

OBAMA THE POPULIST?

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DEDICATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dedication

This master's thesis is dedicated to my loving parents Saejong Chung and Sookyun Rha whose unending support, love, and guidance has allowed me to find success and as I continue to grow as a person and a son.

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ABSTRACT

This master's thesis is a rhetorical analysis of President Barack Obama's 2010 Cooper Union speech concerning financial industry reform. I argue in this thesis that Obama utilizes a populist persuasion in order to rally support for his financial reform legislation. Using Michael Kazin's theory on populist persuasion, this thesis analyzes Obama's rhetorical strategy and investigates the ways in which it is populist.

This thesis draws the following conclusions. First, Obama uses populist rhetoric as a mode of persuasion through traditional tropes and themes. Second, Obama's Cooper Union speech demonstrates how a rhetor can seek cooperation from traditional enemies such as the elites by engaging in the populist paradox. Obama is able to reinvent the boundaries of the enemy in order to offer an olive branch to members of the financial industry. The lessons from this speech show that populist rhetoric is a relevant form of political persuasion and should continue to be investigated as the 2012 election campaign heats up.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

On a Tuesday night in late January 2010, Scott Brown overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to defeat Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley in the race for the Massachusetts Senate seat. This victory would immediately be described as a “historic upset.”¹ The late Ted Kennedy, unabashed Mr. Democrat, held the Massachusetts seat for for nearly half a century; few would have thought a Republican could win in the bluest of states.² Texas Senator John Cornyn boasted : “Americans are ready to hold the party in power accountable for their irresponsible spending and out-of-touch agenda, and they’re ready for real change in Washington.”³ The Democrats read the tea leaves of Brown’s election in a similar manner. Senator Bob Menendez described a nation characterized by “a lot of anxiety” and promised “Democrats understand the economic anger voters feel...”⁴

Political analysts criticized President Barack Obama for provoking a populist fervor with bank bailouts and healthcare reform. The populist public viewed the bailouts as an attempt by Obama to use hard-earned tax dollars to “reward their managers who had already shown themselves to be incompetent”; the health care plan was perceived as “a program that taxes and takes benefits away from them [middle class and senior citizens] in order...to enrich the insurance companies themselves.”⁵ The Suffolk University poll singled out white working-class towns as bellwethers of the Massachusetts election. The results of the poll showed Brown held a high appeal to the working class voters.⁶

As Brown's victory illustrates, politicians and the media viewed the coup as a sign of a populist fervor sweeping the nation. Following the defeat, White House strategists began to signal a change of strategy through appeals to populism.⁷ Speaking of Obama's State of the Union address, University of Notre Dame professor Robert Schmul commented, "...he needs to redefine himself, who he is politically and what his core principles and policies are."⁸ Obama revealed his new strategy to target the banks, limit their power, and restore the lost wealth to the American people.⁹ Lynching Wall Street became the new calling card of the Obama administration.

The Brown case demonstrates the belief by parties on Capitol Hill in the strength of populism. While the Obama administration reorientation toward populism represented a shift in strategy, this shift was not unfamiliar to Obama. Ron Formisano comments, "Populism as style and rhetoric has long dominated American political campaigns."¹⁰ With the rise of economic anxiety across the United States, the 2008 Democratic primary campaign saw the injection of a populist appeal by the candidates. Hillary Clinton televised advertisements that she alone was willing to stand up to the "the oil companies, predatory student loan companies, insurance companies, and the drug companies."¹¹ Clinton was not the only candidate to find a new faith in the populist platform. Senator Obama also chose to pursue a path that involved populist rhetoric. On the campaign trail, Obama declared, "We need a president who will listen not just to Wall Street but to Main Street."¹²

Despite using a vibe of populist sentiment to fuel his election in 2008, Obama was caught off guard by counterbalancing movements of a conservative populist movement. The formation of the Tea Party symbolized a force that used similar populist appeals to

achieve their political message.¹³ However, instead of isolating the corrupt Wall Street firms, the Tea Party went further on the offensive and sought to attack the federal government as an institution.¹⁴

While it is not fair to attribute the rise of the Tea Party to the political arrival of Sarah Palin, Palin offers an example of the populist character that the Tea Party would eventually bring to the table. Palin used the campaign rallies to assail Obama for being an intellectual elite and questioning his ability to relate to “real America.”¹⁵ This strategy provided foreshadowing of the tactics that would be used by future conservative populist movements to thwart Obama’s attempts to claim the populist high ground.

