

Religious Discourse in American Political Speeches: The Jeremiad in Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Lyndon Johnson's We Shall Overcome Address

Dr.Lahlouh Amel*
Ali Lounici University- Blida (Algeria)
a.lahlouh@univ-blida2.dz

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Abstract:

This study aims at evaluating the impact of religious discourse in American political speeches. It contributes to the scholarship on American political and religious history by deriving from key theoretical works of Domke and Koe's *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America* developing an argument about the manner in which religious discourse might influence presidential rhetoric. Through examining speeches of Abraham Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson to illuminate the importance of the Jeremiad as a religious discourse, this article suggests that the intentional use of God in presidential rhetoric remains significant even today especially during times of crisis to invoke words of spiritual strength and refuge in God as encouragement to the nation.

Keywords:

Religious discourse, American jeremiad, Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*, Lyndon Johnson's *We Shall Overcome Address*

Introduction :

An Analysis of most political speeches over time suggests that most Americans presidents embrace religious rhetoric in their speeches. Every time a US president makes a speech, it ends with "God Bless America"! Many do indeed view their country as both blessed by God and held responsible to a divine authority.

The study of religious discourse in political speeches has been inspired by a number of factors: the rhetorical responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the increasingly prominent role of religious rhetoric in the political campaigns, and the manifestly religious discourse of President George W. Bush have all conspired to reignite scholarly interest in the topic.

Indeed in their text "Agendas, Rhetoric, and Social Change: State of the Union Addresses from Eisenhower to Clinton," Donna Hoffman and Alison Howard say that their analysis revealed "a striking increase in religious references in the last two decades of our time series, beginning with Reagan." ¹ This is important because it shows how the rhetorical execution of civil religion changes with each incoming president. Each president sets the tone and precedent for his successor to some degree.

In this study, the researcher attempts to provide answers to the following research questions:

*The corresponding author: Lahlouh Amel

- 1- Why do American presidents use religious discourse in their speeches?
- 2- To what extent was the jeremiad a manipulative strategy designed to accomplish rhetorical and political objectives during crisis times of the American Civil War and the Afro-Americans Civil Rights?

As for the research instrument used in this study, the researcher relied on the speeches of Abraham Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson . looking at how president Abraham Lincoln's *The Gettysburg Address* reflects the Civil War's meaning and its connection with God's purposes provided an eloquent contrast to the Puritan "model" of the jeremiad .

Lyndon Johnson's *We Shall Overcome Address* also used the jeremiad frames namely the lamentation of the present, the evocation of the past and the calling for renewal. By using these frames in combinations with the context of the addresses- Kennedy's assassination and civil rights movement- Johnson presents American perspective and hopes for their situation and future.

Methodologically, the researcher used Domke and Koe's critical book *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America* to maintain that references to God have intentional purposes within Presidential public address.² Yet in the article, the researcher thoroughly refer to discourse and rhetoric. As the terms 'discourse' and 'rhetoric' are often fairly loosely used, it is of a necessity to start by quickly clarifying some relevant theoretical points underpinning their meaning

1- Discourse and Rhetoric

The term discourse was given a more particular and precise meaning in the works of Michel Foucault who argued that our communication (spoken, written, visual) is mediated through the knowledge and power – or discourse -- of various social institutions (such as family, political systems, markets, religion) and individual capacity and ability to act.³ Thus how we communicate and interpret events is shaped by the historical, political, economic 'discourse' we are living in at the time. In turn, this also mediates and limits our own understanding of the world and the 'truth' and 'knowledge' we seek.

Despite the complex nature of discourse as a concept, most approaches to the study of discourse share a set of common theoretical commitments and characteristics. *Firstly*: the notion that language and the use of language are not viewed as neutral instruments of communication. Language is formed in a social context, and social phenomena such as identities and relations are constructed by language. *Second*: the notion that one often seeks to reconstruct social identities through discourse analysis. Identities are flexible, and the formation of identities is done through and inside the discourse. Identities are only possible in placing them in opposition to something else, something they are not. *Third*: the analysis of discourse is often concerned with power relations. Discourses define what can be said, and by who, and can be viewed as a struggle for definitional power . Discourses thus define who is authorized to speak and to act with legitimacy: enabling certain individuals and groups while restricting others.⁴

The term "rhetoric" is also an important tool for the construction of discourse in political speeches. Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion". Proficiency in rhetoric is based on the extent to which one can organize the perceptions of the real world and experiences of those being persuaded, so that what is communicated appears to be self-evident and natural .

