

2017-12-01

How President Barack Obama Reshaped the Rhetorical Presidency by Slow Jamming the News

Preston Haycock Wittwer
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Wittwer, Preston Haycock, "How President Barack Obama Reshaped the Rhetorical Presidency by Slow Jamming the News" (2017).
All Theses and Dissertations. 7274.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/7274>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

How President Barack Obama Reshaped the Rhetorical Presidency
by Slow Jamming the News

Preston Haycock Wittwer

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Brian Jackson, Chair
Gregory Clark
David Stock

Department of English
Brigham Young University

Copyright © 2017 Preston Haycock Wittwer

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

How President Barack Obama Reshaped the Rhetorical Presidency by Slow Jamming the News

Preston Haycock Wittwer
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

The rhetorical presidency encompasses all the ways a president communicates and acts. These rhetorical elements of the job are not prescribed in the Constitution and as a result it is the presidents themselves who help shape the cultural understanding of presidentiality, of what it means to be president. When President Barack Obama participated in a “Slow Jam the News” comedy sketch on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* in 2012, he took the rhetorical presidency to a place it had never been before. This choice established a new genre of presidential rhetoric that President Obama would rely on throughout his time in the White House—communicating directly to target audiences via the YouTube bully pulpit. The aim of this thesis is twofold: first, provide historical context for presidents utilizing comedy and new forms of mass media for political ends; and second, rhetorically analyze select comedic YouTube videos to reveal how President Obama reshaped the rhetorical presidency to create new opportunities to succeed both culturally and politically.

Keywords: Rhetorical Presidency, Presidential Rhetoric, Rhetorical Analysis, Barack Obama, YouTube.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
Introduction: Studying the Ever-Evolving Rhetorical Presidency.....	1
Contextualizing the Comedian-in-Chief at the YouTube Bully Pulpit.....	6
Artifact Analysis #1: “Slow Jam the News” on <i>Late Night</i> —April 24, 2012	14
Political and Cultural Context.....	14
Rhetorical Analysis	15
Measuring Success	17
Artifact Analysis #2: “Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis”—March 13, 2014	20
Political and Cultural Context.....	20
Rhetorical Analysis	21
Measuring Success	25
Artifact Analysis #3: “Slow Jam the News” on <i>The Tonight Show</i> —June 9, 2016	26
Political and Cultural Context.....	26
Rhetorical Analysis	28
Measuring Success	29
Conclusion: Obama’s Presidency in Memoriam	31
Works Cited	35

Introduction: Studying the Ever-Evolving Rhetorical Presidency

The rhetorical presidency is a collection of public perceptions and expectations for how a president should work, look, act, and sound. These perceptions and expectations are influenced heavily by past presidents but are also undeniably shaped by the ways each new president responds to innovations in technology, culture, and politics. Changes in the rhetorical presidency aren't brought only about by mere institutional changes within the White House or federal government; rather, changes in the rhetorical presidency are often the result of purposeful, original strategies employed by presidents looking to find new ways to reach political goals. It is these new presidential strategies that end up stretching the boundaries of perception and expectation, effectively reshaping the rhetorical presidency in the process. So then, what does it mean, rhetorically speaking, to be president and carry out the constitutional duties of the executive branch of government? As the roles and actions of presidents changed over time, academics began focusing on this question of presidential duties and performance to answer this question. In 1981, political scientists Jeffrey K. Tulis, Glen E. Thurow, James Ceasar, and Joseph M. Bessette first explored this idea of the rhetorical presidency in the pages of *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. The concept this group of scholars introduced was an examination of both the communication and governing style of presidents situated not only in the rhetoric of specific, individual actions, but in conversation with the ongoing transformation of the constitutional presidency from George Washington onward.

Later in 1987, Tulis expanded upon this theory in his book *The Rhetorical President*, outlining the foundation for the understanding of and way to study the rhetorical presidency. In the introduction to *The Rhetorical President*, Tulis calls for updated strategic analyses of

presidential rhetoric that included strategies like examining “the changing conceptions of leadership and the place of these conceptions in our political order” (Tulis 16). Tulis called for these new analytical strategies upon noticing a metamorphosis in the expectations, actions, and results of presidents; as the presidents’ rhetoric evolved, so too should the study of said rhetoric evolve. Tulis robustly outlines presidential rhetoric starting with the “The Old Way” of constitutional principles of the president; continuing with “The Middle Way,” Theodore Roosevelt’s strategies and tactics as the first notable evolution in presidential rhetoric; and finishing with “The New Way,” arguing that a “second constitution” (20) devised by Woodrow Wilson saw the executive office practice new constitutional interpretation and expansion.

Scholars like Trevor Parry-Giles, Shawn J. Parry-Giles, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson applied these research strategies established by Tulis in their attempts to answer the question of what it means, rhetorically, to be president. Giles and Giles did so in their examination of “presidentiality,” “an ideological rhetoric that helps shape and order the *cultural* meaning of the institution of the presidency” (209, emphasis added). Campbell and Jamieson expanded on Tulis’ ideas by labeling and examining specific *genres* of presidential rhetoric. Their study of genres of presidential rhetoric was first explored in their 1990 book *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* and later updated in 2008 with *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words*. In these texts Campbell and Jamieson specifically aim to study “the presidency,” a phrase and idea never mentioned in the Constitution, but a concept that has “come into being as the result of actions of all our presidents” (1–2). The presidency has come to encompass a president’s public actions and speeches whose authorship are attributed to the president while fully acknowledging the work of speechwriters and other executive office staff. In essence, the presidency means that if the

president said it or did it, it is fair game to culturally attribute authorship to the president specifically. What sets Campbell and Jamieson apart in their attempt to answer the question of what it means to be president was to focus on the *genres* of presidential rhetoric. Their definition of genre came from one of their earlier works, *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*: “a genre is composed of a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic” (20). Meaning, a genre is only a genre when it appears repeatedly with the same set of expectations and situations.

In this study I will continue this examination of ever-evolving presidential rhetoric by labeling and studying a new genre of presidential rhetoric—the YouTube bully pulpit—along with its requisite innovative performances of presidentiality. The YouTube bully pulpit, as with other bully pulpits, is a platform for the president to speak directly to the American people. But what makes this bully pulpit unique and in need of study is both its newness and directness; with YouTube (and similar Web 2.0 platforms) the president can connect directly with Americans through highly personal channels like social media. This study is made possible in three ways. First, Tulis’ call for new analytical strategies (a call Campbell and Jamieson themselves answered by establishing genres of presidential rhetoric). Second, Campbell and Jamieson’s own acknowledgment that their research does not name or cover every genre of presidential rhetoric, meaning new genres of presidential rhetoric could come into existence or have simply yet to be studied. And third, in accepting Campbell and Jamieson’s invitation to “encourage further study of the links between presidential power and rhetorical action” by looking at the ways President Obama aimed to forge new links of presidential power via rhetoric (*Deeds Done in Words*, ix). Campbell and Jamieson limited their research to inaugural addresses, state of the union addresses, veto messages, and other legacy genres; I will examine the fledgling Internet-specific

rhetorical options that were first available to President Barack Obama as a way of keeping academic study up to date with the latest developments in presidential rhetoric.

One cannot simply write a new genre of presidential rhetoric into existence. Instead, I'll be adhering to the standards of genre study laid out by Campbell and Jamieson where they claim a genre needs to "transcend the idiosyncratic use" of any one president to the point where "these forms of rhetorical action become ritualistic" (*Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 7). What I present in this paper will be an exercise in rhetorical analysis, examining specific examples of presidential rhetoric to show how President Obama's successes in this new genre could inspire future presidents in their rhetoric. An examination of specific instances of the YouTube bully pulpit at work is needed to demonstrate President Obama's rhetorical actions that future presidents and scholars will look to as blueprints for success the same way President John F. Kennedy's early television appearances still influence presidential rhetoric today.

