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America's #1 Fan: A rhetorical analysis of presidential sports encomia and the symbolic power of sports in the articulation of civil religion in the United States

by

Michael Hester

Under the Direction of Mary Stuckey

**Abstract**

White House ceremonies honoring sports champions - "presidential sports encomia" - have become common events in presidential communication since the Carter Administration. In the last quarter-century, more than one hundred presidential sports encomia have taken place, with US presidents honoring both professional and intercollegiate athletes. Presidential sports encomia not only afford Chief Executives an opportunity to stand alongside champions, creating a "winner-by-association" effect, but also allow them to articulate the importance of sports in American society. Whether addressing civic responsibility, patriotism, or race relations, presidential sports encomia ultimately connect athletic achievement to American ideals. In this way, the symbolic power of sports is employed in the development and maintenance of American civil religion. Analysis of these ceremonies reveals how US presidents use the rhetorical resources of sports encomia for both their own political agendas and the larger institution of the presidency.

INDEX WORDS: Civil religion, Encomia, Presidential rhetoric, Sports

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power of sports in the articulation of civil religion in the United States

by

Michael Hester

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the College of Arts and Sciences Georgia State University

2005

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2005

America's #1 Fan: A rhetorical analysis of presidential sports encomia and the symbolic  
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by

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## **Chapter One:**

### **Introduction**

Over the last twenty-five years with increasing regularity, U.S. presidents have invited individuals and teams to the White House in order to publicly celebrate sports championships. These ceremonies – presidential sports encomia – have brought together chief executives and athletic victors together in a rhetorical moment synthesizing sports and politics. A scholarly examination of these events reveals something other than merely a commemoration of athletic achievement and political opportunism, where presidents have bolstered their own image and touted the policies of their administration. More significantly, these White House gatherings have allowed presidents to cite the efforts of sports heroes as exemplary characteristics of a national identity and, in so doing, articulate an American civil religion consistent with the institutional role of the presidency in preserving the political and social order. Rhetorical analysis of presidential sports encomia contributes to a deeper understanding of the connections between sports and politics and the importance of rhetoric in that relationship; it is also an important step in establishing communication scholarship as the appropriate field for studying the intersection of politics and sports.

The explosive growth of sports encomia in presidential address is evidence of their importance in political communication: 115 ceremonies in less than 26 years; a rate of nearly seven a year since 2000. The numbers alone, however, do not explain *what* political significance sports encomia might hold for presidents nor do they describe *how* presidents use the ceremonial occasion to speak in ways that would support their own political ends. Answering these questions requires an investigation of the individual speeches, an exploration of the words presidents have used to honor sports champions

and the cultural and political symbols employed in the celebrations. In short, rhetorical analysis is necessary for a better understanding of presidential sports encomia. My analysis of presidential sports encomia reveals the reasons why presidents honor sports champions, illuminates the political and cultural significance of the ceremonies, and details how presidential rhetoric serves these ends.

Having closely examined every instance of presidential sports encomia since the Carter Administration, I believe that these ceremonies contribute to the institution of the presidency in substantial ways. Presidential rhetoric in sports encomia has transcended the commemoration of athletic accomplishment, with presidents consistently using the moment of celebration as a springboard for discussing larger issues of American values and national unity. In expanding the focus beyond achievement on the playing field, presidents draw upon the cultural importance of sports symbolism as a means of addressing questions of national identity, individual responsibilities to the surrounding community, and sacred notions of human potential. Sports encomia have afforded presidents with opportunities to address substantive social and political questions and presidents, with greater and greater frequency, have taken advantage of those opportunities. In doing so, presidential sports encomia have supported institutional ends<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> References to “institution” or “institutional” as they concern the presidency are not meant to invoke the theories of organizational communication and the meaning of “institution” in such work. Rather, I use the term “institution” in ways that are consistent with scholars of presidential rhetoric who acknowledge that the U.S. presidency encompasses much more than the daily activities of one person. The term “institutional” refers to the duties and obligations of the President in carrying out not only those powers that are explicitly delineated in the Constitution, but also the presidential authority exercised by the Chief Executive in relationships with the Congress and the American people. My use of these terms mirrors the claims made by scholars such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Kathleen Jamieson, Martin J. Medhurst, and others cited in this project.

providing presidents with the ability to not only act as “symbolic guardian of national unity,” but to more actively proselytize on the American civil religion.

This chapter serves as an introduction to the argument. The first section provides historical background on the role of sports in the U.S. presidency. After this brief overview, the next section delves into the rhetorical aspects of the sports-politics connection, noting the features of encomium as a rhetorical genre and referencing the debates in the field of presidential communication scholarship that are relevant to my study. In addition to detailing the basic concepts of sports and presidential rhetoric addressed in the dissertation, these sections also highlight the areas of scholarship to which my examination of presidential sports encomia contributes. Following this background, I outline the research methodology employed in the study. Distinguishing “generic perspective” from an attempt to identify presidential sports encomia as a “genre” in and of itself, I argue that my use of generic analysis is both supportive of the genre methods developed by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson as well as responsive to the primary critics of their work. Aside from explaining the methods by which I examine presidential sports encomia, this section can also be understood as a defense of genre criticism as a useful tool for communication scholars. The next section is a more developed justification of my study, answering some of the potential criticisms that may be raised. For example, my choice of studying ceremonial rhetoric that does not currently receive substantial attention from mainstream news media in their coverage of the presidency is defended as consistent with the communicative theories of Louis Althusser and Michael Billig. Additionally, I justify my use of intra-agency

communications culled from presidential library archives as necessary for a more comprehensive understanding of the “public” rhetoric of presidents. Following this justification of my study is a basic outline of the dissertation chapters. Finally, concluding remarks frame the dissertation as a scholarly response to the growing influence of sports in American society and sports rhetoric in political communication.

### Historical background

With the election of George W. Bush to the U.S. presidency in 2000, the nation experienced an intersection of sports and politics heretofore unknown: someone who had been an owner of a professional sports franchise (baseball’s Texas Rangers) had ascended to the highest echelon of American government. Previous chief executives had achieved notable success in athletics, including the first President George Bush, who played first base for two Yale teams that reached the College World Series. Gerald Ford was well-known for his playing days on the gridiron for the Michigan Wolverines and Jimmy Carter boxed in the Navy. In some respects, sports and outdoors’ activity had been around the Oval Office for many decades, whether it be Teddy Roosevelt’s expressed love for hunting big game or the well-publicized football games of the Kennedy clan on the White House lawn; Franklin Roosevelt told Commissioner Kennesaw Landis that the (baseball) “game must go on” during war-time, while years later Nixon would show nearly as much passion for planning football strategy for the beloved local team as he would for the war plans in Vietnam. Even Ronald Reagan would get an early start on his status as the Great Communicator by participating in sports, calling play-by-play for Iowa football teams long before his careers in acting and politics. All of these are

examples of remote connections between sports and the presidency. But President George W. Bush's own ties add another layer to the overlap. His involvement in sports was not vicarious (as was Nixon's) or only a memory of youth (as was his father's, Ford's, and Carter's); he had been at the head of a major-league franchise right up until his decision to run for governor of Texas in the early 1990s. And even today, at the conclusion of his first term as President of the United States, he still recognizes trading Sammy Sosa as his biggest mistake.<sup>2</sup> As someone who literally gets choked up watching the Super Bowl, the presidency of George W. Bush has only intensified a more than century-old bond between presidents and sports.

To be clear, this association of politics and sports has significance beyond the administration of the 43<sup>rd</sup> President. While having been an owner in Major League Baseball may provide Bush with a unique perspective for politicians, his presidency is also simply a continuation of the sports-politics interface. For decades, scholars have acknowledged the significance of sports in modern societies. In arguing for the need to examine sports with academic rigor, sports scholar Alan Guttmann notes,

...the philosopher Max Scheler lamented what he saw as scholarly neglect: "Scarcely an international phenomenon of the day deserves social and psychological study to the degree that sport does. Sport has grown immeasurably in scope and in social importance, but the meaning of sport has received little in the way of serious attention." That was in 1927. Fifty years later, sports remain among the most discussed and least understood phenomena of our time.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> One can only hope this is a political "line" and not an accurate reflection on his part. Either way, the fact that such a statement is made – repeatedly – by a U.S. President speaks volumes about the significance of sports in American society.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Guttmann, *From ritual to record: The nature of modern sports*. New York: Columbia Press, 1978, p. vii. The quotation comes from Alfred Peters' introduction in *Psychologie des sports*, Leipzig: Der Neue Geist Verlag, 1927, p. xii.

The preceding list of forays into sports by U.S. presidents speaks to the growing “scope” of sports in society; the willingness with which politicians invoke sports rhetoric supports Guttman’s claim as to its “social importance.” Scholarly attention to sports has increased in the twenty-five years since Guttman declared an academic lacuna, and yet there still remains significant work to be done.

Coincidentally, in the same year *From Ritual to Record* was being published, President Jimmy Carter honored the Washington Bullets in a White House ceremony that was the first of its kind – formal presidential celebration of professional sports champions. This event – a political ritual signifying the societal importance of sports – adds weight to Guttman and Scheler’s former claim concerning sport’s significance in society. From 1978 to 1999, more than 90 professional and collegiate championship teams were honored at the White House; President George W. Bush has continued the upward trend, inviting more than two dozen during his first term. Despite their proliferation over the past quarter-century, these events – for which I’ve coined the term “presidential sports encomia” – have not been addressed by scholars, a fact that supports Guttman’s latter claim that further attention from the Academy is warranted. Examining presidential sports encomia from a rhetorical perspective is the purpose of this dissertation.

### Rhetorical background

“Presidential sports encomia” refers to White House ceremonies in which the U.S. President honors an individual or team that has most recently won a championship.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Presidential sports encomium is just on type of presidential sports rhetoric. Presidents have also released

“Encomium” is borrowed from Aristotle’s classification of various rhetorical genres. In his *Rhetoric*<sup>5</sup>, Aristotle posits three kinds of persuasive discourse: deliberative, forensic, and epideictic. Deliberative speeches concern proposals for future action and are situated most comfortably in the halls of legislatures, where politicians debate the merits of action. Forensic speeches are legal in nature and concern accusations and defenses of the past actions in a particular case. In contrast to the precise boundaries of deliberative (assembly) and forensic (courtroom) communication, epideictic rhetoric is less firmly situated. Its topics are either praise or blame, and Aristotle continues the use of temporal delineation by associating epideictic rhetoric with the present. Within the genre of epideictic is the encomium. Defined as “a formal expression of praise” and derived from the Greek root for “praising a victor,”<sup>6</sup> “encomium concerns the [person’s] actual deeds...we bestow encomium upon [people] after they have achieved something.”<sup>8</sup> A Greek poet, Pindar, celebrated the victories of athletes and their patrons. Although distinct in structure, these epinician poems were similar in content to the White House ceremonial speeches celebrating athletes today.

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statements honoring famous athletes upon their deaths; called winning coaches after the championship game; spoken in public while playing the role of spectator at live sporting events; and spoken on the public record of sports and athletes. In this era of presidential sports encomia (1978-present), these other instances of presidential sports rhetoric have been outnumbered by the more formal ceremonies honoring champions at the White House. Additionally, unlike the phone calls, condolences, and infrequent interviews at live events, presidential sports encomia have generated substantially more rhetoric from presidents. Although all of these forms of presidential sports rhetoric will be referenced when relevant, the focus of this dissertation will remain on the more textually significant presidential sports encomia.

<sup>5</sup> Lane Cooper’s expanded translation of Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric* is used for all the quotes attributed to Aristotle. See Lane Cooper, *The rhetoric of Aristotle*, 1960, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc.

<sup>6</sup> American Heritage Dictionary, 2<sup>nd</sup> College Edition, 1976, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

<sup>7</sup> I have made the following editorial decisions regarding gendered language. When the original quote is used in this paper in such a way that the pronoun refers to a U.S. president, the original ‘he/him/man’ will be left alone since (at the time of this writing) only males have held the office. When the term in questions refers to an audience member or the person being praised, it will be replaced by an appropriate gender-neutral substitute.

<sup>8</sup> Cooper, 1960, p. 52.



Pindar's poems were meant not only to celebrate victory, but to relate athletic achievement of the individual to the larger society and the city-state. In this way, the epinician poems share another characteristic with presidential sports encomia. Presidents may choose to invite a sports champion to the White House for many reasons. Certainly, it does not hurt the image of the president to be seen on the same stage with an athletic victor – I refer to this as “winner-by-association.” The frequent attempts by chief executives to relate the difficulties and successes of their administrations to the title journeys of their honored guests are to be expected. But as will be detailed in the examination of sports scholarship, presidential sports encomia provide far more than an opportunity to “look like a champion.” In honoring sports heroes in the sacred governmental arena of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, presidents are injecting athletic accomplishment with a political and social significance that extends far beyond the playing field. In holding up these champions as national heroes, presidential sports encomia serve as a cultural ritual whereby the public is reminded what it means to be an American – who we are and who we should strive to be. Like other forms of political communication that invoke the American spirit, these ceremonies celebrate hard work; in this case, presidents extol the effort it takes to become a champion. But the world of sports also offers unique rhetorical opportunities for presidents. American ideals that are often juxtapositioned in other areas of life – e.g., individual excellence versus a commitment to teamwork – are synthesized in the success stories of sports champions. The popularity of sports, combined with the predictable yet flexible narrative of the

sports championship, result in a powerful confluence of factors that make sports encomia an attractive outlet for presidential rhetoric.

Because of the power of sports as a subject for articulating American values and the power of the office from which these ceremonies are communicated, presidential sports encomia call forth a quasi-religious atmosphere. The social significance of sports can provide a common language by which an American civil religion may be articulated by U.S. presidents. Presidential sports encomia offer an alternative conception of civil religion, inverting the traditionally understood relationship (where the sacred is made secular) into one in which the secular is made sacred. If presidents can invoke characteristics of national identity via the values distilled from sports championships, then they are able to depict a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be “American,” one that continues the tradition of the idealized “Protestant work ethic” without the ethnocentric baggage usually accompanying such attempts to define the good citizen in sacred terms.

These contributions to the fields of sports studies and civil religion build upon significant debates originating in the scholarship done on presidential rhetoric. As referenced in the examination of presidential rhetoric research, the institutional roles performed by presidents often function at the level of persuasion. Richard Neustadt’s observation from 1960 is as insightful as it is succinct – “presidential power is the power to persuade.”<sup>9</sup> Although exercised more forcefully in policy debates with Congress and more publicly with foreign leaders during international crises, this power to persuade is

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Neustadt, *Presidential power: the politics of leadership*. New York: John Wiley, 1960, p. 28.

also present in the epideictic rhetoric of presidents. The decision to speak on a particular ceremonial occasion, in and of itself, signifies important aspects of the president's role in the governing of the nation. Previous work done in the field of presidential rhetoric posits that individual presidents are constrained by their office, directed toward certain actions and words in the fulfillment of their duties as chief executives.<sup>10</sup> In the context of sports encomia, institutional analysis reveals the ways in which presidential commemoration of athletic champions is both guided by, and contributes to, the president's role as 'voice of the nation.' Using the theoretical foundations constructed in the debates between political scientists such as Jeffrey Tulis and Glen Thurow and communication scholars such as Martin J. Medhurst and Bruce Gronbeck, an exploration of presidential sports encomia can situate these instances of executive address within rhetorical scholarship in ways that further an understanding of these particular speeches and the larger scope of political communication.

#### Research questions and methodology

This inquiry into presidential sports encomia encompasses four research questions: What communicative tropes and ceremonial aspects do these epideictic events share in common and how do these components function in the service of presidential rhetoric? In what ways do presidential sports encomia provide chief executives with a prospect to employ the sacred ideals of sports narratives in the articulation of a national

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<sup>10</sup> For an accounting of this debate, see Martin Medhurst (Ed.) *Beyond the rhetorical presidency*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1996. Medhurst cites the work done on "the rhetorical presidency" by political scientists as representative of this "institutional" approach, specifically Jeffrey Tulis, *The rhetorical presidency*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987. The arguments in this book were first developed in Caesar, Thurow, Tulis, and Bessette, "The rise of the rhetorical presidency," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 11, pp. 158-171.

identity which helps form an American civil religion? How have particular administrations taken advantage of these opportunities? In what ways are presidential sports encomia a reflection of an institutional understanding of the presidency and in what, if any, ways can greater rhetorical awareness of these events contribute to the further development of institutional analysis and political communication?

The grouping of presidential speeches honoring sports champions under the rubric of “presidential sports encomia” is an initial step in identifying the methodology employed in this study. As the nod to Aristotelian rhetorical genres suggests, the overarching framework of this study is heavily influenced by form-and-genre criticism and the rhetoricians who have delineated its parameters during the past quarter-century. Although the goals of this study do not include the demarcation of presidential sports encomia as a rhetorical genre unto itself, I will argue these White House ceremonies share similar structures and substance that validate their grouping for analysis, and these shared communicative traits inform debates in both the fields of sports and civil religion that makes this parcel of presidential address worthy of inclusion in the arena of rhetorical scholarship.

The methodology chosen to examine presidential sports encomia can be explained concisely in the following statement: In the context of an institutional understanding of the presidency, a generic perspective employing close textual analysis can illuminate the ways in which presidential sports encomia allow chief executives to promote ideas of national identity and elucidate the means by which presidential sports rhetoric also serves the institutional role of the President as "symbolic guardian of national unity in the

United States."<sup>11</sup> In order to more fully explicate the methods of analysis, it is necessary to define “genre criticism.” Additionally, the major criticisms to genre approaches are detailed and the synthesis of these conflicting views is articulated in light of how a generic perspective is used in this study.

Identifying presidential sports encomia as a type of political communication with distinct rhetorical aspects deserving of specific analysis brings into play previous work done in the area of genre criticism. As will be explained below, even when the argument does not include an explicit claim that a unique genre has been “discovered,” a “generic perspective” may still be relevant and illuminating.

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have defended genre criticism as giving “the critic an unusual opportunity to penetrate [rhetorical acts’] internal workings and to appreciate the interacting forces that create them.”<sup>12</sup> The appeal of this kind of criticism to Campbell and Jamieson is evident in their language: the focus is on “internal” and “interactive” components of communication. Genre criticism allows rhetoricians to comprehend both the individual parts of the text as well as the symbiotic relationship that results in the whole being greater than the sum of the parts.

Campbell and Jamieson have also provided the most developed definition of “genre”: “A genre is a group of acts unified by a constellation of forms that recurs in each of its members. These forms, *in isolation*, appear in other discourses. What is distinctive about these acts in a genre is the recurrence of the forms *together* in

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<sup>11</sup> Vanessa Beasley, *You, the People: American national identity in presidential rhetoric*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Form and genre: Shaping rhetorical action*. Falls Church, VA: SCA Press, 1988, p. 25.

constellation.”<sup>13</sup> The astronomical term “constellation” has a metaphorical significance; like stars in a constellation, a rhetorical genre contains “recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic.”<sup>14</sup> Campbell and Jamieson stress both the recurrence of these forms together and the relationships between these repeated forms. This, perhaps, explains the use of “constellation” rather than “combination” to describe the grouping of rhetorical forms. As Campbell and Jamieson note, “the appearance of the same forms in different genres poses no critical problem; a genre is given its character by a fusion of forms not by its individual elements.”<sup>15</sup> By choosing “constellation” and “fusion” as descriptive terms, Campbell and Jamieson emphasize *symbiosis* – the connections between rhetorical forms that are so powerful as to alter the forms themselves. The product is a genus of communication with unique and discernable qualities.

Proponents of genre criticism advocate it as a method for both scholarly and societal objectives. Aram Aghazarian and Herbert Simons argue, “The primary function of such scholarship...ought to be to identify and account for rhetorical regularities whether for purposes of theory-building and theory-testing, or as a vehicle for cultural and historical insights.”<sup>16</sup> The taxonomic potential of genre criticism provides scholars with a means by which rhetorical artifacts can be identified, classified, and compared. And yet, its benefits exceed the rhetorician’s laboratory. “Cultural and historical insights” can be gained from a better understanding of the recurrent patterns of speech used by rhetors in similar situations; identifying arrangements in communication is the first step

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Aram Aghazarian and Herbert Simons, *Form, genre, and the study of political discourse*. Columbia, SC: USC Press, 1986, p. ix.

toward grasping why rhetors choose the words they do and how those configurations constitute and reflect societal values and expectations.

Rhetorical scholars seeking to discover new genres face a difficult task. Campbell and Jamieson note, “Generic claims are difficult to sustain because constellations of elements rarely fuse into unique and indivisible wholes of the sort described.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, it is hard to detect a rhetorical genre. Rhetoricians can address this difficulty by beginning with an archetype; Campbell and Jamieson believe this methodological avenue is common: “Some genres, probably most, are established deductively from a model or touchstone.”<sup>18</sup> At its best, this process is not merely deductive, but ultimately dialogic. Genre criticism would involve a back-and-forth evaluation, with the rhetorician using a predictive model to make initial classifications and engaging in alterations in the model based on observations of actual rhetorical forms unearthed throughout. In the end, what remains is a genre built of authentic forms used and structured by the scholar for purposes of understanding, not a genre consisting of anecdotal evidence made to fit a pre-existing model.

Critics of genre methods refute the above description as overly optimistic, an ideal that doesn’t exist in the real world of communication scholarship. Relating the use of genre approaches to 18<sup>th</sup> century biological classification systems, Thomas Conley attacks the notion that genre criticism ever actually transcends deduction.<sup>19</sup> Conley’s objections to deductive logic can be explained by imagining the dilemma facing the first

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Conley, “The Linnaean blues: Thoughts on the genre approach,” in Aghazarian and Simons (Eds.) *Form, genre, and the study of political discourse*. Columbia, SC: USC Press, 1986, pp. 59-78.

scientist who tried to classify the duck-billed platypus. Birds, not mammals, lay eggs – it must be a bird. Mammals, not birds, feed their young via mother’s milk – it must be a mammal. The problem with using deductive logic is that one begins with an answer and simply has to find the appropriate evidence to validate the predicted answer. But when the source contains complicated (and perhaps conflicting) evidence, deductive logic breaks down. The “model” becomes a filter, highlighting the characteristics of the object that ‘fit’ while masking those that don’t. Conley observes: “The central problem...is, which is prior, induction or deduction?”<sup>20</sup> In emphasizing the rhetorical nature of this question, Conley argues the problem is intrinsic to the processes of genre criticism: “critical fixation on genre identity may, in fact, obfuscate more than it illuminates. The reason is quite simple. Making speeches fit into classificatory schemes inevitably involves radical abridgment.”<sup>21</sup> By his estimation, deduction is *always* prior, a fact which undermines the process from the very beginning. The selection of genre criticism as a method skews the critics’ view, predisposing them to find evidence to match the structure they have already decided on. For Conley, this isn’t criticism- via-discovery; it’s criticism-via-distortion.

While Conley begins by analogizing his critique of genre methods in rhetorical criticism to the problems inherent in systematic biology, his conclusion is that the troubles of the former are much more significant than the tribulations of the latter. This is because rhetorical critics have much loftier goals than merely identifying new species – they hope to pass judgment on them as well. Conley notes “[rhetoricians] have in view

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 71-72



something more precisely critical. They seek to establish normative standards against which to measure the quality of speakers and their speeches.”<sup>22</sup> The implication is clear: rhetorical evaluation based on genre criticism is without foundation; grades devised using a flawed key are not valid. If accepted, these criticisms leveled against genre approaches are devastating. As a method for identifying distinct types of communication, it suffers from deductive distortion. As a means of judging similar kinds of rhetoric against the ideal, it fails to provide an accurate measure by which evaluation can take place.

While identifying deductive means as the initial mistake made by genre critics, Conley believes the trouble runs deeper. He associates genre criticism with an “invention-orientation,” arguing the micro-management of texts results in the critic evaluating a very different speech than the one heard by audiences:

The main problem with invention-oriented critical approaches is that they abridge speeches to their “arguments” or “strategies,” stating the speech, in effect, in ways not stated by the speech itself, throwing out everything but “motive” and “message content.” Since audiences do not apprehend speeches in those terms, however, it would be useful to cultivate critical sensitivity that is as analogous as it can be to the sort of apprehension audiences do experience, an apprehension more “syntagmatic,” so to speak, than “paradigmatic.”<sup>23</sup>

Note how Conley has identified two ways in which abridgment occurs. The deductive process by which the model is created and observed in the analyzed text subtly encourages the critic to seek out evidence that confirms the existence of the genre.

Conley perceives this as a problem faced by anyone doing classificatory research. But the second avenue leading to abridgment is rooted in the ways that rhetoricians understand

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 64.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 73.

the rhetorical act itself. When Conley decries the focus on “arguments” and “strategies” as myopic, he is reminding the reader that communication is more than words; speech includes situation, setting, and style among other components that in sum comprise the rhetorical act. An audience doesn’t just hear the words; it sees the speaker’s nonverbal signals, feels the emotional tone, and comprehends it all within the context of the setting in which the address occurs.

Although he doesn’t say so explicitly, Conley is advocating *context* over merely text. Instead, Conley chooses the term “style” in which to frame his solution to the problems of genre criticism:

Concentration on style...could do at least three things to enhance the kind of criticism envisaged by the most prominent of the form-and-genre critics. First, giving priority to style (by which I do not mean “verbal ornamentation” or “deviant choice”) would ensure the close attention to the text/transcript that critics of almost every persuasion hold to be desirable, if not required, in good criticism. Second, such attention would tend to preserve the rhetorical idiom of the object of critical scrutiny. ... Third, if indeed we want to take Burke seriously...we can do it only by attending *first* to the style of any piece we examine as critics.<sup>24</sup>

Although he does not provide a specific account of what he means by style, it is possible to infer what it would include. In eschewing more common definitions contrasting style (“verbal ornamentation”) and substance, and invoking Kenneth Burke’s recommendation that style be prioritized in criticism, Conley embraces the view of style as encompassing both form and content. Conley claims the fractionalization of the text by rhetoricians creates an entity very different than that experienced by the immediate audience.

Attention to style here would direct the critic to examine the entire flow of the speech

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 73.

holistically (rather than in selected fragments), which is a more accurate representation of the actual discourse. In terms of content, Conley's version of style would be similar to a cross between *elocutio* (the use of the proper language) and *disposition* (the arrangement of ideas). Conley's version of style is manifest in the textual composition, the ways in which rhetors craft their arguments in not only the words they speak, but also the tone and inflection used to deliver those words and the setting in which they are received by the audience.

Conley's criticisms are a useful frame with which to outline the methods employed in this research project. His comments on the truncated analysis of genre criticism and the need for greater attention to style are essentially a call for a more in-depth examination of the text (meant to be broadly interpreted to include all aspects of rhetoric). Ironically, his prescription for improvement in genre approaches is not that different from the description articulated by Campbell and Jamieson, who claim "...generic criticism is an orderly means of close textual analysis."<sup>25</sup> The crux of their differences lies in what is considered "text." Conley argues that genre approaches have too narrowly defined what comprises the rhetorical act. As long as rhetoricians "cultivate critical sensitivity" to the broader aspects of the speech act so as to cohere with the communication received by the audience, as Conley advises, there is the possibility of successful genre criticism. The use of close textual analysis informed by a generic perspective in this study of presidential sports encomia adheres to Conley's guidelines, with a comprehensive focus on this kind of political communication.

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<sup>25</sup> Campbell and Jamieson, 1988, p. 17.

In fact, it has been argued that rhetoric, specifically political rhetoric, is uniquely suited to genre approaches. Critics like Conley, who worry rhetoricians try to coax wildly disparate communicative artifacts into genres created deductively “out of thin air,” are countered by Aghazarian and Simons, who argue

rhetorical works are more amenable to generic analysis than are literary works, owing to the very nature of rhetoric as a practical, situational art. [Because] such prototypical rhetors as...politicians are far more constrained by situational factors than are poets, novelists, dramatists, and the like...generic concepts and methods may prove more useful in the study of political rhetoric than they have in the study of literature.<sup>26</sup>

In response to the concern that texts are too complicated and varied to be classified, Aghazarian and Simons point out that constraints which shape and facilitate rhetoric (what Lloyd Bitzer includes in the “rhetorical situation”<sup>27</sup>) also limit and homogenize the variety of rhetorical acts, as compared to the realm of literature (in which the author is not as limited). For politicians, this is even more pronounced – the fact that presidents *can* speak on any topic they choose does not mean that, politically, they *should* or that in reality they *do*. A review of the *Public Papers of the President* leads to the conclusion that, in terms of subject and presentation, presidents are far more likely to follow the beaten path than they are to tread new rhetorical roads. This means that scholars seeking to either classify presidential address or examine particular types of executive communication face a less daunting task than the natural historian with the job of identifying and categorizing the insect world.

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<sup>26</sup> Aghazarian and Simons, 1986, pp. 13-14.

<sup>27</sup> Lloyd Bitzer, “The rhetorical situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric I*, 1968, pp. 6-17.

One flaw in Conley's reasoning is his own interpretation of what constitutes "genre criticism." For example, Conley's argument assumes that scholars who use genre approaches are attempting to locate and classify a unique "genre" of communication. Campbell and Jamieson explain how a "generic perspective" can avoid the pitfalls of 'genre-seeking' while still having scholarly merit: "...a *generic perspective* toward criticism [is] not a crusading search to find genres. The generic perspective recognizes that while there may be few clearly distinguishable genres, all rhetoric is influenced by prior rhetoric; all rhetorical acts resemble other rhetorical acts. Such a perspective emphasizes the symbolic and rhetorical contexts in which rhetorical acts are created."<sup>28</sup>

There is little to be gained by establishing presidential sports encomia as a "genre" all its own; none of the arguments developed in this dissertation require it to be so. In a span of less than thirty years, an instance presidential address has grown exponentially: White House ceremonies honoring sports champions. Presidential sports encomium has occurred in every decade since the 1970s; these ceremonies transcend party affiliation, with both Democratic and Republican administrations engaging in the practice; they have proliferated to the point where presidents now invite more athletes to the White House than heads of state and celebrate sports championships more often than they honor any other group or individual.<sup>29</sup> As demonstrated in the chapter on presidential sports

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<sup>28</sup> Aghazarian and Simons, 1986, p. 26.

<sup>29</sup> These statements are based on a reading of the public record, specifically *Public Papers of the President*, Carter through Clinton. In the process of finding examples of presidential sports encomia, I reviewed the other forms of presidential address. While a President may honor winners of various science and research awards in an annual ceremony, they host sports champions more frequently, as many as seven times in one year. Due to the fact that sports encomia have never been the subject of previous scholarship on presidential rhetoric, there are no documented accounts of the frequency of PRESIDENTIAL SPORTS ENCOMIA in comparison to other forms of executive communication.

encomia, these speeches have many characteristics in common. Their regular occurrence and similarities suggest that presidential administrations regard them as a type, if not “genre,” of public address that is both expected and planned for. My analysis of presidential sports encomia in Chapter 5 does provide support for their classification as a sub-genre of presidential epideictic rhetoric. But analyzing these speeches does not require that they be defended as wholly different than other forms of epideictic political communication; only that they have benefits (or detriments) that are unique. On the other hand, a generic perspective can illuminate not only the rhetorical significance of presidential sports encomia as political communication, but do so in a manner consistent with Conley’s insistence on context. “The symbolic and rhetorical contexts” Campbell and Jamieson recognize as inherent in rhetorical acts are not dismissed in a desperate attempt to find the next genre.

The specific application of close textual analysis from a generic perspective as used in this study also avoids the criticism that genre approaches are not appropriate for measuring the success of particular speeches or rhetors. Conley argues that the flaws of genre approaches relating to “radical abridgment” are exacerbated because genre critics are using these inadequate understandings of genres to pass judgment on communicators. But he fails to account for other reasons for employing a generic approach. This study does not attempt to rate the presidents according to their ability to praise athletic victors. Instead the focus is on detecting the ways in which presidential sports encomia fulfill the institutional function under which chief executives use presidential rhetoric to invoke features of national identity and promote particular values that are important for the

maintenance of the political and social order, the institutional function identified by Beasley as “symbolic guardian of national unity.”<sup>30</sup>

Simons and Aghazarian acknowledge Conley’s criticisms, but provide an exemption for cultural and historical scholarship: “All too often...generic scholarship has been bent to the purposes of rendering evaluative judgments on individual works...but there are surely other useful functions of generic scholarship, not the least of which are enhanced cultural and historical understanding.”<sup>31</sup> When the goals are “enhanced cultural and historical understanding,” there is not the problem of misjudging a particular speech by faulty measures. Conley’s argument is that the measuring stick used to evaluate individual works (the genre of which the work is assumed to be an example) is itself flawed, thus any conclusion as to the merit of the individual work is flawed. But that is neither the case with the work mentioned by Aghazarian and Simons nor the exploration of presidential sports encomia detailed in this study. Instead of using a deductively created model to judge the structure of any specific address, a generic perspective simply provides initial boundaries for selecting the speeches to be examined and parameters by which conclusions reached in the particular research can be extrapolated to larger fields (presidential rhetoric and political communication).

Although suspicious of scholarly claims that particular rhetorical genres can be distinguished from other types of communication, Richard Joslyn does acknowledge “there is the possibility that their approaches will uncover ‘otherwise-likely-to-be-

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<sup>30</sup> Beasley, 2004, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Aghazarian and Simons, 1986, pp. 17-18.

missed' meaning in the discourse.”<sup>32</sup> For an analytical method to be worthwhile, it must allow for interpretations, evaluations, and/or prescriptions that would not be possible otherwise. Any useful method of rhetorical criticism must illuminate the text. As manifested in this study, genre criticism can enhance understanding of rhetoric in ways previously underappreciated by other methods. In the context of political communication, a generic perspective complements institutional analysis of the presidency. Campbell and Jamieson argue, “When coupled with an institutional focus, generic analysis...elucidates the ways rhetoric can serve institutional ends and enables an evaluation to be made of how well presidents have used rhetoric to sustain the presidency as an institution and to adapt it to changing circumstances.”<sup>33</sup> Their observation augments Joslyn’s admission. The “otherwise-likely-to-be-missed meaning” in presidential sports encomia – the use of sports imagery in the service of presidential articulation of American values – is more fully explicated via the combination of genre criticism and institutional analysis. By viewing White House ceremonies celebrating athletic achievement from a generic perspective, a comprehensive appreciation of presidential sports encomia can in turn be used to recognize the similar rhetorical tactics reinforcing embedded national values and highlight any divergent stylistic characteristics unique to individual presidents. An institutional focus allows for a broader understanding of how these ceremonies operate within the conventions of executive communication; evidence culled from examining individual speeches assembled into the larger debates in the field of presidential rhetoric.

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Joslyn, “Keeping politics in the study of political discourse,” in Aghazarian and Simons (Eds.) *Form, genre, and the study of political discourse*. Columbia, SC: USC Press, 1986, pp. 312.

<sup>33</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds done in words: Presidential rhetoric and the genres of governance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, pp. 12-13.



Justifying the study of presidential sports encomia

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, presidential sports encomia have not yet been a subject for communication studies. From this standpoint, the arguments contained within this dissertation regarding the rhetorical opportunity for presidents to articulate national identity are unique. However, the investigation of presidential address as a vehicle for the construction and maintenance of national identity is being forwarded outside the realm of sports rhetoric. The most recent contributions, Vanessa Beasley's *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric* and Mary Stuckey's *Defining Americans: The Presidency and National Identity* contain several arguments that support both the methodological stance taken here and the set of data selected for analysis. Beasley's work focuses is on presidential inaugurals and State of the Union speeches, but her defense of the subtle, less publicized, and more contrived characteristics of ceremonial rhetoric fit quite well as justifications for examining presidential sports encomia. Stuckey's research is more comprehensive, closely examining the rhetoric of U.S. presidents from Andrew Jackson through George H.W. Bush and the ways in which they attempted to "articulate national identity...in ways that [would be] accepted as obvious, even inevitable."<sup>34</sup> Both authors defend their methods in ways that support my work.

In responding to the potential criticism that "overt appeals" to the public are more worthy to be studied than are more subtle intonations, Beasley cites Althusser's work on

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<sup>34</sup> Mary Stuckey, *Defining Americans: The presidency and national identity*, Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004, p. 2.

“interpellation” to suggest that reinforcement of identity can occur in more delicate ways.

Specifically, she argues

To find evidence of how presidents have promoted certain forms of American national identity within their discourse, we need not look for overt appeals in which chief executives have told their listeners what to think or which policy to support. Instead, critics can look at ways that presidential discourse subtly reinforces the audience’s presumed collective identity as national subjects.<sup>35</sup>

She argues that subtle reinforcement of collective identity is rooted in the rhetorical ability of presidents to speak to the nation’s conscience. The president is simultaneously a leader and representative of the people; hence, presidential rhetoric has a unique persuasive appeal.<sup>36</sup>

Stuckey takes this line of argument one step further, explaining the significance epideictic rhetoric in presidential address:

When presidents speak, they speak to both immediate, policy-oriented goals and to longer-term, constitutive ends. Often this means presidents rely on epideictic oratory, which sometimes takes ceremonial form. By grounding public speech in their own characters, presidents inhabit a larger representative role and reshape the office to their own personalities. Rather than merely speaking to the people, they claim to become something of a surrogate of “the people,” simultaneously enacting and enunciating our national values and national identity.<sup>37</sup>

Beasley refutes the idea that significant presidential rhetoric must be policy-oriented, but

Stuckey directly identifies epideictic rhetoric as the alternative to policy speeches that

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<sup>35</sup> Beasley, 2004, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> An additional warrant for examining less overt appeals by U.S. presidents can be found in George C. Edwards’ *On Deaf Ears: The limits of the bully pulpit* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2003). He argues that while instances of U.S. presidents “going public” may have increased, there is no evidence that their success rate in altering public opinion has had a related increase. It is possible to infer from his study that one likely result of overt presidential appeals is the mobilization of opposition groups, i.e., a reflexive backlash to explicit presidential rhetoric. From this perspective, less overt appeals to national identity – like those in sports encomia – would perhaps have a greater persuasive effect because they fly under the radar.

<sup>37</sup> Stuckey, 2004, p. 8.

deserves scholarly attention because it is in ceremonial address where presidents most clearly situate themselves as representative of the American people. The enunciation of “national values and national identity” is accentuated in the context of sports encomia. The popularity of sports – in terms of both esteem and recognition – translates into a subject with greater reach.

The claims of Beasley and Stuckey can be extended even further. As explained in the section on spectacle in the chapter on presidential rhetoric, Michael Billig’s notion of “banal nationalism”<sup>38</sup> provides support for the argument that subtle suggestion is *more* persuasive than overt appeals when the objective is the reinforcement of national identity. Presidential sports encomia, like the playing of the national anthem at sporting events, combines sports and national identity in ways that mask the political nature of the event and thus maximize the transfer of values through non-controversial means.

If transmission of American values to the public so as to promote a sense of collective national identity is assumed of a speech act, the question concerning audience size seems a reasonable one. How potent can presidential sports encomia be at promoting national identity if it never reaches a national audience? This criticism is refuted in two ways. First, the question may presuppose a distorted perception of the relative publicity of sports encomia versus other forms of presidential address. Although sports encomia receives scant attention from news outlets (especially compared to the coverage of State of the Union speeches, the coverage they do receive may have lasting effects that fly under the radar of those who aren’t familiar with sports. For example, President George

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal nationalism*. London: Sage Publications, 1995.

W. Bush's speech honoring the 2003 NBA Champion San Antonio Spurs appeared not in the news section of papers, but in the sports section. ESPN, not C-SPAN, is more likely to devote air-time to the event. Rating a news story based on the number of *New York Times* editorials devoted to the event will misjudge the relevance of presidential sports encomia. This is not to argue that presidential sports encomia is more politically or culturally significant than presidential inaugurals; it is only to suggest that they are more politically and culturally significant than would be assumed by someone who is unaware of the overwhelming popularity and influence of sports in American society.<sup>39</sup> To understand its diffusion to the public, a new understanding of political communication is necessary.

Second, "under the radar" rhetoric is worthy of scholarly attention, a claim made by Beasley to defend her analysis of inaugurals and State of the Union speeches:

What have presidents said about American national identity in moments that were "under the radar," that is, ceremonial moments that have required presidents to speak more obliquely about such things? Given the ritualistic and epideictic nature of inaugural addresses and state of the union messages, presidents presumably faced certain constraints in talking about national unity in these speeches. ...Instead, they would presumably have had to offer, either explicitly or implicitly, some very basic definitional and even normative answers to some difficult questions: How are Americans supposed to get along with each other within their diverse democracy? What is it, exactly, that holds Americans together?<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> The list of the most-watched TV shows in history is inundated with Super Bowls. More people will attend college football games in the month of November than will vote in the presidential election. It is safe to say that not only does the public pay attention to sports more than they pay attention to politics, the public comprehends sports more than they understand the operation of government. Hence, a shorter news story about sports may convey more information accessible to the public than a more in-depth story about a presidential speech regarding the economy, war, or other policy-based events.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

As “ceremonial moments,” presidential sports encomia have the “ritualistic and epideictic nature” mentioned by Beasley. As for the “constraints” she speaks of, sports encomia provide an interesting situation. On the one hand, the purpose of the ceremony is to honor sports champions, and thus the president must make sure to keep any remarks applicable to the winner and the sport. On the other hand, the subject itself – celebrating heroic achievements – is ready-made for a president who wants to relate the ingredients necessary for victory in sports to the components required of success in the construction of economic programs, foreign policy, or the maintenance of the nation. The “definitional” or “normative answers” to questions of national identity exist in the lives of the individuals who have reached the top of their sport. The sports narrative provides a blueprint with which presidents can outline their vision of America.

Finally, there is the concern that ceremonial occasions are too contrived, and therefore not an accurate representation of the actual thoughts and expressions of the presidential administration. In other words, time to prepare results in inauthentic speech. In response, Beasley argues, “Rather than seeing the contrived nature of these speeches as a detriment to what they can reveal about the culture, one might view them instead as *especially* meaningful precisely because they provide information about the ideal.”<sup>41</sup> Inaugurals are not merely manufactured; they are meant to be perceived as archetypal – the epitome of the incoming presidential administration as encapsulated in a single occasion. In explaining her data collection, Stuckey states, “much of the material included here can be described as formulaic. Presidents, like other speakers, often rely on

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

platitudes. Rather than dismiss this speech as ‘merely’ platitudinous, I treat it seriously. Much of what is important in a culture is that which is so taken for granted as to be platitudinous, to be ‘mere rhetoric.’ It is precisely the taken-for-granted that I want to examine, for community depends on such shared assumptions.”<sup>42</sup> This reasoning – the idealized event is a purer reflection – has a double-layer of meaning in presidential sports encomia.

Not only is the event an ideal by Beasley’s standard; the people being honored are “ideal” as well. Sport champions are viewed as heroes, personifying the country’s standards of excellence. Yes, presidents shower these champions with “platitudes.” But as Stuckey notes, it is precisely because these ceremonies appear “platitudinous” that presidents are so able to mine these “shared assumptions” for the material from which they reinforce national unity. When portrayed by presidents as examples of how the enactment of national values leads to success, they are rhetorically constructed as the “ideal” Americans. Accordingly, it can be argued that presidential delineations of national identity and declarations of American values observed in sports encomia should be “especially meaningful” for rhetorical scholars.

#### Outline of the project

The dissertation is divided into four main chapters: sports, civil religion, presidential rhetoric, and presidential sports encomia. The first chapter assesses previous studies of sports. Beyond a review of the literature, the following arguments are combed from past research and further developed. The significance of sports in American society

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<sup>42</sup> Stuckey, 2004, p. p. 9.

is detailed, recognizing the manner in which sports contribute to the cultural landscape. While the popularity of sports is acknowledged, the emphasis is on more than simply the economic impact of sports consumerism, accenting the ways in which sports have transcended the game on the field and become a part of American mythology.

This segues into the rhetorical dimension of sports. The major claim forwarded here is that the cultural significance of sports is *communicative*; it has import in society only because the characteristics and components of athletic competition can be transferred into the everyday language of public communication. The discursive aspects of sports are also explained in terms of how sports terms and expressions enhance persuasion. This leads to a discussion of the infusion of sports rhetoric into political communication. Both the potential reasons why politicians would choose to invoke sports and the various ways that sports images are deployed by elected officials. Nationalism is highlighted as a prominent feature of sports rhetoric used by politicians. Developed in this section are the claims that government leaders have historically used sports as a narrative frame by which national unity is promoted and singled out the accomplishments of sports heroes as exemplifying the epitome of national success.

Sports' symbolic importance is then delineated in a religious context, with the sacred nature of sports explained. Sports are deemed sacred based on two main factors. Based on the transcendence of physical limits by athletes, sports are associated with a desire for immortality. Additionally, the perception of sports as merit-based and rooted in fairness give it an incorruptible quality on par with the purity assumed of spiritual

activity. Together with the myth-like significance of sports memories in the lives of many Americans, these features place sports on the same holy plane as a religion.

Next is a discussion of how sports provide a rhetorical opportunity for multicultural symbolism. Combined with the fact that sports is cast in sacred terms without the usual exclusionary baggage associated with Western religions, the manner in which sports' significance transcends racial and ethnic differences translate into a potent rhetorical occasion where an inclusive collective identity can be expressed. Finally, the use of sports metaphors in political communication is addressed. After evaluating the previous work done in the area of presidential sports metaphors, an explanation of how the study of presidential sports encomia avoids the pitfalls of this research while furthering its objectives is detailed.

While acknowledging the origins of the term, the chapter on civil religion centers around the scholarly debates that began in the late 1960's, following Robert Bellah's work on the evolution of civic faith in the United States. After outlining the characteristics of civil religion according to Robert Bellah and Phillip Hammond,<sup>43</sup> attention is paid to the last phase – where symbolism grounds morality and ethics independent of the state and traditional forms of religion. What Bellah and Hammond describe as “symbolism” is further explained from a communication perspective, along with a subsequent evolution in the classificatory system of civil religion rhetoric.

As the expression of a sacred code, civil religion is not merely captured in public communication; rhetoric is intrinsic to its formulation. Given the status of civil religion as

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<sup>43</sup> Bellah and Phillip Hammond, *Varieties of civil religion*, New York: Harper & Row, 1980.



being formed in between the state and the church, the President must perform a balancing act, acting as the leader of a pious nation while avoiding the appearance of establishment. In the American example, this has been accompanied by the investment of national ideals with piety. Bellah and Hammond's claims are countered by the criticisms of John Wilson and Roderick Hart, two scholars who doubt the existence of civil religion as articulated by Bellah. These arguments are related to a key claim of this dissertation – advocating a broader view of civil religion. The traditional conception of civil religion (where sacred is made secular) is argued to have a flip side – where the secular is made sacred. Sports rhetoric exemplifies this alternative understanding of civil religion and the chapter concludes with an explanation of the benefits of studying presidential sports encomia accruing to civil religion scholarship conceived of in the way.

The chapter on presidential rhetoric serves as a theoretical anchor for the dissertation. In contrast to the preceding chapters, where the study of presidential sports encomia is argued to fill substantial gaps in the theories of scholars of both sports and civil religion, this examination of the research being done in the field of presidential rhetoric is more supportive. Analysis of presidential sports encomia does contribute to the field of communication, but the payment is more in the form of a reclaiming of neglected rhetorical territory than a radical alteration of theory. The chapter begins with an accounting of the rhetorical power of the presidency, detailing the ability of presidents to govern as “the voice of the nation.” The communicative aspects of the presidency are further developed in the section on spectacle. The use of spectacle by presidential

administrations is explained as an attempt by chief executives to actively shape public opinion.

Additionally, presidential sports encomia are defined as having the characteristics of a “pseudo-event.” The expansion of presidential sports encomia is cited as informing two debates that have continue among political communication scholars. The first is the question of institution versus individual. Is the presidency a story of great individuals who rise to power, their administrations defined only by their strong personalities? Or, does the office govern the person, with the Chief Executive guided and constrained in both duties and words by the institutional limits of the presidency? Although presidential sports encomia provide superficial support for the former, the conclusion is that the latter view is confirmed by these instances of executive epideictic rhetoric.

The second is more theoretical, posing the question of whether there is a Rhetorical Presidency or simply the existence of presidential rhetoric. Is it possible to distinguish eras of presidents, with the modern presidency unique in that public rhetoric dominates the office? Or, are the contemporary practices, including the likelihood of presidents “going public,” less of a deviation from former presidential administrations than has been assumed? The study of White House ceremonies honoring athletic champions can hardly be claimed to settle the question for one side or the other, but presidential sports encomium does provide an excellent example of the ways in which recent developments in mass communication technologies and the growth of sports beyond a leisure activity into an economic industry and cultural mainstay have transformed the rhetorical landscape upon which presidential address takes place.

The examinations of previous research in the fields of sports, civil religion, and presidential rhetoric are followed by the chapter on presidential sports encomia. Using a generic perspective, close textual analysis is employed in the analysis of presidential sports encomia from the presidency of Jimmy Carter through the current administration of George W. Bush. First, the structure of presidential sports encomia is outlined. Borrowing from Ware and Linkugel's study of apologia,<sup>44</sup> presidential sports encomia are recognized as including both "bolstering" and "transcendence." Presidents invoke the authority of the office, bolster their own administration, and transcend the particular achievements of the sports champions being honored. These transcendent strategies are the locus of civil religion articulation.

In addition to exploring presidential sports encomia as a collective, speeches from each of the administrations are examined in greater depth. The ways in which each president injects his own style into the ceremonies is noted, and, where possible, archived internal White House communication is cited as additional evidence of the various styles of presidents as well as the institutional constraints on sports encomia. Using sports scholar Stephan Walk's research on presidential sports metaphor<sup>45</sup> as a springboard, the sports encomia of President Reagan are given special treatment. Walk investigated the "footrace" metaphor used by President Lyndon Johnson to promote federal civil rights legislation and enforcement and the alternative conceptions of equality as an American ideal articulated by Reagan. However, he failed to account for Reagan's sports encomia,

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<sup>44</sup> B.L. Ware and W.A. Linkugel, "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of Apologia," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 273-283.

<sup>45</sup> Stephan Walk, "The sport metaphor in American presidential rhetoric: Meaning in context," MA thesis for the Michigan State University Department of Health Education, Counseling Psychology, and Human Performance. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1990.

which included, for example, the only instance of marathon winners being invited to the White House. A rhetorical analysis of this address, as well as other pertinent sports encomia under Reagan, provide a much more developed understanding of how the Reagan administration sought to successfully replace the “footrace” metaphor as the frame by which federal approaches to civil rights were constructed.

There is also an independent section comparing presidential sports encomia to the speeches presidents give at national prayer breakfasts, specifically the ways in which presidents invoke sacred ideals and relate those principles to their own administrations and the nation as a whole. The objective is to delineate the manner in which sports rhetoric is used to constitute *civil* religion.

Finally, presidential sports encomium is situated in the realm of presidential rhetoric, identified with other forms of presidential address and the role it plays in supporting the institution of the presidency. In this last section, the various topics are folded into a single theme, the ability of presidents to use the sacred symbols of sports in the construction of a civil religion that helps fulfill the presidential duty of preserving the social and political order.

### Conclusion

Sports underwent a transformation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From games played locally as a leisure activity to a multibillion dollar industry followed nationally (and internationally), sports have become a substantial part of society. Athletes have been praised as heroes for centuries. But in America today, their popularity has risen to a new

level. Professional athletes have parlayed their success on the field into economic<sup>46</sup> and political<sup>47</sup> influence off of it to degrees that would have been nearly unimaginable more than one hundred years ago.

This evolution of sports as a cultural phenomenon has not gone unnoticed by politicians. Perhaps due to their unique status as “the leader of the free world,” U.S. presidents have taken advantage of the rhetorical opportunities more than any other political figure. It is no longer necessary to covertly drop by the practice fields of one’s favorite team (as President Nixon did); presidents since Carter have brought the game to their office, having dozens of sports champions visit them at the White House. These ceremonies have included explicit praise for the athletes and implicit self-praise for the presidents.

But more than athletes and administrations have been the subject of admiration; American identity is always upheld as worthy of celebration. By analogizing the efforts of sports champions to American values, presidents highlight characteristics of national identity worthy of emulation. By negotiating the tension between individual excellence and the self-sacrifice of teamwork in the praise of champions, presidential sports encomia offers a strategy for addressing the conflict of individualism versus communitarianism – a crucial step necessary for the articulation of an inclusive American civil religion.

