

Rooted in the American Spirit:

An Analysis of President Clinton's Speeches on the Oklahoma City Bombings

On April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh pulled a Ryder truck loaded with explosives up to the front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and detonated it, killing 168 and injuring more than 680 (INDYSTAR.com). The bombing was “the most significant act of terrorism on American soil” at the time (INDYSTAR.com). The people of Oklahoma were devastated. The nation mourned. The country was afraid.

On April 23, President Bill Clinton addressed the nation at a memorial service for the victims of the bombing (23 Apr. 1995). The country needed answers. The country needed reassurance. The country needed to feel safe again. The country needed to mourn, and Clinton needed to tell them how to get through this tragedy.

In Clinton’s first epideictic memorial address, his job was to eulogize the victims and praise the survivors of the bombing. His job was to remind the American public that these victims had real lives and were real people. He needed to remind us that, even though the country had suffered a horrendous blow, we could go on; we should go on; we would go on. He needed to make us feel safe again. He needed to give us hope.

Over the next ten years, Clinton would deliver two more speeches that would continue his theme from the first speech. In what follows, I explore the extended metaphor of the tree that Clinton used in all three speeches. By using this extended metaphor, he continued to remind the victims and survivors of the Oklahoma City bombing that they were united with the rest of the country in mourning, in love, and in remembrance of those they lost; he reminded them that, like the tree, they would flourish again.

The April 23, 1995, Speech (The Oklahoma Bombing Memorial Address)

Clinton begins his speech by thanking those whom the bombing had personally affected. He familiarizes himself with the audience when he tells them that he comes not only “to represent the American people,” but also as a parent and a former neighbor (23 Apr. 1995). He says that those who worked in the building were part “of our American family,” and many of them, including the “innocent children” whose parents were trying to be “good workers as well as good parents,” served the rest of us (23 Apr. 1995). By doing so, he makes them symbols of the everyman—the patriotic American who works “to support” and “to protect us” (23 Apr. 1995).

He uses repetition throughout the speech to reinforce his position. He reiterates that he is speaking for the country when he repeats phrases such as “my fellow Americans” and “our American family” (23 Apr. 1995). However, his repetitive use of the words “we” and “our” invokes the pathos, or emotional appeal, of the situation by including himself in the group of those closely affected by this tragedy. Additionally, he makes the listeners’ pain more important than his own when he goes on to say that those who were harmed or killed were the true “neighbors and friends” of those listening (23 Apr. 1995). He tells them, “You know them in

ways that all the rest of America could not.” Therefore, even though America mourns with them, he reinforces his knowledge that their “pain is unimaginable” (23 Apr. 1995).

He validates their anger, but assures them that “[j]ustice will prevail” (23 Apr. 1995). He provides the ethos, or ethical appeal, of a woman whose husband was killed in the bombing of Pan Am 103, another tragic loss of life by terrorism. He uses her testimony to relate to the pain the audience feels and, in doing so, validates his own knowledge of their pain. He also uses her words to call them away from one course of action and to another course of action when he quotes her:

The anger you feel is valid, but you must not allow yourselves to be consumed by it. The hurt you feel must not be allowed to turn into hate, but instead into the search for justice. The loss you feel must not paralyze your own lives. Instead, you must try to pay tribute to your loved ones by continuing to do all the things they left undone, thus ensuring they did not die in vain. (23 Apr. 1995)

In calling the listeners to action, he is also calling for healing and acceptance. He references the Bible and readily invokes God, which are effective tools because Oklahoma is in the Bible Belt, and he knows these people regularly call to God for strength in times of loss and sadness. By invoking God, he also receives the trust and the respect of the listeners. He then leads into the tree metaphor, which continues throughout the rest of the speech and into the two later speeches he gives on the Oklahoma City bombing.

The Tree Metaphor

Toward the end of the speech, Clinton describes how, before they left for Oklahoma, he and Hillary “planted a tree in honor of the children of Oklahoma” at the White House:

It was a dogwood with its wonderful spring flower and its deep, enduring roots. It embodies the lesson of the Psalms—that the life of a good person is like a tree whose leaf does not wither. My fellow Americans, a tree takes a long time to grow, and wounds take a long time to heal. But we must begin. (23 Apr. 1995)

By referencing the Psalms, he again refers to the Bible, and, in doing so, he alludes to the Biblical symbolism of the tree.

