

Cal Poly Humboldt

Digital Commons @ Cal Poly Humboldt

Communication 300 Papers

Student and Alumni Works

Fall 2022

Rhetorical Analysis of Choosing to go to the Moon "and do the Other Things"

Skyler M. Kona
classicskyler@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/comm300>



Part of the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kona, Skyler M., "Rhetorical Analysis of Choosing to go to the Moon "and do the Other Things"" (2022).
Communication 300 Papers. 3.
<https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/comm300/3>

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student and Alumni Works at Digital Commons @ Cal Poly Humboldt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication 300 Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Cal Poly Humboldt. For more information, please contact kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu.

**Rhetorical Analysis of Choosing to go to the Moon “and
do the Other Things”**

Skyler Kona

Cal Poly Humboldt

Communication 300: American Public Discourse

Dr. Armeda C. Reitzel

Fall Semester 2022

Step 1: The rhetorical situation

The year is 1962. America is in the middle of the Space Race against the Soviet Union, and was losing. The Soviet Union had a massive head start, having already launched the world's first man made satellite, Sputnik, as well as already having sent the first man into outer space. To the public, it seemed like the Space Race had a clear victor. To the president, the race had only just begun.

The president at the time was John F. Kennedy, and he wanted to bring his country back into the game in order to finally have some standing in the Space Race, and to get something monumental done. Speaking with members of his cabinet, a path to such a monumental achievement was made clear: landing a man on the moon, and, crucially, bringing him back again safely, before anyone else could. This idea was not initially met with the highest of praises, with a significant amount of congress and the general public opposed to the idea. And yet, work began on making the idea a reality, including beginning construction on a new facility in Houston, Texas. This new facility would eventually be completed and known as the JSC, or the Johnson Space Center.

In the midst of these events, Kennedy visited Rice University in Houston, which had provided crucial support that allowed the construction of the Space Center. With the public convinced that the Soviet Union would win the Space Race, and the desire for the U.S. to bring itself back into the race, and with a lackluster approval rate of Kennedy's plans for the moon, Kennedy delivered a speech that ended up becoming what is one of the most memorable and widely recognized speeches in U.S. history. The speech is officially titled the “Address at Rice University on the Nation's Space Effort”, but today, it is more widely known by its most memorable line, “We choose to go to the Moon”.

Step 2: Rhetorical interpretation of the speech

Kennedy does a lot of things right with this speech. For starters, he is able to recognize the fact that the Soviet Union was, at the time, clearly ahead. Without naming it directly, Kennedy is able to mention that the country is “in need” of knowledge, progress, and strength, “for we meet in an hour of change and challenge, in a decade of hope and fear, in an age of both knowledge and ignorance.” It was important that Kennedy mentioned the negative aspects of the situation at the time, because it helps to bring a better idea as to what exactly is needed to accomplish this task. In other words, it clearly demonstrates significant parts of his plan, and the steps the country needs to take to see it through.

Following his introduction, which focused mainly on acknowledging the situation, Kennedy does something very interesting. “Condense, if you will, the 50,000 years of man's recorded history in a time span of but a half a century.” Fifty thousand years is very difficult for an ordinary person to properly wrap their head around. It is a ridiculously long period of time, which also represents roughly the amount of time humanity has existed in a notable state. Since then, obviously, humanity has made plenty of monumental achievements that would forever define the rest of human history after them. By condensing this entire chapter of history into something more easily understandable, Kennedy was able to make numerous comparisons between when said monumental achievements were actually made, and when they would have been made if humanity only existed for fifty years, which fits comfortably within the average expected lifespan, and is therefore much easier to comprehend. Using this new measurement of time, Kennedy brings up plenty of interesting ideas, starting immediately by saying that “we know very little about the first 40 years”, which is an impressive way to demonstrate just how long humanity has existed. Now working with only the last ten years, Kennedy mentions how the wheel would have been invented five years ago, the beginning of Christianity two years ago, the

invention of the printing press less than a year ago, steam engines arriving two months ago, the discovery of penicillin last week, and incredibly, “if America's new spacecraft succeeds in reaching Venus, we will have literally reached the stars before midnight tonight.”

This is an attempt to bring to attention the relatively extremely rapid pace at which humanity has evolved and grown over history. After Kennedy's remarks with those few sentences, it is easy to compare all that growth to that of a typical exponential growth graph, with a slow start but an accelerated rise later. With this idea, Kennedy has efficiently demonstrated to the listeners that we were in the midst of this rise, and by placing the time frame of the next achievement to “before midnight tonight”, it would probably leave the audience in awe about what was yet to come. And all of this happens before Kennedy actually describes what is yet to come.

With this, Kennedy brings his attention back to the goal at hand, reaching the Moon. According to Kennedy, “the eyes of the world now look into space, to the moon and to the planets beyond,” which, if one is to follow his reasoning for condensing humanity's history into fifty years, brings a heightened sense of urgency and rush. This is the next step of humanity's advancement into the future, and if the U.S. wished to remain a major player in that future, just as it had when it led “the first waves of the industrial revolutions, the first waves of modern invention, and the first wave of nuclear power,” then the next step was made clear: lead the world into space as Kennedy suggests.