Exploration of these speeches can provide evidence of whether the potential of sports encomia has been actualized in presidential address, and if so, in what ways

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<sup>46</sup> Athletic endorsement of commercial products has blossomed since Joe DiMaggio first hawked coffeemakers. Now, sports stars peddle cars, clothes, and medication used to combat male impotence.

<sup>47</sup> Many retired athletes have successfully run for political office, including national positions in the U.S. Senate. Although not elected, Byron ‘Whizzer’ White played for the Detroit Lions before being selected for the U.S. Supreme Court.

presidents have done so. Rhetorical scholarship is uniquely suited to this task of exploration. The tools of communication research can be used to explain the rhetorical power of sports, the attractiveness of sports symbolism to presidents, and the maneuvers by which the qualities of sports are transformed into sacred values of the existing political order.

**Chapter Two:**  
**Talking a Good Game – Rhetoric as Integral to**  
**Sports’ Growing Influence in America**

Sports are a major part of American society. Large segments of the public not only tune into the on-the-field exploits of their favorite teams, but also are “fascinated by sport stars’ lifestyles, love lives, and earning power.”<sup>48</sup> Anyone doubting the significance of sports personalities in the national consciousness need only take pictures of Michael Jordan and Dennis Hastert to any street corner to find out which person more people accurately identify. Economically, sports generate billions of dollars annually. In a society obsessed by the medium of television, the list of highest rated TV events in terms of both audience numbers and advertisement revenue is dominated by NFL Super Bowls.<sup>49</sup> However, sports as a cultural phenomenon cannot be measured merely in terms of the viewing habits of couch potatoes and the resulting spike in potato chip sales – “to consider sport in this passive manner is to ignore many of the ways in which sport structures widespread perceptions of social reality.”<sup>50</sup> To put Stephan Walk’s claim in the context of rhetorical analysis, sports both reflect *and* construct meaning, and it is this latter function that illustrates the *active* power of sports in society. Sports rhetoric offers rhetors a system of symbols by which they can construct social reality, a concept that makes the study of presidential sports encomia much more than simply an accounting of White House ceremonies.

This chapter focuses on the sports narratives as a rhetorical resource in political communication. Unlike previous research of sports scholars, who frequently make note

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<sup>48</sup> David Andrews and Steven Jackson, *Sport Stars: the cultural politics of sporting celebrity*. New York: Routledge, 2001, p. i.

<sup>49</sup> David Bauder, “Super Bowl cliffhanger boosts ratings to 98.5 million,” *Houston Chronicle*, February 2, 2004, online,

<sup>50</sup> Stephan Walk, “The sport metaphor in American presidential rhetoric: Meaning in context,” MA thesis for the Michigan State University Department of Health Education, Counseling Psychology, and Human Performance. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1990, p. 1.



of sports' social significance and less frequently mention the role of communication in the mass popularity of athletics, I argue that the key to understanding sports' place in America<sup>51</sup> requires an explicit recognition of human communication as the fundamental ingredient in the development of sports as a significant cultural phenomenon. By framing sports' importance as a *communication* issue, we can more accurately understand how sports have transformed from a leisure activity into a religious experience and why political leaders are so attracted to sports symbolism as a rhetorical resource. In the first section of this chapter, the importance of rhetoric in understanding sports' significance in the United States is explained, specifically the ways in which communication about sports are intrinsic to its place in American society.

The following section addresses the use of sports symbolism in political communication. The qualities of sports rhetoric that make it attractive to political leaders are examined, with the subsequent section detailing the emphasis of nationalism as a primary goal of sports language in political rhetoric. In the next section, I discuss how sports are conceived of as sacred in American society and how the aspects of sports depicted in spiritual terms complement ideals of the American political system. I then address the potential of sports as an opportunity for multicultural symbolism, or how sports can be used by rhetors to speak to matters of racial equality. The arguments of both proponents and critics of sports' influence on racial issues are outlined, with a middle-ground approach explained as being the most accurate view for understanding why sports rhetoric is employed by political rhetors seeking to speak on racial issues.

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<sup>51</sup> My claims may be true of other societies as well; I limit my conclusions to the United States because my research and personal experiences are limited to events taking place in the United States.

The final section covers previous research on sports metaphors in political rhetoric, detailing why sports metaphors are useful for politicians, the most significant use of sports metaphor in presidential rhetoric, and whether the framework of sports metaphors is appropriate for understanding presidential sports encomia. Concluding remarks summarize the arguments on sports symbolism as it relates to presidential rhetoric.

#### The rhetorical importance of sports

One of the key claims of this study of presidential sports encomia is that sports warrants special attention from rhetorical scholars because the “ways in which sport structures widespread perceptions of reality” are *rhetorical* in character. The evolution of sports beyond ‘leisure activity as an afterthought’ requires that sports exist beyond the playing field. It is my contention that this transformation is properly claimed by the rhetorician as a communicative phenomenon. Michael Novak argues that scholars would be well-served by turning their attention to this concept of sports:

It is a shame to overlook this field of fundamental human experience from which most Americans have tacitly learned so much of harsh humanistic virtue. Overlooking it, indeed, is a little like squandering a precious natural resource. Our philosophers and theologians, our literary scholars and our historians, our psychologists and anthropologists, our sociologists and even our theoreticians of democratic capitalism, if they would but pay attention to the sports which thrive around them, would discover a world rich in symbol, narrative, and mythic material, which sheds much light on the meaning of this quite lovely but fragile civilization which goes by the name of the United States of America.<sup>52</sup>

The phrase “symbol, narrative, and mythic material” certainly justifies the inclusion of rhetoricians in Novak’s list of scholars who have much to gain from studying sports. In

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<sup>52</sup> Novak, 1985, p. 48-49.

response to Novak's energy metaphor, we can appropriately refer to this power of sports as a *rhetorical* resource for those whose argument can be fueled with the mythic material of sports narratives. Novak's recommendation should be heeded by communication scholars because only by way of rhetorical analysis can the potential utility of sports symbolism be understood and by examining the sports language of political leaders from the perspectives found in rhetorical theory can the existence of sports rhetoric in political communication be accurately explained.

The value of a fuel source is determined by the inverted proportionality of two factors – its unique utility for a community versus its scarcity in that community. In contrast, sport as a rhetorical resource is particularly useful for effective communication because it is a unique source in terms of what it offers rhetors while at the same time being accessible to so many. As a political scientist and former sportswriter, Richard Lipsky has been the most prolific scholar to discuss this particular strength of “Sportsworld” (his term for the sports industry as a cultural site) in providing rhetorical resources for communication. He explains,

From its local and personal beginnings, the world of sports has become a major form of national and social communication to the extent that interest in and knowledge of sports make Americans of every region and class “available” to one another. Sport is the “magic elixir” that feeds personal identity while it nourishes the bonds of communal solidarity. Its myths transform children into their adult heroes while allowing adults to once again become children. All this rich excitement is part of a dramatic and symbolic world with important political as well as social ramifications.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Lipsky, “The political and social dimensions of sports,” in Wiley Lee Umphlett (ed.) *American sport culture*, Toronto: Associated University Press, 1985, 68-75, pp. 68-69.

Sports offer stories that cross boundaries (making them available to different groups of people), facilitate identity construction, and bring people together (bonds of solidarity). Lipsky's argument supports my thesis that presidential sports encomia warrant scholarly attention, providing a source of political communication's use of sports' symbolism for the articulation of "the bonds of communal solidarity." The ability of presidents to use a ceremony honoring sports champions as a means of expounding on notions of national identity and American values exemplifies the "dramatic and symbolic world" of sports narratives that have "important political as well as social ramifications." Lipsky's description of sports as a "major form of national and social communication" provides one explanation for why presidents would engage in sports encomia – it is both an accessible and powerful rhetorical resource.

Lipsky makes explicit what much of the sociology of sport studies imply: sport's cultural significance is rooted in a (near) universality among members of society, whether it be actual appeal for the games or simply a basic understanding of their place in public life. Perhaps not recognized as such by sociologists, this is a connection founded in the communicability of sports narratives and readily transferred via symbolism. The power of sport is a *rhetorical* power. My claim extends this line of argument one step further: sport's social significance is *dependent* on its rhetorical power. The growth of sports into a mega-billion dollar industry is less a result of people playing games than of people watching games. Spectators far outnumber athletic participants. But if it ended there – we watch the game and when it's over, we're through with it – sports would be no more significant than traffic lights or rain (two examples of events that are observed by many

and discussed by few). In the next step of the process of sports becoming a social event – when we *talk* about the games we have watched – sports gain social stature as a cultural phenomenon. This point can be understood in conjunction with Lipsky’s claim that sports support rhetoric by providing a vocabulary accessible to a substantial segment of the public. The flip-side of that coin is that rhetoric supports sports in the same way it gives life to all temporal events – talk of sport continues long after the game on the field has ended. Rhetoric acts as a fulcrum for sports, with the narratives and symbolism of athletic contests leveraged by their communicative power. This power must be at the forefront of any scholarly examination of sports in American society. Thus, rhetorical analysis has much to offer in the study of sports.

#### The political importance of sports rhetoric

One particular area where rhetorical analysis is beneficial is in the use of sports rhetoric in political communication. Sports are a popular topic of conversation. But that fact alone does not warrant an academic investigation of sports rhetoric. The justification for a rhetorical analysis of presidential sports encomia is as much about *who* is talking as it is *what* they are talking about. This study is not about *anyone* discussing sports; it is about *people in power* talking about sports - the use of sports rhetoric by politicians, specifically U.S. presidents. The invocation of sporting events and athletes in political communication is evidence of both how rhetoric extends the significance of the game beyond the playing field and how sports offer a rich layer of symbolism for deployment by those not directly involved in its machinations.

This potential of sports' rhetorical resources has not been ignored in studies of political rhetoric. Sociologist J.J. MacAloon has claimed that "among no people known to us in history have sport models, discourse, and ways of thinking so thoroughly colonized politics, a fact often noticed but not yet investigated, much less understood."<sup>54</sup> MacAloon's choice of words – with sports symbolism "colonizing" politics – implies that political rhetors are controlled by, rather than in control of, their language. The implication is that sports rhetoric has become a fixture in political communication. The question is why this has happened in the United States.

Richard Lipsky has attempted to understand why sports have "colonized politics" so thoroughly. In his early work on the subject, he examined the connection between sport and post-industrial consumer society: "it is perhaps legitimate to see sports as part of the paraideology of technology and consumption...it creates a common set of symbols that are specifically American while not directly related to the system of political authority."<sup>55</sup> The ability of sports symbolism to be both politically useful while appearing to be apolitical would explain how sports has become so influential as a rhetorical resource. Sports language is both easy for the public to comprehend and a subject they find interesting. The values emanating from sports narratives can supplement the ideological arguments of both conservatives and liberals, and politicians of various stripes in between. Lipsky uses the term "paraideology" to explain how sports "further integration while being divorced from any political or normative rationale of authority."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> J.J. MacAloon, "An observer's view of sport sociology," *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1987, vol. 4, p. 115.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Lipsky, "Toward a political theory of American sports symbolism," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 1978, vol. 21, no. 3, p. 358.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

Thus, for Lipsky, sports have an “in-between” quality, able to serve the interests of the dominant ideology without being overtly associated with it. The question is then how sports can create symbols that are “specifically American” while remaining neutral in terms of ideological affiliation. Whatever the answer is, it is arrived at via recognition of the rhetorical aspect of sports.

In his book, *How we play the game: Why sports dominate American life*, Lipsky develops his theory of sports and political language further, focusing on the emergence of overt political activism in sport in the 1960’s and Richard Nixon’s public affinity with sports. Lipsky argument is that

the increasing complexity of American society functioned to hinder effective communications between highly specialized sub-groups of people, each having its own unique language. This created a vacuum for a collective and emotional language form which connected these otherwise isolated groups with the rest of society. Sport language and metaphor, then, was said to fill this linguistic gap, by virtue of its widespread familiarity and dramatic connotations, presumably supplanting an otherwise uninteresting and unconvincing political discourse.<sup>57</sup>

While the role of sports in U.S. race relations is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, the rhetorical aspects of Lipsky’s claim require further explanation here. Lipsky articulates the ideological use of sports without the political baggage that would normally accompany such rhetoric in defense of community. “Widespread familiarity” is but one of the means by which sports rhetoric is attractive to the rhetor. “Dramatic connotations” – “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat” – serve to enliven communication.

Whereas familiarity might result in a mundane atmosphere with other subjects, the drama of sports juxtaposes the known (how the game is played) with the unknown (who will

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<sup>57</sup> Walk, 1990, p. 5.

win and lose) in a way that makes even the familiar exciting. Additionally, this drama can allow the rhetor to direct the audience's attention in ways that serve the speaker's own political interests.

For example, the oppositional nature of sports – home team versus visitor or winners and losers – can be used to analogize a political situation in similar ways, casting the issue as black-and-white, with victory on the line. All the while, the sports context leaves an impression of fair play and meritocratic results. The consequence in terms of deflecting ideological criticism lies in the juxtaposition of known and unknown. With the outcome to be “decided on the field,” sports are readily portrayed as the ultimate in meritocracy. The rules apply to all; the results are determined by the participants themselves.<sup>58</sup> For the rhetor, sports serve as “the unique repository of all that is American and good.”<sup>59</sup> For political rhetors, such association is fertile ground for persuasion. A legislative vote justified with a sports analogy has been simultaneously validated as “American”; a policy explained using sports metaphors is more accessible to the public *and* more likely to be assumed to be “good” for the nation.

This metaphorical quality of sports narratives helps explain how the ideological exploitation of sports symbolism by political figures masks inequities in the economic and political system. As a constitutive metaphor, sports rhetoric frames issues in public policy in ways that circumscribe public understanding of complex social and economic

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<sup>58</sup> This is not to claim that such portrayals are accurate or not. As discussed in the section on racism, critics of sport denounce any notion that sports are “neutral” or “meritorious.” But as will be argued then, such debates are not so important when evaluating the *rhetorical* potential of sports. It matters less whether sports are *actually* ideologically neutral than whether rhetors deploy sports rhetoric because they *believe* sports can be portrayed as such and whether the audience *perceives* sports as such.

<sup>59</sup> Lipsky, 1978, p.358.



situations, reducing work related discrimination to a question of “individual merit” (rather than group privilege) and taxation to a question of “fairness” (rather than social responsibility). I detail this use of sports rhetoric as metaphor in political communication in the example of the competing rhetorics of Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan, showing how President Johnson’s “footrace” metaphor was countered by President Reagan’s emphasis on individual achievement over teamwork in his sports encomia. This example highlights the flexibility of sports symbolism as a tool for ideological manipulation, available to politicians on both the Left and Right.

In explaining how individuals of varying political stripes tend to agree that sports are a “passive reflection of the values inherent in American society,”<sup>60</sup> Lipsky analogizes sports to the abstract visual aids used in psychological testing: “Sports, as an aesthetic realm, seems to encompass a rich symbolism that functions as a Rorschach for radically different perspectives.”<sup>61</sup> Like the Rorschach visuals, what one sees in sports may be wholly different than another’s perception. Rhetoricians would most certainly find this analogy troubling. If sports are to be attractive as a rhetorical resource, its meanings cannot be as individuated as Lipsky’s claim would have us believe. It is not preferable that each audience member listening to presidential sports rhetoric, for example, leave with their own impression based on subconscious tendencies that escape the attention of the rhetor. Sports cannot be all things to all people – unless that is the preferred outcome of the rhetor. And given the scholarly assumption that sports symbolism is effectual and the statistical occurrence of sports rhetoric deployed by politicians, it would seem that

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p.349.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

indeed, the symbolism of sports is more predictable and unified than the Rorschach analogy presumes. It is possible to conceive of sports narratives as being fluid and variable – a malleability to exploit by the rhetor – without surrendering control of meaning to the audience.

This idea of fluid and variable interpretation is supported by the work William Morgan.<sup>62</sup> In his work on sports and national identities, he describes the “textual plasticity” of narratives within sports (the basic plot outline leaves space that can be filled in a variety of ways) that allow for multiple and diverse readings, all within the context of using sports narratives to define “national identity.” Morgan makes this argument in response to critics who claim that participation in Western sports by the “subaltern” reinforces Western domination. He cites cricket played (and recently dominated) by nations in the Eastern Hemisphere as evidence that Sport can be re-appropriated by former colonies.

For my purpose here, his argument can be inverted: no matter how different the paths taken to championships may be, presidents can exploit the plasticity of the sports narrative to invoke regular themes consistent with the values connected to American identity they wish to reinforce. Whether they are conservative Republicans or liberal Democrats, they can find space in the experiences of the teams being honored to rhetorically construct support for their own ethos and policies.

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<sup>62</sup> William Morgan, “Sports and the making of national identities: A moral view,” *Journal of the philosophy of sport*, 24, 1997, 1-20.

This conception is consistent with the studies done by J.M Hoberman,<sup>63</sup> who viewed sport a “universal aesthetic” that “differentiated into divergent ideological messages.”<sup>64</sup> The conclusion drawn from his work is “that, within the purview of global politics, proponents of ideologies on both the extreme right as well as the extreme left have been able to exploit sport to advance their goals.”<sup>65</sup> Similar to the argument made by Lipsky, Hoberman identifies the political power of sports rhetoric as transcending party affiliation. Like both Lipsky and Morgan, Hoberman locates this malleability in the open spaces within sports narratives. The story is always familiar, but never boring. We know why it ends (someone wins, the game is over), but not how. Specific details change with each championship, yet always seem well-suited for use by political leaders as examples of societal values.

It is important to note how agency is emphasized differently by both Morgan and Hoberman. Whereas Morgan focuses on the agency of the individuals within a community that choose to invert the colonial subtext of the athletic contest, Hoberman studies the intervention by political elites into the governing structures of sporting authorities for the exploitive purpose of nationalistic propaganda. In each case, sport is *actively* deployed. While the substance of Lipsky’s argument is consistent with the claims of both Morgan and Hoberman, his use of the Rorschach analogy portrays the meanings of sports narratives as far too indeterminate and the result far too passively reached for

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<sup>63</sup> See J.M. Hoberman, *Sport and political ideology*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1984; J.M. Hoberman, “The body as ideological variable: Sporting imagery and the state,” *Man and World*, 1981, vol. 14, pp. 309-329; J.M. Hoberman, “Sport and political ideology,” in B. Lowe, D.B. Kanin, and Strenk (Eds.), *Sport and international relations*, Champaign, IL: Stipes, 1978, pp. 224-240.

<sup>64</sup> Hoberman, 1984, p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> Walk, 1990, p. 7.

the kinds of deployments enumerated in their works. The occurrence of sports rhetoric in political communication reveals a calculative move on the part of the rhetor to deploy a popular and flexible vocabulary in order to achieve a specific purpose. The promotion of national unity is frequently that purpose.

National Unity as a primary goal of political sports rhetoric

The values politicians identify in sports narratives are often related to goals or policies in support of national identity. As a professor of the sociology and politics of sport whose work has explored the links between sport and nationalism in a time of globalization, Alan Bairner has argued, “Sport is frequently a vehicle for the expression of nationalist sentiment to the extent that politicians are too willing to harness it for such disparate, even antithetical, purposes as nation building, promoting the nation-state, or giving cultural power to separatist movements.”<sup>66</sup> In citing the “disparate, even antithetical purposes” to which sports is used in rhetoric, Bairner supports the “textual plasticity” claims of Hoberman, Lipsky, and Morgan. He also aligns himself with those who believe this to be an unfortunate trend. By casting politicians as “too willing” to engage in sports rhetoric, Bairner makes it clear he views this use of sports rhetoric negatively, an evaluation shared by others in the field. Richard Lipsky warns that the language of sports dilutes the substance of politics by diverting attention only to the outcomes:

By using sports symbolism in political discourse the politician or commentator tends to transpose sports’ ideologically unproblematic nature onto politics. This has the effect of underscoring the organizational

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<sup>66</sup> Alan Bairner, *Sport, nationalism, and globalization: European and North American perspectives*, NY: SUNY Press, 2001, p. xi.

(instrumental) imperatives at the expense of articulating substantive goals. It promotes an interest in who is “winning” or “losing” without looking at the reasons why one should win and the other should lose.<sup>67</sup>

For Lipsky, sports distract and obfuscate – oversimplifying the complexities of politics and myopically focusing on the “horse race” aspects of partisan battles at the expense of in-depth dialogue about values and goals. While this criticism offers insight into why, for example, a politician may choose to use a sports metaphor when discussing a particular policy, it is not as relevant in the instance of presidential sports encomium.

Presidential sports encomium is an *overt* example of sports rhetoric. In a ceremony honoring sports champions, sports symbols are not a “metaphor” used as ideological cover for the primary subject of executive policy – sports are the primary subject matter. Winning and losing is the substantive goal, not a diversion. The metaphorical impact of sports rhetoric in presidential sports encomia occurs as presidents explain the championship as an example of what it means to be American or what the nation must strive towards in order to fulfill American ideals. There is still a masking function for sports rhetoric in these instances, but it occurs not as a way to divert attention from policy; instead, presidents use sports encomia to draw attention to examples of athletic achievement that they claim support their visions of national unity and American values.

Presidential policies and legislative agendas may indeed contain details that are glossed over by presidential sports rhetoric, to the detriment of public understanding. But national identity and “American values” are already abstract concepts. Sports narratives

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<sup>67</sup> Lipsky, 1981, p. 140.

are used by presidents to highlight components of national identity, not hide them behind the oppositional win-loss framework of sports. When a legislator uses a sports metaphor to describe the battles on the Senate floor, it is likely to be one of contestation. In contrast, the athletes visiting the White House have completed their season, and are being honored for victories already won. In such a setting, presidents would gain little from discussing an executive decision made “in the bottom of the ninth” or “underscoring organizational imperatives.” Instead, presidents are more likely to use the opportunity of honoring champions to talk of determination, teamwork, and other sporting values that can be applied to the larger issues of national unity.<sup>68</sup>

This is not to discount the entirety of Lipsky’s critique as it applies to presidential sports encomia. The transposition of “sports’ ideologically unproblematic nature onto politics” has traction. Scholarly attention turns from the way that sports transforms politics to the way that politics is injected into sports. This alteration in analytical perspective coheres with the work done by J.M. Hoberman regarding the “body politic.”<sup>69</sup> Drawing upon Hoberman’s argument that sports has the fascistic tendency of supporting aggressive nationalism via “political athleticism,” the chief executive presiding over the championship ceremony is understood as the “political athlete” symbolically linking the state to sport in ways that promote “the virility of the fascist nation by conveying the image of an athletic ‘body politic’.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> See Chapter 5 for detailed examples of this rhetorical maneuver.

<sup>69</sup> Hoberman, 1981, p. 310.

<sup>70</sup> Walk, 1990, p. 7.

A significant caveat must be acknowledged.<sup>71</sup> Hoberman's work concerns *state-sponsored* sport, e.g., the national teams of Soviet-bloc nations. In these cases, the state-sport connection is intrinsic. In contrast, the linkage of sports champions to national values in American presidential sports encomia is one that requires *rhetorical* connections on the part of the rhetors.<sup>72</sup> For example, a president must explain to the audience why the New England Patriots should be perceived as representing the entire nation and how their championship serves as an example of national ideals. Even when honoring the Dallas Cowboys ("America's team"), the president has to make the argument, because intercollegiate and professional teams are identified with cities, states, or regions – not the whole country.

Despite this distinction, Hoberman's claims regarding the "physicality" of nationalism as it relates to the state-sport dyad is informative. Sport is not only the physical manifestation of human achievement. The sporting life serves as a full representation of physical life. In refuting the notion that "sports is a microcosm," Nathaniel Offen argues,

There is a theory, quite prevalent among analysts...that sports is a microcosm of life. It isn't. Sports is [sic] life to the nth degree. It is life *in extremis*; every season you are born and you die...Sports is a world speeded up and a world of absolutes. There is good and bad, black and white, right and wrong. It's not gray and tentative like the real world. It is hyperlife under glass.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> I say "drawing upon" in order to distinguish the claims of this dissertation from Hoberman, specifically electing to use the phrase "fascistic tendency" rather than the more direct "fascism" to further delineate that my argument does not rely on fascism being practiced in American politics.

<sup>72</sup> The exception is, of course, presidential address concerning U.S. Olympic teams. The commonalities between encomia of Olympic athletes and other sports champions indicate that U.S. presidents view the events as similar opportunities for addressing issues of American values and national identity. This dissertation includes such examples of presidential sports rhetoric so as to be as comprehensive as possible.

<sup>73</sup> Nathaniel Offen, *God save the players*. Chicago: Playboy Press, 1974, p. 23.

Offen's claims jibe well with Hoberman's warning about sports and fascism. The "hyperlife" of sports has a tempo quite in step with the "aggressive nationalism" associated with fascism. The unchallenged "moral purity"<sup>74</sup> of sport is what tips the scales of mere patriotism toward its more reactionary cousin. The sporting event is an emotive wellspring from which the political leader can emphasize athletic exploits of "our national heroes" as guidance for the lives of the general public. The athlete is a representation of the body politic at its best.<sup>75</sup>

In this context, Bairner's statement that "sport and nationalism are arguably two of the most emotive issues in the modern world"<sup>76</sup> supports the idea of a visceral reaction to sport that serves the politician seeking to energize the populace around national ideals – a common tactic of which fascism is simply the extreme example. In less extreme contexts, abstract concepts, such as determination and cooperation, are given a human face in the form of sports champions. Athletic achievements are explained by presidents as manifestations of American values. The emotional connection to sports by the public makes it a useful example for the rhetor, contributing pathos to the arguments made by

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<sup>74</sup> This is the argument made by Lipsky (1978) described earlier in this chapter.

<sup>75</sup> This is not to say that sports have been free of scandals. But unlike politics, where individual politicians tend to be assumed guilty of corruption and selfish political agendas, athletes involved in political scandals are treated on a more case-by-case basis. For example, Cal Ripken was the labor representative for the Baltimore Orioles, and yet received no backlash from fans as a result of the 1994 Major League Baseball work stoppage. Michael Jordan, who was personally targeted for his involvement in gambling, suffered only a temporary setback in his public image. Finally, the sport itself usually escapes damage from athletic scandal, as the growing attendance figures in professional baseball and football following player strikes prove. In general, it seems as if the "impurities" of specific sports scandals are treated as exceptions to the rule. In contrast, it is difficult to think of a contemporary politician who enjoys bipartisan support, and politics is denounced by many as a "dirty business."

<sup>76</sup> Bairner, 2001, p. xi.



U.S. presidents in sports encomia. The danger, as Hoberman suggests, is that this emotional aspect can be exploited for fascistic ends.

My analysis of presidential sports encomia does not reveal such exploitation. As explained in Chapter 5, which includes a detailed examination of how presidents massage this sports-nationalism nexus when performing presidential sports encomia, the particularities of these ceremonies offer presidents specific rhetorical advantages when invoking characteristics of national identity. However, there is no substantial evidence that U.S. presidents have attempted to use sports to promote an exclusive notion of national identity in ways similar to that of Hitler in 1930's Germany. As explained later in this chapter, the influence of sports in the United States has been much different, with sports narratives supporting arguments for racial harmony. While critics might allege that such tactics mask racial inequalities, there is still a significant distinction between the use of sports rhetoric to downplay societal discrimination and the use of sports symbolism to justify the existence of a super-race.

One last comment on the connection between sports and nationalism is necessary. In the preceding paragraph, the claim that this linkage is made rhetorically was phrased broadly in order to include more than just U.S. presidents among its tacticians. This is because politicians are not the only ones who choose to associate athletic accomplishment with patriotism – those individuals who constitute the “professional sports industry” also attempt to depict sports as patriotic. Physical Education professor George Sage has studied the ways in which professional sports leagues do this, citing examples such as the use of the national colors (red, white, and blue) exclusively in the

emblems of all major sports leagues (MLB, NBA, NFL) in the United States.<sup>77</sup> The emphasis on sports as a sign of national unity following the tragic events of 9/11, a subject addressed in greater detail later, is another example of this connection. In describing how professional sports leagues have “consistently worked at constructing a symbiotic relationship in the collective American mind linking professional team sports with United States patriotism,”<sup>78</sup> Sage explains,

Throughout their histories, professional sport organizations have represented themselves as beneficent national treasures, pillars of unwavering Americanism, and they have played these out through images, metaphors, rituals, and discourses of imagined community...weaving national symbols and pageantry into pro sports events, such as playing the national anthem before games and patriotic half-time shows; and incorporating pro sports events like the Super Bowl and World Series into a panoply of political ritual that serves to remind people of their common heritage.<sup>79</sup>

Incorporating previous work done on both national identities<sup>80</sup> in general, and as it relates to professional sports specifically,<sup>81</sup> Sage is developing the argument that the sports-state

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<sup>77</sup> The fact that the term “world champion” is used by Major League Baseball is not so much an attempt to internationalize the sport as it is a weak effort to acknowledge the two non-U.S. teams that play in the Major Leagues. Montreal (for now) and Toronto each have MLB clubs. In the NFL, the ultimate winner is known simply as the “Super Bowl” champion. The NBA champion is also sometimes referred to as a “world champion,” a phrase that seems suspect given the recent efforts of the USA Basketball men’s team at the World Championships (6<sup>th</sup> place in 2002) and the 2004 Olympics (bronze medal). But a closer look reveals that of all the professional sports leagues, the NBA has the most valid claim of crowning a world champion. With players from every continent (save Antarctica) playing in the league, the NBA is truly representative of the world. And the recent decline in USA dominance in world basketball can be directly attributed to the development of non-American players in the NBA. For example, Manu Ginobili helped the Argentina men capture gold at the 2004 Olympics after honing his skills with the San Antonio Spurs. Whether it be an exaggeration (like in the case of MLB) or somewhat accurate (as with the NBA), the use of “world” to describe the champion of the league does not deny the strong sense of nationalism promoted in U.S. professional sports.

<sup>78</sup> George Sage, “Patriotic images and capitalist profit: Contradictions of professional team sports licensed merchandise,” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1996, vol. 13, p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> The term “imagined community” comes from Benjamin Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. New York: Verso, 1991.

<sup>81</sup> L.A. Wenner, “The Super Bowl pregame show: Cultural fantasies and political subtext,” *Media, sports,*

relationship is a two-way street as it concerns national identities – “symbiotic” in the sense that each feeds off the other. And it is important to note that the contribution made by sports is a *rhetorical* one – “through images, metaphors, rituals, and discourses” – and it is made primarily *outside* the boundaries of the contest itself (pre-game, half-time, etc).

This supports a key justification of this study: scholarly attention to the ways in which the symbolic values of sports are communicated beyond the field of play is necessary in order to fully comprehend the relationship between politics, sports, and features of national identity. Sage’s claim about the desire of the professional sports industry to be perceived as patriotic can be examined in presidential sports encomia. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5, the gift of a replica jersey given to presidents by teams is an example of this symbiotic relationship. Additionally, the question of how to deal with sports in a post- 9/11 United States is addressed in Chapter 6. The ways in which sports have been discussed by U.S. presidents following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, particularly in sports encomia, bolster my arguments concerning the substantial role sports narratives play in the articulation of national identity. Even during the war on terror, sports encomia continue to provide presidents with a rhetorical resource for identifying and extolling American values, especially in ways that suggest sacred meanings.

### Sports as a sacred subject

Even if the claim that sports rhetoric is deployed by political leaders for the purpose of appealing to particular visions of national unity is accepted, there remains a

question of “why sports”: what makes sports uniquely adaptive to the rhetorical needs of those who seek to converse on matters of national identity? Two factors have already been detailed – “universal aesthetic” and the appearance of ideological neutrality. But alone, these two characteristics would not be enough to distinguish sports from other sociological phenomena as singularly appropriate for these rhetorical situations. It could be argued that fast food, popular music, and television fit these two criteria as well. It is a third characteristic – sports as sacred – that separates sports in the cultural milieu. In his comprehensive study of sports metaphor in presidential communication, Stephan Walk states, “It is a curious phenomenon that sport seems to be one among a select set of social institutions that are near universally treated as sacred topics in American politics.”<sup>82</sup>

Although such a statement does provide scholarly support for my claim that sports have a uniquely sacred quality, Walk finds it more of a curiosity than an issue worthy of further investigation. Answering the question of why sports are considered sacred requires research outside the field of political communication.

In his 1978 work analyzing the evolution of modern sports “from ritual to record,” sports scholar Allen Guttman addresses the issue of sports as religious activity. For the Greeks, this intersection was overtly religious, with Olympic sports played to honor the gods.<sup>83</sup> Within the more secular societies of today, religion may seem less integral to sports at first glance. However, the religious nature of modern sports has not gone completely unnoticed. Guttman explains the connections:

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<sup>82</sup> Walk, 1990, p. 53.

<sup>83</sup> Allen Guttman, *From ritual to record: The nature of modern sports*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978, p. 21.

For most contemporary athletes, even for those who ask for divine assistance in the game, the contest is a secular event. The Sermon on the Mount does not interfere with hard blocking and determined tackling. Religion remains on the sidelines. Unless sports themselves take on a religious significance of their own. One of the strangest turns in the long, devious route that leads from primitive ritual to the World Series...is the proclivity of modern sports to become a kind of secular faith. Young men...seem to quite literally worship the heroes of modern sports. Journalists, referring to the passion of the Welsh for rugby or the devotion of Texans to football, speak of sports as the “religion” of the populace.<sup>84</sup>

Importantly, the “secular faith” referred to in this quote is held by the fan and commentator, not necessarily the athlete: the spectator becomes the participant in this sanctification of sports – worshipping athletic heroes. Thus, the religious quality of sports identified by Guttman in this passage requires a relationship between the contest and the spectators. One of Guttman’s claims is that the sacred purposes for *playing* sports that existed in ancient societies no longer exists today: “The bond between the secular and sacred has been broken...Modern sports are partly pursued for their own sake, partly for other ends that are equally secular. We do not run in order that the earth be more fertile.”<sup>85</sup> It can be inferred from this claim that Guttman views the sacred aspect of sports as being external to the contest itself: the game is only sacred if it is *intended* and *valued* for sacred purposes. Once again the significance of sports is cast in decidedly rhetorical terms – it is in the *communication about* the contest, and not the *execution of skills* required for success in the event where Guttman locates religious characteristics. In this way, “spectators” can be understood not as passive observers, but as actively

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<sup>84</sup> Guttman, 1978, p. 25.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p26.

determining sport's position (religious or otherwise) within a community – constructing and sharing what it *means*. To complete the analogy, spectators are congregants.

There are some who may criticize this inclusion of sports within an understanding of religion, especially those who limit the definition of religion to matters of worshipping deities. In fact, according to this more narrow interpretation, sports fans are definitively anti-religious (and perhaps sacrilegious) in their worship of *human* achievement.

However, definitions of religion need not be limited to worship of a deity. The pioneering anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines a religion as

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [people] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>86</sup>

In this definition, there is no mention of deity, with an emphasis on symbols that create moods and establish order. Instead, the emphasis is on *rhetoric*: “a system of symbols” is employed for purposes of persuasion, specifically the “formulation” of “an aura of factuality” guiding “moods and motivations.” Sports as religion fits nicely within Geertz’ definition – with the competitive framework establishing a general order of existence where winning and losing appears to be the natural order of things. It should be noted that scholars of both sports<sup>87</sup> and American civil religion<sup>88</sup> rely on Geertz’ definition of religion.

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<sup>86</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973, p. 90.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Martyn Percy and Rogan Taylor, “Something for the weekend sir? Leisure, ecstasy, and identity in football and contemporary religion,” *Leisure studies*, January 1997, vol. 16 issue 1, 37-49, p 38.

<sup>88</sup> For example, Michael Angrosino, “Civil religion redux,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, Spring 2002, vol. 75 issue 2, 239-267.

For Guttmann, the religious nature of the sporting contest has been lost, although the religious fervor of the audience remains. For Michael Novak, the event retains a sacred character: “The relation of the athlete to the sports event is rather like that of the clergy to the Solemn High Mass...Our major sports, then, are more like liturgies – symbolic public dramas – than like entertainment or exercise.”<sup>89</sup> It is the event itself that has religious connotations. The argument that sports are spiritual has been made by others as well. In commenting on the issue of prayer in sports, news columnist Scott Baldauf reports, “...he says the very activity of playing sports tends to bring structure and discipline into an athlete’s life, and it’s natural that athletes would consider prayer to be an integral part of the game. ‘Sport is a spiritual discipline,’ Dr. Kirsch [sports psychologist] says.”<sup>90</sup> According to Baldauf’s claims, the public genuflection by football players after they score a touchdown is a “natural” reaction by those who appreciate the “structure and discipline” sports has brought into their lives. Another way of explaining such behavior is to acknowledge athletic performance as one of God’s gifts to humanity. The triumphant athlete pays respects to the Almighty, thankful for being allowed to exceed the average limits of human physicality. In either case, playing sports are understood in spiritual terms.

Both Novak and Kirsch view sports as a sacred realm for the athlete, while Guttmann locates the religious aspect of sport outside the field of play, where the fans reside. This latter view is supported by the work of British sports sociologists Martyn

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<sup>89</sup> Michael Novak, “American sports, American virtues,” in Wiley Lee Umphlett (ed.) *American sport culture*, Toronto: Associated University Press, 1985, 34-49, p. 35.

<sup>90</sup> Scott Baldauf, “When prayer is out of bounds on the field of play,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 12, 1999, Vol. 91 issue 71, p1.

Percy and Rogan Taylor in their work on British football [soccer]. They claim, “Football is like a religion to its devotees. It binds and divides, shapes and delimits, providing a critical identity for a given group and individuals.”<sup>91</sup> It is “like a religion” in the sense that Geertz defines “religion,” providing football fans with a “system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations.” Claims as to the rhetorical nature of sport implied in the previous quotation are made clear when Percy and Taylor – drawing implicitly upon the work of Clifford Geertz<sup>92</sup> - state, “we tend to see religious or sporting affiliation as a matter of a ‘cultural system’ in which language plays a key part in the establishment of identity and ideology for the believers.”<sup>93</sup> Sports gain their significance within a cultural system in the communication of shared identity. The “key part” played by language reinforces my contention that the power of sports as a social force is a condition of rhetoric. Sports spectatorship becomes communal as a *communicative* process. The “establishment of identity and ideology” is dialogic among the fans; the significance of sports would not be nearly as great (and perhaps non-existent) if it were not a *shared* experience and communication is the means by which it is shared.

What is interesting about these two views of sport’s religious character – be it tied to the athlete or to the spectator – is that the focus remains on the event itself. What is missing is recognition of sport’s continued importance long after the stadium lights have dimmed. Is it possible for sports to *mean something*, especially in a sacred manner, to

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<sup>91</sup> Percy and Taylor, 1997, p. 38.

<sup>92</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Ideology as a cultural system,” in D. Apter (ed.) *Ideology and Discontent*, New York: Free Press, 1964, pp. 165-195, p. 64.

<sup>93</sup> Percy and Taylor, 1997, p. 38.



those who were not there to witness the actual event? And what of winning and losing? What significance does sport's competitive nature hold for its religious character? This last point is crucial given the effort devoted to distinguishing sport from mere "play."

Guttman is not the only scholar to devote substantial attention to the categories of play,<sup>94</sup> but his delineation is perhaps the easiest to understand. Play is divided into two categories: spontaneous play and organized play, called games. Games can be further divided into non-competitive and competitive categories, with the latter being labeled "contests." Within this latter category, there are contests that require physical skill and those that rely on intellectual skill (e.g., chess). The former, physical contests, are sports.<sup>95</sup> Guttman devotes an entire chapter of his book to this distinction, but fails to acknowledge how conceptions of competition affect the notion of sports as religion. The emphasis on spectatorship as a force integral to the spiritual nature of sports (yet external to the playing field) would mark some categories of play as "more religious" than others.

Similarly, Novak refers to baseball, basketball, and football in America as "the holy trinity" and all sports as "natural religions,"<sup>96</sup> but doesn't discuss the ways that celebration of victory might influence his connection between sports and religion.<sup>97</sup> As the "national pastime," baseball could be argued to have a more revered place in American society, and there is the issue of whether a sport can lose its status in "the holy trinity" if the public stops attending games. In other words, their categorization is

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<sup>94</sup> See also Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture*, London: Temple Smith, 1938; Bernard Suits, "What is a game?" *Philosophy of Science*, June 1967, vol. 34, pp. 148-156.

<sup>95</sup> Guttman, 1978, pp. 3-9.

<sup>96</sup> Michael Novak, *The joy of sports*, New York: Doubleday, 1976.

<sup>97</sup> Novak does discuss "victory," but only in his definition of "American Zen," where he views "victory over nature" as part of the American character, see Novak 1985, p. 39.

dependent on the public's attention, a facet they do not fully develop and one that gives their argument a rhetorical perspective.

Percy and Taylor, by relating the songs sung by British football fans in the arenas to religious festivals, are only able to make the more limited claim that “charismatic religious rallies and large sports events do share characteristics in terms of crowd behavior.”<sup>98</sup> They admit “these songs or chants” only “partly...provide the ‘complete’ system that Geertz alluded to.”<sup>99</sup> Their attention to fans full of passion during the contest is similar to others who relate sports spectatorship to religious worship.<sup>100</sup>

The problem with these attempts to portray sports as religious is that they cast sports as religious only when the level of interest is at a fever pitch – the “high” of watching sports is akin to a religious epiphany. But such descriptions imply that sports are no more religious than any other adrenaline-increasing activity. Are sports a common “water-cooler” topic of conversation merely because they are so exciting? Or is there something about sports that make them popular fodder for informal conversations? The claims by Guttman and Novak concerning sports’ “religious” qualities imply that there is something more than adrenaline-induced fervor. Sports narratives have a substance that evoke emotional attachment and invoke sacred characteristics. The popular appeal of sports in American society can be measured in attendance, but it can also be recognized in its continued place in national conversations.

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<sup>98</sup> Percy and Taylor, 1997, p. 37.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>100</sup> Novak comments on the bar patrons watching a Monday Night Football game, see Novak 1985, p. 34.

To this point, sports have been described as “popular” both in terms of how many people follow sports as spectators and the common understanding of sports that makes it a useful rhetorical resource. There is another aspect of sports’ popularity mentioned by scholars that informs the notion of sports as sacred. Writing on “TV sport and the sacrificial hero,”<sup>101</sup> sports scholar John Izod has explained the popularity of sports as the result of a desire for immortality. He argues that competitive sports are ideal for hero construction; competitive individualism is the received view in cultural and political ideology in Western societies. According to Izod, we search to strengthen ourselves by identifying with a hero. Heroes mark the passage of time, strength, and virility, and we identify with the athletic hero as symbolic of the triumph of physicality and desires for youth. For Izod, when this attachment is collective, the effect is akin to a religious experience.

The rhetorical genre of presidential sports encomia – epideictic – reinforces this understanding of sports as sacred that emanates from the desire for immortality. John O’Malley, in his work on rhetoric in the Catholic church,<sup>102</sup> notes that the epideictic rhetor has difficulty finding appropriate lines of argument, and “memoria” - recollection of a shared past - becomes an important rhetorical resource with contemplation, rather than action, being the distinctive character of the genre. The setting for epideictic discourse is ‘of the moment,’ a point that speaks to the temporal present. The occasion that surrounds the epideictic encounter has been referred to as a “celebration of

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<sup>101</sup> John Izod, “Television sport and the sacrificial hero,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, May 1996, 173-193.

<sup>102</sup> John O’Malley, *Praise and blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, doctrine, and reform in the sacred orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450-1521*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979, pp. 40-63.

communal values and traditional beliefs.”<sup>103</sup> In this way, the epideictic event takes on trappings of ritual, a description used explicitly by Michael Carter,<sup>104</sup> and implicit in the use of “ceremonial” and “occasional” as synonyms for “epideictic.”

Lawrence Rosenfield’s description of epideictic as the memorialization of “sacredness fleetingly revealed”<sup>105</sup> brings the point home – as sacredness is put on the clock. It is only in the present that time is of the essence. With presidential sports encomia, sport’s invocation of immortality and conquest of physical limits reinforces this point. The celebration of sports champions as an epideictic event is made more significant because not only are we honoring the achievement as it pertains to the particular moment, but also the that the champions on display manifest our own desires for transcendence. Presidential sports encomia can therefore be understood as a religious event, with the president praising sports champions, and the epideictic format serving to reinforce this memorializing of time momentarily subdued under the will of the sports hero.

In terms of the sacred appeal of sports in American society, the religious undertone of presidential sports encomia is further strengthened by the ways in which the competitive framework of sports coheres with the values of liberal democracy and capitalism. Richard Lipsky categorizes sports “as a moral realm” where the “values of teamwork and cooperation, so prevalent in the sports ideology, are important

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<sup>103</sup> Waldo Braden and Harold Mixon, “Epideictic Speaking in the Post-Civil War South and the Southern experience,” *Southern Communication Journal*, 1988, volume 54, 44.

<sup>104</sup> See “The ritual functions of epideictic rhetoric: The case of Socrates’ funeral oration,” *Rhetorica*, 1991, volume 9, 209-232.

<sup>105</sup> Lawrence Rosenfield, “Central Park and the celebration of civic virtue,” in Thomas Benson (ed.) *American Rhetoric: Context and Criticism*, pp. 221-266. Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1989.

influences.”<sup>106</sup> According to Geertz’ definition of religion quoted previously, Lipsky’s “moral realm” takes on a religious form. Sporting contests provide a “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” from which rhetors can formulate “conceptions of a general order of existence,” with the absolutes of wins and losses allowing them to “clothe” these “conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” By reinforcing the economic and political values of the American culture Lipsky’s “moral realm” of sports serves the same function as Geertz’ “religion.”

In presidential sports encomia, “teamwork and cooperation” are indeed part of a “moral realm” elicited by the nation’s political leader for the purpose of establishing “powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” in the public, “formulating conceptions of a general order of existence” – the American way of life. Sports’ sacred qualities are enhanced by the setting of a White House ceremony honoring athletic champions, all of which assist the president in framing the specific details of sporting contests as emblematic of larger issues of national significance – what it means to be American and what it takes for the public to reach the lofty goals exemplified by the champions being honored. In this way, sports encomia are a rhetorical opportunity for presidents to address questions of unity in a heterogeneous society.

#### Sports as rhetorical opportunity for multicultural symbolism

As noted in the introductory chapter, the sacred characteristics of sports may provide rhetors who are attempting to revive American civil religion with the resources

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<sup>106</sup> Lipsky, 1978, p. 358.

necessary to unite a fractured public – using “language to try and develop and maintain feelings of shared national identity within a wildly diverse democracy.”<sup>107</sup> In order for sports rhetoric to serve in this capacity, it must address the issues of race and racism. Whether sports are progressive forces in U.S. race relations is a contested topic. In his book, *New Jack Jocks*, sportswriter Larry Platt contends

that sports can be a lens through which to see the country more clearly, if only we look closely...when it comes to the hot-button issues of our time, the sports subculture has been and continues to be ahead of the culture at large. It’s actually been the breeding ground for progressivism, a laboratory for egalitarianism.<sup>108</sup>

From Platt’s perspective, sports are “ahead of the curve” because the statistics concerning minority participation – specifically, the numbers of African Americans – show a subculture more integrated than the larger society. As Platt notes, “the sports industry...is the most integrated sector of society, with the possible exception of the armed services.”<sup>109</sup> The numbers support this claim. According to D. Stanley Eitzen, in 1999, African Americans comprised 12% of the general U.S. population while accounting for 80% of all National Basketball Association players, 67% of National Football League players, and 18% of Major League Baseball players.<sup>110</sup>

However, Platt’s argument requires more than mere participation. In order for sports to be a “breeding ground for progressivism,” it must, at a minimum, provide a

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<sup>107</sup> Beasley, 2004, pp. 3-4. The ability of candidates to campaign and presidents to govern in the face of this diversity has been a frequent subject for political scientists. See, for example, Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical elections and the mainsprings of American politics*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1970; Stephen Skowronek, *The politics presidents make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. Although their interests are beyond the scope of this study, they do inform the larger issue of presidential leadership in a dynamic society.

<sup>108</sup> Larry Platt, *New Jack Jocks*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002, p. 1-3.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>110</sup> D. Stanley Eitzen, *Fair and foul: Beyond the myths and paradoxes of sport*, 1999, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, p. xii.

forum for racial minorities to air their grievances and formulate resistance to a greater degree than they would find elsewhere. Critics of the positive view of sports disagree on this point. Sports sociologists James H. Frey and D. Stanley Eitzen conclude that “just as racial discrimination exists in society, [so also] it exists in sport. Blacks do not have equal opportunity; they do not receive similar rewards for equal performance when compared to whites; and their prospects for a lucrative career beyond sport participation are dismal.”<sup>111</sup> Note how this conclusion subsumes Platt’s premise – even if there are *more* blacks playing sports, they still may not be receiving *equal* treatment. Sheer numbers of participation do not necessarily provide evidence for how a group of people are being treated. If racial minorities are being treated unfairly in sports, they are being treated unfairly *in large numbers*, which would turn Platt’s contention upside down. As a counter to Platt’s notion that sports allow for progressive political mobilization on the part of racial minorities, Douglass Hartmann has stated that “racial differences and inequalities continue to be a defining feature of the American sporting landscape.”<sup>112</sup> Such pronouncements deny the notion that sports have been a successful forum for addressing problems of race, either internally or externally.

John Hoberman goes even further in criticizing the role of sports in society vis-à-vis racism.<sup>113</sup> Arguing from the perspective of sports’ “*de facto* association with bodies and the mind/body dualisms at the core of Western culture,”<sup>114</sup> Hoberman views athletic

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<sup>111</sup> J.H. Frey and D.S. Eitzen, “Sport and society,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1991, vol. 17, p. 513.

<sup>112</sup> Douglas Hartmann, “Rethinking the relationship between sport and race in American culture: Golden ghettos and contested terrain,” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 2000, vol. 17, p. 235.

<sup>113</sup> John Hoberman, *Darwin’s athletes: How sport has damaged Black America and preserved the myth of race*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

<sup>114</sup> Hartmann, 2000, p. 237.

accomplishments by blacks as reinforcing racist stereotypes that hinder the advancement of the African American community. From this perspective, emphasis on athletic achievement pigeonholes African Americans, fueling the racist belief that “blacks are only good at sports.” Physical prowess is perversely denoted as a sign of low mental and/or moral stature. Such a narrow-minded view depicts successful minority athletes as relying on primal instincts and brute strength, both of which reinforce the racist concept of blacks as sub-human. The more success African Americans have in athletics, so this theory goes, the more ingrained such discriminatory beliefs become. In this way, sports rhetoric serves regressive, not progressive, forces in society.

Whereas Hoberman’s critique merely implies rhetorical work being done, David Andrews is more explicit in connecting the dots. Adapting the work of Jacques Derrida to the issue, Andrews refers to African American athletes as “floating racial signifiers,” whose symbolic value is abstracted from social reality to the extent that they can be interpreted by the audience (or from a communicative perspective, deployed by the rhetor) in a variety of ways.<sup>115</sup> Because racism persists in American society, Andrews views this characteristic as serving primarily conservative forces that perpetuate racial inequality (a viewpoint shared by scholars who attack sports from other perspectives<sup>116</sup>). According to this argument, the actual achievements of racial minorities in sports are irrelevant because they can be “spun” in any number of ways rhetorically; and given the systemic racism in society, this spin-doctoring will always favor the majority culture and

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<sup>115</sup> David Andrews, “The fact(s) of Michael Jordan’s Blackness: Excavating a floating racial signifier,” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1996, vol. 13, pp. 125-158.

<sup>116</sup> For a critique of the hypermasculinity of sports, see Varda Burstyn, *The rites of men: Manhood, politics, and the culture of sport*, 2000, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.



continue to marginalize racial and ethnic groups. One scenario is the “tokenism” argument. In this example, political leaders addressing criticisms of racial inequality can point to the success of minority athletes in sports as evidence of egalitarianism in society. The effect is perverse: the more a minority athlete succeeds, the more harm they do to their own racial group as their achievements can be used to justify inaction on discrimination and blame of the racial group for their situation.

