A Return to Relevance:
Bill Clinton's Responses to the Oklahoma City Bombing

Trevor Parry-Giles
Department of Communication
University of Maryland
2130 Skinner Building
College Park, MD 20742-7635
301-405-8947
tpg@umd.edu
http://www.wam.umd.edu/~tpg

When scholars of American public oratory were asked about the 100 greatest speeches of the 20th century, there were few surprises at the head of the list. The usual suspects were there—Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, Franklin Roosevelt, Barbara Jordan. But missing from the top 50, or even the top 75, was one president, Bill Clinton, who many deemed to be one of these most effective public communicators of his time. In fact, only one speech by Clinton was ranked in the top 100, at number 92. It was his Memorial Address in Oklahoma City following the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in 1995. This study is an analysis of Clinton's rhetorical response to the Oklahoma City bombing, not for the purpose of elevating the perceived importance of these remarks, but to understand their pivotal role in the cultural understanding of the tragic bombing of the Murrah building, to analyze more fully the important place that presidential ceremonial rhetoric plays in U.S. political culture, and to explore how Clinton's responses paved the way for his political resurrection and eventual reelection in 1996.

I argue in this paper that Clinton skillfully employed rhetorical strategies of therapeutic rhetoric derived from ancient epideictic practices that allowed him to effectively memorialize the bombing's victims and motivate public attention to domestic discord. In addition, Clinton managed the symbolic dimensions of this oratorical moment to reposition himself as a relevant, presidential figure in American politics, paving the way for his 1996 reelection campaign. Ultimately, I suggest that this rhetorical event reveals much about the general character of presidential ceremonial speechmaking and particular insight about Bill Clinton's political and rhetorical acumen.