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PAF 9199: Civic and Political Speech-Making

***Vice President Joe Biden’s Eulogy for NYPD Officer Rafael Ramos***

Introduction to the Speech

Vice President Joseph Biden, which will be referred to as Joe Biden going forward, was one of the speakers that delivered a eulogy for slain New York Police Officer Rafael Ramos. Ramos’ funeral service was held on December 27, 2014 at Christ Tabernacle Church in the borough of Queens. Prominent New York City officials in attendance included Mayor DiBlasio, Police Commissioner William Bratton, and Governor Andrew Cuomo (Martinez and Cava).

The funeral service for Rafael Ramos was of great importance in the city, especially for the New York Police Department. The NYPD wanted to pay full respect to the murdered officer who died so tragically and unexpectedly. Ramos funeral service was a public event which was covered by all media sources on the local and national level. Ramos was one of the two officers murdered in Brooklyn as a reaction to the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. The deaths of these African Americans under police custody was not only the subject of heavy debate but caused great tension and mistrust toward the police, especially in the black and Latino communities.

In this paper, the genre of the speech and the media’s treatment of it will be discussed in detail. The discussion begins with some background information on who Joe Biden is and the events that led to the delivery of this eulogy for Police Officer Rafael Ramos.

Background: Joe Biden

Joseph Biden is the Vice President of the United States of America. His political career is marked as being one of the youngest people ever elected to the Senate; he was only 29 years old (White House Administration). According to the White House Administration page, Biden served as the Senator, representing the state of Delaware, for 36 years prior to being elected Vice President. During his time in the Senate his work revolved around issues such as criminal justice, US foreign policy, weapons of mass destruction and terrorism (White House Administration).

Joe Biden has continued to work on issues he feels strongly about during his Vice Presidency. During the economic crisis, he was amongst those who worked on implementing and overseeing the stimulus package known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The Ready to Work Initiative, led by the Vice President, is “the Administration’s key effort to identify opportunities to improve our nation’s workforce skills and training systems to help better prepare American workers for the jobs of a 21st century economy” (White House Administration). Biden has also worked on the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act and is the Chair of the Middle Class Task Force, which seeks to raise the living standards of the middle class (White House Administration).

Background: Rafael Ramos’ Death Is Part of a ‘Bigger’ Issue

Essentially, this speech is a eulogy for NYPD Officer Rafael Ramos. However, there’s more to this eulogy than paying respect to a fallen police officer. Ramos was one of two police officers murdered, unexpectedly, in their patrol car. Neither Ramos nor his partner, Wenjian Liu, were anticipating their murder as they were shot point-blank multiple times while sitting in their car in Brooklyn, a few days shy of the December holiday season. The suspect committed suicide in a nearby subway station afterwards. Prior to shooting both officers, the suspect, Ismaaiyl Brinsley, had shot his girlfriend in Baltimore. After that incident, he posted a cryptic message on his Instagram account stating, “I’m Putting Wings on Pigs Today. They Take 1 of Ours…Let’s take 2 of Theirs #ShootThePolice #RIPEricGarner #RIPMikeBrown” (Mueller).

Michael Brown and Eric Garner were both African American men who were killed under police custody. Brown was unarmed and shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Garner died in Staten Island, New York after being placed in an illegal chokehold by a police officer. These deaths sparked a debate on both the local and national level on the excessive force used by police, specifically against minorities. Protests followed as people were angered by the fact that both police officers were not indicted or charged in their respective states (Mueller).

The fact that Brinsley justified killing police officers intensified the debate not only amongst New York residents but also New York City public figures. Mayor DiBlasio received severe disapproval and backlash from many NYPD officers and leadership of the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association because “he has stressed the rights of protesters to express themselves and spoken of his personal experience instructing his biracial son, Dante, to ‘take special care’ during any police encounters” (Mueller). While the mayor has made every effort to support the work police officers perform, the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association’s leader, Patrick Lynch, has been very vocal on casting blame on DiBlasio for the murder of the NYPD officers: “That blood on the hands starts on the steps of City Hall, in the office of the mayor” (Mueller).

