Introduction

The concession speech to Barack Obama made by presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton in 2008 created the perfect piece of rhetoric to be critically explored. This is self-evident because it clearly meets all five of the criteria Stoner and Perkins (2005) use to define rhetoric: “Rhetoric typically addresses public audiences . . . is purposeful . . . responds to and creates more or less obvious social concerns . . . relies on verbal and nonverbal symbols [and] . . . shapes the way people think, act, believe and feel” (p. 2-5). By analyzing this speech using the method of ideological criticism, applying the ideas of theorists such as Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Jurgen Habermas, and postmodern feminist theorist bell hooks, social truths underlying the message became clear. I claim this artifact functioned as an effective means of perpetuating Democratic ideology, which supports a progressive feminist role. To begin, a brief context explaining the rhetor’s background shows the circumstances leading up to this speech. A summary of the actual speech illustrates the essential elements of its argument, followed by an analysis and interpretation of the approaches Clinton used. The conclusion clarifies the insights learned from this critical analysis.

Context

The events and circumstances preceding this speech help indicate what motivates the rhetor. On January 20, 2007, Hillary Clinton announced her intention to run for the Democratic Party’s nomination for president. Regina Lawrence and Melody Rose (2010) provide a political context outlining Clinton’s race, noting, “Hillary Clinton was an unusually well-known and
controversial political figure by the time she sought the nation’s highest office -- and a woman who had already occupied the White House in the role of First Lady” (p. 6). Collingwood, Barreto and Donovan (2012) explain the dynamics of the state-by-state primaries that comprised the often-tight race for the nomination among Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards: “Hillary Clinton was able to maintain at least a 20-point lead [in opinion polls] over Obama and Edwards throughout the entirety of 2007. Yet in the end she fell short, we argue, owing to the momentum that Obama generated.”

As a loyal Democrat, Hillary Clinton invariably promoted her party’s ideology. The Pew Research Center for People and the Press, relying on public surveys of ideological beliefs, describes liberal Democrats as “opponents of an assertive foreign policy, strong supporters of environmental protection, and solid backers of government assistance to the poor” (The 2005 Political Typology, 2005, p.7). Those on the political right, it reported, “are highly patriotic and strongly pro-business, oppose social welfare and overwhelmingly support an assertive foreign policy. This group is largely white, well-educated, affluent and male – more than three-quarters are men” (p. 4). Because Clinton was seeking the support of Democratic voters, this helps clarify what she did and did not support based on the ideologies of each party.

Hillary Clinton attended Wellesley College in 1965, helping shape her political life during the years when anti-war protests were common on college campuses. As an all-woman’s college, Wellesley helped instill the notion its girls were above the rest, but they were still expected to become good housewives and bear children (Gerth & Van Natta Jr., 2007). After Wellesley, Clinton was accepted into Harvard and Yale law schools. Choosing Yale in 1969, she focused on children’s rights, and met her future husband, Bill Clinton. “She followed a Yale Law degree with working for the House Judiciary Committee's special counsel on Richard Nixon's
impeachment, chairing the Legal Services Corp., and becoming the first female partner at a prestigious Arkansas law firm. As first lady [of Arkansas, after her husband was elected governor], her potential as a political powerhouse became apparent” (Ruggeri, 2009, p.28).

Hillary Clinton was First Lady of the United States for eight years, and in 2000 and 2006 was elected and reelected to a U.S. Senate seat from New York. All of these events led up to her race to become the Democratic nominee. So why did Clinton concede? Lawrence and Rose (2008) citing Katie Couric’s blog, explain how Couric, CBS Evening News anchor, took the news of Clinton’s concession: “However you feel about her politics, I feel that Senator Clinton received some of the most unfair, hostile coverage I’ve ever seen” (p. #).

