Historical Context Paper:  
Of Lions: The Liberal Lion in the Conservative Lion’s Den

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SAMPLE HISTORICAL CONTEXT PAPER FOR STUDENTS IN SCOM 4450

Of Lions: The Liberal Lion in the Conservative Lion’s Den

In America today, it is hard to imagine a time with a political discourse as toxic, as hyper-partisan, and as uncivil as it is now. Modern Americans often lament that contemporary political rhetoric is beyond saving; that it is a plague upon both our houses, and American society cannot, and will not, live up to the legacy of republics past. While there is no doubt that the flames of today’s political rhetoric are fanned by an unfettered 24 hour news cycle, a polarized electorate that views compromise as sin, and elected officials that are all too content in their Gerrymandered castles, inflammatory rhetoric is nothing new in America. In the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, American discourse was a bonfire comprised of the “liberal political Establishment” and the ascendant “New Christian Right” (Branham & Pearce, 1987). While these forces had met before, this reincarnation was particularly intense as two new rhetors emerged to be the voice of their movements, movements that each side perceived to be under threat. Senator Edward “Ted” Kennedy and the Reverend Jerry Falwell became both vilified, and adored; they each contributed to the hostile rhetorical atmosphere; and, ultimately, attempted to become civil men in an uncivilized time when Senator Kennedy was invited to speak at Falwell’s Liberty Baptist College in Lynchburg, Virginia, now known as Liberty University, and Kennedy delivered an impassioned plea for civility now known today as his “Tolerance and Truth in America” address. To better understand the impact of Senator Kennedy’s Lynchburg Address, it is first important to articulate the historical context in which Senator Kennedy spoke, a context that considers the audiences, both direct and indirect, the political and social atmosphere, Senator Kennedy as an orator, and the direct exigencies that prompted Senator Kennedy to speak.

The rise of the modern Radical Reactionary Religious Right, or New Christian Right, can arguably be traced back to the various “Great Awakenings” and neo-Judeo-Christian rhetoric experienced in America since colonists first crossed the Atlantic some four centuries ago. Indeed, John Winthrop, one of the founding Puritan members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony famously declared that their endeavor in North America would be a shining “city upon a hill” for the world to gaze upon. In the latter half of the 20th Century, however, the New Christian Right formed into a blend of religious and ideological purism, social activism, and political efficacy, yielding results in the American system unmatched by past movements. In 1980, Ronald Reagan further legitimized the movement by winning the GOP nomination for president, and eventually the White House, via their endorsement, and newfound voting strength. Reagan spoke to “fifteen thousand evangelicals” at an event in Dallas, and said that while he knows they couldn’t formally endorse him for president, he endorses them “and what (they) are doing” (Kennedy, 2009). Branham and Pearce (1987) point out that President Reagan contributed even further to the heated discourse of the time when he “lamented” that “the ‘frustrating thing is that those who are attacking religion claim they are doing it in the name of tolerance, freedom, and open-mindedness. Question: isn’t the real truth that they are intolerant of religion. They refuse to tolerate its importance in our lives,’” Reagan said to thunderous applause. President Reagan’s diatribe does bring the fore an interesting perspective of tolerance, the focal point in the disagreement between the two movements, which largely stems from a point of misunderstanding and perception. The New Christian Right came into existence in the aftermath of the social and political upheaval of the 1960’s, which largely left identifying conservative Christians on the sidelines while the spirit of progressivism swept over the United States. The aforementioned upheaval experienced in the 1960’s solidified a liberalism that spent nearly a decade in the wilderness, following two crushing presidential defeats in the 1950’s. The established liberals began to see themselves as “secular humanists,” a group that, arguably, deemphasized the role of religion in society, and put more emphasis on the betterment of society through government, and direct human action, rather than divine intervention. To describe the discourse at this time as hostile would be too simple a word. The uncivil discourse was more of a reflection of two “incommensurate social realities” that engaged in “reciprocated diatribe,” each stemming from a position of misunderstanding (Branham & Pearce, 1987). With the two modern movements set in place, the events that led to Senator Kennedy’s Lynchburg Address can be discussed.

