are necessary to learn if we are to “take stock of who we are.” As one of the famous inscriptions in the pronaos at Delphi states, *γνῶθι σεαυτόν* (know thyself). The primary reason to visit and experience memorials like these, Obama stated, is to learn about humanity’s capacity for inhumanity and contemplate the nature of our being.

Second, Obama claimed that Hiroshima not only teaches people about the past, but also invites them to change for the better. Obama took stock of his own response and admitted that “Mere words cannot give voice to such suffering” as was felt on that day. Instead, he said we should feel “a shared responsibility to look directly into the eye of history and ask what we must do differently to curb such suffering again.” We must “fight complacency” with the memory of that suffering because it is the memory of events like Hiroshima that “fuels our moral imagination” and “allows us to change.” Obama provided empirical examples of humanity’s capacity to change for the better. He described the post-war period around the globe and highlighted the great work to reduce structural violence and suffering done in concert between former enemies. Relationships like the Japanese-American Security Alliance make it self-evident that humans are able to change for the better and work on behalf of the global community. There is work to do still though, Obama warned the audience. The most powerful nations in the world still possess nuclear weapons with the power to destroy all life on the planet. The president argued that culture and high-minded ideals will not save humanity from itself:

The world war ... was fought among the wealthiest and most powerful of nations. Their civilizations had given the world great cities and magnificent art. Their thinkers had advanced ideas of justice and harmony and truth. And yet the war grew out of the same base instinct for

domination or conquest ... an old pattern amplified by new capabilities and without new constraints.

Despite the high minded ideals of the romanticists, the first half of the 20th century proved that there were few, if any, limits to humanity's capacity for war and oppression. Between the great wars, the nations of the world had tried a plethora of snake oils for the plague of violence that seemed ubiquitous. Obama recounted the different yokes societies have tried to place on human nature to constrain and direct our most violent impulses:

Every great religion promises a pathway to love and peace and righteousness, and yet no religion has been spared from believers who have claimed their faith as a license to kill. Nations arise telling a story that binds people together in sacrifice and cooperation, allowing for remarkable feats. But those same stories have so often been used to oppress and dehumanize those who are different. Science allows us to communicate across the seas and fly above the clouds, to cure disease and understand the cosmos, but those same discoveries can be turned into ever more efficient killing machines.

Religion cannot save humanity if we cannot learn to love those of different faiths, nationalism cannot offer advice on how to cooperate over global problems and develop international solutions, and science may be able to replicate human appearance and mimic its functions, but no instrument or device in a laboratory measures immorality. Rather than look outside ourselves, he said, we need to "change our mind-set about war itself." If we cannot bind the machinery of human instrumentality to a moral purpose with tools we have built expressly for that purpose, then we need to "prevent conflict through diplomacy and strive to end conflicts after they've begun" and "see our growing interdependence as a cause for peaceful cooperation." Most importantly, he argued, "we must reimagine our connection to one another as members of the human race." After establishing the case for visiting Hiroshima and contemplating the existence of such a place, Obama then constituted a purpose for people when they do attend the memorial. In order for a place of such hallowed suffering to have its

intended effect and inspire change, we must attend to the voices of the dead and allow them to argue for a better future.

Third, to save others the same fate, Obama made the case in his speech for developing a new narrative about humanity. The dead, he argued inveigh upon us a solemn duty to change humanity for the better, to end war. To do so, we must "tell our children a different story" than past generations have told their children. Because we tell stories that exclude or oppress, the narrative of a common fate for humankind is lost. He stated that humans are not "bound by genetic code to repeat the mistakes of the past" but that we can "learn" and "choose" to tell a new story. Barack Obama at Hiroshima did not sound like the newly elected president of 2009 receiving his prize in Oslo, nor did he sound like the upstart senator on the campaign trail promising to usher in a new era of global leadership. Rather than rely on policymaking, international agreements on non-proliferation, or pursuing change through the International Criminal Courts, the president argued in his 2016 speech that we should tell each other stories that "describes a common humanity." The shift strategy in his second term both reflects the inevitable end of his tenure in office, but also a conscious choice that is evident in his changing arguments on gun control (Kirk 2018). By 2015, President Obama avoided making the case for reform by pursuing legislation. Bitter defeats in 2013 in the Senate led the president to eschew direct deliberations over reform and pursue a value-oriented strategy instead. The speech at Hiroshima reflects this shift in tone by Obama, and his argument that "we are part of a single human family" was the argumentative centerpiece in both Charleston and Hiroshima.