**Description**

Clinton stood in the middle of a packed room in the National Building Museum, an edifice in Washington, D.C., dedicated to architecture and design. Her audience of campaign volunteers, Democratic activists, family, friends and staff surrounded her on the ground floor or watched from a second-floor balcony. There was extensive media coverage, including live broadcasting on many networks, so she also reached a global audience. Hillary Clinton gave her speech on June 7, 2008, choosing to concede her defeat in the nation’s capital. The speech opens with “thank yous” for the support she received from her audience. She tells stories of her supporters across the country and their individual efforts towards her campaign. She transitions to her vision and why she wanted to become the Democratic nominee. This vision, she explains, is the same vision Barack Obama, a fellow U.S. senator, has. She endorses him and offers her full support in his race to be elected president. She defines many of the desires Americans have and explains how the Democratic Party can help achieve them. Clinton, who had avoided discussing her gender during the campaign, then talks about being a woman who ran for
president, and offers a short history lesson about the progression of civil rights and women's voting rights. She explains that the actions of women before her made her campaign possible. The speech concludes with a call to action to support “Senator Obama and his campaign.”

**Analysis**

The arguments made in this speech will be analyzed and explained by using ideological theory and feminist theory. Simpson (1993) explains from a critical linguist’s perspective, “dominant ideologies operate as a mechanism for maintaining asymmetrical power relations in society” (p. 6). Stoner & Perkins (2005) define the terms necessary to talk about ideological theory: “[Hegemony] refers to the everyday means by which a dominant belief system, practice, custom, or people prevails within a culture. By contrast marginalization refers to those beliefs, practices and custom that are often overlooked, discarded, ignored, or explicitly oppressed” (p. 240). Two more terms to understand in regards to hegemony are legitimation and naturalization. Legitimation is defined as “the process whereby a political order’s worthiness is recognized as just and right” (Haberman, 1976, pp. 178-79, as cited by Stoner & Perkins, p. 242). Naturalization is “the portrayal of beliefs, customs, practices and so on as coming from nature, the ‘natural way’” (p. 244). One more approach will be used to analyze this artifact: feminist theory. Foss, Foss & Griffin (1999) note that feminist theorist bell hooks has written that feminism looks not only at issues of domination but at ways that gender, race and class are interrelated in oppression (Foss, Foss & Griffin, 1999, p. 78). Having defined these search-model tools, we can now apply ideological criticism to Hillary Clinton’s concession speech.

“Marxism held that all of human experience, from religion to politics to morality to art to entertainment, was ultimately determined by a culture’s economic base, rooted in its ‘mode of production’” (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 239). From a Marxist perspective, Clinton perpetuates
the beliefs of the Democratic Party by accepting the nation’s capitalistic modes of production. The party relies on its members to help generate money to sustain it. With the help and support Hillary received throughout her campaign, she’s perpetuating a party system that relies on a strong economic base. The ideals put forth by the Democratic Party must support the nation’s economic foundations to avoid upsetting fundamental political systems. Hegemonic tools in the speech perpetuate a patriarchal system even as Clinton ostensibly challenges it.

When Clinton uses the term ‘we’ she is creating commonality, moreover creating interdependence among her, her constituents and the Democratic Party to support Barack Obama – who ultimately would become the 44th consecutive male to achieve the presidency. Rushworth Kidder (2003) sheds light on the American dilemma of individuality and independence versus community and interdependence: “Individualism underlay the entire process by which the American frontier became a nation. But community stood for everything the new nation longed to become” (p. 125). This is relevant in our analysis because Clinton has a back-and-forth conversation with her audience as individuals who also function as a community, and as Americans who function as a nation. Audience members may have wanted to elect the first woman president for a variety of individual reasons, but they will collectively vote for a different outcome.

To bridge these poles of individuality and of nation she uses language such as, “We all want to restore America’s standing in the world,” and, “We all want an America defined by deep and meaningful equality.” Through this language, hegemonically she perpetuates American ideals. She legitimizes the Democratic Party as the best party to help the collective good. Also when Clinton uses specific language such as “a more perfect union,” or, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are rights that belong to us as individuals,” she uses iconic words as symbols to make
her argument seem more natural. The notion that all people deserve life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness limits the audience’s criticism of her position because Americans believe those are God-given rights and thus are natural.

