No One Mentioned Trump, But the Contrast Was There

By Richard Cherwitz, For the Express-News Dec. 10, 2018

From left: President Donald Trump, first lady Melania Trump, former President Barack Obama, Michelle Obama, former President Bill Clinton, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and former President Jimmy Carter listen as former Sen. Alan Simpson spoke at the funeral of former President George H.W. Bush, at the National Cathedral in Washington on Wednesday.

Photo: ALEX BRANDON /NYT

As a communication scholar, I have spent my career studying the rhetoric of presidents and other public figures. Among the things I have learned is that, irrespective of a speaker’s intent, words have consequences.
Regardless of political affiliation, most of us recognize that we are witnessing numerous examples of this during President Donald Trump’s tenure in office.

On Wednesday, additional evidence emerged during the state funeral for former President George H.W. Bush.

This occasion called for eulogizing, perhaps the archetype of what the Ancient Greeks called epideictic oratory — a form of speech in which we praise and honor a person.

Traditionally, eulogies are not used as an opportunity to dispute political issues or indict others. However, what transpired Wednesday in a unique way may have violated this norm.

The eulogists certainly did not intend to contrast Bush with Trump — his name was never uttered. Nevertheless, it would be hard for those in the audience not to hear the words spoken as an implicit critique of our current president. How could this not be the case?

Consider a few examples.

Former Sen. Alan Simpson noted: “He never hated anyone. He knew what his mother and my mother always knew: Hatred corrodes the container it’s carried in.”

Similarly, former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney observed: “And let me tell you that when George Bush was the president of the United States of America, every single head of government in the world knew that they were dealing with a gentleman, a genuine leader, one who was distinguished, resolute and brave.”

He continued: “I believe it will be said that no occupant of the Oval Office was more courageous, more principled and more honorable than George Herbert Walker Bush.”

Perhaps historian Jon Meacham made the implicit comparison most clearly: “George Herbert Walker Bush governed with virtues that most closely resemble those of Washington and of Adams, of TR and of FDR, of Truman and of Eisenhower, of men who believed in causes larger than themselves. His life code, as he said, was ‘Tell the truth. Don’t blame people. Be strong. Do your best. Try hard. Forgive. Stay the course.’ And that was and is the most American of creeds.”

Said Meacham, “For Lincoln and Bush both called on us to choose the right over the convenient, to hope rather than to fear, and to heed not our worst impulses, but our best instincts.”

Ironically, even former President George W. Bush said of his father: “In his inaugural address the 41st president of the United States said this: ’We cannot hope only to leave
our children a bigger car, a bigger bank account. We must hope to give them a sense of what it means to be a loyal friend, a loving parent, a citizen who leaves his home, his neighborhood and town better than he found it. What do we want the men and women who work with us to say? That we were more driven to succeed than anyone around us or that we stopped to ask if a sick child had gotten better and stayed a moment there to trade a word of friendship?’ Well, Dad, we’re going to remember you for exactly that and much more.”

Again, I am not suggesting these speakers intended to critique our current commander in chief. In fact, when planning the event, George H.W. Bush and his family wanted the state funeral to be a celebration rather than a rehearsal of prior grievances the family had with Trump — which of course is also why, unlike Sen. John McCain’s funeral, Trump was invited to join all past presidents.

In short, the implicit — though obvious — criticism of Trump owes to the stark differences the audience perceived when contrasting the virtues embodied by Bush (as eloquently delineated by the eulogists) with what they see lacking almost daily in Trump’s behavior and discourse.

The bottom line: Even eulogies of presidents may not be exempt from the “this is unprecedented, we have never seen it before” syndrome characteristic of the Trump administration.

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