

4-26-2020

## Donald Trump's 'Presidential' Rhetoric for the Wall: The Mobilization of 'Crisis' Rhetoric on Behalf of a Campaign Promise

Nicole Perkins  
*University of Dayton*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/uhp\\_theses](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/uhp_theses)

---

### eCommons Citation

Perkins, Nicole, "Donald Trump's 'Presidential' Rhetoric for the Wall: The Mobilization of 'Crisis' Rhetoric on Behalf of a Campaign Promise" (2020). *Honors Theses*. 274.  
[https://ecommons.udayton.edu/uhp\\_theses/274](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/uhp_theses/274)

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the University Honors Program at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu).

# **Donald Trump's 'Presidential' Rhetoric for the Wall**

## **The Mobilization of 'Crisis' Rhetoric on Behalf of a Campaign Promise**



Honors Thesis

Nicole Perkins

Department: English

Advisor: Susan Trollinger, Ph.D.

April 2020

# **Donald Trump's 'Presidential' Rhetoric for the Wall The Mobilization of 'Crisis' Rhetoric on Behalf of a Campaign Promise**

Honors Thesis

Nicole Perkins

Department: English

Advisor: Susan Trollinger, Ph.D.

April 2020

## **Abstract**

Historically, Oval Office addresses in the United States have been given by presidents to unify the nation after a crisis. For example, George W. Bush gave an Oval Office address after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and Barack Obama delivered an Oval Office address after the San Bernardino shooting on December 6, 2015. On January 8, 2019, Donald Trump delivered his only Oval Office address to date in response to an “immigration crisis.” This crisis, according to Trump, can only be averted with the construction of a wall at the United States’ southern border. This presentation applies Barbara Biesecker’s rhetorical theories in “No Time for Mourning” to Trump’s Oval Office Address declaring a state of national emergency arising from illegal immigration. This analysis dissects the speech with the goal of revealing the rhetorical underpinnings of the speech, and examines how “crisis” rhetoric can mobilize a nation.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Dr. Trollinger for all of her help with this thesis. Her advising during this process has helped me become a better student and critical thinker.



**University of  
Dayton**

## Table of Contents

Abstract	Title Page
Introduction	1
Campaign	2
Traditional Presidential Rhetoric	4
2018-2019 National Emergency	6
Oval Office Address	8
What Is The Crisis?	9
Mourning vs Melancholy	11
How Is This Working?	13
Trump's Base	15
The Real Crisis	18
Conclusion	20

## Introduction

On June 16, 2015, Donald Trump announced that he would be running for president of the United States in the lobby of his famous Trump Tower. His words on this announcement day would shape his entire campaign, and ultimately his presidency. After increasing suspicion that Donald Trump may run for the presidency, he confirmed it by saying “we have losers. We have losers. We have people that do not have it. We have people that are morally corrupt. We have people that are selling this country down the drain” (Trump “Campaign Announcement”). In this campaign announcement, Trump delved into what he would accomplish if he were elected as president, and emphasized two main promises: he would repeal Obamacare and would build a wall on the American-Mexican border. He famously said “I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I’ll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words” (Trump “Campaign Announcement”).

As if to preemptively answer the outpouring of questions that would arise from building such a wall, Trump said that “when Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best... They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (Trump “Campaign Announcement”). This image of the Mexican immigrant as someone to fear echoes throughout the rest of his campaign, and his statement about illegal immigrants as criminals from his campaign announcement would be the most replayed clip of his entire campaign (Kettl 8). Trump’s campaign polarized the entire country, with some people arguing his comments are largely

inappropriate, while others value Trump's "honesty." After his campaign announcement, Macy's, NBC, Universal, Univision, and several others companies severed business ties with Donald Trump due to his "problematic comments" (Stantucci and Kelly). Others, such as Sam Nunberg, one of Trump's early political advisors, said that "the idea of the wall is genius, too. It touched on immigration, so it's a policy issue. Two, it touches on Trump's brand. Builder. Developer. Three, it fits the rationale and appeal of his candidacy. The wall" (Diamond). People who aligned with this opinion of Trump see him as a truth-teller and view other career politicians as candidates who do not fulfill their promises or mask reality from the American people.