Partially fueled by an impulse to balance Obama, the Tea Party took off. There is undoubtedly a populist feel to their party. A Tea Party advertisement during the 2010 midterm elections declared that the federal government had corrupted the intent of the Constitution at the cost of the taxpayer. According to the Tea Party, representation for the people had been replaced with representation by special interests. The conservative populist movement was able to exploit its appeal to ride a wave of momentum in the election (swinging the House of Representatives back to the Republicans).¹⁶

Tea Party populism has manifested itself in a style that observers describe as “populist constitutionalism.”¹⁷ This style of populism emphasizes the Constitution as its focal point for establishing the shared and common values of “the people.” The Tea Party argues that contemporary politics has overstepped its bounds of authority and must be constrained again by the intent of the Constitution.

At the time of this study, Obama’s campaign for re-election is beginning. The question remains to be seen as to how Obama will approach this upcoming election. Will

he continue to put up a façade of a populist platform? If he pursues this course of action, how successful will it be? While this study cannot predict the future strategies of the Obama campaign, it can provide some insights concerning Obama's current populist strategy.

This project is not about Brown's victory. Nor is it about Obama's populist rhetoric in the 2008 campaign. Instead, it is an investigation of a sparsely examined speech: Obama's 2010 Cooper Union address.¹⁸ I argue that populism, as President Obama deploys it, is a paradox, riddled with contradictions. As Howard Erlich comments, "Populism is thus best characterized as paradoxical, containing at once features which, though contradictory, coexist."¹⁹ The text of Cooper Union is characterized by contradictions, yet they coexist. On one hand, Obama constructs division between the American people and the financial elites that exploit them. At the same time, Obama asks for the cooperation of the elites on behalf of the people.

While it is not ideal to isolate a *single* text to describe the entirety of Obama's populist rhetoric, I believe there can be significant findings from investigating this particular text ; the alternative of an expansive investigation of Obama's populist speeches would be both unmanageable. By focusing solely on the text of Cooper Union, I provide an in-depth investigation of how Obama uses rhetoric as a response to the rising populist fervor.

I chose the Cooper Union text for three reasons. First, as the narrative concerning Brown's victory demonstrates, the events of January 2010 raised the pressure for Obama; the combination of nationwide economic anxiety and a devastating political loss backed the Obama administration and the Democratic Party into a corner. As a result, I study the

text as part of Obama's response to this pressure. Second, Cooper Union is significant because it is the moment that Obama unveiled his financial reform plan. In prior speeches, Obama highlighted the need to hold Wall Street accountable and reform the system. Actions resonate louder than words; without Cooper Union, Obama would have identified a problem without offering a solution. The third reason to prefer the Cooper Union speech to other speeches during this time period such as the State of the Union address or Obama's speech in Elyria is that it represents a shift in how Obama deploys his populist rhetoric. Before Cooper Union, Obama did not have to answer the question: "how will this be achieved?" Obama's rhetoric focused on demonizing Wall Street and creating divisions between the people and the financial institutions. However, in order to pass financial reform legislation, Obama needed to garner support and cooperation from the members of Congress and lobbyists in the financial industry that he demonized. This contradiction is not as apparent in Obama's prior speeches. Cooper Union represents the collision between the need for a populist appeal and Obama's strategy of cooperation. This moment is a strategic shift in which Obama resolves his two strategies in order to reinvent populist rhetoric.

In the opening to *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, Michael Kazin defines populism as "a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter."²⁰ I use the theory that argues that populism is a persuasive language to analyze Obama's speech. Kazin's work is widely referenced by communication scholars²¹ and analysis focuses on the rhetoric and language utilized by speakers who invoke populism. This exploration is not meant to

suggest that Obama *is* a populist. As Kazin argues, “populism, more an impulse than an ideology, is too elastic and promiscuous” and that politicians employs “populism as a flexible mode of persuasion.”²²

This argument creates separation between Kazin’s work and that of other communication scholars. The latter explores populism as a political ideology which is contained within the historical period of investigation. I argue that populism is also an argumentative strategy used in response to an exigency and as a tool to persuade the rhetor’s audience. I argue that Obama attempts to use populist persuasion as a tactic of communication with his audience, and not an investigation of whether Obama’s policy platform or actions measure up to the ideals of a populist party. I maintain that there are traditions of populist tropes, themes and images which can be displayed by a politician regardless of the effectiveness of their populist ideology.

