

# Comedian-in-Chief: Presidential Jokes as Enthymematic Crisis Rhetoric

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*To understand how jokes have functioned as part of U.S. presidents' strategic communication, this project examined every available White House Correspondents' Dinner (WHCD) speech over the last century, documenting various presidents' approaches to humor. I argue that the ability to talk about difficult or taboo subjects through jokes' deeply enthymematic ways of communicating has offered presidents expanded rhetorical spaces during crises, providing insights into why they started using humor with such routine frequency. Working with multiple factors shaping the modern presidency, presidents have used the elastic and inventive nature of enthymematic joking in attempts to move pressing issues outside immediate lines of criticism. The use of jokes in presidential communication is charted through three periods of WHCD. Several implications are drawn from this analysis, including the risks of humor as a rhetorical strategy.*

*These [press] dinners were a useful moment to defuse with humor what controversy was festering. That spring, we tried to "lance the boil" of fundraising scandals with humor.*

—Michael Waldman (2000, 165), Director of Speechwriting for Bill Clinton

Throughout U.S. history, presidents have met personal and public problems with the aid of trusted advisors, military counsels, or media consultants. Yet the chief executive has found another instrument for managing policies and perceptions—jokes. As might be imagined, an expectation that one of the president's many roles should include "comedian" is relatively unprecedented. While George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt could be commended for their wit (Alisky 1990), throughout much of U.S. history a prospect that presidents should deliver regular, extensive comic monologues to the nation may have conflicted with the office's gravity. Even exceptions like Richard Nixon's four-second appearance on *Laugh-In* in 1968 seemed to prove the rule for a separation of mirth and state.

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Much has changed in recent decades, with candidates, politicians, and presidents routinely presenting themselves to audiences through late-night shows and other comedic events. Clinton remarked that “20 minutes on *The Tonight Show* did more for my career than speaking for two days at the Democratic National Convention,” a point underscored by David Letterman’s advice to presidential candidates: “let me remind you of one thing: the road to Washington runs through me” (Fox News 2005, par. 20; Colbert 2004, par. 22). During his first term alone, President Barack Obama visited *The Tonight Show* (twice), the *Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Daily Show* (twice), and *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, where he told jokes and conducted song parodies (Fox News 2012). In this context, presidents have hired joke writers and even include staff from programs like *The Simpsons* and *The Daily Show* on their speechwriting teams (Nichols 2012; Yardley 2004).

Jokes can serve many purposes in political communication. Politicians have used humor as a “velvet weapon” to chastise opponents, legitimate actions, or engage in diplomacy (Meyer 1990, 76; Speier 1998; Yarwood 1993). Humor can create liking for a public figure or distract attention from particular topics (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 188; Schlesinger 2007, par. 15). According to some scholars, humor may even be evolving from a “means of dealing with reality to a mode of defining reality” in presidential campaigns (Smith and Voth 2002, 124). Overall, much can be learned about the boundaries of presidential communication from humor because “the comedic plays on the ambiguity of terms, the multiplicity of audiences, and the instability of premises” (Warnick 1997, 77-78). While humor can certainly speak truth *to* power, presidential jokes underscore how those *in* power can also use humor to construct truths, challenging scholars to examine its uses and forms as a persuasive strategy.

This study contributes to interdisciplinary projects seeking to analyze rhetorical histories of the laughable, outline humor’s devices and conventions, and explore the possibilities and limitations of comedy in politics (see Bakhtin 1984; Pickering and Lockyer 2009; Virno 2008). To understand the contours of presidential jokes as they have evolved, I examined every publically available presidential White House Correspondent’s Dinner (WHCD) speech over the last century.<sup>1</sup> Over time, an expectation has arisen for presidents to deliver an annual “funny” speech during each WHCD, which spotlights the changing nature of the presidency itself. For scope, the WHCD dinners were selected as the president’s most public and highly regarded of the entertaining dinners in Washington, DC, every year (Katz 2003). The president often delivers similar comic monologues at the Alfalfa, Gridiron, and Radio & TV Correspondents’ dinners, which are more private, insider dinners with less media coverage. By presidential joke writers’ own admissions, the WHCD dinner speeches are now approached with strategic purpose, as “the comic answer to that week’s weekly crisis,” because “humor’s biggest payoff can come at the hour of maximum danger” (Katz 2003, 3, 228). These texts hence

1. Every publically available WHCD speech from Coolidge to Obama was collected by conducting Internet queries (most of the complete transcripts of recent speeches have been posted by newspapers and other sources), extensive searches of scholarly databases like *LexisNexis* and *eBrary*, and by contacting every presidential library to purchase or receive correspondence about any remaining speeches or related WHCD primary source materials available.

provide a window into the evolving functions of humor as part of presidents' strategic communication.

In this article, I concentrate on one function of jokes in presidential discourse: the ability to talk about difficult or taboo subjects through jokes' deeply enthymematic ways of communicating, providing insights into how and why presidents started using humor with such frequency. That is, working with multiple factors shaping the modern presidency, the elastic and inventive nature of enthymematic speech offers a space within which presidents can speak indirectly when facing crises, inviting audiences to sanitize unstated, shared commitments and move pressing issues outside immediate lines of criticism. Under similar terms, after years of writing jokes for President Clinton's WHCD speeches, Mark Katz came to the following conclusion: "The thesis we arrived at was we can do jokes about the smoke and not the fire. We can do jokes about the hoopla of impeachment, but not what brought us to the brink of impeachment" (CNBC 2004, par. 63). The WHCD speeches demonstrate how the rhetorical capacities of presidents have been extended through jokes' enthymematic smoke, attempting to turn perceived losses into gains by creeping up to the edge of the fire—a precipice that holds the possibility for tragedy to become comedy, and vice versa, given the risk involved.

To be clear, this study focuses on the features of presidents' jokes rather than any effects that might be attributed to such rhetoric. It will discuss presidential jokes as invitations for audiences to inhabit particular constructions of reality, without making claims about the exact influence of these acts. This approach is underscored by Day's (2011, 23) case for understanding humor in terms of "incremental effects . . . of slowly shifting [public] debate"—of rhetoric that can circulate in nonlinear ways rather than as one-shot attempts at persuasion that accomplish immediate or significant political work. That the executive branch and media commentators have characterized WHCD jokes as important to the presidential agenda is taken as a starting point for inquiry (see Obeidallah 2013). The rise of 24/7 news cycles, scandal reporting, comedic programming, and many other media factors clearly play into presidential turns to humorous discourse. But this analysis will focus on the operations of humor as presidents attempt to open persuasive spaces, highlighting how jokes' enthymematic qualities, as an analytic perspective, carry explanatory value for and correspond with trends in presidential communication and beyond. Rather than reducing the development of presidential joke making to single causes (e.g., the advance of entertaining talk shows), an enthymematic view underscores the multiple elements likely supporting the eventual acceptability of these practices, such as the increasing difficulties of message control and expectations for interactivity in presidential speech.

