

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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In his July 31, 1996 remarks on welfare reform, President Clinton signaled his intent to sign into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), bipartisan legislation aimed at reforming federal welfare policy. During the press conference, Clinton framed welfare as necessary but ultimately temporary relief, stating its reform would only succeed with shared responsibility between state governments, the private sector, and welfare recipients. This vision of shared responsibility was significant in attempting to unify Americans' orientation toward welfare as a shared social problem of aiding the deserving poor. The president's stated motivation in pursuit of reforming welfare and signing of the bill was to aid the poor in transitioning from welfare to work while safeguarding their children from neglect. However, application of cluster-agon analysis to his remarks reveals another layer of motive, not only idealizing the nuclear family as normative, as other researchers have shown, but also reinforcing work as the legitimating factor that validates American citizenship. I argue that in positioning work as central to American citizenship and necessary for the support of children, Clinton invokes an image of legal immigrants and their children as proto-citizens, more deserving than native born Americans who fail to meet expectations of labor participation.

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Reforming the Land of Opportunity:
Reframing Citizenship for the Deserving Poor in 1996 U.S. Welfare Policy Reform

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Ian Montgomery, Author

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DEDICATION

In memory of Robert Iltis—scholar, mentor, friend.

I. Introduction

Presidential speeches are a common source for researchers looking for insight into public policy. Whereas laws themselves are typically voluminous and semantically inaccessible to most casual observers, presidential addresses on the occasion of signing legislation into law are both far easier to understand and signal significant policy intentions for an administration. These signing statements are typically ceremonial and choreographed for the occasion to include persons other than the President: Congressional sponsors of the legislation, leaders of prominent special interest groups impacted by the legislation, and even children at times participate in these events.

By contrast, the presidential press conference is considerably less stage managed and less formal, yet no less significant in its import for the public. Press conferences routinely receive close attention from academic researchers in political science, journalism, and mass communication, but considerably less attention from scholars studying rhetoric. Instead, their efforts are more likely to be concentrated on more formalized occasions in which Presidents address the public, such as signing legislation or State of the Union speeches. For example, rhetorician Martín Carcasson (2006) analyzed President Bill Clinton's address on the occasion of signing the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act into law on August 22. Carcasson argues that Clinton's decision to ultimately sign the bill despite its shortcomings was not due to political opportunism nor political weakness on the part of the president facing a Republican-controlled Congress, but instead Clinton's expressed belief that it would "transform the nation's 'anti-welfare culture' from one hostile to welfare recipients into one amenable to helping the working poor,"

(2006, p. 657). While this analysis is sound, I will argue that it is also incomplete. To reach a more complete understanding, I look to Clinton's earlier press conference delivered on July 31.

Comparatively little scholarly attention has been afforded to this press conference in particular, though it addresses the same legislation and signals Clinton's intent to sign it. Both the earlier July 31 press conference and the August 22 signing ceremony express similar aspirations and justifications for welfare reform, and both addresses mention his objections to the legislation's failings. However, the press conference, unlike the signing statement, emphasizes Clinton's critique of the bill's treatment of withholding federal assistance for legal immigrants. Clinton casts this assistance as something other than "welfare," and he renders his objection in part by characterizing legal immigrants in a manner that emphasizes their commonality with native born U.S. citizens. The difference in treatment is suggestive of both Clinton's intentions for his reforms and his vision of the ideal American citizen.

To examine Clinton's motives and vision for welfare reform, I first review the literature that discusses the significance of Clinton's July 31 address specifically. Because this literature is scant, however, I also provide context on the American public's attitudes toward welfare and their assumptions about the character of the typical welfare recipient. Additionally, I describe how welfare policy and media coverage historically shaped these attitudes and assumptions. This helps to explain the cultural and economic context in which Clinton both proposes welfare reform as a campaign promise in 1992 and arguably fulfills that promise with his signing of the PRWORA in 1996. In announcing his intention to sign this legislation, Clinton must fulfill another expectation that all presidents face when signing major legislation: justifying policy change to the American people. The choices Clinton makes rhetorically in his press conference must serve this function,

yet they also reveal Clinton's motives and priorities as president. More importantly, in justifying his welfare reform, Clinton's rhetorical choices are conditioned in part by his need to acknowledge the public's attitudes while urging them toward a different perspective on welfare, with a sense of unity and shared responsibility in creating that reform.

Next, I explain the cluster-agon method that I apply to Clinton's speech to generate my analysis, discussing the utility of the method for interpreting public address. I then discuss my own analysis of Clinton's speech, exploring its particular phrases and terminology to identify key terms that Clinton employs to build his message: that safeguarding children is the core function of welfare, and why it is both necessary and yet must remain time-limited; that work and family are foundational values of the American way of life; and that legal immigrants exhibiting these values are more deserving of government aid than citizens who fail to exhibit these values. Finally, I conclude with an interpretation of Clinton's speech that extends previous scholarship and suggest possible directions for future research.

II. Literature Review

As little appears to have been written by academics on the substance of President Clinton's July 31 press conference, I begin this review concerning the literature on presidential press conferences as a genre more generally. I then look to the voluminous literature on U.S. attitudes toward welfare and how these are shaped by media coverage. I also briefly sketch the history of welfare policy as written by public policy researchers and political scientists, as well as welfare historians and other scholars whose work those historians frequently rely on (sociologists, anthropologists, and legal scholars chiefly among them). Finally, I summarize the general overlap among different disciplinary approaches and considerations embraced by researchers who study welfare history, policy, and political messaging.

Clinton's July Address and Presidential Press Conferences

Outside of the odd footnote, relatively little appears to have been written by academics on the subject of President Clinton's July 31 announcement that he would sign the PRWORA. On the other hand, press conferences more generally have remained an object of study for presidential scholars, political scientists, and both journalism and policy researchers, although interest in this work seems to have slowed somewhat over time. According to one group of researchers,¹ these

¹ As Clayman et al. (2006) write,

There is a long tradition of research on such [presidential news] conferences, including broad historical overviews in the context of president-press relations (Cornwell 1965; French 1982; Grossman and Kumar 1981; Juergens 1981; Kumar 2005; Pollard 1947; Smith 1990; Tebbel and Watts 1985) and studies of more narrowly defined topics (Cornwell 1960; Kumar 2003; Lammers 1981; Manheim 1979; Manheim and Lammers 1981; McGuire 1967). This research, while illuminating, focuses less on the substance of what actually transpires within news conferences in favor of the conditions under which they occur, such as their initial growth and institutionalization, their increasingly public character, the declining frequency with which they are held, and so on.

have typically focused on the contextualized interactions between the president and the press (Clayman et al., 2006), although others were struggling to classify which modes of communication count as press conferences (Kumar, 2003). As recently as 2010, scholars interested in measuring the impact of presidential address on public opinion found that relatively little work had been done by that point. Summarizing the state of knowledge on this topic at the time, Kiouisis and Strömbäck (2010) wrote:

Among the major objectives in the use of political public relations efforts by presidents is to gain media coverage for and increase the salience of their agendas, influence foreign nations, garner public support for their administrations, and send signals to legislators and the bureaucracy (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2006, Gleiber and Shull, 1992, Kernell, 2007, Kumar, 2003, Kumar, 2007). Two major tools employed for achieving such aims are press conferences and speeches, yet little research has explored the relationship between such activities and public opinion, with the notable exception of research on the effects of the State of the Union address on public opinion (Cohen, 1995, Edwards, 2004, Hill, 1998, Young and Perkins, 2005).

The following year, Tedin, Rottinghaus, and Rodgers (2011) suggested that presidential scholars in general had found little evidence that presidential messaging directed at the general public accomplishes much in terms of influence. But they also found that little had been written on the efficacy of whether televised presidential addresses to the general public are influential in swaying public opinion, specifically of the president's core versus non-core groups (i.e., the base, whether overall supportive of the president or not), or whether the mode of communication impacted the degree of influence on key issues. They constructed an experimental design to test these questions and found that "the president's base is more likely to rally behind him on policy questions (although there is some rallying from those who did not support him initially) [...]," (p. 517). Even the latest research available seems concentrated on the frequency and timing of press conferences, rather than the substance of presidential messaging in them (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2012). Thus, while

press conferences do appear to receive significant attention, it is typically not concerned with the content of the message, and it is typically confined to disciplinary domains such as presidential studies, journalism, mass communication, and political science.

The Public's Assumptions about Welfare & Its Beneficiaries

The American public has held superficially incoherent attitudes about the modern welfare state since its inception. Public polling reveals that a majority feel that government ought to provide some safety net as an aid to the poor, yet a majority also feels that their taxes should not be used to fund welfare programs. A majority favors entitlement programs such as Medicare and Social Security, while simultaneously disfavoring programs aiding the poor, including welfare assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid.

The apparent incoherence is better explained when these programs are considered in relation to labor and means testing. Entitlement programs that benefit everyone, such as Social Security, are not means tested—that is, the means of the individual does not dictate their eligibility. However, the amounts of assistance received are still relative to what a person has paid into that entitlement. Entitlement payouts such as Social Security benefits are scaled in relation to hours worked and the amounts paid into the system over a person's lifetime. Nevertheless, anyone who has paid into the system is entitled to benefit from it. Likewise, Medicare is a program with minimal eligibility requirements: citizenship and age are the primary factors for eligibility. These are programs Americans favor, and they are broadly described as social insurance (Gilens, 1999, p. 29-30 & Gordon, 1994, p. 5).

On the other hand, Americans are more skeptical of public assistance—those programs that are means tested for eligibility. In general, the purpose of public assistance is to afford people

minimal protection against destitution through comparatively small transfers of cash assistance, food assistance, and child care benefits. With these sorts of benefits, Americans are generally much more concerned with the potential for waste, fraud, and abuse. Recipients of public assistance are scrutinized to ensure that they are deserving of aid. They are subject to eligibility thresholds based on available income and number of children, as well as to auditing requirements, including receiving in-home visits by social workers and keeping regular appointments with welfare offices.

Nominally, in-home visits afford welfare officers the opportunity to evaluate a recipient's maintenance of a suitable home environment for their children and to determine whether recipients may be living beyond their means. But such visits also function as opportunities to pry into the lives of recipients and make eligibility determinations based on other factors. For instance, single mothers receiving welfare assistance were subject to losing their benefits if it were found that they were cohabiting with a male adult. This situation could be interpreted by social workers as both creating an "unfit environment" for children and representing a potential fraud, as adult males are generally assumed to be breadwinners and their presence in the home suggests the mother is less in need of assistance. The actual financial status of the cohabiting male—disabled or unemployed, for instance—is immaterial.