## **Campaign**

Trump's proposal to construct wall remained the cornerstone of the rest of his campaign. In order to legitimize himself as a viable candidate for the presidency, Trump utilized two campaign tools to spread his message: rallies and Twitter. On August 21, 2015, 28,000 people came to witness Donald Trump speak in Mobile, Alabama. This time, Trump was prepared to give explicit examples about why illegal immigrants are a threat to American life, and why the wall is necessary. Within the first three minutes of this rally, Trump spoke about a female veteran who had been raped and sodomized in San Francisco by an illegal immigrant. Such a story clearly resonated with his supporters, who erupted in the chant "BUILD THE WALL" ("Presidential Candidate Donald Trump Rally in Mobile, Alabama"). Historically, campaign rallies have been used to directly interact with the people of that particular region. Many politicians carry the notion that "good speakers adapt their speech to their audiences, both identifying with them and wielding that sense of identification to the speaker's ends" (Stuckey 54). Trump departed

from that precedent by spreading the same message to each city he visits. He used his rallies to convince people that illegal immigration was their problem too, even if they did not think it was. Branded with the phrase “Make America Great Again” across his red baseball cap, Trump traveled the country giving similar speeches on his campaign trail, fanning the flame of intense desire for the wall. Trump continued to hold rallies across the nation even after he had won the 2016 election.

Trump’s Twitter account also has been his main way of communicating with the American people. This type of communication, used by many if not all modern Presidential candidates, amplified Trump’s voice more than any other candidate. Trump’s tweets were five times more likely to be retweeted than Clinton’s, despite tweeting similar amount of times within a day (Pérez, Román, Rodríguez 14). He took advantage of “*ad hominem*” attacks, traditionally avoided by presidential candidates, and these attacks ended up being one of Trump’s most important rhetorical devices (Pérez, Román, Rodríguez 20). On June 30, 2015, Donald Trump tweeted “We MUST have strong borders and stop illegal immigration. Without that we do not have a country. Also, Mexico is killing U.S. on trade. WIN!” On August 31, 2015, he tweeted “For those that don’t think a wall (fence) works, why don’t they suggest taking down the fence around the White House? Foolish people!” Again on October 13, 2015 Trump tweeted: “notice that illegal immigrants will be given ObamaCare and free college tuition but nothing has been mentioned about our VETERANS #DemDebate” (@realDonaldTrump). Trump made his position about illegal immigration known on Twitter, but does it in a different way than most candidates have. He made his position seem like the only viable option

and distracts from facts about immigration with his powerfully worded tweets that are easily accessible by anyone with a smart phone.

These rallies and tweets that seemed so problematic and unlike any other candidate in American history allowed Trump to soar in popularity. These unorthodox approaches to resonate with the American people seem to directly contradict the diplomatic image the office of the presidency has created. Scholars have written about how presidents should act in public and have identified ways in which a good president is supposed to behave. Martin Medhurst, a distinguished professor for Rhetoric and Communication, says that “presidents represent the nation, not merely themselves. They speak on behalf of the people and represent the views of the nation as refracted through the lenses of party, ideology... They do not—and cannot—simply state their own views” (Medhurst 10). Presidents are supposed to listen to the needs of the country, and vow to improve the current situation.

## **Traditional Presidential Rhetoric**

Past presidents have been critiqued for the robotic way they address the public. The Truman administration received criticism over the style in which he addressed the public, arguing that Truman’s speeches were “like a musical comedy which doesn’t have any tunes you can whistle” (Callin 52). In other words, Truman’s speeches were criticized for lack of excitement. Truman countered by saying that “people don’t go to hear people make speeches for entertainment... they have plenty of entertainment on the radio and the movies. What they want are facts and supporting data to prove those facts are correct, and that’s all there is to it” (Callin 53).



This formal style of communication between the president and the American people has typically been an expectation of the president. The presidential administration has the power to change the lives of millions of Americans through new laws and policies such as health care, tax reform, immigration stance, etc. Because of the seriousness and gravity of these issues and their life-altering effect on the American people, presidents portray themselves in a serious a way. When presidents address the nation, they are often given the “role of national historian, giving them the opportunity to reconstruct the past in order to forge the future” (Campbell and Jamieson 137). Presidents address the nation knowing that what they say equates to how they will be remembered, and so they attempt to accomplish their legacy through eloquence and diplomacy.

Trump’s campaign and ultimate presidency, including his rallies and tweets, have not maintained a particular diplomatic style, but instead capitalized on the opportunity to be entertaining as well as provide information about his policies. Compared to past presidencies, the initial conclusion would be that Trump’s “presidential” rhetoric is unprecedented. Robert Rowland, a professor of communication studies at University of Kansas, has published books about rhetorical styles of presidents like Reagan and Obama, and says himself that Trump is unprecedented in rhetoric. He says that most people would “say [Trump’s rhetoric] is a weakness, and does not meet the standards of presidential eloquence we hope for.” He goes on to say that “our presidents who used words most effectively...have well-crafted rhetoric. They are stylists. They often work on the writing themselves. President Trump works on it himself but with a very different style. President Trump is a clear break from their eloquence and unifying ethos” (Hellman).