However, in the 20th century, the evolution of rhetorical studies has led to the concept of "new rhetoric" in contrast to the "old" one conceived in classical sense. This new rhetoric is an interdisciplinary field of study, and heavily based on the works of Kenneth Burke (*A Rhetoric of Motives*, 1950) and Chaïm Perelman (*Traité de l'argumentation – la nouvelle rhétorique* 1958) .The new rhetoric can be conceived even wider: as a type of instrumental discourse which responds to, reinforces, or alters the understandings of an audience or a social community.⁵ Even Aristotle had origins of "new rhetoric" in his

thinking, although for him it was more of “dialectic”, a theory concerning the logic of argumentation.⁶

Coe and Domke further the critical look at presidential discourse by specifically examining U.S. presidential religious language and patterns. In their book *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America*, the authors, similar to Toolin, reference Bellah as a seminal scholar in the genre of religion and politics who discussed the extent to which Religion related sociologically with individuals by appealing to their perception of the world. The specific trend Coe and Domke attend to is the rise of Christian conservatives into the political domain as powerful voters moving from a marginal to an ascendant role. Positing Reagan as the clear spearhead of the trend toward new religious patterns in public address, Coe and Domke further hypothesize that George W. Bush elevated the trend again in 2005.⁷

Methodologically, Coe and Domke content analyzed the State of the Union and Inaugural addresses of Franklin Roosevelt through George W. Bush. The unit of analysis was the single word and coding involved seeking references to God, freedom/liberty, and the linking of God to freedom and liberty. The results revealed two noteworthy trends; first, “references to a higher power increased beginning with the Reagan presidency” and second, “the usage of freedom and liberty shows two distinct peak periods...first, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy...and the second, during the presidencies of Reagan and Bush”. As a concluding statement, Coe and Domke assert:

“the contemporary ascendancy of religious conservatives in the United States political sphere all but guarantees that political leaders will make it a point to speak their language”.⁸

Domke and Coe’s book, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America*, maintains that references to God have intentional purposes within Presidential public address. Marking Reagan as the onset of religious and political connection in United States presidential rhetoric, Domke and Coe first acknowledge that modern political communication is “carefully scripted and rehearsed, with meticulous management of every detail”.⁹

Research on American presidential discourse in public messages about foreign or domestic crises has shown that presidents often shift the public’s attention to religion and typically portray the United States as an exceptional nation by referring to the biblical story of the Jeremiad. The significance of the election sermons as Jeremiad that stresses the decline of a community.

2- The American Jeremiad

The American jeremiad gives shape and contour to the cultural myth and identity of America and, consistent with its early Puritan roots, establishes American values and ideals that are the basis of traditional and contemporary American life and community. Ritter and Harlow defined that originally “the jeremiad was a religious sermon in which the preacher took the role of a scolding prophet like Jeremiah, warning the people that their sins violated their covenant with God.”¹⁰ The jeremiad was initially popular with Puritan preachers in colonial New England, and Sacvan Bercovitch argues that over time the jeremiad became an important expression of American identity. Eventually the jeremiad was transformed from an epideictic religious role to a legislative one, entering the nation’s political discourse as a meaningful form.¹¹

Infact the roots of American exceptionalism begin with the American jeremiad.

The American jeremiad can be defined as is: A mode of public exhortation that originated in the European pulpit, was transformed in both form and content by the New England Puritans, persisted through the eighteenth

century, and helped sustain a national dream through two hundred years of turbulence and change.¹²

During the 1630s, New England Puritans interpreted the judgment of the European jeremiad as indicative of God's irrevocable wrath, and therefore, the inevitable, certain, and soon coming destruction of Europe. They believed that judgment was upon Europe, and based upon their covenant relationship with God, God had given America to them as the "new promised land." These seventeenth century New England Puritans identified themselves as the "New Israel" and the "chosen people of God." Europe had forfeited its right to chosen-nation status, and many Puritans were fleeing to America to escape the upcoming and literal destruction of Europe. Upon their arrival, America was to be a "city set upon a hill." And when America strayed from the covenant, the American jeremiad was constructed to speak the judgment of God and call the people back to covenant with God.

