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Politics in Motion: Barack Obama's Use of Movement Metaphors

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ABSTRACT

The use of metaphors in political discourse is a well documented phenomenon. Metaphors work to shape or reorient our perceptions of the world around us. In doing so, they simultaneously open up and close off particular ontological positions. As such, metaphors can serve a decidedly ideological function. This paper utilizes a metaphoric analysis of Barack Obama's 2010 State of the Union Address as a means of locating his governing metaphor and, in doing so, gaining deeper insight into his ideological underpinnings. The findings show that President Obama made extensive use of "movement" metaphors, particularly journey metaphors. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of Obama's use of these metaphors and what they reveal about his perspective on the role of the presidency.

KEYWORDS:

Metaphor, political metaphors, the rhetorical presidency, Barack Obama, journey metaphors

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“Fish need water to be fish; humans need metaphors to do and think about politics” ([Thompson](#), 1996, p.185).

In 2010 the United States was mired in economic catastrophe. From the time he arrived in office, President Obama had been tasked with both making sense of the collapse of the nation’s financial markets and restoring the citizenry’s faith in their economy. In January of 2010, President Obama delivered his first official State of the Union Address. Obama relied heavily on figurative language, particularly “movement” metaphors, as he addressed the economic crisis. To more fully understand the implications of Obama’s use of movement metaphors, the following offers an account of the financial collapse, the modern rhetorical presidency, and research pertaining to the use of metaphors in political discourse. Finally, this paper concludes with a metaphoric analysis of the President’s State of the Union address and a discussion of what his use of figurative language reveals about his political ideology, especially as it pertains to his perspective on the role of the presidency.

The Economic Crisis

The financial collapse began in 2007, though the seeds for it were sown much earlier ([Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission](#), 2011). For years, financial institutions—banks, investment firms, insurance companies—had been engaged in risky investment practices that had rendered them vulnerable to shifts in the market. However, decades of financial deregulation and limited oversight had led many in the financial industry to overlook such glaring vulnerabilities, choosing to focus instead on potential short-term gains ([FCIC](#)). As noted in The Financial Crisis Inquiry Report,

as of 2007, the five major investment banks—Bear Stearns, Goldman Sachs, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, and Morgan Stanley—were operating with extraordinarily thin capital...Less than a 3% drop in asset values could wipe out a firm. ([FCIC](#), p.xix)

Compounding this lack of assets, many of these companies had also been investing in home loans that had a high risk of default due to questionable lending practices by mortgage companies. However, in pursuit of profits, they willfully ignored the precarious nature of their situation. Indeed, “like Icarus, they never feared flying ever closer to the sun” ([FCIC](#), p.xxiii). Inevitably, “when housing prices fell and mortgage borrowers defaulted, the lights began to dim on Wall Street” ([FCIC](#), p.xxiii). In essence, they had built their financial empires on a foundation of sand.

In 2007, largely as a result of these ethically questionable lending practices, the U.S. housing market imploded. This caused a chain reaction of events that led to the eventual collapse of the United States’ financial system ([FCIC](#), 2011). The resulting crisis was unlike anything the country had experienced since the early 20th century. In an effort to salvage the situation, President Bush signed legislation that provided “bailout” money to investment firms that were threatened with bankruptcy. Upon taking office, President Obama continued this strategy of providing stimulus packages to the financial sector. The total amount of these bailouts was roughly one trillion dollars. However, because many Americans were suffering from unemployment, foreclosure, or both, such measures proved extremely unpopular ([Mishkin](#), 2010). In an effort to regain control over the market—and ensure that there wasn’t a repeat of the collapse—President Obama proposed strict new financial regulations designed to both

restrict the types of investing in which financial firms could engage, and to reduce risks for taxpayers who had funded the bailouts ([Kuhnhehn&Crutsinger](#), 2009; [Treanor](#), 2010). Even so, at the time that he delivered his first State of the Union Address in 2010, the country was still experiencing a period of great uncertainty over its economic future. To address this exigency President Obama would have to draw upon the full rhetorical capacities of his office.