The analysis of President Obama at the YouTube bully pulpit will follow the method of textual rhetorical analysis, meaning I'll be looking closely at the composition, content, and delivery of each artifact to better understand its purpose. Additionally, factors like political and cultural context will be included so that the analysis can go deeper than looking at how the texts operate but can also include the degree to which these rhetorical strategies were effective both politically and culturally.

Before the case can be made for the YouTube bully pulpit as a new genre, it's crucial to acknowledge the evolution of media and how it has made possible new methods of communication for presidents, effectively creating new genres of presidential rhetoric with each new advance in mass communication. It's inadequate to examine the new opportunities afforded by social media without contextualizing these new communication channels with advances in

newspapers, radio, television, and early versions of the Internet. The first section of the paper, entitled “Contextualizing the Comedian-In-Chief at the YouTube Bully Pulpit,” will present a quick look at how media history has influenced presidents while also examining how past presidents have used comedy. This brief examination of White House comedy is necessary as the highlighted YouTube bully pulpit artifacts act as a showcase for presidential humor. With this foundation established the real heart of this study will follow, the “Artifact Analysis” section, where specific instances of this new genre of presidential rhetoric will be contextually and rhetorically analyzed.

In rhetorically analyzing President Obama at the YouTube bully pulpit, I’ll show how these examples act as a starting point in meeting Campbell and Jamieson’s standards of new genres of presidential rhetoric. Additionally, my analysis will implicitly respond to the latest critiques of presidential rhetoric. In 2007, Stephen John Hartnett and Jennifer Rose Mercieca proclaimed we are in an age of post-rhetorical presidency as presidents increasingly engage in deception and misdirection. In 2012, writer Ezra Klein determined the president’s political persuasive power was decreasing when it comes to whipping up votes or using speeches to establish government or national focuses. My study will not be refutation of these ideas, rather an acknowledgement of their credibility and therefore pressing need for presidents to establish new realms of presidentiality where their power isn’t in decline. Campbell and Jamieson studied the ways in which presidents acted rhetorically as “decisive executive, spokesperson for the nation, and a national priest” (*Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 88). Hartnett, Mercieca, and Klein explored the ways in which those roles are becoming increasingly ineffective for presidents. Meanwhile, what I’ll suggest through rhetorical analysis is that this new genre of

presidential rhetoric establishes a modern way for presidents to persuade and perform successfully.

If President Wilson began moving the rhetorical presidency to better fulfil his political goals, I suggest President Obama's rhetorical actions had the same motivation and were just as successful. Regardless of my suggestions, one of two things will happen. Option A: future presidents will follow President Obama's footsteps and what I present here will be a crisp, raw study of how that change started. Option B: future presidents will treat President Obama's rhetorical choices as idiosyncratic methods best not to repeat (tan suits, perhaps?) and this study will simply be a close reading of how President Obama presided in his own, unique way. Either are entirely possible, but I believe as *Jaws* and *Star Wars* changed what it meant for summer movies to be summer movies, President Obama recognized and capitalized on the changing culture to transform how and where the rhetorical presidency is performed.

There are three cultural artifacts that I believe demonstrate President Obama's new realm of presidentiality in this new genre of presidential rhetoric: his two appearances on Jimmy Fallon's late-night talk shows where he helped "Slow Jam the News" and his participation in a "Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis" web video. However, before these texts are analyzed and used as evidence to make this argument, it is crucial to understand the historical contexts of these performances. Specifically, it is necessary to examine how new forms of media have been utilized by past presidents and how comedy has been strategically used in the rhetorical presidency.

Contextualizing the Comedian-in-Chief at the YouTube Bully Pulpit

Any serious study of the evolution of presidentiality is incomplete without an accompanying study of the history of mass media in America. Tulis states that while presidents use new technologies, they “do not depend upon the development of the modern mass media” to evolve presidential rhetoric. Instead, Tulis points out that technologies like radio and TV “were usable before they were politically employed” (15–16). Meaning, presidents only adopt new media channels when it is clearly beneficial for them to do so. This insight remains true in the days of Web 2.0 where new social platforms appear with frequency, but only when they’re politically and culturally expedient do presidents appear on or use them. Examining the history of media innovations offers insight into all the new way presidents spoke directly to the public, moves which effectively shaped cultural perceptions of “appropriate” presidentially. Carol Gelderman notes that when presidents began seeing the political results of speaking directly to the public “they spoke more and more frequently in each succeeding administration” (xi).

It wasn’t until Theodore Roosevelt was in the White House that the president directly addressed the American people. Up until then presidents mostly remained in their constitutional lanes, addressing Congress “from time to time” via State of the Union Addresses (U.S. Const. article 2 section 3). As Gelderman puts it, he was “the first president to see the chief executive’s office as a ‘bully pulpit,’ by which he meant that when he did not get his way with Congress he took his case to the people” (1). Previously, as Tulis points out, even the most gifted of presidential orators like Abraham Lincoln “recognized the need to rest [their] authority on the Constitution rather than upon raw popular will” (80). It was Teddy Roosevelt who prompted the cultural shift in presidentiality, but it was Woodrow Wilson who did the heavy lifting in this change. Wilson changed the executive gears politically by repositioning the president as *the* defining national voice and classifying Congress as a branch of government more concerned

with local matters (Gelderman, 3). Here is one way Woodrow Wilson started this governmental positioning shuffle: starting with John Adams in 1800, the president would send clerks to Congress to read the presidential State of the Union addresses; in 1913 Wilson went to Congress to deliver his remarks himself. Thanks to newspapers, Wilson's twelve-minute speech was spread from coast to coast and Wilson's administration reached an unprecedented number of Americans. First, Wilson aimed to reshape the rhetorical presidency politically and second, angled to get his administration's message out through new methods of mass communication. This two-step process of attempting to expand the rhetorical presidency and then relying on mass media channels to communicate this new political strategy has served as a reliable rhetorical strategy that has been used again and again in the following decades.

Wilson's strategic use of newspapers was eventually followed by Franklin D. Roosevelt's radio fireside chats, succeeded famously with the first televised presidential election debates with Richard Nixon besting John F. Kennedy on the radio waves, but losing the debate according to those watching on TV. Lyndon B. Johnson first coined the phrase "my fellow Americans," which became the de facto opening line for televised presidential addresses to the public. President George H. W. Bush was the first president to use the Internet. President Clinton's administration created the White House's first web site and President Obama sent the first presidential tweet (*White House Historical Association*).

President Obama's successes with social media are well documented and studied. His social media accomplishments like bringing down Reddit's servers during his Ask Me Anything aside, President Obama is peerless in his use of television appearances as a presidential rhetoric strategy. Thus, Tulis' point about presidents capitalizing on media opportunities long after they were first available gains credibility. President Obama showed up on TV programs and channels

where you might expect to see a president: on CNN with Anderson Cooper or Wolf Blitzer, with Bill O'Reilly of Fox News, and sitting across from PBS's Charlie Rose. Additionally, President Obama sat for interviews with morning- and day-time hosts like Kelly Ripa, Ryan Seacrest, Ellen DeGeneres, and Oprah. But President Obama didn't stop there. A *Fortune* article explains, "Barack Obama Became the Late Night Comedy President" by appearing on shows hosted by Jay Leno, David Letterman, Jon Stewart, Jimmy Kimmel, Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon, Samantha Bee, and Bill Maher. In fact, when President Obama appeared on Jay Leno's *Tonight Show* in March 2009, he was the first sitting president to appear on the program, an opportunity that had been available starting with Dwight D. Eisenhower. Because President Obama was the first sitting president to speak to American from the *Tonight Show* couch, this paper will be among the very first examinations of President Obama's developments to the rhetorical presidency via comedy, late-night comedy shows, and pop culture.