The state apparatus for assessing welfare eligibility represents another layer of scrutiny for welfare recipients. Social workers are empowered to project expectations about perceived sexual behavior of single mothers onto recipients and presume that unmarried sexual activity undermines the standing of recipients to justifiably receive assistance (Gordon, 1994, p. 298). This policing of

single mothers' sexuality is evident in the earliest social welfare programs, before the turn of the century and four decades before the establishment of federal public welfare in the United States.

Early charity organization societies, both in the US and in Britain, set the pace for this surveillance orientation in welfare administration. Their volunteer corps of social workers engaged in what they saw as 'moral uplift,' a program of behavior modification wherein the poor received not only financial assistance but instruction in the raising of their children and in comporting themselves in a manner consistent with Victorian-era virtues. The middle class of this period assumed the mantle of salvaging the poor both materially and spiritually, and this comingling of duties generated both expectations from and policing of the poor—in their spending habits, their parenting, and their sexual activity.

Most of all, both the formal and informal means of providing aid to the poor conditioned their eligibility in relation to work. As public policy scholar Joel Handler (1995) put it:

For more than five hundred years, the relief of those who could not earn their way had focused on the individual rather than on labor markets or other social conditions. The enduring issue was framed in moral terms—the preservation of the work ethic. “Man” (that is, people) was viewed as essentially slothful by nature and would work only if required. The goal of relief, therefore, was not primarily to relieve misery but rather to preserve the work ethic. (p. 20)

These feelings about sloth and work were amplified by cultural norms about the proper role of women in relation to work as well as the prevailing racist attitudes toward black Americans of the period. Even as the welfare rights movements began to take shape in the early 20th century, white and black Americans operated separately: welfare rights movements headed by black women were

concerned with securing public assistance for poor black families, but their leadership emulated the Victorian inspired moral uplift of their white women counterparts.

While the preservation of work ethic was indeed one animating factor, another concern was the intergenerational persistence of poverty. Poor women bearing children, especially so in the case of out-of-wedlock births, were viewed as contributing to the burden of poverty on society at large. Policing sexual behavior among the poor was thus an equally powerful factor in determining eligibility and in framing welfare assistance as a moral issue.

These same concerns with welfare recipients' morals and sexual virtue are evident in state-level welfare administration, in both the expressed attitudes of their workers and in actual policy, throughout the 20th century. For example, in 1960 Louisiana governor Jimmie Davis signed legislation that restricted welfare eligibility in his state under "suitable home" standards, ostensibly for the protection of children. The effect of this legislation, however, was to purge welfare rolls of black families; very few whites were impacted (Asen, 2001, p. 266). According to historian Jennifer Mittelstadt, the governor "called the 6,000 women cut from the welfare rolls 'a bunch of prostitutes,' hardly an endorsement of ADC's family image," (2005, p. 17). Poor mothers, particularly those of color, were condemned for their inability to maintain position in the nuclear family, married to a living, working husband, and were thus caught in the double bind of being expected to work but also to raise their children, punished for being unable to do either exclusively.

In fact, these concerns with policing sexual behavior were if anything more important than enforcing work requirements, particularly where black mothers were concerned. During the 1950s,

many states pursued similar policies to not only compel poor mothers to work but to police their domestic and sexual behavior. As legal historian Karen Tani explains:

The behavior that most concerned legislators, however, was not mothers' refusal to work but their nonmarital sexual activity and childbearing. Wisconsin, California, and South Dakota attempted to require welfare [social] workers to report misconduct or immoral behavior by ADC mothers. [...] Another proposal in Illinois would have gone a step further, requiring the mother to establish the paternity of the child before receiving aid. [...] Most prevalent of all, however, were efforts to remove the products of illicit sex from the rolls: twenty-one states representing all regions of the country, considered proposals to deny ADC to children born out of wedlock. (2016, p. 206-207)

Such concerns were only amplified in the case of black families, as Americans increasingly came to identify welfare as a “black problem” and associated poverty and welfare assistance with the black single mother. As Tani writes, these proposals “often targeted black, unwed mothers,” in part because “reconstructing the white, middle-class, nuclear family and containing women’s sexuality were postwar social and cultural imperatives. Unwed black mothers, by their mere existence, undermined both goals” (2016, p. 207). Controlling the sexuality and parental behavior among poor mothers remained a central concern with the PRWORA signed by Clinton, and he extolled many of the bill’s provisions for going after so-called “deadbeat dads” as well as childcare subsidies for unwed mothers. Marriage, family, and children, with a laboring head of household, remained normative from the beginnings of welfare all the way up to Clinton’s passage of welfare reform.

Scholars have argued that these concerns with the sexuality of the poor is not merely pragmatic, attempting to stem the flow of intergenerational poverty by limiting the number of children born to the poor. Rather, it is a concern with the maintenance of the nuclear family. The idealization of this family—a married couple bearing children with the father as a breadwinner—

is threatened by the single female-headed household. The absence of paid, self-sustaining labor represents a threat to the state and the idealized American way of life. It is ultimately labor that is expected in return for the benefits conferred by citizenship (Katz, 2001, p. 342). The link between labor and citizenship is tacit in Clinton's speech, but an integral part for understanding the motives of his rhetoric and the motivation behind passing the bill his speech is celebrating.

A Brief Sketch of U.S. Public Welfare Policy

In his book *Losing Ground*, sociologist Charles Murray purports to demonstrate that welfare expenditures in the form of public assistance—both in existing federal policy with the War on Poverty and Great Society programs and in experimental trials evaluating the effects of a Negative Income Tax on labor force participation—have proven disastrous, inadvertently growing poverty rather than reducing it. To make his case, Murray advances several claims about the impact of welfare programming on African Americans' educational achievement, labor force participation, and likely membership in a female-headed household relative to white Americans. A careful examination of the underlying evidence for these claims, accompanied by alternative interpretations and the occasional outright refutation, is the purpose of a special report titled simply, *Losing Ground: A Critique*. This report, published in 1985 by the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is a collection of critical essays written independently by several of the Institute's social scientists, including Sara McLanahan, Glen Cain, Sheldon Danziger, and Peter Gottschalk. I discuss below Murray's main ideas that each of these scientists engage with in their criticism and their respective interpretations of the evidence.

First, Murray claims welfare produces more female-headed families and illegitimate children. He shows that the number of illegitimate births exploded between 1950 and 1980, then

attributes this statistic to the growth in female-headed households during the 1960s and 1970s. Further, Murray explains this growth “as a response to increases in the generosity and availability of welfare programs,” (McLanahan et al., 1985, p. 1). In other words, generous welfare benefits enabled poor women to have children out of wedlock where they otherwise would not, so they did. But as Sara McLanahan explains, Murray’s analysis turns on a statistical selection error: Murray relies on the illegitimacy ratio, “which is the ratio of nonmarital births to all live births,” (1985, p. 1). If, however, we look at the trend in the illegitimacy rate, “which is the ratio of nonmarital births to the total number of women at risk for such an event (single women between the ages of 15 and 44), a very different picture emerges.” (McLanahan et al., 1985, p. 1). What McLanahan is digging at is the fact that marriage declined among both the poor and the middle class during the period, along with fertility rates among married couples declining at the same time (1985, p. 4). In other words, Murray is conflating the ‘problem’ of illegitimate births generally (including those born to unmarried, two-parent households) with the phenomenon of female-headed households.²

Second, Murray claims that “poverty increased in the 1970s despite increased government expenditures to combat poverty and despite, according to Murray, a record of economic growth from 1970 to 1979 that exceeded the record in the 1950s (pp. 58-59)” (McLanahan et al., 1985, p. 9). Murray further argues that his analysis shows decreased labor force participation rates among black Americans, especially black teenagers; however, this is accomplished in part by ignoring

² According to Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk, in a written contribution to the same special report: “Consider all households with children headed by a person under 65 years of age. The percentage of these households headed by women increased steadily from 10.7 to 20.8 percent between 1968 and 1983 [...]. As David T. Ellwood and Mary Jo Bane conclude ‘welfare simply does not appear to be the underlying cause of the dramatic changes in family structure of the past few decades,’” (McLanahan et al., 1985, p. 84).

pertinent factors, as Glen Cain points out. One significant example: Murray's research fails to include black youth engaged in military service, opting for civilian-only labor force statistics; in essence, Murray is cherrypicking his data over a 5-year period, 1965-1970, comparing school enrollment and labor force participation rates among black teenagers (McLanahan et al., 1985, p. 15-16), when a longer timeline shows different trends less favorable to Murray's conclusion (McLanahan et al., 1985, p. 20-21).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Murray is apparently forthright in distinguishing the deserving poor from the undeserving, claiming that government assistance largely flowed to the undeserving, in his view. Nevertheless, Cain points out that Murray's argument rests in part on "a conventional economic model in which the poor act as rational consumers [...] in response to the incentives and disincentives of the programs directed at them," (McLanahan et al., 1985, p. 29). Thus, the undeserving poor are both unjustly obtaining resources intended for the deserving poor, and yet are only acting rationally in doing so. How does Murray reconcile this? According to Cain, Murray asserts that the apparent rationality of the undeserving poor is rational *only in the short term*; in the long term, the behavior is manifestly irrational because it only hurts them, representing a "Faustian bargain" (Murray as cited in McLanahan et al., 1985, p. 29).

In summary, the Institute for Research on Poverty's report finds that in *Losing Ground*, Murray is selecting inappropriate statistics, cherrypicking data, and flouting his own stated assumptions about economic behavior, all in an effort to prove that providing financial assistance to the poor actually harms the poor. This is fundamentally a Randian-inspired apology for

selfishness dressed up in the guise of social science. It is also a fairly popular attitude among many Americans toward welfare and similar cash-based assistance programs aimed at helping the poor.