The office of the presidency is a uniquely rhetorical institution in American politics ([Murphy](#), 2008; [Stuckey](#), 2010; [Teten](#), 2003; [Teten](#), 2007; [White](#), 1968; [Zarefsky](#), 2004). The “rhetorical presidency” places the president at the heart of policy debates despite the fact that they have no actual legislative power ([Teten](#), 2003; [White](#)). In speaking to the American people, the president is able to frame issues, voice support (or lack thereof) for various courses of action, and advocate for or against specific policy ([Zarefsky](#); [Teten](#), 2007). As such, the president’s ability to lead is directly connected to his/her ability to persuade ([White](#)). One of the most salient examples of this rhetorical capacity is the State of the Union Address.

The State of the Union Address is a legal obligation mandated by Article II, Section III of the U.S. Constitution. Prior to the 20th century the only audience for such addresses was the legislature. However, with the advent of mass media technology presidents began to have their speeches broadcast for mass consumption ([Murphy](#), 2008; [Teten](#), 2003; [Teten](#), 2007). As a result in this shift towards mass media dissemination, contemporary State of the Union Addresses have come to represent “a platform from which policy is proposed and evaluated” ([Teten](#), 2003, p.336). In the address, the president is able to put forth policy, communicate directly to the American people, and set the tone for his/her administration ([Teten](#), 2003; [Teten](#), 2007). In 2010, President Barack Obama delivered his first State of the Union Address before the U.S. Congress and millions of viewers watching from home. At the time that he delivered the speech, the economy was still reeling from the economic collapse and the American public was facing a crisis of confidence ([Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission](#), 2011; [Mishkin](#), 2010). In order to both ease the fears of the nation and successfully set the tone for his new administration, he would have to address what many considered to be the greatest threat to the U.S. economy since the Great Depression. The resulting speech was rich in metaphors, prompting one to question the suasive potential of such figurative language.

The importance of metaphors to language in general, and rhetoric in particular, cannot be overstated. Metaphors are the foundational element of language through which our concepts and meanings are formed ([Franke](#), 2000; [Lakoff& Johnson](#), 1980). Furthermore, they “[reveal] the world in the moment of its emergence as a linguistic creation or construction” ([Franke](#), p.151). Metaphors also serve the vital function of creating a sense of meaning for concepts for which no other avenues of reference are available; they serve to name the unnamable and, in doing so, create a frame through which such foundational concepts are viewed ([Franke](#)). As [Franke](#) states, “far from remaining confined to the category of the merely linguistic, metaphor wields a peculiar power to unite, to ‘reconcile’ real things, even things of mutually exclusive categories” (p.151). In uniting such disparate concepts and words, metaphors create a sense of tension between a word’s more widely accepted meaning and the new meaning bestowed upon it ([Franke](#)). In doing so, the metaphor creates “an effect of surprise” ([Franke](#), p.145) that gives it rhetorical force. This surprise works to reorient our perception of the world around us. Metaphors can, in a very real way, create a new sense of reality by calling for the radical reconceptualization of an

experience, concept, action, or object; they become our basis for the reality within which we operate ([Frank](#); [Lakoff& Johnson](#); [Heradstveit& Bonham](#), 2007). Because of this power to shape and reorient perceptions, metaphors can be used to great rhetorical effect.

The rhetorical function of metaphors has been investigated extensively. [Ivie](#) (1987) put forth that metaphors “produces a motive, or interpretation of reality with which the audience is invited to identify” and, as such, are “at the base of rhetorical invention” (p.166). In fact, metaphors are used to such an extent in rhetoric—and to such great effect—that many have argued that the use of metaphors is cognitively linked to rhetorical efforts ([Ivie](#); [Franke](#), 2000; [Paris](#), 2002; [Lakoff& Johnson](#), 1980). Metaphors gain their rhetorical impact through the way that they can be used to shape a person’s perception of the world around them ([Paris](#), 2002; [Heradstveit& Bonham](#), 2007). However, in doing so, metaphors orient audience members toward one ontological position and, necessarily, away from others. This occurs when the metaphor persuades audience members to “focus on one aspect of a concept” while keeping them from “focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor” ([Lakoff& Johnson](#), 1980, p.10). Essentially, metaphors can be used to establish terministic screens in the minds of audience members (see [Burke](#), 1966). If accepted by an audience member as a frame of reference, a metaphor can “direct the attention to one field rather than to another” ([Burke](#), p.46). From there, “many of the [audience members’] ‘observations’ are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made” ([Burke](#), p.46). The terministic screens formed by these metaphors can fundamentally influence an individual’s beliefs in that their “values are not independent but must form a coherent system with the metaphorical concepts [they] live by” ([Lakoff& Johnson](#), p.22). Furthermore, while this connection between values and metaphorical concepts occurs at an emotional level, the internalization of a metaphor can lead one to *act* out its implications ([Franke](#); [Heradstveit& Bonham](#); [Lakoff& Johnson](#)). Because of this, metaphors can serve a distinctly *political* function. They can structure an audience’s perceptions, beliefs, values and, therefore, their actions. As such, their use in political rhetoric must be investigated in greater detail.