During President Obama's time in the White House, the very notion of television was in flux with social media platforms and video streaming sites creating new opportunities for delayed viewing, providing TV clips and full episodes a chance at a second life by making the rounds on Facebook and Twitter. (President Obama claimed another presidential mass media first when he was interviewed on the podcast *WTF with Marc Maron* in June 2015.) It was through these new platforms President Obama reached online audiences with his meme-y BuzzFeed videos and March Madness bracket predictions. At the end of the Obama administration, while also noting Michelle Obama appearance on James Corden's "Carpool Karaoke" series, *Washington Post* reporter Juliet Eilperin noted, "For the Obamas, online comedy came to represent the latest evolution of the presidential bully pulpit" ("Remember when...").

It wouldn't be too difficult for anyone occupying the Oval Office to get invites to appear on these talk shows. What sets President Obama apart, and made his appearances so engaging, was the style of comedy he used to establish his take on presidentiality. President Obama's style of comedy—used not only in the artifacts studied herein, but throughout his presidency—was described in a 2016 *New Yorker* as a “sophisticated small-club act. It was dry and urbane, performed in the cerebral persona that made Obama a natural fit when he made visits to, say, Marc Maron's podcast or *Seinfeld*'s ‘Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee.’” This explanation is fitting as it identifies not only President Obama's intelligent recognition of what was considered “in style” socially, but also reveals that President Obama didn't attempt to appear “in style” himself; instead, President Obama would bring out the humor that comes when one is comfortable living in their own skin while recognizing they were too old fashioned or sincere to truly fit in with a younger, more jaded cultural majority.

To best understand President Obama's presidential humor contextualization is key. Marin Alisky chronicled the history of “presidential humor to sustain policies,” naming Lincoln as the first president who gained recognition for their use of comedy. Per Alisky, he had “a genius skill for terseness and humor,” deflating tense situations with clever quips and entertaining the presidential staff with jokes (375). In fact, so talented was Lincoln as a humorist and so large was his comedic shadow, that it wasn't until Theodore Roosevelt's tenure as president that humor was again noticeably used as a tool in the rhetorical presidency. From there Alisky analyzes the Wilson (The Professor President), Coolidge (Not-So-Silent Cal), Reagan (Relaxed Reagan), and other preceding administrations, noting the several presidents not known for any signature sense of humor (Johnson, Ford, Carter, and Nixon). This last group overlaps with the premiere of

Saturday Night Live, which has lampooned every president since Gerald Ford with varying degrees of verisimilitude.

Starting with Ford's reaction to Chevy Chase's impersonation, there is useful insight to be gained by seeing how presidents react as a way of measuring their ability to laugh at perceptions of their presidency by miserly defending themselves or going along with the joke. Josh Compton characterizes Ford's response to Chase's impression as one marked with "self-deprecating humor to play along with the popular mimicry" (65). According to Compton's research, Presidents Ford, H.W. Bush, Clinton, and W. Bush all spoke publicly about *SNL* or their specific impersonators with different levels of gameness, noting that W. Bush referenced his *SNL* impersonator to deflect tough questions while H.W. Bush was especially vocal about Dana Carvey's heightened impression, even praising Carvey for "enhancing perceptions of Bush's sociability and sense of humor" (66). Then Senator Barack Obama came on *SNL* in November 2007 in the cold open for the show, helping start the program with its regular line "Live from New York, it's Saturday Night!" This early campaign appearance demonstrates how President Obama would later rely on his comedic chops by turning to comedy to communicate crucial political messages.

That President Obama would not return to *Saturday Night Live* during his presidency speaks to his understanding of the comedic lay of the land. While *SNL* was going through an identity crisis during his presidency, President Obama would visit Jimmy Fallon's show, participate in FunnyOrDie.com videos, and recreate a popular *Key & Peele* sketch at a White House Correspondents Dinner. And again, his appearances are only half the story—the other half is the style of comedy used on those occasions. President Lincoln may have made bawdy jokes to those lucky enough to interact with him in person, but no president has had the reach or

comedic opportunity to perform the rhetorical presidency like President Obama did. It is revealing that President Obama didn't just appear on *The Tonight Show*, but that he participated in comedic sketches too. This is a perfect example of how President Obama's strategic and purposeful use of comedy requires just as much attention when it comes to studying the evolving rhetorical presidency during the Obama era.

In his study of political wit, Hans Speier considers jokes as both aggressive and defensive weapons that can divert, heal, or mock. Additionally, Speier notes the need to examine the *direction* of jokes, asking "who says what to whom?" and "at whose expense?" (1,385). In his comedy, President Obama repeatedly positions himself as either the target of the joke or puts himself on equal ground as the American people. For example, he appeared on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* to participate in a "Mean Tweets - President Obama Edition" segment where he read public, critical tweets about himself for two whole minutes, laughing along to jokes about his ear size, graying hair, and affinity for "dad jeans." In a BuzzFeed video he struggled to dunk an oversized cookie in a tall glass of milk, dropped the cookie in defeat, and muttered, "Thanks, Obama," the meme-y, sarcastic expression used to blame any and all personal problems on President Obama's administration.

With so many and frequent examples of the sense of humor President Obama used to shape his rhetorical presidency, he was recognized by professional comedians for his winning sense of humor. As mentioned previously, Jerry Seinfeld featured President Obama on an episode of his web series "Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee," defending this choice by telling the *Washington Post* "He's done some really good work as a monologist at those correspondents' dinners—that's how he qualifies to be on the show" (Heil). Actor Will Ferrell (*Anchorman*, *Saturday Night Live*, *Step Brothers*, etc.) and director/writer Adam McKay (*The Big Short*,

Anchorman, *Step Brothers*, etc.) agree—they consider President Obama to be the funniest president ever (Colburn).

With this history in mind—specifically the history of the rhetorical presidency as influenced by mass media along with the history of comedy in the White House—an analysis of the earlier identified artifacts can begin. One of the reasons these specific artifacts were chosen is because they are prime examples of a new type of media only existed starting with President Obama. These new media artifacts not only make the analysis more immediately timely, but also raise the stakes for President Obama’s rhetorical strategies as these choices could set new presidential precedents (like JFK with TV). The political and cultural contexts of the three cultural artifacts can reveal the ways in which President Obama reshaped the rhetorical presidency by playing to his comedic strengths and utilizing new media platforms, namely YouTube. President Obama’s appearances slow jamming the news and sitting “Between Two Ferns” are particularly ripe for analysis because they so effectively demonstrate President Obama’s sense of humor: playful, dry, insightful, and self-deprecating. Not only are they worth studying for their comedy, but all three artifacts were seen either mostly (or entirely) through online venues like YouTube, new and strategic venues which offer insight once again into the way presidents experiment with new media.

Again, here is how the artifact study will proceed: a textual rhetorical analysis that looks not only at how the composition and content reveal the purpose of each performance, but also examines the political and cultural context of each selected text. This kind of textual rhetorical analysis requires an especially close look at the speaker’s, i.e. President Obama’s, attempts to establish an ethos that simultaneously fits within the historical expectations of presidentiality, but

also allows for new rhetorical ground to be covered thanks to these new channels of communication.

Artifact Analysis #1: “Slow Jam the News” on *Late Night*—April 24, 2012

Political and Cultural Context

On July 1, 2012, the interest rates for Stafford student loans were set to double and only an act of Congress could keep the interest hike at bay. With 2012 being an election year, President Obama made this issue—and student loans generally—a focus of his campaign. However, when Mitt Romney, the Republican nominee for president in 2012, echoed President Obama in asking Congress to prevent the interest rates from doubling, it wasn’t exactly a partisan issue.