The beginning of the direct exigency that prompted Senator Kennedy’s Lynchburg Address can be linked to the founding of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority in 1979. In what can be, at the very least, a play on words, and at most, a direct rhetorical continuation of President Nixon’s “Silent Majority,” a framing strategy that allowed those already benefiting from the hegemonic power structure to voice their concerns under the guise of being “silent,” or “moral,” the Moral Majority accelerated the New Christian Right into a political entity. The overarching purpose of the Moral Majority can best be summed up with an essay written by the founder himself, Rev. Falwell, that appeared in *Newsweek* in 1981, entitled *The Maligned Moral Majority.* In his essay, Falwell lambasts liberals for politicizing the Bible, and bemoans the direction the country is taking regarding abortion, homosexuality (which he refers to as “perversion”), and pornography. He boldly states that the ultimate goal of the group is to “line people up, all right, but at the polls” (Falwell, 1981). To achieve this goal, the Moral Majority developed a vast membership database with its sophisticated direct mailing system, sending members flashy membership cards that called on them to join to combat ‘ultraliberals such as Ted Kennedy.’ As it so happened, the ultraliberal himself, Senator Edward “Ted” Kennedy, was, by mistake, sent one of these invitations to join the Moral Majority (Kennedy, 2009). In his memoir published shortly after his death in 2009, Kennedy recalls in *True Compass* the moment in 1983 he opened up the envelope “with an instantly familiar return address” with “great amusement” (Kennedy, 2009). Kennedy then passed the mailer and tale off to a reporter friend, who wrote a “whimsical” story, which then generated a moderate amount of press coverage that prompted the Moral Majority’s vice president to write Senator Kennedy an “equally whimsical” invitation to visit Liberty Baptist College in Lynchburg, Virginia. Senator Kennedy “cordially” responded that he would, in fact, take him up on the offer, and thus the stage was set for Senator Kennedy, who would later be dubbed the “Lion of the Senate,” to go into the “lion’s den,” a crowd that was far from friendly, and speak about truth, tolerance, and civility in an uncivilized time (Kennedy, 2009; Branham & Pearce, 1987).

Before discussing the audiences Senator Kennedy spoke to in his Lynchburg Address, it is important to articulate another caveat in the historical context: the “Ghost of J.F.K.” 23 years before Senator Edward Kennedy rose to speak about tolerance and truth in America, his brother, John F. Kennedy, rose to answer the nascent “Catholic Question,” a question that demanded to know if his loyalties were to the Republic or to the Vatican in Rome, to a group of protestant ministers in Houston, Texas (Warnick, 1996). Then-Senator John F. Kennedy’s Address to the Houston Ministerial Association in September 1960 became the siren call for all those yearning for an absolute separation of church and state. While Kennedy’s Houston Address focused primarily on the separation of church and state, his answer to the “Catholic Question,” Kennedy also discussed the idea of tolerance, an idea that his brother Ted would develop further in his Lynchburg Address 23 years later. Though striking similarities do exist, what prompted John F. Kennedy to speak in 1960 is not what called Ted Kennedy forth in 1983. Despite the centuries of “city upon a hill” rhetoric that espoused an exceptional America of religious tolerance, rampant prejudice still existed, as it does today, regarding anything outside of white Protestantism. A Catholic running for President of the United States brought to the fore a latent intolerance of anything other than the hegemonic majority. While John F. Kennedy was not the first Catholic to run for the presidency, as that title belongs to Governor Al Smith in 1928, Kennedy was the first candidate to address his Catholic faith fully (Hostetler, 1998). John F. Kennedy spoke in defense of himself in 1960 while also calling for religious tolerance, whereas Ted Kennedy spoke in support of tolerance and civility, and did not need to engage in apologia. The latter referenced the former several times in an effort to continue the plea for tolerance in America.

