

Merging Form and Style in the 1964 “Lady Bird Special”

On October 6, 1964, Lady Bird Johnson made history as she boarded a train headed south from Washington D.C. In this unprecedented act, as the first solo campaign conducted by a first lady, she embraced the opportunity to advocate on behalf of her husband’s re-election and dedication to Civil Rights in a region she long called home. At the end of a four-day journey, Lady Bird had covered 1,628 miles over eight states, given 47 speeches, and addressed close to 500,000 rural Southerners with a message of education, Southern progress, and the potential to uphold prosperity (*The Whistle Stop Tour*, 2001). Her Whistle Stop Tour was designed to reach out to the unsure, indifferent, and sometimes hostile citizens who felt divided by the recent passing of the Civil Rights Act. By garnering her Southern roots, she strategically forged a viable connection between voters and the President. As Lady Bird remarked in several of her speeches, she was making “a journey of the heart” that would help foster understanding between herself, her husband’s presidency, and the Southern United States.

In this essay, I examine 21 of Lady Bird’s scripted speeches found at the Johnson Presidential Library and Museum. I argue that Lady Bird Johnson’s rhetoric leverages her identity as born and raised Southerner to fuse the identification strategies of the feminine style with the enthymeme’s collaborative nature as a means to empower an otherwise alienated audience. The rhetoric in her campaign speeches signals a novel strategy within the feminine style, the use of enthymeme. Though feminine style has been criticized for not fostering political change for women (e.g. Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 1996; Sheeler & Anderson, 2014; Virgil, 2014), I suggest that the use of enthymeme demonstrates the potential to re-imagine feminine style, not as revolutionary, or gender neutralizing, but as a valuable tool for rhetors who seek to create tangible change along divisive rhetorical terrain. Merging enthymematic form with feminine style allowed Lady Bird to assist the Johnson administration in regaining Southern support, but also advance the rhetorical boundaries of the first lady.

For Lady Bird, the feminine style was an essential option given her historic moment. As a woman from the South, promoting Southern culture after the passing of controversial legislation, her enthymematic call for rural Southern voters to stay with LBJ signaled a vote to preserve Southern culture, and on some level, to respond to a Southern woman’s call for support to preserve privilege and prosperity in the region. The voters who answered this call, who participated in her conclusions, and voted for Lyndon Johnson, accepted Lady Bird’s position as a Southern woman in need of aid; completing the enthymeme was an action to be taken to reassert the saliency of Southern values.

Though the case study is historic, the implications of this study are applicable to the current political landscape. Reports in early 2016 initially compared the Clinton/Trump election to the Johnson/Goldwater battle of 1964, with even more extreme polarization in the electorate, and with fewer individuals changing their voting patterns (Zelizer, 2016). Keeping in mind Lady Bird’s audience may prove necessary if we are to remember the types of arguments needed to empower voters—but also to draw attention to the impact of identifications strategies in times of turmoil. Lastly, this case study offers insight into the continued constraints facing the women who hold the unscripted, unpaid, and often, unappreciated role of First Lady of the United States. After her tour ended, a columnist, Max Freedman wrote “...perhaps this marks the emergence of women as central figures in a national contest instead of being on the edges of a campaign” (*The Whistle Stop Tour*, 2001, p. 1). This whistle stop campaign played a significant factor in pushing the rhetorical boundaries for not only the First Ladyship, but more generally for women’s position in the public sphere at a time of great change.

References

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