President Obama still made it a repeating theme of his campaign message and decided in April 2012 to take this message—the call for Congress to prevent the Stafford loans from doubling—to the viewers of *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, the 12:30 a.m. follow-up to *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Fallon had been hosting *Late Night* since 2009, was invited to host the Emmy Awards in 2010, and had found early online success with his shows’ first viral video “History of Rap with Justin Timberlake,” also in 2010. With Fallon’s popularity rising, President Obama’s decision to appear on *Late Night* was no accident; the Pew Research Center has found that “about a third of people aged 18–29 (34%) learned about campaigns and candidates from late night comedy shows—higher than any other age group” and increasingly those younger viewers were turning in to Jimmy Fallon (Fortune). And President Obama’s appearance on *Late*

Night was even made more strategic by recording that day's episodes at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in front of hundreds of college students.

This appearance on *Late Night* was markedly different than President Obama's previous late-night talk show appearances, which makes this media artifact worth attention and a prime first example of this new genre in action. Instead of limiting himself to the couch for a canned anecdote, President Obama participated in one of *Late Night*'s ongoing comedy sketches: "Slow Jam the News." The premise of the sketch is that Fallon, assisted by his house band The Roots, serenade viewers the day's top news stories and headlines in the style of a slow jam. The comedy of this sketch is rooted in contrast: current events paired with a style of music that is obviously dated, a dorky host in Fallon putting on a smooth blues and soul persona that clearly doesn't fit him, and matching a genre known for heavy emotional and romantic messages with content as dry as the day's economic or political news.

President Obama's slow jam began with him explaining the situation with the Stafford student loan interest rates. While Fallon and members of The Roots handled the comedy lampooning the slow jam genre of music and dropping cultural reference to Kayne West, President Obama stayed on message explaining his administration's desire to "keep college affordable" before ending the sketch with a playful "oh yeah," which came across as more dorky dad than it did soulful crooner.

Rhetorical Analysis

There are so many factors to this sketch that make it so effective, rhetorically speaking. First off, in targeting college students (both those present and those watching later), filming live on a college campus amounts to bowling with the bumpers up. Meaning, it was a strategically

expedient and direct way to reach the target audience of college students. The “studio” audience’s approving responses to calls to keep college affordable operate the same way a laugh track does for sitcoms: it patterns for those also in the target audience watching how they should react.

Thanks to the way the sketch operates, President Obama transitions into late-night comedy in a way that lets him retain an aura of presidentiality by playing the comedic straight man. Fallon plays the clown with statements like “What does POTUS mean?” and “or as I like to call him, the preezy of the United Steezy.” Tariq Luqmaan Trotter, aka Black Thought and lead MC of The Roots, does the actual crooning (“he’s the POTUS with the mostus”) and makes the pop culture-inspired jokes about Kim Kardashian and Kanye West. President Obama reads his lines in the same voice and cadence he would in any traditional televised appearance. The ethos that President Obama is appealing to in this sketch is one of traditional presidentiality, but everything around him is the exact opposite in terms of seriousness of tone, respectability, and sincerity. Even in this sketch that is all about trying to find a way, *any way*, to make the news seem more engaging President Obama is relaying information about voting deadlines and interest rates with an aching sincerity that shows he doesn’t need jokes and irony to engage with current events. This kind of delivery only adds another element of contradistinction to a sketch built on comedic contrasts.

Much of the laughs come from the antithesis between President Obama’s sincerity and all the shenanigans happening around him. But make no mistake—the comedy is only working as well as it is because of President Obama’s performance. Most students of comedy will tell you it is the straight man whose role is the more challenging and more important to the comedy in any double act. Groucho, Costello, Lewis, Belushi, Gonzo, Calvin, Richards, and in this case Fallon,

have the fun with pratfalls and showy jokes, but all their comedy only works as well as it does in contrasting Zeppo, Abbot, Martin, Aykroyd, Kermit, Hobbes, Seinfeld, and in this case Obama.

Not only does President Obama's position in the sketch play to his rhetorical and comedic strengths, it also is a smoother transition from politics to comedy than, say, lip-synced karaoke or wearing a crazy wig on *SNL* would be. President Obama looks like President Obama while slow jamming the news and he sounds like a president in his portions of the sketch. Meaning, the appeals to ethos he is making and the delivery of his political messages in this sketch are the exact same kinds of appeals and messaging you'd see him make in presidential debates with Mitt Romney. He's got the suit and tie on, he's looking right into the camera as he addresses the audience, and he stays on message as he talks about student loans amid the rest of the comedy going on around him. The only thing that President Obama personally does to jokingly add to the sketch is his "oh yeah" and mic drop button to end the sketch. By easing the rhetorical president into late-night comedy President Obama gave Americans a chance to gently test out how they felt seeing a president engage in this new setting. Even as he was taking the rhetorical presidency to places it'd never been before, President Obama still did it with traditional presidential decorum, but managed to find humor in decontextualizing said decorum.

Measuring Success

The appearance on *Late Night* and especially President Obama's decision to participate in the slow jam comedy sketch resulted in almost immediate media attention. The next day, Fox News personality Gretchen Carlson first acknowledged the strategy in targeting younger viewers via Jimmy Fallon's show, but maintained "I personally do not agree with the highest office of the land, the most important figure in the world going on these comedy shows. I think it lowers the

status of the office” (Treadway). Comments like these expose the way media figures and everyday voters engage with notions of presidentiality and presidential rhetoric: is this an appropriate use of the President’s time? Is this something that minimizes the office of the presidency? Surely responses like these must have been leveled earlier in history as other presidents experimented with new forms of mass media. However, MSNBC host Ed Schultz pointed out back in 2012 that these more recent debates about presidentiality tend to follow party lines when he juxtaposed Carlson’s take on President Obama’s appearance on *Late Night* with her read on then President George W. Bush’s pre-taped appearance on *Deal or No Deal* in April 2008. Of President Bush’s game show appearance Carlson remarked “That’s amazing. It’s really bringing down the whole idea of being president to just the human being level. I like it” (“Fox News Did Not Like...”).

To determine the success of President Obama’s decision to “Slow Jam the News” we must examine not just reactions from political pundits, but to see how or if this new experiment in presidential rhetoric moved the needle in any significant way politically. The best way to determine the success or failure of this gambit is placing it in context with Congress’ actions regarding Stafford student loans and by examining the results of the 2012 presidential election.

Of course, President Obama was victorious in the 2012 election, but it is important to note the extent to which he captured the youth vote—the same demographic that he strategically targeted via *Late Night*. President Obama carried 67% of the youth vote over Romney’s 30% take (Robillard), a clear indication that President Obama’s decision to reach young voters by appearing on *The Late Show* to slow jam the news and other similar strategies was an unqualified success.

With the Stafford student loan issue getting the actual attention on *Late Night* perhaps it is fairer to examine *that* political context as the more important determining factor in the success or failure of President Obama's decision. The timeline is straightforward: on April 24, President Obama called on Congress via *Late Night* to keep the interest rates from doubling (a decision Congress then had to make yearly). On June 29, the House voted 373:52 and the Senate voted 74:19 to extend the low rates for another year. Additionally, the next year in July Congress passed a bill that determined Stafford student loan interest rates would henceforth match the Treasury Department's cost of borrowing along with a capped rate should it rise too much (Nawaguna).