There are also ideological assumptions about gender. Clinton is forced to confront this sex inequality because she is a woman running for the Democratic Party nomination. She has to fight the gender stereotype of being unable to protect our country because she is a woman. She was depicted in the media as a woman among men, and the media held her to a different standard than the other candidates because running for president is a man’s arena (Lawrence & Rose). She addresses this numerous times in her speech when she talks about parents encouraging their children to be “whatever they want to be” or says, “I ran as a daughter who benefited from opportunities my mother never dreamed of,” and, finally, “Because of them [female trailblazers] and because of you, children today will grow up taking for granted that an African-American or a woman can, yes, become the President of the United States. And so when that day arrives, and a woman takes the oath of office as our president, we will all stand taller.” Her statements naturalize and legitimize the equality of women in politics. Because Hillary is a Democrat, the Democratic Party is legitimized despite her loss. Her authority in being a woman who came so far establishes the legitimacy of the good the Democratic Party has done, because she has overcome the odds. Even though the party is turning its back on her by supporting a man, Barack Obama, she naturalizes that choice by identifying her supporters with his views.

Analysis through feminist theory is centered on the concept of patriarchy as “domination of men and male thinking and speech in the political, social, and economic structure of a culture” (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 257). Clinton talks about “young people like 13-year-old Anne Riddell,” and “Florence Stein of South Dakota who was 88 years old,” and her 18 million other
supporters at the polls “from all walks of life -- women and men, young and old, Latino and Asian, African-American and Caucasian, rich, poor and middle-class, gay and straight” who, she says, have stood by her. By talking about different types of supporters, she is diversifying the life experiences and gender of her backers. So the representation of women and men in this speech is progressive, and labels the Democratic Party as progressive. Advancing the party will advance the cause of all women because the institution supports everyone equally (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 266) – regardless of the gender of the winning Democrat.

**Interpretation**

After analyzing this speech using ideological criticism and feminist theory it is evident there are three major truths uncovered in this speech. The first is the subtle reflection of Marxist axioms. Hillary Clinton promotes the Democratic Party, thus creating an economic base for her ideology. This is necessary because without political party ideals built on a system of capitalism as well as democratic representation, government would be politically unstable and financially unsound. The second major truth uncovered is that Clinton perpetuates an ideology of gender distinctions. Because of past female trailblazers, and her own trailblazing instincts, Hillary Clinton was able to make a viable run for the Democratic nomination. Whatever its practices, the Democratic Party promotes an ideology supporting the notion it is natural that women have political rights, thus showing they are legitimate. As Clinton put it, because of her own remarkable progress, the progress of a woman presidential candidate next time will be unremarkable. The speech emphasizes difference even as it seeks to downplay it. Third, this speech reflects a postmodern view of feminism. Clinton did not marginalize anyone of either gender, but was inclusive of all groups when talking about her supporters under the labels of Democrat and feminism.
I claim this artifact functioned as an effective means of perpetuating a Democratic ideology that supports a progressive feminist role. My critique matters because it shows this artifact was trying to shape the way we think, act and feel about the Democratic Party and it creates a social concern for the way we are governed.

**Conclusion**

Hillary Clinton has come closest to being elected our first woman president. She gave her concession speech after media scrutiny, gender stereotyping and an exhaustive state-by-state primary campaign. Through my analysis I discovered she was perpetuating a Democratic ideology rooted in our political and economic systems, seeking to be inclusive of all peoples even as she identified gender distinctions. Despite perpetuating a presidential patriarchy, she put party ideology ahead of breaking the “highest, hardest” glass ceiling by seeking to persuade her supporters that the two were linked. In short, this critique described a speech, analyzed it through ideological criticism and postmodern feminist theory, interpreted its meanings and discovered it functioned as an effective means of perpetuating a Democratic ideology while supporting a progressive feminist role. This is important because carefully crafted words can shape the way we think, act and feel. As Stoner and Perkins (2005) conclude, “The more we know about the tools people use to make such significant impacts on human lives, the more we can become cautious and discerning consumers of rhetoric” (p. 9).
References