The funeral service for Rafael Ramos was a big event considering it was a funeral. Many politicians and law enforcement officials were in attendance representing not only New York City but the federal government as well. For this reason, Vice President Joe Biden was amongst the political figures to deliver a eulogy for Rafael Ramos. A representative from the Federal government was necessary because while Ramos was from New York City, the use of excessive police force towards minorities was evident in other states, therefore making it a national issue. While Ramos had no reputation of using excessive force, his death, as well as that of his partner’s, made them martyrs. Their deaths symbolize how innocent and good police officers also die in the hands of citizens, and why police officers in New York are important. On the other hand, some felt that while the deaths of the officers were tragic and unjustified, it could “’tarnish’ the campaign against police brutality that has swept the city (NYC)” as Brooklyn borough president, Eric Adams explained (Mueller).

Background: Joe Biden’s Eulogy Speechwriter

Matt Teper was appointed as the Speechwriter for the Vice President in 2009 but it’s not certain if he wrote the eulogy given at Ramos’ funeral.

An Analysis of Genre and Arrangement: Eulogy

Aristotle identifies epideictic speeches as an example of genre. Epideictic speeches are delivered in ceremonial occasions, meant to commemorate something, whether it be a person, place, or event (Hoffman). Eulogies, in general, consist of the same arrangement; praise for the deceased, lamentation, consolation for the living, and almost always close with a form of exhortation (Hoffman). The Eulogy delivered by Joe Biden follows this same arrangement with anecdotes of civil religion and a celebration of shared values.

The Vice President opens the eulogy with a formal salutation to New York City elected officials and the Ramos Family. From this point forward, the typical arrangement of a eulogy is highlighted through story-telling; making reference to his own experiences. Biden establishes a connection to the family of the deceased by drawing on his own personal experience of losing a loved one. Biden lost his first wife and one child in a car accident many years ago (White House Administration). While he never mentions who died, how or when, he makes reference to this in his expressions of lamentation and consolation to the family. Examples of lamentation are noted in the beginning of the eulogy “I know from personal experience that there is little anyone can say or do at this moment to ease the pain, that sense of loss, that sense of loneliness” and again in “…I know from experience there are no words that I can offer to ease that profound sense of loneliness and loss you’re feeling right now” (Biden). He continues with the same tactic in expressing consolation, “But I also know from experience that the time will come…when Rafael’s memory will bring a smile to your lips before it brings a tear to your eyes” (Biden).

As is typical arrangement in this genre of rhetoric, Biden’s eulogy continues to the next section in which he begins to praise Rafael Ramos. Biden’s praise towards the deceased is evident when he describes Ramos’ character, “he cared about his family” and “…we were all lucky to have Rafael. He didn’t just have a bible in his locker, he lived it in his heart. He was a cop for all the right reasons.” Atypical in Biden’s eulogy is that he doesn’t stick to the arrangement in that specific order of praise, lamentation, then consolation. He jumps from one to the next in no specific order. The first quote in which he praises Ramos for caring about his loved ones was stated in the beginning while the second was mentioned towards the end of the eulogy.

Consolation for those that continue living is noted towards the end of the speech in which

Ramos’ mother, widow, and children are being addressed. Biden’s words are as follows:

“Mom, we owe you for nurturing him. And Martiza, we owe you for supporting him. And Justin and Jayden, know that although your father is gone, you have inherited an entire family, the men and women of the New York Police Department will always be there as long as you are alive.”

The eulogy closes with a form of exhortation in which the Vice President makes reference to a church communion hymn in order to highlight Ramos’ wishes for his children and the city of New York. Lastly, he ends the eulogy by stating may god bless the Ramos and Liu Families, the precinct both officers belong to, and the nation.

What Biden has done brilliantly throughout the eulogy is make reference to the shared values and civil religion of the New York Police Department in describing Ramos’ character. Shared values are commonly held values which are also embodied by the deceased. Civil religion ties right into shared values as it can be thought of as values that form tradition (Hoffman). Biden’s use of these two topics throughout the eulogy makes this speech relevant to New York City life and politics.

The civil religion or traditional values exemplified by the NYPD are that police officers are here to protect and to serve the people. Becoming a police officer has its risks and for this reason it’s not something that anyone or everyone signs up to do. Biden makes reference to this on a number of occasions throughout the eulogy. For example, “They were there to protect and defend, as they always are.” Biden delivered these words when he described what both Ramos and Liu (his partner) were doing on the morning they were killed. They were simply doing their job. Not only does Biden address the idea of being a police officer, but he also identifies the family of police officers as being brave, “…police families are a different breed-thank God for them” (Biden).