One appearance on one late-night talk show did not result in President Obama carrying nearly 70% of the youth vote and Congress wasn't waiting for a YouTube clip from Jimmy Fallon's show to decide how to handle the student loan interest rates. But it must be acknowledged that President Obama strategic decision to slow jam the news exemplifies what William Riker said about presidential rhetoric as "the art of structuring the world so you can win" (quoted in Zarefsky, 612). While appearing on Jimmy Fallon, President Obama called his shot: the Stafford loan rates must not double. When the lower rates were protected it didn't really matter at the vote-by-vote level and who thought what of President Obama's presidentiality, but what mattered is that President Obama looked like a rhetorical winner.

(Unfortunately, even a baseline view count of this sketch is impossible to determine as the *Late Night* social channels, including YouTube, were scrubbed and switched over to *Late Night with Seth Meyers* when Meyers took over hosting duties after Fallon moved to *The Tonight Show* in 2014.)

Artifact Analysis #2: “Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis”—March 13, 2014*Political and Cultural Context*

On October 1, 2013, HeathCare.gov was officially launched. The website was the portal for Americans to sign up for new health care options made possible thanks to the Affordable Care Act, also known colloquially as Obamacare. The website launch was a disaster and it wasn't until November 2013 that the website was reported to finally be working smoothly. The open enrollment deadline for coverage for the following year was March 31 and the Obama administration had a lot of catching up to do politically and culturally to fix the image of HeathCare.gov.

As far back as summer 2013, staff in the Obama administration were meeting with show business figures to determine “how Hollywood could help get the message out about healthcare reform” and reportedly the top choice of Obama’s advisors was Zach Galifianakis’ web series “Between Two Ferns” (Johnson, “How Funny or Die Got President Obama”). The web series, hosted by FunnyorDie.com and viewable via YouTube, has fewer than twenty episodes total, and most are under five minutes long. “Between Two Ferns” is a dry, sardonic, and irreverent series where host Zack Galifianakis (*The Hangover* trilogy, *Bored to Death*, etc.) alternates between asking asinine questions and caustically roasting his guests as they sit between the two eponymous ferns in front of a plain, black backdrop, giving the show a feeling of low, almost cheap production value. Previous guests including Natalie Portman, Ben Stiller, Sean Penn, Bruce Willis, and others usually were given the opportunity to answer Galifianakis’ barbs in kind, ultimately positioning the host as the pitiful butt of the joke in nearly each episode.

When President Obama and his staff finally decided on participating in a “Between Two Ferns” in early 2014, the prep work came together quickly, resulting in Zach Galifianakis and his production crew shooting in the White House Diplomatic Room on February 24, 2014. The plan was to highlight the enrollment deadline and to do some damage control on the botched HealthCare.gov rollout.

The result was a six-and-a-half-minute video where Galifianakis mocks President Obama for pardoning turkeys, for getting “the guy who created the Zune to make your website,” the questions about his birth certificate, calls him a nerd, and asks him “what is it like to be the last black president?” In return President Obama makes fun of Galifianakis for not being as good looking as Bradley Cooper, for starring in the disappointing *Hangover* sequels, for having a three-inch vertical jump, and quips “when I heard people actually watched this show I was pretty surprised.” After three straight minutes of comedic back and forth President Obama gets to talking about the Affordable Care Act and says “HealthCare.gov works great now,” encouraging young Americans to sign up for affordable health care and informing them insurers can no longer discriminate against those with preexisting conditions. In the last few minutes of the video HealthCare.gov is referenced repeatedly, a phone number is provided for more information, and basic instructions for signing up for health care are provided.

Rhetorical Analysis

“Between Two Ferns” plays to President Obama’s rhetorical and comedic gifts the same way slow jamming the news did. His comedy is layered, insightful, and playful while always remaining dignified, even as he fields questions about the extent to which he actually supports America. But what makes this video such an astounding move for the rhetorical presidency is

President Obama's willingness to let his administration be critiqued and questioned through the comedy. By allowing Galifianakis to make cracks about drone strikes and the government reading citizen's text messages President Obama is implicitly supporting constitutional freedoms of speech. (And this isn't the only way President Obama is able to support the Constitution in this sketch: he specifically voices his support of a two-term limit for presidents as well.) Not only does President Obama allow for criticisms against his administration, he also permits joke after joke directly at his expense. He is even introduced as simply "Barack Obama—Community Organizer" at the top of the video.

There is no exaggerated image control or attempts to position himself as a flawless leader. It isn't JFK's televised Bay of Pigs mea culpa, but it at least pointing in that direction as President Obama owns up to Healthcare.gov not working the way it should when it was launched. This is a clear demonstration of the level of credibility President Obama wishes to possess as president: he doesn't want his administration's mistakes hidden or rationalized. Instead, President Obama wants to establish an ethos that communicates his goal to make things right and to own his mistakes, even when they are unforced errors like the botched HealthCare.gov rollout. The audience for "Between Two Ferns" is one that has a great level of comfort navigating the internet, both because it is a series only available online and much of the show's jokes require a familiarity with pop culture news and interests which are available online before anywhere else. With that, the "Between Two Ferns" audience likely knows HealthCare.gov was a mess of a website upon launch and would criticize President Obama the same way Galifianakis does. All of this demonstrates, again, the credibility President Obama demonstrates by allowing those criticisms to reach him directly and to not make excuses for his administration's mistakes.

However, President Obama always maintains control in the sketch as he endures Galifianakis' cracks. He acts conventionally presidential as he tells Galifianakis when he is ready to move on to the next subject and when he responds to Galifianakis' absurd questions by actually calling them ridiculous. President Obama smirks and bites his lower lip as an acknowledgment of a particularly good joke he makes at Galifianakis' expense. Even though he is responding to jokes about his nationality and support of America President Obama is showing his actual frustration with these questions that have followed him throughout his political career. Again, he looks and sounds presidential just as he did slow jamming the news, but this time he adds a presidential setting in revealing at the end of the video they've been filming in the White House. This web series is like "Slow Jam the News" in that it is a gentle slide into comedy, allowing President Obama to retain the trappings of the rhetorical presidency even as he experiments with it.

But what is perhaps most effective about this video is just how *sharp* the humor is. The jokes cover a wide variety of comedic ground, including phallic jokes, and come in rapid succession: "In 2013 you pardoned a turkey. What do you have planned for 2014?" "Do you send Ambassador Rodman to North Korea on your behalf? I read somewhere you'd be sending Hulk Hogan to Syria. Or is that more of a job for Tonya Harding?" "Where are you planning on building your presidential library: Hawaii or your home country of Kenya?" This isn't dad humor or politicians attempting to make easy jokes on Twitter. This is comedy written (Scott Aukerman) and performed (Zack Galifianakis) by some of the most renowned comedians working today.

Most of the best written one-liners are delivered by Galifianakis and not President Obama, a choice which again reveals that President Obama is a team player when it comes to

creating the best possible comedy. This video is not a solo exhibition for either participant: Galifianakis' jokes only land as well as they do because the audience can see President Obama's growing frustration at having to answer questions yet again about his birth certificate. And President Obama's jokes about Galifianakis work thanks to the president's willingness to play along with the hyper specific comedic wavelength that is "Between Two Ferns." While President Obama maintains an ethos of control in this video, it is clear he knew when to let the professional comedians handle the comedy.

The writing in the sketch is sharp, quick, and completely matches the tone set in the series' previous episodes. What is most impressive about President Obama's performance in this episode is how well he matches the kind of comedy displayed by the likes of Jennifer Lawrence and other guests in previous installments. President Obama responding to the turkey pardon crack with "was that depressing to you, seeing one turkey taken out of circulation, a turkey you couldn't eat?" is a pitch perfect match in delivery and subject with an exchange in Jennifer Lawrence's earlier episode. Galifianakis tells her she's being off-putting, and Lawrence responds "you should be off pudding. Cause you're fat. You shouldn't eat any more pudding."