Despite these shortcomings, *Losing Ground* was undeniably popular in politically conservative circles, to the point of allegedly serving as the Reagan administration's "new bible" on policy, according to historian Michael Katz (2001, p. 24). Whatever flaws may be found in Murray's analysis or methodology, his conclusions and assumptions were taken seriously by policymakers. The handwringing over illegitimate births continued into the 1990s, unnerving policymakers as they assumed the trend coincided with ever greater dependency on public assistance. The policy discourse around welfare shifted as a result from one focused on costs and resource distribution to one preoccupied with dependency and its consequences for economic stability. The shift was not unnoticed among authorities on the subject:

Welfare experts Mary Jo Bane and David Ellwood wrote, 'It is hard to miss the profound shift in emphasis and tone in poverty discussions over the past ten to fifteen years. A decade or two ago, the academic debate and to a large degree the popular debate were often focused on matters of adequacy, labor supply responses, tax rate, and opportunity. Now 'dependency' is the current preoccupation. (as cited in Katz, 2001, p. 319)

To those persuaded by Murray's argument, of course, the slippery slope was plain to see: a generous welfare entitlement, unburdened by work requirements or other strings attached, permitted reckless women to bear children out of wedlock, unconcerned with how to pay for it all. Their children, absent a strong father figure in the household, would understandably learn from the example of their dependent mother that dependency was perfectly acceptable. They would

grow up without role models to teach them a strong work ethic, and as they became adults they, too, would settle into a life of dependency, creating an intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Missing from this alarmist picture of society sliding into complacent economic ruin was the constant, inescapable awareness embedded in our culture's collective psyche that only work and productivity provide authentic dignity for the American citizen. That awareness is evident in the statistics on the long-term recipients of AFDC, as beneficiaries routinely demonstrated efforts to return to work or to remain working while they received benefits. It is that tacit awareness that animates Michael Katz's (2001) observation on the difference between the acceptable subsidy and the unacceptable handout:

Why is it appropriate for farmers to depend on government subsidies, corporations on government contracts and tax concessions, and homeowners on tax-deductible mortgages—but not for single mothers to depend on public assistance? The American answer almost surely would stress work—the new criterion of full citizenship. Because it is acceptable to subsidize those who ‘work hard and play by the rules’ [...]. (Katz, 2001, p. 348)

This slow contraction of the welfare state since the 1970s was mirrored by an expansion of the carceral state over the same period. As a bureaucracy, the welfare state is typically viewed in isolation, subjected to shifting political priorities over time, experiencing major cuts during Reagan's presidency and finally deep reform under Clinton. But Sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2009) argues that the fortunes of the welfare state and the carceral state over roughly the same period is not incidental. Instead, it represents part of a concerted effort by the burgeoning neoliberal state to assert greater control over the poor.

First, the populations impacted by policy shifts in both the welfare and carceral bureaucracies are largely the same: a mostly indigent underclass of predominantly racial minorities. For Wacquant, this control is both material and symbolic, as policymakers increasingly

abandoned rehabilitation as a goal of penal institutions and resorted simply to “warehousing” them (2009, p. 292). Second, the rationale for these conjoined functions—of welfare turned workfare and the transformation of the prison as a site of rehabilitation to one trained on “retribution and neutralization” (Wacquant, 2009, p. 292)—is ultimately one of behavioral management. Controlling the poor serves state interests in maintaining middle class support for socioeconomic inequalities, by normalizing both material realities of contingent labor and the symbolic desire to impose punishment on noncompliant populations (Wacquant, 2009, p. 294). Welfare recipients are treated as noncompliant in failing social strictures to work and maintain self-sufficiency; similarly, criminals are noncompliant in failing to abide by legal codes largely in place to preserve property rights. In this, the state:

enforce[s] the normalization of social insecurity ... [giving] a whole new meaning to the notion of ‘poor relief’: punitive containment offers relief not *to* the poor but *from* the poor, by forcibly ‘disappearing’ the most disruptive of them, from the shrinking welfare rolls on the one hand and into the swelling dungeons of the carceral castle on the other. (Wacquant, 2009, p. 295)

Thus, relief from the poor necessitates both protection from overt criminality and covert parasitism represented by the dependent, undeserving poor, siphoning the economic vitality of the body politic. In this context, the popular image of the welfare cheat—the figure of the welfare queen popularized by President Ronald Reagan—signifies a dual symbol as both welfare recipient and criminal, subverting both economic and moral order.

Anthropologist David Harvey’s (2007) examination of the origins and functions of the neoliberal state reinforce this notion that both the carceral and welfare functions of the state work in concert, primarily to serve the larger purpose of preserving institutional frameworks that maintain property rights, free trade, and free capital movement. In Harvey’s analysis,

unemployment rates are subject to overarching policies designed to keep inflation low. The welfare state is treated as a mechanism that sets incentives which partially drive the “reserve price” of labor—that is, whether a member of the underclass chooses to work rather than remain un- or underemployed and draw welfare benefits (Harvey, 2007, p. 53). “Since that reserve price is partly set by welfare payments (and stories of ‘welfare queens’ driving Cadillacs around), then it stands to reason that the neoliberal reform carried out by Clinton of [ending] ‘welfare as we know it’ must be a crucial step towards the reduction of unemployment,” (Harvey, 2007, p. 53-54). Put differently, shrinking welfare rolls by further restricting eligibility is justified in part as a rational policy for limiting unemployment while simultaneously correcting behaviors that undermine economic and moral order by threatening (white) middle class sensibilities about core social values: equality of opportunity, personal industry and responsibility, and meritocracy.

These sensibilities represented much of the appeal of Third Way politics embraced by the emergent class of “knowledge workers” and the “creative class,”—mostly white, suburban dwelling professionals in the tech industry and similarly high-skilled labor that by 1990 had become a key constituency of the New Democrats. Skeptical of collectivist policies and protections represented by organized labor and the welfare state, they nevertheless valued strong government as a vehicle for fostering progressive social values and supporting public-private partnerships to address social ills.

Historian Lily Geismer (2015) traces the emergence of this voting bloc to the growing tech sector around Boston during the 1970s and 1980s. In courting this population for support, then governor Michael Dukakis appealed to their policy preferences for both lower taxes and improved social and environmental quality, embracing “[an] approach [that] accentuated and reinvigorated

the technocratic dimensions of liberalism [...] first articulated by George McGovern [...] with an even more pronounced probusiness and private sector bent,” (Geismer, 2015, p. 252). Geismer further argues that Dukakis’ shift toward the political center was partly an effective gambit to both revitalize the state’s economic well-being while shaking off the pejorative “Taxachusetts” label, but it also made an indelible impact on the Democratic party nationally. Pursuing policies that included “public-private partnerships, a balanced budget, a welfare-to-work program, environmental protection, and [...] other liberal causes that combined a technocratic ethos, business-oriented reform, and quality-of-life issues,” (Geismer, 2015, p. 252), Dukakis burnished the profile of his state. Moreover, Dukakis influenced the policy agenda of Democrats at the national level, with the New Democrats and the Democratic Leadership Council adopting much of Dukakis’ platform, Bill Clinton’s campaign and presidency included.

While the policy details of his state’s economic recovery—the so-called Massachusetts Miracle—could hardly be attributed solely to him, Dukakis nevertheless received much of the credit for the turnaround and spurred his 1988 presidential bid. But the Willie Horton scare ads attacking Dukakis in the fall of that year overshadowed his ‘tough on crime’ credentials and doomed his campaign to a decisive loss. This in turn forced the New Democrats, Bill Clinton, and the DLC to “remake the image of the party” through effective brand messaging, essentially marketing themselves as closer to the political center to court voters. To that end, they embraced the pejorative Massachusetts liberal label attributed to Dukakis even while “virtually recapitulat[ing] the components of Dukakis’ gubernatorial record and campaign platform,” (Geismer, 2015, p. 278). This revision worked electorally to return Democrats to the White House but failed to confront the Republicans’ control of the ‘tough on crime’ narrative, leaving

unchallenged the political ratcheting away from rehabilitative toward retributive punishment in the carceral system.

As lower income populations increasingly lost political influence amidst the Democratic Party's turn "away from urban ethnics and labor unions to suburban knowledge professionals and high-tech corporations," their economic fortunes dwindled. Increasingly demonized for their presumed associations with both welfare dependency and criminal behavior, the marginal populations targeted by Clinton's welfare reform became victims of a political agenda that "continued to disproportionately benefit postindustrial professionals, while also perpetuating forms of racial and economic inequality [...] in the Democratic Party's priorities," (Geismer, 2015, p. 16).

Disciplinary Approaches to Presidential Rhetoric

Communication studies, more so than most other academic disciplines, is concerned at least as much with *how* a president's messaging about legislation is constructed as with what that legislation accomplishes. A core assumption held by many rhetorical scholars—not necessarily shared by political scientists or historians, generally speaking—is that language itself shapes reality. A president's message is therefore capable of producing a new, different understanding of an issue in the minds of the audience. The president's chosen language will necessarily frame or define an issue in terms that will likely be familiar to, but not necessarily shared by, the audience. To the extent the President's message moves an audience to a different understanding than they held before receiving that message, it may be said that the President has successfully reframed or redefined some aspect of the issue. For that reason, rhetoricians will often take deep dives into

analyzing how the attributes of presidential messaging frame or enact particular conceptions of that policy legislation and its impacts on the public.

By contrast, historians and policy scholars grasp this foundational concept of framing, of course, but tend not to analyze presidential speech for its rhetorical effects or intentions. Rather, they are more concerned with the empirical effects of the legislation being passed and how or to what degree publics are impacted.

What all three disciplines share is a sensitivity to inclusion and exclusion in how publics are constituted. Who is targeted by the legislation and who is left out? How do we define or label the target population, and how is this legislation intended to affect that population? What stereotypes or biases are present in the public's understanding of the issue addressed by the legislation? How are symbols and/or foundational narratives used to reinforce or undermine those stereotypes in pursuit of policy change?

Because of this shared sensitivity, two common themes emerge in the literature on presidential rhetoric concerning welfare reform: first, who is empowered/disempowered by policy shift? Second, who is deserving/undeserving of government aid to justify a policy shift?

First, there is a theme of who is empowered / disempowered. Who benefits from public policy legislation and who is "left out"? In the case of welfare reform, historians often look to explanations of racial, gender, and class divides between the beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of welfare (Chappell, 2010; Geary, 2015; Kohler-Hausmann, 2015; Katz, 2001). Changes in the target populations and trends concerning their inclusion/exclusion are identified—e.g., what proportion of welfare recipients were female v. male, or white unwed mothers v. black unwed mothers?—but the focus is typically broad, concerned with change over decades. Historian Marisa

Chappell, for example, finds that the historical underpinnings of the so-called traditional nuclear family, understood as “the male-breadwinner, female-homemaker family,” is a relatively recent development that grew out of 19th century economic shifts in the emergence of industrial wage labor (2010, p. 6). Moreover, early welfare policies at the state level developed to promote this nuclear family ideal within poor immigrant communities, casting white women as economic dependents entitled to “widow’s pensions” while excluding black women from eligibility (Chappell, 2010, p. 7-9). It was not until the late 1960s that black women were fully entitled to the same economic protection as white women under federal welfare policy, but by then fresh anxieties had emerged about the viability of a single, wage-earning adult in a two-parent household.