Tree symbolism is deeply rooted in the Christian faith. In Genesis, the tree of life gives everlasting life to those who partake of its fruit; consequently, Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden for eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Presumably, Noah built his ark by cutting down trees; that wooden ark saved humanity from the wrath of God during the flood. All wood comes from trees: people fish from wooden boats; carpenters (like Jesus) work with wood; Christ was crucified on a wooden cross. Thus, alluding to a tree as a symbol of life leads the listener, especially in a densely Christian area like Oklahoma, to think of God and Jesus and the Christian belief of an afterlife.

The dogwood tree itself is symbolic of spring and, as such, is a symbol for renewal. The flowering dogwood, which is common in Oklahoma, blooms between late March and mid-May, making it a perfect symbol for something that occurred during that time frame (“Dogwood”). The dogwood also plays an important part in Christian folklore and in the anonymous poem, “The Legend of the Dogwood”:

When Christ was on earth, the dogwood grew
 To a towering size with a lovely hue.
 Its branches were strong and interwoven
 And for Christ's cross its timbers were chosen
 Being distressed at the use of this wood
 Christ made a promise which still holds good:
 “Not ever again shall the dogwood grow
 To be large enough for a tree, and so
 Slender and twisted it shall always be
 With cross-shaped blossoms for all to see.
 The petals shall have bloodstains marked in brown
 And in the blossom's center a thorny crown.
 All who see it will think of me,
 Nailed to a cross from a dogwood tree.
 Protected and cherished this tree shall be
 A reflection to all of my agony.” (“LEGEND”)

Those who are familiar with the “Legend of the Dogwood” would quickly relate to the dogwood as a Christian symbol. This symbolic reference would bring comfort to those who believe in the Christian idea of an afterlife in which people are happy and pain-free in Heaven. The allusion to the concept of the afterlife in Christianity also leads the listener to reflect on the belief that God will punish those responsible for this tragedy.

Clinton never overtly expresses all of this, but the meaning is implied based on what the listeners, presumably Christians, believe. His anecdotal use of the dogwood story allows the listener to make the leap from sadness about the tragedy to hopefulness for the future to acceptance of God's will to the promise of retribution against those who committed this violent act of terrorism.

Clinton further expands his tree metaphor by referring to its “wonderful spring flower” and its “deep, enduring roots” (23 Apr. 1995). He uses the reference to spring as a symbol of renewal and rebirth, where everything old is new again. Here, “spring” does not only represent the season, it also represents the change from sadness and anger to acceptance and peace. The listener infers that things will get better, that the tree will bloom, and that life will go on. He uses an implied antaclasis in which the listener infers both the literal and figurative meanings of the word “roots.” The listener imagines that, as the roots of a tree will continue to feed the tree and allow it to grow even if it has been damaged, the “roots” of the listeners will continue to allow them to grow and flourish in the face of despair. He continues the tree metaphor in his later speeches about the Oklahoma City bombing.

The April 5, 1996, Speech (President Clinton Remembers)

Two weeks before the first anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, President Clinton presented another speech to the people of Oklahoma. In the speech, he commemorated the one-year anniversary of the bombing and praised the people of Oklahoma for their efforts to rebuild not only their city, but also their lives.

He refers to his first speech in which he mentions the dogwood tree that he and Hillary had planted a year ago to honor the memory of those who perished in the bombing (05 Apr. 1996). He re-emphasizes the tree metaphor and the Biblical reference by repeating his words from the previous speech and adding to them:

A year ago I noted that the dogwood tree embodies the lesson of the psalms that the life of a good person is like a tree whose leaves do not wither, that just as a tree takes a long time to grow, sometimes wounds take a long time to heal. Well, your tree has taken root on the South Lawn of the White House. In a few weeks it will flower. The healing power of our faith has also taken root, and must bloom again here. (05 Apr. 1996)

As he did in the first speech, he mentions the “tree whose leaves do not wither,” which leads the listeners to reflect on the undying resilience of the human spirit. He reinforces this by telling them that their “tree” has “taken root” and will soon “flower.” Here, listeners can infer that the tree represents the triumph of the human spirit that has taken root in the people of Oklahoma. By rebuilding after this tragedy, they will allow their spirit to flourish, or flower.