Chapter two offers an examination of the rhetorical theory used to supplement Michael Kazin’s work on populism. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section reviews the relevant literature surrounding my study. This review includes an examination of communication literature written about populism and surveys other studies of presidential populist rhetoric. The second section examines Michael McGee and Maurice Charland’s work on constitutive rhetoric. As discussed in chapter two, constitutive rhetoric is concerned with the rhetorical construction of the people and plays a central role in understanding Kazin’s argument about “the people.” The “people” are one of the major components of Kazin’s theory of populist rhetoric. The third section describes Kenneth Burke’s theories of identification and enemy creation. The fourth

section outlines Jeremy Engels' theory of enemyship. Enemyship provides additional insight for the analysis of enemy creation and its use throughout American history.

Chapter three examines Obama's speech at Cooper Union and is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the events that transpired before Obama's arrival in Cooper Union providing context for the speech. The second section investigates how Obama uses populist rhetoric. This section explores how Obama's rhetoric is similar to the themes and tropes that Kazin argues construct the populist argumentative frame. The final section examines how Obama's rhetoric differs from that argumentative frame. I argue that the contradictions between populism, which relies on divisions between people and the elites, and Obama's call for cooperation with the financial industry, is a paradox in his rhetoric. Here, too, I attempt to show how this paradox does not disqualify Obama's rhetoric as populist, but instead demonstrates how Obama reinvents populist rhetoric.

Chapter five concludes the thesis. It reviews the lessons that can be learned from the Cooper Union speech and attempts to provide analysis on the effectiveness of Obama's populist rhetoric. This section questions whether this paradox in populist rhetoric is sustainable and strategic for Obama. In addition to these investigations, this section offers insight on the implications of Obama's reinvented populism and the consequences of the rhetoric.

Endnotes

- ¹ See “Scott Brown Pulls Off Historic Upset,” *Politico*, (January 19, 2010). <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0110/31674.html>; In addition, Democratic officials regarded Coakley’s defeat as “one of the worst debacles in American political history.”
- ² “Coakley Favored in Mass. Senate Race,” *The Hill*, (September 17, 2009). p. <http://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/59217-coakley-favored-in-mass-senate-race>; “Is the Massachusetts Senate Race Getting Closer,” *The Washington Post*, January 5, 2010, p. <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/thefix/senate/is-the-massachusetts-senate-ra.html>;
- ³ “Republicans Revel in Brown Win As Democrats Try to ‘Move Forward,’” *ABC News*, January 20, 2010, p. <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/republicans-scott-brown-victory-rejection-democratic-arrogance/story?id=9611601>
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Does He Feel Your Pain?, *The New Republic*, (January 20, 2010), p. <http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/he-doesnt-feel-your-pain?page=0,1>
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ “Populist Anger Turns Against Obama and Democrats,” *The Irish Times*, (January 21, 2010), p. 10; “President Obama Changes Tone Ahead of State of the Union Address,” *ABC News*, January 24, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/president-obama-tone-ahead-state-union-address/story?id=9651262>;
- ⁸ “Obama to reintroduce himself during State of the Union,” *USA Today*, (January 24, 2010), http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2010-01-24-Obama-speech_N.htm
- ⁹ “Republicans and the Populist Temptation,” *The Wall Street Journal*, (February 8, 2010), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703630404575053152722941786.html>
- ¹⁰ Ron Formisano, “Populist Currents in the 2008 Election,” *The Journal of Political History* 22 (2010), 237
- ¹¹ “Populism Rising.” *The American Prospect* (April 2008). Proquest
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Kazin, Michael. “What’s Behind the New Populism?” National Public Radio (February 5, 2010). <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=123137382>
- ¹⁴ Stengel, Richard. “One Document, Under Siege.” *Time* (June 23, 2011). <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2079445,00.html?xid=huffpo-direct>
- ¹⁵ Levin, Yuval. “The Meaning of Sarah Palin.” *Commentary*. Vol. 127. Iss. 2. (February 2009). 15-20
- ¹⁶ “Which Tea Party Candidates Won?” *ABC News* (November 3, 2010). http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/2010_Elections/vote-2010-elections-tea-party-winners-losers/story?id=12023076
- ¹⁷ Anderson, Larrey. “Populist Constitutionalism and the Tea Party.” *American Thinker* (July 1, 2011). http://www.americanthinker.com/2010/02/populist_constitutionalism_and.html
- ¹⁸ I describe Cooper Union as a sparsely examined speech because a search of the communication field’s literature on Communication & Mass Media Complete does not reveal any articles that address this speech. It is possible that scholars view this speech as insignificant, but I make for its importance.(was it covered much by media)

¹⁹ Howard S. Erlich, "Populist Rhetoric Reassessed: A Paradox," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1977), 150

²⁰ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 1.