This article will first offer a conceptual overview for the enthymeme as a rhetorical response to crises, before turning to an analysis of U.S. presidents' WHCD speeches. I chart the use of deeply enthymematic joking in presidential communication historically, demonstrating the functions of humorous messaging through three periods of the WHCD: Coolidge to Johnson, which appears to have provided a foundation for more recent presidential choices; Nixon to Bush Sr., in which the enthymematic capacities of jokes were increasingly tested and established; and finally, Clinton through Obama, a period in which the strategic use of enthymematic, crisis-directed humor has been amplified during the WHCD speeches, with some critical exceptions.

## Crises, Enthymemes, and Joking Rhetoric

This article uses a broad definition for “crises” as material or perceived problems that may undermine a president’s image or political standing in audiences’ minds. In this view, both the material outbreak of a war or a developing perception that the president negotiates poorly could be crises. My definition partly follows Pearson and Clair’s (1998) understanding of crises as impending, high-stakes events that threaten organizations or leaders through their ambiguity.<sup>2</sup> Yet scholars should not see presidential crisis rhetoric as a homogenous form of discourse, given its evolving shape and functions (Dow 1989). Kiewe (1994 xvii, xxiii, emphasis added) writes that presidential crisis rhetoric “consists of the discursive products created and transacted through an *interaction* between the president, press, and the public, and serves to legitimize (or delegitimize) a given situation as critical.” This flexible conception urges researchers to see presidents as both reacting to and creating crises in many different ways through rhetoric. The crisis rhetoric literature has examined communication strategies like apologia, instruction, and differentiation (Hoffman and Ford 2010).<sup>3</sup> Within this tradition, humor has been seen as a tool for negotiating economic crises, coping with stress, repairing one’s image, and as a method often employed by underserved populations—but the slippery nature of humor can also create its own problems in public affairs (Achter 2008; Compton 2011; Kuipers 2011; Maxwell 2003; Waisanen 2011; Willems 2011). As another crisis device, I find that enthymematic joking can address political demands and pressures that threaten a president’s image or standing.

Two research lines are relevant to presidential jokes as enthymematic. Most accounts of the enthymeme begin with Aristotle (2007, 33, 40), who considered it the strongest proof, which “excite more favorable audience reaction[s]” than discourse in which reasoning is stated more explicitly. He wrote about syllogisms as forms of tight philosophical logic but situated enthymemes with popular, informal speech (Aristotle 2007, 34). Scholars have also tended to speak about the enthymeme either in terms of more formal, syllogistic *argument schemes* or more broadly as an informal type of *rhetorical appeal*. In the former, formalistic approach, researchers typically identify a major premise covering a general opinion or belief and a minor premise offering a more specific, shared commitment about a subject; from there, an unstated premise or premises are then targeted as knowledge and beliefs audiences possess and will likely provide (Johnson 2001). An enthymeme may highlight the argument “Joe is a liar, so Joe is a coward,” identifying the warrant “all liars are cowards” as unexpressed (Madden 1952, 368). In other words, scholars interrogate the incomplete nature of enthymemes that logically hide a part supplied by audiences (Aden 1994).

2. This article’s crisis definition is further constructed from Coombs (2009, 99) and Fink (1986). “Image restoration” appears to be the dominant paradigm in crisis communication scholarship (Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow 2007, 130).

3. One other article puts enthymemes in a crisis communication context but uses the concept to explore stasis theory and restricts its definition to the narrow, syllogistic sense (Marsh 2006).

In the latter approach, scholars have taken a broader view of enthymemes. Farrell called it “partisan argument as collaborative utterance,” spotlighting the role of audience involvement and judgment in the rhetorical form, with validity conceived more loosely in terms of social knowledge or “tacit reference” rather than formalistic schemes (2000, 99, 98). Along these lines, the style, timeliness, and attitudes invoked by the enthymeme show that it involves not only premises or warrants but emotions and values in seeking an audience’s support for one’s cause (Walker 1994). The background assumptions audiences bring to a public figure’s character and the visual dimensions of arguments have expanded this line of thinking further (Finnegan 2001; Jasinski 2001). Understood as a rhetorical appeal, unstated premises are a sufficient but unnecessary condition for enthymemes, illustrating more fundamentally that successful arguments depend on cooperation between speakers and their audiences (Bitzer 1959, 405). Compared to scientific, demonstrative syllogisms, an enthymeme’s premises invite and involve audiences in multifaceted acts of self-persuasion.

I see enthymematic joking generally as a matter of rhetorical appeal and take Conley’s (1984) work as a point of departure for understanding presidential humor. Conley offers a stylistic and adaptive understanding of enthymemes, which should not be reduced to formalist conceptions; if they are truncated, it is for “practical reasons, not for formal reasons” (1984 169, 171). More important, Conley (2004, 267-69) has speculated about the potential relationships between humor, enthymemes, and arguments in writing that jokes draw from shared knowledge that is “radically enthymematic” because of the large amount of unstated information they leverage, which may secure or intensify an audience’s adherence to an argument’s plausibility. That is, enthymematic humor targets a level of presupposed agreement between an audience and speaker that is rhetorically significant in bidding both parties to participate in a construction of meaning (see Meier 2008; Wilkes n.d.).

Overall, an enthymematic perspective illustrates how presidents attempt to draw and redraw the lines of crisis rhetoric through jokes. From this standpoint, the activation of certain kinds of indirect or unstated references/premises holds the greatest potential for jokes to supplant tragic for comic perceptions, delegitimizing perceived or material problems. Discourse that asks for shared recognitions of indirect or unstated knowledge attempts a kind of collective sanitization, similar to Booth’s (1974, 13) argument that irony can achieve “a more astonishing communal achievement than most accounts have recognized.” Jokes can move outside the circle of more direct messaging, playing in an outer, concentric, yet risky rhetorical space that allows presidents to touch “third rails,” or topics they might otherwise find too difficult or taboo to talk about directly. This collaborative process asks audiences to view crises, if not anew, then at least with a greater sense for a president’s likeable reflexivity. The next section will analyze how presidents have enacted these moves in light of an evolving modern presidency.

## Presidential Humor at the WHCD

The White House press formed the White House Correspondents Association on February 25, 1914, as a result of 11 reporters responding to “an unverifiable leak” that

congressional correspondents would be selecting journalists for President Wilson's press conferences (Condon n.d., par. 1). The organization advocated for reporters to have clear lines of access to the president, suitable travel arrangements, and coverage for costs. Despite the leak being proved false, the organization continued and held its first dinner in 1920, and in 1924 Calvin Coolidge became the first president to visit the event (Condon n.d., par. 3). Before World War II, the dinner tended to be a source of light entertainment rather than speechmaking, concluding with an after-dinner show with famous performers (Condon n.d., par. 4). Since 1993, the WHCD has been broadcast on C-SPAN, and representatives from almost all major media organizations, many high-ranking political officials, celebrities, and Washington insiders have become mainstays at the dinner (Halloran 2004). To better understand these developments and enthymematic crisis humor, this analysis first turns to early examples of the WHCD speeches and presidential joking.