Researchers have argued that metaphors serve a pragmatic role in political discourse by acting as sanctions for direct political action ([Lakoff& Johnson](#), 1980; [Thompson](#), 1996; [Kovecses](#), 2002; [Paris](#), 2002). Metaphors that occur in political discourses “impose a particular order or pattern on political activities. They not only make sense of these activities but also structure them in imperceptible ways” ([Kovecses](#), p.62). As such, a metaphor can create “a license for policy change and economic action” ([Lakoff& Johnson](#), p.156) by framing an issue in a particular way. Compounding this effect, the metaphors that occur in political discourses are reiterated by political actors and disseminated through a host of mass media outlets ([Kovecses](#)). [Thompson](#) argued that this dissemination serves an important civic function, stating

Politics cannot be understood as an individual level phenomenon in the way that basic psychological, cognitive, or emotive process can be. The personal is *not* the political until a person understands that his/her life experience is a function of membership in a group or category. (p.186)

Therefore, metaphors serve the important function of bridging the gap between the personal and collective by both reifying the individual’s relationship to the group and demonstrating the consequences of this relationship. In this way, metaphors can make intangible or irreducibly complex sociopolitical situations accessible to the wider body politic by making “definition,

decision, and action possible” (Thompson, p.187). Because of the impact that they can have on political action, both the metaphor that is used and the way that it is interpreted matters greatly (Thompson; Paris). As such, control over the use of a metaphor is of vital importance to political rhetors.

Of particular importance in political discourse is the manner in which metaphors symbolically suggest a course of action (Thompson, 1996; Paris, 2002). In essence, if audience members accept the applicability of a metaphor, then the course of action suggested by the metaphor is seen as a viable option. Within the realm of political discourse “there are compelling incentives for political actors to fight over the usage of...metaphors. In addition to shaping interpretations of particular events...metaphors can also influence the manner in which political communities define their collective goals” (Paris, p.426). As Thompson stated, “military strategists stress the importance of controlling the high ground; political strategists stress the importance of controlling the metaphor” (p.190). However, this is not to suggest that a rhetor needs simply invoke a metaphor to propel a course of action. The role of the audience as active participants in the interpretation of the metaphor, and their judgments as to its applicability to the political situation, is vital to the outcome of the appeal (Holborow, 2007). As such, the use of metaphors in a political context can be, and often are, contested (Paris; Heradstveit& Bonham, 2010). Even though political rhetors advocate for the advancement of a metaphor as a means of framing a political issue and, by implication, suggesting a course of action, the audience *always* retains the power to reject its applicability and/or veracity.

The use of metaphor in political discourse can have decidedly negative effects as well. In the same way that metaphors can make politics accessible to the people, they can also “induce acquiescence and passivity” (Thompson, 1996, p.185). Metaphors can stand in the place of reasoned discourse and “become a digression from or substitute for serious thought and debate” (Gramm, 1996, p.147), thus proving a barrier to informed political activity. Additionally, their very nature as framing devices allows the use of metaphors to foreclose alternative approaches to an issue. As an example of this one only need to consider the prevalence of war metaphors in contemporary American discourse. Once a sociopolitical issue is framed as a “war,” certain courses of action are opened, but others are definitively closed off. Therefore, it is important to investigate the types of metaphors used by political actors. In investigating the ways in which political rhetors utilize metaphors in the public sphere the critic is afforded a means of discovering “why political leaders speak in certain ways and not in others” (Paris, 2002, p.449). Furthermore, in uncovering the metaphors that are employed, and the contexts in which they are used, the critic is also able to better understand the ideological perspectives implicit in a particular political discourse (Gramm, 1996).