The comedy of the YouTube channel was not compromised to make a puffy government PSA and President Obama holds his own among professional comedians featured in the series by producing genuinely layered, insightful, and playful content. The layers exist in the kinds of comedy coming from both President Obama and Galifianakis. The insightfulness is found President Obama allowing criticisms of his administration to be launched at him directly, revealing the ethos of president. Additionally, in President Obama adapting so well to this new style of comedy he is revealing an ethos defined by competency, a kind of presidentiality long expected from modern presidents. And the playfulness is apparent in that President Obama isn't

staying as close to traditional presidential rhetoric as he did in the first “Slow Jam the News;” instead, President Obama is making out-and-out jokes and in his delivery positioning himself next to the career comedians who also appear in this web series.

Measuring Success

On YouTube alone, there were 10 million views of the video on the first day of its release (Stanley). The day the video was first online it was the “number one director of traffic to HealthCare.gov” (Schulman) and more importantly the video led a 40% overall “surge in traffic and helped shift the broader narrative about HealthCare.gov” (Eilperin). FunnyorDie.com founders Will Ferrell and Adam McKay claim the video is the most important, biggest video their website produced. Combining all the different ways to watch the video, “Between Two Ferns with Barack Obama” notched more than 50 million views (Colburn). The video even earned its producers an Emmy Award for Outstanding Short-Format Live-Action Entertainment Program.

These cultural and political results all but prove this rhetorical choice an effective success: millions of Americans heard from their president in a new way about an important issue made possible through legislation and years of hard work from those in the Obama administration. Of course, not everyone saw this new venture in presidential rhetoric as a success: Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly called the video a farce, said it made President Obama appear weak to foes like Vladimir Putin, and said simply “Abe Lincoln wouldn’t have done it” (Talking Points Memo).

A few days later President Obama was asked in an interview with Colin Cowherd of ESPN Radio (which itself was another strategic appearance to spread the news about the health

insurance signups) to respond to O'Reilly's criticism that Lincoln wouldn't have done it. To that President Obama said, "if you read back on Lincoln, he loved telling the occasional bawdy joke about being out among regular folk" and went on to talk about the difficulty of escaping from the artificial bubble of being the president and avoiding sounding like "some Washington stiff" (Johnson, "President Obama Defends"). President Obama went on to say he did "Between Two Ferns" not only to reach young, male Americans who weren't particularly politically active and couldn't be reached through normal platforms of presidential rhetoric, but to remind himself of "the wonderful people that you are supposed to be serving, who have a sense of humor, and aren't thinking every day about position papers" (Johnson, "President Obama Defends").

Artifact Analysis #3: "Slow Jam the News" on *The Tonight Show*—June 9, 2016

Political and Cultural Context

Only a few months after President Obama's appearance on *The Late Show with Jimmy Fallon* in 2012 NBC was said to begin discussions with Jimmy Fallon to take over hosting duties on *The Tonight Show*. When President Obama returned to Jimmy Fallon's late-night talk show in 2016 to once again "Slow Jam the News" he did so this time on *The Tonight Show*. Again, this was not President Obama's first time on *The Tonight Show*; he had appeared early on in his presidency when Jay Leno was hosting but played it straight being a typical talk show guest sitting on the couch.

The political stakes for this slow jam were much lower for President Obama than last time. He had only months left in the White House and the 2016 presidential election was well under way. On June 6, Hillary Clinton was named the presumptive nominee for the Democratic

party and Donald Trump had been leading the Republican party primaries since March. President Obama showed up on *The Tonight Show* to do three things: show his support for Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, defend the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement (TPP), and enjoy a cultural victory lap.

In March 2016 Donald Trump wrote an opinion editorial for *USA Today* outlining his many concerns with the TPP, calling it a job killer and a “mortal threat to American manufacturing,” sentiments he repeated often in campaign speeches (Trump). The same day President Obama officially endorsed Hillary Clinton for president he later appeared on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* to do so informally, culturally. But *The Tonight Show* gave him a unique opportunity to reach those who don’t read responses to opinion editorials or watch C-SPAN for official endorsements. Instead, President Obama relied once again on the YouTube bully pulpit to connect directly with specific target audiences who otherwise might not hear from him.

The “Slow Jam the News” segment remained the same in its transition from *Late Night* to *The Tonight Show*, where again President Obama could share his message directly while Fallon and The Roots sang and made jokes about Beyoncé and Steph Curry around him. President Obama ran down highlights of his administration: the recovery from the recession, job creation, focus on clean energy, same sex marriage, the Iran nuclear deal, and reopening diplomatic ties with Cuba. While other items were simply name checked, the TPP was explained and defended by President Obama. He threw his support behind Hillary Clinton, pronounced “Americas best days are still yet to come,” and signed off, once again, with a wry “oh yeah” and another literal mic drop.

Rhetorical Analysis

Once again, President Obama can both participate in a comedy sketch while still maintaining the decorum of presidentiality in demeanor, dress, and delivery. Most of what President Obama says in this sketch is essentially a mini, informal State of the Union address covering the achievements of his presidency. He drops numbers and percentages about job growth and economy stimulation in a way that would work in any other political context. However, knowing his audience and the uniqueness of this format he follows up these remarks with “love is love,” when discussing marriage rights. There is still that expected level of presidentiality yet tinged with signs that he knows who he is talking to and how he is being seen.

Because “Slow Jam the News” has remained the same in its format President Obama takes his place once again as the comedic straight man in the sketch. Jimmy Fallon chimes in with “Commander-in-Preach!” and “Prez dispenser” while President Obama talks about the ethical responsibility of voting. Perhaps the best example of this relationship on display in this clip is when President Obama is discussing the upcoming 2016 presidential election and mentions “Now, I know some of the presidential candidates have been critical of my foreign policy.” He continues by saying “I don’t want to name any names . . .” but is immediately cut off by off by MC Black Thought who quickly adds “He’s talking about Donald Trump.” Again, comedy is mined in President Obama’s sincere commitment to the ethos of the respectful, responsible president which is undercut by the absurdity of the sketch.

What is different about President Obama’s comedic straight man in this iteration of the sketch is the overwhelming sense of comfort President Obama radiates in his position, both as a soon-to-be outgoing president and as the unique style of rhetorical presidency he’s carved out for himself. When once again turning down an invitation to run for a third term, President Obama

jokes “Daddy’s got a Hawaiian vacation booked in about 223 days, but who’s counting?” This level of informality and wryness in admitting he’s counting down the days of his presidency show a very relaxed President Obama. An exchange with Jimmy Fallon that exemplifies President Obama’s confidence and tranquility: “Mr. President, are you down with TPP?” “Yeah, you know me.” These glimpses of humor reveal the successes President Obama has had with comedy and reveal a presidency and president very at ease with his sense of humor and established ethos.

It’s more than just the jokes and words that reveal a playful version of President Obama at home with himself and knowing exactly how to reach his target audience in this video. He raises an eyebrow to some of Fallon’s more euphemistic jokes, even smirking and shaking his head in response to “even when Congress tried to block him he found a way in . . . through the back door.” When the soulful slow jam breaks into a riff of Rihanna’s “Work,” President Obama shimmies along to the music and even ends the riff by speak/singing the song’s hook-y chorus “work, work, work, work, work.”

By the time President Obama drops the mic and closes out his late-night presidency, there is an overwhelming feeling of accomplishment, intimacy, and satisfaction radiating from President Obama, Fallon, The Roots, and the studio audience. This video portrays more than just a straight man comedic performance, but a version of that character with senioritis looking back fondly on accomplishments and thankful for the people who helped him along.