Much of what Trump says publicly about important policies is jarring, and his willingness to make off-color remarks to both national and global audiences is disturbing. In this thesis, I will argue that his rhetoric surrounding the wall and immigration follows a powerful example. I will use the theoretical rhetorical concepts in Barbra Biesecker's "No Time for Mourning" and apply them to Donald Trump's 2019 Oval Office address to prove that he replaces proven facts surrounding illegal immigration with melancholic rhetoric in order to legitimize the need for a wall at the southern border. The result of this melancholic rhetoric is an anxiety surrounding immigration that is consistent with the fears of Trump's largest base, white evangelical Americans. As outlined in "No Time for Mourning", this process of creating a melancholic citizen subject in order to push particular policies has been accomplished by the Bush administration.

## **2018-2019 National Emergency**

When Trump was elected president of the United States on November 8, 2016, he reiterated the promise that he would construct a wall at the U.S. southern border. In December of 2018, Trump rejected two bills that offered funding for border security without funding for the border wall. After rejecting a bill for other border security measures, the disagreement surrounding the border wall resulted in what would be the longest government shutdown in American history, lasting from December 22, 2018 to January 25, 2019 (Kettl 15). During this government shutdown, federal workers missed multiple pay checks and continued working without pay, government employees stopped showing up for work, airport delays due to staff shortages hindered the efficiency of air travel, National Park Service suspended services like trash collection causing littered

national parks, lack of airport security staff and air traffic controllers made travel less safe, and the economy ended up losing approximately \$11 billion (McCarthy).

On January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019 at 9:00pm, Donald Trump delivered his first Oval Office address in response to this government shutdown. In this speech, Donald Trump declared a state of national emergency because of illegal immigration and stressed how vital it is to have the border wall. The Oval Office speech opened with President Donald Trump sitting at his desk in the Oval Office. Behind him was the American flag on one side of the window and the blue Flag of the President on the other side of the window. There was an assortment of badges or awards behind him in addition to picture frames with black and white photos that the audience can assume are relatives of Trump. He was wearing a black suit with a red, white, and blue tie and a small American flag fastened to his suit jacket. Outside the window, it was dark out, which indicated that the speech was being broadcasted live. Trump's eyes darted from side to side making it clear that he was reading off a teleprompter. He often gestured with his hands when he was speaking about something for which he appeared to have particular enthusiasm. Throughout the speech, his facial expression conveys the idea that he sees the situation he is discussing as serious, urgent, and in need of a prompt solution. The camera is located directly in front of his desk such that throughout the speech the audience is positioned as sitting just across the desk from him. Thus, viewers could easily imagine that he was talking to them directly. Now and again, the camera zoomed in for a close-up on Trump when he was stressing the severity of the issue he was talking about. The speech was approximately 9 minutes and 33 seconds long, and was televised on many networks. Roughly 40 million people tuned in to watch Trump talk about border security on this day (Grynbaum).

## Oval Office Address

Trump began the speech by addressing the American people. He immediately stated that there was a “growing humanitarian and security crisis at our southern border” (Trump). He went on to describe the crisis by claiming it was rooted in the illegal immigration issue, meaning people were trying to come into America undocumented through Mexico. He said that this was a problem because it “strains public resources and drives down jobs and wages” (Trump). In addition to draining resources, Trump claimed that many illegal drugs have entered via illegal immigrants through the southern border, and these drugs have killed more people than the Vietnam War (Trump). He rattled off numbers of arrests made in the last two years of illegal immigrants and also provided statistics about the dangerous trek from Mexico to America illegally. Trump asserted in the previous month (December 2018), “20,00 migrant children were brought into the United states—a dramatic increase. These children are used as human pawns by vicious coyotes and ruthless gangs. One in three women are sexually assaulted on the dangerous trek up through Mexico” (Trump). Because of these assertions, Trump was able to deem illegal immigration a humanitarian crisis as well as a security crisis.