Like historians, policy scholars also look for explanations as to how inequalities emerge from and are sustained by welfare policy, whether through conscious or unconscious biases (Gilens, 1999; Handler, 1995; Iyengar, 1991); however, policy scholars also may limit their focus to relatively short chronological periods—a single legislative session or presidential administration—or expand them to the duration of a policy regime spanning a much longer period. Public policy scholar Martin Gilens (1999), for example, examines white Americans’ attitudes toward welfare and welfare recipients and finds that, while a majority of white Americans actually support welfare as a legitimate function of government, they nevertheless oppose existing welfare policy largely due to “cynical views of welfare recipients [as taking advantage, and that] are paralleled by their negative stereotypes of blacks” as lacking work ethic similar to that of whites (p. 5). These stereotypes appear to be sustained in part by media portrayals of welfare recipients

as disproportionately black, despite the predominance of white welfare recipients, beginning in the 1950s and continuing through the 1990s.

Political scientist Shanto Iyengar (1991) finds a similar tendency among network news outlets covering the related issue of poverty. Studying the effects of how networks impose different types of media framing in their coverage of social issues, Iyengar concludes that experimental subjects (all white, middle-class Americans) attribute causal responsibility more frequently to the individual than to society. This effect is compounded in the case of single, poor black women in particular, the “demographic combination [that] represents the largest segment of poor adults in America,” (p. 68). Among white, middle-class Americans, the causes of poverty are more often attributed to the poor themselves rather than to policy impacts, and this attitude is the product of both cultural values and media framing.

In any case, both policy scholars and historians of welfare policy frequently draw on the work of sociologists concerned with the effects of public policy on social and economic inequality (Gans, 1995; Piven & Cloward, 1971; Reese, 2005; Williams et al., 1995). Sociologists Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward observe that social insurance—which includes entitlement programs such as Medicare and Social Security that individuals pay into through their connection to employment—is administered far differently than public assistance or antipoverty programs. Whereas public notices of eligibility for the former are trumpeted, calls for participation in the latter are typically muted:

The Social Security Administration, for example, works vigorously to inform a broad public of entitlements to old-age payments, advertising on radio and in newspapers, and deploring the fact that some benefits go unclaimed. [...] By

contrast, potential welfare recipients are never sought out; rather, they are fended off. (Piven & Cloward, 1971, p. 151).

The difference in the approach is not accidental; rather, eligibility for social insurance and public assistance reflect social hierarchies related to the individual's standing as a result of their economic contribution.

In addition to the theme of empowerment/disempowerment, a second, related theme complicates the first: the deserving/undeserving. There is broad agreement among policy scholars, sociologists and historians alike that the deserving / undeserving binary has informed policy design and political rhetoric around welfare policy since its inception. For example, sociologist Herbert Gans (1995) traces various labels used in United States for the “undeserving poor,” a phrase he traces to 1830s England, and offers several potential functions served by this group for the rest of society. In brief, the undeserving poor symbolically represent several societal threats, according to Gans, including economic, legal, and moral threats to the status quo; these threats functionally reinforce norms and values for the rest of society. The poor can effectively be blamed for their own poor economic condition as a function of their inability to conform to extant norms and values, making welfare policy easier to attenuate to maintain their marginalization. Likewise, most efforts to adjust welfare policy, whether to expand it (during the 1960s and early 1970s) or contract it (during the 1980s and 1990s), have been accompanied by political rhetoric aimed at redefining or reframing who counts as deserving of public assistance.

As this review demonstrates, substantial research exists exploring the history of welfare policy, including the public's attitudes toward welfare and the social, legal, and media forces that shape them. Additionally, there is much to suggest a plausible basis for why Clinton was able to

campaign for the Presidency in 1992 on a platform that championed welfare reform in the mold of Third Way politics.

At the same time, little has been written about the rhetorical choices Clinton made in justifying his ultimate decision to sign the PRWORA into law. As he emphasizes in his July 31 address, the bill is not perfect, and he vetoed two previous versions, the defects of which he also discusses. His decision to both openly criticize the bill and yet embrace it for its merits is the subject of his address. In the analysis that follows, I examine both Clinton's critique and his rationale justifying his decision to sign the bill. To do this, I will first explain the analytic method I apply to the speech, the cluster-agon method.

III. Methodology

The ‘cluster-agon method’ is the name communication scholars have given to Kenneth Burke’s method of identifying key terms and their associations and oppositions. As explained by Carol Berthold in an essay devoted to demonstrating the method’s application, its utility for critics lies in its capacity to provide “an objective way of determining relationships between a speaker’s main concerns, as well as new perspective to rhetorical critics who desire to discover more about the motives and characters of speakers,” (1976, p. 302). The approach requires both an identification of key terms, along with other terms associated with those key terms occurring together in what are called ‘clusters,’ and the explication of relationships of association and opposition between key terms.

Key terms come in three categories: ‘god,’ ‘devil,’ and ‘good’ terms. ‘God’ terms are sovereign terms: they represent an ideal for the rhetor, something to which other values and means, and all other terms, are necessarily secondary. As Berthold puts it, “It is an ultimate term through which other terms are ranked by degrees of comparison with it. The god term is almost certain to demand sacrifice in a material sense,” (1976, p. 303). ‘Devil’ terms, by contrast, represent the opposition or “counterpart of the ‘god term,’” according to rhetoric scholar Richard Weaver (as cited in Berthold, 1976, p. 303). Such terms are fundamentally incommensurate with the god term. Finally, there are what Weaver calls ‘good’ terms—those that both exist in opposition to the devil term but also “represent a relatively small number of terms which are second only to the god term, which appear to receive a society’s greatest sanction, and to which the very highest respect is paid,” (as cited in Berthold, 1976, p. 303). ‘Good’ terms are of course ‘subordinate’ to the god

term, but they typically function in ways that support or enable the god term and oppose the devil terms. In combination, god, good, and devil terms form a value hierarchy for the rhetor.

In addition to key terms, there are three other classifications for terms: affiliated terms, supporting terms, and satellite terms. First, affiliated terms are those which are synonymous or strongly associated with a key term. These do not necessarily cluster around key terms directly, but their strong association with a key term makes them functional surrogates for those terms. For example, in a discussion concerning school lunches and nutrition, we are necessarily if indirectly invoking ‘children,’ without naming them explicitly. Affiliated terms are significant because these are used frequently in Clinton’s rhetoric and function as third terms that connect good and devil terms.

Second, there are supporting terms. Supporting terms are those which are said to cluster around key terms; god, good, and devil terms may have any number of supporting terms. Clusters are designated by terms that are significant because they are strongly associated with key terms by the rhetor. Such significance may be demonstrated by frequency (i.e., occurring several times together) or by emphasis (e.g., due to the imagery the rhetor supplies in describing the term).

Third, there are also satellite terms, which are crucial supporting terms that possess enhanced significance for a rhetor. The ‘agon’ in the cluster-agon method is the opposition that exists between satellite terms. This opposition represents conflict; because satellites exist in relation to the ‘good’ or ‘devil’ terms, they function as proxies, simulating or standing in for the opposition between ‘good’ and ‘devil’ terms or their affiliates.

However, not all supporting terms are satellites. To be included in an agon, a satellite term must satisfy two criteria: first, they appear in clusters as supporting terms in relation to either a god term or a devil term; second, they are simultaneously placed in opposition to the opposing key

term (whether the god term or devil term) by the rhetor. In other words, to qualify as a satellite, a supporting term must both be opposed to a devil term while clustering around a god term, or vice versa. For this reason, not all supporting terms in a cluster will appear in an agon. To sum up: first, all satellites are supporting terms, but not all supporting terms are satellites. Second, only satellites in opposition can form agons.

Having described the method conceptually, I can now describe how I conducted my analysis using this method. First, I identified key terms: I performed a close reading of the transcript of Clinton's address multiple times, paying attention to emergent themes and any recurring phrases and imagery. Next, I read through the transcript again, circling the terms and phrases that appeared most frequently and any terms that seemed synonymous or closely associated with those recurring terms. I then made lists of all the recurring terms and phrases and looked for thematic associations between them.

Organizing the terms and phrases into potential thematic groups, I then considered the terms of each group with respect to their degree of abstraction. The more concrete a term was, the more likely it was either a supporting term or an affiliated term, rather than a god, good, or devil term. Over multiple iterations, I arrived at four key terms that emerged as frequent thematic abstractions that seemed to condense most of the essential meaning in Clinton's address.

I then considered the speech in terms of conflict orientation in the message: What is most sacred? What is most shameful or harmful? What concepts are mentioned in opposition to these? This inquiry allowed me to identify the oppositions or conflicts at work between terms; based on

this, I identified the god term, its oppositional counterpart (the devil term), and the good terms in this address.

I then reread the transcript in light of these four identified key terms, this time circling other terms and phrases adjacent to these key terms. This process allowed me to identify the key supporting terms and their clusters. I also took note of any terms or phrases that seemed emphasized or described at length by Clinton, considering them as potential key terms on the basis of intensity rather than frequency. In doing so, I discovered a fifth key term on the basis of intensity. I then repeated the process of reviewing the transcript comprehensively, looking for thematic associations, verbal repetitions, imagery, and associated words and phrases that appeared adjacent to this fifth key term to identify its particular clusters.

Next, I reviewed a clean copy of the transcript, this time reading through it with the key terms in mind and circling these in a color-coded process to reduce the potential for error. I circled each key term and its affiliates (i.e., synonyms) using a single color to differentiate it from other key terms and their respective affiliates. I also identified terms appearing adjacent to key and affiliated terms and circled these in black. I then listed all adjacent terminological clusters separately and considered them in relation to their key terms. I subsequently examined the adjacent clusters of the devil term for any direct oppositions to adjacent clusters around good terms and the god term. This step enabled me to identify potential agons and consider their significance for the speech as a whole.