One problem with these criticisms of sports as negatively impacting racial minorities is that it requires a dismissal of the lived experience of many of the individuals who are depicted as victims. Blacks *do* have participation levels in sports that are disproportionately large compared to their overall numbers in the general population. Although the evidence is anecdotal, African Americans who play professional sports *do* have greater opportunities to speak in public forums about race (and other issues).<sup>117</sup> How do critics account for the very real numbers of racial minorities<sup>118</sup> who seem to thrive in the world of sports? Douglas Hartmann provides an answer (and the problem with it):

...they see the popular ideology that sport is a positive and progressive racial force strictly as a form of false consciousness, as *mere* ideology. This cynical, dismissive attitude makes it impossible for academic critics

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<sup>117</sup> A personal experience illustrates this fact. On April 25, 2004, Sunday TV news shows devoted substantial time to two sports-related stories that had cross-over appeal: the attempts by collegiate underclassmen Mike Williams and Maurice Claret (both black) to declare early for the NFL draft and the death of Pat Tillman, the (white) NFL player who had volunteered for military service and who had been killed in action while serving with the Army Rangers in Afghanistan. On ESPN, the panel of 4 athletes discussing the stories consisted of 3 African American males: Corey Chavous, Takeo Spikes, and Michael Irvin. On ABC's *This Week*, Fareed Zakaria was the only person of color on the air during the one hour show; NBC's *Meet the Press* had none; Juan Williams was the only person of color on Fox News. It struck me that only the “sports channel” had significant representation from people of color discussing these issues.

<sup>118</sup> While African Americans are often the focus of such studies, participation in sports such as baseball and boxing by Hispanic-Americans is proof that the subject is not just a “black-white” issue.

to grasp why popular perceptions appeal so widely, especially among African Americans, *even* in the absence of scholarly argument and empirical support of them. Even worse, in many ways, such an approach makes it more difficult if not impossible to recognize the ways in which racial resistance and change have been fostered in and through sport in the past and the possibilities for such that are in place still today.<sup>119</sup>

For Hartmann, academics who denounce sports as regressive and counterproductive for African Americans ignore the fact that sports are embraced by the African American community.<sup>120</sup> This move by critics of sports is similar to the claim of “false consciousness” found in Marxist scholarship. What neo-Marxists in the academy refer to as “false consciousness” can be stated in more simple terms: for critics of sport, blacks who believe in the progressive potential of athletics are “dupes.” Hartmann articulates the problem with this “cynical, dismissive attitude” in terms of how it hinders scholarship. But an even greater problem exists. Dismissing actual participation by racial minorities as “false consciousness” infantilizes the racial minorities, with the scholar playing the role of the paternalistic superior and the athlete as the “poor soul” who just doesn’t know any better. For example, Hoberman claims that achievement in sports reifies the idea that “blacks only have physical skills” and lack mental acuity. And yet, to deny the choices made by African Americans as “false consciousness” reifies the very stereotype (blacks are uneducated and able only to exert themselves in physical contests) he condemns in sports. The circularity of this reasoning is not just a logical fallacy – it is a flaw that undermines the ideological ground of the critic and the criticism itself.

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<sup>119</sup> Hartmann, 2000, p. 240.

<sup>120</sup> Due to the specificity of authors such as Platt and Hartmann, my claims are limited to African Americans. However, the importance of Jim Thorpe to the American Indian communities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the popularity of Ichiro Suzuki and Yao Ming within Asian American communities in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century could be argued to have similar significance.

In contrast to the “ivory tower”<sup>121</sup> quality of much of the scholarship in the field as it concerns race, Larry Platt injects both the voice of the athlete and his own experience into the debate. First he quotes NBA star Charles Barkley: “One of the things I’ve enjoyed most about sports is that it brings the races together. In the locker room, we’re all the same.”<sup>122</sup> This integration is not limited to athletes on the playing field either. Platt notes that the basketball games he attended as an undergraduate at Syracuse University were “easily the most multicultural gathering on campus. In the stands, blacks and whites hugged and high-fived, just as on the court...these games linked us to the surrounding community....”<sup>123</sup> Platt’s claim is that sports are a positive force for race relations, citing the level of integration on the court and in the stands that is appreciably greater than the society at large. No matter how lasting such memories are for Platt, such anecdotal evidence cannot totally deny the criticisms leveled by those who view sports as merely upholding the status quo.

The myopic vigilance with which John Hoberman and Larry Platt defend such divergent opinions on sports – like two ships passing in the night – recalls the parable of the “golden ghetto” told by Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>124</sup> Bourdieu described the predicament of the African American athlete in the 1970s, dismissed by those on the Right because they were black and by those on the Left because they played sports. They are left in the isolation of a “golden ghetto,” their voices ignored by the same social commentators

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<sup>121</sup> This phrase has a double meaning in this sense, given the criticisms by Hartmann and Platt of much of the anti-sports scholarship is that it relies on academic theory while ignoring the lived experiences of racial minorities.

<sup>122</sup> Platt, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>124</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Programme for a sociology of sport,” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1988, vol. 5, p. 155.

whose arguments may determine the future of sports. In reviewing both sides of the arguments over sports' role in American society, Douglas Hartmann cites Bourdieu's "golden ghetto" to admonish scholars for ignoring the potential of sports:

...academic critics have been too quick to dismiss the opportunities for racial resistance and change available through sport and, thus, failed to grasp the full extent to which sport is implicated in American racial formations. ...They have made their points only by exchanging one totalization (that sport is a positive force for racial change) for the other (that it is a negative, impending one). ...While it may not be perfect, sport is an unparalleled institutional site of accomplishment for African Americans and remains one of the most integrated institutions in American life. This is part of what gives sport its paradoxical, golden ghetto-like quality: for all its problems, sport offers opportunities and possibilities for racial resistance and change that stand out in comparison with other institutional realms.<sup>125</sup>

Hartmann explicates a middle-ground: accepting the limits of sports to foment mass resistance on the part of the African American community while acknowledging that sports, more than any other institution in the U.S., still provide a forum for progressive change. Hartmann recognizes the networks that already exist ("the full extent to which sport is implicated in American racial formations") and the historical record of sports as a source of racial progress ("an unparalleled institutional site of accomplishment"). He does this not as a dismissal of every criticism of sports, but rather an acknowledgment that sports can make, indeed *have made*, a positive contribution to alleviating the plight of marginalized minority groups in the United States. His position privileges rhetoric. Sports are neither "all good" nor "all bad," but instead offer various resources for rhetors. It is up to the rhetor to decide how the sports narrative will be deployed. In Chapter 5, my analysis of presidential sports encomia shows how some presidents have used the

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<sup>125</sup> Hartmann, 2000, pp. 229-240

occasion to portray America as no longer burdened by racism while other presidents have chosen to speak out on the continuing ills of racial inequality via the examples of sports champions. The contrasting examples of sports encomia during the Reagan and Clinton presidencies provide support for a nuanced understanding of the role that sports' symbolism plays in addressing racial inequality.

The question remains as to whether these “opportunities and possibilities” are sufficient to successfully address racism in American society. For Hartmann, the answer is no:

My argument, more specifically, is that the parallels between sport culture and liberal democratic American political ideology – their common emphasis on competition, meritocracy, and equality before the rules, in particular – limit and undermine the ability of African Americans to use sport to contribute to the struggle for racial justice because they actually stand in contrast to the structural and institutional factors at the root of racial inequalities. This has been especially true since the Civil Rights movement of the late 1950's and early 1960's effectively outlawed and de-legitimated overt prejudice, segregation, and discrimination against individuals in the U.S. simply because of their skin color.<sup>126</sup>

The first part of Hartmann's conclusion repeats the claims cited earlier on the American values symbolized in sports. Specifically, sports narratives provide presidents with a many examples of “competition, meritocracy, and equality before the rules.” Presidents who want to honor sports champions as symbolic of American values have little difficulty describing their achievements in terms that echo the ideals of democracy and capitalism. Hartmann's claim is that these ideals do not serve the cause of disempowered minorities who suffer oppression as the result of majority-rule and laissez-faire economics. Although not explicitly connected, the second part of Hartmann's argument

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p. 239.

echoes the criticisms of “color-blind” approaches to law.<sup>127</sup> According to this perspective, the success of “equality before the law” arguments against the overt racism of the Jim Crow era cannot be repeated in modern times where more covert and “unintentional” discrimination is the result of systemic racism. Hartmann’s nod to the Civil Rights Movement carries more persuasive force in this light – now that race-specific discrimination has been removed from the law, focus on “equality before the rules” only serves to delay further reform.

However, two factors undermine Hartmann’s position. First, in an article on sports and race, Hartmann acknowledges that the Civil Rights Movement did result in major changes in U.S. law. But he fails to acknowledge that sports may have played any role. Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play major league baseball and a significant figure in the Civil Rights Movement, receives no mention.<sup>128</sup> Using Hartmann’s own logic, it seems fair to argue that the “emphasis on competition, meritocracy, and equality before the rules” shared by “sport culture and liberal democratic American political ideology” provided a foundation on which leaders of the Civil Rights Movement could base their claims for justice. This omission is critical because it ignores the historical example of sports’ providing symbolic power in the fight against racism.<sup>129</sup> In Hartmann’s defense, it could be argued that this historical example is just that – a thing of the past, with sports’ values no longer applicable in today’s America.

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<sup>127</sup> For a comprehensive examination of “color consciousness” in the law, see Kwame Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

<sup>128</sup> Jackie Robinson “broke the color barrier” in 1949, 5 years before the Supreme Court ruled segregation unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*. By 1954, African Americans were competing for baseball teams in both the National and American Leagues.

<sup>129</sup> Two examples from college football support this claim. In 1970, following a loss to the USC, Coach

Such a response segues nicely into the second point. The problem with this defense of Hartmann's claim is that it circumscribes sport in static terms: the unchanging symbolic values of sports are found lacking as the times have changed. But Hartmann doesn't define sports' influence on issues of race as static and inflexible. In fact, he does just the opposite: "The racial dynamics of sport are both positive and negative, progressive and conservative, defined by both possibilities for agency and resistance as well as systems of constraint."<sup>130</sup> In other words, "the racial dynamics of sport" are *rhetorical*, where meaning is contested and able to be interpreted in a variety of (potentially contradictory) ways. As Hartmann notes, the *dynamics* of sport span the political spectrum. His statement coheres with the "textual plasticity" cited by Morgan and the "floating racial signifier" of Andrews. This flexibility of sports' narratives are like an empty vessel for those who deploy sports rhetoric: the contours of the container offer a shape familiar to the audience while offering the rhetor the opportunity to "fill it" with their own meaning and for their own purpose. This flexibility acknowledges the potential for sports rhetoric to be used for progressive, as well as conservative, or even racist, ideals.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the perception of the general public as to sports' support for the cause of racial justice is more important than the ultimate determination of its effects by scholars, especially to the rhetor who chooses to engage in

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Bear Bryant asked Sam Cunningham, the Trojans' African American running back who had just run all over the Crimson Tide defense, to come into the Alabama locker room so the (all white) Alabama team "could see what a real football player looks like." Alabama began recruiting and playing black athletes the next year. The recent decision by the University of Mississippi to disassociate its athletic teams from the Confederate Flag (their nickname is the Ole Miss Rebels) was precipitated, in part, by the claims by the head football coach that such symbolism hurt recruiting.

<sup>130</sup> Hartmann, 2000, p. 241.

sports rhetoric as a way of reaching out to a more racially diverse audience than would otherwise be inaccessible. In arguing that sports have moved from being an idea that is debated to an ideology that is accepted, Hartmann makes a point in support of this claim:

The notion that sport is a positive, progressive force for African Americans is more than just an idea, it is an ideology, an idea that has taken on a life of its own. It doesn't need to be restated or defended. It is cultural common sense, an article of faith held by American black and white, liberal and conservative, even those who don't care about sport in any other way.<sup>131</sup>

As Hartmann implies, the question of whether sports *should* be perceived as a progressive force is irrelevant to the fact that it *is* understood as such by the public. This perception by the public – “cultural common sense” – is a tremendous opportunity for rhetors. From a rhetorical perspective, the public embrace of athletics as racially progressive makes the sports narrative extremely attractive as a tool of communication: what “doesn't need to be restated or defended” can be deployed in enthymeme, analogy, or anywhere in the text where the rhetor would like to maximize persuasion while minimizing effort and controversy. Anyone who can position their side of the argument with “cultural common sense” is going to be more persuasive.<sup>132</sup> And if it is held as an “article of faith” by the audience, the position becomes nearly invincible: it is not merely “agreed with,” it is “believed in.” With this in mind, the motivations that might prompt presidential sports rhetoric are not so hard to imagine.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid, p. 233.

<sup>132</sup> The increased persuasion associated with framing one's argument in terms of “common sense” is detailed in Chaim Perelman and Luis Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1969.



### Sports rhetoric and metaphor

As noted previously, scholars such as Richard Lipsky and Michael Novak have argued sports rhetoric is flexible, accessible, and useful as a means of giving concrete example to abstract value. As such, it should be perfectly suited for use as metaphor in political communication. D. Stanley Eitzen and George Sage agree, stating that “sport itself is so popular in American society that politicians may use examples of sport or sport metaphors to communicate with the public.”<sup>133</sup> Eitzen and Sage were theorizing the existence of sports metaphors in political rhetoric, implying that the popularity of sports made it a potential source for linkages that clarify meaning. Stephen Figler theorizes that sports metaphors are attractive to politicians not only because of sports being part of the common knowledge of the public, but also because of the positive perception attached to the politician that uses them: “Many politicians are prone to using sports terminology in their explanations of the machinations of government and politics because, we presume, they feel such terms... will make the intricacies of government more comprehensible to the populace and will reinforce their own sporting image and attach a positive value to their policies.”<sup>134</sup> Figler’s claim is proof of the “cultural common sense” articulated by Hartmann. Sports rhetoric is defined as being accessible and positive to the public, something that Figler “presumes” because of his own assumptions about the significance of sports in American society.

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<sup>133</sup> D.S. Eitzen and G.H Sage, *Sociology of North American sport*. Dubuque, IA: W.C. Brown, 1989 (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), p. 179.

<sup>134</sup> S.K. Figler, *Sport and play in American life: A textbook in the sociology of sport*. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1981, p. 231.

The dual function of sports metaphors mentioned by Figler – promoting both the policy and the politician – would add an obvious attraction for rhetors. The reinforcement of the politician’s “sporting image” occurs as the use of sports metaphors signal the politician is familiar with the subject. This accrues an additional benefit for the government official – by sharing in the general knowledge of sports, the politician is “one of them.” Associated with what Lipsky calls the “magic elixir” and what Novak calls a “precious resource,” presidents invoking the symbolism of sports rhetoric are attaching their ideas to a “field of fundamental human experience from which most Americans have tacitly learned so much....” That such a rhetorical association might “attach a positive value to their policies” is no surprise. In presidential sports encomia, the positive association is attached not to policies, but to notions of national identity and American values.

Curiously, the use of sports metaphors in political communication has not been an area of rhetoric frequently or thoroughly studied by scholars. More commonly, it has been cited without actual examination (Eitzen and Sage claim “politicians may use” sports metaphors and Figler can only “presume” as to their motivations in doing so). While there has been some investigation of the use of sports metaphor in war rhetoric,<sup>135</sup> two scholars who have researched the subject in more comprehensive terms – I. Balbus<sup>136</sup> and Stephan Walk<sup>137</sup> - warrant further attention. In each case, the scholar has

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<sup>135</sup>Two essays in the last 15 years have addressed the issue. The most recent is S.C. Jansen and D. Sabo, “The sport/war metaphor: Hegemonic masculinity, the Persian Gulf War, and the new world order,” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1994, vol. 11, pp. 1-17. Five years prior was M.J. Shapiro, “Representing world politics: The sport/war intertext,” in J.D. Derian and M.J. Shapiro (Eds.), *International/intertextual relations: Postmodern readings of world politics*, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989, pp. 69-96.

<sup>136</sup>I. Balbus, “Politics as sports: The political ascendancy of the sports metaphor in America,” *Monthly*

attempted a comprehensive survey of presidential sports rhetoric, and thus their conclusions can be accepted as more than mere speculation.

Balbus takes a neo-Marxist perspective, denouncing the use of sports metaphors by U.S. politicians as legitimating capitalist structures. He identifies Richard Nixon as the exemplar of the political exploitation of sports metaphors. He criticizes the way that “state activity is being cloaked in the rhetoric of the sports world,”<sup>138</sup> specifically excoriating the Nixon-Ford administration for using sports metaphors to “cloak” policies, thus shielding them from moral criticism. For Balbus, this rhetorical move is indicative of a society where politics have taken “on the appearance of sports,” which he deplors as “corruption of the discourse of politics.”<sup>139</sup> This view depicts sports rhetoric as a “trick” used by politicians to divert attention from the flaws of policies and a “mask” that hides the inequalities of the capitalist system under a veneer of patriotic deference to meritocracy.

As a neo-Marxist writing in *Monthly Review*, Balbus’ view of sports as a “legitimizing mechanism of the American state”<sup>140</sup> is unsurprising. Stephan Walk chides Balbus: “While one may resent the capitalist system and its manifestations, to criticize the president of a capitalist nation for failing to promote some other system is

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*Review*, 1975, vol. 26, no. 10, pp. 26-39.

<sup>137</sup> Stephan Walk, “The sport metaphor in American presidential rhetoric: Meaning in context,” MA thesis for the Michigan State University Department of Health Education, Counseling Psychology, and Human Performance. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1990. Walk has also published a more specific account of the “footrace metaphor” discussed in his MA thesis. See Stephan Walk, “The footrace metaphor in American presidential rhetoric,” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1995, vol. 12, pp. 36-55.

<sup>138</sup> Balbus, 1975, p. 75.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

misplaced.”<sup>141</sup> Walk is condemning Balbus for stating the obvious. This comment may be accurate, but it too easily dismisses Balbus’ critique. What is more important to note is that scholars from all sides acknowledge the political significance of sports rhetoric. The idea that sports rhetoric can symbolically reaffirm American values is not something that only those ideologically opposed to the United States espouse. As Walk himself notes in relaying an account of President Woodrow Wilson (first retold by William Safire<sup>142</sup>):

“President Woodrow Wilson was reported to have said, ‘I have always, in my own mind, summed up individual liberty, business liberty, and every other kind of liberty, in the phrase that is common to the sporting world, *A free field and no favor.*’”<sup>143</sup> This quotation from Wilson is insightful because it relates sports rhetoric (not the game, but a philosophy that guides play) to politics, recalling the point made previously that the social significance of sport resides in the ways we *communicate* about it.

As for the implication for the scholarly evaluation of sports, it can be argued that Balbus’ critique and Wilson’s performance of political sports rhetoric are evidence of a consensus of sorts. The proponents of sports rhetoric in political communication (the politicians themselves being the most obvious) and their opponents (Balbus, et al.) agree on the notion that sports rhetoric is both accessible in terms of audience receptivity and its ability to amplify American ideals. They only disagree on whether this serves the greater good.

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<sup>141</sup> Walk, 1990, p. 59.

<sup>142</sup> William Safire, *The new language of politics*. New York: Random House, 1968, p. 633.

<sup>143</sup> Walk, 1995, p. 42.

In his research on presidential use of sports metaphors, Stephan Walk identifies the “footrace” metaphor employed by Lyndon Johnson in defense of civil rights legislation as the most prominent example.<sup>144</sup> According to William Muir, “it would be hard to overstate how rich in implication it was.”<sup>145</sup> Walk chronicles the history of the metaphor, as it was first deployed by LBJ and, later, how it was refuted during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. In a 1965 commencement address at Howard University, Johnson promoted an evolution in civil rights:

You do not take a person, who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘you are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates. This is the next and the more profound stage of the battle for civil rights.<sup>146</sup>

By comparing the life of the human race to the sports contest of a foot race, President Johnson distilled the complexity of the approach to civil rights he was proposing into the simplicity of a footrace – the sporting contest that is perhaps the easiest to understand. When contextualized by the sports metaphor, the historical abuses against African Americans cannot be dismissed as a “thing of the past”; the oppression of slavery and Jim Crow laws are given weight as a harm that must still be addressed. This metaphor was considered by some scholars as “the single most dominant metaphor within the American

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<sup>144</sup> For an examination of President Johnson’s civil rights rhetoric from a non-sports perspective, see David Zarefsky, “Lyndon Johnson redefines ‘equal opportunity’: The beginnings of affirmative action.” *Central States Speech Journal*, 31, pp. 85-94. Like Zarefsky, I argue that LBJ’s rhetoric was a departure from previous rhetorical strategy in so far as it made the case for affirmative action and not merely elimination of overt discrimination. Although Walk does not use the term “affirmative action,” his argument does support my claim that sports rhetoric provided LBJ with the ability to defend more aggressive civil rights policies.

<sup>145</sup> W.K. Muir, “Ronald Reagan: The primacy of rhetoric,” in F.I. Greenstein (Ed.), *Leadership in the modern presidency*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 260-295).

<sup>146</sup> As quoted in T. Wicker, “Johnson pledges to help Negroes to full equality,” *New York Times*, June 5, 1965, p. 1.

public when President Reagan took office in 1981.”<sup>147</sup> Given that it would become a guiding principle justifying many of LBJ’s Great Society programs, including what would later be known as ‘affirmative action,’ for the next 15 years and even beyond, such a proclamation has merit.

According to Walk, the rise to power of Ronald Reagan, and the accompanying conservative movement, was both facilitated by, and in need of a response to, this metaphor:

[Johnson and Reagan] have been part of the only two strong, presidential-led coalitions of the past 30 years. Out of the contexts of these coalitions arose divergent uses of the sport metaphor which struck at the core of what are among the most extreme ideological positions in modern American politics; namely, liberal and conservative versions of the role of government in insuring social welfare. Further, the ideas expressed by President Johnson were evidently so salient and meaningful for the generation of support for Johnson’s policies that, 17 years later, President Reagan had to counter and offer alternatives to them.<sup>148</sup>

This comparison and contrast emphasizes the importance of rhetoric, specifically sports rhetoric, in each Administration’s civil rights policy. That Johnson’s metaphor anchored federal policy for nearly two decades speaks to both the strengths of his words, in particular, and the power of sports rhetoric, more generally. In Lloyd Bitzer’s words, Walk’s characterization of the obstacle facing Reagan was a rhetorical situation, with the need to displace Johnson’s “footrace” metaphor in order to rollback government expansion serving as a worthy exigency.<sup>149</sup> Walk’s analysis falters at this point. Although he cites the Reagan administration as “the most prolific user of sports language by

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<sup>147</sup> Walk, 1995, p. 44.

<sup>148</sup> Walk, 1990, p. 63.

<sup>149</sup> Lloyd Bitzer, “The rhetorical situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric I*, 1968, pp. 6-17.

presidents in modern history,”<sup>150</sup> he is unable to reference sports rhetoric used by Reagan to specifically counter the footrace metaphor (instead referring to Reagan’s own commencement address at Howard University 17 years after Johnson’s in which he chooses to use a “train in the station” metaphor to describe the burdens of big government<sup>151</sup>). Reagan did use sports rhetoric to justify his policies,<sup>152</sup> but they more often took the form of relating the achievements of sports heroes to the American spirit, rather than the workings of government.

Walk explains this fact by distinguishing his conception of metaphor from previous scholars who had studied sports rhetoric. He characterizes the work done by both Balbus and Lipsky<sup>153</sup> as mistakenly relying on an “accuracy or representationalist view of metaphor.”<sup>154</sup> This view of metaphor as a model of objective reality places the rhetorician in the position of determining whether the metaphor accurately represents reality. In contrast, Walk prefers the framework in which “metaphor is considered to be constitutive of reality.”<sup>155</sup> For Walk, the question of whether sports *accurately* reflect American reality is not nearly as important as the belief on the part of the public that “sports *constitute* that reality.”<sup>156</sup> The implication is that sports rhetoric offers those who employ it strategically the opportunity to shape the meaning of significant political and social events.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid, p. 67.

<sup>151</sup> Walk, 1995, pp. 48-49.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, pp. 49-51.

<sup>153</sup> Richard Lipsky, *How we play the game: Why sports dominate American life*. Boston: Beacon Press.

<sup>154</sup> Walk, 1995, p. 37.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, p.51.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

It is interesting that what sports metaphors provide in terms of quality is not matched in terms of quantity – instances of actual usage in presidential address. In his effort to catalogue the use of sports metaphors by U.S. presidents in the years 1961-1984, Stephan Walk reached the following “unanticipated” conclusion: “Accordingly, the sport metaphor does not appear to have been a consistent or particularly frequent feature of the speeches of any modern United States president. ...Overall, it should not be assumed that the sport metaphor is a regularly-used, distinct and integrated aspect of the political speech of U.S. Presidents with an extensive history of use.”<sup>157</sup> He found “only 17 presidential speeches which contained sports metaphors”<sup>158</sup> in anything more than a superficial way, a fact that may have led to him narrowing his focus to just the footrace metaphor in later years. Such statistics tend to justify another look at presidential sports rhetoric, specifically encomia. Walk, like others cited previously, emphasizes the substantial role sports imagery plays in political communication. And yet, it doesn’t appear as often in the form of metaphor as one would predict of a rhetorical resource with such symbolic power.

Quite simply, the scholarship done in this area is undermined by the omission of the most overt nexus of sports rhetoric and politics – presidential sports encomia. In proposing “the most fruitful path for future research in the area of sports and politics,”<sup>159</sup> Walk mentions presidents with athletic pasts and athletes with political aspirations, failing to recognize that, by 1995, *fifty-nine* White House ceremonies honoring sports

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<sup>157</sup> Walk, 1990, pp. 46-47.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, p. 46.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, p. 85.



champions had already made this connection between sports and politics explicit! Walk notes how Reagan used sports anecdotes frequently in his speeches. But “relating the achievements of sports heroes to the American spirit” is not to be found only as opening tangents used in policy speeches. It is a primary purpose of presidential sports encomia. In the context of Walk’s broader view of metaphor, this purpose has “metaphorical” qualities:

...political use of the sport metaphor...is...an active contributor to widespread perceptions of American life and democracy. It is then natural to consider the possibility that, beyond verbal deployments of the sport metaphor, the imagery of sport via whichever source, also functions metaphorically. In other words, to attend, recall, read about or otherwise think about sport or a sporting event, as opposed to some other cultural activity, may also contribute to the way people think about their lives, including their political lives. In this way, sport symbolism in general functions metaphorically.<sup>160</sup>

The applications to presidential sports encomia are striking. As a form of epideictic rhetoric, presidential sports encomia recall a sporting event, with presidents explaining how the experience of the sports champions being honored “contribute to the way people think about their lives, including their political lives.” It can even be argued that because presidential sports encomia is a more explicit linking of sports and politics, it is, more than other forms of sports rhetoric in political communication, “an active contributor to widespread perceptions of American life and democracy.” Even Walk’s own work on the footrace metaphor could be served by examining this form of political communication.

To date, Ronald Reagan is the only U.S. president to have invited marathon runners and a Heisman Trophy winner to the White House to be honored for their

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

achievements. Each is an example of *individual* accomplishment, as opposed to the more traditional celebration of *team* achievements. As will be explored in Chapter 5, these instances of presidential sports encomia may provide additional - and more specific - rhetorical clues as to how Reagan dealt with the footrace metaphor.

### Conclusion

Expanding our view of sports beyond the field of play to include the post-game celebration of champions addresses several issues related to the study of sports and politics. First, it highlights the competitive aspect of sport that differentiates it from other forms of play. Ceremonies where sports champions are honored for their achievements remind us that the main purpose of competition is to win. Highly competitive people will cite Vince Lombardi, who said, “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing,” while the less cut-throat would suggest, “It’s not whether you win or lose; it’s how you play the game.” A more realistic understanding of American sports is more likely to permute the two: What’s most important is how winners play the game. Presidential sports encomia are manifestations of this statement – these ceremonies serve to honor champions and remind the audience of the qualities required for winning. Just as Pindar’s odes to Olympic champions relayed heroic exploits in didactic fashion, so too does the President explain to the public how the deeds of the athletes being honored provide the country with lessons we can all use to be better Americans.

Secondly, the study of presidential sports encomium broadens the understanding of sports as religious. As quoted in the previous discussion of sports sacred qualities, Novak relates the role of athlete and priest. Percy and Taylor perform a similar rhetorical

move, arguing, “The shaman is the magical priest, pastor, player or manager, who has knowledge of heaven and hell, who guides believers in their quests, possesses the vision to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, arrests decline, ‘cures’ the ‘sickness’, and elevates the followers to new heights of expectancy and ecstasy.”<sup>161</sup> The problem with this conception is its lack of coherence within most religions in contemporary America, especially the most popular forms of Protestantism. The role of pastor/preacher as practiced in churches across the United States is less like the sports hero and more like the role the President plays when honoring the sports hero. If you attend a service in one of the Judeo-Christian Protestant sects – Baptist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, or even Nazarene – you are likely to observe the following format in sermon: the preacher initially quotes directly from Biblical scripture, telling a story of past events, then relating the exploits of Biblical figures to modern-day issues, and finally concluding by explaining how there is wisdom in the past that can help guide the congregation to live better lives in the future. Although Catholicism would be different in its emphasis on Mass Communion (which the other denominations would also do, but less frequently), there would still be strong similarities in the format of the sermon. In this performance, the priest/pastor is not assigned the role of hero, but instead is understood to have credibility as a moral leader with an expertise that bequeaths a certain authority. In the Sunday sermon, David is the hero for slaying Goliath; the preacher is the wise leader that reminds us to trust in the Lord. In presidential sports encomium, the athlete is the hero; Presidents will remind the audience of everyone’s ability to be a “hero” in America.

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<sup>161</sup> Percy and Taylor, 1997, p. 42.

It must be noted here that Presidents often use the occasion of presidential sports encomium to analogize their own achievements to those of the sports champions, implicitly identifying themselves as winners.<sup>162</sup> However, this rhetorical tactic does not undermine the claim made in the previous paragraph. Presidents and preachers may indeed find opportunities in the text of their speeches to associate themselves with heroic figures. Percy and Taylor state, “The belief is in a God, or in a team: both are there to perform, lead, bless, and bring victory to the believer. Consequently, tribal heroes emerge – those with the greatest sporting or charismatic abilities – who can orchestrate and fulfill the desires of the audience.”<sup>163</sup> A charismatic and eloquent individual – as U.S. President or pastor – may be able to successfully persuade the audience that they too are heroic (or holy).<sup>164</sup> But the difference that remains is the emphasis on *action*. It is the activity of the Biblical/sports hero that is in focus.

Unlike the quotation from Percy and Taylor cited in the previous paragraph where the “shaman” exhibits “magical” powers, preachers/presidents do not perform miracles during their sermons<sup>165</sup> - they tell of heroic exploits performed in the past. During the ceremony, presidents do not perform deeds that earn them the mantle of hero so much as they may attempt relate their experiences in the White House in ways that portray themselves as like the sports champion being honored. Once again, the emphasis must be

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<sup>162</sup> Reagan’s self-identification with George Gipp (the Notre Dame icon he played in *Knute Rockne: All-American*) is a memorable example.

<sup>163</sup> Percy and Taylor, 1997, pp. 39-40.

<sup>164</sup> Michael Novak makes a similar claim when discussing the power of sports as a means of hero-worship. See Novak, 1985.

<sup>165</sup> The more evangelical/charismatic variety of preachers, ala Benny Hinn, may do so (or at least claim to). But the vast majority of Sunday services merely *recount* miracles that had been performed by either Christ or Yahweh. In this much more common example of church service, the preacher is more teacher than hero.

on how the significance of sports is *communicated* to an audience. Presidential sports encomium is the most overt manifestation of the sports-politics-rhetoric intersection, and a rhetorical analysis can illuminate how presidential sports encomium contributes to sport's religious substance.

**Chapter Three**  
**Sanctifying the Secular:**  
**Broadening the Concept of**  
**American Civil Religion**

Despite the claim that sports have become a “secular faith,”<sup>166</sup> sports scholars have not yet attempted to connect their argument to the scholarship done on “civil religion.” While scholars examining the significance of sports in American society have compared the fan’s relationship to athletics in spiritual terms, like Novak’s “secular faith,” they have not explicitly recognized the similarities between their arguments and those made by researchers exploring civil religion in America.<sup>167</sup> The works of Robert Bellah, John F. Wilson, Robert Linder and others on the subject have much to offer a rhetorical investigation of presidential sports encomium. With their concentration on the idea that religion provides a common language for people – as Wilson says, “it serves to mark out a realm of intelligibility”<sup>168</sup> – the scholars of American civil religion provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how presidential sports encomium strengthens the notion of sports as religion. A further inquiry into the research on American civil religion, from the perspective of one seeking to understand the cultural significance of sports and sports rhetoric, can contribute to both fields of scholarship.

Such an inquiry first requires an acknowledgment that studies of civil religion do not have the same popularity today as they did in the 1970’s. Scholarly attention to civil religion reached its zenith near the bicentennial of the United States, when reflection on

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<sup>166</sup> Michael Novak, “American sports, American virtues,” in Wiley Lee Umphlett (ed.) *American sport culture*, Toronto: Associated University Press, 1985.

<sup>167</sup> Interestingly, religion scholars have attempted to connect their work to sports. *The Faith of 50 Million: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture* by \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Know Press, 2002) is a collection of essays by scholars of civil religion concerning the cultural and spiritual significance of baseball as the “national pastime.” Although topics such as national identity and civil religion are discussed, the role of presidential rhetoric in promoting the symbolism of baseball is not examined. Instead the focus is on how divisive issues in American history, such as racism and sexism, have influenced the game of baseball and vice versa.

<sup>168</sup> John F. Wilson, *Public religion in American culture*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979, p. 46.

the spiritual moorings of the country was a natural extension of honoring the nation's history. Since that time, academic study of American civil religion has continued as scholars attempt to navigate the tensions between idealized values of the nation's founding and more pragmatic policy-making as practiced in the daily duties of politicians. According to Michael Angrosino,

American civil religion is an institutionalized set of beliefs about the nation...The virtues of liberty, justice, charity, and personal integrity are all pillars of this religion and lend a moral dimension to its public decision-making processes quite different from the realpolitik that presumably underlies the calculations of states not equally favored by divine providence.<sup>169</sup>

Angrosino's classification of civil religion identifies important theoretical subjects that extend beyond celebrations of the nation's "birthday." Whether expressed as "civil religion" by those who invoke such ideals, the notions of "liberty, justice" and "the moral dimension" of "public decision-making processes" are as topical in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as they were in 1976. Some might even claim that the growth of Christian fundamentalism in the Republican Party and the subsequent rise to power of two presidents (Reagan and George W. Bush) who appear to depend heavily on such support makes the issue of civil religion even more important.

However, scholars draw a sharp distinction between evangelical influence in politics and the notion of "civil religion." Although based on the Judeo-Christian tradition, this civil religion is grounded not in church doctrine, but in the history and culture of the nation as portrayed by "institutions such as the branches of government,

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<sup>169</sup> Angrosino, 2002, p. 240.



patriotic organizations, and outlets of popular culture.”<sup>170</sup> Their interest is not in the invocation of any particular God by political leaders, but rather the ways in which sacred meanings are deployed in secular settings in order to portray American political foundations as divinely inspired and spiritually implemented. While events such as prayer to open a session of Congress is worthy of study, civil religion scholars are more likely to be interested in the ways that political deliberation sanctifies terms such as “democracy” or “equal rights.” In other words, the research always emphasizes the *civil* in civil religion. My study of presidential sports encomia focuses on one particular “outlet of popular culture” – sports – and how sports rhetoric is used to promote American civil religion.

My argument as it regards civil religion revolves around two claims: an inclusion of sports in the study of American civil religion furthers the work done by previous scholars. Specifically, it shows how civil religion is formed not only by the secularization of the sacred, but also by making the secular sacred. Second, recognizing the civil religious component of sports symbolism in presidential rhetoric understands civic faith as more complex than previous notions and acknowledges the role of presidential sports encomia in the contemporary articulation of American civil religion. This chapter begins with an account of the origins of the term “civil religion” and then an outlining of the American civil religion developed in the work of Robert Bellah. The role of the U.S. presidency in furthering an American civil religion is then discussed, along with a subsequent evolution in the classificatory system of civil religion rhetoric. The criticisms

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<sup>170</sup> Angrosino, 2002, p. 240.

of proponents of civil religion are then detailed, first covering the insights of John Wilson and Roderick P. Hart, segueing into the one of the key components of this dissertation – an argument for a broader view of civil religion. I argue that expanding the scope of civil religion to include instances of the secular made sacred contributes to a more complete understanding of contemporary articulations of American civil religion as exemplified in presidential sports encomia. Finally, concluding thoughts revolve around the benefits of studying presidential sports encomia accruing to civil religion scholarship conceived of in the ways documented in the chapter.

### Civil Religion

The 18<sup>th</sup> century social and political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau is credited with first using the term “civil religion.” In his treatise on the relationship between citizen and government, *The Social Contract*, Rousseau includes a chapter titled “Civil Religion.” In it, he defines the need for “political dogmas”:

There is therefore a pure civil profession of faith of which the Sovereign should fix the articles, not exactly as religious dogmas, but as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject. ...The dogmas of civil religion ought to be few, simple, and exactly worded, without explanation or comment. The existence of a mighty, intelligent, and beneficent Divinity, possessed of foresight and providence; the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked; the sanctity of the social contract and the laws: these are its positive dogmas.<sup>171</sup>

Rousseau’s operational definition of “civil religion” consists of three vectors of meaning. First, an interactive deity is described – its actions in this world directed by “beneficent” motives and resulting in “providence.” Unlike the God who dissociates from its creation,

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<sup>171</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, edited by G.D.H. Cole. New York: Dutton, 1950, p. 139.

a Supreme Being who continues to influence the world is presumed to be necessary for the existence of civil religion, sanctioning proper governing and threatening punishment upon those who would abuse sovereign power.

Second, a political leader (“the Sovereign”) is described as needing to draw upon this conception of “Divinity” in order to craft a model of social and political behavior “without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject,” while distinguishing this schema “not exactly as religious dogmas, but as social sentiments.” It is the job of the political leader to connect the products of government (“the laws”) to the principles of religion (“dogmas”) so as to construct a quasi-religious relationship between the people and its government (“the sanctity of the social contract”). Establishing this relationship reinforces the power of laws and of its executors as adhering with sacred values.

Finally, Rousseau’s conception of “civil religion” emphasizes political *rhetoric*. Communication is the key to this construction of civil religion: the articles must be “fixed” and “exactly worded” in a nuanced manner that implies a social rather than religious character while still conveying a *faith*-ful bond. Unlike Truth in religion, which may be expressed in human language but is understood as being “God’s words,” the principles of civil religion are a *human creation* dependent on strategic rhetoric. The tenets of civil religion are not brought down from the Mount Sinai in tablet form so that God’s ways can be known to humanity. From the very beginning, they are products of human intent, calculated to promote a strategic vision of the political order.

Rousseau’s explanation of civil religion is *prescriptive* rather than *descriptive*. He is articulating a need for civil religion more than an observation of civil religion as it

existed at the time. As history professors Richard Pierard and Robert Linder note, “Rousseau was above all a cosmopolitan individualist committed to the ideals of the Enlightenment.”<sup>172</sup> For Pierard and Linder, Rousseau was a man concerned more with political stability than moral clarity. Although his emphasis on civil religion does refute the overly-generalized depiction of Enlightenment thinkers as rabidly anti-religious, Rousseau’s commitment to individualism and reason should not be washed away in holy waters. Pierard and Linder’s comment serves as a reminder that Rousseau’s development of civil religion is best understood in a *political* context. It is a political creation intended for political consequences. As a response to, and transition away from, the “divine right of kings” that had previously defined civic relations, one goal of Enlightenment thought was to provide a philosophical justification for sovereignty external to the throne. In this context, Rousseau’s conception of civil religion has parallels with the use of sports rhetoric by U.S. presidents. The objective is to encourage public support for the political order, drawing upon symbols that “instill civic pride and discipline in the citizenry.”

Civil religion’s origins, therefore, are due to the needs of governmental, rather than spiritual, leaders; the rhetoric of civil religion has a political purpose. Pierard and Linder explain,

Rousseau apparently obtained from Locke the idea for a civil religion<sup>173</sup> based on a minimum creed that would instill civic spirit and discipline in the citizenry. ...Civil religion was the device Rousseau hit upon to solve the problem of religious allegiance and dual loyalty. It also provided a larger moral context by which the behavior of the body politic might be measured in order to restrain the tendencies for selfish expression by the

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<sup>172</sup> Richard Pierard and Robert Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*. Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books, 1988, p. 32.

<sup>173</sup> While Locke’s work fueled Rousseau’s own theories, Rousseau is credited with first using the term “civil religion.”

political whole. ...In short, Rousseau's civil religion would provide the moral glue for the political order created by the social contract.<sup>174</sup>

Two points are clear in this description. First, religion is reduced in scope: a "minimum creed," not a comprehensive faith; a "device" to be "hit upon" rather than an epiphany of the soul. This calculative interpretation of religion helps explain how the religion in civil religion functions. Couched in sacred terms, civic faith interpellates citizens in ways that dampen individualistic tendencies and promote cohesion within the nation. Just as religion constitutes a "natural order" by which the world is understood to operate, civil religion constructs a "natural political order" by which political leaders and citizens operate.

Second, these limits are dictated by the particular needs of the political leader. Civil religion is circumscribed by its rhetorical functions. The manner in which morality is expressed exemplifies this line of reasoning. Modifying "context" and "glue," the term "moral" is drained of nearly any sense of the sacred. Instead of being a way to access a Higher Power, it is a quasi-religious means to a decidedly political end. The political purpose is two-fold: associating the work of the government to the sacred and binding the people to the state as a sanctified union. For Rousseau, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, "the problem of religious allegiance and dual loyalty" was a substantial obstacle, one made even larger in the American context, where leaders drew power not from divine right, but from democratic choice.

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

In the last two centuries, theocratic and monarchic rule have waned. And yet, civil religion is still relevant. This is because it has extended far beyond being the solution to Rousseau's problem of "dual loyalty." Civil religion not only connects the people to the state; it connects the individual members of society to each other. "The tendencies for selfish expression" that concerned Rousseau have not become as scarce as kings and queens, posing perhaps an even greater threat to the political order than ever before. This is where civil religion can be "the moral glue for the political order," a mortar that helps transform the bricks of individuals into a unified citizenry: "In short, civil religion was the vehicle that provided the members of Rousseau's body politic with identity and meaning."<sup>175</sup> This identity and meaning is collective and directed toward citizenship – the relationship to the state. In Rousseau's conception of civil religion, faith in government and a notion of sacred collective identity are important for utilitarian reasons – it is creed driven by need. This understanding of civil religion as a political creation for the purpose of facilitating national unity is important, because it this utilitarian framework that led 20<sup>th</sup> American scholars to warn of its deterioration in the United States. It also sets the table for my claim that presidential sports encomia can be read as a contribution to American civil religion.

### American Civil Religion

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some scholars began to wonder if civil religion was still, or ever, present in America. Sociologist Robert Bellah outlined the civil religion he believed already existed in the United States. Bellah's 1967 article titled

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid, p. 35

“Civil Religion in America”<sup>176</sup> is considered to be the first scholarly attempt to define an American civil religion, which he followed up with multiple books on the subject.<sup>177</sup> For Bellah, the goal is to identify the uniquely American character inherent in our cultural practices, a character that he locates in the gaps between religion and politics.

Robert Bellah and Religious Studies professor Phillip Hammond demarcate four phases of religious evolution: primitive societies where there is no differentiation between religion and politics; archaic societies where religion and politics are differentiated yet fused into the ‘divine king’; historic religions where there is differentiation and a direct relation to the divine is unmediated by political authority; and finally, the modern situation in which we find a “distinct set of religious symbols and practices...that address issues of political legitimacy and political ethics but that are not fused with either church or state.”<sup>178</sup> According to them, this last phase is the definition of “civil religion”: symbolism grounding morality and ethics independent of the state and traditional forms of religion. Civil religion resides in the gaps of both civics and religion. For Bellah, “this religion – or perhaps better, this religious dimension – has its own seriousness...and requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does.”<sup>179</sup> Given the role of civil religion in the political order, as claimed by Bellah and Hammond,

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<sup>176</sup> *Daedalus*, Winter 1967, pp. 1-21.

<sup>177</sup> See Robert Bellah and Phillip Hammond, *Varieties of civil religion*, New York: Harper & Row, 1980; Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, & Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*, New York: Harper & Row, 1986; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, *The Good Society*, Harper & Row, 1992.

<sup>178</sup> Bellah and Hammond, 1980, p. xi.

<sup>179</sup> As quoted in John Wilson, *Public religion in American culture*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979, pp. 145-146.

political scientists, even more than religious scholars, need to be involved in developing such an understanding.

Their use of the phrase “religious dimension” opens the door to understanding civil religion as a *rhetorical* phenomenon. This latter claim is supported by Bellah and Hammond when they state,

The conviction that the American founding figures gained important insights into this public philosophy and conveyed those insights in certain documents, sermons, speeches, and so forth...they are also expressions of a theory of how “self-interest is related to awareness of interdependence,” to use Wilson’s phrase. They are windows onto the sacred code making democratic society possible.<sup>180</sup>

In other words, American civil religion is the spiritually based justification for our system of government and way of life found in public rhetoric. The reference to “documents, sermons, speeches, and so forth” recalls Rousseau’s notion that the articles of civil religion be “fixed” as social sentiments and “exactly worded.”<sup>181</sup> Bellah and Hammond go even further, citing the “expression” of civil religion as “the sacred code” that is a prerequisite of democratic governance. From this perspective, civil religion is not merely captured in public communication; rhetoric is intrinsic to its formulation. Communicative acts are crucial to the maintenance of civil religion because, unlike conventional religion, civic faith is inherently *social*. It must be fostered publicly. Additionally, the distinction of civil religion from being either a creature of church or state doctrine puts a premium on rhetoric as a means of maintaining separation from either institution.

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<sup>180</sup> Bellah and Hammond, 1980, p. 203.

<sup>181</sup> However, it could be argued that the verbosity and ambiguity of today’s politicians violates Rousseau’s dictum that civil religion should be articulated in “few” and “simple” terms.



It is the independence from traditional religion and the government that gives civil religion its unique character. Bellah and Hammond conceive of civil religion as being formed in between the church and the state. Richard Pierard and Robert Linder argue,

Civil religion is unique in that it has reference to power within the state, but because it focuses on ultimate conditions, it surpasses and is independent of that power. Moreover, a civil faith must be independent of the institutional church as such or it will merely be an ecclesiastical endorsement of the state, and it must be genuinely a religion or it will only be secular nationalism.<sup>182</sup>

They describe a balancing act – with civil religion transcending politics because of its spiritual character while remaining non-denominational and deinstitutionalized.

However, this distance from traditional forms of religion cannot be too great or it loses its divine inspiration. Notably, the focus on “ultimate conditions” allows civil religion to ‘surpass’ the state – a division necessary for the political order: “...some sort of civil religion is required for American democracy to function properly. ...it provides a set of transcendent values that constitute a standard of justice by which government actions may be measured.”<sup>183</sup> By being distinct from the government, civil religion offers “objective” evaluative criteria that can be used to judge the actions of the state. And by being distinct from the church and any specific religious belief system, a more inclusive civic faith is possible. Given the demographic diversity of the United States, this move towards a more universal enunciation of sacred values is a necessary one – else substantial segments of the population be excluded from the nation’s narrative. The fact that various groups of people – racial minorities, women, and immigrants to name three

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<sup>182</sup> Pierard and Linder, 1988, p. 23.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, p. 289.

significant examples – and the political and social unrest resulting from opposition to such exclusions reinforce the notion that a more inclusive civil religion is needed.

From this perspective, civil religion is a rhetorical construction, with notions of civic duty and divine responsibility communicated as conception that is related to, yet separate from, the doctrines of church and state. Rhetoric is necessary to successfully balance civil religion between the foundations of church and state. And rhetorical analysis is necessary to comprehend and evaluate this balancing act. The paradox of this supposed independence from both church and state is that civil religion is both created and maintained in political rhetoric, nurtured by the very state it is assumed to be above, with its power used for political ends – the establishment and preservation of the social order. In this light, it is neither independent of political institutions nor apolitical itself – it must only *appear* to be both independent and apolitical. If it is too closely aligned with the dogma of a particular religion, it will be ineffective as a means of unifying groups with divergent sacred beliefs. If it appears to support a partisan political agenda, it will be discredited as divisive.

A well-worn communication adage – “language creates reality” – accurately describes the role of civil religion in society. In making this point about civil religion, Pierard and Linder argue

...it refers to the widespread acceptance by a people of perceived religio-political traits regarding their nation’s history and destiny. It relates their society to the realm of ultimate meaning, enables them to look at their political community in a special sense, and provides the vision which ties the nation together as an integrated whole.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

This explanation reinforces the importance of rhetoric in the development of civil religion as an effective means of unifying the public. Although historians by trade, Pierard and Linder cast civil religion in overtly rhetorical terms. For them, perception is determined by the relating of meaning, and it is the connection of “society to the realm of ultimate meaning” that “enables” a lens by which a unified national image can be understood by the public. Their description of this process in this passage fails to highlight the *agent* – if there is to be “widespread acceptance by a people of perceived religio-political traits,” someone with an authoritative voice must present those traits in a form that is persuasive. Given the title of their work – *Civil Religion and the Presidency* – it is not difficult to infer the main agent in the articulation of American civil religion.

Although their research backgrounds have more often been in history, sociology, or religion, scholars of American civil religion consistently frame their arguments in terms of political rhetoric. Roberta Coles defines “civil religion” as “a set of myths that seeks consensus, attempts to provide a sacred canopy to a diverse community, and gives meaning to the community’s existence.”<sup>185</sup> Her emphasis on “consensus” and “meaning” echoes the work of Richard Williams and Nathan Demerath, who “see [civil religion] as a cultural interpretive resource, a discursive tool for connecting morality and policy.”<sup>186</sup> Civil religion is identified as a conception of the social order that is formed and nurtured in the rhetorical acts of political leaders and justified as a form of political communication necessary for national cohesion. In this way, rhetorical analysis is a part

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<sup>185</sup> Roberta Coles, “Manifest Destiny adapted for 1990’s war discourse: Mission and destiny intertwined,” *Sociology of Religion*, volume 62, number 4, 2002, p. 403.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. See R.H. Williams and N.J. Demerath, “Religion and political process in an American city,” *American Sociological Review*, volume 56, 1991, pp. 417-431.

of all scholarship on American civil religion. Foregrounding rhetorical analysis as the lens by which American civil religion is observed highlights this point further. This is especially true when the study of American civil religion more closely examines presidential rhetoric as the primary means of articulating a civic faith in the United States.

### U.S. presidents and American Civil Religion

The President of the United States is the central figure in scholarship on American civil religion. John Wilson noted that “in proposing that there was a civil religion in America, Robert Bellah advanced as primary evidence for his case the addresses given by American presidents on the occasions of their inaugurations.”<sup>187</sup> The unquestioned assumption<sup>188</sup> is that these texts offer a credible source for investigating the existence of an American civic faith. Wilson himself attempts to refute Bellah’s claims concerning civil religion by referencing the same source material – presidential rhetoric.

The “civil religion debate” – as it is called by Religion professors Russell Richey and Donald Jones<sup>189</sup> - has revolved almost exclusively around the words of U.S. presidents. In addition to the general arguments of how the President is a “singular voice” in politics (in contrast to the often cacophonous Congress) and the exponential growth in power of the Executive branch of government,<sup>190</sup> Pierard and Linder develop this

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<sup>187</sup> Wilson, 1979, p. 47-48.

<sup>188</sup> Roderick P. Hart does take issue with this assumption, but his arguments are addressed more fully later in this chapter. Both Robert Bellah and John Wilson – who disagrees with Bellah for many of the same reasons that Hart does – accept the basic premise that presidential rhetoric is an appropriate site for discovering (or in Wilson’s case, *dis-proving*) the existence of American civil religion.

<sup>189</sup> Russell Richey and Donald Jones, *American civil religion*. New York: Harper Row, 1974.