Trump then went into detail about his plan for reducing illegal immigration, including “cutting edge technology” as well as a “physical barrier” (Trump). This physical barrier he referred to is the wall that Trump promised long ago in his campaign for the presidency. Trump said that all he needed to construct this wall is a mere 5.7 billion dollars, and he needed this wall because it is “absolutely critical for border security...This is just common sense” (Trump). Trump then finally arrived at the central argument of his Oval Office address: “The federal government remains shut down for

one reason and one reason only: because Democrats will not fund border security” (Trump). Trump then delivered perhaps the most famous line of the speech. He said “why do wealthy politicians build walls, fences, and gates around their homes? They don’t build walls because they hate the people on the outside, but because they love the people on the inside” (Trump). Trump concluded his speech by referencing stories of innocent people being raped, killed, and attacked by illegal aliens. He called upon congress in the final moments of the speech to mobilize them to ameliorate this situation, and called on the American people to push their congressmen and end the crisis once and for all.

Oval Office speeches throughout history have been traditionally aired to the American public in order to convey a message typically regarding a crisis and provide insight into how the crisis will be resolved. Some of these addresses include Eisenhower’s address about sending troops to Little Rock to enforce desegregation, and Reagan’s address about the *Challenger* Space Shuttle disaster, and George Bush’s address to the American people in the Oval Office on 9/11. A speech delivered from the Oval Office is one that is typically rooted in solemnity because “the Oval Office invokes the center of presidential authority. That’s the president’s office, that’s where he supposedly makes decisions, where he governs” (Thai).

## **What Is The Crisis?**

By declaring a state of national emergency, Trump implied that the country was facing a profound threat to American life. The national emergency of illegal immigration sounded urgent and terrifying. However, when this “emergency” is fact checked, a quite different situation emerges. In his Oval Office address, Trump points to statistics about ICE arrests and migrant children to suggest that illegal immigration is on the rise.

However, according to the Pew Research Center, the number of illegal Mexican immigrants has declined by 2 million since 2007. In 2017, 4.9 million unauthorized immigrants from Mexico lived in the United States, which was down from a peak of 6.9 million in 2007 (Gonzalez-Barrera and Krogstad).

Trump also points to statistics about very specific and isolated criminal activity of illegal immigrants without contextualizing these stories. The CATO institute, which is a conservative think tank, decided to research who was committing the most crimes among illegal immigrants, legal immigrants, and natural born citizens. They found that native born Americans committed the greatest number of crimes, illegal immigrants committed the second greatest number of crimes, and legal immigrants committed the fewest number of crimes (Landgrave). Many conservative-leaning political leaders in the US have acknowledged this statistic, but dismiss its significance. They argue that crimes like misdemeanors are not the crimes we should worry about when it comes to illegal immigrants, we should be worried about illegal aliens committing terrorist attacks. This anxiety can also be put to rest, because CATO reports that “the chance of being murdered in a terrorist attack committed by a chain immigrant or a diversity visa recipient was about 1 in 723 million per year” between the years of 1975 to 2017 (Nowrasteh). The chance of an American being murdered by a foreign-born terrorist at all was 1 in 3,609,709 a year, and the chance of being murdered by a refugee was 1 in 3.64 billion. The chances of struck by lightning in any one year is 1 in 700,000 (Howard).

If illegal immigration is lower than it has been in within the last decade, immigrants are committing fewer crimes, and the threat of terrorist attacks from illegal immigrants is slim (to put it modestly), then it would seem that the crisis Trump is describing doesn't

really exist, or at least not any worse than it has been in the past. So, if after doing research it is clear that there is no crisis at the border like the one Donald Trump describes, we should ask ourselves, how is his rhetoric working? Why do millions of Americans believe these assertions despite factual evidence of the contrary? How is Trump able to convince his followers that the United States has a national emergency that it doesn't actually have? The answer is that he employs a melancholic rhetoric, as described in Barb Biesecker's *No Time For Mourning*, and it has been done before.

### **Mourning vs Melancholy**

Barbara Biesecker's "No Time for Mourning: The Rhetorical Production of the Melancholic Citizen-Subject in the War on Terror" analyzes George Bush's response to the 9/11 attacks. Just hours after the attacks, Bush introduced the idea that America was in a War on Terror in an Oval Office address saying "we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world" (Bush). Bush also declared that the United States was in a state national emergency in this Oval Office address. Biesecker argues that Bush employed melancholic rhetoric to advance his goal of starting the War on Terror. Then, Biesecker makes the distinction between mourning and melancholy. Biesecker borrows from Slavoj Zizek who says that mourning is a helpful process of coming to terms with something that one once had, whereas melancholy is "the loss of an impossible object, ideal, or relation that the subject has never had" (Biesecker 154).