Finally, I reread the speech transcript again in light of potential agons, identifying three in particular; I then evaluated the satellites in these agonistic relationships and their significance to each other in relation to key terms. I then created a simple graphic containing the resulting list of

related satellites, the god term, and the devil term to illustrate their relationships, as shown in Figure 1 below.

I now turn to the analysis of Clinton's speech, where I define the key terms and discuss each at length. I then address the agons that emerge from this analysis, as they shed light on Clinton's construction of key themes in his speech concerning especially welfare, work, family, and children.

IV. Analysis

In his July 31, 1996 remarks, President Clinton signaled his intention to sign the legislation agreed upon in Congress earlier that day, warts and all. Clinton was careful in his address to name and shame those warts, though he ultimately touted the bill as a “historic opportunity” to remake welfare into what it was intended to be: temporary relief for those unable to work. While the bill ended the federal entitlement to government assistance for the poor, it was lauded by Clinton and others as a necessary correction to misaligned incentives in public welfare policy. By instituting a lifetime cap of 60 months, limiting qualification to those seeking but not obtaining work, and setting added limits on the additional amounts available to those who were bearing additional children while receiving welfare assistance, the bill was intended to signal that welfare would remain a lifeline without perversely becoming “a way of life.” Welfare experts debate the consequences of this legislation and its intents even today. One prominent welfare expert, professor of political science and public policy Lawrence Mead, is known as one of the architects of so-called “workfare” embraced by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Mead maintains that welfare reform was a success, crediting it with both increased employment levels among the poor and reductions in welfare rolls, both at similar spending levels overall (2005, pp. 172-173). But other scholars (Chappell, 2010; Gilens, 1999; Wacquant, 2009) view the reforms far more critically, suggesting they effectively eradicated the social safety net, particularly for poor minorities. Though the socioeconomic outcomes of welfare reform are perhaps debatable, Clinton’s own rhetoric concerning the law’s pros and cons is instructive for what it reveals about the expectations and assumptions that Clinton has in mind

while addressing his audience, the American people—including assumptions about both the essence of U.S. citizenship and the character of those seeking or receiving welfare relief.

The analysis proceeds as follows: first, key terms are identified, along with their associated clusters of supporting terms. Second, satellite terms are identified, and their relationships in respective agons are analyzed. Finally, conclusions are drawn from the agon analysis.

Key Terms and Clusters

Five key terms stand out in Clinton's press conference: *child(ren)*, *welfare*, *work*, *family/families*, and *immigrant(s)*. Associated cluster terms can be generally classified into three categories: values/character (or status), agents/institutions, and means/vehicles.

Key Term #1: Children ('god term')

The term *children* functions as the 'god term' in this speech. As such, it represents that thing which demands sacrifice, as Berthold suggests. It is among the most frequently used of all key terms, and all other key terms cluster near it at some point during the speech.

It may seem curious at first that children are the centerpiece of a speech on welfare reform, as the common public image of those on welfare is frequently a single black mother (Iyengar, 1991). However, this is a rhetorically savvy calculation on Clinton's part. First, Clinton deliberately avoids any terminology that would call attention to race; only gendered terms (poor mothers, deadbeat dads) are sometimes used. Second, the terms family and children are used repeatedly, often in conjunction with one another. Unlike welfare mothers, children are vulnerable, pitiable, worthy of protection and nurturing. Children are rightly positioned in families, rather than

as orphaned wards of the state. To invoke children and family repeatedly before a public audience is to put a deserving face on a program long associated with the undeserving.

Although Clinton does not explicitly articulate the well-being of children as a motivating force for the bill's reforms, he does explicitly link most of the virtues of the bill either to child well-being or to American values (namely, these include *work*, *family*, *responsibility*, and *independence*). Moreover, Clinton tacitly links American values to children, by openly condemning "welfare as we know it" for both subverting those values and trapping children into a cycle of intergenerational dependency. Put differently, "welfare as we know it" disproportionately prevents children from either learning or adopting and exercising these American values to a suitable degree. This is significant because the conflicts Clinton alludes to in this speech are largely between these values and their opposites, such as work and welfare, or independence and dependency.

The affiliated terms for children include *child welfare*, *child support*, *child care*, *day care*, *school lunches*, and *nutrition*. Such terms are considered affiliates because they often function as surrogates for the god term children. Moreover, where Clinton uses these terms, they are invoked as necessary policy vehicles for safeguarding the well-being of children, and much of Clinton's description of both the bill's virtues and failings are cast in terms of how the bill's provisions impact children. For example, Clinton lauds the bill's tools for enforcing collection of child support, as well as its substantial subsidies and its health and safety standards for day care facilities.

In addition to praising its virtues, Clinton also specifies two particular shortcomings of the legislation, and he discusses each at some length. In the first, he invokes children while describing

the bill's cuts to nutritional assistance for poor families as well as repeal of the 1992 Excess Shelter Reduction, which provided extra food stamps for low-income families. As he says:

Some parts of this bill still go too far. [...] First, I am concerned that [...] this bill still cuts deeper than it should in nutritional assistance, mostly for working families with children. [...] [T]he congressional majority insisted on another cut we did not agree to, repealing a reform adopted four years ago in Congress [...]. It's called the Excess Shelter Reduction, which helps some of our hardest pressed working families. Finally, we were going to treat working families with children the same way we treat senior citizens who draw food stamps today. [...] This provision is a mistake, and I will work to correct it.

Here, Clinton condemns the bill for including two specific cuts and mentions children specifically in connection with each. Neither policy failure requires that Clinton mention children explicitly—they could easily be described without reference to this term—but it is rhetorically advantageous for him to do so. His equating “working families with children” and “senior citizens who draw food stamps today” signals that the latter receive a benefit the former do not and yet should be entitled to. Preceding the statement with the word “finally” in this context signals a measure of exasperation on Clinton's part, suggesting that this particular reform in benefit eligibility for Excess Shelter Reduction was justified and agreed to previously in Congress but was deferred for too long, now reversed by the provisions of this legislation. Calling it a “mistake” that he will correct, Clinton refrains from characterizing this provision as some acceptable compromise in the usual business of producing legislation. This, too, serves to reinforce Clinton's overall characterization of children; their treatment informs the worthiness of policy decisions in this context. Children are deserving, after all, and they have been shortchanged by this provision.

In addition to the affiliated terms given above, Clinton's imagery emphasizes vulnerability when speaking about children, signaling the term's value. For example, speaking generally of what he calls his “principles for real welfare reform,” Clinton identifies that it should encourage “moving people from welfare to work,” “impose time limits on welfare,” “give people the child

care and health care they need to move from welfare to work without hurting their children,” and “should protect our children.” His emphasis here has a dual focus on both work (with time limits acting as an inducement to returning to work) and on children (with policies intended to ensure their protection and prevent their neglect).

When Clinton mentions children in this speech, he typically does so in a manner that describes how policies will either hurt children or help them. Phrases signaling ‘hurting’ include *hurting their children, tough on children, neglect their children, help for disabled children, and put poor children in orphanages*. ‘Helping’ phrases include *protect(s) our children, better for children, health care for poor children, doing better by children, and (working) families with children*. Each of these phrases represents an outcome of welfare policy, whether those resulting from the “welfare as we know it” derided by Clinton or those made possible by the reform bill he will sign. The bill’s provisions in general support or help children, while the present system—as well as the bill’s failings—represent significant vectors of neglect or harm for children.

This series of contrasts is itself indicative of Clinton’s pre-occupation with children vis-à-vis welfare. The god term *children* is described and alluded to with more significant detail and with greater attention than the term *welfare* ever receives throughout this address. This attention to greater detail on describing children than on describing welfare reveals that, for Clinton, getting welfare policy right is fundamentally about protecting children.

Key Term #2: Welfare (‘devil term’)

Welfare, as Clinton frequently uses it, is the apparent devil term of this speech, occupying the opposite end of the hierarchy as the counterpart to the god term *children*. Around *welfare*, numerous clustered words and phrases appear related to character/values: *dependency, (work and) independence, (work and) responsibility, and (welfare) as we know it*. The agents/institutions

category contains the following clusters: *welfare recipients* (frequently referred to by other labels, often simply *people*, *families*, or *mothers with children* in context); *states* (as well as ‘the state,’ both federal and state government in general, referred to as *we* in context); Congress; and Clinton himself. The means/vehicles clusters include *cycle of dependence*, *welfare reform*, *welfare check*, and *from welfare to work*.

However, there is a significant qualification to be noted here. Clinton uses phrases like *welfare as we know it*, *from welfare to work*, or simply *welfare* as a shorthand for the former terms, especially where it occurs as a modifier (e.g., *welfare check* or *welfare offices*). Nevertheless, welfare as a policy instrument reasonably includes measures that Clinton advocates for, including school lunches, food stamps for seniors, and health care for the poor, for instance. Indeed, the address itself commemorates the reform of the present welfare system into something that will “do better by children.” There are two clear examples of this comparison which Clinton makes explicitly.

First, Clinton describes a reformed welfare system in aspirational language. Early in his address, he says the bill represents “an historic opportunity to make welfare what it was meant to be—a second chance, not a way of life.” The present welfare system has become “a way of life,” and that is what makes it broken. A way of life is something that will communicate values to children; a mother whose way of making a living includes a lifetime of dependency on welfare will transmit that value to her child. That mother will have modeled for her child that life on the dole is acceptable, that economic dependency on welfare is not inferior to economic independence through work.

This represents Clinton’s second comparison, which he makes twice early in the speech as well. Initially he calls the bill “a chance [...] to transform a broken system that traps too many

people in a cycle of dependence to one that emphasizes work and independence [...].” Soon thereafter, he says:

[T]his bill is a real step forward for our country, our values, and for people on welfare. [...] A long time ago I concluded that the current welfare system undermines the basic values of work, responsibility, and family, trapping generation after generation in dependency and hurting the very people it was designed to help.

Basic American values are threatened by the present system. Intergenerational dependency is a trap the present system enables. As Clinton reminds his audience in the middle of his speech, this legislative reform undoes the cycle of dependency that traps welfare recipients, “exiling them from the world of work that gives structure, meaning, and dignity to most of our lives.” Work is an American value that makes our very lives worthy.