### Coolidge to Johnson

During this period of WHCD speeches, presidents' choices and changes in the presidency itself laid some groundwork for the increasing use of enthymematic crisis humor following the Johnson administration. While it has become imperative for the president to deliver a comedy monologue at the dinner in recent decades, in earlier years the chief executive often gave a serious speech or skipped the event altogether. Coolidge occasionally joked with reporters (Alisky 1990), but there is no evidence that he took to entertaining during the WHCD. In 1930, the organization canceled the dinner when a former president himself, Chief Justice William Howard Taft, died the exact day of the event (Edwards 2011). Correspondence with the Hoover presidential library also indicates that Hoover only attended the dinner in 1931 and 1932 but did not make any remarks.

Although earlier presidents' speechmaking remains sparse, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR's) first dinner speech in 1941 marked a precedent for both serious and less serious discourse at the event. Amidst the evening's scheduled entertainment, he gave a solemn war speech against the spread of Nazism (Roosevelt 1941). This was the most important speech delivered at the dinner to that point, elevating the event's status, yet also foreshadowing FDR's cancellation of the dinner the following year due to World War II (Edwards 2011). In 1943, FDR returned to deliver another speech designed to lift troops' morale and to attack others unsupportive of his plans, in a moment of crisis rhetoric: "I could not truthfully deny to our troops that a few chiselers, a few politicians, a few—to use a polite term—publicists . . . have placed their personal ambition or greed above the Nation's interests" (Roosevelt 1943, par. 23). While an option to inform *and* entertain went unrealized in earlier speeches, the WHCD itself remained entertaining, as in 1944 when U.S. war leaders "ate unrationed duck and traded off-the-record political wisecracks with the Capital's press" (*Charlotte Observer* 1944, par. 1). Although he did not deliver any remarks at the 1944 dinner, it was the only party FDR permitted himself to attend during wartime, and he "sang loud when the entertainers called for audience participation, and laughed louder at some of the fourth term jokes which flew thick all evening" (*Charlotte Observer* 1944, par. 2).

While scholars have contested the beginnings of the “modern rhetorical presidency,” FDR generally set precedents for shorter individual speeches, a greater use of terms like “we” and “our,” and increased broadcasting to national audiences “to translate policies and decision-making processes into media events” in presidential rhetoric (Murphy 2008, 300, 302).<sup>4</sup> The shift to economy in communication and the use of words or media positioning presidents in a more interactive relationship with their audiences may have set a foundation for the acceptability of joking, enthymematic rhetoric. Over the past two centuries, rhetoric has become increasingly important in expanding the presidency, which grew exponentially during FDR’s tenure in office and fostered a structural trend of “going public”—making citizens’ participation in presidential communication more essential than elite bargaining (Kernell 1986, 10; see also Campbell and Jamieson 2008; Greenstein 2004; Thomas and Pika 1996). FDR’s intimate style, broad performances, and widening of his office’s power can thus be seen as important precursors to presidents becoming entertainers themselves.

Nevertheless, gravity continued to win out in President Harry Truman’s choice to cancel the dinner in 1951 due to what he called the “uncertainty of the world situation” (Edwards 2011, par. 8).<sup>5</sup> While Truman’s record at the dinners appears to be thin, he did make rare, humorous quips to reporters in other situations, labeling opponents’ words against him “horse manure” and explaining to the press he meant that term “as descriptive, not pejorative” (Kirkendall, quoted in Alisky 1990, 378). An increase in slang and casual references has occurred in presidential rhetoric since Truman (Lim 2002), which may also have contributed to an eventual turn to the comic persona. Although his actual attendance is unclear, Dwight Eisenhower planned to attend at least four of the dinners but only made brief remarks following the evening’s entertainment, as in his 1953 visit (U.S. Treasury 1953, 2).<sup>6</sup> In fact, one extant document shows the WHCD was placed “in the category ‘off the record’ to the press” by the Eisenhower administration (U.S. Treasury 1953, 5; 1954, 6).

Given available evidence, what *is* clear is that presidents eventually became comedians at the dinners. Explanations of modern trends in political comedy often claim that the 1990s marked an era when presidents and politicians broke down walls between politics and entertainment, especially in President Clinton’s playing a saxophone on the *Arsenio Hall Show* (see Huffington 1997; Parkin 2014). Yet the WHCD speeches demonstrate an earlier trend, with John F. Kennedy (JFK) delivering public, stand-up style monologues at the annual dinner. JFK began his remarks with jokes from the outset, such as “First, the sudden and arbitrary action of the officers of this organization in increasing the price of dinner tickets by \$2.50 over last year constitutes a wholly unjustifiable defiance of the public interest. If this increase is not rescinded . . . it will have a serious impact on the entire economy of this city” (Kennedy 1962, par. 1). Although JFK’s

4. Rhetoric scholars have also attended to presidential rhetoric prior to FDR. See Medhurst (2008) and Kiewe (1994, xxvi).

5. Correspondence with the Truman presidential library yielded no evidence that Truman gave a speech at these dinners.

6. From correspondence with the Eisenhower library, there are no data showing Eisenhower’s actual discourse during any of these events.

humor was not particularly crisis directed—referring little to material or perceived problems that could undermine his image or political standing—the choice to invoke “the public interest” and the city’s “economy” put extended humor about political topics within the president’s province.

Subtle shifts toward joking speech might also be inferred from Kennedy’s turning presidential rhetoric toward more “you” terms in which conversational language has become commonplace between presidents and their audiences (Lim 2002, 344). Discussing the compatibility of the “unitary executive model” and “rhetorical presidency,” Beasley (2010, 18) finds that the JFK years were a “watershed moment” in both expanding the presidency’s policy power *and* use of popular discourse. Moreover, from a crisis rhetoric standpoint, Kennedy catalyzed the use of “sophisticated news management techniques, he created a context in which crisis promotion and management could occur on a regular basis” (Bostdorff 1994, 3). In this setting, strategic presidential entertainment simply became more plausible, with JFK’s remarks referring to famous figures such as the British prime minister and celebrities like Peter Sellers at the event, perhaps creating further pressure to combine gravity with levity. The dinner even became the target of serious policy making. White House reporter Helen Thomas’s protests led the WCHD to permit women to attend the event for the first time during the Kennedy years (Edwards 2011).