The American jeremiad was a public ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, intertwining practical spiritual guidance with advice on public affairs. The jeremiad was the "state-of the-covenant address, tendered at every public occasion (on days of fasting and prayer, humiliation and thanksgiving, at covenant renewal and artillery company ceremonies, and most elaborately and solemnly, at Election Day gatherings) observed by the Puritan colonist." ¹³

The Puritan jeremiad reminded America of its divine mission as established by John Winthrop in 1630. Winthrop, in a sermon at sea aboard the *Arabella*, paraphrased Matthew 5:14 to crystallize New England's mission: "we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." Given sacred history and a theocratic universe as the theatre for God's judgment, the Puritan migration to America was the "desacralization" of England and "the sacralization of the wilderness in America as a shelter and place for the Nonconformist Puritans." The Puritans believed that their pilgrimage to America fulfilled prophetic apocalyptic and eschatological visions:

the Old and the New World were totally antagonistic and mutually exclusive entities. So, according to Puritan ideology of the migration to New England, the "discovery" of America was a great revelatory and prophetic event in the course of progress of the church upon the earth in which God's divine providence transformed the locus of the history of redemption and salvation from the corrupted Old World to the New World.¹⁴

Following this sense of divine mission, "the purpose of the jeremiads was to direct an imperiled people to God in order to fulfill their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God."¹⁵

Unshakeable optimism is the essential characteristic of the American jeremiad. Any looming challenge is only a test of character and not a fatal error or structural flaw in the American system. Any crisis may be overcome by a return to the optimism of traditional American ideals rather than the identification of fundamental and structural flaws in American values. If there are concerns of subjugated groups over access to freedom, liberty, justice, citizenship, economic participation, equality, voting rights, and so on, it is a matter of unfulfilled values, that is, Americans not living up to their professed values, rather than fundamental and structural flaws in the nation.

Based in optimism rather than judgment, over a period of time, the American jeremiad provided a conceptual framework that defined and embraced acceptable dissent, or dissent that could gain a hearing in American culture. The result was that acceptable dissent functioned within the optimism of the American jeremiad and left fundamental and structural flaws in American values unchallenged.

3- Abraham Lincoln's Jeremiad on the Civil War

With the outbreak of the Civil War, many Northern thinkers and critics came to see the Union army as the instrument of God's holy vengeance— and purging justice— on the South, for the sin of slavery and rebellion. In 1864, looking back over three years of war and carnage, clergyman S. A. Hodgman explained the tragedy of the war by linking the suffering of God's chosen people with God's judgments:

It was not because the Lord abhorred us as a people, but because of his great favor towards us, that he hath purged us, as gold is purified in a furnace. We have a great mission to perform, and there is a bright destiny before us, in the future; and it was necessary that we should receive a discipline to prepare us for both. . . . It is to be our destiny, to teach all tyrants and oppressors, that their days are numbered. We are to be a city set on a hill, whose light can not be hid.¹⁶

As in early New England, jeremiadic thinking—chosen people, covenanted with God, with an exceptional mission to fulfill, judged by God and found to be wanting— provided a meaningful guide for interpreting battlefield results. Victory proved God's favor. Defeat represented a sign of an everlasting sin in need of purgation. In their efforts to understand the reasons for the triumphs and terrible sufferings of the war, Southerners, too, drew on jeremiadic language. Preaching in 1862, Confederate supporter J. W. Tucker argued that “God is on our side— is with us in this conflict— because we have had reverses. ‘Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.’ . . . God sent our reverses for our good. They were necessary to humble our pride; to stop our foolish and absurd boasting, and to make us feel the importance of the conflict in which we are engaged.”¹⁷

During the Civil War Lincoln found beliefs about American union sharply challenged and at the same time gave them their most eloquent and powerful jeremiadic expression. In most of his speeches. Lincoln had always kept his questing and often skeptical spirituality closely guarded, but as the war ground relentlessly on, his beliefs and speeches took on not a sectarian but a deeply Old Testament tone. The cadence and words of his speeches accentuate his message: the Union, “the last best hope of earth,” was fighting for the sacred cause of liberty.