When giving his Oval Office address in response to the 9/11 attacks, Biesecker says that Bush made the executive decision to make his speech not about mourning the loss of American lives, but about endeavoring to protect a "'democratic way of life' that can hardly be claimed as already its own" (154). Biesecker is arguing here that the United

States never had an actual democratic way of life where every voice is heard, so protecting a democracy that never existed is impossible. Bush's deceptively simple speech invited the country to anticipate the loss of something it never had, which would be the loss of American life as we know it. Biesecker says that "out of this state of emergency has emerged a new kind of State. If that is not a post- 9/11 melancholic rhetoric's most spectacular achievement, it surely will be its most enduring effect" (Biesecker 155). This new kind of state is a state in constant anxiety of another terrorist attack. The country's anxiety surrounding terrorism has certainly been one of the most enduring effects of 9/11 and Bush's speech, and is an anxiety many Americans have today. Out of this rhetoric emerges the *citizen-subject*.

Melancholic rhetoric used to mobilize a nation for a political purpose is exactly what Donald Trump did with his Oval Office address. Trump is articulating his audience, the American people, into a melancholic citizen-subject. Biesecker says that subjectivation at the level of the citizen articulates us into a certain relationship with the past on behalf of a patriotic subject (Biesecker 162). Subjectivation is the process by which a person or group of people is socially constructed to believe an ideal that is reinforced by a higher power through rhetoric. Individuals do not have a particular subjectivity when they are born, but instead are talked into it throughout life. This theory of citizen-subjectivation can be applied to Donald Trump's Oval Office address because he uses words like "crisis" and "emergency" that have rhetorical implications of danger and threat. Americans are supposed to be afraid of losing the white Christian America that never existed, which is the state of the country to which immigrants pose a threat.



Trump's citizen-subject, like Bush's citizen-subject, is expected to abdicate to the state and to his administration and trust Trump's assertions about the looming fear of loss.

## **How Is This Working?**

Calling illegal immigrants rapists, thieves, criminals, job takers, and drug lords mobilizes Trump's melancholic rhetoric, and he provides explicit examples of illegal immigrants hurting Americans in his Oval Office address. According to Trump, Americans are constantly being besieged, and he and the wall can be our one and only savior. Melancholic rhetoric in this speech implies that if nothing is done about illegal immigration, America and its ideals will crumble. American life itself is threatened according to Trump, and immigrants are a tangible sign of what is to come, which is the loss of the white Protestant America.

A melancholic citizen-subject is successful when each citizen puts all of his or her trust in the state. Convincing American citizens that there is a security crisis at the border when there is not is a powerful rhetorical strategy that can be used to secure Trump's following and allow those ignorant of the facts to take Trump very literally. This fear could potentially drive fear-stricken voters to the polls in 2020 and could prompt Congress to grant funding for the wall. In his state of emergency address, Trump implies that we are missing the pure white Christian nation that simply never was. It was white Christians after all who were the original immigrants to North America and killed thousands of indigenous people in the process. Even further, the largest "migrant" group in American history were African slaves forced to come to America. The belief that America had white Protestant origins followed by a long history of white Protestantism is a lie.

One method Trump’s administration uses to sustain the idea of a melancholic



*Caravan of Migrants (Fox News)*

citizen-subject always under the attack of the illegal immigrant, is to use a repetition of images. These images serve as a persistent

reminder of what will happen if we do not stop this crisis. These images include photographs and video footage of caravans reported by Fox News, which depict thousands of migrants heading toward the American-Mexican border. An article published in Fox News on February 27, 2020, entitled “Dangerous Criminals from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are Hiding in Migrant Caravans, Official Says” describes violent criminals disguising themselves as human trafficking victims seeking refuge in the United States (Norman). This type of visual rhetoric from the images of the incoming migrants suggests to the reader of this article that anyone crossing the border *could* be a criminal. This type of rhetoric encourages fear and victimization of natural born US citizens and allows for Trump’s message in his Oval Office address to remain relevant.

One of the most successful means of perpetuating the melancholic citizen-subject has been Trump’s ability to discredit media outlets that try to report accurately on illegal immigration. By dubbing any criticism of himself “fake news,” meaning the source has inaccurate reporting, his followers read every news source as a lie. In other words, it causes Trump supporters to question any source that contradicts what Trump claims. A

report from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) entitled “The Trump Administration and the Media” stated that Trump’s attacks on news outlets have “endangered American democracy and imperiled press freedom” (Farhi). The report also states that Trump has “dangerously undermined the truth” by deeming bad press as fake news (Fahri). The result of this, is complete dominance over the illegal immigration narrative amongst a massive sector of people who follow Donald Trump.