To investigate President Obama’s use of metaphors I utilize Ivie’s (1987) method of metaphoric mapping. He began from the assumption that the use of recurrent metaphors by political actors serves to reveal the rhetor’s motivations, or the makeup of their terministic screens. As such, it is vital to locate the recurring metaphor, or “generating term” (Ivie, p.167), within a particular actor’s discourse. This is done by noting instances of the usage of metaphors by the rhetor and then dividing them into subgroups, or clusters, based on their similarities. Each set of metaphoric clusters is then compiled and analyzed, both separately and across clusters, in order to reveal the speaker’s “system of metaphorical concepts” (Ivie, p.168). In the following, I

will apply this methodology to Barack Obama's 2010 State of the Union Address. In doing so, I uncover President Obama's system of metaphorical concepts, thereby gaining a deeper insight into his motives as a rhetor. Additionally, in uncovering Obama's governing metaphor, I provide the reader valuable insight into Obama's political ideology ([Gramm](#), 1996; [Holborow](#), 2007).

Findings

President Obama's 2010 State of the Union address was rich with figurative language, particularly metaphoric language. Within this body of figurative language one particular cluster of metaphors stands out and, in effect, governs the meaning of the others. This governing metaphor is MOVEMENT, particularly the movement of individuals (or the nation *as* an individual) facilitated through concerted action. Figure 1.1 shows some of the various manifestations of this cluster of metaphors.

Figure 1.1

MOVEMENT (Action)				
<i>Journey</i>	<i>Delay/Reversal</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Growth/Loss</i>	<i>Unity/Division</i>
move forward	gridlocked	burdens	growing	joined
work through	put things on hold	struggles	gain back	come together
Overcome	waiting	weight	expand	common purpose
took steps	standing still	share	declined	connected to
on track	walk away	supported	dissipated	unity
move to	reversed			united
Launching	delay			
Pathway	obstruct			
Approach	stopped			

Within this family of metaphors the image of the journey manifests itself as the ideal type of movement, i.e. movement toward a goal. For example, when framing the financial collapse in historic terms [Obama](#) (2010) stated that, in the past, "Americans prevailed because we chose to *move forward* [emphasis added] as one Nation, as one people." America's success was attributed to "forward" movement, thus leaving its problems "behind." In a more direct use of the journey metaphor, [Obama](#) proposed both a path and a goal, arguing

in this economy, a high school diploma no longer guarantees a good job. That's why I urge the senate to *follow* [emphasis added] the House and pass a bill that will revitalize our community colleges, which are a career *pathway* [emphasis added] to the children of so many working families.

Here, Obama is arguing that the trajectory of the journey is governed by a "pathway," or an established avenue for forward movement. This implies the existence of an ideal course of progress along which the nation should move. The Senate is being urged to follow the same pathway as the House as a means of achieving a goal: increased opportunities for youths. In another example, [Obama](#) directly urged Congress to move in a particular direction, stating, "Here's what I ask Congress though: don't *walk away* [emphasis added] from reform. Not now. Not when we are so close. Let us *find a way to come together* [emphasis added] and finish the job

for the American people.” In this instance, Obama uses the journey metaphor to imply that Congress is already following the correct course of action and that deviating from this course would result in failure to achieve the goal. Furthermore, this movement metaphor is combined with a unity metaphor, “come together,” i.e. movement towards one another. Obama seemed to imply that, while Congress was generally moving in the right direction, their movement was chaotic or scattered. Throughout the address, he continuously utilized division metaphors to typify movement that is chaotic, unproductive, or in service to self-interest rather than the good of the nation. For example, when speaking of political divisiveness, he stated, “it’s precisely such politics that has *stopped* [emphasis added] either party from helping the American people. Worse yet, it is *sowing further division* [emphasis added] among our citizens” (Obama). For Obama, concerted effort is needed for progressive political action to occur. The implication is that the journey is both positive and necessary and that stasis puts the nation’s future at risk. Individuals deviating from the group’s movement along the path, or stalling the group’s movement altogether, put the goal of the journey at risk.