<sup>190</sup> These points on the unique role of the President in American politics – dealt with from an institutional perspective – will be covered in greater detail in the Presidential Rhetoric chapter, where the scholars who

argument further, explaining that "...the president historically has been looked upon as a one-person distillation of the American people, just as surely as the monarch is of the British people."<sup>191</sup> In other words, the President is not only *a* singular figure of American politics, the President is *the* singular figure of the American *nation*.

This synecdochal relationship is given a religious quality through the ways in which the public perceives the office and their country. Pierard and Linder continue

...the president occupies a special place in American life – a place that is at once political and religious. ...The way he [sic] lives affects the self-image of the people, and his lifestyle and tastes greatly influence those of Americans at large. ...Especially in the modern era of instantaneous communications and intimate press coverage of the White House, individual citizens have perceived their destinies to be bound up with that of their president. That is why most people during the course of a week react personally and intimately to the actions of the president – with hatred, rage, contempt, bitterness, love, approval, admiration, pride. ...All of this quasi-religious political devotion and emotion is then channeled through the many religious and political tributaries into the ocean of the presidency. This office is the single object of their flow.<sup>192</sup>

Interestingly, Pierard and Linder emphasize communication – the media of mass communication – as central in the sanctification of the presidency. The institutional factor – the singularity of the office – is portrayed via the metaphor of water. Public perceptions that tie the presidency to the public and classify the office in sacred language “flow” easily due to the government system established in the Constitution. The metaphor of flowing water can be unpacked further to explain how this relationship develops. Passively, moving water follows the path of least resistance – flowing downhill, filling the nooks and crannies of space provided. However, the constant movement of water is

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are more versed in the complexities of presidential rhetoric are more comfortably placed.

<sup>191</sup> Pierard and Linder, 1988, p. 15.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

also powerful, able to carve rivers through mountains of rock over time. Similarly, the association of the presidency as the representative of the people may occur at first as one of convenience – one executive being more easily comprehended compared to 535 legislators or a varying number of U.S. Supreme Court Justices. But over time, this association grows stronger, until it is accepted as part of the “natural” (and ultimately sacred) landscape of the political order.

As proponents of greater Christian influence in American politics,<sup>193</sup> Pierard and Linder warn of civil religion becoming a “demonic culture religion.”<sup>194</sup> Such warnings have an eschatological quality, with the omission of sin from public rhetoric being transformed from a mere sin of omission into a more sinister plot of fostering societal deviance being forwarded by corrupt politicians.

But one need not be a fan of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins<sup>195</sup> to understand the implications of civil religion gone awry. Marty discusses the specter of fascism raised by civil religion in the transition from a nation “under God” to one that is “self-transcendent.” While the former has the fire-wall of divine deference to dampen any megalomaniacal tendencies, the latter fuels such inclinations with visions of a nation of manifest destiny. Marty claims, “Modern fascisms have this element, and should a version of these become strong in the American future, it would probably be an

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<sup>193</sup> Although each is formally a history, their coauthoring of books such as *Twilight of the Saints: Civil religion and Biblical Christianity in America* and *Politics: A case for Christian action* indicates that they have more than a passing interest in the subject.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid, p. 296. However, to be fair, they also “resist the tendency to blur public religion and genuine Christian faith” and admonish those who “erroneously” mark “America [as] as Christian nation”(p. 297). The tension between this claim and their more developed position that Christian ideals should guide public officials and be used to measure public policy is not dealt with in great detail.

<sup>195</sup> These two men are the authors of the *Left Behind* books, a wildly popular series that deals with the ‘end times’ in the context of Christian theology.

expression of priestly civil religion.”<sup>196</sup> Note that Marty is not predicting that fascism is inevitable in America’s future or that civil religion makes it more probable – only that its existence in the United States would likely take the initial form of priestly civil religion.

This is wholly consistent with what he views as the primary function of priestly rhetoric – to “integrate people into a system of meaning and belonging.”<sup>197</sup> So, we can conceive of Marty’s thoughts on priestly civil religion as a sort of spectrum of political order. In moderation, it serves a critical role as “moral glue” (Rousseau’s phrase) that provides the disparate segments of the American population with a set of commonly understood values that both cement national identity and depict American values in a sacred manner, giving the political order a revered foundation. In the extreme, it can be exploited by jingoistic politicians who hope to arouse the passions of the public, sanctifying the policies of the status quo and demonizing those who are scapegoated as outside the political order.<sup>198</sup> As detailed in Chapter 5, there is little evidence of this extreme form of civil religion in presidential sports encomia. However, Marty’s warning of how priestly rhetoric can be deployed to dampen motivations for progressive reforms is developed when I discuss President Reagan’s sports encomia as a response to federal civil rights policy as framed by President Lyndon Johnson’s “footrace” metaphor.

The fact that civil religion contains the elements necessary for extremist rhetoric does not mean there is a slippery slope towards fascism. This is why Marty felt the need

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<sup>196</sup> Marty, 1974, p. 151.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, p. 145.

<sup>198</sup> For a more insightful rhetorical analysis of radical rhetoric in the United States, see James Darsey’s *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (NY: New York University Press, 1999). Although his work does not deal with presidential epideictic communication, his claims as to the fractured nature of the American public do support my own claims as to the need for unifying rhetoric on the part of U.S. presidents.

to develop a more complicated four-part schema of civil religion, so “that care is taken, [and] civil religion can be judged in the context of what it set out to do and not what scholars think it should.”<sup>199</sup> More precisely, there must be care for what the *rhetor* “set out to do” when employing the language of civil religion. This reference to fascism does recall the arguments made in the chapter on sports concerning the tendency of “political athleticism”<sup>200</sup> to facilitate fascistic tendencies in public perceptions of the state.

Ultimately, the line between what Hoberman called “aggressive nationalism” and what Pierard and Linder believe to be the crux of civil religion – “widespread acceptance by a people of perceived religio-political traits regarding their nation’s history and destiny” – is a fine one. Marty’s delineation of the civil religion that places the nation “under God” from that which depicts the nation as “Self-transcendent” presents it as a rhetorical distinction. Presidents engaging in the rhetorics of civil religion or sports (or both, as in the case of presidential sports encomia) are responsible for crafting their words and choosing the manner in which they will invoke the sacred so as to secure a political order that unifies the public around inclusive conceptions of national unity. My study of presidential sports encomia contributes to scholarly conversations of civil religion. Specifically, athletic achievement as a subject for White House ceremonies is illuminated as a rhetorical resource that U.S. presidents are finding more and more attractive as a means for articulating national unity.

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid, p. 144.

<sup>200</sup> J.M. Hoberman, “The body as ideological variable: Sporting imagery and the state,” *Man and World*, 1981, vol. 14, p. 310.



### Rhetorical criticisms of American civil religion

Those on the various sides of the question as to whether or not civil religion is a constructive force in U.S. society all seem to agree on one point: there is such a thing as American civil religion. However, there are critics – not just of civil religion, but of civil religion *scholarship* – who challenge the very existence of the phenomenon. The two most prominent scholars on this question are Roderick P. Hart and John Wilson. Hart, a communication scholar, and Wilson, a professor of religion, both make an argument rooted in semantics, denying that what Robert Bellah identified in his 1967 essay actually met the definition of “religion.” Although it is my contention that their claims do not deny the efficacy of using the construct of civil religion to study presidential sports encomia, their positions are based on a rhetorical criticism of Bellah and thus warrant special attention.

Roderick P. Hart’s *The Political Pulpit*<sup>201</sup> is devoted entirely to answering Robert Bellah’s contention that America has a civil religion. Hart begins his work by acknowledging that religion continues to play a significant role in American culture.<sup>202</sup> But he stops short of endorsing Bellah’s claims as to the existence of a *civil religion*. His argument can be best understood by first recalling an earlier quotation from Bellah: “this religion – or perhaps better, this religious dimension – has its own seriousness...and

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<sup>201</sup> West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1977.

<sup>202</sup> It should be noted that Hart begins his book with a lengthy anecdote about the 1974 Orange Bowl, an NCAA football game between Penn State and LSU. As someone who is studying sports rhetoric, I find it fascinating that so many scholars in the fields of Rhetoric, Civil Religion, and Presidential studies often use sports anecdotes and/or cite sports metaphors, frequently at the beginning of chapters or essays. Whether they acknowledge it explicitly, their invocation of sports in non-sports contexts does seem to support the claim that sports language and images assists rhetors in making their arguments more accessible and understandable to their audiences.

requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does.”<sup>203</sup> Bellah’s statement here claims that civil religion deserves scholarly attention.

But Hart takes on the very notion that it is a *religion* at all: “Bellah’s errors are more than syntactical. What he meant to add, of course, is ‘this religious dimension of rhetoric.’ That is, Bellah discovered not ‘religion,’ but interesting rhetorical assertions.”<sup>204</sup> As a rhetorician, Hart has staked his ground – Bellah has chosen (presidential) rhetoric as his source of evidence, therefore he must be prepared to defend his linguistic choices from the arguments of those with expertise in the area of communication (i.e., Hart).<sup>205</sup> By injecting the term “rhetoric” into Bellah’s words, Hart is reminding the audience that the real subjects are communicative *texts*, subject to various interpretation and analysis. Hart’s admonition that this error is “more than syntactical” is a response to the rejoinder that his criticism is indicative of a “sterile debate, focusing more on form than content, definition than substance.”<sup>206</sup> Communication scholars – due to the frequent practice – are quite adept at defending their focus on “mere words.” As Bellah’s own methods (explicating the contours of American civil religion via the words of U.S. presidents) prove, language matters. The words we use to describe an entity determine how that thing will be understood.

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<sup>203</sup> Robert Bellah, “Civil religion in America,” *Daedalus*, Winter 1967, p. 1.

<sup>204</sup> Hart, 1977, p. 40

<sup>205</sup> This argument can be confusing, because while Hart denies that there is a civil *religion*, he does acknowledge sacred meaning, hence his willingness to use the term “piety” as an alternative to what Bellah labels as “religion.” This distinction is sometimes omitted by those who rely on Hart’s work. For example, Vanessa Beasley does use the phrase “civil religion rhetoric” in her *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric*, which seems to be a compromise of sorts, although she doesn’t explicitly recognize it as such.

<sup>206</sup> This is, in fact, the response of Robert Bellah (from Bellah and Hammond, 1980, p. vii). His ultimate defense is a rather weak argument: “the controversies it generated are fruitful...more neutral terms would not have churned up the profound empirical ambiguities [civil religion] inevitably did” (p. 4).

In terms of his critique of “civil religion,” Hart explains that “if Bellah’s initial assumption is faulty (or insufficiently developed), then any subsequent extrapolations made of such an assumption are either logically premature or founded on benign premises.”<sup>207</sup> Specifically, if Bellah is wrong in asserting that a civil religion exists independent of church dogma and state policy, then any argument premised on its existence potentially contains a fatal flaw rendering its impacts null and void.<sup>208</sup>

As for the details of his definitional criticism, Hart relies prominently on the prior charges leveled by John Wilson.<sup>209</sup> In *Public religion in American culture*, Wilson reviews the use of religious language not only in presidential inaugurals, but in State of the Union addresses and Thanksgiving Day proclamations as well. Wilson is attempting to discover whether a civil religion has always existed and hence his conclusions are directed toward that particular end. Although he views Thanksgiving proclamations as “the more promising direction of inquiry,”<sup>210</sup> his overall conclusion is that “the presidential addresses...do not seem to be evidence that a highly structured religion centers in the public realm. Nor do the Thanksgiving Day materials seem to be evidence for a ritualistic kind of religion.”<sup>211</sup> According to his criteria, these forms of presidential rhetoric do not constitute civil religion. Hart cites Wilson in support of his own critique:

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<sup>207</sup> Hart, 1977, p. 40.

<sup>208</sup> As an “alternative understanding” of American civic piety, Hart offers up the metaphor of a contract (pp. 43-65). Because it is not as pertinent to the arguments contained in this dissertation regarding civil religion, it will not be explained in elaborate detail and only the relevant portions of this ‘contractual relationship’ between church and state will be discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>209</sup> Hart uses Wilson’s 1974 essay, “A historian’s approach to civil religion,” found in Richey and Jones (Eds.) *American civil religion*. My quotations of Wilson come from his lengthier 1979 book, in which Wilson developed those original ideas further. This explains my phrasing that Hart (1977) relies on Wilson (1979), which may have seemed odd.

<sup>210</sup> Wilson, 1979 p. 56.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid*, p. 66.

Wilson politely refuses to accept the notion of an American civil religion, concluding his essay with the observation: “In a historical perspective, I think it is difficult to arrive at the judgment that there is in American society an institutionalized, well-developed, and differentiated civil religion, a tradition parallel to and interrelated with other religious traditions in our culture.” ...a rhetorical model of civic piety thereby sheds new light on a topic which has become unnecessarily beclouded.<sup>212</sup>

The quotation from Wilson nicely summarizes the problem that he and Hart have with the use of the term “civil religion” – neither believes that what Bellah has illuminated meets the criteria of what it takes to be labeled *religion*.

According to their observations, the lack of institutionalization in American politics and differentiation from the Judeo-Christian ethics of the culture deny it the status of another species of religion. Instead, “piety” is offered a more suitable term: “...by employing the construct of religion, Bellah committed himself to all of its attendant dimensions and implications. Had he used Wilson’s happier conceptualization of ‘civic piety,’ Bellah might have avoided a number of theoretical Waterloos.”<sup>213</sup> In other words, Hart is willing to accept many of Bellah’s secondary claims (specifically the admission that religious undercurrents run strong through American culture and significantly impact perceptions of the political order) as long as the subject being discussed is properly classified.

Oddly, Hart criticizes Wilson for taking a narrow view of what constitutes religion: “Wilson can be charged with theoretic provincialism (possibly even anachronism) when he insists on reserving the term *religious* for those activities which

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<sup>212</sup> Hart, 1977, p. 42.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

take place in churches.”<sup>214</sup> This comment would imply that Hart’s own definition of “religion” is more up-to-date and inclusive, and yet he makes the following claim:

If the American civil religion is a religion (and, as we have seen, there is little reason to suspect that it is), it is a rhetorical religion. As a “religion,” it does not take verifiable action. It does not give alms to the poor. It does not even hold bingo games. Rather, it is a religion which exists within and because of discourse. Since it *does* nothing it is doomed to tag-along status existentially.<sup>215</sup>

Even if such remarks can be excused as Hart injecting a bit of humor into the exercise, it still manifests an assumption upon which rhetoricians are usually quick to pounce: Hart’s logic here assumes speech is not a form of action. It can be noted that no religion takes “verifiable action” – only those *actors* who *practice* a religion take action. Catholicism doesn’t “hold bingo games,” Catholic priests do. Protestantism doesn’t proselytize, Protestant missionaries do. What religion doesn’t exist “within and because of discourse”? Given that Hart references Burke and “symbolic, dramatic action”<sup>216</sup> when initiating the discussion of how to classify civil religion, it is unfortunate he doesn’t also refer to Clifford Geertz’ definition of religion used in this dissertation (“a system of symbols...”<sup>217</sup>), one that is actually broader than “church activity.” According to Geertz, the existence of religion does not depend on the superficial formalities of churches and “bingo games,” but rather on the use of “a system of symbols” that Hart’s comments denigrate as non-action.

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>217</sup> For the full definition, see the Chapter 2.

Such a modification would also clarify a point that is more critical to Hart's overall argument. Rather than view the "do-nothingness" of civil religion as a mistake made by those attempting to secure a place in the political order for religious thought, Hart believes that this passive quality is key to achieving that aim. Of civil religion, he states that "...it owes its very preservation to the fact that it *does* nothing. For, when ritualistic rhetoric becomes something other than ritual, it too must open itself up to the scrutiny, actions, and potential rebuffs of all who inhabit the marketplace of controversy."<sup>218</sup> This claim also explains Hart's criticism of Bellah's use of the term "religion." The "scrutiny" and "potential rebuffs" Hart warns of are the "attendant dimensions and implications" he argues comes with the turf of "religion." In his estimation, the negative attention following "religion" outweighs the theoretical benefits that may illuminate civil religion. It also inaccurately denotes the role that civic piety plays in the United States. According to Hart, civic piety comes in under the radar because it doesn't rise to the level of "religion."

This reasoning also accounts for Hart's alternative framework for understanding the church-state relationship in America – the "contract metaphor." His notion of a "contract" posits a give and take alliance in which religious leaders sacrifice the ability to stridently criticize the political order in exchange for a seat at the table:

...the genius of the compromise must not be understated. Because of it, church leaders were accorded rhetorical access to the heads of state,

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid, pp. 77-78.

allowed to set the agenda for discussions of the various moral issues affecting the American government, and generally treated with respect, if not obeisance. ...By carefully modulating the existential/rhetorical balance between church and state, Americans thereby avoided the Scylla of irreligiosity and the Charybdis of pure theocracy.<sup>219</sup>

By describing this relationship as a middle-ground approach balancing the secular and the sacred, Hart puts emphasis on communication. The “rhetorical access” ensures that religious leaders and political leaders are in contact, with each side having the opportunity to persuade the other. Prominent members of the community with spiritual credentials endeavor to make politics moral and civic officials seek to convince religious leaders to sanction public policy. As long as the “church” is perceived as having *only* rhetorical influence, the compromise is accepted.

This emphasis on the *rhetorical* nature of civil religion is also described from the perspective of the politician. In speaking of instances of presidential communication, Wilson says they are “to be viewed as potential linguistic evidence for religious constructions of the public realm.”<sup>220</sup> Although he disagrees with Bellah’s conclusion, this admission shows he does agree with the method. Similarly, Hart chides Bellah for “overreacting” to the religious tone of presidential inaugurals,<sup>221</sup> claiming that American presidents have no “rhetorical option” but to pay homage to “fundamental aspects of our civil religion.”<sup>222</sup> Thus, even Bellah’s critics concede that presidential rhetoric is a fruitful location for examining civil piety. A key question that requires further development is whether the form American civil religion takes is different than has been previously

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, p. 65.

<sup>221</sup> Hart considers this form of address to be atypical, “likely to cause even the most hard-headed sociologist to swoon”(p. 40).

<sup>222</sup> Hart, 1977, p. 9-10.

assumed. My answer is that the studies conducted thus far are insufficient and further investigation is needed.

In support of this last point, and in further explication of civil religion's relationship to the presidency, consider the following definition of "civil religion" from history Professor Robert Linder:

Civil religion is a scholarly term for the widely but informally held set of fundamental political and social principles concerning the history of the state or nation that help to bind that state or nation together. It is a collection of beliefs, values, ceremonies, and symbols that gives sacred meaning to the political life of the community, provides the nation with an overarching sense of unity that transcends all internal conflicts and differences, and relates the society to the realm of ultimate meaning.<sup>223</sup>

In his study of President Clinton's rhetoric, Linder describes his "public pronouncements of religion" as "merely articulating what every president of the United States has practiced since the birth of the nation – namely, civil religion."<sup>224</sup> Even though his investigation of Clinton's discourse is directed toward the political use of religious language (like Bellah, Hammond, and Wilson), he has defined the rhetoric of civil religion as those "symbols that give sacred meaning to the political" – a conception consistent with my interpretation of presidential sports encomia where the secular language of the sports and politics are made sacred in the context of ritual. As Phillip Hammond remarks, [even] "if the link between self-interest and collective good does not have to be religious...this link is nonetheless inescapably sacred."<sup>225</sup> This point is uncontested if one allows for "piety" as an acceptable alternative for "religion." Written

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<sup>223</sup> Robert Linder, "Universal pastor: President Bill Clinton's civil religion," *Journal of Church and State*, Autumn 1996, vol. 38 issue 4, pp. 733-749, p. 733.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 733.

<sup>225</sup> Hammond, 1980, p. 202.



in 1980, these words are the strongest response to Hart and Wilson’s definitional criticism that proponents of civil religion scholarship can make.<sup>226</sup> The substance of civic faith – whether it is conceived of as “religion” or “piety” – still reinforces the political order as sacred.

When buttressed by the definition of “religion” posited by Clifford Geertz and the definition of “civil religion” offered by Robert Linder, a second justification of Bellah’s linguistic choices is apparent. Hart and Wilson’s criticisms are based on an overly-narrow definition of “religion.” According to the definitions of Geertz and Linder, a broad interpretation of religion is necessary for comprehending the role of civil religion in American society. It is the use of rhetoric (“a system of symbols”), and not action as conceived of by Hart, that allows American civil religion to function as a unifying force.

Furthermore, these broader conceptions of religion warrant a reconceptualization of civil religion, in contrast to the one-way thinking of the idea up to this point. What Bellah and Hammond (as well as Hart, Wilson, and all others) have done is search “potential linguistic evidence” for religious constructions *in* the public realm, rather than religious constructions *of* the public realm.<sup>227</sup> By limiting their attention to references that signify overtly traditional conceptions of religion (e.g., “God” and “prayer”) in public rhetoric, they have ignored the ways that rhetors may depict secular things (e.g., economy and sports) in a sacred manner. By recognizing the sacred manner with which sports narratives are deployed in political communication, I am able to expand the scope of civil

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<sup>226</sup> Interestingly, this argument is made by Phillip Hammond in the epilogue, rather than by Bellah himself when he alludes to the critics in the introduction, perhaps signaling that Bellah’s supporters are evolving his original arguments.

<sup>227</sup> Given that he doesn’t question their methods on this issue, this criticism also applies to Hart’s work.

religion research and offer an alternative lens by which scholars can determine the existence and depth of American civil religion.

### Secular as Sacred

Civil religion is a scholarly term; rarely, if ever, do those who engage in such rhetoric call it “civil religion.” Therefore, it is the duty of scholars to identify what they perceive of as civil religion and detail what it is that makes it so. Richard Pierard and Robert Linder employ a sports analogy to explain this process:

In other words, it is like what the famous baseball umpire Bill Klem used to say about the placement of a pitched ball: “They ain’t nothin ‘til I call ‘em!” In a similar fashion, careful students of American civil religion can find abundant evidence of civil religion if they “call ‘em” – that is, identify the numerous manifestations as they appear before their discerning eyes.<sup>228</sup>

This is the task accepted by Robert Bellah, Phillip Hammond, Vanessa Beasley, and others who attempt to locate civil religion in public communication – defending the rhetorical texts they have chosen as examples of a civic faith. The subject is not only discourse; the method is rhetorical. Thus far, both those who propose that an American civil religion exists and the critics who deny that what has been identified actually merits being termed a “religion” have worked from the same premise: rhetoric is assumed to potentially be evidence of civil religion if it involves sacred images deployed in and for the purposes of the secular. As mentioned above, this assumption unnecessarily reduces the scope of what constitutes “civil religion,” ignoring the possibility of civil religion’s existence in rhetoric that presents secular images in a sacred manner. Hence, the current

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<sup>228</sup> Pierard and Linder, 1988, p. 22. This is yet another example of sports rhetoric being used to clarify and elucidate.

narrow view renders the investigation of American civil religion incomplete. But before the study of civil religion can be made more comprehensive, its broadened contours must be more fully articulated.

I want to emphasize that my argument concerning the secular as sacred is unique only in the context of definitions of civil religion. The blurring of lines distinguishing the secular and the sacred has been a frequent topic for scholars of religion, as well as scholars of American culture. William Safran has studied the interconnections between nation, religion, and politics,<sup>229</sup> but he maintains the unidirectional focus of how religious symbols are invoked for political gain. On the other hand, Herbert Fingarette's study of Confucius<sup>230</sup> does examine an instance of secular culture – Confucian philosophy – as it is translated into religious teachings. But Fingarette is not examining either American civil religion or even civil religion in general, let alone attempting to define the term.

R. Laurence Moore's *Touchdown Jesus: The Mixing of Sacred and Secular*<sup>231</sup> deals explicitly with how secular and sacred themes are dissolving into each other through a survey of American church history. However Moore is more focused on Roman Catholic and Jewish influences as they relate to Protestant America than with the relationship between sacred and secular boundaries. His argument is not about civil religion, but about illusion of Protestantism's domination of American society. And despite the title (an allusion to Notre Dame football), "the relationship between modern

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<sup>229</sup> William Safran, *The secular and the sacred: Nation, religion, and politics*, New York: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002.

<sup>230</sup> Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The secular as sacred*, Boston: Waveland Press, 1998.

<sup>231</sup> Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003.

sports and religion is left unexplored.”<sup>232</sup> This summarizes not only Moore’s work; it describes all of these works as they relate to civil religion. Despite their attention to secular and sacred topics and their intermingling of secular and sacred symbols, these authors are not making claims as to the definitional boundaries of the term “civil religion.” As I outline below, when scholars *do* define “civil religion,” it is only as “sacred subjects brought into the secular realm.” As can be inferred from the works cited here, this narrow interpretation is not representative of contemporary society.

Will Herberg, a Religion scholar critical of the secularizing nature of civil religion, says that it “...has always meant the sanctification of the society and the culture of which it is the reflection,” with the social and political order “divinized by being identified with the divine purpose.”<sup>233</sup> The sanctification of society – making the secular sacred – is not limited to religious images injected into political communication. What he describes is not merely the invocation of God by politicians to make themselves seem devout; it would also include the portrayal of secular images in sacred ways. Geertz’ definition of religion – “a system of symbols ...formulating conceptions of a general order of existence”<sup>234</sup> – justifies how this more expansive interpretation still adheres to the classification. By depicting secular entities – e.g., sports heroes or economic policy– in a sacred manner, political leaders can “establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations ...clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that

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<sup>232</sup> W. Terry Lindley, “Book Reviews,” *Journal of Church and State*, 2004, pp. 664.

<sup>233</sup> Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An essay in American religious sociology*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960, p. 263.

<sup>234</sup> Geertz, 1973, p. 90.

the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”<sup>235</sup> Presidential sports encomia meet Geertz’ criteria for religion. In the ceremony honoring the achievements of sports champions as a model for the American way of life, the President offers up the life experiences of the athletes as proof of the link between self-interest and collective good. By citing the athletic hero as exemplary of American values, both the champion and the characteristics noted as part of the national identity are invested with divine qualities.<sup>236</sup> This politico-sports ritual completes the sacramental culmination of sport – the secular activity has become sacred.

To be clear, it is not my contention that instances of presidential sports encomia are *more* “religious” than inaugural addresses, national prayer breakfasts, or Thanksgiving Day proclamations, in the sense that Bellah, Hammond, and Wilson view religion. Clearly, the explicit references to God found in the aforementioned instances of presidential rhetoric more precisely fit the criteria laid out by most scholars of civil religion. My claim is that by expanding the scope of civil religion to include instances of the secular-made-sacred described above, it is possible for rhetorical scholarship to analyze presidential rhetoric in ways that offer insights on constructions of civil religion as they have developed over the last quarter century. In his work on presidential use of sports metaphor, Sports scholar Stephan Walk acknowledges the “curious phenomenon” of sports being “universally treated” as “sacred in American politics,” and advocates comparative study of religious and sports rhetoric: “A comparative study of rhetorical

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> The chapter on sports provides a more in-depth argument for the ways in which sports rhetoric elicits thoughts and emotions concerning “ultimate meanings” in such areas as immortality and perfection. It is here where the warrants for ‘sports as sacred’ are fleshed out.

tactics used by politicians when speaking to, for example, sport versus religious groups, may shed light on what the specifics of this practice [portraying sports as sacred] may be.”<sup>237</sup> In the chapter focused on presidential sports encomia, this call is heeded, with presidential address at National Prayer breakfasts compared directly with the rhetoric used in White House ceremonies honoring sports champions.

#### The contributions of presidential sports encomia to American civil religion

This chapter began with the premise that civil religion scholarship can inform the study of presidential sports encomia. In examining the evolution of civil religion in America – from its origins in political thought to the debates over its existence and its purposes in political rhetoric, and finally its expansion in scope to include the secular made sacred – it is possible to understand the values espoused in sports rhetoric as synchronous with the American values credited to a civic faith. However, the study of presidential sports encomia can also inform the work previously done on civil religion, directing future inquiry toward fertile ground and helping to resolve theoretical problems. Specifically, this intersection of civil religion studies and presidential sports rhetoric has edifying benefits in four areas: the modern dilemma of presidential religious rhetoric; the rift between individual self-interest and collective good; the challenge created by demographic diversity; and finally, the contemporary lack of prophetic civil religion.

In doing the initial research, I discovered a “coincidence” connecting civil religion and presidential sports encomia. Bellah and Hammond note that the time around 1976 – the bicentennial of the United States – marked a time where the issue of civil

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<sup>237</sup> Walk, 1990, p. 53

religion peaked among scholars. In that same year, “the born-again presidency of Jimmy Carter brought with it vast changes in the way we view a president’s personal religious convictions.”<sup>238</sup> This is the first linkage of the “coincidence”: the simultaneous development of interest in civil religion and the election of an openly evangelical president.

Religion scholar Richard Hutcheson argues that the presidential administrations following Nixon faced a dilemma. On the one hand, “the vigorous entry of religion into the councils of the presidency...has responded to the multidimensional moral crisis...compounded of Vietnam, Watergate, and...the turmoil of the sixties.”<sup>239</sup> From his perspective, presidential invocation of religion can be viewed as helping to unify a fractured and disillusioned public. Hutcheson’s argument is not that religion in the White House was an original development in the 1970’s – he admits it reflects “a continuing American conviction going all the way back to the founders of the nation.”<sup>240</sup> But according to Hutcheson, the traditional assumption was that the personal beliefs of the president were a private matter, with affirmations of American faith being more pronounced during times of national crisis.<sup>241</sup> This view is consistent with those of Bellah, who cites Lincoln as “our greatest civil theologian”<sup>242</sup> and his second inaugural as the most overtly religious of its kind.<sup>243</sup> It wasn’t until the Carter presidency that the

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<sup>238</sup> Richard G. Hutcheson, Jr., *God in the White House: How religion has changed the modern presidency*, New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1988, p. i.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid*, p. ix.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid*, pp. ix-x.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid*, p. 35-36.

<sup>242</sup> Bellah, 1980, p. 15.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

“gentleman’s agreement” that had kept presidential religious convictions a private matter was ended.<sup>244</sup>

The dilemma arises when this change toward more open professing of presidential faith butted heads with the “sharp polarization in the religious community.”<sup>245</sup> The institutionalized doctrine separating church from state, combined with strong support for religious pluralism and the growing reality of cultural heterogeneity in the United States restricts the ability of presidents to articulate any specific religious vision.<sup>246</sup> The result is a catch-22 whereby presidents from Carter on have perceived a need to speak of religious faith only to face political dangers when religious discourse either exacerbates divisiveness in the public or hampers the ability of Chief Executives to attempt to govern in ways that are politically effective.<sup>247</sup>

The final “coincidental” piece of the puzzle is the rise of presidential sports encomia began during the Carter administration. I use the term “coincidence” because, absent evidence that would attribute explicit motives, it is not possible to say definitively that President Carter chose to initiate presidential sports encomium as a way to re-direct American civil religion through the mechanism of sports hero worship. But what can be argued is that presidential sports encomium was initiated at a moment in history when presidents sought to increase the public presence of religion as a unifying force, a task constrained by the exclusionary manner most traditional forms of civil religion have taken. This dilemma has only been exacerbated by the growing recognition of

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<sup>244</sup> Hutcheson, 1988, p. 34.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid, p. x.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, pp. 6-9 and 136-152.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, pp. 220-235.



multiculturalism in America. What presidents would benefit from are rhetorical resources for developing a civil religion that couch the secular values necessary for the maintenance of a republican democracy and a capitalist economy in sacred terms. The ritual of presidential sports encomium does just that: allowing presidents to articulate a vision of American civil religion that promotes an American way of life based on the optimum balance between individual self-interest and the collective good of the nation. Sports are made sacred as the achievements of champions are presented by the president as parables for the public to model.

The presidency of George W. Bush, which has been one of more openly Christian evangelical expression, may be argued to be a stark exception to Hutcheson's claim that presidents find it difficult to be overtly religious, although this conclusion cannot be confirmed until he successfully obtains a second term.<sup>248</sup> And as detailed in the chapter on presidential sports encomia, George W. Bush has been as closely associated with, and supportive of, sports as any other Chief Executive. These two characteristics – promoting both sports and religion – create a unique opportunity to compare the rhetoric of Bush in religious versus sports settings. Whether Bush's initial goal of encouraging "compassionate conservatism" finds a more welcoming home in sports encomia than it has in the rhetoric surrounding the War on Terror remains to be seen. My analysis can reveal whether President George W. Bush's religious beliefs influence the civil religion

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<sup>248</sup> Bush's use of religion has solidified his support among the Christian Right, but has also inflamed the passions of Democrats and potentially isolated him from moderates. Clearly, the polarization of the electorate indicates that Bush has not escaped the controversy predicted by Hutcheson.

espoused in his sports encomia, and if so, how he relates the two as a way of balancing individual desires and community values.

In his later work, Bellah is concerned with “one of today’s major moral dilemmas: the conflict between our fierce individualism and our urgent need for community and commitment to one another.”<sup>249</sup> The contradiction of individual rights and community obligations threatens to tear the country apart. The question is whether a truly American civil religion can be articulated in ways that this resolve this contradiction in American life.

Building upon the initial work of Bellah, John F. Wilson declares, “the question has become: whether a public religion can be revitalized”<sup>250</sup> – a civil religion whose effect is “no less than the revitalization of the culture”<sup>251</sup> – “the unspoken premise, of course, is that without such a development the nation cannot long endure....”<sup>252</sup> Of course, the other unspoken premise is that contemporary America lacks the strong sense of civil religion that is needed. For both Wilson and Bellah, the lack of a civil religion in America creates dire consequences because the coherence provided in such a public code alleviates the problems within society that create chaos and dissension.

Bellah argues that civil religion must overcome the baggage of exclusion that has doomed more conservative traditions:

...when civil religious symbols are more and more co-opted by ultraconservatives and...liberalism seems less and less adequate...a revival of public philosophy seems urgently needed. One of the tasks of

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<sup>249</sup> Bellah, et al., 1986, p. 357.

<sup>250</sup> Wilson, 1979, p. 20.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

such a revival would be to make the religious aspect of our central tradition understandable in a non-reactionary.<sup>253</sup>

Note the way the solution is framed in rhetorical terms – Bellah is arguing for a civil religion that is “understandable” to a larger and more diverse public. The content – what Bellah calls the “central tradition” – remains constant; it is the discursive form that must be altered. According to Bellah and Hammond, Wilson is pessimistic regarding the ability of civil religion to solve the nation’s problems: “...for Wilson, the American civil religion is an ineffective way to bind people and nations together. Other methods, most notably economic exchange, are better.”<sup>254</sup> They then quote from Wilson: “A broadly economic framework which seeks to relate perceived self-interests to awareness of interdependence probably has promise of being more effective than explicitly universal religious or political world views.”<sup>255</sup> From the perspectives of Bellah and Hammond (and even Wilson), which view civil religion as the secularization of the sacred, this quote is accurately understood as a marginalizing civil religion’s potential in society.

However, by viewing civil religion as consisting of not only the secularization of the sacred but also the sanctification of the secular, an alternative reading of Wilson’s quotation is possible – an American civil religion may incorporate an economic model into its overall framework. Presidential sports encomium is a forum where an “economic framework which seeks to relate perceived self-interests to awareness of interdependence” is presented within the mythic narrative of heroic sports achievement. Sports scholars David Andrews and Steven Jackson note how Sport combines the

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<sup>253</sup> Bellah, 1980, p. xiv.

<sup>254</sup> Bellah and Hammond, 1980, p. 201.

<sup>255</sup> Wilson, 1979, p. 173.

“twinned discourses” of liberal democracy and consumer capitalism in a narrative ripe for politicians.<sup>256</sup> In the context of presidential sports encomium, the assumed difference between civil religion and economic models dissolves away, revealing a civil religion based on the American economic system and packaged in the myth of sports victory.

In the context of presidential sports encomia, the ability of sports rhetoric to resolve the “individual self-interest versus collective good” dichotomy also alleviates Bellah’s fear that “...the morbid anti-Communism of the American right, and the tendency to assimilate every kind of socialist or even liberal position to that of Communism, indicates, I believe, some serious failure to come to terms with the balance between dependence and independence, solidarity and autonomy, that are part of any mature personality or society.”<sup>257</sup> For Bellah, American thought privileges “rugged individualism” at the expense of collective action. But sports rhetoric is a significant exception to this claim: the “team” concept (frequently expressed with the colloquialism, “there’s no ‘I’ in ‘team’”) that is so revered in sports shows that Americans do not abhor “every kind of socialist or liberal position.” Indeed, sports rhetoric gives communal effort an exalted status, with individual sacrifice (“taking one for the team”) being consistently lauded as a key ingredient to success. If anything, Bellah’s fears only support the claim that sports rhetoric is crucial for political communication, offering the best way to reconcile conflicting values.

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<sup>256</sup> David Andrews and Steven Jackson, *Sports Stars: The cultural politics of sporting celebrity*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 1.

<sup>257</sup> Robert Bellah, *The broken covenant: American civil religion in time of trial*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 125.

An additional obstacle to the presidential articulation of an American civil religion relates to the demographic diversity of the nation. In discussing the problems facing any attempt to revitalize civil religion in the U.S., Pierard and Linder cite “the inherent tensions in American society between civil faith and particular faiths. These tensions have become more pronounced with the increasing pluralism resulting from the influx of new peoples from the non-European world after 1945.”<sup>258</sup> This demographic shift creates a two-fold problem. First, the growing population is less homogenous in their cultural values. Second, even when the various cultures have similar values, it is more difficult to communicate in a way that is both accessible and persuasive for the divergent groups. Each of these factors creates a need for an inclusive civil religion in the context of a multicultural America.

Wilson argues that racial and ethnic minorities “have become ethnically self-conscious enough to call into question the viability of traditional American society...a broadly Protestant hegemony is experienced as alien and oppressive.”<sup>259</sup> This is a resistance to notions of civil religion grounded in traditional Anglo-Saxon ideals that hinders the revitalization movement Wilson believes is necessary. Bellah and Hammond warn, “Thus, Wilson points out, black and Spanish-speaking Americans, having a different interpretation of *their* American past, do not want to recover the religious legacy of the Protestant Establishment. Any appeal in the name of the American civil religion is therefore – on this score at least – futile; the inclusiveness it seeks is the very feature it

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<sup>258</sup> Pierard and Linder, 1988, p. 288.

<sup>259</sup> Wilson, 1979, p. 171.

cannot have.”<sup>260</sup> This claim reinforces the unidirectional and narrow understanding of civil religion that informs the work of Bellah and Hammond: American civil religion is limited to only those conceptions grounded in “the Protestant Establishment” and is conceived of only as the use of the sacred in a secular context. Because their idea of civil religion is tied to religious traditions that are perceived of as White and Eurocentric by minority groups, they deem it impossible for civil religion to unify the public.

My alternative interpretation, which includes the use of the secular in a sacred context as well, does not limit civil religion in this way, and therefore is not immediately rejected as unable to speak to the needs of a multicultural society. Presidential sports encomia, with access to the rhetorical resources of sport, can help frame American civil religion as more inclusive than previous articulations grounded in Anglo-Saxon Protestantism. As a symbolic system, sports rhetoric is more likely to be understood by a larger section of the American public.

One key aspect of civil religion is its ability to be understood by the mass public. Phillip Hammond has stated, “the public square does not rule out religious words and motives; it simply does not accord them authority until they are translated [into terms readily understandable even by the non-religious].”<sup>261</sup> Once again, it must be noted that Hammond is conceiving of civil religion in a unidirectional way – where civil religion consists only of public use of religious symbols. The alternative interpretation posited in this study – acknowledging the use of the secular in sacred ways – would invert

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<sup>260</sup> Bellah and Hammond, 1980, p. 201.

<sup>261</sup> From “Can religion be religious in public?” in William Swatos and James Wellman (eds.) *The power of religious publics: Staking claims in American society*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999, pp. 19-31, p. 30, as quoted in Angrosino, 2002, p. 240.

Hammond's requirement: authority would not be accorded unless the secular could be translated in terms that the majority perceived as sacred. As evidenced elsewhere, sports are rich in rhetorical resources. As Lipsky states, "The political and social importance of Sportsworld rests on its rich symbolism and dramatic structure... the team provides social structure...sports language gives the world cohesion."<sup>262</sup> The ability of sports as a cultural force to bring together a disparate and multiracial society has been recognized by scholars of civil religion.

In his work on the contradictory aspects of Thomas Jefferson's philosophy as it regards race and civil religion, Conor Cruise O'Brien explains that the field of sport may offer a necessarily multiracial avenue for American civil religion:

Modern America is, and has been for more than a quarter of a century, a post-racist society; post-racist juridically and institutionally ...and – not least significant – in the field of sport. The American civil religion, if it is to be a bonding force through the coming century, must be unequivocally multiracial...it must do so...if it to remain a civil religion for the American people as a whole.<sup>263</sup>

The term "post-racist" for O'Brien does not mean "no longer racist" in fact, but merely that racism is no longer accepted in theory.<sup>264</sup> As a society, racism has been universally denounced as a bad thing. What remains is how to address the racial differences that still exist. Platt believes sports transcend racial discord; O'Brien implies that sports may allow for the invigoration of an American civil religion that can successfully navigate a multiracial society toward unity.

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<sup>262</sup> Lipsky, 1985, p. 72.

<sup>263</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1785-1800*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 318.

<sup>264</sup> O'Brien's condemnation of Jefferson for his writings concerning 'free blacks' make it clear he is anti-racist in sentiment and in no way condones racism in either thought or action.

## Conclusion

Previous examinations of civil religion in America have been limited by narrow views. The initial scholarship on American civil religion by Bellah and Hammond looked only at political rhetoric in which sacred subjects were secularized by their inclusion in the political sphere. Such a perspective ignores how American civil religion may also be invoked in instances where the rhetor sanctifies aspects of American culture usually thought of as secular. Presidential sports encomia depict the secular activity of athletics in a spiritual manner, investing the accomplishments of sports champions with meanings that are sacred within the American political order. Critics of Bellah and Hammond, such as Hart, mistakenly narrow their conception of “religion,” with the result being the omission of symbolic systems that provide ultimate meaning, what Geertz identifies as the essential ingredients for “religion,” that should be considered within the realm of the sacred. In both cases, an inability to recognize articulations of civil religion in presidential sports encomia results in a flawed understanding of “civil religion.” Presidential sports encomia is an example of growing body of presidential rhetoric that remains in the shadows due to the limited scope of previous scholarship on American civil religion.

The consequences of this omission are not only a limited understanding of what constitutes “civil religion.” A second problem concerns the discussion over whether civil religion can be successfully articulated in a nation with the racial and cultural diversity of the United States. Some scholars, like Bellah and Hammond, have lamented the exclusive features of an American civil religion grounded in Anglo-Saxon Protestant terms. Others,



like Wilson, have concluded that the impossibility of reframing civil religion to meet the needs of such a diverse population requires that the concept be jettisoned in favor of “economic” models that are more conducive to addressing issues of multiculturalism. An expanded understanding of “civil religion,” one that includes its articulation in presidential sports encomia, provides an alternative solution that revives the potential of civil religion to be both inclusive and unifying. My examination of presidential sports encomia highlights how this form of presidential address overcomes many of the obstacles that have hindered more traditional conceptions of civil religion.

Overall, the research on American civil religion has wisely emphasized the crucial role of rhetoric in the formation and maintenance of civil religion in the United States. However, this scholarship has often been performed by individuals from fields other than Communication. The work of Roderick P. Hart and Vanessa Beasley stand out as exceptions to this norm. My study of presidential sports encomia continues the direction initiated by Hart and Beasley, claiming rhetorical analysis as the most appropriate means for investigating the role of civil religion in the American political system. A formal inquiry of presidential sports encomia can serve as a model for the contributions rhetorical scholarship has to offer to the study of American civil religion.

**Chapter Four**

**Symbolic Guardians of National Unity:  
The Institutional Functions of Sports Rhetoric  
in the U.S. Presidency**

Presidential sports encomia lie at the intersection of sports, civil religion, and presidential rhetoric. Each of these three is a field of study unto itself, and those who study presidential rhetoric have come closest to specifically addressing the sports encomia of chief executives. Much of the research done by those exploring the terrain of presidential discourse can inform – and be informed by – an examination of presidential sports encomia. These scholars come mainly from one of two fields: political science or speech communication. And although presidential sports encomia have been mentioned tangentially in the larger works of a few and implicated in the general conclusions of several more, it has yet to receive specific and comprehensive attention by any. What is required is an exploration of presidential sports encomia that makes explicit the connections between this form of presidential address and the relevant research in the field of political communication scholarship.

By contextualizing my project within the realm of presidential rhetoric studies, I am able to draw upon the work of both political scientists and communication scholars. The results are both the establishment of presidential sports encomia as a subject best understood via rhetorical analysis and an augmentation of the field of political communication scholarship with the contribution of sports encomia to institutional analysis of the presidency. Recognition of these White House ceremonies as symbolic action infused with the ideology of national unity and invocation of civil religion can identify the “means by which self-interests [of athletes] are converted into communal

interests [of the nation]”<sup>265</sup> and locate sports encomia within the institution of the presidency.

The chapter is divided into the following sections. First, I note the historical background of the growing significance of presidential rhetoric, specifying the characteristics of the presidency which lead the office being the “voice of the nation” and an outline of the origins of scholarship on presidential address. Rhetorical background follows, as I explain the distinctions between the political science study of the rhetorical presidency and communication studies of presidential rhetoric. This leads to a focus on the place of presidential rhetoric within analysis of the presidency as an institution, including discussion of how presidential sports encomia functions in support of the institution.

There are three specific issues within presidential rhetoric studies that most directly impact my analysis of presidential sports encomia: “going public,” mass media, and political spectacle. After recounting the basic arguments concerning a president’s motivations and attempts at “going public,” the work of Vanessa Beasley is referenced as evidence of alternative ways of conceptualizing “going public,” with emphasis on how the study of presidential sports encomia furthers this analysis. The debate over whether and how much development in mass media have influenced the rise of the rhetorical presidency is used as foundation for delineating the similarities between the changes in sports and the presidency in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I argue presidential sports encomia is a unique case supporting the arguments of Bruce Gronbeck, identifying where the two

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<sup>265</sup> Bruce Gronbeck, “The presidency in the age of secondary orality,” in Martin Medhurst (Ed.) *Beyond the rhetorical presidency*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1996, p. 49.

institutions of sports and the presidency converge and illuminating the ways in which “the electronic revolution” has affected each and brought the two together.

I cite presidential sports encomium as an example of political spectacle, using the criteria of Daniel Boorstin and Bruce Miroff to elucidate the spectacular elements as well as the reasons why presidents find sports encomia as an attractive form of spectacle. In conclusion, I summarize the significance various aspects of presidential sports encomia for political communication scholarship, reinforcing my claim that presidential sports encomia furthers the field of presidential rhetoric by emphasizing the importance of sports rhetoric in political communication.

#### Historical background

The rhetorical power of the presidency is based on many observable facets of the office. The President of the United States is a singular figure (although the executive branch has many facets) unlike the 535-headed hydra that is Congress. The chief executive also has a rhetorical flexibility unmatched in the U.S. system of government. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson note, “Presidential rhetoric is one source of institutional power, enhanced in the modern presidency by the ability of presidents to speak when, where, and on whatever topic they choose, and to a national audience through coverage by the electronic media.”<sup>266</sup> Able to speak on any subject and likely to be covered on every channel’s evening news, the president has no real challenge for the role of “voice of the nation.” This fact is important for communication scholars because it demarcates presidential address as a subject worthy of analysis, while resulting

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<sup>266</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds done in words: Presidential rhetoric and the genres of governance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 3.

in the pragmatic advantage of being able to focus on the words of one person. For those interested in investigating the functions of American politics, recognition of this “voice” as a political power is a reminder of rhetoric’s growing influence on the evolution of U.S. government.

This “voice” has a power beyond a substantive defense of presidential agendas. Presidents use rhetorical situations to not only “speak on the issues” but also to speak-into-being a sense of purpose and identity for the entire country. Campbell and Jamieson explain, “When we say that presidents constitute the people, we mean that all presidents have the opportunity to persuade us to conceive of ourselves in ways compatible with their views of government and the world.”<sup>267</sup> Mary Stuckey and Frederick Antczak have emphasized the importance of such constitutive “consequences” as crucial to a complete understanding of the function of rhetoric in the maintenance of the presidency as an institution.<sup>268</sup> Presidential invocations of American values may be described in terms that encourage the public to understand their own place in the country as both supporting and maintaining those values. This “constitutive” function of rhetoric extends the power of communication beyond the mere transmission of information. Political scientist Jeffrey Tulis has noted, “Rhetorical power is thus not only a form of communication, it is also a way of constituting the people to whom it is addressed by furnishing them with the very equipment they need to assess its use – the metaphors, categories, and concepts of

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid, pp. 5-6.

<sup>268</sup> Mary Stuckey and Frederick Antczak, “The rhetorical presidency: Deepening vision, widening exchange,” *Communication Yearbook*, volume 21, 1996, p. 406. I reference their work in greater detail when discussing Vanessa Beasley’s arguments in the section on “going public.”

political discourse.”<sup>269</sup> Thus, the constitutive rhetoric of presidents provides the means for understanding the very message being delivered.

Stephan Walk’s work on the footrace metaphor employed by President Lyndon Johnson<sup>270</sup> supports the claim that sports metaphors are a prime example of this constitutive function of presidential rhetoric. “[T]he notion that American economic life is essentially a footrace whose competitive conditions are the central focus of political debate”<sup>271</sup> presents the audience with not merely an analogy; it provides a lens by which their own life experiences and the governmental policies enacted to address any problems are to be understood and evaluated. I argue presidential sports encomia perform a similar role in political communication, with the celebration of athletic champions providing presidents an opportunity to constitute national identity via the sacred idioms of sports. Campbell and Jamieson observe, “Public communication is the medium through which the national fabric is woven.”<sup>272</sup> Presidential sports encomium is a medium through which the American civil religion is articulated. As a uniquely singular voice in the political sphere, the president has a substantial rhetorical space – the president doesn’t just speak *to us*, but often *for us*. In this way, presidential sports encomia provide examples of constitutive rhetoric employed for institutional ends, a case study by which scholars of presidential rhetoric can observe the role of communication in the maintenance of the political order.

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<sup>269</sup> Jeffrey Tulis, *The rhetorical presidency*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 203.

<sup>270</sup> Stephan Walk, “The footrace metaphor in American presidential rhetoric,” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, volume 12, 1995, pp. 36-55.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>272</sup> Campbell and Jamieson, 1990, p. 6.

Presidential rhetoric is firmly ensconced in the Academy as subject worthy of investigation. Scholars have articulated the importance of rhetoric for presidential power, since at least the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>273</sup> Over the next four decades, the study of presidential rhetoric was included both political scientists<sup>274</sup> and rhetorical scholars<sup>275</sup> exploring the merits of a “public presidency.” In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, attempts to more precisely define the field of presidential rhetoric arose. Communication scholar Theodore Windt stated, “The discipline of presidential rhetoric is concerned with the study of presidential public persuasion as it affects the ability of the President to exercise the powers of the office.”<sup>276</sup> The inclusion of institutional effects in this definition excludes evaluations focused only on the text of the speech while ignoring the office and resulting authority that invest the rhetor with the powers and/or responsibilities to speak on the subject and in the manner performed. According to this interpretation, an essay on Reagan’s eloquence would not fit within the realm of “presidential rhetoric” unless it also explained how that eloquence implicated his ability to execute his duties as president.

Such a narrow interpretation can result in the omission from analysis instances of presidential address, such as ceremonial speeches like sports encomia, where the institutional end is general support for the political order rather than a specific exercise of presidential power. The role of presidents in developing a sense of national unity is an example of such institutional functions of the presidency. Although Windt’s definition is

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<sup>273</sup> See Clinton Rossiter, *The American presidency*, New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1956; Richard Neustadt, *Presidential power: The politics of leadership*, New York: John Wiley, 1960.

<sup>274</sup> See George Edwards, *The public presidency: The pursuit of popular support*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1983.

<sup>275</sup> See Roderick Hart, *The political pulpit*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1977.