Another way to perpetuate the melancholic citizen subject is through his campaign phrase “Make America Great Again,” or MAGA. Trump never says when it was that America was great or which era he is trying to restore, but makes sure it is known who is a threat to his vision of America. Those considered threats include women, people of color, or anyone who opposes his building a wall. There is speculation that many conservative evangelical supporters of Trump assumed that America was great until the Supreme Court, through many court cases, removed God from public life (Fea 82). Through the perspective of the evangelical Christian, the nostalgia of such an era was enough to drive them to the polls in 2016

## **Trump’s Base**

Trump’s devotion to the wall and limiting who can enter America directly correlates to who his largest group of followers are: white evangelical Christians. According to a 2016 analysis done by the Pew Research Center, 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump (Martinez and Smith). In 2020, white evangelicals continue to support Trump. On March 12, 2020, Pew Research Center released a study and found that 81% of white evangelicals still see Trump as fighting for their beliefs and advancing their interests, and they feel their side generally has been winning recently on political

matters important to them” (Pew Research Center). 63% of white protestants who are not evangelical and 66% of white Catholics think that Trump fights for their beliefs as well. 27% of black protestants believe that Trump fights for what they believe in (Pew Research Center). Trump’s melancholic rhetoric encourages white evangelicals to fear the loss of something they never had, which is a white evangelical nation. White evangelicals make up less than 15% of the population, and have always been a religious minority (Shimron). Because evangelicals have always been a religious minority, the white evangelical nation they are scared of losing has never existed. Trump’s melancholic rhetoric resonates with the longstanding fears and anxieties evangelicals have had toward outsiders.

Evangelicals felt that the traditional ideals of America were at risk when Obama was president because he “was an exotic figure to many white conservative Christians, and he [Obama] represented nearly everything that made white evangelicals afraid,” meaning that he was the son of a white woman and black man, lived in a Muslim country as a child, and had the same middle name as a well-known Muslim dictator (Fea 18). Although Obama identified as Christian, Obama’s “embrace of Christianity took place in a liberal African American congregation with a pastor who was not shy about calling America to task for its past sins” (Fea 18). Conservative Christians, white evangelicals falling within this category, feared that their nostalgia of a great White America that never existed would be destroyed by Obama’s “liberal” Christian retelling of history. Obama became both the embodiment of all the social changes that have happened in America as well as the person who encompassed so much of what white evangelicals feared was the leader of the free world.

If Obama personified evangelicals greatest fears, Trump was their ideal candidate in terms of his illegal-immigration stance. The distaste and distrust toward lenient immigration policies stem from the same fear the religious group had when Obama was president— fear of “otherness”. White evangelicals have a fear of newcomers, or “those who might challenge the power and privilege that evangelicals have enjoyed in a nation of Protestantism” (Fea 75). Evangelicals have had a general anxiety toward newcomers and feared the loss of Christian civilization since they conception of Evangelicalism According to Pew Research Center, only 25% of white evangelicals say that the United States has a responsibility to accept refugees (Johnson). This attitude toward refugees and anyone else entering the country directly contradicts with passages directly from the Bible, such as “the alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the foreigner as yourself” (Leviticus 19:34). The famous Matthew 25:35 quote also contradicts their anti-immigration sentiment, as it reads “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

The hypocrisy of white evangelicals extends even further when it comes to Trump’s controversial past and problematic tendencies. After Bill Clinton’s scandal of 1998 involving White House intern Monica Lewinsky, Christian fundamentalist James Dobson said that it was “foolish to believe that a person who lacks honesty and moral integrity is qualified to lead a nation and the world” (Graham). Dobson proceeded to declare that the country was in a moral crisis because of the immorality of American leadership. Just twenty years later evangelicals appear to have shifted their opinion toward the moral requirements for any US President. Robert Jefress, a leader of an

evangelical megachurch in Dallas, Texas, told Fox News that “we’re not under any illusion that we were voting for an altar boy when we voted President Trump. We knew about his past. And by the way, none of us has a perfect past. We voted for him because of his policies” (Graham).

This decision to overlook Trump’s misconducts and vulgar language is a small price to pay for white evangelicals who resonate with Trump’s melancholic rhetoric surrounding a national immigration crisis. Evangelicals have always feared the white Christian nation that never was, and a president who promises to “make American great again” and secure the southern border make evangelicals feel as though their ideal America may become a reality. Trump’s rhetoric, perhaps unknowingly to him, legitimizes the persecution and victimization white evangelicals feel when they see outsiders coming into “their” America, that was never theirs to begin with. The nonexistent anxiety that Trump wants *everyone* to fear is a fear that white evangelicals have always had, and feel validated or protected by Trump’s wall.