As mentioned above, Biden identifies the characteristics the NYPD through the use of shared values and civil religion. There is section in the speech where he addresses the identity of the city of New York. Biden states that New York is a great city, an intimidating one, where so many different people come in contact with each other. In doing so, Biden wanted to show the strength of the city despite the obstacles it has had to deal with. This is a very subtle hint in which Biden is talking to the city, letting the city know, they will overcome this tragedy (the death of two innocent police officers) and the larger issue it is involved in (the tension/distrust some feel toward the police).

Media Treatment

The purpose of Biden’s eulogy couldn’t be any clearer; it was meant to pay tribute to a man who was so unexpectedly murdered. Overall the media had a good reaction to Biden’s eulogy and it was received with praise. The media’s coverage of the speech didn’t alter the meaning. Vice President Biden made it very clear that despite the fact he didn’t know Ramos personally, he was paying his respects because he was a man that deserved that type of respect. The Huffington Post’s article was titled “Joe Biden Delivers Touching Eulogy for Slain NYPD Cop”. The word “touching” needs no further explanation.

James Warren, a writer for the New York Post, titled his article “Joe Biden’s wonderful eulogy at a moment of national mourning.” While the Huffington Post’s article was brief, Warren’s article in the New York Post goes into a little more detail as to why Biden did such an excellent job with this eulogy. Warren writes, “For a man who occasionally stands guilty of rhetorical overreach and imprecision, he hit all the right and compelling notes on this day---and avoided all the unceasing and divisive background noise.” The background noise that Warren references is that of political noise. Not once in his eulogy did Biden advise the NYPD or the people of New York that they needed to improve their relationship. Not once did he mention any political officials, leaders, or issues. His eulogy only addressed Ramos and what he represented, nothing more, nothing less. Warren continued to state that Biden hit the right points as his eulogy captured the essence of police work and what their families feel. Most importantly, “The notion of “not what they did…but who they were” was nifty (Warren). Warren characterized this speech as one of the best given at a moment of national mourning.

The absence of political noise in Biden’s speech was widely accepted because he was the only speaker that kept politics out of it! Police officers who attended the funeral turned their backs on Mayor DiBlasio due to the statement he told his son (Bobic). This tension was obvious at the funeral service. Governor Cuomo was also very vocal in his support of the NYPD and how threats would not be tolerated (Newman). Lynch, from the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association also took a political stance since the murders occurred by stating it was the Mayor’s fault (Mueller). Again, these political figures didn’t separate the politics from the funeral service like Biden did. That aspect is what received such great praise and acceptance from the media.

The fact that Biden delivered the eulogy was also received well by the media. The Vice President was described as being the more “fitting choice” over President Obama to deliver the eulogy (Chozick). Like DiBlasio, the president received some backlash as he expressed that protestors had the right to protest. Biden is described as being the “fitting choice" because while serving as Senator he wrote the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act in 1994 (Chozick). The purpose of this act was to create crime prevention programs, build new prisons and put more police officers on the streets, among other items (Chozick). Clearly, this act was very pro-law enforcement. For this reason, this particular writer expressed content in Obama’s selection of Biden to deliver the speech.

Ramos’ eulogy and the funeral service as a whole went viral. Clips from the service and of the eulogies were mentioned in literally every New York City news channel that day. Biden’s speech, in its entirety, was posted in various news pages and articles. There was one specific passage that resonated in the press as it was quoted often. This is the passage that highlights the essence of being a police officer, it begins with “Being a cop was not what they did; it was who they were…” While these are only parts of the speech, they embody what the entire speech meant to address.

Conclusion

Vice President Joe Biden was one of the few individuals that delivered a eulogy for the murdered NYPD Officer, Rafael Ramos. The deaths of Rafael Ramos and his partner were closely intertwined to the larger issue of the use of excessive force by the police towards minorities, not only in New York but in other states. The funeral service for Officer Ramos was highly covered by the media. The eulogy delivered by Biden was well-received. While this eulogy touched upon the usual topics covered in such a speech (praise, lamentation, consolation and exhortation) it was free of political associations or call to action. For this reason, the eulogy received a great response from the media. Biden’s eulogy paid respect and praise not only to the deceased but also to the NYPD and the strength and known characteristics of the city of New York.

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