Following JFK’s speeches, President Lyndon Johnson (1968, pars. 9-10) assumed the role of a playful “valedictory address” to the press in one of his texts: “There has always been some friction between the press and us in the academic community. . . . Why this friction? We intellectuals agree that it is not so much a matter of substance—we just plain don’t like your style—much too earthy.” As a role reversal between the president and press, the joke was partly a conceit about Johnson’s image, because he was known for being earthy or “boorish, bullying and boastful” (U.S. Senate n.d., par. 2), with the comment targeting a shared recognition about critiques directed against him. The joke may not strike readers as particularly funny, but Johnson at least asked the press to inhabit a crisis space where they were urged to “fill in” the unstated reference to his perceived credibility problem, reduce any relational distance, and conduct a minor repair of his image.

In this process, the operations of enthymematic jokes share a relationship with what Koestler (1964, 84, 96) termed “interpolation” in humor, which involves “bridging a logical gap by inserting the missing links” between two incompatible frames of reference that have their own patterns, rules, or codes. A word, concept, image, or situation acts as a link between the two frames, but audiences must do the work of reinterpreting what was thought to be a part of only one mental plane with another, implicated plane—a riddle that lifts listeners out of their passivity to cooperate and invent the joke themselves (Koestler 1964, 64; see also Waisanen, Friedman, and Friedman 2014).<sup>7</sup> In the Johnson example, the “earthy” term acts as just such a link between an explicit academic and an implicit presidential frame.

7. Koestler (1964, 86) says that language is “never completely explicit,” but differences can still be drawn between discourses relying *more* on indirection and implication than others.

What goes unstated in enthymematic humor is not just premises or implications, then, but frames of reference that straddle more than one domain of human experience. Given the changes presidents have made to speak increasingly with public audiences in intimate terms, some parallels can be drawn: presidents have had to speak to more individuals and groups who necessarily bring many associative contexts to political encounters. Presidents have needed to acknowledge wider ways of reasoning, the existence of multiple audiences, and project more roles than ever before (e.g., leader, father, entertainer, etc.) to be, if not all things to all people, then at least more things to more people. Enthymematic interpolations highlight *how* the presidency can expand through entertaining rhetoric, showcasing a figure who—with attendant winks and nods—can operate on more than one level at once. Where JFK and Johnson began to invest in such humor at the WHCD, in the next period of speeches presidents brought the enthymematic capacities of jokes to bear on more serious personal and public crises.

### Nixon to Bush Sr.

Upping the stakes for presidential humor, on April 14, 1973, in the aftermath of several aides' convictions in the developing Watergate Scandal, Nixon delivered a speech with a joke that foreshadowed his own crisis rhetoric later that year: "It is a privilege to be here at the White House correspondents dinner. I suppose I should say it is an *executive privilege*" (Nixon 1973, par. 2, emphasis added). In an event prefiguring the tactics humor writers have taken with more recent presidents, on May 4, 1974, after most of the Watergate debacle had unfolded (and just shy of Nixon's August resignation), Vice President Gerald Ford was sent in Nixon's place to deliver a series of dinner jokes that circled around the crisis, showing how the lines of enthymematic crisis joking appear to have been tested during the challenging historical moment.

Ford (1974, 1) opened with "lately I have been eating at so many banquets I am beginning to think I have a tapeworm. I say 'tapeworm' because they bring me another course every 18<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> minutes." The 18<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-minute comment referenced a controversial 18<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-minute gap in one of the taped White House phone conversations subpoenaed by the Senate Watergate committee (Watergate.info n.d.), with the terms "tape" and "18<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> minute" acting as links with double meanings between the scandal and banquet frames. The joke asked the audience to fill in the shared reference to circle around the subject matter. In colloquial terms, Ford asked the audience to identify an elephant in the room, welcoming some convergence on an issue dividing the press from the president. Ford's very ethos as the vice president contributes to this rhetoric, too. Just as the joke allowed the performer to be one step removed from the direct reference, Ford's status as one step removed from the president added another layer of indirectness to the comic act.

Such indirect discourses tease the audience with a promise of direct comment but deflect into an alternate space that begs for continued audience involvement. Ford (1974, 2-3) told the press, "I do have a small news announcement to make. I have listened to the tape," whetting the audience's appetite for a comment about one of the subpoenaed tapes. But he then clarified, jokingly, "I mean, of course, the tape of what I said Wednesday

night in North Carolina, when (Phil Jones?) [a White House correspondent] asked me how I could comment on a 1350 page transcript without having read nine-tenths of it.” Here the *ambiguity* of meaning raised by a crisis fits with the enthymeme’s ambiguous interpolations between two contexts, recognizing that multiple interpretations are at stake while bidding hearers—who have entered this tense liminal space—to temporarily shake off fixations for seeing the crisis in only one, negative way. In this manner, Ford’s toggling between two meanings of “tape” helped him communicate indirectly about a difficult topic. Yet the joke may run too close to a subject deserving more earnestness than ambiguity, providing audiences some agency to attribute comic or tragic meanings to the act.

As such, it is worth noting the potential influence of enthymematic jokes relative to how humor can affect cognitive processing and persuasion. Research has found that audiences are highly motivated to process humor and tend to like and attribute credibility to its producers, but it can also short circuit peoples’ ability to scrutinize arguments (Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, and Byrne 2007). Some immediate persuasion can be offset by a tendency to judge messages as “only a joke,” yet on balance such findings at least show that Nixon and Ford tried to address a crisis through a rhetoric whose characteristics bid audiences to be both *involved* with and *uncritical* of the administration.

Upon becoming president, Ford opened his first dinner speech in the new position with

Let me congratulate the distinguished members of the White House Correspondents Association on your valiant, courageous, and successful struggle to achieve one of the greatest and most consequential journalistic triumphs of our time. I am referring, of course, to your heroic efforts to keep the press plane from converting to no frills. (1975, par. 5)

Where a typical crisis rhetoric response might be to avoid talking about the Watergate scandal or to talk about it directly with an apology or other response, this statement paradoxically manages to do *both* by flirting with a possible premise of “he’s talking about Watergate” to maximize audience interest, while turning from that expectation in the punchline to avoid bearing the cost such a move may portend. By juxtaposing two frames, audiences are gently nudged to negotiate the expanded space as a way of reframing the unstated, “crisis” domain. Because crises create sites where many meanings are up for grabs—with presidents seeking to diminish the influence of others’ framings of a problem—the enthymeme asks audiences to persuade themselves to attribute more positive valences to the problems in the unstated frame by tacking back and forth between the domains through links and laughter (or, more technically speaking, perceptual shifts and a physiological change that tend to skew in a positive, emotionally pleasing direction).