<sup>276</sup> Theodore Windt, “Presidential rhetoric: Definition of a field of study,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, volume 16, 1986, p. 102.



overly narrow, it is still useful in emphasizing the need for rhetorical scholars to always be aware of how the words of individual presidents affect the presidency as an institution.

Windt used this definition to classify the work being done on presidential rhetoric. Upon surveying the field, Windt declared, “Contemporary studies in presidential rhetoric are primarily critical and fall into four categories: criticisms of single speeches, criticism of rhetorical movements, development of genres of presidential speeches, and miscellaneous articles on various ancillary topics dealing with presidential rhetoric.”<sup>277</sup> Windt’s division was supported ten years later by Martin J. Medhurst as “still generally true, with a few studies of presidential campaign advertising, some full-length rhetorical biographies, and a few general studies of presidential communication having been completed in the interim.”<sup>278</sup> Although distinguishing the categories of inquiry, Windt unifies the various types as “primarily critical,” reinforcing the focus on the institution of the presidency in the aforementioned definition.

Whether the subject is President Carter’s “Panama Canal” speech or a comparison and contrast of presidential inaugurals since 1932, the focus, in Windt’s estimation, remains on the connection between presidential address and presidential power. More often than not, the powers being discussed revolve around executive execution vis-à-vis the legislative and judicial branches. The study of presidential communication has been predominantly policy-oriented, focusing on the ways in which rhetoric serves a president’s attempt to push an agenda, persuade Congress to act accordingly, or respond

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid, p. 104.

<sup>278</sup> Martin Medhurst, *Beyond the rhetorical presidency*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1996, p. xx.

to judicial rulings. These analyses have treated rhetoric as a means to policy action, as only “instrumental.” What has been less thoroughly examined are the ways in which presidents use their rhetorical resources in non-policy situations.

Ceremonial rhetoric, in general, falls outside the realm of policy-oriented executive communication, a missed opportunity to examine constitutive rhetoric. In the specific case of presidential sports encomium, there is no evidence of presidents seriously attempting to alter congressional attitudes or challenge legal reasoning. However, this does not mean that the study of these presidential sports encomia cannot meet Windt’s criteria for presidential rhetoric – how “it affects the ability of the President to exercise the powers of the office.” It only requires that one explain how these speeches relate to the institution of the presidency. By arguing that presidential sports encomia serve presidential efforts to articulate an American civil religion by describing athletic accomplishments as characteristics of national identity, I identify these instances of presidential address as constitutive rhetoric located squarely within the institutional function of the presidency that calls for the chief executive to preserve the existing social and political order. My study of presidential sports encomia shows how a broader understanding of presidential rhetoric in the functioning of the institution can expand the utility of rhetorical studies of political communication while remaining true to the spirit of Windt’s emphasis on the office of the presidency.

One clue as to the significance of commemorative rhetoric in executive communication is their sheer volume within recent administrations. Ronald Reagan, the Great Communicator, gave more speeches proclaiming a day/week/month in honor of a

small segment of society (medical transcriptionists, disability in entertainment, and senior centers are just three of the more than two hundred examples) than all of his speeches on two of his major policy proposals – tax cuts and missile defense – combined.<sup>279</sup> This is not to say that quantity trumps quality or that the Reagan presidency will (or should) be remembered more for his commemoration of secretaries than his vision of supply-side economics. However, the fact remains that presidents perceive some need to speak on subjects that do not have direct relevance to issues of policy. The issues for scholars to examine are what role these “non-essential” speeches may play in the overall repertoire of presidential rhetoric and what individual presidents may hope to accomplish by speaking on such subjects.

Comparing administrations since Jimmy Carter, from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush, an accounting of presidential address indicates the ceremony honoring sports heroes is taking the place of the declaration of days or weeks in honor of events or people. This does not mean such declarations will cease to exist as part of presidential communication; but based on what topics recent presidents have chosen to speak, it appears that presidents will be giving more and sports addresses and fewer “National Laundry Service Day” speeches. Thus, the question as to how commemorative rhetoric functions in the presidency can be examined in the specific context of sports encomia. I argue that sports narratives offer presidents a better canvas on which to paint their vision of American values and civil religion. The mass appeal of sports – as spectator events, as

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<sup>279</sup> I arrived at this conclusion after using a ‘macro’ style of content analysis. I went through the Reagan volumes of the *Public Papers of the President, 1981-1989* and counted the speeches on either missile defense or tax cuts versus the speeches honoring various individuals and groups.

activities in which millions of Americans participate and are familiar with, and as the easily accessible metaphor for life and politics – makes it fertile ground for presidential communication.

### Rhetorical background

I approach presidential sports encomia from a communicative perspective, specifically presidential address. The field of presidential rhetoric has been described as concerning “two different objects of study: the presidency in one case and rhetoric in the other.”<sup>280</sup> In terms of scholarship, the two foci can be thought of as a study of the rhetorical presidency versus a study of the rhetoric of presidents. The former is concerned with the effects that presidential rhetoric has on the office and its role in government, while the latter involves examination of the communicative strategies of presidents on a more individual level. Before explaining how this exploration of presidential sports encomia borrows from each, an outline of the two sides can shed light on how the dichotomy arose and how it informs my analysis of White House ceremonies honoring sports champions.

Medhurst has done more than any other scholar to delineate the “two constructs” associated with the study of presidential communication. He says, “there is no debate about when the interdisciplinary interest in the intersection of the presidency and the practice of rhetoric commenced. “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency,” written by James Ceaser, Glen Thurow, Jeffrey K. Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette was the intellectual

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<sup>280</sup> Martin Medhurst, *Beyond the rhetorical presidency*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1996, p. xii.

precursor to much of the recent interest in presidential rhetoric.”<sup>281</sup> Medhurst explains “the primary focus and basic concern of those working within the construct of the rhetorical presidency is largely, if not entirely, institutional. They are most concerned with the nature, scope, and function of the presidency as a constitutional office.”<sup>282</sup> The origins of scholarly attention to the institutional aspect of presidential rhetoric are credited to Richard Neustadt’s *Presidential power: The politics leadership* first published in 1960.<sup>283</sup>

His arguments concerning the evolving nature of presidential communication would be greatly expanded two decades later when Jeffrey Tulis and his coauthors would declare that the institution of the presidency to have been fundamentally altered with the proliferation of direct popular appeals by chief executives. In his treatise on “a true transformation of the presidency,”<sup>284</sup> Jeffrey Tulis identified “rhetorical leadership” as “the essence of the modern presidency.”<sup>285</sup> Although acknowledging that “all presidents are rhetorical presidents,”<sup>286</sup> he argued that unlike their predecessors, presidents in the 20<sup>th</sup> century relied more heavily on *public* rhetoric to defend presidential policy. Tulis’ conclusion is that this rhetorical turn has deleterious effects for politics in the United States. Specifically, public rhetoric on the part of presidents threatens to spiral out of control, with more and more “sloganeering” and less and less substantive deliberation.

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid, p. xiii.

<sup>283</sup> Stuckey and Antczak ‘trace’ the “rhetorical presidency as an analytic construct” to this “landmark work.” Stuckey and Antczak, 1996, p. 409.

<sup>284</sup> Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical presidency*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 7.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>286</sup> Jeffrey Tulis, “Revising the rhetorical presidency,” in Martin Medhurst (Ed.) *Beyond the rhetorical presidency*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1996, p. 3.

The result is a simplification of political discourse and the hasty overhaul, rather than gradual reform, of policy. Medhurst describes this genre of scholarship as sharing the following characteristics: the implicit assumption that there was a non-rhetorical presidency; rhetoric is narrowly defined and focused on emotional appeals; rhetoric is a substitute for, rather than a form of “symbolic,” action; only policy oriented rhetoric is meaningful to governance; and, rhetorical theory is rarely used.<sup>287</sup> Rooted in political science and grounded in constitutional theory, studies in the mold of the rhetorical presidency tend to be narrow and theory-driven while maintaining an institutional focus.<sup>288</sup>

In contrasting the research by political scientists on the rhetorical presidency with the analysis of the rhetoric of presidents done by communication scholars, Medhurst describes the latter as being “broad and practice dependent”; grounded in theories of human persuasion, with an individual focus.<sup>289</sup> Rather than depict rhetoric as including only emotional appeals, “scholars interested in rhetoric would be more likely to begin from the premise that rhetoric is an art that has both practical and productive dimensions....”<sup>290</sup> Rhetoric can thus be evaluated in terms of how the speaker builds and presents the arguments as well as the intended and actual effects on the audience. Medhurst references Bitzer’s work on “the rhetorical situation”<sup>291</sup> as “the most basic principle of rhetorical theory”<sup>292</sup> guiding this form of scholarship. The uniqueness of

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<sup>287</sup> Medhurst, 1996, pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid, p. xi.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid, p. xi.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid, p. xiv.

<sup>291</sup> Lloyd Bitzer, “The rhetorical situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric I*, 1968, pp. 6-17.

<sup>292</sup> Medhurst, 1996, p. xv.

presidential rhetoric is understood according to the “complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence”<sup>293</sup> as perceived by the chief executive. Framing “the principal subject of investigation to be rhetoric rather than the presidency,”<sup>294</sup> scholars can more accurately apply rhetorical theories in their examination of presidential communication.

My exploration of presidential sports encomia is aligned with the communication tradition of presidential rhetoric studies. It is grounded in human persuasion rather than constitutional theory, and is practice-dependent more than theory-driven. My claim that this form of ceremonial address has institutional implications challenges the notion that only policy-oriented rhetoric is meaningful to governance. The conclusions give substance to the concept of rhetoric as “symbolic” action. However, my project also supports a feature Medhurst associates with studies of the rhetorical presidency: the focus is more institutional than individual based. With Windt’s definition of the field as a guiding objective, conclusions drawn from the research of presidential sports encomia are cast in terms of institutional analysis. The study of presidential sports encomia is informed by theories of institutional constraints on presidential rhetoric.

#### The institutional role

Campbell and Jamieson’s development of genres of presidential rhetoric is an example of rhetorical scholars defending their work as having contributing to an understanding of the presidency as an institution. They state, “we look at the presidency as an institution in which rhetoric plays a major role, asking what can be discovered if we

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<sup>293</sup> Bitzer, 1968, p. 6.

<sup>294</sup> Medhurst, 1996, p. xiv.

assume that the character of presidential rhetoric has been created, sustained, and altered through time by the nature of the presidency as an institution.”<sup>295</sup> Causes, correlations, effects, and modifications of public rhetoric are each potentially insightful of a greater understanding of the presidency. In order to understand presidential sports encomia within the framework of the presidency as an institution, it is necessary to delineate the ways that this type of presidential address is influenced by and affects the office of the president. After briefly noting the evidence for an institutional influence on presidential sports encomia, I discuss four related issues: the institutional reasons why presidents would choose to engage in sports encomia; and the contributions of the study of presidential sports encomia in three areas – the discussion over presidents “going public,” the debate concerning the effect of mass communications on presidential rhetoric, and the use of political spectacle by presidents as it relates to sports encomia.

At its most basic, institutional constraints on the presidency exert a standardizing influence on presidential sports encomia. Campbell and Jamieson note, “A generic perspective applied to the major types of presidential discourse...treats recurrence as evidence that symbolic institutional needs are at least as powerful as the force of events shaping the rhetoric of any historical period.”<sup>296</sup> In other words, if presidents of different parties and different time periods speak in similar styles on similar subjects, it can be inferred that individual rhetorical characteristics of the presidents are less of an influence in these instances than the power of the office to shape presidential address. From this perspective, presidential sports encomia are indicative of rhetoric shaped more by the

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<sup>295</sup> Campbell and Jamieson, 1990, p. 3.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid, p. 8.



office than the individual. There has been some small variety in the types of sports teams invited to the White House and slight differentiation in what presidents said to honor them. Reagan's inclination to honor athletes who played individual sports (e.g., tennis, long-distance running) is a notable exception that receives special attention for its possible implications. But more prominent are the similarities. Since 1978, two Democrats and three Republicans have served as President of the United States. From those who served in World War II to those who missed combat duty in Vietnam, the group spans generations.

And yet, the speeches given by each U.S. President are remarkably parallel in both content and form. Presidential sports encomia follow a common trajectory: an opening welcoming of the athletes and attending dignitaries; a recitation of the particular achievements of the champions with a few individuals singled out for their contributions; and concluding remarks explaining the significance of the honoree's accomplishments as they relate to the larger issues facing the nation. Institutional constraints on the presidency, from the busy schedule that necessitates a brief ceremony to the gendered expectations of the office that require chief executives to perform the role of the masculine leader who is an avid fan of whatever game the champions play, circumscribe the event in ways that transcend party or generation. The very existence of presidential sports encomia are evidence of an institutional "inertia" – due to the precedent set over the past quarter-century, presidents are now expected to honor sports champions in White House ceremonies, even if national crises force rescheduling.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> President George W. Bush hosted seven different teams during one day. Several of the teams'

The fact that presidents do honor sports champions in White House ceremonies does not, in itself, illuminate the degree to which the institutional nature of the presidency influences, and is influenced by, presidential sports encomia. What institutional reasons might encourage presidents to choose to continue this recent tradition? What political work is being done in these ceremonies? In analyzing the institutional nature of presidential sports encomia from a generic perspective, I take a position similar to the one offered by Campbell and Jamieson in their research on genres of presidential rhetoric: “...we have limited our concerns to genres that most clearly illustrate the link between rhetorical action and the maintenance and development of the institution.... The rhetorical genres analyzed...are those we see as the structural supports for the edifice of the presidency. In them, presidents perform the functions essential to maintaining the presidency as an institution.”<sup>298</sup> While I do not claim sports encomia are the political equal of inaugurals in the library of presidential address, I do establish a “link between rhetorical action and the maintenance and development of the institution,” specifically the connection between the American presidency and a cohesive civil religion fostered in presidential celebrations of athletic achievements.

In answering the question of what presidents have to gain from referencing characteristics of national identity, Beasley explains, “While there might be other elected individuals who would also have an interest in promoting a shared social idiom among the American people, few could deny chief executives’ interest in this cause. ...for there

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ceremonies had been postponed in the aftermath of 9/11. Rather than cancel those visits, the schedule of a ‘war-time’ president was rearranged so that all of the teams would have their moment at the White House.  
<sup>298</sup> Campbell and Jamieson, 1990, p. 4.

to be an American nation, an American ‘we,’ or even an American presidency at all, U.S. presidents must find ways of breathing life into the otherwise abstract notion of American political community.”<sup>299</sup> This claim helps answer the question of how the constitutive rhetoric in sports encomia serves the institution of the presidency. Note that this benefit is described in relation to the institution as well as the individual. The reinvigoration of shared notions of identity is a function of, *and* a prerequisite to, effective political communication. If the rhetorical presidency scholars are correct in claiming public rhetoric to be the essence of the modern presidency, there must be an *audience* prepared to understand itself as the *people* of whom the president is frequently invoking. In the context of presidential power, “the power to persuade,” such attempts to promote a sense of national community must be acknowledged as vital to the office.

Presidential use of constitutive rhetoric is a crucial step in the process I refer to as “maintenance of the political order.” Recalling the previously mentioned explanation by Tulis – the rhetorical power of the presidency is “not only a form of ‘communication,’ it is also a way of constituting the people” – the relationship between the president and the public can be understood as symbiotic. Rogers M. Smith described it thusly: “[officials] require a population to lead that imagines itself as being a ‘people,’ and ...they need a people that imagines itself in ways that make leadership by [them] appropriate. [These requirements] drive political leaders to offer civic ideologies, or myths of civic identity, that foster the requisite sense of peoplehood.”<sup>300</sup> So what do presidents have to gain from

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<sup>299</sup> Vanessa Beasley, *You, the People: American national identity in presidential rhetoric*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004, p. 8.

<sup>300</sup> Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting visions of citizenship in U.S. history*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1997, p. 6.

infusing their rhetoric with ideals of national identity symbolized by sports narratives, i.e., why would they do it? The answer lies in their need to have a public to persuade – in order to have an appropriate audience, presidents must find ways in their language to promote the very kinds of *public* to which their public arguments are addressed.

If a chief executive's public rhetoric is considered part of the institution of the presidency, then the function of constituting a public within that rhetoric is decidedly institutional in nature. This means that presidential address previously discounted as less *substantial* due to its "ceremonial" (i.e., non-policy) function must be given greater respect (and scholarly attention) as a means by which presidents support their policy agenda by constituting notions of the American public in non-policy settings. This is exactly what I do when identifying President Reagan's sports encomia as part of his Administration's response to liberal civil rights policy.

The potential of presidential sports encomia to assist presidents in their need to constitute the people to whom they direct their public rhetoric is just one of the institutional functioning of the presidency. Another is the responsibility of U.S. presidents in developing and nurturing an American civil religion. Civil religion scholars claim although this role is not explicitly recognized in the Constitution, it is nonetheless among the duties assigned to modern chief executives. James Fairbanks notes, "The increasing scope of government in the twentieth century has opened up additional areas of presidential leadership."<sup>301</sup> As this growth in government's jurisdiction over social life

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<sup>301</sup> James Fairbanks, "The priestly functions of the presidency: A discussion of the literature on civil religion and its implications for the study of presidential leadership," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, volume 11, 1981, p. 214.

has created opportunities for elected officials to expand their own authority, with the addition of leader of the national spirit added to the mantle of the presidency. Although he acknowledges any “attempt to assign the president responsibilities in the spiritual realm would seem, at least at first, to be a direct challenge to the separation of church and state principle,”<sup>302</sup>

Fairbanks concludes that the disestablishment clause of the First Amendment does not prevent the national government from taking over where the church is excluded. Michael Novak argues that as official church-initiated religion is kept out of politics, a “symbolic vacuum is created which the state itself inexorably fills.”<sup>303</sup> The result is a civic faith with the president at the spiritual leader of this civil religion. Fairbanks explains,

...American civilization is best understood as a set of secular religious systems and ...the presidency is the nation’s central religious symbol. ...Much of the recent literature in the debate over the imperial presidency has noted the religious trappings that have evolved with the office and has criticized what appears as the deification of the nation’s chief executive. This literature seldom considers the possibility that the president may have a legitimate religious role to play. ...The president is the national religion’s chief priest in that he is the person most responsible for conducting those rituals and repeating those creeds which keep alive for the people the “sacred cosmos” which defines their collective existence.<sup>304</sup>

Fairbanks’ argument demarcates the promotion of civil religion as a necessary function of the presidency – the president is “the person most responsible.” In making this claim, Fairbanks also provides support for my arguments concerning the role of presidential sports encomia in the articulation of national identity within civil religion. As a “ritual” for “repeating those creeds which keep alive for the people the ‘sacred cosmos’ which

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid, p. 214.

<sup>303</sup> Michael Novak, *Choosing our king: Powerful symbols in presidential politics* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1974), p. 303.

<sup>304</sup> Fairbanks, 1981, pp. 229-230.

defines their collective existence,” presidential sports encomia help the president achieve the institutional objective whereby civil religion maintains the political and social order.

Fairbanks provides further definition for this particular objective, explaining, “A set of religious-political symbols and rituals, that is, a civil religion, which aid in the interpretation of national purpose and values helps to promote political/religious solidarity. A wide observance of the civil religion will increase the solidarity of society and make the task of political leadership less difficult.”<sup>305</sup> This basic premise of civil religion scholarship – that a civic faith assists politicians in their efforts to maintain social cohesion and political stability – placed in the context of presidential governance supplies an additional warrant for the argument developed here. Presidents whose rhetoric furthers civil religion benefit in that they are fulfilling an institutional expectation of the presidency and, if they do it well, possibly profit from conditions favorable to successful political leadership during their own administrations.<sup>306</sup>

### Going public

The potential benefits accruing to presidents in their execution of the office point to one of the ways in which the study of presidential sports encomia contribute to ongoing scholarship on the rhetorical presidency – the discussion about “going public.” Theodore Lowi described the trend toward a personalization of presidential politics that had begun with Franklin Roosevelt. Warning that direct appeals to the public on the part

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid, p. 223.

<sup>306</sup> The obstacles hindering presidential leadership have been extensively covered by Stephen Skowronek in *The politics presidents make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. Although his particular theories of the cyclical nature of leadership – what he labels as “reconstruction, articulation, and disjunction” – are beyond the scope of this dissertation, his defense of how presidents act as agents of change does generally reinforce a concept assumed in my work, that of presidential leadership being dependent on a broad understanding of political rhetoric.

of presidents has resulted in a “plebiscitary presidency” and a president-centered national government focused on short term initiatives that divide constituencies, Lowi decries the rise of “The Second Republic.”<sup>307</sup> This is clearly a negative take on the expansion of presidential activity beyond a narrow interpretation of constitutionally-defined executive authority.

Less than a decade later, “going public” was identified by Samuel Kernell as a form of presidential power distinct from that defined by Richard Neustadt.<sup>308</sup> Neustadt had associated presidential rhetoric with bargaining; negotiation was necessary because formal authority promises presidents power it cannot constitutionally provide (presidential commands are never self-executing).<sup>309</sup> Kernell posited “going public” as an alternative to the kind of bargaining Neustadt noted. Going public is “a strategy whereby a president promotes himself and his policies in Washington by appealing to the American public for support.”<sup>310</sup> For example, a president may choose to bypass haggling directly with Congress and instead launch a campaign via direct appeals to the public (e.g., via the State of the Union speech, weekly radio addresses, or press conferences) in order to build public support for executive agenda items as a way of using public opinion to sway legislative attitudes.

According to Kernell, going public is more akin to force than bargaining because “it fails to extend the benefits of compliance, but freely imposes costs for non-

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<sup>307</sup> Theodore Lowi, *The personal president: Power invested, promise unfulfilled*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985.

<sup>308</sup> Samuel Kernell, *Going public: New strategies of presidential leadership*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1993.

<sup>309</sup> Neustadt, 1960.

<sup>310</sup> Kernell, 1993, p. 2.

compliance.”<sup>311</sup> By avoiding negotiations with the opposition party represented in Congress, presidents could push for their agenda without having to give anything back in return. While my own work diverges from the strict focus of Lowi and Kernell on the immediate effects “going public” has on policy debates, this research does provide further support for examining presidential rhetoric that does not appear to be directed toward Congress.

The work of Lowi and Kernell reflected a trend as well, with scholars becoming more attentive to the growing opportunities for presidents to engage the public directly. In their survey of the field, Stuckey and Antczak acknowledged “much of the research on the rhetorical presidency has been that the role of the president within the national government has changed from emphasizing constitutionally delineated power to power based on the president’s relationship with the American public.”<sup>312</sup> As evidenced by the growth of presidential sports encomia, presidents are finding more and more opportunities to step outside of the confines of their constitutionally designated duties and speak with a voice oriented toward the public. From the perspective of Kernell, these opportunities are attractive to presidents who face opposition in Congress; speaking directly to the American people is a means of leveraging public opinion. My own study of presidential sports encomia is instead focused on reading ceremonial rhetoric as a form of “going public” in which presidential address speaks to larger issues of identity and

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Stuckey and Antczak, 1996, p. 406.



unity, while recognizing that such appeals may have implications for particular policies.<sup>313</sup>

While more and more is being written about the public nature of the presidency, there remains a narrow focus on the use of public rhetoric to explicitly advance policy agendas. The idea of going public for reasons other than pushing the presidential agenda has received less attention from scholars. One notable exception is Vanessa Beasley, who recently published *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric*. She challenges the implicit assumption of prior research dealing with public appeals by U.S. presidents, instead positing the notion of presidents using public communication in the constitution of an American public:

What have presidents said about civil rights, for example, when they were not giving civil rights speeches? Likewise, what have they said about the relevance of ethnicity and gender when they were not speaking directly about immigration crises or women's voting rights, but were instead merely expected to report on the nation's values, current state, and future?...the rhetorical presidency can be understood as an institutional response to the United States' diversity. Rather than "going public" solely to promote specific legislative or policy measures, chief executives may have also used the bully pulpit to "form a mass" out of an increasingly diversifying American people.<sup>314</sup> ...Instead of viewing the rhetorical presidency solely in terms of its more obviously political functions, then, we might also view it as involving more subtle ministrations. In this sense, the concept of "going public" might mean something slightly different than it has in the work of Tulis or Samuel Kernell. ...if we take a more expansive and symbolic view of the presidency, ...then chief executives might also be viewed as symbolic guardians of national unity in the United States. ...going public might also function to promote the *idea* of an American people *to* the American people.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> The Reagan/LBJ civil rights discussion is one example.

<sup>314</sup> Beasley, 2004, p. 7.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

By broadening the concept of “going public” from Kernell’s initial definition, Beasley’s argument reorients rhetorical analysis of presidential address away from an exclusive focus on deliberative rhetoric.

Beasley’s argument has three important implications for my research on presidential sports encomia. First, she acknowledges the possibility that “going public” is not synonymous with the presidential tactic of going over the heads of opposing legislators in an attempt to sell their agenda to the public. Going public can also include the use of the bully pulpit by chief executives as they speak to the American people on important national issues that are not directly related to the specific policies advocated by the administration. The development of civil religion in sports encomia falls into this category, as presidents use sports narratives to emphasize American values. Rather than being an illegitimate use of presidential rhetoric, as Kernell and Lowi’s depictions of public appeals are, this example shows how “going public” can be conceived of as an appropriate tool of the office of the presidency.

Second, she specifically identifies national identity as an issue that necessitates public rhetoric by presidents. She views the use of unifying rhetoric by presidents as a response to the diversity of the U.S. population and connects it to the institutional role of presidents as “symbolic guardians of national unity in the United States.” This protection of national unity helps maintain the existing political order in that the audience of presidential address – the citizenry – identifies with the “we” constituted in executive rhetoric. Without this identification, presidents cannot successfully address problems requiring the attention of the public because the people do not recognize the message as

being directed toward them. As addressed in Chapter Three, this is a primary function of civil religion and why the articulation of an American civil religion in presidential sports encomia should be recognized as an important contribution to the presidency as an institution.

Finally, Beasley suggests that these normative statements regarding national unity may be revealed indirectly, e.g., references of civil rights injected into speeches where the primary subject is not civil rights policy. My study of sports encomia is buoyed by her claim; the topic is the commemoration of sports champions, but there may be other concepts being developed. A point not elaborated by Beasley is why such “subtle ministrations” may be a *preferred* means of speaking on topics such as national unity. Unlike the political arena of executive-legislative policy debates, where every idea is scrutinized and frequently contested, the less controversial atmosphere surrounding encomia affords presidents greater latitude to make claims about American values and national unity without fear of criticism from oppositional constituencies.

The overall position staked out on presidential sports encomia is that the subject of sports contains the necessary ingredients for an articulation of an American civil religion and the specific attention to Reagan’s use of sports encomia highlights the way in which an alternative to Lyndon Johnson’s footrace metaphor were honed in speeches that appeared on the surface to have little to do with civil rights. This approach is consistent with the recommendations of Stuckey and Antczak, who advise,

But such analysis must also include recognition that presidential rhetoric has constitutive as well as instrumental consequences, that...political reality is partly or wholly created from and sustained in rhetoric, and that presidential communication plays a major role in the construction and

continuous reconstruction of political perceptions. ...Each president, intentionally or not, helps to create and maintain specific sorts of rhetorical communities, communities that in turn work to shape and constrain the possibilities of the presidency.<sup>316</sup>

By recognizing the manner in which presidential sports encomia not only associate administrations with victorious athletes (instrumental) but also translate American values and articulate civil religion via the accessible terms of heroic sports efforts (constitutive), I show how this particular form of “presidential communication plays a major role in the construction and continuous reconstruction of political perceptions” and national identity. The “rhetorical community” of presidential sports encomia is much larger than the group of honored athletes and attending dignitaries; “each president, intentionally or not, helps to create and maintain” a national identity forged in an American civil religion that is more inclusive than its Protestant predecessors.

#### Mass media and the presidency

As an artifact of presidential address, sports encomium offers insight into the debate over the rhetorical presidency between those who take an “essentialist stance,” like Jeffrey Tulis, and scholars, such as Bruce Gronbeck, who “write from a functionalist perspective.”<sup>317</sup> The celebration of sports champions in White House ceremonies is a recent phenomenon, and as such, may shed light on whether the changes that have taken place in presidential rhetoric over the last one-hundred years are the result of an evolved political theory or more practical alterations in the surrounding social and economic terrain. It clearly supports the functionalist assumption that growth in presidential rhetoric

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<sup>316</sup> Stuckey and Antczak, 1996, p. 406.

<sup>317</sup> Medhurst, 1996, p. xxii.

– both the amount of rhetoric and the expansion in acceptable topics – is as much a result of the uncontrollable changes taking place outside of the White House as it is a political calculation by chief executives.

In his work on the rhetorical presidency, Tulis diagnoses a more publicly rhetorical president as symptomatic of a doctrinal shift in the office: the movement towards a “second constitution” facilitating more expansive executive role in governance via the use of popular address by presidents for the purpose of influencing public opinion.<sup>318</sup> Tulis distinguishes the contemporary use of rhetoric by presidents from that of pre-20<sup>th</sup> century presidents, describing the difference as “an important transformation of the constitutional order.”<sup>319</sup> Tulis posits a causal relationship whereby doctrinal choice drives presidential voice. Presidents in the modern era have chosen to expand their role in governance via public rhetoric. Whether this choice has been motivated by personal desire for power or characterized in more altruistic terms as a means of leading the nation, the locus of agency remains.

In contrast, Gronbeck argues, “What Jeffrey Tulis has designated ‘the rhetorical presidency’ has been in fact a change in kind in the executive branch of government brought about by the electronic revolution. We live in an era where access to the presidency – and, for the president, to his various constituencies – is controlled and conditioned by electronic channels.”<sup>320</sup> According to Gronbeck’s theory, the changes have been imposed on the presidency by external factors, not initiated by presidents seeking to

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<sup>318</sup> Tulis, 1987, pp. 1-3.

<sup>319</sup> Tulis, 1996, p. 3.

<sup>320</sup> Gronbeck, 1996, p. 30.

govern via a second constitution. Due to changes in the way presidents are covered by media, presidential rhetoric has proliferated. Not only are presidents speaking more often; what is considered to be “rhetoric” has been expanded as every publicly displayed behavior of a president is reported and analyzed in the news. Whether it is chopping wood on the ranch or jogging in the suburbs, presidential exercise has been added to the ever-growing list of presidential acts that are assumed to carry a political message. In the case of chopping and jogging, the message conveyed is one of a healthy and virile president. Keith Erickson labels such visual messages “prudent presidential performances” because they signify active political leadership and reinforce dominant ideology;<sup>321</sup> in the case of physical exercise, the ideological bent is the belief that masculinity is a prerequisite for a successful presidency. The photo-opportunities of sports encomia are also “prudent presidential performances” in the promotion of the “winner-by-association” imagery when presidents share the stage with sports champions.

The parallels between the growth of sports and the rhetorical presidency in the 20<sup>th</sup> century support Gronbeck’s argument. In each case, the development of mass communications technology and subsequent intensification of media reporting appear to have altered the institution being covered. By examining the ways that sports have been affected by their coverage in mass media, I am able to more fully explain the reasons why chief executives engage in presidential sports encomia.

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<sup>321</sup> Keith V. Erickson, “Presidential rhetoric’s visual turn: Performance fragments and the politics of illusionism,” *Communication Monographs*, volume 67, number 2, June 2000, pp. 138-157.

Stuckey and Antczak note, “Changes in the presidency appeared simultaneously with the growth of mass media.”<sup>322</sup> More specifically, James Davis claims, “Significantly, the emergence of the public or rhetorical presidency at the turn of the [20<sup>th</sup>] century coincides with the rise of mass circulation of daily newspapers....”<sup>323</sup> The correlation in these comments concerns developments in mass media and changes in the presidency; a similar correlation has been identified between developments in mass media and changes in sports. David Andrews and Steven Jackson explain, “the era of the modern sport celebrity began with William Randolph Hearst’s establishing of the first newspaper sport section within *The New York Journal* in 1895... [It] provided a mechanism and forum for the transformation of notable athletes into nationally celebrated figures.”<sup>324</sup> Like Davis, Andrews and Jackson emphasize the newspaper as a turn-of-the-century development. But like Gronbeck, they articulate *causality* more than mere correlation. Andrews and Jackson argue coverage of sports in newspapers changed how athletes were conceived by the public. The rise of daily newspapers circulated to large segments of metropolitan populations resulted in a new form of sports spectatorship – the game was discussed and dissected long after the players had left the field, and by a majority who didn’t witness

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<sup>322</sup> Stuckey and Antczak, 1996, p. 410. Also see Mary Stuckey, *The president as interpreter-in-chief*, Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1991.

<sup>323</sup> Davis, 1987, p. 333. I recognize that such claims are contested. Richard Ellis’s *Speaking to the People: The Rhetorical Presidency in historical perspective* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) includes several of these alternative viewpoints. However, my argument does not depend on any specific timeline. Whether newspapers were the *start* of a “rhetorical presidency” is not as important as the more general claim that the introduction and evolution of mass communication technologies have had an effect on presidential rhetoric, a claim that is not denied by those who disagree on when it all began.

<sup>324</sup> David Andrews and Steven Jackson, *Sport Stars: The cultural politics of sporting celebrity*. London: Routledge, 2001, p. 6.

the contest live. Athletes have become cultural figures, with their virtues praised on the sports pages and their vices exposed in the lifestyle sections.<sup>325</sup>

Radio and television not only augmented this coverage by bringing the sights and sounds of the arena to ever larger audiences, they literally gave a voice to and put a face on sports heroes. The entire nation is now able to watch and listen to the whole sporting event: pre-game warm-ups, play-by-play, and post-game reactions. Professional sports are now an industry with tremendous economic influence and sports figures are cultural icons. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “sport celebrity endorsers were present in 11 percent of all television advertisements...receiving more than \$1 billion dollars from U.S. companies for their services.”<sup>326</sup> The current economic status of the sports industry – with athletes making tens of millions, team owners making hundreds of millions, and league revenues measuring in the billions – is a direct result of this relationship between sports and media.<sup>327</sup>

However, these facts only tell one side of the story. Media coverage has not only augmented the economic and cultural significance of sports; it has changed sports institutionally. The aforementioned changes in spectatorship are but one example. The ability to listen to a game on radio, and later watch a game on television, altered the demographics of sports fans. No longer did one have to live in the same city or state to follow a team. National broadcasts have encouraged national fan bases. The Atlanta

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<sup>325</sup> Andrews and Jackson, 2001, pp. 1-19.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>327</sup> The most economically lucrative aspect of contemporary sports is the relationship between a sports league and a TV network. The revenue generated from TV contracts dwarfs the other profit streams, including ticket sales and concessions. Only merchandising deals, themselves a result of sports celebrity, are on par with media profits.



Braves fan living in Idaho or the Chicago Cubs fan living in Wyoming can watch 100 or more games of their favorite teams via “superstations” WTBS and WGN, respectively.

As for the game itself, media coverage has led to “instant-replay” to double-check calls made by officials on the field in professional football and on the court in professional basketball. This is a tremendous example of how mass communication technology has altered sports because it was primarily because fans at home were able to see (over and over) the mistakes hurting their teams’ chances that the NFL and NBA executives were compelled to consider the addition of instant replay as an arbiter of controversial calls. The medium drove the message. Perfection in officiating games became an objective because media made visible flaws that escaped the attention of the live audience. “TV timeouts” – for the benefit of advertisers, not athletes – have elongated the time it takes to play the game and TV coverage itself often dictates the starting times of the games.<sup>328</sup> The white tennis balls used at Wimbledon, adhering to the century-old tradition that white is to be the only color of any material (clothing included) displayed on the court, have been jettisoned for yellow balls because the latter are thought to be easier for the television viewer to see.

These are but a few of the many examples of media coverage *acting upon*, rather than merely reporting on, sports. They provide a background from which the growth of presidential sports encomia can best be understood. These White House ceremonies exemplify the dual expansion of sports as a significant part of American culture and

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<sup>328</sup> This last effect led the Chicago Cubs franchise to install stadium lights at hallowed Wrigley Field in 1988, in order for night games to be played in front of larger TV audiences.

presidential rhetoric as consisting of far more than only remarks made directly to the Congress. In each case, mass communication has been a factor.

Presidential sports encomia are a convergence point for the changes in the presidency and sports wrought by “the electronic revolution.” Each institution has been affected by being a subject of media coverage, and their synthesis in the instance of presidential sports encomia highlights the ways in which the medium has modified the message. As sporting contests and the athletes who participate in them have received more and more attention from news outlets, sports have grown from a local happening played in the moment into a national event recorded for, and discussed throughout, history. In large measure due to extensive media coverage, sports have become “an American religion...shaping cultures, driving economies, and molding politics.”<sup>329</sup> The expanding influence of sports in America made it a subject worthy of attention from political leaders.

Presidents in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could not afford to ignore this facet of American life. Fortunately, the parallel changes taking place in the presidency as an institution meant they didn't have to. As Gronbeck argues, “Radio, television, and film have not simply amplified their voices and mass-distributed their faces. Rather, they represent new arenas of discourse within which the presidency takes shape and gains force. In other words, the age of second orality both refashions presidential rhetoric and refabricates the presidency itself.”<sup>330</sup> The infusion of multimedia – audio and visual –

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<sup>329</sup> Kendall Blanchard, “Foreword,” in Robert Sands (Ed.) *Anthropology, sport, and culture*, Westport, CN: Bergin & Garvey, 1999, p. xi.

<sup>330</sup> Gronbeck, 1996, p. 49.

resulted in not merely additions to rhetoric, but actually *multiplications* of the category in fundamentally new ways.

Much like news reporting had the unintended consequences of facilitating sports gambling and fantasy leagues, both now firmly attached to the institution of sports, the age of secondary orality has not only affected how presidential rhetoric is received, but also augmented the category of presidential rhetoric itself. Gronbeck himself cites sports spectatorship as an example of the expanded understanding of political rhetoric: "...in the age of secondary orality, what we are to understand as political rhetoric must be monumentally expanded. ...even attendance at basketball games: the fact that President Clinton took daughter Chelsea to a George Washington University basketball game and then stayed for part of the following women's game as well was seen as a significant political act."<sup>331</sup> Visual aspects of a speaking engagement are now not only viewed by the immediate audience; video recording makes it possible for news media to report the entire event to the audience at home and TiVo allows citizens to watch it at their convenience. Gronbeck exclaims "*The Public Papers [of the President]* will never again contain [all] the rhetorical discourse of a president."<sup>332</sup> Gronbeck's example of President Clinton's attendance at a basketball game may not include public address (and thus fail to be reported in *The Public Papers*), but it still draws media attention and comment from political pundits as to what Clinton's spectatorship *meant* for gender equity in athletics.

The decision as to what constitutes presidential rhetoric is not the exclusive jurisdiction of the president – news reporters can depict any presidential behavior as

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

having political importance. Modern presidents are very aware that everything they say and do in public will be analyzed.

As for the individual's own intentions, presidents now have greater latitude in the topics on which they can speak – if a president so chooses, any subject can become a topic of political rhetoric. By recognizing the nearly synchronous developments of sports as a culturally significant phenomenon and presidential rhetoric as encompassing far more than just those topics specified in the Constitution, it is easier to understand why presidential sports encomia have become commonplace in presidential address. Developments in mass communication allowed sports to transcend the playing field and encouraged presidents to include sports narratives in their rhetoric.

The existence of presidential sports encomia does not resolve the competing claims Tulis and Gronbeck; an exploration of this form of presidential rhetoric does address the concerns for scholarship Gronbeck identifies. First, Tulis has acknowledged it is impossible to “return to a nineteenth-century constitutional order,”<sup>333</sup> denying Medhurst's claim attributed to Tulis' theory that “if it is true that political theory or doctrine is the culprit, then a change in doctrine could potentially remedy the situation.”<sup>334</sup> Thus, the argument as to whether it was doctrine or mass media that spawned the rhetorical presidency cannot help put the genie back in the bottle.

Additionally, Gronbeck does not attempt to deflate political theorizing on presidential rhetoric; instead, he seeks to invigorate the study of the presidency from a rhetorical perspective. Of his objective, Gronbeck states, “...it is to argue that politics

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<sup>333</sup> Tulis, 1996, p. 5.

<sup>334</sup> Medhurst, 1996, p. xxii.

understood as symbolic action demands that we analyze systematically the discourses of political ideology and valuation, of political visions and the places citizens occupy in such visions, of the means by which self-interests are converted into communal interests....”<sup>335</sup> Gronbeck’s call for more thorough examination of presidential rhetoric is heeded in my study of presidential sports encomia. Reading White House ceremonies honoring sports champions as symbolic action infused with the ideology of national identity and valuation of civil religion, this study delineates the political visions articulated by presidents and the constructed “places citizens occupy in such visions” and identifies the ways sports narratives are employed as a “means by which self-interests [of athletes] are converted into communal interests [of the nation].”

### Political spectacle

The multidimensionality of contemporary media coverage – print, radio, and moving image media – have enlarged the scope of political rhetoric, broadening the category to include potentially any recorded actions by presidents. Gronbeck cites the centrality of “spectacle” to politics as a side effect of the increase in media coverage: “With photographic reproduction, editing, enrichment of pictures through sound and graphics, narrative, and intercut images from a thousand sources, spectacle in our time has become the North Pole of politics. Spectacle provides our polaris to the political; it is central to the process....”<sup>336</sup> Citing Murray Edelman’s research on political spectacle,<sup>337</sup> Gronbeck is referencing the process by which journalistic choices in what events will be

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<sup>335</sup> Gronbeck, 1996, pp. 48-49.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>337</sup> Murray Edelman, *Constructing the political spectacle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

covered by the news and how that coverage will be framed have the effect of driving public opinion and political debate, predetermining what are problems and what are possible solutions. Due to its focus on crisis rhetoric, Edelman's work on political spectacle is less applicable to presidential sports encomia.

But Gronbeck is not only commenting on the "hard news" reporting of domestic instability and international crisis. As his example of the George Washington University basketball games illuminate, political spectacle encompasses the less urgent messages conveyed in political rhetoric, e.g., ceremonial discourse delivered by presidents in the Rose Garden and East Room of the White House. Gronbeck argues political spectacle is constitutive in that it recommends to the audience their own role in society via the ontological qualities expressed in images and words. He explains, "Politically, the notion of interpellation suggests that we are all called to public action via images of citizenship, to positions or roles in public proceedings. To extend these ideas specifically to presidential politics, one could argue that political spectacle positions us, interpellates us, to the role of citizen in particular ways. ...Spectacle must be understood in terms of both what is seen and who it is that is doing the seeing."<sup>338</sup> This aspect of spectacle makes it attractive to presidents in their attempt at speaking into existence the citizenry they seek to govern.

Presidential sports encomia closely resemble this conception of political spectacle. As an orchestrated publicity event, presidential sports encomium honors

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<sup>338</sup> Gronbeck, 1996, p. 38. Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn Parry-Giles have explored the ways in which depictions of the White House in television dramas can be read as a form of political spectacle with implications for the ways that the audience is interpellated as a citizenry. See, T. Parry-Giles and S. Parry-Giles, "The West Wing's prime-time presidentiality: Mimesis and catharsis in a post-modern romance," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, volume 88, number 2, May 2002, pp. 209-227.

athletic achievement while it simultaneously articulates idealized characteristics of national identity, all in a civil religious atmosphere where the athlete represents the archetypal citizen. The works of Daniel Boorstin and Bruce Miroff further define the contours of political spectacle in which presidential sports encomia should be understood.

To use Daniel Boorstin's words, presidential sports encomia are examples of the "pseudo-event"<sup>339</sup> in politics. According to Boorstin, pseudo-events share four characteristics: they are "planned, not spontaneous; planned primarily for the immediate purpose of being reported; intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy; [and, the] relation to reality of the situation is ambiguous."<sup>340</sup> The first component is most obvious: as a ceremony, presidential sports encomium is definitely planned. Previously, presidents may have called the coach of the winning Super Bowl team immediately following the game; now every NFL champion can expect a White House ceremony honoring all of the victorious players and coaches. Similarly, the second criterion is met in this planning of a special ceremony at the White House. As a public event noted on the president's schedule, these ceremonies draw attention from media who routinely follow presidential activity and national sports news outlets, as well as the local media of the team being honored. Like other ceremonies involving U.S. presidents, presidential sports encomia are planned and performed with the intent of being reported by the media.

Adherence to the last two criteria requires more detailed explanation. What is the "self-fulfilling prophecy" intended in presidential sports encomia? A superficial reading

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<sup>339</sup> Daniel Boorstin, *The image: A guide to pseudo-events in America*. New York: Vintage Publishing, 1961.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

of these ceremonies fails to uncover one; the team has *already* won a championship and thus any prophecy of theirs has been fulfilled by now. But reading presidential sports encomia more critically highlights two potential answers. First, there is the “winner by association” motive. Presidents who stand next to champions, actually having their own jersey in hand, may be labeled a champion themselves. Hosting champions on their “home field,” presidents are able to invoke their authority as commander-in-chief and position themselves favorably with regards to the athletes being commemorated. They control the ceremony, choosing plot lines that highlight their own accomplishments in office. By the end of the observance, with presidents sharing their own stories of achievement and receiving gifts from the team, it might be difficult to distinguish the champion from the chief executive, or so an administration can hope.

Second, as the discussion below on civil religion and national identity indicates, presidents may be seeking to create a self-fulfilling prophecy regarding the American public. In highlighting the accomplishments of athletes as exemplary of the values that are critical to the nation’s success, presidents are presenting a model for public behavior. The constitutive function of rhetoric is employed in these messages, as presidents extol the idealized citizen identity to which their public rhetoric is addressed. Indeed, constitutive public rhetoric *is* self-fulfilling in that it attempts to speak into existence the audience to whom it is directed. Presidential sports encomium defines the public in the ways that presidents articulate selected characteristics of national identity.

But how is this event “ambiguous” with relation to reality? Aren’t the players easily identifiable, along with the purpose of their visit to the White House? Once again,



a more in-depth reading of presidential sports encomia reveals facets not apparent on the surface. In their book, *The Image-Is-Everything Presidency*, Richard Waterman, Robert Wright, and Gilbert St. Clair note, “An example of a pseudo-event would be when a president seeking the image of being tough on crime organizes an event at the White House Rose Garden.”<sup>341</sup> As with presidential sports encomia, the “ambiguity” of this ceremony lies in the presumed connection between the subject being hailed and the event itself. Standing next to police officers does not, in and of itself, reduce crime. But it does portray the president as an ally of law enforcement, visually reinforcing the chief executive’s determination to “do something” about crime. It also creates an artificial relationship where the president is depicted as playing a vital role in the jobs of those who serve and protect; it is as if the ceremony reveals to the public a process whereby visible presidential involvement with police officers is a necessary step in the apprehension and conviction of criminals. This relationship between the president and law enforcement is ambiguous – the picture of the officers and the chief executive being together substitutes for a detailed explanation of how presidential action will reduce crime while also creating an illusion of presidents playing a critical role in crime abatement.

Presidential sports encomia contain similar elements of ambiguity. Presidential action is not necessary for the claiming of a championship. Teams win on the field, not at the White House. However, the extolling of athletic virtue by chief executives does give the accomplishment an imprint of legitimacy as a national honor. In essence, presidential

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<sup>341</sup> Richard Waterman, Robert Wright, Gilbert St. Clair, *The image-is-everything presidency*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999, p. 15.

sports encomia transform sports championships from local or individual triumph into a success that has political significance for the entire nation. In relating the efforts of athletes to the larger citizenry, presidents are attempting to make sports championships *mean something more* than simply athletic accomplishment. Like the president who speaks publicly on crime while surrounded by police officers in an effort to create a key role for the administration in law enforcement, the president who speaks publicly on championships while surrounded by athletes is attempting to make the presidency a key player in the national obsession with sports. It is as if the championship journey is not complete until the team has been invited to the White House. This is the ambiguous relation to reality – presidential sports encomia have created their own niche in the sports narrative as the final summation of athletic accomplishment in the sacred language of civil religion.

What do presidents hope to accomplish for themselves by hosting sports teams at the White House? One answer has been provided in Bruce Miroff's work on the presidency as political spectacle – “a kind of symbolic event, one in which particular details stand for broader and deeper meanings. What differentiates a spectacle from other kinds of symbolic events is the centrality of character and action. A spectacle presents intriguing and often dominating characters not in static poses but through actions that establish their public identities.”<sup>342</sup> Why would a president engage in spectacle?

According to Miroff, “The modern president...not only responds to popular demands and passions but also actively reaches out to shape them. Both the possibilities

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<sup>342</sup> Bruce Miroff, “The Presidency and the public: Leadership as spectacle,” in Michael Nelson (Ed.), *The Presidency and the Political System*. Washington: CQ Press, 2000, p. 302.

opened up by modern technology and the problems presented by the increased fragility of parties and institutional coalitions lead presidents to turn to the public for support and strength. If popular backing is to be maintained, the public must believe in the president's leadership qualities."<sup>343</sup> The staging of spectacles allows a president to create a scene in which favorable values and ideas, as represented by symbols deployed for that very purpose, are presented via presidential communication. James Davis cites presidential sports encomium as an example of political spectacle portraying leadership qualities: "Presidents have always been able to capitalize on the chief of state ceremonial rhetoric to strengthen their leadership role... scenes of the president...inviting the U.S. Olympic hockey team to the White House, pinning medals on national heroes have all attracted the nation's attention and generated a sense of pride throughout the country."<sup>344</sup> Recognizing that all sports teams invited to the White House, not just those representing Olympic teams, are depicted by the president as displaying qualities worthy of national honor and public emulation results in the Davis' claims being applied to all instances of presidential sports encomia. As the "nation's #1 fan," the president is well-placed to take advantage of the pride and goodwill shown to athletes and reap the benefits of being the nation's leader in this commemoration.

Miroff argues, "A president's approach to, and impact on, public perceptions is not limited to overt appeals in speeches and appearances. Much of what the modern president does, in fact, involves the projection of images whose purpose is to shape public understanding and gain popular support. A significant – and growing - part of the

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid, p. 301.

<sup>344</sup> Davis, 1987, p. 352.

presidency revolves around the enactment of leadership as a spectacle.”<sup>345</sup> Borrowing Roland Barthes comparison of professional boxing and pro wrestling Miroff explains the role of spectacle in the presidency: “Much of what presidents do is analogous to what boxers do – they engage in contests of power and policy with other political actors, contests in which the outcomes are uncertain. But a growing amount of presidential activity is akin to wrestling. The contemporary presidency is presented by the White House (with the collaboration of the media) as a series of spectacles in which a larger-than-life main character, along with a supporting team, engage in emblematic bouts with immoral or dangerous adversaries.”<sup>346</sup> Presidential commemorations of sports champions are a prime example of “spectacle.” The symbolic power of sport – with its American values of competition, individual accomplishment within a team framework, and intense desire to be the best all intertwined – is deployed in non-policy circumstances for the purpose of associating the presidency with champions and increasing the perception of presidential leadership.

The use of the boxing/wrestling analogy is itself a clue that sports can be useful as a rhetorical symbol. Sports metaphors bridge gaps between complicated presidential politics and the public’s understanding of the presidency. Miroff himself finds sports a useful symbol for explaining his point. But how are ceremonies that have the president and the championship team in seemingly “static poses” consistent with Miroff’s definition of spectacle?

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid, p. 302.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid, p. 303.

To better understand presidential sports encomia as spectacle, it would be useful to refer back to what makes professional wrestling a spectacle. One important aspect of pro wrestling that Miroff does not fully explain is the trash talking that really drives the popularity of wrestling. “Cutting a promo” is the term used to describe the taped interviews outside of the ring where wrestlers pump up their own character or denounce an upcoming foe. When done before live audiences, it’s called “creating heat” (what heels, or bad guys, do) or “creating pop” (what baby faces, or good guys, do). The success of wrestling in the past 15 years has been the change in marketing in which there is less worry about whether wrestling is perceived as “fake” and more time and effort are spent developing story lines and having wrestlers paint a picture for the audience. This emphasis on rhetoric as both precursor to and part of the action is what really sets wrestling apart from boxing. The audience gets as much, if not more, enjoyment and fulfillment out of the *talking* as they do the wrestling itself.<sup>347</sup> Miroff notes that the key to spectacle is the “centrality of character and action.”<sup>348</sup> The focus on character in pro wrestling and presidential sports rhetoric is easy to understand. The centrality of *action* is best understood as a rhetorical focus on the actions of the characters, actions that invite celebratory communication. The ceremonies in either the East Room or Rose Garden provide rhetorical moments for presidents to recall the athletic exploits of champions just as the interview areas near the wrestling ring allows the endeavors of grapplers to be touted.