At the same time that Clinton condemns the current welfare system, he lauds other elements of government assistance (incidentally, often in connection with *children*), though he tends not to use the word *welfare* as a label for these elements. In the middle of his address, Clinton praises the bill, and by extension himself, for its improvements over the previous versions of the legislation that he vetoed:

[T]his new bill is better for children [...]. It keeps the national nutritional safety net intact by eliminating the food stamp cap [...]. It allows states to use federal money to provide vouchers for children whose parents can’t find work after the time limits expire. And it preserves the national guarantee of health care for poor children, the disabled, pregnant women, the elderly, and people on welfare.

As described, these elements are arguably “welfare” as the term is understood in the common vernacular: a “safety net” of nutrition standards, vouchers that provide a lifeline for those who are doing their part to become employed but struggling to do so, and health care for the most vulnerable in society. Clinton does not call these elements “welfare,” yet these are precisely the

emergency benefits and government services for the severely disadvantaged that the American public associates with aid to the poor.

To be precise, then, it is actually *welfare as we know it* that is the absolute devil term in Clinton's rhetoric. It represents a serious policy failure because it enables irresponsibility, dependency, and ultimately the intergenerational poverty that results from the failure to enculturate children with American values of work and family, the values that "give dignity and meaning to most of our lives." Thus, *welfare* in and of itself is not the devil term; rather, *welfare as we know it* is.

Key Term #3: Work ('good term')

The term *work* itself along with its associated synonyms (*wage, job, hire*) represents a good term, rather than the god term. Throughout this speech, 'work' represents the sole, legitimate means for people supporting themselves, their children and their families in the long-term; government assistance or welfare—whether it be school lunch programs or health care for poor children—is only legitimate to the extent that it is temporary.

While such programs are necessary to protect children from extreme poverty, they are also to be used as sparingly as possible. Clinton emphasizes this early in his address, calling the reform bill "an historic opportunity to make welfare what it was meant to be—a second chance, not a way of life." Work and welfare are thus juxtaposed into an agon pattern, which is explored later in this section.

Key Term #4: Family ('good term')

The term *family* or *families* appears less frequently throughout the speech than *child(ren)*, *work*, or *welfare*. Even so, the term has clear significance both because of how frequently it appears

to cluster with other key terms and the imagery Clinton employs when using it. For example, early in the speech, Clinton contrasts welfare with families directly:

[This legislation] gives us a better chance to give those on welfare what we want for all families in America, the opportunity to succeed at home and at work. [...] I've spent time in welfare offices, I have talked to mothers on welfare who desperately want the chance to work and support their families independently. A long time ago I concluded that the current welfare system undermines the basic values of work, responsibility, and family, trapping generation after generation in dependency [...].

As in this passage, Clinton appears to use *families* and *children* almost synonymously; at other times, the two terms are used separately but cluster together, creating a strong association between them for the audience: "Finally, we were going to treat working families with children the same way we treat senior citizens who draw food stamps today. Now, blocking this change [...] will make it harder for some of our hardest pressed working families with children." Where the term *families* appears, it is typically accompanied either with the modifier *working* directly or an affiliated term for *work* (e.g., jobs, wage, or hire).

Key Term #5: Immigrant ('good term')

The final key term is *immigrant*; though it appears much less frequently than the other four key terms, it also holds a significant relationship with each of them. First, in every occurrence but one, where the term *immigrant* appears, the terms *work*, *families*, and/or *children* cluster around *immigrant*. For instance, the first time Clinton uses the term *immigrant*, he is decrying what he feels is the other major flaw of the bill:

Second, I am deeply concerned that the congressional leadership insisted on [...] a provision that will hurt legal *immigrants* in America, people who *work* hard for their *families*, pay taxes, serve in our military. This provision has nothing to do with

welfare reform. It is simply a budget-saving measure, and *it is not right* [emphasis added].

Furthermore, the remaining key term, *welfare*, forms a secondary agon with *immigrant* in this address, partly because they do not occur together except where Clinton is explicitly negating a relationship between the two. The imagery of people on welfare is conspicuously decoupled from the term *immigrant*, even as Clinton advocates for immigrants' status as worthy of government aid. In describing the effects the reform bill will have on legal immigrants and their eligibility for federal assistance, Clinton avoids the term *welfare*. Even so, he insists that immigrants are deserving of receiving "help" or "assistance" when experiencing circumstances beyond their control:

These immigrant families with children who fall on hard times through no fault of their own—for example because they face the same risks the rest of us do from accidents, from criminal assaults, from serious illnesses—they should be eligible for medical and other help when they need it.

This characterization is absent from descriptions of people on welfare, who are instead described as people who "desperately want the chance to work and support their families independently," but who nevertheless remain trap[ped] ... in a cycle of dependence." Both families with children on welfare and immigrant families with children are deserving of at least temporary government aid, because they are assumed to be either working or willing to work. The key factor uniting them is the aspiration toward working.

Agons

Agons represent oppositional relationships between good and devil terms, or between good term satellites and devil term satellites. Thus, agons represent both the conflicts underlying a

discourse and the animating rationale for its existence. Agons can be represented graphically, as in the figure below, with both god/good and devil terms situated in opposition to one another.

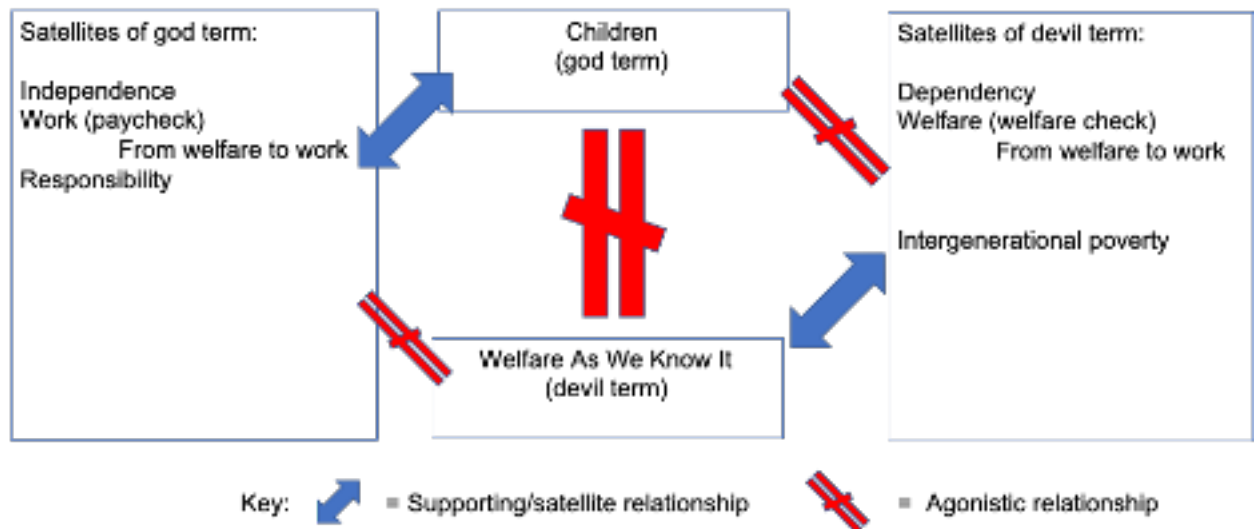


Figure 1: God and Devil terms, with satellite terms supporting each

The Work – Welfare Agon

This agon is fundamental to not only Clinton’s address, but to the audience’s shared understanding of the problem identified in the speech, justifying the need for legislative reform. As discussed previously, the work/welfare binary is the fundamental tension that animates welfare reform in public debates. To what extent are welfare recipients genuinely in need? How do we measure and define what counts as sufficient effort to obtain employment, let alone what degree of employment is adequate as a “cut off” in determining welfare recipients’ eligibility?

This agon pattern is established at the beginning of the address: Clinton states the reform bill’s aim is “to transform a broken [welfare] system that traps too many people in a cycle of dependence to one that emphasizes work and independence; to give people on welfare a chance to draw a paycheck, not a welfare check.” Already, welfare and work are diametrically opposed; the

former signals dependence, the latter independence. This division is perhaps most saliently summarized in the precise phrase *from welfare to work*, repeated throughout the speech.

In an agon pattern, it is not only the good term and the devil term that are opposed, but their associated ‘satellite’ terms. In this address, the satellites of *work* include *responsibility*, *reward*, *opportunity*, and *independence*, all of which are in opposition to *welfare* satellites *dependence*, *dependency*, and the repeated phrase *welfare as we know it*.

The tension between welfare and work, between the expectations of job seekers and job creators, is evident in several key passages. These passages justify Clinton’s decision to sign the reform bill and clarify his expectations for how the bill will succeed in enacting authentic reform. For example, he cites the improvements the bill contains over the previous reform bills he vetoed; where the vetoed bills were “soft on work and tough on children,” Clinton calls the final version “strong on work,” providing childcare subsidies and setting “health and safety standards for day care.” He summarizes the significance of these provisions both simply and forcefully: “You cannot ask somebody on welfare to go to work if they’re going to neglect their children in doing it.” Thus, an agon is proposed between *work* (good) and *welfare* (devil), as the relative (in)accessibility of each to those on welfare with children signifies a direct threat to children (god): the threat of interminable dependency.

The Public – Private Agon

Clinton thus frames the essential problem as the welfare system itself: everyone agrees it fails to serve everyone it should and fails to work efficiently to move people off of welfare over time. Rather, that system “undermines the basic values of work, responsibility, and family, trapping generation after generation in dependency and hurting the very people it was designed to help.” This implies that the status quo policy, maintained by the federal government, is itself to

blame. This explains why Clinton later emphasizes the role of states and employers in reshaping welfare policy outcomes. Reforming the system requires the commitment of all agents enmeshed in the system utilizing the available means to uphold the values shared by everyone. Crucially, welfare is the vehicle that not only traps families in the present, but also traps children in an intergenerational cycle of dependency. Clinton thus sets forth a cause-effect relationship in which welfare threatens children.

Clinton calls on state governments and employers jointly to create work—using associated terms *hire*, *jobs*, and *wages*—while disbursing sorely needed child care funding as the foundational means for effecting reform.

This bill must also not let anyone off the hook. The states asked for this responsibility, now they have to shoulder it and not run away from it. [...] The business community must provide greater private sector jobs that people on welfare need to build good lives and strong families. I challenge every state [...] to take the money that used to be available for welfare checks and offer it to the private sector as wage subsidies to begin to hire these people [...]. All of us have to rise to this challenge and see that – this reform not as a chance to demonize or demean anyone, but instead as an opportunity to bring everyone fully into the mainstream of American life [...].