President Obama also used metaphors to argue that there are those who would see the path altered or progress stopped altogether. For example, Obama (2010) stated,

I’ve been told that our political system is too gridlocked and that we should just *put things on hold* [emphasis added] for a while. For those who make these claims, I have one simple question: How long should we wait? How long should America put its future on hold?

Here, the lack of concerted effort is seen as an unnecessary interruption in the nation’s progress. In effect, those who would deviate from the pathway utilize the lack of movement (“gridlock”) to justify a further lack of movement, thus putting the goal of the journey at risk. As he framed it,

You see, Washington has been telling us to *wait* [emphasis added] for decades, even as the problems have grown worse. Meanwhile, China’s not waiting to revamp its economy. Germany’s not waiting. India’s not waiting. These nations are—they’re *not standing still*” [emphasis added]. (Obama)

In this framing, a “revamped economy” (the goal) is being pursued by all nations; failure to move forward means being left behind. Obama made further use of this movement/slowed movement pairing when discussing trade, stating

We have to *seek* [emphasis added] new markets aggressively, just as our competitors are. If America *sits on the sidelines* [emphasis added] while other nations sign trade deals, we will lose the chance to create jobs on our shore.

Again, Obama frames the lack of movement as a loss. Thus, the success of the journey is not assured, but rather must be *won* from others that are actively seeking the same goal. As such, interruptions in the nation’s progress are a threat to the country; deviations from the path of the journey should not be allowed. The inevitable slowdowns that accompany the democratic process are thus framed as frivolous, with individuals in Congress halting progress “just because they can” (Obama). In pursuing the nation’s goals, dissent is a diversion that the country cannot afford.

Obama typically framed issues that would disrupt or slow progress along the journey as “obstacles,” or “weight.” For example, the national debt was framed as a “mountain” and the deficit was called a “massive fiscal hole in which we find ourselves” (Obama, 2010). These are geographic obstacles that delay movement (such as one might find on a path). Other political

and social factors that might slow movement were described as having weight that could “burden” individuals and families. As [Obama](#) stated,

This recession has also compounded the *burdens* [emphasis added] that America’s families have been dealing with for decades: the burden of working harder and longer for less, of being unable to save enough to retire or help kids with college.

Here he argues that the same burdens that are slowing the nation’s progress are similarly affecting individual citizens, symbolically connecting the fate of the nation to those of American families. This cluster of metaphors provides valuable insight into Obama’s political ideology, particularly as it pertains to his view on the role of government. While Obama framed political and social obstacles as burdensome weights that slow America’s progress, he also implied that these burdens could be shared, thus lessening the impact of such impediments. Specifically, he argued that it is the role of the government to lessen such burdens, stating, “it is precisely to *relieve the burden* [emphasis added] on middle class families that we still need health insurance reform” and “I *take my share* [emphasis added] of the blame for not explaining it more clearly to the American people” ([Obama](#)). In another example of this, [Obama](#) stated “what the American people hope, what they deserve, is for all of us, Democrats and Republicans, to work through our differences, to *overcome the numbing weight* [emphasis added] of our politics.” Through concerted effort and the sharing of burdens, America can “deliver on [its] promise” ([Obama](#)) of continuous prosperity and growth.

Obama’s use of slowed-movement metaphors combined with his use of the journey metaphor to frame what he considers ideal political action: a concerted effort to improve the lives of the citizenry. They are also indicative of his perception on the role of the executive. The following section will discuss the implications of the metaphors that Obama utilized and how they provide insight into his views on the proper role of the presidency.