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<sup>347</sup> I owe thanks to my brother-in-law, an avid wrestling fan, who provided me with the knowledge and terminology used in this section.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

In laying out the scene of spectacle, Bruce Miroff says, “Presidents are the principal figures in presidential spectacles, but they have the help of aides and advisers. The star performer is surrounded by a team...For a president’s team to enhance the spectacles, its members should project attractive qualities that either resemble the featured attributes of the president or make up for the president’s perceived deficiencies.”<sup>349</sup> In the ceremonial sports address, the “team” is usually literally a team. And their attractiveness is obvious – the person or team being honored is a champion of some sport. But even though this “team” often includes sports celebrities who are at least as well-known (or in the case of Michael Jordan, both more well-known and more popular) than the President of the United States, the star of the show is still the chief executive.

Two aspects of the ceremony highlight the point that the president is the most important person in the room – the setting and the gift giving. Each serves to bolster the image of the individual president and the office of the presidency. The particular details of the sports championship may change from team to team. But as the primary speakers, presidents are able to blend the specifics of the sports narrative into a mixture suiting their own political ends. James Davis discusses Reagan’s sports rhetoric:

The president’s use of ceremonial rhetoric has reached new heights during Reagan’s White House tenure. Who can forget his official opening of the 1984 summer Olympics in Los Angeles? ...Similarly, Reagan became the special beneficiary of another major ceremonial event when he was asked by the National Football Conference [sic] officials to flip the coin before the start of the Nineteenth Super Bowl contest between the San Francisco Forty-Niners and Miami Dolphins in January 1985. ...After the game, the ABC-TV network provided another opportunity for Reagan to deliver a

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid, p. 305.

congratulatory message to the winning San Francisco team...the president did not miss the opportunity to remark jokingly that he could use the help of the victorious Forty-Niner squad on Capitol Hill to bring a recalcitrant Congress around to support major items of his legislative agenda.<sup>350</sup>

It is surprising that Davis fails to mention the sports encomia that took place *at* the White House during Reagan's tenure. Indeed, ceremonial rhetoric did "reach new heights" during Reagan's time in office, especially in terms of presidential sports encomia. After only two sports encomia by Carter, Reagan hosted 23 ceremonies honoring 24 different sports champions.<sup>351</sup>

Additionally, the omission of sports encomia by Davis leads him to characterize sports rhetoric in a serendipitous manner. When asked by TV networks to participate in sporting events, presidents are "special beneficiaries" of "opportunities" provided by others. But presidents need not depend upon others for their involvement in sports. More and more often, presidents since Carter are not waiting to be asked to participate, choosing to create space for themselves by constructing political spectacles in the form of sports encomia.

### Conclusion

In a time of international "war on terrorism," with conflicts abroad and security in the homeland dominating media coverage of presidential administrations, the study of presidential sports encomia may appear insignificant. Responding to this line of reasoning, Beasley argues, "Although feelings of nationalism are most obvious during times of war and turmoil, they can also be invoked to great effect during more peaceful

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<sup>350</sup> Davis, 1987, pp. 352-353.

<sup>351</sup> In 1988, Reagan honored the men's and women's NCAA basketball champions in a single ceremony, a practice employed irregularly by President G.H. Bush (1990-92, but not in 1989) and all but once during President Clinton's two terms (in 1994, Arkansas men and UNC women had separate ceremonies).

times, when citizens may take pride in their nation's Olympic athletes...feelings of nationalism can sow powerful seeds of connectedness where there might otherwise be none."<sup>352</sup> As noted throughout, Olympians are not the only athletes in whom Americans take pride, and presidential sports encomia characterize all athletic champions as worthy of national honor.

The ability of sports symbolism as a means of expressing American values in a more inclusive language speaks directly to Beasley's claim that "chief executives cannot afford to engage in constitutive rhetorics of American identity only in times of turmoil. ...the conditions and frustrations of multiculturalism are not new in the United States, nor are they evident only during times of national or international crises."<sup>353</sup> As detailed in the chapter on sports, the arena of athletics holds great promise for rhetors searching for an accessible language in efforts of inclusion, especially regarding ethnicity and race. Beasley argues that moments where partisanship is low are ideal for this kind of communication, citing Inauguration Day as an example.<sup>354</sup> Presidential sports encomium is an event with an even less partisan atmosphere, for unlike inaugurals, sports encomia are not a reminder that one party has lost its bid to govern from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

I refer to presidential sports encomium as an example of "non-essential" presidential rhetoric not to deny its political significance, but to acknowledge that it falls outside the purview of constitutionally required or policy-initiated address. Like most

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<sup>352</sup> Beasley, 2004, p. 4

<sup>353</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid, p. 10.



other rhetorical scholars studying the presidency who choose to research forms of presidential address that are the result of either overt involvement in the making of policy or constitutional requirements, Beasley focuses on presidential inaugurals and State of the Union speeches. However, her conclusions cohere with my reading of presidential sports encomia, specifically the claim “that chief executives have dealt with topics of diversity largely through rhetorical indirection. That is, they have not addressed difference outright but instead treated it in highly symbolic yet strategic ways: presidents have defined American identity ideationally, explaining that the civil religion requires citizens to transcend their differences and that they can do so only by adopting a proper set of attitudes.”<sup>355</sup> In constructing civil religion via the expression sports narratives in terms of American values, presidential sports encomia deal “with topics of diversity largely through rhetorical indirection.” The sacred nature of sports denies any hint of partisanship, cloaking presidential rhetoric with the aura of civil religion. In ideological terms, this cover can mask racial inequality in society under the veneer of “meritocracy.” The “proper set of attitudes” exemplified in the efforts of sports champions portray “American identity ideationally,” as presidents persuade the American people to emulate the characteristics of athletes to “transcend their differences.” An exploration of this “non-essential” presidential rhetoric can illuminate the role of presidential sports encomia in the *essential* functions of the presidency.

My examination of presidential sports encomia is consistent with the perspective of institutional analysis as defined by Windt; any identified element of sports encomia is

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid., p. 150

explained in terms of how “affects the ability of the president to exercise the powers of the office.” Because this type of ceremonial address has not received scholarly attention and due to my own background in communication studies, this inquiry follows the parameters delineated by Medhurst regarding the rhetorical study of presidential rhetoric: grounded in human persuasion, broad and practice dependent. By inductively inspecting the sports encomia of presidents from a generic perspective, I seek to discover the constellation of forms that define these speeches and illuminate the underlying messages regarding national identity regularly constructed by chief executives.

The role of presidential sports encomia plays in the institution of the presidency remains the ultimate endpoint of my research. Based on the previous work of presidential rhetoric scholars, the study of sports encomia contributes to the field in three areas. First, presidential sports encomia buttress the institution of the presidency. The use of presidential sports encomia as constitutive rhetoric assists presidents in their need to speak into existence the audience they want to address and the citizenry they wish to govern. Additionally, sports encomia support the fulfillment of the president’s role as “chief priest” of the civil religion. Each of these roles helps maintain the institution of the presidency.

Rhetorical analysis of presidential sports encomia also interconnects with two issues within presidential rhetoric: the occurrence of “going public” and the effects of mass media coverage on presidential communication. My research extends Beasley’s claim that “going public” should refer to more than just the use of public address by presidents to challenge congressional obstacles to the administration’s agenda. The

“subtle ministrations” of presidential sports encomia serve presidents in their roles as “symbolic guardians of national unity.” As an example of “going public,” presidential sports encomia functions “to promote the *idea* of an American people *to* the American people.”

The study of presidential sports encomia reveals the similar trajectories of sports and the presidency in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as each was affected by the development of mass communication technologies and the subsequent growth in media coverage. Mass media created the conditions by which sports grew from a localized leisure activity into a national industry with enormous economic and political influence. This transformation mirrors the developments in presidential rhetoric as articulated by Gronbeck. The confluence of sports and presidential address in the instance of presidential sports encomium highlights the ways in which “the electronic revolution” has affected each institution and the reasons why they became so intertwined in the latter quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sports have taken on a cultural importance that cannot be ignored by politicians and presidents have gained the freedom and been saddled with an expectation to talk about athletics in substantive ways.

Finally, the proliferation of presidential sports encomia is a manifestation of the significance of political spectacle in presidential rhetoric. With opportunities to invoke authority as chief executive and evoke leadership as the government representative in charge of bestowing national honor on sports champions, presidents have been encouraged to initiate sports encomia to an ever increasing degree. These spectacles offer presidents the immediate benefit of a photo opportunity where they may be perceived as a

“winner by association” and perhaps a more lasting chance to articulate a civil religion in ways that depict the status quo as part of the natural order, thus helping maintain the presidency and the larger political system.

**Chapter Five**

**Celebrating America and Inspiring the People:  
The Civil Religion of Presidential Sports Encomia**

Thus far, I have explained how particular scholarship in the fields of sports sociology, civil religion, and presidential rhetoric support my contention as to the political and cultural significance of presidential sports encomia. Yet, the lack of specific attention by previous researchers to this type of presidential address limits the value of this support. By dealing directly with presidential sports encomia, connecting the arguments made by scholars of sports, civil religion, and presidential rhetoric to the words of U.S. presidents in White House ceremonies honoring sports champions, I am able to give greater depth to not only my claims regarding sports encomia, but the claims of other scholars as they relate to presidential sports rhetoric. In this chapter, I closely examine the texts of presidential sports encomia of U.S. presidents from Carter to the current Bush in order to identify the following: communicative tropes and ceremonial aspects these epideictic events may share in common and how these components function in the service of presidential rhetoric; how presidential sports encomia provide chief executives with opportunities to employ the sacred ideals of sports narratives in relationship to national unity, helping to form an American civil religion; and, the ways in which particular administrations have taken advantage of these opportunities.

The chapter is divided into seven sections. In the first two, I detail the ways in which the ceremony facilitates presidential articulations of an American civil religion. Initially, I present evidence delineating how presidential leadership is enabled, thus portraying the speaker as the voice of the nation. Then, the aspects of the occasion that make sports encomia sacred are outlined. Each of these contributes to the rhetorical power of the event, giving presidents a foundation for their arguments. The third section

describes the features of national identity accented by presidents, including the emphasis on teamwork and serving the greater good, as well as particular attention to how sports narratives synthesize the individual versus community interests.

Next, the claim that presidential sports encomia alleviate the racial and cultural deficiencies of more traditional notions of civil religion is given textual support. Specific references to racial matters in presidential sports rhetoric are detailed, along with further explanation as to the multicultural accessibility of sports symbolism. At this point, special attention is paid to the sports encomia of President Reagan and how that rhetoric formed the basis of the conservative response to President Lyndon Johnson's "footrace" metaphor, which had been used to frame discussions of discrimination and justify federal civil rights policies for nearly two decades.

The final section follows up on Stephan Walk's suggestion for scholarship comparing presidential rhetoric for religious versus sports audiences. Given the focus of this study, a comparison of presidential sports encomia and National Prayer Breakfast speeches not only heeds Walk's call, it also develops further the idea that sports encomia encompass religious, as well as athletic, themes. I conclude by summarizing the implications of my examination of presidential sports for communication scholarship and presidential studies.

#### Establishing presidential leadership in sports encomia

Evidence for the president carrying the mantle of the country's leader, properly positioned to speak on matters of national identity, lies not only in the scholarly claims of

those who study presidential rhetoric,<sup>356</sup> but also in presidential sports encomia itself. The two primary characters in the rhetorical event – presidents and sport champions – each act in ways that enable presidential leadership. By invoking their authority, chief executives signal the political significance of the event and call to mind the president’s preeminence in such affairs. Sports champions respond to the moment by presenting presidents with gifts that both include chief executives as part of the team and explicitly acknowledge the president’s authority as voice of the nation. Symbolic efforts of inclusion – such as the replica jersey given to the president – implicitly qualify the president as able to speak on behalf of athletic achievement while the presentation of the gift is often accompanied by rhetoric that depicts the president as speaking on behalf of the nation. This duality – with the president portrayed as both part of the championship team and lead representative of the fans that cheer them on – gives the president unique perspective from which to reflect on the political and cultural significance of athletic achievement.

As the first example of presidential sports encomia honoring professional athletes, Jimmy Carter’s remarks to the 1978 NBA champion Washington Bullets include prototypical examples of a president invoking authority. The most obvious instance is when Carter says, “Well, it’s a great honor for me as President of a wonderful country to share the honor and glory....”<sup>357</sup> Although brief, this comment has two interesting implications. First, the self-apparent – that Carter is President of the United States – is not

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<sup>356</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>357</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Washington Bullets Basketball Team – Remarks at a White House reception, June 9, 1978,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Jimmy Carter, 1977-1981, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1981, p. 1069.



left implicit, but instead made explicit. From the standpoint of communicating to increase understanding, his self-identification as president is unnecessary; it is not as if the audience would fail to recognize Carter as holding the office unless he mentions it. But from the standpoint of communicating to persuade, i.e., *rhetoric*, his comment delineates authority. Carter is the *leader* of this “wonderful country,” and thus his comments on the championship are not personal opinions, but expressions of national regard. Presidential sports encomium is a forum for *national* expression of the societal significance of athletic accomplishment.

Second, Carter implies that his role in the ceremony is not simply that of honoring, but also of being honored himself. He *shares* in “the honor and glory” achieved by the Bullets. Rhetorically, Carter has crafted a place in the spotlight for himself. Any fan can celebrate the victory of a sports champion, but the president is in a unique position to commemorate the championship in a context larger than the field of sports. This unique position privileges presidential judgments of the championship, increasing the weight of their words and reinforcing their importance in the ceremony.

Carter’s address to the Pittsburgh Pirates and Steelers nineteen months later includes similar remarks. He states, “It’s my honor, as President of the United States, to add my voice to the salute,”<sup>358</sup> reminding the audience of his stature, as well as noting, “It was my honor and my pleasure to be present in the Pittsburgh [Pirates] locker room last fall on the final night of the World Series.”<sup>359</sup> Once again, Carter reminds the audience of

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<sup>358</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Remarks at a White House reception for the championship baseball and football teams, February 22, 1980,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Jimmy Carter, 1980, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1981, p. 371.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*

his office. And while he may only be adding his “voice to the salute,” he also adds the details of having been in the locker room, something that the ordinary fan is unable to do. Ultimately, Carter’s words not only speak honor for the champions; his rhetoric constitutes a role for the president as the leading fan and uniquely positioned to speak about the championship. And his pride in their achievements reminds him of his pride in the country: “As President, I am very proud of this achievement, and I’m very proud to lead a nation like this.”<sup>360</sup> These references are not outlandish or even conspicuous. But they do serve to constantly remind the audience that the person speaking is the President of the United States. In this way, it allows the individual to connect with the office, thus instilling the individual’s comments with *institutional* substance. Thus, the words spoken are not the thoughts of an individual who is (temporarily) President, but rather reflections of the *presidency*. All of these quotations serve as a constant reminder of the president’s position as national leader.

Presidents since Carter most frequently refer to the setting as a means of invoking authority. Performed at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, the locale for presidential sports encomium is a reminder of the role of president as the voice of the people. In President Reagan’s first sports encomium, he says, “Nancy and I are especially pleased to welcome you to the White House, our national home, this afternoon.”<sup>361</sup> The White House may be the “national home,” but only the president can extend an invitation to come in, and Reagan’s comments are a subtle reminder of this home-field advantage. Honoring the

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid, p. 370.

<sup>361</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a White House reception for members of the Davis Cup Tennis team and the US Ski team, July 19, 1982,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan 1982, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1983, p. 944.

Michigan Wolverines, President George H.W. Bush echoed Reagan's line when he stated, "let me welcome you here to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. For nearly 200 years, this has been America's house. And in 1989, you have become America's sports heroes."<sup>362</sup> In identifying America's house, Bush invokes his authority as the nation's leader; in identifying America's sports heroes, Bush employs this authority as a means of determining who *is to be considered* a national hero.

This example shows how the invocation of authority by presidents facilitates the construction of presidential sports encomium as a rhetorical event with political importance. The men who have commemorated sports champions in White House ceremonies are doing so not merely as fans, but as elected officials. Identifying their office and the setting in which the ceremony takes place differentiates these events from other celebrations, e.g., parades taking place in the hometowns of the victors. Presidential sports encomia are infused with national political significance by *who* chooses to celebrate the accomplishment and *where* that ceremony takes place. Presidential sports encomia are made *political* when presidents note their position and made *national* when presidents note the locale. Such introductory remarks create an atmosphere of political significance, allowing presidents to speak on matters that transcend the achievements of particular athletes.

Invocations of authority in sports encomia also serve institutional ends. First, by explicitly identifying their office, presidents suggest the commemoration of sports

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<sup>362</sup> George H.W. Bush, "Remarks congratulating the University of Michigan Wolverines on winning the NCAA basketball championship, April 12, 1989," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush, 1989, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1990, p. 398.

champions springs from the requirements of the presidency rather than the preferences of the individual. For example, when Clinton honored the University of Arkansas NCAA track champions to the White House, he said, “As all of you know, as an ardent sports fan I have happily followed the practice of previous Presidents in welcoming to the White House various national championship teams in college and professional athletics.”<sup>363</sup> Perhaps anticipating the criticism that he invited the team only because they were from his home state, Clinton begins the ceremony by framing his actions as continuing presidential precedent. As neither the first nor last chief executive to host champions in the White House, Clinton is speaking as the President, not just as a proud Arkansan. He is fulfilling his presidential duties, which now include playing the role of America’s sports authority, by extolling the virtues of athletic achievement. When Clinton made this remark in April of 1993, there had been 46 previous ceremonies commemorating sports champions at the White House. Eleven years later, presidential sports encomia have mushroomed, with 115 ceremonies honoring more than 150 sports teams or individual sport champions now having occurred since June 1978. As a regularly scheduled event no longer requiring executive justification, presidential sports encomia are now part of the institution of the presidency.

The “winner by association” atmosphere created by presidential sports encomia is a second institutional end in play. By interacting with champions, presidents bolster the leadership aspects of the office and, perhaps, the success of their own administrations. Dean Ware and Richard Linkugel define bolstering as “any rhetorical strategy which

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<sup>363</sup> William J. Clinton, “Remarks to the champion University of Arkansas track team, April 26, 1993,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1993, Book I*, Washington, DC:.

reinforces the existence of a fact, sentiment, object, or relationship... a speaker attempts to identify...with something viewed favorably by the audience."<sup>364</sup> The event of speaking to champions can be understood as an act of bolstering; presidents have the opportunity to stand with and relate to champions. To use Erickson's term, individual presidents benefit from such "prudent presidential performances."<sup>365</sup> As someone with the authority to stand in evaluation of champions, their own stature is raised. *Institutionally*, sports encomia bolster the office of the presidency as the public comes to associate the political function of honoring athletic champions and relating their accomplishments to national ideals as an executive power.

In his address to the Pittsburgh Pirates and Steelers, President Carter identifies the potential advice to be offered by sports champions: "this is a special year for politicians. And when I began to think who, in the entire Nation, can give me the best advice on how to meet a tough challenge successfully and win great victories, I naturally remembered the Pirates and Steelers."<sup>366</sup> Interestingly, these remarks deviate from the script, where his speechwriter, Chris Matthews, had written, "I have every intention of imitating your winning ways this November. I'm thrilled to be in the same room with so many winners – hope it's contagious."<sup>367</sup> In the end, maybe Carter's individual humility (weakness?) lead him to dilute the forceful words in the speech draft, words that make explicit the objective of bolstering. Whatever caused him to alter the phrasing, the result was a less

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<sup>364</sup> Ware and Linkugel, "Apologia," 1973, p. 429.

<sup>365</sup> Keith V. Erickson, "Presidential rhetoric's visual turn: Performance fragments and the politics of illusionism." *Communication Monographs*, volume 67, number 2, June 2000, pp. 138-9.

<sup>366</sup> Carter, *Public Papers*, February 22, 1980, p. 369.

<sup>367</sup> Memo, Chris Matthews to Jimmy Carter, 2/20/80, "Suggested talking points: Reception for Pittsburgh Pirates/Steelers," Pittsburgh 2/22/80 folder, Box RE 12, WHCF – Subject File, Jimmy Carter Library.

confident statement, foreshadowing his unsuccessful bid for re-election. In these ceremonies, the president is “rubbing elbows” with sports champions, allowing the audience to visually associate the president with winners.

President George W. Bush recognized this benefit explicitly, stating, “It’s my honor to welcome some of our nation’s finest athletes and finest people. I really enjoy the chance to rub elbows with the champs.”<sup>368</sup> Presidents who rub elbows with champions may have some of that championship quality rub off on them. In control throughout – as host at the White House and primary speaker during the ceremony – every president should feel as confident as President George W. Bush sounds when he says, “I love championship day at the White House. I love to be around success.”<sup>369</sup> Surrounded by champions, presidents speak of upbeat themes and present themselves and their office in a positive light. Whether their attempts are ultimately successful, the inference to be drawn is that *everyone* on stage – the President and the players – is a champion. The ceremony thus has two beneficiaries – the athletes honored as champions and the President framed as a champion.

The shared stage is only one aspect of the sports encomia that depicts presidents in a favorable manner. A key part of the ceremony validating the notion of the president as successful leader of a successful nation is the presenting of gifts to the president by the

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<sup>368</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President at Welcome for NCAA Fall Champions February 24, 2003,”

<sup>369</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President at Welcome for NCAA Winter Champions May 21, 2002,”

sports champion.<sup>370</sup> It has become a tradition at the conclusion of the president's remarks for the team or individual being honored to bring gifts for the president, usually including a replica jersey with the president's name on the back along with the number 1.

Additional gifts may also include a ball (of the sport played) signed by all the members of the team.

While the ball can be thought of as typical of the gifts that the invited one might bring to the host's house, the jersey symbolizes something more important for this analysis – the inclusion of the president as part of the championship team. The following dialogue between President Reagan, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, team captain and Finals MVP of the NBA champion Los Angeles Lakers, and Coach Pat Riley exemplifies the significance of the jersey as a gift:

**Abdul-Jabbar:** I was telling the President that I'm not a Republican, but I am one of his constituents and because of that, I figured we should suit him up the right way.

**Reagan:** Thank you very much.

**Abdul-Jabbar:** Just so we know who's number one here.

**Reagan:** Thank you very much. I'm very proud to have this.

**Riley:** Mr. President, on behalf of the players and the entire organization, we would like to express our appreciation and gratitude for this honor, for being able to come to the White House, because we know that there's only one other place other than Los Angeles that there's a winner, and that's here.<sup>371</sup>

Abdul-Jabbar and Riley acknowledge Reagan as a winner, and the jersey further depicts the president as not only part of the championship team, but #1 amongst champions.

Abdul-Jabbar's comments put a bipartisan exclamation point on the scene; recognition of

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<sup>370</sup> This began with Carter's first sports encomia, when the Washington Bullets presented him with a signed basketball, and has continued ever since.

<sup>371</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks to the Los Angeles Lakers, NBA champions, June 10, 1985," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1985, Book I*, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1986, p. 742.

the president as the preeminent figure on stage transcends party differences. Even among those who don't support him with their vote, Reagan's authority as the nation's leader is reinforced.

Similarly, when visiting the White House with his NCAA football champion Miami Hurricanes, Coach Jimmy Johnson said, "From the number one national champions, we give this jersey to our number one, President Reagan."<sup>372</sup> Like the comments from the Lakers, Johnson defers to the president as "number one." In both cases, the champions acknowledge their place *behind* the president. By identifying himself as part of a national championship team in the same sentence, Johnson's reference to Reagan as "our number one" reinforces the president's status at the top of the national hierarchy. When Johnson says "our," he is referring to the entire country and not just the Miami team, a claim supported by Leslie Alexander, owner of the 1994 NBA champion Houston Rockets, who said to President Clinton, "Thank you, Mr. President, for having us here today. I'd like to present you with a championship ring with your name on it, and it says, 'To the number one fan in America, from the Houston Rockets.'"<sup>373</sup> Whether it is a championship ring or a team jersey, the message is the same: the ceremony may be honoring the team, but everyone honors the president. These gifts symbolically place presidents at the center of the celebration, including them as part of the championship team while simultaneously recognizing their prominence amongst

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<sup>372</sup> Jimmy Johnson, "Remarks to the NCAA football champion University of Miami Hurricanes, January 29, 1988," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1988, Book I*, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1989, p. 151.

<sup>373</sup> Leslie Alexander, "Remarks to the 1994 NBA champion Houston Rockets, February 18, 1995," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1995, Book I*, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1996, p. 224.



champions and acknowledging their status as leader of the nation. In this way, the gifts place presidents *above* the honored athletes, able to comprehend their place in the larger narrative of America and relate that significance to the public.

These two elements of presidential sports encomia – invocation of authority by the chief executive and deferential gifts by the team – frequently bookend the ceremonies, with the president beginning the event with a welcome that reminds the audience of his place at the top of the national and political order and concluding with the champions offering gifts that reinforce the president’s standing. Rhetorically, these features support the president’s credibility to speak authoritatively on the political and cultural significance of athletic achievement. Presidents identify themselves as political figures, thus marking their speech as political rhetoric. Athletes and coaches complement these assertions of political leadership by presidents with the presentations of gifts that validate chief executives as qualified to assume leadership in matters of sports championships.

In both the words of presidents and the reactions by the teams being honored, the institution of the presidency is depicted as both rightly concerned with the accomplishments of athletes and appropriately qualified to speak on the significance of these championships. In the context of presidents as “symbolic guardians of national unity in the United States,”<sup>374</sup> the rhetorical positions of presidents and their honored guests can be understood as empowering presidents to “guard” national unity. The

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<sup>374</sup> Beasley, 2004, p. 22.

ritualistic character of the gifts also contributes to the ceremony's sacred nature, a formality that emphasizes the preeminence of the president in sports encomia.

#### The Sacred nature of sports encomia

Presidents begin creating a sacred atmosphere in sports encomia by reminding the audience of the special location in which the ceremony takes place. When President George W. Bush described the White House as “one of the great shrines of America,”<sup>375</sup> he identified the location as a “holy place.”<sup>376</sup> While other presidents have not been as explicit, they have depicted the setting as having characteristics deserving reverence from the American people. Such reverence for the White House is due in part to its unique status as both the domicile of the nation's leader and a place of governance.

Like the Capitol building and other federal offices in DC, the White House is where the governing of the nation occurs. But it also serves as a shelter for the President, literally, and more symbolically as “America's house.” The White House is recognized as unique in both *who* and *what* it represents. It is “the greatest house in our country, the people's house,”<sup>377</sup> and “majestic in its beauty.”<sup>378</sup> President George W. Bush's words depict 1600 Pennsylvania as more than just the president's home and workplace. It represents the public, and the entire nation can take pride in its splendor. Although it may

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<sup>375</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President in Photo Opportunity with University of Nebraska 2001 NCAA Women's Volleyball Champions, May 31, 2001,” [/2001/05/20010531.html](#).

<sup>376</sup> “Holy place” is the first definition of “shrine” in the Microsoft Word dictionary.

<sup>377</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President to the 2001 NCAA Women's Hockey Champions, University of Minnesota-Duluth, June 25, 2001”

<sup>378</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President in Welcoming the World Series Champion Arizona Diamondbacks, December 13, 2001,”

seem contradictory to describe “the people’s house” as “majestic” (a term denoting royalty), Bush’s description is better understood as splendid, as when he says, “This is a majestic place, as you can see. It is a magnificent home, and it's the people's house.”<sup>379</sup>

The majesty of the White House is due to its democratic connection with the people. As a metaphorical link between the governed and the government, the White House has a spiritual quality. It is “one of the greatest shrines in America”; it is a holy place.

It is important to recognize possible distinctions between a “sacred” location in terms of civil religion and their counterparts in more traditional forms of religion. Locales obtain are deemed “sacred” in particular religions because they are connected in some way to the deity or deities at the center of that belief system. For example, Jerusalem is a holy location for Christians, Jews, and Muslims because of its historical role in the histories of figures that each religion considers sacred. In civil religion, the historical role of revered figures also plays a role in the contemporary classification of locations deemed to have a sacred status in the political order. Its status as the greatest house of the people and an American shrine has been attained by the actions within more than any physical beauty on display. Unlike President George W. Bush and those before him who only briefly refer to the special nature of the setting, President Clinton explained in detail the sacred history of the White House when he hosted the Atlanta baseball team in 1996:

This room is a good reminder of why teams and why this country should never say die. And I think I should tell you this. It was in this room in

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<sup>379</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President During Photo Opportunity with University of Oklahoma Football and Softball Teams, March 5, 2001,”

1814, 182 years ago, that symbolically the light of liberty in America almost went out. This room was all set up for a fancy banquet, and...the British had actually landed a few miles from here. And our President, James Madison...was out of the White House and...sent his wife word that the British were coming and that she should get out of here before she was killed. But she had to save that picture of George Washington... She cut that picture out of the frame, rolled it up, and just before the British rolled in here she cleared out, along with all the party-goers...[the British troops] burned the house down. And a lot of people thought the next day that America's days were numbered. It didn't turn out that way.... I hope you'll – when times get rough, you'll remember that story.<sup>380</sup>

This story from the War of 1812 explains why the White House is sacred in American history and why the setting itself symbolizes the revered values exemplified in both the efforts of Dolly Madison and champions honored in sports encomia. Its very existence is a result of the never-say-die attitudes the public cherishes in its sports team. Celebrating their accomplishments in the East Room or the Rose Garden is a ritual that reminds the audience of the long history of these national ideals – the White House is hallowed ground.

By using words and descriptions that denote otherworldly qualities, sport itself is expressed spiritually in presidential encomia. One common claim in all presidential sports encomia are that what is to be celebrated is more than merely a game. The lengthy history of sports in America has been cited as proof of its significance, as when President Clinton explains, “If something goes on for that long without interruption, seeing our Nation through wars and dramatic social changes, it becomes more than a game, more than simply a way to pass time. It becomes part of who we are.”<sup>381</sup> Sport has not only

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<sup>380</sup> William Clinton, “Remarks welcoming the World Series champion Atlanta Braves, February 26, 1996,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1996, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1997, p. 341.

<sup>381</sup> William Clinton, “Remarks and an exchange with reporters on the Major League Baseball strike,

endured as an activity, it played a key role in “seeing our Nation” through domestic and international crises. The result is a deeper relationship between the American people and the games we play.

President Reagan claims this role of sports is essential, arguing, “Sports have played an indispensable role in the development of American character. ... The men and women of sports have done much to bring this country together.”<sup>382</sup> Reagan’s claims invest sports with abilities to both alter the development of human character and unify the nation as a whole. Clinton describes sports as becoming “part of who we are,” adding sports to the list of what it means to be American. Reagan’s phrasing suggests that the American people are actually transformed by sports, the very essence of the public character indelibly changed. Both make it clear that sports have a power that exceeds any definition of “leisure activity.” Their comments imply a spiritual role for sports in the nation, extending beyond celebration of athletes to a larger celebration of human potential and its importance in the development of America.

This “spiritual” power of sports crops up frequently in presidential sports encomia. In his address to the Pittsburgh Pirates and Steelers, President Carter makes the case for sports as a crucial element in the nourishment of the nation’s spirit:

In these trying times it’s almost imperative that our Nation be united, that our Nation be strong and courageous, that our Nation be consistent in its purposes, that our Nation be inspired, that our Nation be willing to meet hardship without flinching, and that our Nation be united as a great family. And that’s what has been exhibited in the United States of America during

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February 7, 1995,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1995, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1996, p. 169.

<sup>382</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a White House reception opening the ‘Champions of American Sport’ Exhibition, June 22, 1981,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1981, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1982, p. 547.

the last few weeks. ...What they have done has united a community, has unified a region of our Nation, and has aroused the admiration of every American who's interested in sports, interested in courage, interested in achievement, interested in cooperation and teamwork, interested in the spirit of patriotism and the value of a close family relationship.<sup>383</sup>

Sports champions, according to Carter, have the power to inspire, arouse, and unite. And this capacity of sports is not confined to secular excitement; athletic achievement promotes the "spirit of patriotism." Like the previous quotations from Clinton and Reagan, Carter's phrasing indicates a presidential belief in the ability of sports to transcend the playing field and substantially influence the character and unity of the American public in spiritual ways.

President Clinton explains this influence as one of athletes embodying the spirit of America: "The young Olympians who are here did more than carry our flag. In a fundamental way, they carried with them the spirit of America....The lessons of setting your sights high, working hard, being persistent, believing in yourselves, playing by the rules, supporting your team, those are lessons that every child in America needs to learn, lessons that every child can see in your eyes and in the power of your example."<sup>384</sup>

Clinton's description of the virtues of athletes and the examples set by their efforts has a Sunday sermon quality, with athletes in the role of Biblical characters and the president as the preacher. Based on their language, presidents view sports as worthy of political

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<sup>383</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Remarks at a White House reception for the championship baseball and football teams, February 22, 1980," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Jimmy Carter, 1980, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1981, p. 370-1.

<sup>384</sup> William Clinton, "Remarks at a reception for the United States Winter Olympic and Paralympics teams, April 29, 1998," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1998, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1999, p. 639.

rhetoric because athletes and the games they play have a spiritual essence crucial to the nation's well being.

President George H.W. Bush explicitly defends his fascination with sports on these grounds: "I get accused in my job of having perhaps too keen an interest in sports. Well, too bad. I think it does a lot for the real spirit of this country. And certainly this team has made a contribution to the real spirit of this country."<sup>385</sup> Although personalized, his defense applies to presidential sports encomia more generally, providing an explanation of why presidents choose to honor sports champions at the White House – they believe sports have spiritual significance for the nation. They honor sports champions for characteristics that exemplify American values; it is not athletes that are "worshipped" in these ceremonies, but the manifestation of national ideals.

In addition to being invested with a spiritual power, sports have been characterized as a central element of American myth in presidential sports encomia. President Reagan noted, "More than any other people, Americans are sports-minded ...this is what has contributed to what we call the American personality...the legends of sports become part of American folklore."<sup>386</sup> Sports have a special place in American culture, contributing to national identity and public communication. Sports are in our hearts and minds. Reagan emphasizes the supernatural force of sports: "All we expect is for you to do your best, to push yourself for one more fraction of second or one notch

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<sup>385</sup> George H.W. Bush, "Remarks honoring the Women's World Cup soccer champions, January 23, 1992," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1992-93, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1993, p. 140.

<sup>386</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a United States Olympic Committee dinner honoring August A. Busch III in St. Louis, Missouri, July 22, 1982," *Public Papers of the Presidents, Ronald Reagan, 1982, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1983, p. 968.

higher or one inch further. Each time you do that, you've created a magic moment of beauty and excellence in which all of us will share. The American ideal is not just winning; it's going as far as you can go."<sup>387</sup> With magic created by the champion and shared with the nation, the relationship between the American athlete and the American public is perceived as a sacred union. In ways similar to the function of communion in some Christian sects,<sup>388</sup> sports encomium is a ritual with symbolic significance. Magical moments are passed down from generation to generation in the folklore of sports narrative. Presidential sports encomium legitimizes these legends as part of the American spirit.

The recognition of athletic achievement as a key element of the American spirit is a sacred ritual consisting of two steps. First, there is the accomplishment on the field of play, where Reagan claims, "Watching you, we renew our faith in ourselves and our country."<sup>389</sup> Dispelling the notion that his use of the term "magic" intended something other than sacred, Reagan's reference to "faith" more clearly invokes traditional notions of religion. Presidential sports encomium completes the national ritual, for as Reagan explains, "...in celebrating your championship, we see how America can be a nation of champions as well."<sup>390</sup> By celebrating these championships at the hallowed "shrine" of

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<sup>387</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks to United States athletes at the Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles, California, July 28, 1984," *Public Papers of the Presidents, Ronald Reagan, 1984, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1985, p. 1106.

<sup>388</sup> I say "some," because it does not seem to be similar to the understanding of "consubstantiation" in communion as practiced by Catholics and Lutherans, but rather like the more symbolic role of communion as it practiced by Methodists.

<sup>389</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a White House reception for members of the Davis Cup tennis team and the United States Ski team, July 19, 1982," *Public Papers of the Presidents, Ronald Reagan, 1982, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1983, p. 944.

<sup>390</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on meeting the Boston Celtics, the National Basketball Association world champions, June 13, 1984," *Public Papers of the Presidents, Ronald Reagan, 1984, Book I*, Washington,



the White House, presidents mark the ceremony as a culturally significant political event; and by using terms such as “spirit,” “magic,” and “faith,” they reinforce the idea of the events as sacred.

My claim as to the sacred nature of presidential sports encomia does not rest exclusively on the singular terms of “faith” and “spirit.” On multiple occasions, presidents have provided more detailed explanations of sports that express athletic achievement and the celebration of those champions in ways that are consistent with religion. Clifford Geertz’ definition of religion as a cultural system of symbols conceptualizing a “general order of existence”<sup>391</sup> is contextualized within the field of sports by scholars such as Allen Guttman<sup>392</sup> and John Izod as emphasizing the quest for immortality exemplified in the conquest of physical limits in athletic contests. This conception of sports and religion can be found in President Reagan’s sports encomia, as when he states,

the elusive pursuit of perfection is one of the things that makes man human....It’s always inspiring when we see young men and women try to resist gravity, to fight fatigue, to, in the words of the first astronauts, push out the edge of the envelope – push out of the things that hold us down and push on to new possibilities, new records. ...Our young people are running for their country, running for greatness, for achievement, for that moving thing in man that makes him push on to the impossible.<sup>393</sup>

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DC: US Government Printing Office, 1985, p. 848.

<sup>391</sup> Chapter 2 contains the exact definition from Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973, p. 90.

<sup>392</sup> Allen Guttman, *From ritual to record: The nature of modern sports*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978; John Izod, “Television sport and the sacrificial hero,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, May 1996, 173-193. See Chapter 2 for a comprehensive account of the arguments of Guttman and Izod.

<sup>393</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Radio address to the nation on the Summer Olympic Games, July 28, 1984,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1984, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1985, p. 1105.

By celebrating men and women athletes' "pursuit of perfection," presidential sports encomia constitutes the "general order of existence" revolving around humanity's quest for immortality. Sports are explained as a microcosm of life, with success in athletic competition described as exemplary of humanity's quest for perfection, and this pursuit of excellence revered as a characteristic inherent to the fulfillment of the species' potential, i.e., the meaning of life. In Reagan's words, sports are "inspiring" because they encompass this "push on to the impossible."

His claim that such efforts are a key ingredient in what makes us human is supported further when he says, "It's the personal striving, the ability to achieve the fullest measure of human potential that counts most. ...The thrill of striving for excellence in sports, as in other areas of our lives, fires our imagination, stirs us to dream great dreams, and often enables us to achieve them."<sup>394</sup> Note that while the fulfillment of human potential occurs at the individual level of the competitor, the larger community also benefits as athletic achievement spurs the imagination and helps turn dreams into reality. Presidential sports encomium is like a religious revival in this sense, with the celebration of champions serving to energize the entire nation to a higher calling as the efforts of athletes are used to explain life's meaning. In a ceremony honoring NCAA champions, President George W. Bush made this argument explicit:

So this is championship – we're honored to have the teams with us...Championship Day. I think the lesson I love about team sports and about champions is that champions work hard. They live a good, clean life in order to succeed. But they all serve something greater than [themselves]

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<sup>394</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a White House ceremony on the 1984 Olympic Torch relay, May 14, 1984" *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1984, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1985, p. 698.

in life. And that's an important example for our country. It's important for people to recognize that serving something greater than yourself in life is - makes you a whole person, helps you understand the significance of life.<sup>395</sup>

Bush makes the argument for sports as transcendent. The “something greater than themselves” that athletes serve is, as Reagan noted, the quest to fulfill their human potential; in Bush’s words, sports “makes you a whole person.” And by reflecting on sports and celebrating those who are champions, presidential sports encomia help us “understand the significance of life.” Because the achievement being celebrated is explained in transcendent ways, the ceremony takes on spiritual qualities, with the country’s political leader honoring sports champions for their enactment of sacred American values.

#### National unity as a theme

The sacred atmosphere surrounding sports encomia allows presidents to speak about important social matters in a serious tone. By choosing to extend their comments beyond those of exclusive praise for athletic achievement, presidents engage in transcendent rhetoric. Transcendental strategies, according to Dean Ware and Richard Linkugel, “psychologically move the audience away from the particulars...at hand in a direction toward some more abstract, general view.”<sup>396</sup> Unlike transcendence in apologia, where speakers seek to mask wrongdoing, the use of transcendence in presidential sports rhetoric serves to locate the event in a greater context – usually one of American values. Transcendent rhetoric buttresses the institutional role of the presidency as the voice of the

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<sup>395</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President with NCAA Spring Season Champions, November 17, 2003,”

<sup>396</sup> Ware and Linkugel, 1973, p. 431.

nation and symbolic guardian of national unity. Although, as the examples that follow show, every president from Carter through the latest Bush has used transcendental strategies, only President George H.W. Bush has explicitly recognized the deviation from strictly sports rhetoric, noting, “You guys thought I’d just talk about basketball, but it is tough to limit yourself to sports when an entire team sets this kind of selfless example for the rest of our society.”<sup>397</sup> His comment applies to all presidential sports encomia, because it is the example set by the champions that presidents build from when relying on transcendence. The characteristics necessary to “win it all” are identified by presidents as *transcending* athletic accomplishment and the president’s strategy of analogizing victories in games to success as a nation *transcends* celebratory rhetoric. It is in this transcendent rhetoric where presidential sports encomia evoke characteristics of national identity – sports champions embody what it means to be “American.”

While honoring sports champions at White House ceremonies is evidence that such accomplishments are considered exceptional, presidents have also made an effort to frame these athletic achievements as typical of the American story. For example, President George H.W. Bush congratulated the 1992 World Cup champion U.S. women’s soccer team for continuing an American tradition: “Let me just say that it’s great to join you in honoring a group of women who reflect a favorite American pastime; it’s known as winning.”<sup>398</sup> This remark is a reminder that losers are not invited to the White House. It

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<sup>397</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks congratulating the 1991 National Basketball Association champion Chicago Bulls,” October 1, 1991, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush, 1991, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1992, p. 1243.

<sup>398</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks honoring the Women’s World Cup soccer champions, January 23, 1992,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush, 1992-93, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1993, p. 140.

also identifies athletic achievement as an “American” trait; winning is a standard of American life. Additionally, Bush uses sports encomia to praise the sporting contest itself as exemplifying American virtues: “And so today I salute the only two Division I college football teams to finish undefeated and untied in the same year since 1976. Teams which showed, as quarterback Joe Kapp once said, ‘The greatest game in America is called opportunity. Football is a great expression of it.’ ...congratulations not just for winning but for the example you set for the rest of the country, to our country, the greatest, freest land on the face of the Earth.”<sup>399</sup> In extolling the freedom and opportunity available in the United States, this passage honors the country as much as it celebrates the individual athletes. Rather than limiting his praise to the athletes, these two examples show President Bush paying homage to America itself: a land of opportunity and freedom, where success is expected.

The ability of sports narratives to bridge the gap between individual effort and teamwork was discussed in detail in Chapter 2. The need to resolve the tension between individualism and communitarian values is critical to the social order, especially in the United States, where conceptions of individual rights and free markets require constant negotiation by political leaders seeking to encourage unity and sacrifice for the greater good. Sports encomia are laden with opportunities to extol the virtues of cooperation. Teamwork is a quality of championship teams that comes up frequently in presidential sports encomia. It is easy to claim that champions must work together as a team to be

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<sup>399</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks congratulating the undefeated NCAA Division I football teams, March 20, 1992,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush, 1992-93, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1993, p. 476.

successful, and, more importantly for transcendent strategies, it is easy for presidents to explain how teamwork by athletes is a behavior to be modeled by the larger public. In his first sports encomium, President Carter explained at length the importance of teamwork:

...one of the things that made this remarkable success possible is the fact that it was not built upon a single person. There are obviously stars, and there are obviously those who show that they are the most valuable player in a particular game or even in the great series. But what made this tremendous victory possible for the Bullets is the fact that it was a team effort. And I think that's the basis of a sound, unconquerable spirit that bound them altogether. The team was not fragmented or driven apart by jealousy, nor by an excessive desire for personal recognition. But all the way through there was a realization that only through a common effort and a team effort could this remarkable victory be successful. ...I want to express my admiration on the part of the whole United States for the remarkable achievement that the Bullets represent. And I know that everyone in our country, no matter what basketball team they may have supported at the beginning of the season, share my admiration...thank you for being such wonderful men such wonderful leaders, such wonderful sportsmen, such a wonderful representation of what our country is.<sup>400</sup>

There are three aspects of this explanation deserving of analysis. First, Carter's speech is consistent with my theory of presidential sports encomia as constructing civil religion. In identifying teamwork as "the basis of a sound, unconquerable spirit," Carter's words reinforce the sacred nature of sports. This becomes a claim of civil religion when Carter argues that the champions' cooperative spirit is "a wonderful representation of what our country is."

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<sup>400</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Remarks at a White House reception for Washington Bullets basketball team," June 9, 1978, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Jimmy Carter, 1978, Book I*, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1979, p. 1069-1070.

Second, this is rhetoric that affirms American ideals, where Carter “glorifies the national culture and strokes his political flock.”<sup>401</sup> Teamwork is not what we as Americans *ought* to strive for; cooperative is what we already *are*.

Finally, Carter directly addresses the conflict between individualism and communitarianism. While he acknowledges stellar individual performances, he emphasizes the prioritization of “common effort” over “an excessive desire for personal recognition.” Overall, this passage encompasses all of the key components of sports encomia in furtherance of an American civil religion: spiritual references, sports achievement explained as national values, and mediation of the individual/community tension.

President Reagan chose not to stress the virtue of teamwork in his sports encomia, a fact that is explored below in greater detail. His successor, however, continued the emphasis on teamwork begun by Carter. President George H.W. Bush went so far as to categorize teamwork as a life-saving quality:

You beat the injuries. You beat the odds....So, your hard work, your drive, your determination made this a season to remember. But while you're here, let me just commend you for another special achievement off the ice – for a team spirit that just doesn't win games, but saves lives. I mentioned [goalie] Tom Barrasso a moment ago. Two years ago, Tom and his wife Megan got the news that every parent dreads – they learned their daughter was stricken with cancer. And this brave little girl is only 4, and already she's pulled through surgery and chemo and a bone marrow transplant....Now, the Barrassos have overcome their pain to reach out to other children battling illness. They've begun a foundation to combat childhood cancer. Every member of the Penguins team – the family, if you will – has joined the effort....And so I would say to you, you are, in addition to being fantastic skaters – tough hockey players – you are what

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<sup>401</sup> Richard Pierard and Robert Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books, 1988, p. 24-25.

we like to refer to as Points of Light, each of you in your own way, and we're very grateful for the example that sets for our country.<sup>402</sup>

Singling out a particular athlete for their off-the-field contributions was a common tactic of Bush's sports encomia, helping promote his "Thousand Points of Light" policy. But Bush is sure to include all of the players in his praise, noting that the team spirit has been brought from the rink into the community. The example this "sets for our country" is one of teamwork amongst citizens, helping each other in ways that improve the health of the entire community. Compared to Carter's encomia, Bush is light on the warrants for why teamwork is important, choosing to focus on the community service of players instead. Speaking of society as a team and highlighting the personal lives of sports champions as productive members of that team is in keeping with his theme of a "kinder, gentler nation."

Perhaps reflecting the importance of partisan differences, President Clinton's sports encomia are more akin to those of Carter, with the values of teamwork given more in-depth coverage. Clinton's favorite sport – basketball – was frequently cited as promoting teamwork, as when he says, "I want to say again that the thing I like about basketball and the thing I think our country needs more of is that you can't just win with great players; you have to have great teamwork. People have to understand each other's strengths and weaknesses and learn to work together in a consistent way."<sup>403</sup> Unlike his predecessor, Clinton spends time explaining why teamwork is necessary for

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<sup>402</sup> George H.W. Bush, "Remarks congratulating the National Hockey League champion Pittsburgh Penguins," June 24, 1991, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush, 1991, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1992, p. 717.

<sup>403</sup> William J. Clinton, "Remarks to the NCAA Men's and Women's basketball champions and an exchange with reporters, April 27, 1993," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1993, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1994, p. 523.



championship results and how these examples are valuable for the nation. Not only does he note the subordination of individual excellence to the cohesiveness of the group, he also adds the relational aspect of understanding “each other’s strengths and weaknesses.”

Even when the opportunity arises to focus on individual excellence, Clinton emphasizes teamwork. The 1996 Chicago Bulls, led by Michael Jordan, won more regular season games than any team in NBA history. Clinton could have lauded the Bulls team or their star guard as one of kind. Instead, he states,

The individual Bulls stars are well known to America, all of them, but I’d like to point out that this is a team that plays great defense as well as great offense and a team with a great sense of teamwork, a team that plays together and works together and tries to win together. It seems to me that that’s something that we’d all do well to remember....So let me say again, the Chicago Bulls have given America a lot of thrills. They’ve given Chicago a lot of pride....But more than anything else, they’ve given us the sense that when people do things together, a lot more is possible.<sup>404</sup>

Notice how Clinton makes this achievement possible for everyone in America. By stressing the teamwork of the Bulls, he portrays their effort not as something that can never be matched, but rather a capacity for cooperation within all of us. He reinforces this point in his last statement: any group can choose to “do things together” and makes improvement “possible.” Lastly, Clinton describes sports championships as an educational opportunity for the audience. The Bulls “have given” the public lessons on the importance of teamwork, lessons “we’d all do well to remember.” The lesson of Clinton’s sports encomium is the public should read sporting events as parables for how to succeed as a people.

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<sup>404</sup> William J. Clinton, “Remarks to the 1996 National Basketball champion Chicago Bulls, April 3, 1997,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1997, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1998, p. 380.

In his presentation of the Commander-in-Chief trophy to the Air Force Academy, a prize bestowed each year upon the service academy with the best overall record in football, Clinton argues that the ultimate object of all human endeavors is successful cooperation with others:

That is what we need more of in college athletics and, indeed, in all of our endeavors. It's so important that young people be taught not only to take responsibility for becoming the best they can in every endeavor, but also doing that in working with a team. That's what makes our military work. That's what makes our country work. And I think sometimes we forget that that is the ultimate object of all our human endeavors. Winning is wonderful, but everybody who does his or her best and who tries to do it with a genuine spirit of cooperation with others is a winner.<sup>405</sup>

Working as team is what got the Air Force Academy to the White House. More generally, it is what makes the military, and the entire country, successful. By classifying teamwork as “the ultimate object of all our human endeavors,” Clinton gives cooperation a preeminent position. The individual who loses while attempting to succeed “with a genuine spirit of cooperation with others [should still be considered] a winner.” This emphasis on teamwork supports Clinton’s governance, which depends on the willingness of citizens to accept personal sacrifices for the greater good. By using sports narrative to frame his argument, Clinton avoids the pitfalls of relying on more politically contested subjects.

If someone analyzing presidential sports encomia were to stop with the Clinton Administration, it would be easy to conclude that Democrats focus on team while Republicans focus on individuals. Carter and Clinton provide detailed arguments praising

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<sup>405</sup> William J. Clinton, “Presentation of the Commander-in-Chief trophy to the Air Force Academy, May 10, 1996,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1996, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1997, pp. 724-725.

cooperation among successful athletes, Reagan seemed to ignore this facet of championships altogether, and George H.W. Bush appeared most interested in remarking on the community service of individual athletes – perhaps in keeping with the conservative ideal of privately initiated, rather than publicly funded, social services. However, the presidential sports encomia of George W. Bush shatter this party-based distinction. More similar to Clinton than his father, President George W. Bush has devoted most of his rhetorical efforts to exalting the teamwork of sports champions as model behavior for the nation. In his commemoration of the 2003 NHL champion New Jersey Devils, Bush spoke broadly about the key ingredient for a championship:

The concept of a team is just really important. I have a chance to welcome champs to the White House on a regular basis, and it seems to be a common ingredient, where people are willing to put something above individual achievement, called the team, where you kind of work together for something bigger than self-glory. It's the common ingredient of all the champs that come here, and it's been the common ingredient of this team, led by a very capable captain and great players.<sup>406</sup>

Like Clinton, Bush conceives of team effort being prioritized over individual accomplishment. Working together is prized as “something bigger than self-glory.” He uses the example set by the “very capable captain and great players” of the Devils to expound on the virtues of working together for the greater good. Although this passage lacks the eloquence of Clinton’s remarks to the Air Force football team, the message is similar: subordinating individual goals to community needs.