In the best-known piece in all of American oratory Lincoln captured a particular vision of America's origin and future, and how these two were linked in the war he was then prosecuting. In considering what has been called “the American manifesto,” we see that Lincoln speaks at once to who Americans *are* as a people and who *ought to be*. While volumes have been written on the Gettysburg Address, I confine myself to the role this speech has in the development of the American jeremiad tradition.¹⁸

Lincoln begins the Gettysburg Address by calling the audience's attention to the beginning—not of the Battle of Gettysburg or of the Civil War—but of America herself. In beginning with the words, *Four score and seven years ago*, Lincoln deliberately places his speech in the broader context of the American experiment. These remarks are not simply a eulogy for those soldiers who died on this battleground, appropriate as that would be. It is more. It is a comment on the nature of America. The opening lines serve not only to situate this speech in American history, but also to frame and interpret American history altogether. In saying that, “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation,” Lincoln points to the adoption of the Declaration of Independence as the moment of birth, the moment of union for “the Union.” There can be little doubt that Lincoln means to argue just this: the Declaration of Independence was *the* defining point of origin for the United States, and that moment gives the union its course in subsequent history.¹⁹

Though the Gettysburg Address was not the first time Lincoln broached the founding of the nation, the phrasing at the beginning of the Gettysburg Address has a sort of solemnity that is unmatched his other speeches. The cadence is different, the phrasing and subtle rhyming is beautiful. Unlike these other speeches, Lincoln begins by alluding to Scripture. According to William J. Wolf, a twentieth-century theologian, the phrase *four score and seven years ago* is “an inspired adaptation of Old Testament counting,” particularly Psalm chapter 90.⁷² Imitating the form of counting used in Scripture seems to have elevated the significance of the subject of the speech to make it worthy of the moment. Lincoln matched the weight of the speech with the gravity of the hour.²⁰

Again borrowing a phrase from the King James Bible, Lincoln uses the phrase *brought forth* to claim that America is something new. The Bible uses the expression on multiple occasions to describe a variety of different beginnings, including the creation of the earth, the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, and the birth of Christ Jesus. Genesis 1 asserts that “the earth *brought forth* grass and herb yielding seed after his kind” (1:12). Psalm 90 states that “before the mountains were *brought forth*, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God” (90:2). Exodus states that it was “the strength of the hand of the Lord *brought us forth* out of Egypt” (13:16).⁸³ Luke states that the virgin Mary “*brought forth* her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger” (2:7). Job, in the midst of his suffering, asks the Lord, “Wherefore then hast thou *brought me forth* out of the womb?” (10:18).

In the second paragraph of the Gettysburg Address, a mere four sentences, Lincoln transitions from the past to the present, beginning with a short word denoting the immediate present—*now*. Like the many biblical stories of a person’s trust or a people’s faith being tested, the Civil War is a test, an immense test, claims Lincoln. The struggle between brother and brother is a trial by fire as to whether or not America, or any nation *conceived in liberty* and born to the idea of human equality, can survive. The nation was born. It *lives*. It can also die. The Civil War, according to Guelzo, was “a kind of pass/fail examination to determine once and for all whether the American Founding had indeed been misbegotten,” and it was a terrible test.²¹

For Lincoln and his listeners, the most immediate and impressionable part of the test was the *great battlefield* on which they were standing. Even for those not in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in early July, the calamities of the war could not be ignored. According to White, it was :

...not a serene cemetery with rows of white crosses on manicured lawn
Gettysburg on that day was still an unfinished burial site. Barely a third of the
bodies had been buried. Confederate skeletons lay unburied beneath stones and
vegetation dying with the onset of winter.(Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address”,
November 19,1863)

Even as Lincoln arrived by train the day before the ceremony, he saw “hundreds of coffins on the station platform.” The cost of the test was high, and everyone who *met* at Gettysburg that day saw it. Hence Lincoln’s reference to jeremiad conjoined lamentation over the present conditions at Gettysburg.

Lincoln alludes to Scripture in the Gettysburg Address to communicate his ideas with a biblical cadence but also, and most importantly, to infuse the speech with the deep theological content of Scripture. In a subtle way, Lincoln claims that the nation *lives* like the church. America is God’s “almost chosen people,” as he says in 1861, a clear reference to Paul’s claim that the church is “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people.” The order of Lincoln’s words is important. It is not that America is almost God’s chosen people. Lincoln does not claim that the nation *is* the church ... and then pull the statement back a little. Lincoln does not use the word “almost” to avoid blaspheming. The thought of idolatry probably never crossed his mind. Instead, the adjective “almost” modifies “chosen people.” America is, like the church, *under God*. In

fact, she is *of God*, but she does not hold that spot of God's chosen people and does fight the church over that position. Rather, she works *under God* in a way similar to the church. In other words, Lincoln's analogy is a simile, not a metaphor. A proper translation of Lincoln's phrase is, America is God's *like* chosen people. She *lives* like the church lives—only with the continual rededication of her people to that *life giving* principle of human equality and only with the assistance of a benevolent God.