Measuring Success

When measuring the cultural and political success of this rhetorical performance, the results are split where the earlier two examples were the same. This time President Obama failed

politically but succeeded culturally. When President Obama was announced by Jimmy Fallon and walked onto the *Tonight Show* stage he was greeted with a long and loud standing ovation from the studio audience. The way he listed off his accomplishments only encouraged the live audience (and those watching later) to continue to show appreciation for President Obama.

Succeeding culturally with this appearance was an easy target to hit: many of his supporters and voting base were already in the show's viewership. In fact, he helped *The Tonight Show* score its highest rated Thursday episode since February 2014 (*Variety*, "TV Ratings"). Not to mention that amid the ugliness of the 2016 election President Obama's approval rating had been steadily increasing to record highs for his administration (Berlatsky). All he had to do was go on stage and take his final late-night talk show bow. When the clip hit YouTube, it reached an even wider audience than those who saw it live. This clip reached 14 million views on YouTube and is in the top 2% of most popular videos on the YouTube page for *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* (*The Tonight Show* YouTube).

The cable TV and partisan backlash to this appearance was much more muted than President Obama's *Late Night* appearance in 2012 or even the "Between Two Ferns" video. Instead of critiquing President Obama for appearing on a comedy show, Bret Baier at Fox News kept to questioning the appropriateness of President Obama's endorsement of Hillary Clinton "amid a federal probe" (Fox News). Perhaps Donald Trump's multiple appearances on late-night comedy shows like Jimmy Fallon's along with Trump hosting *Saturday Night Live* himself in November 2015 made it more difficult for conservative pundits to question the presidentiality of participating in comedy sketches. In fact, the only attempt to question President Obama's comedic choice this time was an attempt by Breitbart News in an article where they compare President Obama's remarks about how the 2016 election should not be treated as a reality show

next to his latest appearance on *The Tonight Show*, a move encouraging their readers to see President Obama as less than consistent (Spiering).

In the long run every political goal President Obama hoped to achieve by slow jamming the news again backfired. Hillary Clinton was not elected president and one of Donald Trump's first actions as president was to withdraw the United States from the TPP. Of course, it is woefully shortsighted to say President Trump won the election because of President Obama's rhetorical decision to appear again on Jimmy Fallon's show. Instead this example of presidential rhetoric simply reveals that even this new brand of presidentiality made possible by the YouTube bully pulpit can be a boon or a hindrance to the president, just like any other kind of presidential rhetoric.

Conclusion: Obama's Presidency in Memoriam

Scholars like Klein, Mercieca, and Hartnett have made difficult-to-refute claims that we now live in a post-rhetorical presidential world. Clearly, gone are the days when a well-written State of the Union address could set a national focus for a decade that would inspire achievements like manned trips to the moon. Gone are the days when presidents were treated unquestionably as the leaders of their political parties, inspiring sweeping successes in elections and legislation. Gone are the days when the president was automatically endowed with an aura of trustworthiness and infallibility. But then again, refuting the claims of writers like Klein, Mercieca, and Hartnett was never the goal here; instead this study aimed to examine the ways President Obama dealt with the stark limitations of his rhetorical presidency during in his two terms in the White House. What President Obama did upon realizing the boundaries of his

rhetorical power was seeking for new ways to achieve his goals, and the YouTube bully pulpit is unquestionably one of those new ways President Obama aimed to find political success.

With this new brand of presidential rhetoric Barack Obama found a novel way for the president to “[structure] the world so that you can win” (Riker quoted in Zarefsky, 612), culturally if not always politically. He was the only person in the world to receive advance episodes of *Game of Thrones* season six. He put one song from a struggling band on a public Spotify playlist and overnight the band’s popularity grew enormously (Garofalo). He was a midwife of sorts for the musical *Hamilton*, giving Lin Manuel-Miranda an early venue in the 2009 White House Poetry Jam to preview his art and later in hosting the cast for a White House concert after the show opened to overwhelming success. President Obama and Michelle Obama even prepared a taped message to be shown at the Tony Awards broadcast where *Hamilton* won award after award. During their time in the White House the Obamas prepared similar videos for the Emmy Awards, Grammy Awards, and Academy Awards, illustrating President Obama’s cultural reach and welcome presence across all forms of media. (Not exactly as impressive as an actual EGOT, but still noteworthy.)

President Obama’s forays into comedy, cultural commentary, and television did not go unnoticed by entertainment reporters when it came time to eulogize the Obama administration at the end of 2016. Film critic Wesley Morris wrote “Barack Obama’s performance as president—meaning the performance he gave in the role of the president of the United States—was flawless” and TV critic Todd VanDerWerff summed it up saying “Obama’s pop culture persona was the guy you maybe wanted to be someday when you grew up” (*New York Times* and Vox).

In looking for answers to “what does presidential rhetoric do,” Zarefsky encourages not only “searching for factors associated with success or failure,” but claiming presidential rhetoric

is better understood as invitations to respond (13). In that sense, this study has started the groundwork in looking for factors associated with the success and failures of President Obama's rhetorical choices as president, but it won't be clear the extent to which this new genre of presidential rhetoric is established concretely until we see how later presidents *respond* to President Obama.

When will we know with any sense of certainty the impact President Obama had on the rhetorical presidency? For now, we are still far too close to the Obama administration to know for sure, but the way the candidates performed in the 2016 presidential primaries and general election provide some hints. Granted, these are the actions of presidential candidates, not presidents and their actions may be overly influenced by the shadow of President Obama's recent rhetorical decisions. Nonetheless it is still interesting to note this incomplete list of presidential hopefuls who appeared on late-night comedy shows on ABC, NBC, CBS, or Comedy Central: Jeb Bush, Rand Paul, Carly Fiorina, Martin O'Malley, Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, Chris Christie, Bernie Sanders, John Kasich, Hillary Clinton, and, of course, Donald Trump. Nearly every one of these candidates followed Barack Obama's footsteps in appearing on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. And, what's more, both Chris Christie and Jeb Bush decided to "Slow Jam the News" when they appeared on the show.

In the immediate future President Obama's influence on presidentiality comes down to President Donald Trump's time in the White House. However, future presidents' response to President Trump's own employment of experimental presidential rhetoric is the more immediately imperative focus, as fellow politicians and historians need to determine if President Trump's version of presidentiality is a one-off, Nixonian blip or the establishment of a new normal of sorts. For both President Trump and, more importantly for the purposes laid out in this

study, President Obama we'll have to wait to accurately measure the response in changes to presidential rhetoric.

As with all things in presidential rhetoric, genres of presidential rhetoric, and presidentiality only time will tell, and we simply won't know until we know. But what we can do now is start to pinpoint historic moments and actions worth studying in attempting to pinpoint important forks in the road, rhetorically speaking. And any study of President Obama's experiments with presidential rhetoric would be well served by looking closely at his time slow jamming with Jimmy Fallon or sitting "Between Two Ferns."