With the historical context of Senator Ted Kennedy’s Lynchburg Address in place, a discussion about the audiences Kennedy spoke to can now occur. The Rev. Jerry Falwell founded Liberty Baptist College, now known as Liberty University, in 1971 in hopes of educating students in a “Christian worldview,” a worldview that included “Creationism, political conservatism” and a firm belief in American capitalism (Boorstein, 2015). Falwell’s hope became more than a reality, as the university is, arguably, the bastion for active conservative Christians in modern America (Berman, 2015). The university has served as an echo chamber for conservative elected officials, candidates, and ideologues over the last several decades. The junior Senator from Texas, and tea party darling, Ted Cruz, announced his candidacy for the presidency at Liberty University last year to thunderous applause (Boorstein, 2015). The student body at Liberty University was, and remains, the epitome of conservative. Those in the crowd for Senator Kennedy’s Lynchburg Address on October 3rd, 1983, saw the senator as their “bête noire;” a living, breathing gadfly that they, at least in principle, despised (Berman, 2015).

The student body at Liberty University may have been Senator Kennedy’s direct audience, an audience that could charitably be described as skeptical, but the senator had several other audiences in mind as he crafted and delivered his address. First, as Senator Kennedy spoke about tolerance and proposed a new contract for civility, he was speaking to Rev. Falwell and his Moral Majority (Gailey, 1983). The Moral Majority was responsible for using Senator Kennedy as a recruiting tool, a figure that could rally the New Christian Right into unity, as Kennedy was often painted as the spokesman for “godless liberalism and immorality” (Kennedy, 2009). While the Moral Majority was the rhetorical mastermind behind the Kennedy attacks, attacks that only perpetuated the distance between the opposing realities, those in Senator Kennedy’s ideological camp were far from innocent in the discourse as well. The student body at Liberty University served as Senator Kennedy’s direct audience to his Lynchburg Address, and the two opposing groups best represented in the New Christian Right and the liberal establishment served as Kennedy’s second audience; Senator Kennedy’s third audience, then, could arguably be the audience of history. Ted Kennedy knew all too well that his brother John’s legacy included his Houston Address, an address held to high esteem in Ted’s time, as well as our time; and Ted Kennedy also knew that words have the power to shape and alter reality, given his passion in leading the congressional investigation into the Tuskegee Syphilis study. An expanded discussion of these audiences will be included in the analysis of this essay, but before turning to that, Senator Kennedy must be examined through an incredibly humanizing lens: his faith and religion.

Senator Ted Kennedy did not encounter the extremes of the anti-Catholic sentiment as his brother John did, nor did he encounter the lethal visceral hatred his brother Robert encountered, but Ted Kennedy was not without his detractors, and his demons. Senator Kennedy had an “uneven” relationship with the Catholic Church, and his personal faith throughout his lifetime was fluctuating (Sullivan, 2009). As Sullivan (2009) reminds readers, Ted Kennedy felt “disconnected from his faith after losing four of his older siblings to early and violent deaths”, and he himself survived near fatal accidents and health problems. While he would rediscover his faith later on in life, the man who took the stage in Lynchburg in October of 1983 was broken. Perhaps this is why Kennedy spoke with such elegance; perhaps this is why Kennedy spoke with such urgency; perhaps this is why Kennedy spoke at all. Public address offers a unique relationship between an audience and a rhetor, a relationship that is formed as the two attempt to form a shared reality; there is something almost cathartic about this attempt to create and share meaning with one another, it makes our existence meaningful.

To conclude, Senator Ted Kennedy’s Lynchburg Address responded to a rhetorical and historical situation fraught with toxins, misunderstanding, and intolerance. Kennedy’s attempt in civility, especially in front of an audience that didn’t like him, was as surprising to his contemporaries as it is today. By examining the historical context, audiences, and the rhetor, the impact of Senator Kennedy’s Lynchburg Address can be fully appreciated as this essay now looks to provide an analysis of the text.

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