That the nation was *brought forth* by our founding fathers some *four score and seven years ago* means that the nation *lives*. Though it is not of heaven, it has lasted longer than the lifespan of human beings. Because its *conception* and *bringing forth* was a philosophical one, the nation's stipulations for membership function like the church's do. The people of God and the people of the Declaration belong to their respective communities in similar ways: any person of any ethnicity, gender, height, or weight can join, for attachment to the community depends on a sort of faith. Like the biblical stories of men and women being tested, the Civil War is a test to see if America would keep the faith in her Founding principles. Like Christ gave Himself for His people, the church, the men who died at Gettysburg gave their lives *that that nation might live*, and *from* that wellspring. Through using this jeremiadic frame i.e. calling for renewal, Lincoln encourages the people *increase* their *devotion* to the cause for which these men sacrificially died. At Gettysburg Lincoln asks the people to fight for *a new birth of freedom*, a sort of political salvation, so that the American regime would *not perish from the earth*. In the coming address-the Second Inaugural- Lincoln again asks America to *rededicate* herself to the principle of human equality, *that that nation might live*.

America's sense of exceptionalism was shaken by a racial issue, Abraham Lincoln had to meet the challenge of slavery, he insisted that the United States could no longer remain divided "if we cannot permit each man and woman to find their rightful place in a free society to which they are entitled by merit," and that the Americans, "cannot preserve a free society itself." We have stressed Lincoln's use of the jeremiad to define the Civil War as a moral issue, and to wield the nation's self professed Judeo-Christian ethic as a sword in its behalf, constituting something of a watershed in nineteenth century American political history.

4- Lyndon Johnson's Jeremiad on Civil Rights:

When president Johnson came to office, his administration was under a tremendous amount of pressure. While the country was grieving a slain president, Johnson was uncertain of his own ability to do the job and civil rights loomed as a crucial problem for both the country and his own political future. And so in this uncertain time, Johnson turned to myth as a means for selling the country on the need for legislation. Through a close reading of the speeches, contextualized by the lamentation following Kennedy's assassination, I argue that Johnson's jeremiad operates, in part, as a rhetorically skillful response to the post-Kennedy's crisis of national identity. I further argue that Johnson both acknowledges and appropriates the crisis, offering Americans a "way home" to mythic America and explain the unification of the American populace in a time of strife.

Johnson began his religious campaign for civil rights with his first national address, given to a joint session of Congress on the night of November 27, 1963. The very occasion of the speech was tinged with religious symbolism because it shared certain aspects in common with funeral ceremonies. We have to recall that this address was taking place just four days after the assassination of Kennedy. The country had not yet finished mourning. As such, the public would obviously expect Johnson to praise Kennedy's life and accomplishments and, indeed, Johnson did open his speech with a deep jeremiadic framework; with a eulogy of sorts for the fallen president: "The greatest leader of our time has been struck down by the foulest deed of our time."²²

Johnson actually gave another national address on November 28, the day after his appearance before Congress. It was Thanksgiving Day. Some of the religious content of this speech certainly fell into the standard ceremonial type language we would expect to find in early Puritan jeremiads. Yet Johnson also made another eloquent statement about the need for racial progress. In the middle of the speech, Johnson remarked:

In each administration the greatest burden that the President had to bear had been the burden of his own countrymen's unthinking and unreasoning hate and division. So, in these days, the fate of this office is the fate of us all. I would ask all Americans on this day of prayer and reverence to think on these things.

Johnson had thus made a strong religious argument about the need for equality ("God made all of us, not some of us, in His image") and he had announced it as the "work that I most want us to do." He had done these things on a day, as he called it, "of prayer and reverence." He asked that the country "pray for His divine wisdom" about how best to eradicate prejudice. The last paragraph of this speech might as well have come from a minister.