The changing nature of political authority in the post-Watergate era plays a role in this rhetoric. Scholars have documented citizens’ high levels of distrust toward traditional sources and authority claims since Watergate (Denton 2000). In this climate, presidents have faced expectations for being both strong rulers *and* humble and responsive

populists, with the latter demand arising from intellectuals who waged terms like “imperial” and “monarchy” against presidents in the 1970s (Ellis 2008, 82). By operating on two levels at once, enthymematic jokes negotiate these dueling expectations. Shifting the construction of meaning to audiences through the enthymeme’s risky, unstated context provides a means for presidents to appear less controlling and dictatorial in their messaging. Since Nixon especially, “presidents have found an increasing need to verbally express a point of commonality” with audiences than in times past (Lim 2002, 341, 338).<sup>8</sup>

Jimmy Carter’s WHCD speeches exhibited less crisis joking and a choice to hold a serious, breakfast interview format with the press in 1978. But he still used the event to engage in self-deprecation during the energy crisis: “we are planning . . . to give an award to the newsperson who can best explain our energy policy in clear and concise language” (Carter 1977, par. 16). He also playfully lambasted the press for its presidential criticisms: “a lot of alcohol, doesn’t seem to affect your judgment very much. You’re still able, under conditions of sobriety or otherwise, to concentrate about the same facility on the important issues of the day” (Carter 1979, par. 12). The two jokes allowed Carter to widen his rhetoric beyond typical choices and to stage an evaluation in a less overt, stinging manner—similar to *The Simpsons* creator Matt Groening’s (1996, 109) idea that “you can get away with all sorts of unusual ideas if you present them with a smile on your face.”

Ronald Reagan more firmly established crisis joking as a viable option for presidential rhetoric. Reagan’s background as a performer, use of experienced joke writers like Landon Parvin (who wrote many WHCD speech jokes for Reagan and both Bush presidents), and general willingness to tell jokes helped spur the trend along, but some changes in the WHCD format probably influenced the president’s choices.<sup>9</sup> Since its inception, the dinner had included a “star-studded cabaret” as its headlining act; but starting in 1983, the dinner began using leading stand-up comedians instead, making joke telling its primary focus (Cohen 2012, par. 4). Visits from controversial celebrities also brought increasing attention to the event, like the presence of Iran-Contra scandal associates and “a woman with whom one presidential candidate had had an affair” (Ververs, n.d., “The Dinner,” pars. 2-3), showing how the event itself became rhetorically entangled with “crisis” connotations. These figures’ attendance meant that crises did not simply lie at a distance, as dormant perceptions for presidents to tap into. They brought some material force to the room, threatening the president’s image and increasing the potential for crisis rhetoric.

Many of Reagan’s jokes addressed Cold War crises and policy making. After a speech calling the Soviet Union an “Evil Empire,” Reagan (1983, 1) opened his remarks the following month with, “Well, from the looks of this crowd I can put away my evangelical speech.” As the press had criticized the president for the “evil” reference at a National Association of Evangelicals meeting, Reagan’s joke acknowledged this strained

8. On the “imperial” terms, see also Thomas and Pika (1996); Laracey (2009); Caesar et al (1981).

9. Parvin also helped Nancy Reagan’s image with humor speeches at the Washington, DC, dinners (Zoroya 1996).

relationship by using the word “evangelical” as a meeting point between two ways of framing the prior speech. Arguments are about more than gaining adherence to theses; they also draw attention to “position[s] already agreed to by an audience” (Conley 2004, 276). Reagan’s single line acted as the tip of an iceberg, in this regard, urging the audience to summon the shared ground that lay beneath to sanitize the issue. More so, because setups are unnecessary for some jokes, the distinction between a two-liner that provides the audience with a premise and the even *more* enthymematic one-liner that asks audiences to do added background work illustrates that such jokes are engineered to create unity when facing problems.

Similarly, enthymematic humor skirts lines between fact and fiction to expand what can be said. Reagan (1982, 1) asserted that someone asked him on the way to the dinner, “what is the White House doing to lessen the threat of being caught in a nuclear holocaust[?],” to which he replied, tongue-in-cheek, “Well, I can assure you we’ve thought of that. We’re putting in smoke alarms.” The punchline’s construction of a fantasy in which the White House trivializes the nuclear crisis through smoke alarms could activate a premise of “we are *really* taking this seriously,” or even, “Reagan’s ability to joke amidst the crisis signals confidence.” In this process, jokes both endorse criticisms while undermining them. Reagan (1987, par. 5) targeted critiques directed toward himself through jokes like, “when I go in for a physical now they no longer ask me how old I am, they just carbon date me”—making himself both the “other” critics hoped to divide themselves from and an “ally” who, with an irreverent glance, could be perceived as self-aware enough about the critique to devalue it.

Jokes’ enthymematic capacities further leveraged criticisms against others. To underscore his anti-Soviet stance, Reagan (1986, par. 1) stated, “this is also the night of the Kremlin Correspondents Dinner in Moscow. That’s when the members of the Soviet media gather to laugh at Gorbachev’s jokes—or else.” From an enthymematic view, the significance of Reagan’s punchline lies less in its critique of the Soviet government than in the unstated premises it bids audiences to (re)produce such as “The U.S.S.R. is a harsh place,” or “if there were a Kremlin Correspondents Dinner, the humor would be more controlled than in the U.S.” Although the joke is a fantasy—and even if hearers rejected its warrants—it still manages to do ideological work by inviting the audience to role play a cognitive viewpoint reinforced by chuckles.

By shifting responsibility for raising messages to audiences, jokes also became useful for not having to bring up major talking points repeatedly. Reagan used this method in his domestic criticisms, joking that “I have been criticized for going over the head of Congress. So what’s the fuss? A lot of things go over their heads”—and “if the Congress wants to bring the Panamanian economy to its knees, why doesn’t it just go down there and run it?” (Reagan 1986, par. 11; 1988, par. 5). In both jokes, Reagan saved himself from having to repeat a worn mantra: big government is inept. To have audiences construct his propositions, sometimes these critiques bore on specific individuals and the Democrats more generally, as in “I’m afraid Dukakis’[s] foreign policy views are a little too far left for me. He wants no U.S. military presence in Korea anymore, no U.S. military presence in Central America, and no U.S. military presence at the Pentagon” (Reagan 1988, par. 4).

George H. W. Bush's WHCD jokes were less adventurous than Reagan's, including a choice to do only one joke at the 1992 speech, given the Los Angeles city riots (Bush 1992). Moving outside of media framings of "unrest" and "violence" may have been difficult in this context. But Bush (1990) still used the forum to joke about perceptual problems that had developed during his presidency, including Dana Carvey's impressions of him on *Saturday Night Live* and reported gaffes like standing next to Michael Jackson without realizing it during the Gorbachev summit. Attempting to move beyond the "embarrassing" frame in which he was enmeshed, Bush told the press: "Sunglasses. No coat, no tie, no expression. Bored. A little confused. I just figured he was another reporter" (Bush 1990, 8).