Works Cited

- Alisky, Marvin. "White House Wit: Presidential Humor to Sustain Policies, from Lincoln to Reagan." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20.2, 1990. 373-381.
- Berlatsky, Noah. "Obama's Approval Rating is the Highest It's Been in Years. Why?" *The Week*, 15 Mar. 2016, theweek.com/articles/611956/obamas-approval-rating-highest-been-years-why.
- "Brian Williams/Feist." *Saturday Night Live*, created by Lorne Michaels, season 33, episode 4, NBC, Broadway Video, 3 November 2007.
- Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance*. University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- . *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- . *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*. Speech Communication Association, 1978.
- Ceaser, James W., et al. "The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11.2, 1981. 158-171.
- Colburn, Randall. "Watch Adam McKay and Will Ferrell Reflect on Obama, Tear into Zach Galifianakis." *The A.V. Club*, 31 Aug. 2017, avclub.com/watch-adam-mckay-and-will-ferrell-reflect-on-obama-tea-1798666340.
- Compton, Josh. "Live From DC: *Saturday Night Live* Political Parody References in Presidential Rhetoric." *International Communication Association*, 2010. Web.
- "The Constitution of the United States." Article 2, Section 3.
- Eilperin, Juliet. "Remember When Zach Galifianakis Asked Obama About Being 'The Last Black President'? How that Happened." *The Washington Post*, The Washington Post, 16

Aug. 2016, washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/obama-legacy/funny-or-die-video-history.html.

“Fox News Did Not Like President Obama Doing Slow Jam on Jimmy Fallon.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Tom Rise, 26 April 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=tQYabRz5Pt4.

Gardner, Gerald. *Campaign Comedy: Political Humor from Clinton to Kennedy*. Wayne State University Press, 1994.

Garofalo, Alex. “What Happens When the President Puts a Struggling Band on His Spotify Playlist.” *Thrillist*, 3 Aug. 2017, thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/low-cut-connie-barack-obama-spotify-playlist.

Gelderman, Carol. *All the Presidents' Words: The Bully Pulpit and the Creation of the Virtual Presidency*. Walker & Company, 1997.

Hartnett, Stephen John, and Jennifer Rose Mercieca. “‘A Discovered Dissembler Can Achieve Nothing Great’; or, Four Theses on the Death of Presidential Rhetoric in an Age of Empire.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37.4, 2007. 599-621.

Heil, Emily. “Barack Obama, the First Alt-Comedy President.” *The Washington Post*, 25 Apr. 2016, washingtonpost.com/news/reliable-source/wp/2016/04/25/barack-obama-the-first-alt-comedy-president.

Huddleston Jr., Tom. “How Obama Became the Late Night Comedy President.” *Fortune*, 4 Nov. 2016, fortune.com/2016/11/04/obama-comedy-late-night-shows/.

“The Internet at the White House.” *White House Historical Association*, whitehousehistory.org/the-internet-at-the-white-house.

“Jimmy Fallon and President Obama Slow Jams the News with The Roots.” *YouTube*. Uploaded by ABC News, 25 April 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=TtHoRBIXvvs.

Johnson, Ted. "How Funny or Die Got President Obama on Zach Galifianakis' 'Between Two Ferns' (VIDEO)." *Variety*, 11 Mar. 2014, variety.com/2014/digital/news/president-obama-on-zach-galifianakis-between-two-ferns-watch-1201129329.

---. "President Obama Defends Doing Funny or Die's 'Between Two Ferns'." *Variety*, 20 Mar. 2014, variety.com/2014/biz/news/president-obama-defends-doing-funny-or-dies-between-two-ferns-1201140586.

Klein, Ezra. "The Unpersuaded. Who Listens to a President?" *The New Yorker*, March 2012.

Morris, Wesley. "Obama Understood the Power of Art. And He Wanted You to Get It, Too." *The New York Times*, 18 Jan. 2017, nytimes.com/2017/01/18/arts/president-obama-pop-culture.html.

Nawaguna, Elvina. "Congress Finally Votes to Cut Student Loan Interest Rates." *Reuters*, 31 July 2013, reuters.com/article/us-usa-studentloans-rates/congress-finally-votes-to-cut-student-loan-interest-rates-idUSBRE96U1G220130731.

Nussbaum, Emily. "How Jokes Won the Election." *The New Yorker*, 23 January 2017, newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/23/how-jokes-won-the-election

"Obama Says Rise of Trump has Him 'Worried' about GOP." *Fox News*, 10 June, 2016, foxnews.com/politics/2016/06/10/obama-says-rise-trump-has-him-worried-about-gop.html.

"O'Reilly Slams Obama's 'Ferns' Spot: Lincoln Wouldn't Do Comedy! (VIDEO)." *Talking Points Memo*, 12 March 2014, [talkingpointsmemo.com/livewire/bill-oreilly-abe-lincoln-wouldn't-do-between-two-ferns-interview](http://talkingpointsmemo.com/livewire/bill-oreilly-abe-lincoln-wouldn-t-do-between-two-ferns-interview).

Parry-Giles, Trevor, and Shawn J. Parry-Giles. *The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and US Nationalism*. University of Illinois Press, 2006.

- “President Barack Obama: Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis.” *YouTube*. Uploaded by Funny or Die, 13 March 2014, [youtube.com/watch?v=UnW3xkHxIEQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnW3xkHxIEQ).
- Riker, William H. *The Art of Political Manipulation*. Vol. 587. Yale University Press, 1986.
- Robillard, Kevin. “Study: Youth Vote Was Decisive.” *Politico*, 7 Nov. 2012, [politico.com/story/2012/11/study-youth-vote-was-decisive-083510](https://www.politico.com/story/2012/11/study-youth-vote-was-decisive-083510).
- Schulman, Kori. “In Review: President Obama's Top Moments In the Digital Era.” *Medium*, The Obama White House, 23 Dec. 2016, medium.com/obama-white-house/in-review-president-obamas-top-moments-in-the-digital-era-9493bd5aba51.
- “‘Slow Jam the News’ with President Obama.” *YouTube*. Uploaded by The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, 9 June 2016, [youtube.com/watch?v=ziwYbVx_-qg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ziwYbVx_-qg).
- Speier, Hans. "Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power." Translated by Jackall, Robert and William College. *American Journal of Sociology* 103.5, 1998. 1,352-1,401.
- Spiering, Charlie. “Obama 'Slow Jams The News' While Arguing Presidency is 'Not Reality TV'.” *Breitbart*, 9 June 2016, [breitbart.com/2016-presidential-race/2016/06/09/obama-slow-jams-news-arguing-presidency-not-reality-tv/](https://www.breitbart.com/2016-presidential-race/2016/06/09/obama-slow-jams-news-arguing-presidency-not-reality-tv/).
- Stanley, T.L. “How Between Two Ferns Landed Obama.” *Adweek*, 22 June 2014, [adweek.com/brand-marketing/how-between-two-ferns-landed-obama-158496/](https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/how-between-two-ferns-landed-obama-158496/).
- The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon. *YouTube*. [youtube.com/user/latenight](https://www.youtube.com/user/latenight)
- Treadway, Dan. “Obama's Appearance on Jimmy Fallon Is a Laughing Matter.” *The Huffington Post*, 26 Apr. 2012, [huffingtonpost.com/daniel-treadway/obama-jimmy-fallon_b_1456425.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-treadway/obama-jimmy-fallon_b_1456425.html).
- Trump, Donald. “Donald Trump: Disappearing Middle Class Needs Better Deal on Trade.” *USA Today*, 14 March 2016, [usatoday.com/story/opinion/2016/03/14/donald-trump-tpp-](https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2016/03/14/donald-trump-tpp-)

trade-american-manufacturing-jobs-workers-column/81728584/.

Tulis, Jeffrey. *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Princeton University Press, 1987.

“TV Ratings: ‘The Tonight Show’ Soars with President Obama Appearance.” *Variety*, 10 June 2016, variety.com/2016/tv/news/tv-ratings-the-tonight-show-jimmy-fallon-president-obama-slow-jam-news-1201792944/.

VanDerWerff, Todd. “Barack Obama Was the Perfect Pop Culture President – For Better or Worse.” *Vox*, 20 Jan. 2017, vox.com/culture/2017/1/20/14289476/barack-obama-president-pop-culture-late-night.

Zarefsky, David. "Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34.3, 2004. 607-619.