## **The Real Crisis**

There is a crisis at the Mexican/American border, and it is not the crisis Trump describes. Migrant detention centers run by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and other federal agencies were exposed in the summer of 2019 as being both overcrowded and unsanitary (Joung). Immigration detention centers are a way for authorities of a country to hold non-citizens for reasons regarding their immigration status (International Detention Coalition). The detention centers at the American-Mexican border specifically serve the purpose of holding immigrants as soon as they cross the border in order to establish identification and immigrant status.

The lack of regulation at these centers and the mistreatment of the people who are forced to detain there are a national emergency in itself. A report in May 2019 from the Department of Homeland Security's inspector general found "900 people crammed into a space designed to accommodate 125 at most" in both El Paso and Rio Grande Valley (Jeong). A pediatrician named Dr. Dolly Lucio Sevier interviewed 39 children at one of these centers, and reported that "the conditions within which they are held could be compared to torture facilities. That is, extreme cold temperatures, lights on 24 hours a day, no adequate access to medical care, basic sanitation, water, or adequate food" (McLaughlin). Many reported the inability to wash their hands at any time upon entering the facility, which could contribute to the flu, lice, chicken pox, and scabies outbreaks that have been reported at these sites. Reports of migrant officials sexually assaulting immigrant children held in Yuma, Arizona have gone underreported, and children have been reported to need hospitalization after leaving detention centers (Saboroff and Ainsley).

This border crisis has not only been dismissed and ignored by federal agencies, but even mocked by Border Patrol agents. In July of 2019, photo evidence of a Facebook group of Border Patrol agents showed the officials joking about deaths of migrants, discussing throwing burritos at Latino members of congress visiting detention facilities in Texas, among other gruesome and insensitive comments (Thompson). One group member in the Facebook group responded to the death of 16-year-old Guatemalan migrant who died in May while in custody at a detention center in Weslaco, Texas by saying "Oh well" followed by another group member stating "If he dies, he dies" (Thompson). This real crisis is overshadowed by the nonexistent immigrant crisis Trump

has created, and the consequences of this melancholic-rhetoric are the lives of innocent people trying to enter the country.

## **Conclusion**

Prior to Trump, presidents have worked tirelessly to portray themselves as diplomatic, intelligent, and trustworthy to the American people. They accomplished this through careful speech writing and deliberate messaging strategies both in public addresses and on social media. To so many people who followed Trump's campaign, it seemed as though Trump was completely unprecedented in the way he spoke and behaved. How a person viewed Trump's departure from this traditional rhetoric depended on who you were. At the very least he spoke casually and off-color, and at the most he spoke in dangerously racist and misogynistic ways. To write Trump off as an anomaly or an outlier in presidential history is a dangerous conclusion, because he follows a very specific precedent of creating a melancholic citizen-subject. This melancholic citizen-subject in constant threat of illegal immigrants reiterates racist and xenophobic anxieties of white Evangelical Americans, and is not rooted in facts or statistical data.



## Works Cited

- Biesecker, Barbara A. "No Time for Mourning: The Rhetorical Production of the Melancholic Citizen-Subject in the War on Terror." *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 40 no. 1, 2007, p. 147-169.
- Campbell, Karolyn Kohrs and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words*. The University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Carlin, Diana B. "Harry S. Truman: From Whistle-Stops to the Halls of Congress." *Presidential Speech-Writing: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond*, edited by Kurt Ritter and Martin K. Medhurst, 2003.
- Diamond, Jeremy. "CNN's 'Unprecedented': 'Common sense,' Trump's campaign strategy from the get-go." *CNN*, 18 November 2016.
- Fahri, Paul. "New Study Says Trump has 'dangerously undermined truth' with Attacks on News Media." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 April 2020.
- Fea, John. *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018.
- Gonzalez-Barrera and Jens Manuel Krogstad. "What We Know about Illegal Immigration from Mexico." *Pew Research Center*, 28 June 2019.
- Graham, Renee. "The Hypocrisy of White Evangelicals." *The Boston Globe*, 24 July 2019.
- Grynbaum, Michael M. "40 Million Watched Trump's Prime-Time Address on TV." *The New York Times*, 9 January 2019.
- Howard, Brian Clark. "Fatal Strike a rarity in 'Lightning Proof' Southern California." *National Geographic*, 28 July 2014.
- Hellman, Rick. "Unfiltered Trump is Unprecedented, Expert in Presidential Rhetoric Says ." *University of Kansas*, 18 August 2017.
- Johnson, Stephen. "White Evangelicals are Least Likely to Say US Should Accept Refugees." *Pew Research Center*, 9 July 2019.
- Joung, Madeline. "What Is Happening at Migrant Detention Centers? Here's What to Know." *Time*, 12 July 2019.
- Kettl, Donald F. *Trump's Wall: The Battle on Immigration*. Sage Publications, 2018.
- Landgrave, Michelangelo. "Criminal Immigrants: Their Numbers, Demographics, and

Countries of Origin.” *CATO Institute*, 15 March 2017.