In sum, presidents tested and deepened their use of enthymematic jokes to address crises during this period of WHCD speeches. Heads of government have increasingly been expected to become "national meaning-maker in chief[s]" when facing problems or risk losing political capital (Masters and Thart 2012, 760). But jokes could on occasion ask too much from audiences, who may have a hard time engaging in enthymemes' semantic stretches to other frames. In this light, the next several presidents' WHCD speeches amplified this type of rhetoric while illustrating some risks in presidential crisis joking.

### Clinton to Obama

Where Nixon through Bush Sr. raised the stakes for presidential joke making during the WHCD, Clinton turned the speech into a veritable art form for crisis rhetoric. This period can further be distinguished by its shift to a postbroadcast environment well suited to enthymematic communication, particularly with the Internet's advent and increasingly deregulated and fragmented media during the Clinton years. While leaders during the post-World War II years saw audiences as relatively homogenous and passive, there has been a studied shift in political communication and public policy toward "recursive governance," in which politicians must continually engage in monitoring audiences, who have become exponentially "diverse, complex, and [inter]active" (Crozier 2007, 1-2; see also Williams and Delli Carpini 2011; Waisanen 2013). In this era, crises continually loom from every direction. As Kuypers (1997, 3) noted, because Clinton was the first "atomic-age president unable to draw upon the Cold War meta-narrative" and had generally "lost the authority of unilateral definition," he had to turn to "new and more dialogical method[s]."

The White House began to see these speeches as immense opportunities. One speechwriter revealed, "each year, only two presidential speeches were rehearsed and polished . . . the White House Correspondents Dinner and the State of the Union" (Katz 2003, 353). Clinton had a learning curve, however; he was hesitant to deliver comic monologues early in his tenure but embraced the form after initial successes to see "the strategic advantage of tacit comic concessions" (Katz 2003, 352). To make bad circumstances more manageable, Clinton (1999, 669) eventually tried jokes about one of his most demanding crises involving sexual indiscretions with intern Monica Lewinsky.

You may have seen a list compiled by the Newseum of the top 100 news stories of the century. . . . I don't mind telling you, I made the Newseum list—something about the events of last year, number 53—53! I mean, what does a guy have to do to make the top 50? I came in six places after the invention of plastic, for crying out loud. I don't recall a year of 24-hour-a-day media coverage on the miracle of plastic. (Katz 2003)

Clinton walks up to the edge of the fire in this joke, using the vague “something about the events of last year” to shift the burden of stating the specific reference to the audience. The president was so embroiled in the Lewinsky controversy that it might have been a mistake *not* to acknowledge the problem. Compared with the choice of so many presidents to avoid the dinner or turn serious, however, Clinton's strategic, enthymematic confrontation of the topic attempted to expand his credibility by recognizing the shared reference as a problem, letting humor help him speak about, in Cicero's terms, “something offensive in an inoffensive manner” (1970, 150).

At the same time, such jokes became recursive technologies by addressing the circulating frames and meanings of the media environment. A president's skills at multilateralism extend beyond domestic and foreign policy to all contemporary events where audiences value an ability to stitch together different ways of seeing. In other words, joke's structures resist unilateral frames and play into the very *mélange* of modern media. Late-night talk-show humor expanded substantially during the 1990s and focused heavily on the president (Niven, Lichter, and Amundson 2003), driving a presidential need to communicate in a similar fashion. Telling jokes constituted an attempt to move this discursive terrain back in Clinton's direction by co-opting the same comedic tools nightly hammering away at his image.

In the aftermath of the “Lincoln Bedroom scandal,” for example, where critics accused the Clinton administration of pandering to high-level donors by letting them stay at the White House, the president indirectly raised the topic in joking that his daughter Chelsea would be leaving for college: “the bad news is, our only child is going off to college. The good news is, it opens up another bedroom” (Clinton 1997, 501). Referencing Chelsea's bedroom as a means for more donor visits, the joke's importance partly lies in its willingness to signal an ironic way of communicating. But it also lies in comporting with new media styles, which have made “disfluent” ways of speaking useful for the intimacy they can promote between presidents and audiences (McCormick and Stuckey 2013, 3). Modern presidents have become less able to exert control over the press than their forebears, and their fragmented message environment “shifts the hermeneutic burden of making sense . . . upon the receiver” (Becker, quoted in Gaonkar 1990, 300); viewers tend not to watch entire speeches, instead channel or website surfing, multitasking, and ingesting “discursive shards” in an endlessly choice-filled media terrain (Hart 1994, 310; see also Heidt 2012; Tulis 1987, 186). Audiences therefore bring an interpolating consciousness to presidential speech—culling shards from politics, popular culture, and other areas of experience—and come ready to induce and juxtapose the multiple contexts presidential jokes inspire.

Where Clinton amplified the use of dinner jokes as enthymematic crisis rhetoric, George W. Bush both continued and slowed the trend, illustrating some limits to the

strategy. He sometimes used jokes' enthymematic capacities to address crises by commenting, for instance, that "for 8 years as Vice President, Dick [Cheney] has ridden shotgun. That's probably not the best analogy" (Bush 2008, 604). Referring to an embarrassing incident in which Cheney accidentally shot a friend in the face while hunting, in both literal and figurative senses the joke used a colloquial image of the vice president riding "shotgun," or side by side with the president, to invite the audience to fill in the reference with the additional context of Cheney's blunder. Television programs like *The Daily Show* had mocked the administration mercilessly for the incident (Daily Show 2006), so, like Clinton, the joke attempted to dip a toe into the comedic pool and news cycle, fashioning less distance between the president and his opponents. Consistent with jokes at the WHCD from Nixon forward, Bush's joke spoke to a need to come across as less than monarchical, asserting the humility to self-deprecate and appear confident in the face of problems.

Visual enthymemes expanded this strategy further. To address pressing criticisms, Bush's favorite method of delivering jokes involved a slide-show format that used pictures to get to punchlines. The press's framing of Bush as unintelligent constituted a key problem during early speeches. Bush (2001, 681-82) addressed this criticism by showing "my actual First Grade report card. Up top it says: 'George W. Bush' and then notice the final grades on the right: 'Writing A, Reading A, Spelling A, Arithmetic A, Music A, Art A.' So my advice is—don't peak too early." Setting up the joke with visuals could be a way of making the verbal punchline more concrete. That is, enthymematic space becomes more limited with visuals; there is less that the audience has to "imagine" in the lead-up to the punchline, akin to the difference between "hot" media that require less user participation than "cool" media (McLuhan 1964, 22). If visuals circumscribe space for audiences to fill in images themselves, however, responsibility for a joke's content may revert back to the performer (a point that one of Bush's most controversial WHCD jokes will focus).

More than a visual appeal, the report card joke asked audiences to think up a credibility-based premise in which "the president is at least self-aware about this criticism," or even, "in recognizing shortcomings, Bush may be more intelligent than he's been given credit for." Bush used the same strategy by trying to turn his problem of mispronouncing words into an asset, saying his wife, "Helps me in a million ways. Here she is helping me pronounce 'Azerbaijanis'" (2002, 718). Tellingly, one Democrat speechwriter wrote that "every time [Bush] jokes about mangling the English language, he makes it harder for people like me . . . to make that joke" (Buchanan 2004, par. 3).