Kennedy makes multiple comparisons between space and the ocean. While the space and the ocean are similar in that they are both vast and mysterious, Kennedy mostly mentions the means at which we travel through them. Specifically, because we have already successfully learned how to travel the ocean, it gives the idea that this next step forward will only remain a challenge for so long before we too conquer it. When Kennedy says “We set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained...”, the direct comparison between space and the sea serves as another way in which the audience can comprehend and understand the challenge, yet also the feasibility, of this next step forward.

Following this, Kennedy asks the question of “why?” To demonstrate the reasoning for this plan, Kennedy brings up a few other feats of humanity, and asks the same question. “Why climb the highest mountain? Why, 35 years ago, fly the Atlantic?” The answer follows immediately after, in one of the most memorable spoken lines in U.S. history. “We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.”

There is a lot to unpack in that statement, starting with how he brings up things we have already done, about climbing mountains and flying the Atlantic. Comparing a Moon mission to those things gives the idea that this plan just naturally follows. As a matter of fact, Kennedy groups the idea of a Moon mission with these other achievements directly. One can easily make jokes about how unprofessional “do the other things” sounds, but in the context of the speech, it is directly grouping the Moon mission with things humanity has already done, which could be reassuring to members of the audience who may still be concerned about the feasibility of the plan. And the feasibility of said plan is still in question, as Kennedy specifically states that they are hard, but crucially, a lot of them have already been done. So not only is this line memorable, it is also reassuring. It also demonstrates another purpose of the Moon mission, which is that it will bring out the best in the country, and to “organize and measure the best of our energies and skills”.

Following this, Kennedy mentions how far we have already come, and how far we have yet to go, in making his plan a reality. In mentioning how far we have yet to go, Kennedy says “To be sure, we are behind, and will be behind for some time in manned flight. But we do not intend to stay behind, and in this decade, we shall make up and move ahead.” In mentioning how far we have already come, Kennedy mentions the benefits space related actions have already had on the economy, in creating new jobs, in starting new companies, “while still in its infancy”. Together, this helps add more reasoning to go forward with the plan: both to pull ahead of the Soviet Union, and to see what other benefits the space programs could add to the country.

Later, Kennedy also addresses the cost of the mission, explaining how expensive it will be, and how expensive it already is. But Kennedy believes that this cost is part of the process, and indicates that he seems to lump it in with the things that would make this mission “and the other things” hard, as well as his intent to continue forward with his unwillingness to postpone the mission, as he had stated earlier. The main purpose of the speech as a whole is to convince the listeners to join him in this commitment, and to watch humanity's next big achievement with America leading them.

Finally, Kennedy quotes British explorer George Mallory, who wished to climb Mount Everest “because it is there.” Taking direct inspiration from the quote, Kennedy says “space is there, and we're going to climb it”. One of the easiest comparisons to understand, yet also one of the most descriptive. It is a clear one-to-one relation. Somebody finds a challenge, and simply wishes to overcome it. Therefore, when America finds this challenge, they wish to overcome it. And after the entire speech preceding this moment, perhaps the audience is convinced that going to space in this matter really is the right way forward, because it, like Mount Everest, is there.

Step 3: The impact

The impact of this speech was not initially great. There were concerns about mainly the cost of Kennedy's plan, especially how it would pull from military funding during a time when America was still competing with the Soviet Union on a number of things. However, slowly, the impact and legacy of the speech would reveal itself overtime.

Specifically, the plan was completed. The Moon mission was a success. In 1969, the Apollo 11 mission was successful in landing the first people on the Moon. The Moon landing is widely recognized as one of humanity's most historic achievements, as well as proof that Kennedy's plan was feasible and monumental. Kennedy himself was not alive to see this mission completed, but the legacy of what he had said that day is still seen today. Multiple moon landings have been completed since then, and while the next steps for where humanity goes from here are a bit uncertain at the moment, most of humanity seems to agree that wherever we decide to go next, we will choose to go there and do the other things not because they are easy, but because they are hard.

The plan may have been initially met with doubt, but the end result is beyond remarkable. As our space programs continue to look to the future, they too look back at this speech with how efficiently it was able to speak to the curiosity and determination of all of humanity, and how inspiring it would eventually become to those who take part in the next achievements. Kennedy's speech remains one of the most recognizable speeches in U.S. history today.

References:

The speech: *Address at Rice University on the Nation's Space Effort* | JFK Library. (John F. Kennedy, 1962, September 12). <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/address-at-rice-university-on-the-nations-space-effort>

Book on the topic: *Journey to Tranquility* (Hugo Young, Bryan Silcock, Peter M. Dunn, 1969). <https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/2733747-journey-to-tranquility>

Guide on rhetorical analysis: *SAGE Books - The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts*. (Deanna D. Sellnow, 2020, January 9). <https://sk.sagepub.com/books/the-rhetorical-power-of-popular-culture-3e>

(This paper was originally written for a class assignment, and was complete with a full slideshow presentation to present to the class. While the presentation was made to be more comedic in nature than this paper, it may still be noteworthy to link to a video recording of that presentation. Should the reader of this paper be interested in a visual representation of the information written here, they can go to this link: <https://youtu.be/XUVg8pipYTg>)