Given these foundations and the lifetime caps established by the bill, he calls on welfare recipients to accept responsibility and pursue economic opportunity by moving off welfare and into work. He calls on Congress to re-examine the portions of the bill he decries as mere budget-saving measures that hurt legal immigrants, to work in a bipartisan fashion to “fix” what’s wrong with this bill that he will nevertheless sign into law. The agonistic relationship between welfare and work can only be resolved by action from the institutions responsible for both setting the terms of

welfare eligibility and for creating working opportunities: states, employers, Congress, and Clinton himself.

The Immigrant – Citizen Agon

Essentially, Clinton’s rhetoric both assumes and emphasizes willingness to work as the fundamental character trait that determines whether a person is deserving of ‘assistance,’ welfare or otherwise. People on welfare are presumed to be *not* working, though he characterizes them as eager to do so, whereas immigrants are presumed to be working. Clinton’s description of the provision of the bill that limits lawful immigrants’ federal aid eligibility is explicit: this provision, he says, is one of two “non-welfare reform provisions” that “has nothing to do with welfare reform. It is simply a budget-saving measure, and it is not right.” Clinton precedes this pronouncement with a characterization of immigrants as law-abiding, tax-paying, serving in the military, and working—all intended to establish their worthiness for receiving assistance: “[...] I am deeply disappointed that the congressional leadership insisted on attaching [...] a provision that will hurt legal immigrants in America, people who work hard for their families, pay taxes, serve in our military.” Only moments later, he echoes this characterization again, emphasizing the shared qualities of both legal immigrants and natural born citizens in terms of assuming civic responsibilities (paying taxes and serving in the military), working, and supporting families and children:

These immigrant families with children who fall on hard times through no fault of their own – for example because they face the same risks the rest of us do from accidents, from criminal assaults, from serious illnesses – they should be eligible for medical and other help when they need it. [...] It is just wrong to say to people, we’ll let you work here, you’re helping our country, you’ll pay taxes, you serve in our military, you may get killed defending America – but if somebody mugs you

[...] or you get cancer or you get hit by a car or the same thing happens to your children, we're not going to give you assistance any more.

That Clinton never uses the term *welfare* as a descriptor when discussing immigrants, pivoting instead to synonyms *help* and *assistance*, suggests a deliberate effort by Clinton to avoid associating the types of aid immigrants are or should be entitled to in Clinton's view with the taint of *welfare*. In a terminological hierarchy, then, *immigrant* is superordinate to *welfare*, due to Clinton's deliberate associations of the term with *families*, *working*, and *(immigrant) children*. In fact, by highlighting the vulnerability of legal immigrants to enduring hardships "through no fault of their own," Clinton effectively positions (working) legal immigrants as equal, if not superior to, (nonworking) citizens presently drawing welfare.

Clinton caps his discussion of this non-welfare provision by stating his intent to exercise his executive power toward "directing the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] to continue to work to remove the bureaucratic roadblocks to citizenship to all eligible, legal immigrants," demonstrating his willingness to use his own agency to effect just outcomes on behalf of "people who are generally in need through no fault of their own." In effect, neither the welfare recipient nor the immigrant fully "share in the prosperity and the promise that most of our people are enjoying today," as Clinton says. Rather, a shared burden in reforming the system exists, even though this burden does not fall equally on everyone's shoulders.

Summary

In light of the analysis above, it is clear that *children* represent the apex of Clinton's rhetoric, the god term in the cluster-agon analysis. All terms are subordinate to *children*, and all related concerns likewise. Given this, *work* exists in the service of the proper raising of *children* in a *family*. Deadbeat parents, welfare as we know it, and other instances of failing children in society represent a reprehensible dereliction of duty on the part of citizens and institutions. The

proper rearing of children is the full measure of American citizenship; saving children from the future of intergenerational poverty is necessarily the utmost calling of welfare policy. Clinton also hints at a cause-effect relationship between working and producing preferred outcomes for children (as in child support, working families supporting their children, and the equation of parents working without adequate day care for their children as a form of child neglect).

Whatever threatens, neglects, or fails to live up to “doing better by our children” represents an opposition to children. Working is thus nominally a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of protecting children; other features, such as adequate child care and nutritional assistance, may be needed for children to thrive. Put differently, children are the alpha and omega in this address. All terms, means, and ends exist in service to them. Ultimately, children must never be subject to a lifetime of welfare; rather, they are to be reared in a home that prizes work and family as its essential values.

To a first degree, *welfare as we know it* represents failure in this regard: a failure to rise to the occasion of accepting and reveling in work as a duty of citizenship. Citizens rightly work; that is their function. This is why Clinton calls out for recognition the legal immigrants who work and support their families. Children are the apex of reproducing society. All policy, all parental action, is in service to children. Work, family, and even immigrants are subordinate to the function of properly raising children. Immigrants who work to support their families are presumed to be supporting children. By this measure, they are superior to natural born citizens who shirk the duty to raise their children by seeking and fulfilling their employment obligations.

Given this, welfare *tout court* is not the enemy; “welfare as we know it” is. The latter is the result of decades of failed federal policy, while the former is the understandable, necessary, temporary function of government to protect children while their parents seek and obtain work,

fulfilling their obligation as citizens. Clinton positions *children* against *welfare as we know it*; the latter is a policy reality that potentially “traps” children in intergenerational poverty. The only exit from such a trap is work and the policy reforms that enable and incentivize work.

To protect and nurture children, work is an essential component. Children, by definition, imply parents and thus family. The idealized American citizen is a person with a family, i.e., children, who is working and thus reconstituting the idealized nuclear family. That person generally does not require welfare, but when they do, it will be temporary, and it will be contingent on that person demonstrating sufficient effort to obtain sufficient work to support their family, their children. This fundamental message is the subtext of Clinton’s address.

The enemy of this idealization of the citizen worker is *welfare as we know it*. Clinton posits the fundamental problem as not simply welfare, but specifically *welfare as we know it*. Welfare, broadly speaking, still has an essential place in American society. Its proper function is to serve as a temporary benefit for persons who are unable to work, yet actively looking for work. This latter detail is crucial, as it becomes a criterion for sanctioning welfare recipients or stripping them of welfare eligibility altogether, depending on their circumstances. In other words, welfare is for would-be workers, full stop. Anyone who demonstrates insufficient effort at obtaining work while drawing a welfare check is suspect.

By contrast, *welfare as we know it* represents a failed policy: it does harm to children and to their parents, in part because it incentivizes not working, but also (and most egregiously) signals to parents that they do not need to work to properly raise their children. The final result of such a system is that children will be raised in poverty and ultimately grow into adults living in poverty, giving birth to a second generation of children in poverty, who will themselves grow up in poverty,

and so on. This is anathema to American values that Clinton alludes to earlier in his speech, as work is the thing that gives dignity and meaning to our lives.

At the same time, legal immigrants are presumed to be working, and potentially maintaining or beginning new families. The key characteristic is that they are working. By virtue of this, they are entitled to ‘help’ or ‘assistance’ when they encounter hardships ‘through no fault of their own.’ Clinton thus positions the legal immigrant in relation to the native born in a hierarchical manner, where provided that the former is working and the latter is not, the former better fits the category of deserving than the latter. Read this way, Clinton is tacitly arguing that immigrants are proto-citizens.

It is a commonplace to say that America is a land of immigrants who came in search of opportunity (where “opportunity” is synonymous with work) and built this country. Clinton’s framing of citizenship posits a duty to work, which in turn enables the positioning of legal immigrants as superior, or “more American,” than native born persons who are not working and will not work.

In the next section, I consider conclusions from this analysis as well as limitations of the cluster-agon method and of the press conference as a unit of analysis. I also suggest future directions for research that may be of interest to scholars in the social sciences studying the issues raised by Clinton’s address, especially those scholars considering research in multi- and interdisciplinary settings.

V. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have demonstrated the potential for applying cluster-agon analysis to a presidential press conference in order to elucidate a more expansive understanding of presidential motives and messaging. I have examined Clinton's speech announcing his intention to sign the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 with an interest in learning how he justified signing the Act into law. The rich literature on the history of welfare policy preceding the law, as well as the debated effects of the law itself, justify such an examination.

Clinton's remarks in his July 31, 1996 press conference and in his signing statement speech at the August 22, 1996 signing ceremony express similar aspirations and justifications for welfare reform. Both addresses mention his objections to the legislation's failings. However, the press conference, unlike the signing statement, emphasizes Clinton's critique of the bill's withholding federal assistance for legal immigrants. Clinton casts this assistance as something other than "welfare," and he renders his objection by characterizing legal immigrants as hardworking, family-oriented, and law-abiding taxpayers made unduly vulnerable as a result of the bill's provisions. In short, legal immigrants are characterized as proto-citizens, easily deserving of federal assistance. And in an inverse image of the working legal immigrant, the nonworking poor caught up in the cycle of dependency on welfare are characterized as regressing to a state of proto-citizenship—that is, their fully valid citizenship is in a sense rendered suspect by their failure to embrace work as a duty of the ideal citizen. These two groups are at best in parity with one another, but in light of Clinton's rhetoric in this speech, I propose it is not too much to say that

working legal immigrants are plausibly set forth as models for the citizen nonworking poor to look up to.

This conclusion is consistent with work by other scholars (Foster, 2017; Fujiwara, 2006) who have examined the similarities within political conservatives' rhetoric between the utilization of the *welfare queen* metaphor and the *anchor baby* metaphor. Both the *welfare queen* and *anchor baby* metaphors are “two different but functionally similar phrases [that] have been used by U.S. lawmakers [...] in marginalizing women and families of color” (Foster, 2017, p. 50). Like the threat posed by the welfare queen in becoming a drain on the taxpayer undeservingly, the anchor baby was invoked as a similar threat. The child born of so-called illegal immigrants would serve as a basis for keeping their parents in the United States, where they would become a burden on the welfare state. These arguments were made in apparent good faith, despite the fact that Clinton's welfare reforms, still in place today, prohibit unauthorized immigrants from obtaining any welfare benefits and are only entitled to emergency healthcare (Fujiwara, 2006). Some lawmakers backed so-called immigration reform by questioning the basis for (and even suggesting legislative proposals for ending) birthright citizenship—*after* the anchor baby metaphor became common in public discourse.