In what became a common choice, Bush decided not to give a humorous speech at the 2003 dinner to reap support for the Iraq war and journalists' efforts abroad (Ververs n.d.). Like FDR, who only chose to give serious speeches during the WHCD, a topic like war—instead of a personal crisis—appears to contain a much narrower ability for presidents to move beyond direct appeal. Bush's speeches show that perceived or real *violence* affecting many people supported such choices. While Stephen Colbert's blistering satire against the administration during the 2006 dinner provided grounds for more reservation about these events' potentially embarrassing effects (C-SPAN 2006), the following year Bush further explained that "in light of this weeks' tragedy at Virginia Tech, I

decided not to be funny,” contracting a capacity to play in enthymematic space (2007, par. 2).

Part of the president’s hesitation at the WHCD may have been generated from one early rhetorical failure at the dinner. In 2004, commenting on a slide showing Bush looking under his Oval Office desk, the president joked that he still could not find any weapons of mass destruction (WMD), a pretext for launching the Iraq War (CNN.com 2004). Bush failed to construct an enthymeme, because the audiences’ contribution necessary to get the joke was that Bush had *not* yet found the WMDs—which is not the premise or frame of reference you want audiences interpolating toward if you were the president. There was a “filling in” necessary to get the joke, but Bush stayed within the boundaries of a single frame—the very one in which he was factually enmeshed, essentially asking his audience to fill in a gap in the same valenced direction as the literal text supplied to them, with no ironic reading to the joke. Bush directly stated that this joke was about not finding WMDs, and the use of pictures left less room for the audience to fill in their own imagery than otherwise. The administration’s actual failure to find WMDs and the issue’s connections with mass violence created a boundary in which Bush could not extricate himself from his graver responsibilities as a public figure.

Consequently, following public outcry over the joke’s indecency, Bush only told a few jokes in 2005, highlighting how humor as enthymematic crisis rhetoric is a risky strategy with continually negotiated boundaries (Bush 2005). As communication increasingly disperses across the boundaries of social media and other online forms, the risk that some audiences may compound or amplify certain interpretations presents as much of an opportunity as a danger for presidential jokes. Stuckey highlights how we can now “all participate in the creation of presidential speeches—we can participate in the construction of a president. All we need is a computer” (2010, 46). Humor’s ambiguity (i.e., its potential to interpolate outward to contexts the producer of the message did not intend) has always been its liability, and whether a president’s jokes get a laugh track or not appears increasingly in the hands of external audiences.

Finally, in a more enthused run, President Obama has had few reservations about using jokes as enthymematic crisis rhetoric. The stakes of his problems may not have risen to the same levels as previous presidents, but he has continued to follow the pattern established by predecessors, especially in jokes intended to correct circulating misperceptions and issues involving his presidential image. Referring to Republican governor and presidential candidate Tim Pawlenty, Obama (*Chicago Tribune* 2011, par. 16) asked, “Have you heard his real middle name? Tim ‘Hosni’ Pawlenty? What a shame”—raising a reference to his middle name, Barack “Hussein” Obama, and the negative connotations opponents have attempted to foster about Obama’s supposed foreignness. Although fictional, the “Hosni” reference is deeply enthymematic in urging audiences to invoke an image of Hosni Mubarek, Egypt’s former, autocratic ruler. Different than Bush’s failed WMD joke, this enthymeme juxtaposes two different worlds, one in which what critics *say* is true and one that outlines what is *really* true, with “Hosni” as a link between the two contexts. The audience supplies a premise of Obama being a foreigner as ridiculous, inverting the stated meaning with a different context with an opposite valence. The audience could read the joke literally, but this option seems unlikely given the nature of the

WHCD audience and the amount of work it calls them to do beyond a single frame of reference, requiring far more participation than Bush's joke.<sup>10</sup>

The significance of enthymematic jokes as sound bites should not be lost here. Sound bites can be reductionist, but in joke form they ask audiences to pull from an iceberg of important political information beneath. In contrast with rhetorical questions or more direct statements like "In our multicultural world, what if a white politician like Tim Pawlenty had a middle name like 'Hosni?'" There is no necessary association between people of the same name," the joke can come across as less "preachy" when the audience has to do more of the heavy lifting to get the argument. Many of Obama's WHCD jokes used this method to object to conspiratorial rhetoric about his citizenship. Citing recent low approval ratings, Obama jested, "I happen to know that my approval ratings are still very high in the country of my birth," and also, "there are few things in life that are harder to find and more important to keep than love—well, love and a birth certificate" (2010, 1). In their everyday work, presidents have few opportunities for counterfactual rhetoric, given the magnitude of their decisions and expectations for direct talk. Yet, in each example, moving beyond the boundaries of more serious, direct speech gave Obama license for counterfactual spaces advocating that he both acknowledges the specific objection and rejects it as false.

Introducing alternate frames in which the audience has to construct an unstated premise of "the president does not really believe what he's saying" to get the joke functions to rebuke objections in some jokes but may also discount any agenda the joke's producers had hoped to embed. Responding to Republican comments about Obama's policies as socialist, and taking the words directly out of opponents' mouths, the president similarly stated, "I've not seen [the movie] 'The Hunger Games,' not enough class warfare for me" (Obama 2012, 2). The joke requires at least some knowledge about the movie *The Hunger Games* and the "class warfare" attacks made on Obama's policies by his political detractors, and thus may be too moored to popular culture or political references for some audiences to oscillate between the two frames and invoke a critique. Relative to the scope of the enthymematic, a joke is a persuasive syllogism that uses the *endoxa*, or the background of shared beliefs and opinions of a community, to ultimately break free from or undermine those very beliefs and opinions from within (Virno 2008). Although they serve as platforms for critiques, Bush's and Obama's jokes show that the jump from a background of allusions shared by a community to the point where they are overcome—rather than simply reproduced—limits some of the potential for enthymematic humor to be radical. Because presidents carry out so much of this kind of joking "tongue-in-cheek" (as in Obama's subtext, "the class warfare objection is ridiculous"), some degree of intended earnestness may also be lost on audiences.