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<sup>406</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President to the 2003 Stanley Cup Champion New Jersey Devils, September 9, 2003,”

Bush was presented with the perfect example of a team in the 2001 NFL champion New England Patriots. The traditions of the Super Bowl include pre-game introductions of the teams, with each player's name being called as they run onto the field. However, the AFC champion Patriots declined this opportunity, choosing to enter all at once instead. This symbolic gesture was the focal point of Bush's address:

I was impressed by a lot, but let me tell you what impressed me most was when the team took the field prior to the Super Bowl. It wasn't one of these things where the spotlight was on any individual, everybody went out at the same time. I thought that was a pretty good signal to America that teamwork is important; that the individual matters to the team, but the team is bigger than the individual. That's one of the things I try to explain to people in Washington, that we're here to serve something greater than our self. And I appreciated so very much that signal to the country.<sup>407</sup>

First, he claims that the pre-game entry was the most impressive part of their performance, showing that “the team is bigger than the individual.” Bush then emphasizes the “signal to America” by their entry. The role of presidential sports encomia is implicit in this passage. Bush's own attempts to “explain to people in Washington” the value of self-sacrifice for the larger society are assisted by the mass communicated symbolism of the Patriots and their signal that “we're here to serve something greater” than individual accomplishments. By honoring them at the White House, Bush is able to accentuate his own message with the public images of the Patriots. Sports narratives provide lived experiences of teamwork for presidents seeking to promote cooperation.

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<sup>407</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President in Photo Opportunity with Super Bowl Champion New England Patriots, April 2, 2002,”

In sports encomia, presidents often do more than merely praise the virtues of teamwork. Because sports narratives contain elements of both individual excellence and cooperative effort, there is the rhetorical possibility of articulating a relationship between these two characteristics, what Robert Bellah describes as “one of today’s major moral dilemmas: the conflict between our fierce individualism and our urgent need for community and commitment to one another.”<sup>408</sup> President George H.W. Bush’s sports encomia contain a rough example of this strategy in his comments to the 1989 Super Bowl champion San Francisco 49’ers:

...most people have forgotten the adversity that you overcame just to get [to the Super Bowl]. But you never gave up, you pulled together as a team, you came back step by step, game by game, and you eliminated mistakes, never stopped striving for excellence. And there is a lesson in that for – I think for all of us, but maybe particularly for the student body presidents and athletes that are here in the audience with us today. And that’s why I wanted you to share in this ceremony. To the young people here and across the country. ...if I could offer one piece of advice, it would be this: Strive for excellence in all things and don’t accept mediocrity. Being satisfied with mediocrity might be the easy way, but striving for excellence is the only way up. ...The main ingredient in each person’s success is individual initiative. It always has been, and it always will be. So I would say, if you’re willing to work hard and make sacrifices, you can accomplish just about anything you set your mind to. And that’s what the American dream is all about. ...to all the 49ers – my congratulations to you! And thanks for setting a superb example for our country.<sup>409</sup>

Initially, this passage is significant in that Bush briefly acknowledges a persuasive function of sports encomia – “there is a lesson...for all of us...that’s why [he] wanted [the country] to share in this ceremony.” As for his take on the Bellah’s moral dilemma, Bush is disjointed. He begins by praising the 49’ers as a team, and his references to

<sup>408</sup> Bellah, et al., 1986, p. 357.

<sup>409</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks congratulating the Super Bowl champion San Francisco 49’ers, February 3, 1989,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush, 1989, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1990, p. 54.

overcoming obstacles by pulling together does imply that it took cooperation to do so. However, he tacks on to this celebration an admonition about refusing mediocrity that privileges “individual initiative” as “the main ingredient” in success. He does conclude by noting that the team made “sacrifices,” behavior for which they are to be congratulated “for setting a superb example for our country.” Unlike his son, who explicitly praises teamwork over individual achievement, the elder Bush’s address is muddled, vacillating between celebration for those who “pulled together as a team” and those who strive for excellence as individuals. This confusion is perhaps the most accurate representation of the tension between individualism and cooperation in American society. In that sense, Bush’s inability to cohesively address the problem is understandable.

In contrast, President Clinton’s sports encomia are much more lucid regarding this dilemma. Most often, Clinton’s speeches use the game played by the champions being honored to highlight the way sports, in general, illuminate the proper balance between the desires of the individual and the needs of the community. His commemoration of the 1996 NCAA men’s and women’s basketball champions is a perfect example:

And I hope America will remember...the teamwork that you exhibited all year long...I think that America likes March Madness and likes college basketball as much as anything else because it is both an individual and a team sport. And it has both rules and creativity, discipline and energy. And in that sense, it is sort of a symbol of what’s best about our country when things are going well. And I hope we can all remember that. We all need to live with rules and creativity, with discipline and energy, and we all need to remember that, however good any of us are, we’re all on a team. And when we’re on the team, the team’s doing well, the rest of us, we do pretty well individually.<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> William J. Clinton, “Remarks to the NCAA Men’s and Women’s basketball champions, May 20, 1996,”

Clinton does a wonderful job of boiling down the essences of team and individual: discipline versus creativity. Teamwork requires that rules be followed; individual excellence requires energy on the part of each member. He acknowledges each as crucial to success and weaves them together as a potent combination. Clinton identifies basketball as both an individual and team sport, but goes on to portray the workings of the nation itself in identical terms: “We all need to live with rules and creativity.” His conclusion calls to mind the belief that “a rising tide lifts all boats,” and should provide liberals with all the evidence they need that sports narratives can be used to support their cause.

Clinton is explicit in arguing that society’s attention to sports is a good thing, stating in his remarks to the 1994 NBA champion Houston Rockets, “...all Americans enjoy athletics, and I think it’s a very healthy thing...it requires a team mentality, even with a lot of stars, to win. You can’t win without great players, but you can’t win without good teamwork either. And that’s what our country needs more of.”<sup>411</sup> Enjoyment of sports is a “very healthy thing” because they offer such important lessons, one of which is the realization that individual effort and cooperation with others are each indispensable components of success. No matter how “good any of us are, we’re all on a team,” and the success of that team will ultimately dictate the quality of our individual fortunes.

Teamwork has become a dominant theme in presidential sports encomia.

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*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1996, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1997, p. 784.

<sup>411</sup> William J. Clinton, “Remarks to the 1994 National Basketball Association champion Houston Rockets, February 18, 1995” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1995, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1996, p. 224.

Although teamwork is regularly emphasized in presidential sports encomia, it is not the only characteristic identified as “American.” In describing the players and at times even the game itself, presidents articulate qualities associated, both directly and indirectly, with the character of the American public. President George H.W. Bush identifies athletic accomplishments as archetypes of the American spirit: “You showed how America can outscore, outfight, and out compete any nation we’re up against. That kind of spirit made you champions. The American spirit is proud, not arrogant, confident, determined, and victorious.”<sup>412</sup> From watching the U.S. women’s soccer team, we are reminded that Americans are “proud,” though “not arrogant,” “confident, determined, and victorious.” While the qualities of determination and confidence relate to the *process* of competition, the quality of being “victorious” refers to an *outcome*. Americans are, by definition, champions.

In his comments to the 1992 U.S. Winter Olympic medalists, Bush links this success to “the work ethic, the desire to give of yourself and of your heart, the love of victory and, above all, competition... Americans...showed what we mean by competition, decency, self-reliance, self-discipline, proving that the Olympics, like America, are truly number one.”<sup>413</sup> In the words of President George H.W. Bush, American identity is defined by “decency, self-reliance, [and] self-discipline,” and it is these qualities that make America “truly number one.” President Clinton extols similar

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<sup>412</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks honoring the Women’s World Cup soccer champions, January 23, 1992,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush, 1992-93, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1993, p. 140.

<sup>413</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks congratulating United States Olympic athletes, April 8, 1992,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush, 1992-93, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1993, p. 560.



virtues, praising the New York Rangers for showing “us what is best about professional sports: perseverance, hard work...It’s an example for which all of us...are very grateful.”<sup>414</sup> Determination, self-discipline, perseverance, and hard-work are all qualities mentioned in presidential sports encomia, and each trait implies effort is necessary and success is not guaranteed. And yet, presidents speak of sports champions as if these features are intrinsic to the national identity, with victory as the American destiny. Each championship won reinforces the birthright of every citizen. In celebrating the achievements of *teams*, presidential sports encomia promote the idea that success is not only accomplished by working together, but is also achievable for everyone.

#### Filling the multicultural gap of civil religion

The emphasis on teamwork abundant in sports rhetoric is one aspect of sports encomia that makes it a viable solution to one of the key problems facing civil religion – overcoming the baggage of exclusion or more conservative visions of a civic faith. The communal values of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism could now be articulated in the more universal language of sports narrative. The pessimism of civil religion scholars such as Robert Bellah, Phillip Hammond, and John Wilson was grounded in their belief that the Eurocentric foundations of American civil religion made it inhospitable to a public that was becoming ever more diverse.<sup>415</sup> Sports narratives not only provide rhetors with the resources to articulate communal values and national identity expressed in sacred terms; sports are more accessible to a heterogeneous public. Larry Platt’s description of sports as

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<sup>414</sup> William Clinton, “Remarks to the 1994 NHL champion New York Rangers, March 17, 1995,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1995, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1996, p. 370.

<sup>415</sup> This argument is explained in detail in Chapter 3.

a “breeding ground for progressivism, a laboratory for egalitarianism”<sup>416</sup> and Douglas Hartmann’s claim of sports as “an unparalleled institutional site of accomplishment for African Americans”<sup>417</sup> reveals only one aspect of sports’ rhetorical utility.

Sports narratives are not only valuable to rhetors attempting to construct an inclusive American civil religion because large numbers of people of color participate in athletics as competitors and spectators. Just as importantly, sports images are powerful as “floating racial signifiers,” whose symbolic values are abstracted from social reality to the extent that they can be deployed by the rhetor in strategic ways.<sup>418</sup> In Hartmann’s words, sports rhetoric would be extremely attractive to presidents using sports symbolism as a means of envisioning an inclusive American civil religion because, “The notion that sport is a positive, progressive force for African Americans...doesn’t need to be restated or defended. It is cultural common sense, an article of faith held by American black and white, liberal and conservative, even those who don’t care about sport in any other way.”<sup>419</sup> Thus, this contribution to presidential sports encomia does not require that presidents overtly address race or racism in their speeches – the message in support of American values in support of diversity is already conveyed.

This does not mean that presidential sports encomia never include such explicit references to racial issues. On several occasions, President Clinton, at least, used the moment as an opportunity to discuss racism in American society. And one instance shows how Clinton used the moment of sports encomium itself to promote racial

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<sup>416</sup> Larry Platt, *New Jack Jocks*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002, p. 1-3.

<sup>417</sup> Hartmann, 2000, pp. 240.

<sup>418</sup> David Andrews, “The fact(s) of Michael Jordan’s Blackness: Excavating a floating racial signifier,” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1996, vol. 13, pp. 125-158.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

equality. In 1993, he invited the football and track teams from the historically black college and university (HBCU) Central State to the White House. This is the only example of an HBCU being the subject of presidential sports encomia, a fact that, by itself, can be read as evidence of Clinton's attempt to put racial equality in the foreground.<sup>420</sup>

By choosing to honor sports champions from a "black college," Clinton is implying that African-American athletes are role models for all Americans, a point he makes clear when he says, "[Coach Billy Joe's] winning formula: the three D's he preaches to his players, drive, desire, and determination. These are good words to live by not only on the playing field but here in Washington as well....As student athletes at an historically African-American institution, you can be proud of your many achievements. Your drive and your desire and your determination are an example for all Americans."<sup>421</sup> This ceremony can be viewed as promoting unity in a multicultural society in at least two ways. First, the decision to honor multiple champions from a Historically Black College/University places emphasis on the achievement of racial minorities in the United States – a fact that Clinton mentions explicitly. Second, he extends the message beyond black athletes by citing their efforts as "an example for all Americans." By highlighting

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<sup>420</sup> HBCU's compete mostly at levels lower than Division I of the NCAA, either Division I-AA or Division II. Central State competes athletically as an NAIA school. This is the only instance of an NAIA school being honored in sports encomia. Given that no other "small schools" have been invited to the White House, it can be inferred that Clinton wanted to honor Central State as a "black college" more than he wanted to set a precedent for hosting sports champions from the non-Division I leagues. However, Clinton's motives will not be known until his Presidential Library opens and archived materials are available (if then).

<sup>421</sup> William Clinton, "Remarks to Central State University NAIA champion athletic teams, June 3, 1993," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1993, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1994, p. 807.

the achievements of minorities as a useful model for the nation, Clinton's words can be read as breaking down racial barriers.

President Clinton's views on sports' contribution to racial harmony have not been limited to encomia of African-American universities. In an ESPN-sponsored "town hall meeting" on racial issues in sports, President Clinton made his opinions on the value of sports in a multi-racial society clear: "...I think it's obvious that athletics in a way is leading America toward a more harmonious, united society...the lessons learned from athletics carry over into good citizenship, including attitudes about people of different races."<sup>422</sup> Clinton makes a causal claim as to the relationship between sports and racial progress in America. Although not an example of presidential sports encomia, it does provide insight into Clinton's support for sports as a means of addressing racial inequality, as well further evidence of presidential rhetoric specifically endorsing the notion of sports as an important source for educating citizens as to how they can play a positive role in the maintenance of society.

As for sports encomia that address racial issues, Clinton's most common tactic is to emphasize the heterogeneity of individual states. In a ceremony honoring the 1996 Summer Olympic medalists, California is referenced. Clinton argued, "...it was fitting that the centennial Olympics were held in the United States because we do represent so many nations. When I leave you, I'm going out to California. There were 197 teams in the Olympics. In one county in California, there are people from the same places as over

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<sup>422</sup> William Clinton, "Remarks at the ESPN Townhall Meeting on Race in Houston, April 14, 1998," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1998, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1999, p. 565.

150 of those teams. That's what special about our country. And you gave that to the world when we saw you, when we saw you compete, when we saw you win."<sup>423</sup> This passage includes both a privileging of the status of the United States as representing Olympian-sized diversity as well as identifying that diversity as the characteristic that makes the country "special." The rhetorical resources of sports encomia are evident in this ceremony, where Clinton is able to reference the diversity of U.S. Olympic athletes as "proof" of American equality.

When honoring the Major League Baseball team from Miami, Clinton's comments encompass both race and immigration: "You know, a lot of the players on this team are newcomers to our country, and so are many of the fans of the Florida Marlins. I suppose it's only right that the capital of the Americas would take its turn as the baseball capital of the world. But even more importantly, we should be proud of the example this team set, proving once again that people of very different ethnic backgrounds can play together and win together."<sup>424</sup> Although he identifies the non-Americans among the Marlin players, Clinton uses them to emphasize the cooperative spirit in the United States. The play of the team is cited as proof of America's racial harmony and the public is told we should be proud of this championship because of the example it sets.

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<sup>423</sup> William Clinton, "Remarks honoring the 1996 United States Olympic Team, August 7, 1996," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1996, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1997, p. 1266.

<sup>424</sup> William Clinton, "Remarks to the 1997 World Series champion Florida Marlins, February 17, 1998," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1998, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1999, pp. 235-236.

On the evening of June 10, 1999, President Clinton addressed the nation, speaking of the military conflict in Kosovo.<sup>425</sup> Less than three hours earlier, Clinton commemorated the 1998 World Series victory of the New York Yankees, choosing to accentuate the diversity of New York – the team, city, and state: “...if you look at the composition of the Yankee team behind us, and you look at the composition of the city and State they represent, the United States should be proud that at this moment in our history we were able to stand against the proposition that any people should be killed or uprooted or abused because of their race, their ethnic heritage, or religious faith.”<sup>426</sup> Clinton is referencing Kosovo, citing the celebration of the Yankees’ championship as an important component in the American stance against genocide. By honoring this athletic achievement in presidential sports encomia, the nation reaffirms its values of tolerance and recognition of racial diversity and multiculturalism. In each of these three examples – whether it is California, Florida, or New York, Clinton is able to mine sports narratives for rhetorical resources that help him make the case for acceptance and cooperation between people of different backgrounds. Success in sports is communicated as a model for society.

A comparison between the Reagan and Clinton’s sports encomia offers an interesting contrast in how each chose to address matters of race. President Reagan used

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<sup>425</sup> William Clinton, “Address to the Nation on the Military Technical Agreement on Kosovo, June 10, 1999,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1999, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2000, pp. 913-914.

<sup>426</sup> William Clinton, “Remarks to the 1998 World Series champion New York Yankees, June 10, 1999,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1999, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2000, p. 912.

his speech on the opening of a “Champions of American Sport” exhibit to speak about the dissolution of racial barriers:

We owe something else, seriously, to the world of sports. ...thanks to Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson, baseball became truly the American sport. And I’m sure many people have forgotten any feelings of prejudice they might have had as they’ve cheered black athletes who were bringing home victory for their favorite team. Those players have made baseball better, they’ve made America better, and so have the great black athletes in all the other major sports.<sup>427</sup>

In some ways, Reagan’s rhetoric is similar to the previously cited passages from Clinton’s sports encomia. He singles out African-American athletes for their accomplishments on the field; achievements in sport are claimed to transcend the playing field; and, these efforts are explained to have value for all Americans, regardless of their race. According to Reagan, the nation owes a debt to these athletes for the lessons that they have taught us.

This appears consistent with Clinton’s position. However, a comparison of Reagan’s remarks about Jackie Robinson to Clinton’s own words about the famed second-baseman who was the first black player in Major League Baseball illuminates a distinction between the two. In commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Robinson’s joining the Brooklyn Dodgers, Clinton says,

I can’t help but think that if Jackie Robinson were here with us tonight, he would say that we have done a lot of good in the last 50 years, but we can do better. We have achieved equality on the playing field, but we need to establish equality in the boardrooms of baseball and throughout corporate America. And we need to make sure that, even as we celebrate his brilliant successor Tiger Woods’ victory in the Masters, we need even more of our

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<sup>427</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a White House reception opening the ‘Champions of American Sport’ Exhibition, June 22, 1981,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1981, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1982, p. 547.

young people from all walks of life to get their master's degrees and help to make more of their lives in this country. And he would remind us – look around this stadium tonight – that as we sit side by side at baseball games, we must make sure that we walk out of these stadiums together. We must stand for something more significant even than a grand slam home run. We ought to have a grand slam society, a good society where all of us have a chance to work together for a better tomorrow for our children. Let that be the true legacy of Jackie Robinson's wonderful, remarkable career and life.<sup>428</sup>

Like Reagan, Clinton claims that the integration of professional sports has had a significance that extends beyond the ballpark. But whereas Reagan's phrasing suggests that the problems of racial discrimination are a relic of the past, Clinton argues that there is still substantial progress to be made. Reagan says racial cooperation in sports have "made America better." Clinton says "we can do better." Reagan speaks of racial prejudice being "forgotten"; Clinton speaks of inequalities that still exist "throughout corporate America" and in higher education.

It is ironic that Clinton's remarks take place at a ceremony honoring an event that occurred a half-century ago because they are decidedly forward-looking: he begins by imagining what Jackie Robinson would say if he were alive today and proceeds to push for further progress in matters of racial equality and harmonization. Where President Reagan's words imply an achievement, President Clinton's rhetoric makes it clear there is still much work to be done. These two passages reveal the flexibility of sports narratives, accessible to both sides in the political debate over how best to address claims of racial inequality. Whereas Clinton is able to capitalize on the racialized nature of

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<sup>428</sup> William Clinton, "Remarks in Queens celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jackie Robinson's integration of Major League Baseball, April 15, 1997," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1997, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1998, p. 444.



sports in America to promote a vision of equality that encourages progressive change on the part of both government and individual actors, Reagan uses the same sports text to fashion a defense of the status quo.

Reagan's sports encomia as a response to LBJ's footrace metaphor

The claim that Reagan's sports rhetoric supports conservative political ideals is neither surprising nor new. In his work on the use of sports metaphors in presidential rhetoric, Stephan Walk argues President Reagan used sports rhetoric to counter the footrace metaphor employed by President Lyndon Johnson to justify federal civil rights laws.<sup>429</sup> Although Walk cites the Reagan administration as "the most prolific user of sports language by presidents in modern history,"<sup>430</sup> he references very little sports rhetoric used by Reagan to specifically counter the footrace metaphor (instead referring to Reagan's fundraising speech<sup>431</sup> at Howard University 17 years after Johnson's in which Reagan employs a "train in the station" metaphor to describe the burdens of big government<sup>432</sup>). President Reagan did use sports rhetoric to justify his policies,<sup>433</sup> but they more often took the form of relating the achievements of sports heroes to the American spirit, rather than the workings of government. A more thorough examination of Reagan's sports rhetoric, including his sports encomia, provides evidentiary support for Walk's claims.

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<sup>429</sup> Stephan Walk, "The footrace metaphor in American presidential rhetoric," *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1995, vol. 12, pp. 36-55.

<sup>430</sup> Stephan Walk, "The sport metaphor in American presidential rhetoric: Meaning in context," MA thesis for the Michigan State University Department of Health Education, Counseling Psychology, and Human Performance. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1990, p. 67.

<sup>431</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at fundraising dinner for Howard University, May 20, 1982," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1982, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1983, pp. 659-660.

<sup>432</sup> Walk, 1995, pp. 48-49.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-51.

When one considers Ronald Reagan's life experiences, Walk's claim concerning Reagan's penchant for sports rhetoric makes sense. Reagan worked as a radio broadcaster for Iowa football games and Mid-West regional baseball as an early career, played baseball as a teen, and portrayed both the Major League Baseball player Grover Cleveland Alexander and the Notre Dame Football player George Gipp during his film career.<sup>434</sup> Sports narratives were familiar terrain for Reagan. One particular story, told by President Reagan at a United States Olympic Committee dinner, epitomizes his use of sports rhetoric in support of his political views on societal responses to racism:

But I remember – and have remembered 50 years now – my senior year, and we were playing a team. And there was a center – and I played beside the center, being a guard on our team – and this [noseguard] took off on our center in the most vicious manner, fouling, every dirty thing he could get away with – but also with his language. And the things he was saying. And what he was saying made it plain that his whole motive was nothing more than the difference in the color of his skin and that of our center, Burkie. ... The rest of us wanted to do something about this opponent of his, but over and over again in the huddle, Burkie said, "This is my fight." And he just played football. Nothing dirty and no fouling. He just played football until he had played the man opposite him off his feet. ... and this fellow started off the field... and he turned around. He came back, and he elbowed his way through the two teams standing on the field waiting for play to begin again, stepped up to Burkie and... he stuck out his hand and crying, said, "I just want you to know, you're the greatest guy I've ever met," and turned and left the field. I think the young man learned something very important that Saturday afternoon. Now, maybe he might have learned it some other way in life. But then maybe he might not. He might have gone through life soured and embittered, unreasoning, by unreasoning prejudice and hatred. But I think all of us learned something in that game that day.<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>434</sup> *LIFE: Ronald Reagan, 1911-2004*, New York: LIFE Books, Inc., 2004.

<sup>435</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a United States Olympic Committee dinner honoring August A. Busch in St. Louis, Missouri, July 22, 1982," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1982, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1983, p. 969.

The African-American in this story – “Burkie” – is a single individual facing adversity. He faces racism not from his teammates, but from the opponent. He refuses help, relying on his own efforts to literally wear down his foe. The outcome is a change of heart that may not have happened if Burkie had handled it any other way. Reagan concludes by noting that everyone there that day learned a lesson, and, by telling the story, Reagan has a lesson for his audience: racism is not the result of systemic factors, but merely the ignorance of a few “others”; the best response from the aggrieved is individual resolve, not request for group protection; and, the optimal result is a change in attitudes rather than a change in the rules. One can only assume that Stephan Walk missed this speech in his research, for it makes his argument better than any of the selections he does choose – it is a sports address that uses sports narrative as a constitutive metaphor to explain his own position on effectively dealing with the ills of discrimination.

It is often difficult for communication scholars to assign intent when analyzing rhetoric. How do we really know what a speaker was trying to say? Determining the purpose of a particular passage in a speech can result in the researcher working backwards from the conclusion, attaching meaning because it affirms the point the scholar is trying to make. David Zarefsky provides a solution to the communication scholar’s dilemma in proving how one knows the intent of presidential rhetoric: “Perhaps the appropriate test is that of the historically sensitive researcher who gathers evidence, conducts thought experiments, and advances arguments. Evidence of presidential definition can be found in the texts of public statements, the audio and video records of presidential performance, comments by the president or his aides about his purposes, and

the informed speculation of commentators.”<sup>436</sup> I follow his suggestion by analyzing internal administration communications, looking in the archives for evidence of intent – dialogue among speechwriters, presidential staff, and the chief executive are akin to strategy sessions where goals are more clearly defined than in the speech itself, where subtlety often increases persuasion.

In the case of the Reagan administration, there is such evidence. A document of “talking points” produced prior to the 1985 Super Bowl sheds some light on how sports rhetoric was to be discussed by President Reagan.<sup>437</sup> Here is a portion of that document, in its original format:

- Sports reflect American society
- The U.S. system fosters the kind of individual initiative in people that encourages each of us to identify our particular skills and reach for our highest potential.
- Diversity
- There is a sport for everyone who wants to play, a seat for everyone who wants to cheer.

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<sup>436</sup> David Zarefsky, “Presidential rhetoric and the power of definition,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, volume 34, number 3, September 2004, p. 618.

<sup>437</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson explain their decision of analyzing only the “public” communication of presidents and excluding “private” interactions that occur behind the closed doors of the White House: “Because our focus is on the presidency as an institution, we are interested in public, not private discourse. As a result, we ignore private negotiations, presidential correspondence, and communication with White House staff and the members of the cabinet” (1990, pp. 4-6). In contrast, a basic premise of this study of presidential sports encomia is that relevant “private discourse” between presidents and their administrative staff can provide a great deal of assistance to rhetoricians interested in presidential rhetoric. First, it may offer insights into presidential motives. Conversations between presidents and the staff in charge of scheduling events may provide evidence of why some teams received invitations to the White House while others did not. Dialogue between presidents and speechwriters can substantiate claims as to the goals chief executives hope to achieve in their orations. Perhaps more than any other aspect, the motive of the rhetor can illuminate the speech act in ways that explain the relationship of sports encomia to the presidency. Second, if the “focus is on the presidency as an institution,” then an “understanding [of] the workings of the executive branch” *is* relevant. By examining the intra-office discourse concerning the scheduling, planning, and preparation of sports encomia, scholars can observe institutional factors *in action*. Theories concerning the presidency as an institution should not only be able to withstand the realities of “the workings of the executive branch,” they should be fortified. Specifically, President-staff communications should shed light on the basic assumption of institutional analysis that the office has a homogenizing effect on the behavior and rhetoric of individual presidents.

#### Objectivity/Fair play

- Over the past few decades, America has changed rapidly, which sometimes causes a bit of confusion along the way. In sports, specific rules are declared; there are set periods of play, winners and losers, and the clock.<sup>438</sup>

Aware of these “talking points,” one need not speculate what Reagan means when he references individual initiative – the point is to highlight the ways that the “U.S. system fosters” such opportunities so that we might “reach for our highest potential.” Note how the insertion of the preposition “for” substantially alters the implication. The system “works” as long as individuals can reach *for* their potential, whether they *actually* reach that potential – it is the traditional conservative view of opportunity emphasized over outcome.

The title of this section – “Sports reflect American society” – shows recognition on the part of the administration as to sports’ potential as a constitutive metaphor. The section on “Diversity” has a similar emphasis on opportunity and individual initiative over outcome and systemic factors. It is up to the individual to *want to play* or to *want to cheer*, because, in America, there is space for all. There is no mention of how the scene looks with regards to diversity, a tactic deployed by those who would justify affirmative action as a legitimate means of making a scene “look more like America.” The section on “Fair Play” supports this interpretation. The confusing changes in the United States (growing cultural and racial diversity would be perceived by Reagan supporters as confusing) are countered by the stability of sports, with its “objective” rules that ensure

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<sup>438</sup> Memo, Draft talking points for the President’s Super Bowl interview, January 15, 1985, RE010, WHCF Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

the right individuals are declared “winners and losers.” When in doubt about how to deal with instability in society, we should look to the steadiness of sports, and sports teaches us that individuals succeed based on their own efforts and not changes in the rules.

In order to completely displace Johnson’s footrace metaphor as the dominant framework for developing federal responses to civil rights in America, Reagan would need to posit an alternative to government protection. Walk’s reference to individual character is only one piece of the puzzle. Just as important is the prominence of “private initiatives” as a solution developed in conservative rhetoric. President Reagan took advantage of the opportunity afforded by the U.S. Olympic example to make this argument:

Unlike some other countries, American teams, as well you know and has been told here today, do not receive government grants or Federal tax dollars. ...we were in danger of drifting into a feeling in this country that, well, it was always government’s turn to do it, let government do it. And we were beginning to lose, perhaps, that wonderful do-it-yourself thing that has always characterized the American people. ...One of the top priorities of our administration has been to encourage the American people as individuals, as organizations in private and in business life to get more directly involved in getting things done, solving problems, and helping each other. Private initiative is our most precious American resource....<sup>439</sup>

U.S. success in the Olympic Games is supported by private donations, not government tax dollars. This preference for relying on non-governmental solutions is what “has always characterized the American people,” and is a “top priority” of the Reagan Administration. By making this point in the context of the Olympics, Reagan is able to portray this belief as inherent to the American identity, “private initiative is our most

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<sup>439</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a luncheon meeting of the United States Olympic Committee in Los Angeles, March 3, 1983,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1983, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1984, pp. 323-324.

precious American resource.” Looking to the government for help is what *they* do; taking an active role as an individual is what *we* do. Private initiative is “American.” Relying on government to solve societal ills is therefore, *un-American*. In this case, the sports context provides an emphasis that may not have been available otherwise. By addressing this subject while discussing the Olympics, he frames the issues in patriotic terms.

Reagan’s sports rhetoric includes evidence of his conservative response to federal civil rights policies, but is his sports encomia consistent with this strategy? The answer is yes. As mentioned earlier, Reagan’s sports encomia are unique in their omission of references to teamwork. Unlike Carter, George H.W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush, who are all more effusive in their praise of athletes working together for the team or (in the case of George H.W. Bush) the community, Reagan emphasized individual accomplishments. Comparing the list of those sports champions who were honored during his terms to the lists of champions celebrated by other presidents provides further evidence of this point. There have been more than 110 sports encomia ceremonies since 1978, and, to date, Ronald Reagan is the only president to have honored:

- Distance runners (1982 New York marathon winners)<sup>440</sup>
- Individual award winners in football (1984 Heisman Trophy winner Doug Flutie)<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>440</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks on greeting New York Marathon winners, October 27, 1982,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1982, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1983, pp. 1389-1390.

<sup>441</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks congratulating Doug Flutie, 1984 Heisman Trophy winner, December 6, 1984,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1984, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1985, p. 1869.

- Tennis players and skiers, participants in “individual” sports not affiliated with the Olympics (1982 Davis Cup tennis team and U.S. Ski team)<sup>442</sup>

To understand the full impact of these selections, it helps to recall the words of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, who note, “Presidential rhetoric is one source of institutional power, enhanced in the modern presidency by the ability of presidents to speak...on whatever topic they choose....”<sup>443</sup> Thus, the decision as to *who* to invite to the White House is part of the institutional power of presidential rhetoric. Reagan’s choice of what kind of sports champion to honor – emphasizing those who play “individual sports” much more than other presidents – is just as rhetorically important as what he says in their honor.

As for the content of President Reagan’s sports encomia, there is also an emphasis on the individual over the team and private efforts over governmental support. His remarks to the 1984 Winter Olympic medalists repeat his earlier arguments in support of private initiative as opposed to public subsidies: “For those of you who won medals, we have a special word of thanks....You’ve proven that a free country like ours, where support for the Olympics is totally voluntary, can hold its own against societies which subsidize their athletes. ...you reminded us that the qualities of personal commitment – courage, character, and heart – are the mark of greatness in sport.”<sup>444</sup> By contrasting the

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<sup>442</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a White House reception for members of the Davis Cup tennis team and the United States Ski team, July 19, 1982,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1982, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1983, p. 944.

<sup>443</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds done in words: Presidential rhetoric and the genres of governance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 3.

<sup>444</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a White House reception for members of the United States Winter Olympic team, February 29, 1984,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1984, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1985, p. 275.



victories of U.S. Olympic athletes – a foundation built by volunteers – with those competitors who are propped up by their governments, Reagan argues that *only* those individuals who succeed due to their own “personal commitment” bear the mark of “greatness.” Greatness cannot be gained through government support. In celebrating the achievements of tennis players and skiers, Reagan says, “Well, on behalf of all Americans, I want to thank John [McEnroe] and each of these athletes here for the inspiration that they’ve given us, on snow as well as on the courts. If every American strives for individual excellence, we can find it together as a nation.”<sup>445</sup> For Reagan, Sports inspire us because individual excellence is on display. The people of the United States can “find [success] together as a nation,” but only through “*individual* excellence.”

According to the rhetoric of President Reagan, sports narratives constantly reinforce the American values of individual excellence and private initiative. Recall the work of Clifford Geertz, who defines a religion as

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [people] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>446</sup>

Reagan’s sports rhetoric depicts sports in religious terms. Accounts of athletic achievement are to be understood as symbolizing the value of individual effort that makes America a great nation. The natural order coheres with Reagan’s own views – beliefs that have “always characterized the American people” – because sports champions embody these values when they succeed on the field of play. Reagan’s sports

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<sup>445</sup> Ronald Reagan, 1982 Davis Cup/U.S. Ski team, 1983, p. 944.

<sup>446</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973, p. 90.

encomia are “culture affirming” rhetoric. It is this “culture affirming” quality that distinguishes Reagan’s sports encomia from the more judgmental and demanding sports encomia of later presidents. These differences are best understood in the context of classificatory schemes outlined by civil religion scholars.

#### Affirming national unity – various presidential tactics

While all presidential sports encomia can be characterized as promoting ideals of national unity, these speeches are not alike in every way. One difference is the way that presidents describe the America they govern. President Reagan’s sports rhetoric is unique in its exclusive focus on “positive” aspects of American society. The sports encomia of President Reagan can be described as “positive” in that he depicts America as having overcome the problems of discrimination. In Reagan’s world, these problems are in the past, not the present. America is not in need of improvement. In contrast, the subsequent presidencies of George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush contain sports encomia that is more critical of the public and more demanding regarding the need for further progress.

This trend began, albeit slowly, with the sports encomia of President George H.W. Bush. When hosting collegiate champions, Bush often mentioned the need for greater attention to education, as in the following passage in his speech honoring the basketball teams from Duke (men’s) and Stanford (women’s): “Already, you’ve been missionaries for educational excellence. You’ve shown how a nation that is physically fit and educationally fit is fit to take on the world. So today, I ask you to carry that zeal to our educational systems at all levels, to your careers, and to the dream we call America.

You stand here as examples of how will and heart can stir the human spirit.”<sup>447</sup> Although more reserved than the examples from his successors, Bush’s appeal implies America can do better. He is calling on these athletes from prestigious universities to proselytize on the issue of education. His anti-drug plea to the San Francisco 49ers two years earlier is more overt: “But I urge you to take some of this fame that you have earned and help the kids in this country stay off drugs and learn to read and grow up to be the kind of sportsmen that each and every one of you are.”<sup>448</sup> Here, Bush is not only acknowledging that sports champions are role models, but asking them to use their popularity in a form of community service.

Both of these examples are simple appeals for athletes to use their fame to promote community goals. The cynical political observer might point out that each of these issues – education and drugs – were part of Bush’s stated executive agenda and thus, his remarks are as much a reference to his own policies as they are an attempt at mobilizing athletes. Even if this point is conceded, such rhetoric is still a departure from the rosy assessments of President Reagan, who may have complemented athletes on their community service but who never admitted there were societal ills in need of attention from sports champions.

Sports rhetoric with a more demanding tone blossomed during Clinton’s eight years in office. In his televised comments concerning race and sports, President Clinton

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<sup>447</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks congratulating the NCAA men’s and women’s basketball champions, April 15, 1992,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush, 1992-93, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1993, p. 605.

<sup>448</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks congratulating the Super Bowl champion San Francisco 49ers, February 27, 1990,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush, 1990, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1991, p. 283.

argued forcefully that progress remains regarding racial inequality and that sports have a significant role to play in addressing those ills:

First of all, America, rightly or wrongly, is a sports-crazy country and we often see games as a metaphor or a symbol of what we are as a people. So I think by dealing with both the positive things which have happened, in terms of opportunity for people of all races and people getting together and working together, and the continuing challenges in athletics, I think just by doing that we learn more about the rest of the country and what needs to be done. Beyond that, I think it's important that people see that in athletics in America, that the rules are fair, that people get their fair chance...closing the opportunity gaps that have existed historically between the races in our country...because that clearly will have larger implications for the society as a whole.<sup>449</sup>

His initial claim answers the question about presidential use of sports metaphor in a direct way – sports rhetoric can serve as a powerful metaphor because the public is attracted to sports and is ready to comprehend sports symbolism as a constitutive metaphor. The progressive nature of this passage resonates in the way that Clinton points toward future advancement; “dealing with both the positive things which have happened... and the continuing challenges in athletics” will help us learn “what needs to be done.”

A ceremony honoring the University of Maine hockey team shows that Clinton's view of presidential sports encomia contains a similar refrain:

Sport brings out the best in individuals and in teams and in communities. ...the Black Bears...have shown us all how to play as a team, how to bring out the best in one another, and how to come from behind. I think it's important, as I ask young people from around America who have achieved outstanding things in working together to come here to the White House to be recognized and appreciated by their country, to remember that those kinds of values and those kinds of virtues need to be ingrained in all of us

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<sup>449</sup> William Clinton, “Remarks at the ESPN Townhall Meeting on Race in Houston, April 14, 1998,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1998, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1999, p. 560.

for all of our lives. We now have another role model, and I'm glad to have them here today.<sup>450</sup>

Within this instance of presidential sports encomia are statements of purpose by President Clinton. He invites sports champions to the White House “to be recognized and appreciated by their country” so that their accomplishments might help us all “remember that those kinds of values and those kinds of virtues need to be ingrained in all of us for all of our lives.” This claim supports the thesis of this dissertation – presidential sports encomia provide presidents with the rhetorical resources to articulate visions of national identity in the maintenance of the political and social order.

“Rosy” rhetoric – with optimistic assessments of the status quo – fits well with the celebratory atmosphere of presidential sports encomia. However, President Clinton’s sports encomia provide numerous examples of rhetoric that, while perhaps not pessimistic, admits of problems in American society and the need for greater efforts by the public. In complementing the Lake Superior hockey team, Clinton says, “Be proud not just because you’re champions but, more important, because of what made you champions: hard work, determination, discipline, loyalty, and teamwork. I hope each of you will take that example into your communities and on into your lives. There are too many young people in America who don’t have the kind of hope you have, no one to push them forward or no one to cheer for them.”<sup>451</sup> Where more affirming rhetoric would have portrayed the champions on stage as representative of America’s youth, President

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<sup>450</sup> William Clinton, “Remarks congratulating the NCAA men’s hockey champion University of Maine Black Bears, April 19, 1993,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1993, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1994, p. 454.

<sup>451</sup> William Clinton, “Remarks to the NCAA champion Lake Superior State University hockey team, May 6, 1994,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1994, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1995, p. 857.

Clinton's language gives this moment of celebration a more serious tone – acknowledging the obstacles facing young people in the United States and urging the athletes to “take that example [of hard work, determination, discipline, loyalty, and teamwork] into your communities.” By attempting to raise awareness of problems in communities, the example set by sports champions is invested with urgency for its importance in society.

The ceremony honoring the UNC women's basketball champions includes similar claims:

I get very concerned when I travel around the country and I see so many children growing up in difficult circumstances and they're going to schools that are no longer able to finance their team sports programs, their athletic programs, their music programs, the things that give children a chance to get out of themselves and reach beyond themselves and to grow and be part of something important. And I don't believe those things should ever be held to be in conflict with or adverse to developing our intellectual faculties that God gave us. So the University of North Carolina is truly a symbol, it seems to me, of what our country ought to be striving for in the personal development of all of its students.<sup>452</sup>

Although the specifics of the argument are different – this time a defense of extracurricular activities, the tone is the same: Clinton centers his point around a “concern” he has with problems facing youth, expresses his thanks to the athletes for providing the nation with a good example, and stresses the need for societal progress. Rather than define the moment as one of appreciation for community service performed by sports champions (as, for example, George H.W. Bush did in his address to the

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<sup>452</sup> William Clinton, “Remarks honoring the NCAA women's basketball champion University of North Carolina Tar Heels, July 27, 1994,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1994, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1995, p. 1323.

Pittsburgh Penguins<sup>453</sup>), Clinton takes the more judgmental approach of talking of “what our country ought to be striving for.”

Identifying problems that require solutions are just one aspect of didactic rhetoric in President Clinton’s sports encomia. He also often uses the occasion to not only praise the champions for the example they have set, but to implore the American people to adopt the attitudes and behaviors of these athletes. For example, in his address for the Dallas Cowboys, Clinton pronounces, “I also want to say something very serious. I watched this team over the last year win the way I think Americans win best. They hung in there. They were strong. They were dedicated. They started a lot of games slow, and they always finished fast. And that’s what we have to do in this country. We have to endure. We have to never quit, and we have to finish fast.”<sup>454</sup> Unlike the previously cited examples of presidential sports encomia depicting athletic achievement as representative of who we *are*, Clinton is telling us who we *have to be*. This is a plea for the public “to endure” and “finish fast.” This is a president calling on the public to do more, something that Clinton does explicitly in the ceremony honoring the Major League Baseball team from Atlanta:

I think the Braves have shown us the best side of professional sports: perseverance and hard work and commitment, and a commitment that has endured over seasons. There really does seem to be a spirit of teamwork that has worked for this team. At a time when so many people wonder whether the team spirit and the ties to the community still characterize professional athletics, the Braves have demonstrated that is still the truth,

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<sup>453</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks congratulating the National Hockey League champion Pittsburgh Penguins,” June 24, 1991, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush, 1991, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1992, p. 717.

<sup>454</sup> William Clinton, “Remarks congratulating the Super Bowl champion Dallas Cowboys, March 5, 1993,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1993, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1994, p. 246.

and that it has been richly rewarded by consistent performance year-in and year-out and finally by the World Series victory....we can do more in our own lives to help our country, our teams, our families, and our communities. And that's the sort of spirit you've exhibited.<sup>455</sup>

Clinton is complementary of professional sports, but identifies room for improvement when speaking of the nation at large. The qualities of “perseverance and hard work and commitment” are what the public needs more of. Clinton is not “glorifying the national culture” with accepting words; he is exhorting the public to do more “to help our country.” Athletic achievement is spoken of as a “sort of spirit,” but one that serves as a higher measure to be met rather than a description of the current national standard.

It is this last feature – the use of sports narratives to flesh out desired traits necessary for national improvement – that most accurately exemplifies the moralizing nature of Clinton's sports encomia. Time and again, his argument involves the rhetorical maneuver of highlighting aspects of sports championships as the missing ingredients in American society. When honoring a college baseball team, he says, “But it's very important in baseball to have that daily awareness, that daily readiness, that steadiness that so many Americans bring to other aspects of their lives....And I hope the qualities required for real success and excellence in baseball will become more and more appreciated by all of our people, because they're qualities that we can all use in our everyday lives, no matter what else we do.”<sup>456</sup> Clinton is sure not to criticize all

Americans for their lack of “steadiness,” for he acknowledges that “so many Americans

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<sup>455</sup> William Clinton, “Remarks welcoming the World Series champion Atlanta Braves, February 26, 1996,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1996, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1997, p. 340.

<sup>456</sup> William Clinton, “Remarks honoring the 1995 NCAA champion California State University at Fullerton baseball team, September 15, 1995,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1995, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1996, p. 1361.



bring [this] to other aspects of their lives.” But he also hopes that these qualities “will become more and more appreciated by all of our people,” indicating that not everyone is not on board. Clinton’s language is that of someone who is not satisfied and who is willing to speak out for societal change.

Clinton’s vision of productive change centers on increased cooperation, something he admires about soccer:

One of the things I really like about soccer is that even though people are given a chance to star, to excel, to score, it really is fundamentally a team sport. It’s a sport where people really have to think about what’s best for the team and how they can do well together. And that’s a lesson we’re trying to get across to America now. There are a lot of educational and social problems that we can only face if we start to think of each other again as well as ourselves and start to play on a team again. And so you’ve set a good example not only for soccer but for the way we might do better in our own lives.<sup>457</sup>

An acknowledgment of “a lot of education and social problems” is accompanied by an admission that “we might do better in our own lives.” Where sports encomia from Reagan also spoke of sports as an appropriate model for how a successful society functions, Clinton speaks of a need for Americans to *be more like their athletic heroes* and calls on the nation to rise to the level of a champion. The teamwork exhibited by sports champions may be an “American value,” but the public cannot rest on its laurels because greater efforts as a team are needed. This emphasis on teamwork as a model for the nation is summarized best in Clinton’s remarks to the champion University of Texas wheelchair basketball team:

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<sup>457</sup> William Clinton, “Remarks to the NCAA soccer champion University of Virginia Cavaliers, February 25, 1994,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1994, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1995, p. 324.

They've practiced. They've worked hard. They've produced a championship team in ways that few people will ever know. I commend all of you for your unrelenting pursuit of excellence and for your demonstration about what is true in every sport: that as an individual you may star, but as a team you can be champions. I believe that when people are empowered and when they work together, when they're given the opportunity to make something of themselves by a real community effort, that's when we all achieve the fullest meaning in our lives. If we're going to be a strong America, we're going to have to do more of what you've done with this team, coach.<sup>458</sup>

Clinton's final statement is quite emphatic. America is not as strong as it could be; "we're going to have do more." Only by working together can we, as individuals, "achieve the fullest meaning in our lives." Clinton's praise for teamwork in this passage is consistent with Pierard and Linder's claim that "...some sort of civil religion is required for American democracy to function properly. ...it provides a set of transcendent values that constitute a standard of justice by which government [and public] actions may be measured."<sup>459</sup> Clinton's invocation for working together is a moral declaration with sports narratives serving as the example for an American civil religion.

George W. Bush's presidential sports encomia have continued the imperative tone of his predecessor, further developing the linkage of sports qualities with transcendent values crucial to the nation. Early in his first year in office, Bush identifies his purpose for presidential sports encomia: "One of the reasons I'm so thankful to be able to welcome sports champions to the Rose Garden is that it gives me a chance to remind people about what a responsible society should be about, and it should be about loving a neighbor like you'd like to be loved yourself, or setting good strong examples

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<sup>458</sup> William Clinton, "Remarks to the champion University of Texas Wheelchair Basketball team and an exchange with reporters, May 13, 1993," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1993, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1994, p. 653.

<sup>459</sup> Pierard and Linder, 1988, p. 289.

when you have an opportunity to do so.”<sup>460</sup> This statement is important in two respects. First, Bush describes his [the President’s] role in sports encomia as speaking of how the experiences of sports champions are to be used by the public as lessons for their own lives. Like Clinton, he views presidential sports encomium as more than a mere photo opportunity and celebration of athletic achievement. Second, he speaks of the occasion in a spiritual tone. The focus is on “what a responsible society should be about,” a more somber topic than which players are most valuable to their team. And his comments about loving neighbors is a direct reference to the “Golden Rule” – do unto others as you would have done to you, a line that tinges all of his comments with a religious hue.

In his remarks to the basketball teams from Duke and Notre Dame, President George W. Bush speaks of the Golden Rule explicitly:

They set goals of understanding the Golden Rule, and living by it. These are good people. And I'm sure your teammates are, as well. But they set the kind of example that America needs. And all of us who have got positions of responsibility, all of us, whether we're a President or a coach or a player or a President of a university, must understand that with responsibility comes the necessity to set the right signal all throughout America that there's a difference between right and wrong, that we can be compassionate, and that we can love a neighbor like we'd like to be loved ourselves.<sup>461</sup>

In speaking of “responsibility” and the “difference between right and wrong,” Bush uses the celebratory event to discuss serious matters. By mentioning the Golden Rule as something “that America needs,” Bush fulfills the criteria for civil religion rhetoric, citing

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<sup>460</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President in Photo Opportunity with University of Nebraska 2001 NCAA Women's Volleyball Champions, May 31, 2001,” [/releases /2001/05/20010531.html](https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2001/05/20010531.html).

<sup>461</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President in Welcoming NCAA Men's Basketball Champions from Duke University and the NCAA Women's Basketball Champions from Notre Dame University, April 23, 2001,”

transcendent values as goals for the country to strive for. That the nation may lack in this area is made clearer in another instance of Bush's sports encomia:

There's another way you can serve your community, as well, by loving a neighbor like you'd like to be loved yourself; that a champion on the field can be a champion off the field by mentoring a child or caring for somebody in need or helping to eliminate pockets of despair and hopelessness in the country. You've got an opportunity as champions to be champions off the field in the community in which you live. And there's no question in my mind that when you put your mind to it, you can. You can help shape the character of the country. You can overcome -- help overcome evil by doing some good in the communities in which you live.<sup>462</sup>

According to Bush, there are “pockets of despair and hopelessness in the country” that require attention by citizens who can love their neighbors like they would like to be loved themselves. By living according to this higher value, we can “shape the character of the country.” President Reagan's references in his Olympic rhetoric extolling private initiative as an American value are couched in optimistic rhetoric, glorifying the national culture (in conservative terms); here, arguments that are consistent with Reagan's (citizens should help each other) is presented in an edifying manner, as a transcendent value inspiring a call to action.

President Clinton holds up the examples of athletes succeeding as team as a model for how American should more closely work together. In a similar vein, President George W. Bush uses the event as an opportunity to advocate the ideal that the most fortunate in society should extend a helping hand to those less fortunate. In a ceremony

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<sup>462</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President in Photo Opportunity with NCAA Spring Champions, September 24, 2002,”

honoring several NCAA championship teams, Bush lays out his vision for how a champion should behave:

I guarantee you there's a bunch of junior high kids in the state of Ohio wondering what it's like to be a champion. They know their football team won the championship, and now they're wondering what it's like. How does a champion behave? What does a champion do? Not only can a champion run fast and tackle hard, but hopefully the champions up here send the signal that making right choices in life for youngsters is an important part of living a responsible existence. I know there's a lot of young ladies who are growing up wondering whether or not they can be champs. And they see the championship teams from USC and University of Portland here, girls who worked hard to get to where they are, and they're wondering about the example they're setting. What is life choice about? I guess my point to you is that you're a champ on the field, and now you have a great opportunity to be a champion off the field, by setting good examples; by showing people that there is such thing as a compassionate society; that -- encourage people in the university you go to love a neighbor just like you'd like to be loved yourself; that recognizing in the midst of plenty here in America, there are some are some who suffer and some who hurt. And you have an example now, as champs, to help solve America's issues one person at a time.<sup>463</sup>

Bush challenges the athletes to be champions in their communities, and that means setting an example of “making right choices” and loving “a neighbor just like you'd like to be loved yourself.” These are part of “living a responsible existence,” another phrase with transcendent implications. Bush’s claim that “in the midst of plenty here in America, there are some are some who suffer and some who hurt” is bold. First, it is statement from the nation’s leader that we face serious problems as a society. By contrasting it to the “plenty” that exists elsewhere in the country, Bush hints at dissatisfaction with the economic and political system responsible for the distribution of wealth. The essence of

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<sup>463</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President at Welcome for NCAA Fall Champions, February 24, 2003,”

such a claim is the foundation of many arguments made against capitalism itself, and thus may be interpreted as a slight against “the American way of life.”