When combined with his speech from a day earlier, Johnson's religious rhetorical campaign for civil rights was now well underway. In addition to the theme of martyrdom for race, Johnson's language would feature several recurring religious arguments for civil rights that bear individual discussions.

Johnson began his "*We Shall Overcome Address*" by asserting that he spoke for "the destiny of democracy" .(Johnson, March 15th,1965) Indeed, the current crisis was critical, he claimed, because it constituted a "turning point in man's unending search for freedom" and "equal rights" . It was an episode in the story of the American Promise, Johnson reasoned, which was a guarantee of freedom and equality—and the potential to be "the greatest nation on Earth" . Johnson suggested that denying equal rights to African Americans, exemplified by the violence in Selma, represented a threat to "the values and the purposes and the meaning of (the) beloved nation" . He claimed that to keep African Americans from enjoying the freedom and equality assured by the Declaration of Independence and the battle cries of the Revolution would be to break our nation's promise and neglect our potential to "fail as a people and as a nation" . Of course, none of the dictums quoted by the president ("All men are created equal"; "Government by consent of the governed"; "Give me liberty or give me death") constituted a direct promise to African Americans regarding political freedom or equality. Yet Johnson interpreted them to have an expansive meaning that applied to the present problem. And since the story of the forward march of freedom and equality is perhaps the United States' "master narrative," his proposed political reform is made to seem a natural progression in American history. In short, he seized the rhetoric of democratic freedom and equality—transforming the meaning of the two principles in the process—to help guarantee equal voting rights to African Americans.²³

The themes of promise and urgency established in the beginning of Johnson's speech were central to the message's overall rhetorical power, as they transformed the political problem of voter discrimination into something even grander: a threat to America itself. And the effort to solve that problem took on a grand, almost religious imperative—as described by the president—since it implicated America's destiny, faith, and mission. He suggested the United States represented a chosen nation, "the first . . . in the history of the world to be founded with a purpose" . Invoking a passage from the Bible, Luke 9:25, he claimed the nation would lose its very soul if it failed to achieve its purpose of upholding

the democratic model of government, its promise to ensure freedom and equality. President Johnson took on the role of prophet in his speech, recalling the nation to its original task. As the gift of the prophet is vision, he suggested that by taking a penetrating look at current events to see their underlying meaning, one could truly understand what was at stake: the heart and soul of the nation.

By filling his narrative of the American Promise with a religious dimension, Johnson tapped into the cultural tradition of civil religion. His message articulated three key myths in American civil religion: that the United States has a covenant that makes its citizens a chosen people, that it has a special purpose, and that its founding was a consecrated act that defined the meaning of the nation. In doing so, the president encouraged his audience to experience current events as part of a transcendent reality. As the nation's prophet, he called to mind its purpose, pointed out its sins and the wages of sin, and identified the path to redemption.

To a great extent, Johnson's speech is persuasive to the extent it invested events with deep meaning for its listeners. His story of the American Promise aimed to help his audience make sense of a disturbing crisis in a particular way, to see it as part of a larger context of events. By emphasizing the idea of a promise, he provided a logic that framed his listeners' decision making: they should act to keep their promise. His story reinforced the values to which the nation must recommit itself through action. It reaffirmed America's national identity and identified citizens with their government.

When listeners found Johnson's speech compelling, it was likely because he induced them to guarantee voting rights in order to honor their status as a chosen people and to live out the nation's sacred purpose. He effectively appealed to their patriotic duty, infused with a religious imperative. Moreover, for those listeners who felt shame following Bloody Sunday, Johnson provided a way to purge their guilt. The violence in Selma was horrific, but the president suggested it may serve a significant purpose, since it has "summoned into convocation a convocation all the majesty of this great government." The violence in Selma can be made meaningful, he implied, by enacting voting rights legislation.

Regardless, such a lengthy thought places a jeremiad frame around all of the content in the speech, whether intentionally or not. Again, what is important to note is that Johnson was issuing a warning. He depicts a God who will judge America. "God is not mocked." "We reap as we sow" Johnson "trembles" for the nation. The implication is that the passage of the civil rights bill was crucial if the country hoped to avoid a terrible fate.