Despite these risks, jokes permitted Obama to play within the boundaries of his opponents' reasoning—not simply *stating* his opponents' arguments but *performing* the punchlines as if he *were* them. When opponents created scares about "death panels" for seniors resulting from his health care policies, the president joked, "this provision ought

10. For research showing how humor can be read in number of ways, see Lamarre, Landreville, and Beam (2009) and Vidmar and Rokeach (1974).

to put a common misconception to rest. It says right here: ‘If you do not like the ruling of your death panel, you can appeal’” (Obama 2010, 3). In performing the joke with his opponents’ seriousness, Obama urged the crowd to role play with him and see a premise by which this particular community’s *endoxa* might be overcome: isn’t this silly? Humorous messages like these can be discounted in the short term as “just a joke,” yet recent evidence suggests they can exhibit a sleeper effect, where the humor exerts increasing influence after a period of time has elapsed, probably due to the message’s memorability (Nabi, Moyer-Guse, and Byrne 2007, 49)—but perhaps also from the very undertow invited by the joke’s form.

All in all, the last century of WHCD jokes highlights the strategic uses of enthymematic humor. Jokes provide only one method for creating rhetoric, but they can expand presidential discourse beyond its typical bounds and herald a site of opportunity for the chief executive—albeit with risks. In the final section, I explore numerous implications from this project.

## Turning Presidential Crises into Punchlines

Presidents have brought comedy and politics together for rhetorical purposes, attempting to turn “problems into punchlines” across their WHCD dinner speeches.<sup>11</sup> Although they may not be successful in these efforts, the strategy of deeply enthymematic joking when facing difficulties marks a distinctive type of political communication corresponding with the evolving modern presidency and other factors. Several conclusions can be drawn from this analysis.

First, to an extent, jokes can expand the discursive boundaries for presidential messaging. They afford relatively open spaces for toying between the lines of fact and fiction in a way that typical, more serious messaging may not. Jokes allow presidents to walk up to a line where a well-known problem may undergo a brief cleanse or complete sanitization. Presidents face many constraints in their communication, as exemplified by their constant use of teleprompters and media handlers. Yet jokes can easily move beyond the circumference of more direct messaging, providing a means of speaking about the unspeakable. Huizinga (1949, 45) commented on this discursive expansion in his classic study of play: “the play concept . . . is of a higher order than seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness.” Recent scholarly discussions have similarly noted irony’s capacities to move beyond dogmatic discourse by fostering “perceptions of reasonableness, humility, and dialectical transcendence”—with the implication that “donning the personality of an ironist permits a politician to adopt the *broadest* circumference of all” (Stuedeman 2013, 59, 66, emphasis added).

As part of this textual expansion, presidential jokes seek to frame and reframe crises. Entman (1993, 53) wrote that frames “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular

11. Judy Carter (2001) has described this quoted function as one of comedy’s most valuable features (back cover).

problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” Enthymematic crisis jokes focus the assignment of blame and make moral evaluations (e.g., my critics are misinformed), and promote certain definitions and causal interpretations (e.g., Congress is making a mess of things, not myself). They ask audiences to expand and juxtapose presidents’ stated frames with other frames carrying hoped for valences. From Nixon and Ford forward, in particular, Campbell and Jamieson’s (2008, 343) point that “great presidents [have] enlarged the range of rhetorical possibilities by performing” the forms and genres of past presidents while “transcending the formulas” appears apt. As part of an expanding modern presidency, the telling of jokes has moved beyond the lighthearted farce or simple image repair problems of earlier speeches to engage increasingly difficult crises.

In this regard, second, enthymematic jokes gain rhetorical momentum by shifting many of the burdens associated with riskier topics to audiences. The pushing of unstated references that need “filled in” onto audiences demonstrates a procedure of “identification,” which, as Burke (1969) reminds us, constitutes the very grounds of persuasion. Having audiences do the work necessary to get many of these jokes has to start with the “self-persuasive” invocation of a shared place (Bitzer 1959, 405), raising the audience’s status as collaborators rather than simply passive recipients in the speechmaking. Enthymematic joking hence contributes to research finding that humor is strategic to the degree that it accomplishes interactive communication goals (Graham, Papa, and Brooks 1992). It also speaks to the observation that “to refuse to take a joke is, in effect, to refuse to accept a relationship”—an act made difficult by laughter being 30 times more likely in social rather than solitary settings (Perinbanayagam 1991, 130; Provine and Fischer 1989).

Just as a phrase can “stand for an entire construction of reality [that] enables a rhetor to modify an antagonist’s philosophy” (Jamieson 1988, 96), enthymematic jokes urge audiences to attend to the weight of what lies beneath compact, stated messages, bringing the collective pressures of laughter to bear on brief moments where implied oppositional constructions can be considered absurd. An open question surfaces over how much this collaborative form of reasoning may contribute to a too cozy relationship between the press and presidents, however. Rich (2007, par. 2) has charged the WHCD event with “the press’s failures in the post-9/11 era: it illustrates how easily a propaganda-driven White House can enlist the Washington news media in its shows. Such is literally the case at the annual dinner, where journalists serve as a supporting cast.” Given Rich’s charge and experimental findings that humor can prevent counterarguments (Young 2008), more pause may be deserved over the deliberative implications of jokes as highly enthymematic, interactive rhetorical devices.

In both expanding textual capacities and inviting audiences to identify with a speaker through enthymematic undertow, third, some glimpses into the practical and ethical limits presidents have faced emerge from these acts, spotlighting the enthymeme’s scope. One limitation concerns the aforementioned thesis of joking about the smoke but not the fire, a line that George W. Bush appeared to cross in his failed WMD joke. *The Daily Show* correspondent Mo Rocca hinted at the parallel constraints comedians themselves faced in joking about the Iraq War: “since we couldn’t make fun of the

events themselves, we could [only] make fun of some of the coverage of the events” (Kurtzman 2002, par. 15). Relevant to current discussions about “the boundaries of discursive responsibility” in comic communication (Carlson and Peifer 2013, 333), and whether through comedians own imaginings of these limits or by way of feedback from audience laughter, some countervailing barriers materialize. Since the president’s role is so wrapped up with the creation and implementation of war and similar policies, an ability to move beyond the boundaries of serious framings of hostility appeared curtailed across the presidential speeches.<sup>12</sup> When it comes to those at the highest echelons of power, associations of real or perceived violence beg more sensitivity than personal crises.

Outside these limitations, enthymematic jokes share affinities with crisis situations, as textual forms well suited to problem contexts. Crises raise anxieties that leaders attempt to purge through rhetoric, while jokes’ setups similarly raise tensions that communicators attempt to remove through punchlines.<sup>13</sup> A rhetorical perspective on jokes provides a sense for how enthymematic undercurrents can function as appeals, so future research should continue to conceptualize humor’s functions in presidential communication. Orwell (1968, 284) once commented that jokes are “tiny revolution[s].” While presidential humor’s effects are still up for question, the features of this strategic rhetoric spotlight that jokes are as likely to attempt top-down as bottom-up revolts, offering insights into the surprising weapons of both rulers and the ruled.

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12. In a content analysis of presidential debates, Rhea (2012, 128) has also found that humor may be counterproductive when dealing with war.

13. As “relief” theories of humor have long established (see Graham, Papa, and Brooks 1992, 167).

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