While such a reading of this passage may seem overstated, it is consistent with the following example from Bush’s 2002 speech honoring NCAA spring champions:

...you showed some things that I think are important for our country, particularly at this time, that if you served something greater than yourself, called a team, you can achieve great things. If you recognize that life is more than just an individual record, that if you recognize there are -- something bigger than an individual accomplishment, you can win. You can win in a broader sense. And to me, that's what these championships mean. It's kind of what our country has got to do, as well. If we serve something greater than materialism, self-absorption, we can do some great things as a country. Starting with loving our neighbor like we'd like to be loved ourselves; making sure the country is as hopeful and promising as it can possibly be.<sup>464</sup>

If said aloud by a Democratic politician, conservatives would pan this denunciation of “materialism” in support of “something bigger than an individual accomplishment” as socialist balderdash. Yet from a Republican speaking of “what our country has got to do,” Bush is making a plea for the public to serve something greater than individual needs. It epitomizes transcendent civil religion, judging the country by standards that rise above national ideals (Constitutional liberties and free market ideology) to more inspirational values of justice. In his sports encomia, we find some of Bush’s most detailed explanations of “compassionate conservatism,” and yet he avoids the obvious associations to the presidential agenda that his father made (the Points of Light reference in the Penguins speech being just one example). There appears to be a conscious effort on

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<sup>464</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President to NCAA Men and Women Sports Champions, May 21, 2002,”

the part of George W. Bush to keep his presidential sports encomia focused on more sacred purposes.

The rise of judgmental rhetoric in the presidential sports encomia of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush raises the question as to how sports encomia compare to the more overtly religious rhetoric of presidents in other communication settings. Comparing and contrasting White House ceremonies honoring athletes to national prayer breakfasts, for example, can provide further insight into the form and content of presidential sports encomia as it relates to civil religion.

#### Comparing presidential rhetoric: prayer breakfasts and sports encomia

In viewing the “curious phenomenon” of sports being “universally treated” as “sacred in American politics,” Stephan Walk concludes, “A comparative study of rhetorical tactics used by politicians when speaking to, for example, sport versus religious groups, may shed light on what the specifics of this practice [portraying sports as sacred] may be.”<sup>465</sup> The best sources for presidential address to “religious groups” are the National Prayer Breakfasts hosted annually at the White House since the Eisenhower Administration.<sup>466</sup> It is an annual event, thus all U.S. presidents since Eisenhower have given such a speech, and the audience always consists of religious officials. What, if any, similarities are there in the sports encomia and prayer breakfast addresses of Presidents Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush? To answer this question, I have reviewed the prayer breakfast speeches of these

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<sup>465</sup> Walk, 1990, p. 53

<sup>466</sup> President Reagan explains the history of White House prayer breakfasts in his speech on January 31, 1985. See Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the annual National Prayer Breakfast, January 31, 1985,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1985, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1986, p. 97.

presidents. The prayer breakfast speeches of the various presidents, like their sports encomia, are similar in length and vary in content only to the extent that current events during each administration alter the examples used during their addresses.<sup>467</sup>

The two kinds of presidential address also share common “rhetorical tactics” in the invocation of sacred themes. In the prayer breakfast addresses and sports encomia of Presidents Carter, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush, teamwork – cooperation and self-sacrifice – is presented as a transcendent value. Here is a portion of the quotation from President Carter’s address honoring the Pittsburgh Pirates and Steelers: “In these trying times it’s almost imperative...that our Nation be united as a great family. And that’s what has been exhibited in the United States of America during the last few weeks. ...What they have done...has aroused the admiration of every American who’s interested...in cooperation and teamwork, interested in the spirit of patriotism and the value of a close family relationship.”<sup>468</sup> As explained earlier, Carter’s description of the athletic “spirit” characterizes sports as transcending the playing field and substantially influencing the character and unity of the American public in spiritual ways. This spirit is one of unity and cooperation among “family” members – teammates and citizens.

Fifteen days before that sports encomium, Carter addressed religious leaders at the National Prayer Breakfast. That speech included the following thoughts on human potential:

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<sup>467</sup> For example, in 1978, President Carter mentions the hostage crisis in Iran, while, in 1991, President George H.W. Bush refers to the U.S. conflict in Iraq.

<sup>468</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Remarks at a White House reception for the championship baseball and football teams, February 22, 1980,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Jimmy Carter, 1980, Book II*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1981, p. 370-1.



This morning I want to talk for a few minutes about growth – growth in our lives as we develop and growth in our spiritual lives as we develop. All of us start out with a sole preoccupation, as an infant and then as a developing human being, with one person, ourselves; later, our mothers; then our families; and as we grow, our classmates and the community and perhaps the district or State or Nation. And as we go through these phases of our life’s evolution we become more and more aware of others. ...as we think more and more about others, the relative preoccupation with ourselves becomes less and less if we grow. ...the higher position we occupy in a human measured life, the more the temptations of self-satisfaction and pride press on us. ...God’s laws, the basis of our own human laws, have no difficulty at all in describing a path for human or spiritual growth. ...It’s always easier to isolate ourselves to enjoy the blessings that God has given us...and to forget about the need to reach out to others.<sup>469</sup>

The spiritual growth Carter speaks of at the prayer breakfast is the same spirit of cooperation and teamwork exhibited by the Pittsburgh sports champions – the close family relationship of the Steelers and Pirates is the kind of bond the nation needs during trying times. The prayer breakfast address more directly connects reaching out to one’s fellow human beings to God, while the sports encomium more eloquently explains the importance of cooperation in America. But both stress teamwork as a transcendent value that is crucial to the human existence.

References to teamwork in President George H.W. Bush’s sports encomia, as explained previously, are brief and lacking in details, but he does speak of individuals who are “willing to work hard and make sacrifices” and praises those who have “pulled together as a team.” His prayer breakfast speech includes a more expressive defense of cooperation and self-sacrifice as characteristics of a religious people:

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<sup>469</sup> Jimmy Carter, “National Prayer Breakfast, February 7, 1980,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Jimmy Carter, 1980-1981, Book I*, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1981, pp. 275-276.

A truly religious nation is also a giving nation. A close friend of mine sent me a poem recently which eloquently embodies this spirit of giving. “I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see. I sought my God, but my God eluded me. I sought my brother and found all three.” Thousands of Americans are finding their soul, finding their God, by reaching out to their brothers and sisters in need. You’ve heard me talk about a Thousand Points of Light across the country. ...when people are free they use that freedom to serve the greater good and, indeed, a higher truth.<sup>470</sup>

The poem Bush cites is succinct – only by reaching out to help those around us can humans find God. In each passage, he refers to his “Thousand Points of Light” vision of community service, describing such efforts in his prayer breakfast speech as “a higher truth.” In both his prayer breakfast speech and his sports encomium, working together is rhetorically constructed as a human trait that necessary for the preservation of the social order. As such, it is part of the natural order of existence (Geertz’ definition of religion) and a sign of God’s plan for humanity (the more Judeo-Christian reading).

The sacred nature of human cooperation articulated in the presidential sports encomia of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush has been extensively documented in this chapter. For Clinton, the cooperation of teammates is symbolic of the human interaction in which “we all achieve the fullest meaning in our lives.” Or as he said in his 1998 prayer breakfast remarks: “I thank so many of you in the community of faith who have worked...to help move poor families from welfare to work, to honor the scripture...and I ask you to help us to enlist more young Americans to give meaning to their lives, to live out their faith, and to help make our country a better place.”<sup>471</sup> These instances of

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<sup>470</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks at the annual National Prayer Breakfast, February 1, 1990,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush, 1990, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1991, p. 136.

<sup>471</sup> William Clinton, “Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast, February 5, 1998,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William J. Clinton, 1998, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government

individual effort for the greater good of the larger community (team or nation) are an enactment of religion – a way that people “live out their faith.” Clinton’s words paint a dynamic picture of the sacred; it is brought into existence and maintained through a process of human relationships. But although humans are responsible for this process, it still transcends the egoistic desires of humanity.

The common theme of “serving something greater” so common in the sports encomia of President George W. Bush is repeated in his first prayer breakfast address: “There are many experiences of faith in this room. But most of us share a belief...that there are purposes deeper than ambition and hopes greater than success. These beliefs shape our lives and help sustain the life of our Nation.”<sup>472</sup> The “crucial contributions of faith to our Nation: justice and compassion and a civil and generous society”<sup>473</sup> are transcendent values – ideals that reveal a higher purpose. The rhetorical tactics of George W. Bush and Bill Clinton in their presidential sports encomia mirror the language of their prayer breakfast speeches. Unlike the presidential sports encomia of Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush, which present a more rosy assessment of the nation, both Clinton and George W. Bush are more apt to identify problems in American society that could be alleviated by a public mobilized around transcendent values.

### Conclusion

There have been more than one hundred and ten sports encomia ceremonies at the White House since 1978, with nearly two hundred teams or individual athletes honored in

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Printing Office, 1999, p. 173.

<sup>472</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks at a National Prayer Breakfast, February 1, 2001,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George W. Bush, 2001, Book I*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2002, pp. 42-43.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid*, p. 43.

presidential address during that time. There are some important similarities in these speeches. The invocation of authority by presidents and the offering of gifts by sports champions both serve to empower the president to speak with an authoritative voice on the subject of sports' place in American society. The language employed by presidents to describe the setting and the accomplishments of athletes promotes a sacred tenor, draping the occasion in reverence for the values being honored. These values are linked from the efforts of sports champions to features of American character that reflect national unity, especially emphasizing the characteristic of individual sacrifice for team goals. The unique qualities of sports narratives that successfully combine the conflicting values of individual interest and communal cooperation offer presidents the rhetorical resources to address the American dilemma of individual versus nation. Presidential sports encomia include multiple instances of presidents, specifically Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, using sports championships as examples of how this divide can be successfully negotiated.

Another contribution of sports encomia to presidential rhetoric is the possibility of articulating a civil religion that is more inclusive and accessible to the American public, as compared to more traditional expressions of civic faith. The choice by presidents to use sports encomia as an opportunity to address issues of racial inequality, buttressed by the near universality of sports symbolism, alleviates the limitations that have hampered previous attempts at constructing an American civil religion. In these respects, both in the assembly of American ideals around themes of cooperation and the ability of sports to reach a more diverse audience, sports encomia perform an institutional function in the

presidency, assisting chief executives in their duties as “the symbolic guardian of the United States,” preserving the political and social order.

President Ronald Reagan’s sports encomia are an example of how individual presidents can exploit the event to develop their own political agenda. Analyzing Reagan’s sports encomia extends previous research by Stephan Walk on presidential sports metaphor and Reagan’s attempt to craft an alternative to Lyndon Johnson’s “footrace” metaphor. Both in his choices of who to honor and what specific qualities of champions to highlight, President Reagan promotes a vision of American success built on individual initiative rather than team cooperation. In this way, this study of presidential sports encomia contributes to communication scholarship by illuminating the rhetorical resources mined by presidents.

After only two such ceremonies during the Carter Administration, each subsequent president has performed sports encomia at a faster rate than his predecessor, with George W. Bush having hosted twenty-nine of these events before the 3 ½ year mark of his term in office. The frequency of sports encomia is just one of the changes that can be identified. The content of presidential sports encomium has also evolved over the last quarter-century. Carter invoked authority and hailed champions. Reagan framed the events in sacred terms, relating athletic achievement to the desire to transcend human limits. He also cited the events as an opportunity to “renew our faith” in the country. Reagan and George H.W. Bush employed culture-affirming rhetoric to extol the American values exemplified in sports championships. In contrast, Clinton and George W. Bush have transformed presidential sports encomium into more of a evaluative

moment, regularly calling on athletes to act as role models and acknowledging the need for the public to do more to behave like champions.

**Chapter Six:**

**Conclusion**

British professor of American Studies Jon Roper began his article on the “Myth of Heroic Presidential Leadership” in the aftermath of 9/11 with the following argument concerning news coverage of popular culture versus coverage of the President George W. Bush:

On September 11, 2001, the lead story on the CNN early morning news centered on speculation that Michael Jordan was planning to come out of retirement and resume playing basketball. The story preoccupied the American media; after all, three years previously, *Fortune* magazine had estimated the economic impact of Jordan’s career at \$10 billion. President George W. Bush, in Florida, ordinarily might have had to compete for attention in a world in which celebrity, popular culture, sports, and entertainment normally jostle for the public’s attention and set the parameters of public interest. But not on that day. The architectural symbols of American power – its economic base in New York City, its military headquarters in the Pentagon, and the institutions of its federal government in Washington, DC were destroyed, damaged, and threatened. In a crisis, the media spotlight immediately refocuses on the president.<sup>474</sup>

By opening with this passage, Roper foregrounds two assumptions of his study. First, the world of sports and the world of the presidency are distinct; the former is confined to pop culture, while the latter is the realm of politics. The second assumption is that the world of sports celebrity is only worthy of news coverage (and our attention) until a “real” national issue comes along, at which point the focus shifts to the U.S. president. The implication of Roper’s explanation of news coverage on the day of September 11, 2001 is the creation of a dichotomy, a division between the imagery of sports entertainment and the imagery of presidential leadership.

The rest of the article tends to this latter subject as it relates to George W. Bush, as Roper argues, “During a critical period of his presidency – the 18 months from

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<sup>474</sup> Jon Roper, “The Contemporary Presidency: George W. Bush and the myth of heroic presidential leadership,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, volume 34, March 2004, p. 132.



September 2001 to March 2003 and the military intervention in Iraq – it was from this image that his popularity and political authority were derived.”<sup>475</sup> There is no further mention of Michael Jordan or any other reference to sports because, for Roper, those events are no longer important in the aftermath of 9/11. But what if Roper’s juxtaposition is false; what if the world of sports celebrity is not mutually exclusive with greater attention on presidential leadership during times of national crisis? Indeed, what if the connections between the symbolism of sports and the imagery of presidential leadership are so substantial that presidents often draw upon the cultural power of sports narratives as a tool of presidential leadership? Of course, I do not pose these as mere hypothetical scenarios. My examination of presidential sports encomia illuminates the sports rhetoric of White House ceremonies honoring sports champions as a recently evolved rhetorical resource that has been used institutionally to articulate an American civil religion and promote the agenda of at least one Administration,<sup>476</sup> and one that has the potential to be developed further by presidents in the future.

Upon beginning my exploration of presidential sports encomia, I asked, in what ways are these ceremonies a reflection of an institutional understanding of the presidency and in what, if any, ways can greater rhetorical awareness of presidential sports encomia contribute to the development of institutional analysis and political communication? In this chapter, I will organize a summary of my findings with these questions and the issues of presidential leadership raised by Jon Roper as guides. The first section includes a brief

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<sup>475</sup> Ibid, p. 132.

<sup>476</sup> President Reagan’s sports encomia has been identified as assisting him displace LBJ’s footrace metaphor as the lens by which to understand federal civil rights policy.

summary of Chapters 2, 3, and 4, with emphasis on how previous scholarship in the fields of sports sociology, civil religion, and presidential rhetoric provide the foundations for my study of presidential sports encomia, as well as the contributions of my research for these areas of inquiry. In the next section, I tackle the potential criticism of the dissertation implied in Roper's idea that the significance of sports is diminished during times of national crisis. In other words, do sports encomia matter after September 11, 2001? I also address the substance of Roper's analysis – heroic presidential leadership – in the context of sports encomia. How does my research contribute to the ongoing studies of presidential leadership in the fields of communication and political science? In the final section, I discuss avenues for future research opened up by my study of presidential sports encomia, in particular, the implications of sports as a metaphor for presidential politics.

#### A brief summary of my study of presidential sports encomia

Because mine was the first scholarly analysis of presidential sports encomia, I employed a methodological approach that drew upon relevant scholarship in the fields of sports sociology, civil religion, and presidential rhetoric, but that also avoided the potential pitfalls of deductive interpretation. Campbell and Jamieson's "genre criticism" allows "the critic an unusual opportunity to penetrate [rhetorical acts'] internal workings and to appreciate the interacting forces that create them."<sup>477</sup> By adopting a generic perspective, one that emphasizes the importance of similarities without getting bogged down in an attempt to "prove" presidential sports encomia is a "genre" unto itself, I was

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<sup>477</sup> Campbell and Jamieson, 1988, p. 25.

able to recognize the institutional importance of presidential sports encomia, rather than treating each speech as an isolated and ad hoc instance of political communication. By examining all of the instances of presidential sports encomium at one time, I was able to take a bird's eye view, observing similarities and differences in style and substance in ways that illuminated patterns in these ceremonies and helped explained divergences by individual presidents from traditional forms.

Although I am the first to research this particular type of presidential sports rhetoric, I locate these ceremonies at the intersection of sports, civil religion, and presidential rhetoric, and outline the previous scholarship in these area as it pertains to my dissertation. With each, I describe the major themes of research, detail the arguments that are most applicable to my study, and denote any gaps in the fields to which my examination of presidential sports encomia may contribute a more complete understanding.

I begin with sports as the subject of Chapter Two in order to emphasize both the worthiness of sports as a subject for rhetorical scholarship and my claim that the study of sports requires an acknowledgment that *communication* is intrinsic to the cultural importance of sports. While many scholars, like Novak and Lipsky, have posited the value of sports symbolism for public communication (stressing its accessibility as a language), I argue that one must recognize the value of communication for sports. The cultural significance of sports is established *before* and *after* the game, when we talk about the contest and the competitors in ways that make athletic accomplishment meaningful beyond the game itself. The aspects of sport that make it a worthy subject for

scholarship justify *rhetorical scholarship* as the proper domain for analyzing sports in American society.

This communicative focus is then applied to two concepts involved in the cultural importance of sports – nationalism and religion. The deployment of sports imagery in political communication is explained as a function of sports’ “textual plasticity.”<sup>478</sup> Because the sports narrative is both known (someone wins) and unknown (who wins and how?), it is both accessible to the public and able to be manipulated for divergent political reasons. One common political use of sports rhetoric is the promotion of national unity. Olympic athletes are an obvious example, but, more generally (and frequently), any sports champion is the potential example of a political leader seeking to identify the values of teamwork and hard work laden in sports as symbolic of the values necessary for national success. For politicians, sports offer myriad examples of individual and group efforts that can be portrayed in terms that support the political order.

The religious aspects of sports spring from two factors. The desire for immortality expressed in the athletic attempt to transcend human limits is one. The second is the notions of fairness and meritocracy associated with sports; sports are perceived as a pure form of human behavior. While this sacred nature of sports has been recognized, I connect the notion of sports as sacred with the rhetorical advantages offered in sports symbolism to suggest sports rhetoric as contributing to the articulation of collective identity that is more inclusive than alternative frameworks.

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<sup>478</sup> Morgan, 1997, p. 1.

Chapter Three develops these claims about sacred symbols within the context of civil religion. After outlining the history of civil religion scholarship, I attend to the scholarly debates over the existence of an American civil religion. Again, the emphasis is on rhetoric. The main differences between those who perceive the existence of civil religion in the United States (e.g., Bellah and Hammond) versus those who disagree with such conclusions (Hart and Wilson) are rooted in communication. Hart is willing to accept “piety” as a more appropriate term than “religion,” while Wilson’s concern is simply that the Anglo-Saxon Protestant foundations of civil religion are no longer intelligible to an American public that is less and less Anglo-Saxon in its makeup. I synthesize these arguments around the inclusion of presidential sports encomia within an understanding of “civil religion.” This move is a rhetorical one in which I defend expanding the definition of civil religion as previously observed (scholars have only been looking at instances where the sacred is made secular) to include instances where the secular is made sacred. Building upon the claims by sports scholars as to the sacred nature of sports, I argue that sports encomia are examples of the secular conveyed in sacred terms. This reformulation of civil religion addresses the problems cited by Wilson and provides a way of understanding civil religion in America that can reinvigorate its study.

I also explore various styles of presidential sports encomia. As I evidence in Chapter 5, Reagan’s encomia describes an America that is already as good as it can be, while the rhetoric by both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush is more demanding of the American people, referencing the need for further improvement. While all sports encomia

include articulations of national unity, this distinction indicates that individual presidents have opportunities to invest sports encomia with their own views of where American society stands in relation to national values. Overall, my study of presidential sports encomia has much to offer for those interested in American civil religion; an broader conception of civil religion reveals a growing instance of presidential rhetoric that promotes the ideals that are both consistent with those of traditional forms of civic faith and more accessible to contemporary American society than its more exclusive counterpart.

In Chapter Four, I frame these issues of sports rhetoric and civil religion as important for the study of presidential rhetoric. My earlier delineations of the critical ideas of sports and civil religion as best addressed through rhetorical analysis is explained in this chapter as ripe for inclusion in presidential rhetoric studies, given the nexus of presidential sports encomia. As an example of political spectacle, presidential sports encomia exemplify Boorstin's concept of the "pseudo-event."<sup>479</sup> But why would presidents create such a spectacle? The answer to this can be found in my discussion of the debate between those who study the rhetorical acts of individual presidents versus those who study public rhetoric as it affects the presidency as an institution – or, to use Medhurst's terms, presidential rhetoric versus the rhetorical presidency.<sup>480</sup> I identify presidential sports encomium as contributing to the study of the institution of the presidency, although much of my methodology is consistent with the rhetorical approach of those who study presidential rhetoric rather than based in political science. Using

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<sup>479</sup> Boorstin, 1961, p. 3.

<sup>480</sup> Medhurst, 1996. See note 9.

Windt's admonition that the legitimate "discipline of presidential rhetoric [should be] concerned with the study of presidential public persuasion as it affects the ability of the President to exercise the powers of the office"<sup>481</sup> as a guide, I define the significance of presidential sports encomia in institutional terms, citing the promotion of civil religion as part of the presidential duty as "symbolic guardian of national unity."

I also discuss the literature on "going public" in presidential rhetoric. While acknowledging the works of Lowi and Kernell as the basis for this idea of presidential communication, I take a position more aligned with Beasley, who argues that "going public" is not exclusively the extra-constitutional practice of going over the heads of Congress and straight to the people in the pursuit of the presidential agenda. It also includes the public communication of presidents who are attempting to promote national unity, "going public...to promote the *idea* of an American people *to* the American people."<sup>482</sup> And this concept of "going public" is not outside the realm of presidential authority, but rather crucial to the proper functioning of the presidency and the maintenance of the political order.

In Chapter Five, I closely analyze the specific texts of presidential sports encomia from Jimmy Carter through the current Administration of George W. Bush. An inductive reading of presidential sports encomia lead to the following conclusions about these events as a whole. First, the beginnings and endings of presidential sports encomia rhetorically invest presidents with the authority to speak on the national impact of sports championships. Presidents regularly open the ceremony with remarks that emphasize

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<sup>481</sup> Windt, 1986, p. 102.

<sup>482</sup> Beasley, 2004, p. 22.

their status as the “voice of the nation.” In so doing, they establish their credibility to relate the specifics efforts of athletes to more general notions of American values. The champions being honored reinforce this view of the president at the end of the ceremony, when they offer gifts to the chief executive. The dialogue that often accompanies this moment has a tone of deference toward “America’s #1 Fan,” buttressing the president’s own efforts to accentuate their position on the stage. The overall atmosphere created in these two portions of the ceremony is one where the president is *above* the event and the athletes being honored, able to comprehend the significance of the championship and communicate that message to the American people.

The second feature is the sacred nature of sports encomia. As discussed in Chapter Two, sport has its own sacred qualities, independent of presidential rhetoric. In that sense, the ceremony has a sacred undertone because of the subject matter. I take the argument one step further, highlighting the ways that presidents emphasize a sacred atmosphere, especially in reference to the setting. President George W. Bush’s description of the White House as “one of the great shrines of America” is the most explicit example of this rhetorical tactic, with the location being identified as a “holy place,” in the context of American civil religion. This characterization of the event in sacred terms can be read as defining sports encomia in line with civil religion, with athletes representing “American ideals” as they are honored at the shrine of national governance.

The final common feature of presidential sports encomia is the use of transcendent rhetoric by presidents as they broaden their comments beyond an exclusive



focus on the championship won on the field. The broader topic is most often an explication of how the sports championship symbolizes the victory of “American values.” This is not to say that things like individual achievement, teamwork, self-sacrifice, perseverance, and effort are unique to the American people; it is just that U.S. presidents talk about them as if they are. These references to American ideals are best understood as presidential invocations of American civil religion. The secular accomplishments of sports champions are depicted in sacred terms, as emblematic of the very values that, in President Carter’s words, help “our Nation be united as a great family.”<sup>483</sup> My comparison the rhetoric of presidents at National Prayer breakfasts with their sports encomia shows a similarity, with presidents speaking at the breakfasts about self-sacrifice and societal unity in ways that were consistent with their rhetoric in sports encomia.

In examining the transcendent aspect of presidential sports encomia, two related issues received special attention. The first was the question of whether sports encomia promoted a more inclusive civil religion, especially as it regards articulating a civil religion that addresses racial heterogeneity in the United States. As explained similarly on the earlier topic of sports as sacred, sports rhetoric can be understood as being more accessible to diverse groups than other symbol systems due to the history of sports and race in America. Thus, sports narratives are more inclusive independent of whether U.S. presidents choose to emphasize that aspect or use the forum of sports encomium to directly address matters of racial inequality. However, I also mine presidential sports encomia for *explicit* presidential remarks on race in America. The sports encomia of Bill

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<sup>483</sup> Carter, 1981, p. 371.

Clinton contain multiple examples of his attempt to use sports championships as a platform for discussing the need on the part of the American people to attend to racial inequality. In contrast, Ronald Reagan's sports encomia are more conservative, emphasizing the improvements in race relations that have already taken place and implying that the status quo was not in need of further improvement.

Reagan's sports encomia are then explained as a response to the "footrace" metaphor used by President Lyndon Johnson to justify increased federal involvement in civil rights enforcement. Building off of the work of Stephen Walk in his study of presidential sports metaphors, I argue that Reagan's sports encomia, more than other examples of his public address, provide clues as to how he approached the "footrace" metaphor and how his Administration planned the use of sports rhetoric in the justification of Reagan's opposition to liberal interpretations of federal civil rights policy. My examination of Reagan's sports encomia shows that while Walk's intuition is correct regarding the importance of sports rhetoric in U.S. civil rights formulation during the Johnson and Reagan Administrations, his omission of sports encomia from his research unfortunately limits the scope and validity of his claims. My research fills that gap.

The second aspect of transcendent strategies in presidential sports encomia regards the different evaluations of American society. Unlike Ronald Reagan, whose sports encomia contained only glorification of the national culture, both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have been more willing to emphasize the shortcomings of the status quo and use the example of sports champions to argue that the American people can, and should, do better.

The increase in transcendent rhetoric in the sports encomia of Clinton and George W. Bush are significant for scholars of civil religion and presidential rhetoric. Presidential sports encomia have evolved toward more substantive speeches. In the last two Administrations, sports encomia have become more critical and more likely to use sports narratives to more overtly address political subjects, such as racism and war. For civil religion scholars, presidential sports encomia offer a substantial body of presidential rhetoric that speaks to the issue of articulating civic faith in ways that are more accessible to a populace that is growing more diverse, and in ways that more rigorously judge the American people. For communication theorists studying presidential rhetoric, sports encomia are an untapped resource whose benefits accrue in both theory and practice. Theoretically, presidential sports encomia help validate the field of rhetoric as the most appropriate domain for investigating both sports and civil religion. In other words, rhetorical analysis of presidential sports encomia helps justify rhetorical analysis of *many other* instances of sports and *all* aspects of civil religion. In practice, presidential sports encomia provide rhetoricians with a kind of political communication that is both novel and growing. With each subsequent president since Carter performing more sports encomia than his predecessor, there is a trend toward more and more White House ceremonies honoring sports champions. As the most overt example of a political-sports-religion intersection, these speeches have much to offer in the way of rhetorical artifacts to be examined.

### The significance of presidential sports rhetoric after 9/11

One possible reason why sports encomia have not been previously researched by either political scientists or communication scholars is the assumption that, except for instances of eulogizing or commemorating political figures, presidential ceremonial address does not register as politically significant. Although sports encomia spring from official duties, these epideictic moments may not appear to impact on the presidency as an institution. There is no doubt that sports encomia do not have the same gravity as state funerals or State of the Union addresses. However, as my research indicates, there are institutional effects of presidential sports encomia, and the rhetoric of these events has implications beyond the acknowledgment of athletes. Rather than diluting the political importance of presidential sports rhetoric, the social aftermath of 9/11 has actually reinforced the value of sports symbolism in political communication.

In celebration of its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, ESPN is counting down the top 25 sports stories since the first ESPN broadcast in 1979. Story #8 deals with September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and how the terrorist attacks in the United States affected sports and how sports have been an influence since that tragic day. Both President George H.W. Bush and President George W. Bush agreed to be interviewed for the program, a sign in and of itself of the presidential recognition of sports' significance in American society. When asked how he felt sports leagues should have handled the issue of when to return to action following 9/11, President George W. Bush said, "I said to the American people, 'Get back to your lives.' And of course, an integral part of American life is sports."<sup>484</sup> The son's assertion of

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<sup>484</sup> George W. Bush, "September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks," *ESPN the Headlines*, ESPN, original air date July 2004.

sports' integral place in America is buttressed by the father, when President George H.W. Bush argues, "Americans can come together, in good times, and certainly in times of tribulation and support a team and feel good about competition."<sup>485</sup> Sports, according to the elder Bush, are cathartic; sports bring people together both literally as spectators at specific venues and more figuratively as fans of the game. One can infer that cheering the competitive spirit of athletes serves to bolster the competitive fires of the fans themselves.

Peter Jennings<sup>486</sup>, of ABC News, commented on how the effect of watching sports together is particularly powerful following 9/11: "When we began to emerge from our cocoon of pain, one of the obvious places that we all began to share again, both pain and suffering and the values of the country were the sports stadiums."<sup>487</sup> Note how both Jennings and President George W. Bush use words like "obvious" and "of course" when remarking on the significance of sports in American society. For them, the claim does not need any explanation; it is a fact of life. Jennings goes further than Bush in explaining how sports are consumed by spectators, arguing that the contests offer opportunities for public commiseration *and* celebration. The emotive potential at sports gatherings allows for community grieving while also reaffirming community values, values on display in athletic competition. In this way, the social significance of sports *increased* after September 11, 2001.

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<sup>485</sup> George H. Bush, "September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks," *ESPN the Headlines*, ESPN, original air date July 2004.

<sup>486</sup> Although Jennings is a Canadian citizen, his comments during the ESPN program were in the context of the United States.

<sup>487</sup> Peter Jennings, "September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks," *ESPN the Headlines*, ESPN, original air date July 2004.

Post-9/11 presidential sports encomia echo this notion of sports as a critical activity for the public to embrace. Roper identified the 18-month period between September 2001 and March 2003 as a crucial time during which President Bush's image as heroic leader was established. Contrary to Roper's assumption concerning the diminished presence of sports in the national spotlight, the statistics on presidential sports encomia reveal a very different view. There were ten ceremonies during that timeframe, as President Bush honored more than thirty championship teams at the White House. This prominence in the presidential schedule, more than one ceremony every two months, is the indirect evidence in support of sports' significance during this time. The president's own words provide more direct confirmation. First, President George W. Bush has made a connection between sports encomia and public response to 9/11:

This is Champions Day here at the White House, and I want to welcome all the champs who are here. I particularly love being around those who've set high goals, worked hard to achieve them and win. I want to thank the chancellors, presidents, athletic directors, supporters, family members for being here, as well. I'm honored to welcome people of high accomplishment to the White House. You're here during extraordinary times. This is a time of challenge for our country. It's really a time to determine the fiber of our nation, the character of our people. We're being tested. But because we're Americans, because we believe things, hold values deeply in our heart, we will succeed -- there's no question in my mind.<sup>488</sup>

That the presence of athletic champions at the White House following 9/11 is evidence of sports' significance is emphasized when Bush says, "You're here during extraordinary times." Bush links the accomplishments of the honored champions to the trials facing the

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<sup>488</sup> George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President in Photo Opportunity with NCAA Spring Champions," September 24, 2002,

public, with the winning efforts on the playing field optimistically foreshadowing the successful efforts by Americans who are “being tested” in this “time of challenge.”

The first team to visit the White House following 9/11 was the Arizona Diamondbacks, 2001 champions of Major League Baseball. President Bush credited the team with providing significant relief to the nation:

It's an amazing year, obviously, for our country. And the World Series couldn't have come at a better time. It gave the American people a chance to think about something other than the war. And what a fabulous World Series it was.... I really felt proud to be an American at that moment.... The players gave us a fabulous Series. I can't think of a better way to end a World Series, particularly in a time of national need, than in the bottom of the 9th, in the seventh game, everybody watching in the country, people cheering one way or the other, such joy and jubilation.<sup>489</sup>

It is not surprising that the World Series would take the public's mind off of war; this is consistent with the notion of sports as leisure activities. But Bush also claims that the particular way the Series ended – game winning single in the bottom of the ninth of game seven – was important in such “a time of national need.” This remark implies that the contribution of sports is more substantive than mere diversion. Anything worthy of encomium would certainly do more than just hold the attention of the public; presidential sports encomia, in both its presence on the agendas of administrations and in the words of chief executives, signals political acknowledgment of sports as vital to the social order.

Recent White House ceremonies signify presidential recognition of sports' direct role in defining the character of the nation in times of war. In his remarks to the 2002 NCAA Fall champions, President Bush states,

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<sup>489</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President in Welcoming the World Series Champion Arizona Diamondbacks,” December 13, 2001,

You have a fantastic opportunity as champs to help define the character of America; to help say loud and clear that we will not tolerate evil, and that we will -- the collective goodwill of our country, the gathering momentum of millions of acts of kindness will define the very nature of America; that we will stand strong against evil by the collective goodness of our country. You've shown that on the playing fields, and I want to congratulate you for being strong and great athletes.<sup>490</sup>

Bush identifies the championships won on the playing fields as assisting directly in the fight against terrorism. Sports are part of the “collective goodness of our country” and superior athletic achievement helps “define the very nature of America.” Rather than a leisurely distraction from “the real world,” sports are instead rhetorically constructed as a vital component in the defense of the country. In this light, presidential sports encomium is not a trivial addition to the chief executive’s demanding schedule. It validates sports victory with political rhetoric that situates the accomplishment as a contribution to the fiber of the nation. While these presidential explanations come only from George H.W. and George W. Bush, my study of the sports encomia of other presidents indicates that the overall explanation provided by the 41<sup>st</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> Presidents are consistent with presidential sports encomia as a whole. Sports encomium is now firmly established as a regular form of presidential address. And presidents are becoming more explicit in articulating the importance of sports in American society.

#### Heroic leadership in presidential sports encomia

Another potential criticism with my institutional focus on presidential sports encomia is that sports encomia has more to do with presidents attempting to craft an image of themselves as heroes than an articulation of civil religion. Essentially, this is the

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<sup>490</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President to the NCAA Sports Champions,” March 12, 2002,



individual versus institutional debate in the context of presidential sports encomia. Should sports encomia be read as nothing more than “winner-by-association,” with presidents only trying to look “macho” as they talk about sports? Roper argues that constructing and promoting an image of the president in heroic terms has become a primary objective since death of John F. Kennedy.<sup>491</sup> Alan Stevenson goes so far as to state, “American history is mainly the history of men rising to the demands of their time.”<sup>492</sup> If sports encomia is *just* part of the public relations strategy of making presidents look heroic, does that mean that the rhetoric of sports encomia is just “empty words” and the photo opportunity is the real point? My answer is no. There are two flaws with such reasoning, one rooted in presidential rhetoric theory and the other detailed by scholars of sports and those of civil religion.

The “heroic” model of the presidency suffers from a myopic focus on the individual over the institution, limiting the ability of scholars adopting this model to understand the ways that the office circumscribes the behaviors of the individuals. Following the death of John F. Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote what became “the blueprint for heroic presidential leadership.”<sup>493</sup> Schlesinger argued, “The heroic leader has the Promethean responsibility to affirm human freedom against the supposed inevitabilities of history. As he does this, he combats the infection of fatalism which might otherwise paralyze mass democracy. Without heroic leaders, a society would tend to acquiesce in the drift of history.”<sup>494</sup> As applied to the presidency, this recommendation

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<sup>491</sup> Roper, 2004, pp. 132-142.

<sup>492</sup> Alan Stevenson, “The presidency 1984,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, volume 14, 1984, p. 19.

<sup>493</sup> Roper, 2004, p. 133.

<sup>494</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “On heroic leadership and the dilemma of strong men and weak peoples,”

calls upon the president to be a catalyst for mass democracy, projecting a heroic image as the leader of the free world. The emphasis is on the president as an individual, like Prometheus, who must act alone to save the world. As applied to sports encomia, this view would interpret these White House ceremonies as opportunities for presidents to construct their personal image as someone who is active, masculine, a hero among heroes. And indeed, it is possible to read sports encomia as promoting the image of the president in these ways. For example, the passages in Chapter 5 where presidents invoke their authority as commander-in-chief can be viewed as promoting the power of the individual as president.

However, this is a truncated view of presidential sports encomia, one that is accurate in a narrow sense, but misleading on the whole. In explaining the scholarly limits of this perspective, Stuckey and Antczak explain, “This ‘heroic’ model of the presidency was reflected in both political science and in speech communication as scholars concentrated on the rhetoric and administrations of individual presidents and largely ignored the development and influences of the political structures of the institution of the presidency.”<sup>495</sup> An individual focus neglects institutional factors at work. In the case of presidential sports encomia, such a prioritization ignores the ways that presidents enact institutional functions of the presidency in the ceremonies. For example, as I have shown, sports scholars have identified the sacred nature of sports as flowing from the reach for immortality inherent in athletic efforts to transcend limits on human potential. Additionally, I have argued that presidential celebration of such efforts as

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*Encounter*, volume 15, number 6, 1960, pp. 3-4.

<sup>495</sup> Stuckey and Antczak, 1996, p. 408.

exemplary of the “American spirit” is evidence of civil religion expressed in sports encomia. In light of these claims, the earlier passage from Schlesinger can be read much differently. Presidential sports encomia can be read as an affirmation of “human freedom against the supposed inevitabilities of history” not in the sense of the individual hero, but rather as supporting the institutional role of the president as “symbolic guardian of national unity.” In other words, presidential rhetoric can be *both* supportive of heroic imagery *and* contribute to the presidency as an institution. Individual benefits do not preclude institutional functions.

There is a second reason why sports encomia should not be read from an exclusively individualistic focus, and it can be found in the works on sports and civil religion. When speaking on the subject of sports or religion, rhetors may indeed find opportunities in the text of their speeches to associate themselves with heroic figures. Percy and Taylor state, “The belief is in a God, or in a team: both are there to perform, lead, bless, and bring victory to the believer. Consequently, tribal heroes emerge – those with the greatest sporting or charismatic abilities – who can orchestrate and fulfill the desires of the audience.”<sup>496</sup> A charismatic and eloquent individual – as president, pastor, or coach – may be able to successfully persuade the audience that they too are heroic (or holy). But this effort to benefit personally does not void the features that depict sports as sacred. In fact, the prophetic style of civil religion might include such charisma as a way of making judgmental rhetoric more persuasive to the audience. In the example of

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<sup>496</sup> Percy and Taylor, 1997, pp. 39-40.

Clinton's use of sports encomia to address the subject of racial inequality, his personal charisma can be recognized as improving his overall argument.

Civil religion scholars have noted how this "personalization" tactic is common among presidents. Linder notes "some of the more perceptive recent presidents ...attempted to tap the power of the American civil religion by identifying themselves with it."<sup>497</sup> Presidential rhetoric is personalized in this case, with the specific agenda of presidential administrations couched in the language used to describe the civil religion. President Reagan's use of sports encomia as a response to LBJ's "footrace" metaphor is such an example. But again, it is important to note that attempts by individual presidents to gain credibility for their positions by associating them with the ideals of civil religion does not deny the institutional components of their rhetoric. In the case of presidential sports encomia, the distinctions between styles of civil religion explain how Reagan's sports encomia has both individual and institutional aspects. As an example of culture-affirming rhetoric, Reagan's sports encomia serve his agenda of crafting an alternative vision of federal civil rights policy to the one launched by LBJ's "footrace" metaphor. Once his policies of rolling back affirmative action and adopting a more passive approach to civil rights enforcement were in place, his optimistic outlook served the institutional function of maintaining the current political order. To ignore these institutional elements of presidential sports encomia in favor of focusing exclusively on how the individual might benefit is to ignore significant political work being done in these ceremonies.

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<sup>497</sup> Linder, 1996, p. 734.

### Directions for future research

As the initial foray into the study of presidential sports encomia, I wanted to examine all of the ceremonies comprehensively and provide an overall view of this form of presidential address. I have done that. However, given that my study is the first rhetorical analysis of presidential sports encomia, there is clearly a need for further research. I speculated earlier as to the reasons why sports encomia became such a prominent feature of presidential address in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Directly interviewing President Carter is something I hope to do<sup>498</sup>, to ask him why his Administration began the tradition of hosting professional sports champions at the White House and what he hoped to achieve with his speeches. Research involving presidential speech-writers or other White House staff associated with sports encomia could serve the same objective, providing “inside” information about the process: Why were some teams invited and others not? How involved was the president in making those decisions? What were the stated objectives of the ceremony from the perspective of the presidency? All of these questions, and many more, could be answered if those who were part of a presidential administration were interviewed about sports encomia.

Another facet of presidential sports encomia regards the influence of sports rhetoric on the larger scope of presidential policy objectives. For example, I have investigated the role that Reagan’s sports encomia played in his Administration’s civil rights policy. I was alerted to this subject thanks to the prior work of Stephen Walk on

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<sup>498</sup> I suspect that I have a better chance of speaking with a president from my home state. Having said that, an interview with Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, or George W. Bush would all be useful in answering questions about what motivates a president to perform sports encomia.

presidential sports metaphor. Are there other examples of a president's sports encomia influencing either the substance or form of their policy agenda? I did discover that both President George H.W. Bush and President Clinton injected comments about free trade into their sports encomia on occasion.<sup>499</sup> Did their remarks reflect an attempt by either to alter the way that trade policy was framed? Or perhaps sports encomia provide an opportunity for a president to "test" a phrase or idea that they are interested in using in a policy context. One other area that I am currently exploring is the depiction of female athletes in sports encomia and what a study of the hosting of female champions at the White House has to contribute to rhetorical analysis of sports and gender in political communication.

In conclusion, I'd like to discuss the potential influence of sports rhetoric on presidential politics. The sheer numbers of sports champions who have been honored in White House ceremonies warrants recognition by academics who study politics. Presidential interest in and attention to sports may have a long history, but this recent wave of formal presidential address devoted to celebrating sports champions at the White House indicates a level of *institutional* involvement in sports that requires more than an observation that "presidents like sports." Something more fundamental is occurring, and it would behoove presidential scholars to begin focusing on the possible consequences of this relationship between sports and the presidency. Although beyond the scope of my research presented here, I will speculate on one potential alteration in the political landscape – the move toward a "sporting" metaphor for presidential campaigning.

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<sup>499</sup> In both instances, the reference was to the Toronto Blue Jays and their MLB championship.

In discussing the evolution in presidential campaigns, Sidney Blumenthal argues, “With the decline of the parties, candidates must wage their own campaigns. Consequently, there is a high value placed on projecting a vivid personality for it makes the politician stand out.”<sup>500</sup> The “vivid personality” of the individual running for president has taken the place of the integrity of party affiliation as the primary means of attracting voters. As result of this emphasis on the candidate’s image, campaigning becomes a never-ending struggle of image management. As Blumenthal explains, “The permanent campaign is the political ideology of our age. It combines image-making with strategic calculation. Under the permanent campaign governing is turned into a perpetual campaign. Moreover, it remakes government into an instrument designed to sustain an elected official’s public popularity.”<sup>501</sup> Blumenthal argues that governing has become *an extension* of the permanent campaign, so that presidential decision-making is evaluated not in terms of what makes good policy but what will help get the president re-elected. Stuckey and Antczak offer an explanation for this change in presidential politics in terms of presidential rhetoric, noting, “With the institutionalization of the rhetorical presidency, the distinction between campaigning and governing has become increasingly blurred....”<sup>502</sup> As presidents rely more and more on public rhetoric as a means of exercising presidential power, it becomes difficult to discern whether their words are intended to promote the presidential agenda or their candidacy.

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<sup>500</sup> Sidney Blumenthal, *The permanent campaign: Inside the world of elite political operatives*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1980, p. 3.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>502</sup> Stuckey and Antczak, 1996, p. 407.

Theodore Windt's comparison of the metaphorical foundations of campaigning versus those for governance provides further insight into this development:

...let me suggest some major distinctions between campaigning and governing:

- 1) the metaphor for campaigning is war; the metaphor for governing is negotiation
- 2) campaigning aims at absolute victory over one's enemy with a specified period of time; governing aims at solving problems through compromise and thus passing legislation in which there are no final victories
- 3) in a campaign the enemy is singular, visible, and constant; in governing, there are no enemies in this sense. ...the treatment of adversaries in governing must be more genteel than in campaigning.
- 5) In a campaign one forces an either/or choice and frames issues that way; in governing, there are more alternatives and the goal often is compromise
- 6) Finally, a campaign involves confrontation or at least the appearance of confrontation politics; governing seeks accommodation.<sup>503</sup>

For Windt, the distinction between campaigning and governing is analogous to the distinction between war and negotiation. Campaigning is based on zero-sum calculations, with only one winner allowed; on the other hand, the best negotiation is one in which both parties achieve a "win." Windt's conception is a normative one; describing what *ought* to exist in politics. If Blumenthal is correct about the permanent campaign, Windt's ideas have a very different implication. Attaching this framework to Blumenthal's warning of the perpetual campaign leads to an unsettling conclusion. If governing has blurred into an extension of campaigning, then the "war" never ends. Members of Congress belonging to the oppositional party are no longer partners in negotiation, but rather an "enemy" to be defeated. Rather than policy-making based on negotiated compromise where both sides can achieve success, the process is conceived of as a series

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<sup>503</sup> Windt, 1986.



of battles, with concessions allowable only as a means of achieving ultimate victory at a later date. This conception of governing as war is essentially the worst-case scenario of those who decry the dominance of partisanship politics in Washington.

There is, however, a third option. Perhaps the growing influence of sports in presidential rhetoric, as evidenced in the rise of sports encomia, can have an effect on the consequences of blurring of campaigning and governance in presidential politics. For example, sports may present a third metaphor for framing governance in contemporary politics. The war metaphor requires absolute victory; enemies that are singular and non-changing; one-time either/or choices; and a general attitude of confrontation. The negotiation metaphor is based on compromise; genteel relationships with temporary adversaries; multiple, non-exclusive alternatives to choose from; and a general attitude of accommodation. The problem is that in the world of permanent campaigns, the war metaphor dominates and governance in the national interest suffers. A sports metaphor can be defined as fair and regular competition; consisting of players who compete in an forum that is zero-sum (win-loss) but not limited to a single decision ( a season has many games); and promoting a general spirit of competition in which winning and losing is done with grace and respect for one's opponent.

Like Windt's distinction, my conception of sports as a guiding metaphor for governance is a normative, i.e., I do not claim that such a framework is currently followed. How would governance differ from the status quo, or other conceptions, if this sports metaphor did define political relationships? I believe there are two main benefits of such a framework. First, the integrity of the game (politics) would trump the interests of

the players (politicians). Sports must be “played the right way”<sup>504</sup> in order for participation to be meaningful. In Chapter Two, the notions of sports as promoting fair play and rewarding hard work were identified as factors as contributing to the perception of sports as sacred. Applied to politics, this reverence for the integrity of the game would check the potential for dirty political tricks and unethical behavior because the outcome would no longer be the only measure of success.

A second benefit for governance would be a change in how political opponents view each other. In this respect, sports offer a middle ground between negotiation and war. More adversarial than negotiation, opposing parties in sports are not seeking compromise. But less cut-throat than war, opposing players have a respect for each other and a recognition that there’s always tomorrow, which makes any victory or loss short-lived. If Blumenthal is correct, the negotiation metaphor is too idealistic for today’s political climate. The sports metaphor offers a pragmatic solution. Genteel accommodation may not be possible, but respect for one’s opponent is. And the sports framework emphasizes the regularity of contested decision-making, so that policy debates are not viewed as do-or-die battles that force each side into bunkers of hostility. The result for governance would be that fierce rivalry would not crowd out adherence to fair competition and the outcome would be accepted as a temporary evaluation and not eternal judgment.

It might be argued that my conception of sports as a metaphor for governance is too optimistic in its assessment of how sports are played. Some athletes cheat. Some treat

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<sup>504</sup> Larry Brown, coach of the NBA champion Detroit Pistons, used this phrase to describe the formula of his team’s success, stressing play that was based on fundamentals over flashiness.

the game like a war. Wouldn't an admission that sports is a cut-throat business deny its potential as a superior alternative to the war metaphor? No, it does not. And the reason why such exceptions do not corrupt the sports metaphor is found in the earlier explanation of sports' rhetorical power in American society articulated by Douglas Hartmann: "The notion that sport is a positive, progressive force...is more than just an idea, it is an ideology, an idea that has taken on a life of its own. It doesn't need to be restated or defended. It is cultural common sense, an article of faith held by American black and white, liberal and conservative, even those who don't care about sport in any other way."<sup>505</sup> In other words, Americans understand instances of wrongful behavior by athletes as "unsportsmanlike."<sup>506</sup> Such behavior falls outside the realm of sporting conduct. The American public understands sports as promoting fairness and equality and refuses to comprehend exceptions to this conception of sports as a mark against sports as a whole. In terms of sports as a metaphor for governance, such a steadfast defense of sports as fair competition translates into a guiding force that can be used to judge the actions of politicians. All may be fair in love and war, but that is not true for sports.

What, if any, role does presidential sports encomia play in the promotion of sports as a metaphor for governance? I would argue that the relationship need not be causal as much as constitutive. In ways similar to how presidents use sports encomia to articulate the national values that would serve America, it is possible for presidents to employ these same sports narratives in the formulation of political behavior that best serves the nation.

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<sup>505</sup> Ibid, p. 233.

<sup>506</sup> While I recognize the problematic nature of this word as gendered, I choose to use it because it is a term of art, with NFL referees throwing a flag (calling a penalty) for "unsportsmanlike conduct."

To paraphrase Beasley, the symbolism of sports may serve as a way “of breathing life into the otherwise abstract notion of American political [order]”<sup>507</sup> by promoting “the *idea* of an American [politician] *to* the American people.”<sup>508</sup> And finally, the growing presence of sports rhetoric in political communication may have a similar effect, as the language used by politicians modifies political behavior in ways that adhere to the values of sports.

### Conclusion

We have witnessed a change in presidential address over the last twenty-five years, as presidential sports encomium has become a regular event at the White House. I have identified this growth in presidential sports rhetoric as a revival of American civil religion, transformed from its Anglo-Saxon Protestant roots into a civic made more accessible and intelligible to the heterogeneous American population because of its foundations in sports narratives. As the examples from the Reagan Administration show, this does not mean that all presidential sports encomia similarly promote progressive ideals for active resistance to racial inequality. Indeed, it is “textual plasticity” of sports narratives that make them so appealing to rhetors and understandable to the audience. What my research does show is that presidents have become more explicit in identifying the accomplishments of sports champions as exemplifying American values and the need for the American public to more closely follow the examples set by these athletes.

There are several future avenues that studies of presidential sports encomia might take, and I have outlined a few of them. The most significant may be the impact that sports as a constitutive metaphor can have for framing the proper functioning of the

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<sup>507</sup> Beasley, 2004, p. 8.

<sup>508</sup> Beasley, 2004, p. 22.

American system of government. These ideas are only intimated by my arguments concerning presidential sports encomia. More directly, my study of sports encomia makes the case for rhetorical analysis as the most appropriate form of scholarship for explaining the magnitude of sports in society in general, and, more specifically, the importance of sports rhetoric in political communication. Sports have become culturally significant in the United States because of its *rhetorical* qualities, and only by investigating it as a communication phenomenon. My study of presidential sports encomia is an important step in that process.

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