Both the welfare queen and anchor baby metaphors are used to evoke suspicion or outright condemnation of economically precarious minority women: threatening in their sexuality and fertility as well as presumed to be probable cheats, or at least net drains on public services such as health care, education, or public assistance services. Both groups of women represent the undeserving who fail to live up to basic obligations of American civil society. In like fashion, both represent a moral failing that undermines their entitlement to citizenship or a path to citizenship. As the welfare queen is itself a popular proxy for welfare recipients generally, the public attitude

toward both is arguably similar. Where the welfare queen and anchor baby metaphors differ is in their specific normative violations: the former violates the duty to work, while the latter violates the duty to “play by the rules,” seeking citizenship through established legal channels.

The welfare queen (a stand-in for welfare generally) and the anchor baby (a proxy for illegal immigrants generally) are invoked in similar ways to describe threatening populations. In Clinton’s address, he does something similar with a different purpose: he invokes both legal immigrants and welfare recipients together, but in a positive manner. He conjures a revision of what the welfare recipient is: a person who wants to work, wants to provide for their children while trapped by a broken system. Clinton posits a re-envisioning of the welfare recipient as a person who wants to work, wants to succeed, and wants to share in the benefits of work, family, and independence. This is the parallel of what Clinton praises openly about legal immigrants with children. They are hardworking, taxpaying, and supporting their families. They are proto-citizens to which our welfare population can aspire to emulate.

Clinton campaigned in 1992 on a promise to “end welfare as we know it.” In announcing his intention to deliver on that promise at the July 31 press conference, he needed to acknowledge the public’s understanding of what welfare is while sharing his vision of what it would become, how it would work, and why it was justified. To do this, he conjured up an image of the welfare recipient as hungry for work, desperate to join in the success that most Americans enjoy. He celebrated the forthcoming incentives and policy latitude available to states in shaping policy outcomes, and he challenged states and private industry to embrace the work-hungry welfare population. He further proclaimed that the burden to truly transform welfare was a shared one, including states as well as those on welfare, and enjoined against demonization in the wake of

policy reform. Finally, he justified all of these changes as necessary to end the plight of poor children.

This is why *children* functions as Clinton's god term in the speech. Children are effectively the lynchpin that ties together all of his policy preferences, represented by what is laudable about the bill. The preservation of food stamps and other nutritional assistance programming, continued health care assistance for poor children, cash assistance extensions beyond lifetime caps, and safety standards for day care—all of these are necessary safeguards to protect and nurture poor children. Most of the bill's other key aspects mentioned by Clinton appear superficially punitive in nature: lifetime caps, work requirements, and additional penalties for so-called deadbeat fathers. But these are provisions targeted at adults, the necessary incentives to force them to move from welfare to work. And it is, as Lawrence Mead has called it, the "new paternalism," a set of policy levers to induce people to be on their best behavior. These policies are intended to enable the poor to transform themselves: to "succeed at work and at home", to break the intergenerational cycle of dependency, to build strong families, and to embrace American values of work, family, and independence.

Everything in this speech is constructed around the essential normative belief that the maintenance of the nuclear family is necessary for the protection and nurturing of children, and this is only made possible through work. It is the essential schema that ties together all of the key terms in his address. It explains why *welfare* is a necessary if negatively charged term, yet ultimately not his devil term. That Clinton goes to great lengths to justify policies and programs that superficially look like welfare, while avoiding the term *welfare*, is grounded in the fact that

he needs the public's support for these policy features. The public's kneejerk, negative reaction to the word is obviously known to Clinton, and this explains why he is so careful in his language.

These conclusions are also consistent with the findings of other communication scholars (Carcasson, 2006; Gring-Pemble, 2003) who have examined the rhetorical construction of Clinton's welfare reform. Gring-Pemble considers the rhetorical construction of the nuclear family in its impact on legislative debate in Congress surrounding the bill itself, whereas Carcasson considers Clinton's motivations and concludes that his August 22 signing statement likely sought to transform the public's attitudes toward welfare and its beneficiaries, away from condemnation and toward cooperation. Building on their work, I have shown that Clinton's rhetorical asides concerning the bill's failings—made during the relatively less formal press conference nearly a month earlier—suggest something more. In that July 31 press conference, Clinton expands on his criticism of the bill's failings, dwelling in particular on working immigrant families with children, suggesting that Clinton is embracing a very particular vision of citizenship that implies a duty to work.

Historian Michael B. Katz (2001) and public policy researcher Lawrence Mead (2005) both affirm that work is functionally an embedded, cultural expectation of American citizenship. The essential ideals of family and work are represented in the reproduction of the nuclear family, with at least one breadwinner. This ideal enables Clinton to suggest further that working legal immigrants with children are (very nearly) as American as anyone possessing birthright citizenship. It is why he dwells on their moral entitlement to government assistance, why he vows to work to correct this particular feature of the bill, and why he insists he will direct the Immigration and Naturalization Service to “cut red tape” to expedite legal immigrants' pathways

to citizenship. This otherwise incongruent aside is made far more coherent when viewed as contrasting legal immigrants as deserving workers with the undeserving, nonworking poor.

Limitations

In this thesis, I have relied upon the cluster-agon method and a specific presidential press conference to conduct my analysis. It must be said the cluster-agon method presumes a conflict, or drama, at the heart of an artifact, be it textual, oral, or visual. While most artifacts that may be of interest to scholars studying presidential communication may be said to contain some theme or concept that is praised or blamed, some policy pursued or issue addressed, not all artifacts of interest necessarily contain these elements. Furthermore, even in a text that clearly praises or celebrates some achievement, there may be no clear opposition exhibited—at best, there may only be a tacit opposition. Imagine, for instance, if Clinton’s press conference had said nothing about his reservations concerning the bill, nothing about failings of previous welfare policy, and nothing about those who would remain in need of help as a result of the bill’s changes. Analyzing such texts may be of interest to scholars and yet the cluster-agon method would likely reveal little about them.

I have also relied upon a specific press conference and assumed it to be significant for what it reveals about Clinton’s motivations and goals for welfare policy. Indeed, I have advocated that the content of press conferences, not just their timing or frequency, have value for scholars interested in presidential communication. This view is not necessarily a shared one, and there are good reasons to look askew at press conferences as a source of insight. Coe and Neumann have argued that press conferences lack message control, allowing a President to make gaffs or “go off message” in varied ways: “In an environment without message control, (e.g., a press conference) a president asked about national security might ramble or stumble over his words and inadvertently

say [the word] ‘threat’ several times. The meaning of such a pattern would be difficult to interpret,” (2011, p. 734). For this reason, they chose in their study of presidential addresses to limit their data to what they determined to be “major addresses” only. This comes with its own difficulties of classification, as they admit. Yet there is some truth to the claim that “where message control is assured, scholars can have reasonable confidence that [...] a speech that uses threat twice is trying to convey a slightly more urgent security need than is a speech that uses threat only once,” (Coe and Neumann, 2011, p. 734). Scholars must decide for themselves whether a press conference represents an artifact issued by an unreliable communicator or one that reveals a speaker’s motives that might otherwise remain hidden from public view, as I have in this thesis.

Suggestions for Further Research

Press conferences as a genre have long been an object of attention for researchers working in journalism, mass communication, and political science. This paper suggests that presidential press conferences represent a potentially rich genre for rhetoric scholars to consider, as well. They are useful as sources for understanding presidential motivations underlying legislative appeals and similar policy changes. In addition, they are a rich resource for examining how presidents attempt to shape public opinion. Much like State of the Union addresses which commonly receive attention from rhetoricians, press conferences can be usefully analyzed and compared with later presidential addresses and actions. Scholars interested in communication rhetoric, as well as historians, sociologists, and legal scholars in particular, may also find press conferences useful artifacts for inquiry.

While press conferences in isolation may be viewed skeptically as sources of reliable insight into presidential motives and actions, particularly in the absence of resulting policy change, it is of course possible to examine them in tandem with other addresses, such as signing ceremonies

or State of the Union addresses. Even when considered alone, when they are clearly policy endorsements of forthcoming legislation and analyzed in the context of a clear intent to shift longstanding policy, their examination may yield useful insights for the policy scholar, the historian, or the rhetorician.

Further, my research suggests that scholars interested in exploring public policy issues related to labor, citizenship, and immigration may wish to consider how these issues are interrelated or similarly constructed by public figures over time. In particular, researchers may find the rhetorical framing of these issues both as a result of media framing effects and by deliberative arguments made by public figures (including governors, state legislators, and both Congressmen and the President) to be of special interest.

Finally, I suggest that scholars working in varied disciplines, particularly among the social sciences, may gain an enhanced understanding of their own subjects when they extend themselves to consider both the different objects of analysis and the research generated by those outside their own field. Of course, such multi- or interdisciplinary work will at times make researchers feel awkward, even profoundly uncertain, as they leave the comfort of their disciplinary “silos.” Nevertheless, the production of shared understandings of social phenomena across disciplinary borders, along with shared tools, methods, and objects of analysis, may itself represent a future breakthrough in any one discipline, or perhaps the origin of some offshoot or hybrid, evolving into a new discipline altogether, much like biophysics or chemical engineering in the sciences—fields at the leading edge of knowledge production. Moreover, much like the student of a foreign language learns a great deal about their own language from the diligent effort of studying the new

and unfamiliar, the work of a scholar extending themselves outside their areas of expertise can both reveal new insights and deepen their existing understanding.

Final Summary

Presidential rhetoric shapes the public's understanding of the state of their country, of the salient issues on the President's agenda, and of the President's intentions and vision for the country. A State of the Union address or a proclamation are examples of such rhetoric. But only the presidential press conference can truly be said to reveal the President's state of mind at the time that they are speaking and the feelings they have on the issues that they address. A President's personal feelings may be just as significant as their policy preferences. The press conference is a unique speaking situation for Presidents in that they can anticipate a potentially adversarial response, in full view of the public, as they are subject to immediate questioning and pushback from the White House Press Corps.

Experts may disagree on whether Clinton actually transformed welfare policy for the better. That Clinton rationalized that transformation on the basis that it was best for the long term well-being of children is itself debated: was it a cynical, disingenuous ploy, calculated to insulate the policy from criticism, or was it an authentic concern with intergenerational inequality? Whether or not the policies themselves are better for the poor, I maintain that Clinton made a good-faith attempt to transform how the public imagined welfare and its beneficiaries: as aspiring citizens, down on their luck, in need of a second chance in the Land of Opportunity.

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