What story should we tell, then? If the memorial and museum speak to us irreducible truths, and we are to tell stories that encapsulate an argument of common humanity, then which stories did the president recommend? Obama started his final argument by giving an example: "We see these stories in the *hibakusha*. The woman who forgave a pilot who flew the plane that dropped the atomic bomb because she recognized that what she really hated was war itself. The man who sought out families of Americans killed here because he believed their loss was equal to his own." By holding up the *hibakusha* as a model for global citizenship, Obama defined a global citizen as one who hates "war itself." Pacifism becomes the defining feature of citizenship in this story, and heroes are

those who overcome national and other differences to acknowledge and embrace all humanity. Next, Obama provided an example from American history, the Declaration of Independence. Once again echoing Lincoln at Gettysburg, the president said that “The irreducible worth of every person, the insistence that every life is precious, the radical and necessary notion that we are part of a single human family – that is the story we all must tell.” His case rests on self-evident truths established at the start of the speech, the argument that war memorials like those at Hiroshima allow us to commune with history and bear witness to humanity’s capacity for evil, and the argument that we are capable of creating a world without war or weapons thereof. “That is why we come to Hiroshima,” he argued, “So that we might think of people we love. The first smile from our children in the morning. The gentle touch from a spouse over the kitchen table. The comforting embrace of a parent. We can think of those things and know that those same precious moments took place here, 71 years ago.” The lessons we learn from memorials and ceremonies about the dead are lessons of universality and commonality. Obama argued in his Hiroshima speech that our obligation to those who died, to those who gave us the world we have today, is to preserve it for those who inherit the world tomorrow. Only a story of common humanity can enact this future.

In his conclusion, Obama told the audience that these are not lessons that have escaped humanity’s grasp somehow after thirty thousand years of history. Ordinary people “know” these lessons from history already. Whether their family members served in combat, they are estranged from their home country because of conflict, or because they have lost loved ones in war, citizens of the world know the cost of war and they know there is a better way. Obama’s concluding argument was that leaders like himself must reckon with this truth, otherwise the world is in peril. Ordinary citizens do not direct armies, control nuclear weapon launch codes, or build chemical weapons on an industrial scale. Leaders are responsible for war, and it is they, Obama argued, that had the most to learn from stories like those of the *hibakusha*.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, Obama’s argument for pacifism and a common humanity were clearly laid out,

supported with a variety of materials, and was seen to be largely successful as a foreign visit and ceremony (Donnelly and Vinograd 2016; Labott 2016; Sneider 2016). His use of self-evident arguments were reinforced by the performative elements of the ceremony. Obama’s demeanor and gravitas demonstrated for viewers and audience members that he took the duty seriously and held the lessons of the day in deep contemplation. His argument was supported by a depiction of his own sensory and emotional response to the site, and the wisdom imparted by his visit. Given the timing of the visit (during a heated election year), the approaching end of his term, and the perceived constraints, the president cogently and clearly laid out a case for global peace. The president directly challenged other world leaders to visit Hiroshima and sites like it to bear witness to the cruelty of humanity and its capacity for violence. Despite the potential responses from other nations in the region and United States allies, little negative reaction to the speech was evident (Sneider 2016). Clearly, the president, in his visit to Hiroshima, made arguments that the people and leaders of the world agreed with, the only remaining question now is, will they meet the challenge and listen to the stories of the dead? And if they do, what story will they choose to tell?

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