Pauley writes that "in this civil religious view of the world, Lyndon Johnson plays the role of the nation's prophet/priest" and calls Americans to action.²⁴ Johnson used civil religion to appeal to distinctly American ideals such as justice, liberty, and union, not any specific religion in particular. His brand of civil religion can be called traditional—he uses it in an attempt to bring the populace together, not to advance any particular denominational belief. Johnson "kept the line between church and state reasonably clear, if not the line between religion and politics". (Ibid) He both enacted and understood the traits of civil religion, and, based on this small sample, applied them traditionally. He maintains the transcendent unifying ideals of civil religion by being nondenominationally devout, even given his location at a synagogue.

Conclusion:

The jeremiad as a religious discourse thus provided the basic structure of both Lincoln and Johnson's speeches to overcome challenging moments in the history of the United States. Lincoln marks an important moment in the history of the American

jeremiad. His speech *The Gettysburg Address*, the most reverent, yet quick, address, Abraham Lincoln not only honorably bestows a Farewell to the soldiers who gave their lives for the livelihood of their country, but through his rhetorical usage of the jeremiad, Lincoln sends a central message of unity for the nation in the midst of a war. It shows Lincoln's growing providentialism and calls America to account for the suffering for the slaves and what slavery brought in a civil war that was but one measure of an angry God, demanding that America as a chosen nation, must confess its sins and pay for them. Only then might America have peace with itself and realize its promise.

Developed in terms of America's obligation to remain faithful to liberty, justice, and union. Lyndon Johnson eclipsed the memory of Kennedy's inauguration with a speech that reached far back into the American experience. It drew on America's oldest rhetorical form to unite national values with LBJ's national policies. His addresses can be read as secular jeremiad that provided a moral justification for his Great Society domestic policies. In like manner, Lincoln's addresses followed the pattern of the jeremiad in which union required that Americans achieve a sense of national community and urged Americans to rely on old principles of democracy and union.

The above analysis gives us a concise overview of the trajectory of key meanings across decades of presidential discourse. Religious discourse nonetheless holds a powerful place in the nature of political discourse. Such a tradition has been used in political speech from the inception of the United States as an independent nation. It is almost impossible to overstate "the power and seduction of this type of discourse in American political culture that has been used as a justification for the great goods and ills."

Footnotes :

¹ Hoffman, Donna R., and Alison D. Howard. "Agendas, Rhetoric, and Social Change: State of the Union Addresses from Eisenhower to Clinton." 2003 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association. Palmer House Hilton, Chicago. 03-06 Apr. 2003.

² Domke, D., Coe, K.. 2010. *The God strategy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

³ Foucault, 1979, pp74,97

⁴ Milliken, Jennifer (1995). "The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods" *European Journal of International Relations* 1999: 225-254.p,229.

⁵ Burke, Kenneth (1969): *A Rhetoric of Motives*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, pp.40-42.

⁶ Gill, Ann M. – Whedbee, Karen (1997): *Rhetoric*. In van Dijk, Teun A. (ed.): *Discourse as Structure and Process*, p.157

⁷ Toolin, C., (1983). American civil religion from 1789 to 1981: A content analysis of Presidential Inaugural Addresses. *Review of Religious Research*, 25(1), 39-48.

⁸ Domke, D., Coe, K.. 2010. *The God strategy*. New York: Oxford University Press.p,318.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Rohler and R. Cook.(2008). *Great speeches for criticism and analysis fourth edition*. Greenwood,IN: Alistair Press,p77.

¹¹ Bercovitch, S. (1978). *The American jeremiad*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

¹² Ibid,p74.

¹³ Ibid,p 24

¹⁴ Ibid,p78

¹⁵ Ibid ,p79

¹⁶ S. A. Hodgman, *The Great Republic Judged, but Not Destroyed*, 2d ed. (New York, 1865).

¹⁷ J. W. Tucker, "God's Providence in War" (1862). In "*God Ordained this War*": *Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830-1865*, ed. David B. Chesebrough (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 229, 233-234

¹⁸ Beasley, Vanessa B. "The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States: American Principles and American Pose in Presidential Inaugurals." *Communication Monographs* 68.2 (June 2001): 169-183.p,169.

¹⁹ Ibid,p170.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Guelzo, Allen C.(1999). *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, p 56.

²² Johnson, Lyndon B. (1963). "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress." November 27. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25988&st=&st1=#axzz1QftZt1Rz> {accessed June 29, 2011 }

²³ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), xvi.

²⁴ R.P. Hart and J.L. Pauley, *The Political Pulpit*, p.47.

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