He also tells the audience that their tree will flower in a few weeks. This period coincides with the actual one-year anniversary of the bombing, but he never says it outright. Instead, he leaves it to the audience to infer the significance of the timing. In doing this, he acknowledges the significance of the one-year anniversary to the people of Oklahoma and encourages them to continue rebuilding their lives.

The April 19, 2005, Speech (Oklahoma City Memorial Service)

On the tenth anniversary of the Oklahoma City Bombing, Clinton again spoke to the people of Oklahoma. This time, he began his speech in a lighthearted manner, giving the listeners a sense of renewed optimism (19 Apr. 2005). Ten years had passed and much had changed. The bombing was no longer known as the largest loss of life by terrorism on American soil. Timothy McVeigh had been executed several years earlier, providing a sense of closure for many of the survivors and the family members of the victims. Clinton was no longer President; however, he was still needed. The American people, especially those in Oklahoma City, needed to be reminded of his words. They needed him to tell them that they had done a good job of rebuilding and moving on with their lives.

He begins his continued metaphor of the tree by referring to the survivor tree, a tree that withstood the bombing in 1995, as a symbol of the “triumph of the human spirit” (19 Apr. 2005).

He jokingly reminds the listeners that the survivor tree was “ugly” when he saw it right after the bombing, but that it has since flourished (19 Apr. 2005). He goes on to remind the listeners of the dogwood he and Hillary planted at the White House and how it now flourishes as well. He continues by explaining the symbolism of the tree:

Trees are good symbols for what you did. You can't forget the past of the tree. It's in the roots. And if you lose the roots, you lose the tree. But the nature of the tree is to always reach for tomorrow—it's in the branches—and to always find regenerative power from season to season. The Book of Job ... says, “Even if you cut its limbs, it will return. The shoots will grow again. The branches will come again.” We owe it to the 168 people who perished, to their family members, to all who lost here never to forget them, never to stop mourning, never to stop missing, but to be like a tree: to keep our roots and reach for tomorrow.... (19 Apr. 2005)

Whereas in his previous speeches he only alludes to the meaning of the tree, in this speech, he overtly explains the symbolism. He reassures them that they have honored the memories of those they lost by moving on and rebuilding their lives. He encourages them to continue living their lives and flourishing in the face of tragedy. He reinforces the belief that the roots of the American spirit lie not within the country's government or its laws, but within its people.

Conclusion

The exigence of Clinton's first speech was the bombing itself. The exigences of his next two speeches were the first and tenth anniversaries of the bombing. The bombing provided a catalyst for Clinton to embrace the American people. But more importantly, he, as the President, needed to reassure the American public, and especially the people of Oklahoma City whose lives were personally affected by this tragedy, that those who died on April 19, 1995, did not die in vain. He needed to let the survivors and family members of those who were killed know that their lives and their sacrifices mattered.

By using the metaphor of the tree in all three of his speeches, Clinton was able to convey a sense of renewal, a sense of strength, and a sense of hope to the people who were most affected by this tragedy. In doing so, he also offered comfort and reassurance to the American public who, until the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, had never witnessed such a tragic loss of life by terrorism on American soil. He did not focus on the reason why it happened; he only focused on moving forward and honoring the victims by encouraging the survivors and family members to rebuild their lives. He also provided a blueprint for those who would later try to help the nation recover and rebuild after September 11.

Clinton effectively used the metaphor of the tree to connect with the listeners on a personal level. His actions (in planting the dogwood tree) and his words (in his speeches) played an important part of the healing process after the bombing. The listeners were able to take away from it a sense of rebirth not only as a city, but also as a nation.

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**Because of the similarities of the titles and authors of these sources, I referred to the dates (for the Clinton speeches) or the INDYSTAR website (for the background info) in the in-text citations (for clarity). **