“The Decision to go to the Moon”

By John F. Kennedy

A Review of the Literature

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With the recent occurrence of the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Soviet Union daily stretching the boundaries between peace and full out war, President John F. Kennedy needed something monumental in order to inspire the United States of America back into action. The Soviet Union’s staggering lead in rocketry and space exploration left behind a whirlwind of worry and despair as to whether or not the red Russians would conquer the moon. The President’s choice to announce the moon mission served as a revival to the America whose hopes had dissipated and worries increased. In President John F. Kennedy’s speech “The Decision to go to the Moon” given in congress toward the American people, the president effectively convinces the public to support the mission to the moon by appealing to the sense of American pride, and using tools such as forceful diction through imagery, and by appealing to logos through use of statistics.

President Kennedy appeals to the American sense of pride in order to effectively persuade the public to support the moon mission by first recognizing the state in which he addresses the nation. He speaks “But this city of Houston, this State of Texas, this country of the United States was not built by those who rested and wished to look behind them. This country was conquered by those who moved forward—and so will space.”(para. 7) He appeals to the country as a whole by reminding the citizens about what brought the United States together. The president’s word choice of “conquered” and “forward” exemplifies the American spirit and serves as a call to arms to anyone listening. Referring to the forefathers of America also serves as a positive addition to his speech mainly because it reminds American citizens the duty that they have to uphold a country of innovation and progress.
A separate way that President Kennedy used American pride to strengthen his speech was when he frankly stated the difficulty of the challenge that lay ahead of them if they accepted this mission. He movingly declares:

We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too. (para 13)

In two sentences, the President may have perhaps given the most moving and pivotal moment in his speech. By recognizing the challenge of a near impossible task, he bluntly gives his people the only answer to the arising problem, to push forward and to win. Demanding attention from his audience, he proceeds to push America into action by igniting their sense of pride and sense of ownership.

The President’s speech also effectively persuades his audience with the use of forceful diction, and imagery. The words mentioned before, “conquered”, “win”, and “forward, awaken deep emotions that would not have risen if separate words had been chosen. President Kennedy criticizes the state of the space mission and urges others to take action by stating:

Those who came before us made certain that this country rode the first waves of the industrial revolutions, the first waves of modern invention, and the first wave of nuclear power, and this generation does not intend to flounder in the backwash of the coming age of space.

The words, “flounder” and backwash” create such a powerful image of loss and desperation that it creates a perfect tone to accompany his future announcement of the goal to reach the moon. His word choice conveys the message that the United States must take part in the race and move forward in order to avoid the risk of figuratively drowning in a sea of upcoming technological advances. Therefore, because of the tone that suggests the imperativeness of the need to succeed, the President successfully communicates his desires unto the people and sways the public to accept this idea quickly.
The President also uses his knowledge of world history to set a scene for his audience. He solemnly declares, “We set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained,” (para. 11) and new rights to be won, and they must be won and used for the progress of all people. Using the image of an ocean in his speech, he hints toward the symbolism and history that the great deep holds. Before modern technology, the sea was considered the key to power and wealth. Multiple wars were fought on the ocean as crude wooden ships transformed into sleek metal vessels, submarines now swim in the sea and transportation of objects such as airplanes, cars, livestock and people has become possible because of man’s spirit to venture off of land. President Kennedy did not use this symbolic example as a simple way to get his point across, but intended to strike the human spirit and remind the American people where they came from.

Kennedy’s use of logos strengthened his effort to persuade the American public through statistics and facts about the space mission. The President first argues the problem of money by stating:

To be sure, all this costs us all a good deal of money. This year’s space budget is three times what it was in January 1961, and it is greater than the space budget of the previous eight years combined. That budget now stands at $5,400 million a year—a staggering sum, though somewhat less than we pay for cigarettes and cigars every year. Space expenditures will soon rise some more, from 40 cents per person per week to more than 50 cents a week for every man, woman and child in the United States, for we have given this program a high national priority—even though I realize that this is in some measure an act of faith and vision, for we do not now know what benefits await us. (para. 22)

By stating the problem in his speech, he can now address the difficult decision on his own grounds with sufficient back up evidence and reasoning. Admitting the risk in investing such a large sum of
money into this program way detracts from his momentum, however, by being honest to his audience, he gains a sense of trust and respect from those listening. By simply stating the evidence and avoiding any logical fallacies or loopholes, he is able to sincerely reach across the radio waves and television screens and convince those abroad to trust in him and have faith in his vision.

Despite the issue of funds for the space mission, he counters negative logos with positive logos by providing statistics about the amazing incoming technology used to transport humans to the moon.

But if I were to say, my fellow citizens, that we shall send to the moon, 240,000 miles away from the control station in Houston, a giant rocket more than 300 feet tall, the length of this football field, made of new metal alloys, some of which have not yet been invented, capable of standing heat and stresses several times more than have ever been experienced, fitted together with a precision better than the finest watch, carrying all the equipment needed for propulsion, guidance, control, communications, food and survival, on an untried mission, to an unknown celestial body, and then return it safely to earth, re-entering the atmosphere at speeds of over 25,000 miles per hour, causing heat about half that of the temperature of the sun--almost as hot as it is here today--and do all this, and do it right, and do it first before this decade is out--then we must be bold.(para 23)

The President’s use of statistics radiates an attitude of overwhelming glory by acknowledging the size and quality of the mission. Similar to something straight out of a science-fiction book, one cannot help but imagine in awe what the spacecraft would look and sound like. An image of a gleaming tower of metal, hissing and rumbling into the stratosphere gave something for the American people to look forward to and an icon to symbolize the American spirit and
pride. This use of logos provides support to his argument and helps strengthen the confidence that the people have toward the space mission and JFK as a whole.

By appealing to the American sense of pride, using imagery with forceful diction, and utilizing logos, President Kennedy perhaps gave one of the most influential and inspiring messages in the history of the world. A man of action and service, JFK eased an entire nation onto its feet and created a work that was not only necessary, but truly daring. The vow to no longer follow the Soviet Union in the race to the moon and make the a controversial decision to lead proved to preserve the United States, and prolong the free nations existence on the Earth.
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