Martinez, Jessica and Gregory A. Smith. “How the Faithful Voted.” *Pew Research Center*, 9 November 2016.

McCarthy, Niall. “The Government Shutdown Cost the U.S. Economy \$11 Billion.” *Forbes*, 30 January 2019.

McLaughlin, Elliott C. “At Detention Facilities, Migrant Children Plead for Basics: Food, Medicine, Soap and a Bit of Solace.” *CNN*, 27 June 2019.

Medhurst, Martin J. “Ten Myths that Plague Modern Scholarship.” *Presidential Speech-Writing: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond*, edited by Kurt Ritter and Martin K. Medhurst, 2003.

Norman, Greg. “Dangerous Criminals from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are Hiding in Migrant Caravans, Official Says” *Fox News*, 27 February 2019.

Nowrasteh, Alex. “Immigration and Crime— What the Research Says.” *Cato Institute*, 14 July 2015.

Pérez, Francisco Seoane, Irene Asiaín Román, and Javier Lorenzo Rodríguez. “Seizing the Populist Rhetorical Toolkit.” *President Donald Trump and His Political Discourse: Ramifications of Rhetoric via Twitter*, edited by Michele Lockhart, Routledge, 2019.

@realDonaldTrump, “For those that don’t think a wall (fence) works, why don’t they suggest taking down the fence around the White House? Foolish people!” *Twitter*, 31 August 2015, 11:05a.m., [https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/638367095424712704?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E638367095424712704&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2016%2F08%2F26%2Fpolitics%2Fdonald-trump-immigration-tweets%2Findex.html](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/638367095424712704?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E638367095424712704&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2016%2F08%2F26%2Fpolitics%2Fdonald-trump-immigration-tweets%2Findex.html)

@realDonaldTrump, “Notice that illegal immigrants will be given ObamaCare and free college tuition but nothing has been mentioned about our VETERANS #DemDebate” *Twitter*, 13 October 2015, 10:33p.m., [https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/654122760860495872?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E654122760860495872&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2016%2F08%2F26%2Fpolitics%2Fdonald-trump-immigration-tweets%2Findex.html](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/654122760860495872?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E654122760860495872&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2016%2F08%2F26%2Fpolitics%2Fdonald-trump-immigration-tweets%2Findex.html)

@realDonaldTrump, “We MUST have strong borders and stop illegal immigration. Without that we do not have a country. Also, Mexico is killing U.S. on trade. WIN!” *Twitter*, 30

*June 2015, 8:35 a.m., [https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/615861274929446912?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E615861274929446912&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2016%2F08%2F26%2Fpolitics%2Fdonald-trump-immigration-tweets%2Findex.html](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/615861274929446912?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E615861274929446912&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2016%2F08%2F26%2Fpolitics%2Fdonald-trump-immigration-tweets%2Findex.html)*

Soboroff, Jacob and Julia Ainsley. “Migrant Kids in Overcrowded Arizona Border Station Allege Sexual Assault, Retaliation from US Agents.” *ABC News*, 9 July 2019.

Santucci, John and Conor Kelly. “The Companies that have Dumped Trump.” *ABC News*, 4 July 2015.

Shimron, Yonat. “How White Evangelicals are Outliers Among US Faith Groups.” *National Catholic Reporter*, 19 July 2018.

Thai, Xuan. “Oval Office Setting is Message Behind Message.” *CNN*, 31 August 2010.

Thompson, A.C. “Inside the Secret Border Patrol Facebook Group Where Agents Joke About Migrant Deaths and Post Sexist Memes.” *ProPublica*, 1 July 2019.

“What is Immigration Detention.” *International Detention Coalition*, 2020.

“White Evangelicals See Trump as Fighting for Their Beliefs, Though Many Have Mixed Feelings About His Personal Conduct.” *Pew Research Center*, 12 March 2020

Trump, Donald. “Campaign Announcement.” 16 June 2015, Trump Tower, New York City. Trump, Donald. “Oval Office Address on Illegal Immigration.” Oval Office, 8 January 2019, Washington D.C.

Trump, Donald. “Presidential Candidate Rally.” 21 August 2015, Mobile Alabama.