Implications

In his 2010 State of the Union Address Obama both set the initial tone for his administration and revealed his perspective on the role of the presidency. By referring to political action as “movement,” Obama has managed to frame himself as the arbiter of what direction that movement should take. This is especially true in the case of Obama’s usage of “journey” metaphors. To use a metaphor, if the nation is progressing along a journey, Obama views himself as the navigator whose job it is to discern the correct path for the nation’s movement, removing burdens and barriers that might slow progress while also reining in the forces of disorder and stagnation. He views himself as charged with pointing the country in the correct direction and redirecting those who wander from the “true” path. This perspective carries with it important implications. First, the navigator of a journey possesses unique insight and expertise. As [Obama](#) (2010) stated, “when I ran for President, I promised I wouldn’t just do what was popular; I would do what was necessary.” He/she is familiar with the path being traveled and, therefore, makes more accurately informed judgments than their charges. Second, because of his/her unique insight, the path that he/she sets is *ideal*; any deviation from it is, at best, a setback. This view could conceivably lead Obama to discount alternative perspectives (e.g. his view that political opponents were blocking legislation simply because they could). However, as the navigator, Obama is also responsible for ensuring that *all* followers arrive at the proper destination. His view that movement should be a concerted effort indicates willingness to

compromise on subtle shifts in direction while maintaining the overall thrust of the journey. As he stated, “on some issues, there are simply philosophical differences that will always cause us to part ways....They’re the very essence of our democracy” (Obama). Yet he continued, stating, “We were sent here to serve our citizens, not our ambitions. So let’s show the American people that we can do it together” (Obama). For Obama, the “ambitions” of individual politicians should be put aside in service to a larger purpose, i.e. America’s journey. And, as navigator, Obama viewed himself as ultimately responsible for guiding the nation and ensuring that the entire country travel the pathway together.

Through the consistent use of movement metaphors—particularly the journey metaphor—President Obama has attempted to frame the political process as a confluence of movements toward a goal. This is unsurprising given his past rhetorical efforts. Obama utilized the journey metaphor to great effect during his 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention and throughout his campaign for the presidency (Rowland & Jones, 2007; Darsey, 2009). By continuing to employ this family of metaphors, Obama both remained consistent with his past rhetorical efforts and established the tone of his new administration. Policies that Obama supported were framed as movement along the path of the nation’s journey; policies he opposed slowed the progress of this journey. Because Obama made such extensive use of the journey metaphor it is worth investigating in further detail.

The archetypal nature of the journey metaphor lends it great rhetorical force (Darsey, 2009). As an archetypal metaphor, “journey” transcends time and culture, resonating with individuals at a deep, subconscious level (see Osborn, 1967). Furthermore, the journey metaphor finds a uniquely receptive audience in the American public due to their tendency to favor a progressive view of history (Darsey, 2009). Therefore, it is no great leap for citizens to view politics as a sort of vehicle guiding the nation along the path to its “destiny.”

In addition to being an archetypal metaphor, “journey” is also a decidedly teleological metaphor (Darsey, 2009). As Darsey states, “the element that distinguishes journey from mere movement, is purpose” (p.90). Furthermore, a journey typically has a transcendent purpose or goal. The echoes of this can be felt throughout American political discourse, from the Founders’ desire for a more perfect union, to the 19th century concept of Manifest Destiny. In light of the historical weight behind the journey metaphor it perhaps comes as little surprise that Obama would choose to invoke it during such a critical time. The economic collapse had left many American’s feeling deeply pessimistic about the future of the economy. By utilizing the journey metaphor, Obama was able to frame it as a temporary slowdown in the national march toward growth and prosperity. As he stated,

we have finished a difficult year. We have come through a difficult decade. But a new year has come. A new decade stretches before us....Let’s seize this moment to start anew, to carry the dream forward, and to strengthen our Union once more. (Obama, 2010)

For Obama, the catastrophic nature of the collapse was not enough to bring a permanent halt to the nation’s progress. While this is a comforting sentiment, it also carries with it certain ideological assumptions.

Framing the nation’s history as a journey implies both a progressive view of history and a belief in the *ameliorative* character of historic advancement. As the nation advances it is

transformed into a better, more just land. As such, progress is seen as a moral imperative that, in Obama's speech, is represented by specific policy decisions. For example, when speaking of the need for healthcare reform, [Obama](#)(2010) stated, "I took on health care because of the stories I've heard from Americans with preexisting conditions whose lives depend on getting coverage." He continued, stating "after nearly a century of trying...we are closer than ever to bringing more security to the lives of so many Americans" ([Obama](#)). Regardless of one's position on a particular policy, the choice to frame a piece of legislation in moral terms (i.e. lives at stake) carries with it troubling implications. By couching a policy debate in moral terms, participants run the risk of having political contests devolve into intractable moral conflicts (see [Freeman, Littlejohn, & Pearce](#), 1992). In such a climate, voices of dissent can be (and often are) framed as a threat to moral order or, in this particular instance, threats to Americans' lives. However, the ubiquity of the journey metaphor in American political discourse often causes this "dark side" of the metaphor to go unnoticed.

In addition to having moral implications, journeys are also singular affairs that are not easily abandoned. They require that one travel along a specific path; deviating from it can prove disastrous. Ontologically, once an audience member internalizes a journey metaphor they implicitly accept that deviating from it is foolish, if not dangerous. The calamity that might befall the nation if it deviates from its journey thus strikes at the core of the American psyche. Consider this passage from the Old Testament in which the Israelites are rebuked for deviating from the path God set for them:

Because I have called and you refused,
I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded,
Because you disdained all my counsel,
And would have none of my rebuke,
I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when your terror comes,
When your terror comes like a storm,
And your destruction comes like a whirlwind,
When distress and anguish come upon you. (Proverbs 1:24-27)

[Obama](#)(2010) similarly points to the danger of disregarding the journey, stating when you try to do big things and make big changes, it stirs passions and controversy.... Those of us in public office can respond to this reality by playing it safe.... We can do what's necessary to keep our poll numbers high... instead of doing what's best for the next generation. But I also know this: If people had made that decision 50 years ago or 100 years ago or 200 years ago, *we wouldn't be here tonight* [emphasis added].

For Obama, failure to traverse the journey's pathway would not merely prove unwise, but would actually pose an existential threat to the nation. As such, the journey towards a more perfect union is necessary for national survival.

While the exact end-goal of the journey may be ambiguous, the *a priori* assumption that the nation is indeed progressing is implicit in the use of journey metaphors. Once the terministic screen of a journey has been established, one may have difficulty accounting for the possibility of alternative approaches to an issue. Deviations from the path or (even more so) questioning the end-goal of the journey are seen as a threat to the people traversing the pathway. As a result,

questions as to whether the idea of progressive/ameliorative history are actually in service to the nation, or rather form a hindrance that prevents introspection and debate, cansadly go unheeded.

Conclusions

The financial crisis left many in America feeling a loss of control over their future. At the time of his address, the economic climate was chaotic and many feared for the future of the nation. The extensiveness of the collapse, and the confusion surrounding its cause, would seem to have invited the strategic use of metaphors by politicians. This would serve to make the issue more accessible to a lay public. However, an overreliance on metaphors runs the danger of allowing those metaphors to stand in the place of reasoned discourse. Furthermore, once an audience member accepts a metaphor it acts as a terministic screen, framing their understanding of an issue while simultaneously disallowing alternative understandings. By using movement metaphors—particularly the journey metaphor—Obama attempted to create an image of order amid chaos. The collapse of the economy was framed as a speed bump, slowing—but not halting—the nation’s progress towards its destiny. This would be a comforting image for a public suffering a crisis of confidence. However, the ideology that supports the journey metaphor (i.e. a progressive/ameliorative view of history) and the accompanying propensity forcouching the end-goal of the journey in moral terms runs the risk of creating intractable divisions among a shakenpopulace.

In addition to addressing the economic collapse, Obama also utilized the State of the Union Address to set the policy tone for his new administration. He framed policies with which he agreed as aids to national progress; policies with which he disagreed were framed as deviations. Furthermore, Obama revealed his view that government should have an active role in American social and economic life. For Obama, it is the government’s job to alleviate the burdens that affect the citizenry so that America can deliver on its promise of an overall better society. Even so, his extensive use of the journey metaphor runs the risk of creating further divisions within an already polarized public. Future research will show whether Obamaremaind consistent throughout his presidency with the generating metaphors that characterized his early rhetoric. Regardless, his first official State of the Union retains its import as it set the initial tone of his administration.

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