²¹ Cited in Michael J. Lee, "The Populist Chameleon: The People's Party, Huey Long, George Wallace, and the Populist Argumentative Frame," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006): 355-78; Ron Formisano, "Populist Currents in the 2008 Election," *The Journal of Political History* 22 (2010): 237-55; Ritchie Savage, "Populist Elements in Contemporary American Political Discourse," *The Sociological Review* 58 (2010): 169-88; Lloyd Rohler, "Conservative Appeals to the People: George Wallace's Populist Rhetoric," *The Southern Communication Journal* 64 (1999): 316-22. In addition, a reference search on Google Scholar reveals over three hundred references in the field.

²² Kazin. 3.

CHAPTER TWO

A POPULIST NARRATIVE

The United States Constitution begins with a declaration that “We the People of the United States...do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” The newly formed government would be representative of the people. The members of the legislature, judiciary, and executive would be held accountable to the will of the people. The United States government was intended to be “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” Given the importance of the will of the people, it seemed like only a matter of time before a political party levied the ideals and beliefs of the Constitution as their platform. “There is a party that the people can trust,” declared Henry Demarest Lloyd in 1894, “because in the face of overwhelming odds, without distinguished leaders, money, office, or prestige, it has raised the standard of a principle to save the people.”¹

Lloyd was speaking of the newly established People’s Party. The People’s Party has been the subject of rhetorical studies.² Limiting the study of populism to the People’s Party and its immediate antecedents is dangerous. Michael Kazin comments that such an approach would “neglect the potent tradition to which insurgents in the late nineteenth century added their own blend of economic dread and missionary zeal” and, more importantly, lead “to ahistorical debates.”³ Instead, Kazin’s work focuses on movements and prominent figures that “sought to speak *for* the people instead of to attempt what, by necessity, would have been an anecdotal, scattershot presentation of what ordinary, nonactivist Americans were saying.”⁴ However, not all of the literature discussing

populist rhetoric is relevant to this thesis. Scholars have investigated popular culture figures like Bruce Springsteen and their populist rhetoric.⁵ As Kazin comments, this “glib habit” to label “everything from Bruce Springsteen to Rush Limbaugh” as populist “makes no useful discrimination.”⁶ In order to provide a more focused reading of the rhetorical scholarship on populism, I offer a more limited exploration.

The earliest rhetorical scholarship on populism focuses on a negative characterization of populism. These studies emphasize an analysis of the demagoguery and incendiary rhetoric utilized by populist movements. Robert Gunderson’s 1940 piece in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* examines farm orators during the Populist Revolt known as “calamity howlers” because of their “gloomy prophecies of doom and distress.”⁷ Gunderson highlights the “chief weapon” of the calamity howlers as oratory.⁸ The persuasive nature of the movement relied on the denunciation of the enemy as the “wolves of Wall Street.” Gunderson’s work contributes two major understandings about populist rhetoric. First, populist orators used incendiary messages about the exploitative elites as part of their persuasive strategy. Second, early populists were able to mobilize a diverse group of farmers by constructing a shared agrarian experience.

Another early rhetorical study of the Populist Party is Charles Lomas’ work on Dennis Kearney, California populist politician of the late 19th century. Lomas identified four basic contentions of Kearney’s rhetoric: “(1) ‘The Chinese must go’; (2) grafting bankers and thieving railroad magnates must give up their spoil; (3) corrupt politicians should be ‘hung’ to the nearest lamp post; and (4) unjust laws should be burned and new ones written to replace them.”⁹ Lomas’ analysis highlights an early example of the recurring themes of populist rhetoric. First, populist rhetoric is combative. Once the

enemy is identified, the orator calls for the elimination of the enemy. In Kearney's example, there was a call for politicians to be hung from the nearest lamp post. The intention of the rhetoric was not to provoke or use violence. Instead, Lomas comments, "rhetorical violence served their ends better."¹⁰ If Kearney's movement engaged in actual physical violence, the movement might run up against a superior military force. Rhetorical violence allowed the populist movement to walk a fine line of aggression without facing the consequences of resistance.

Kearney's populist rhetoric also relies on "a demagogue...who can win a noisy following by oversimplifying the cause of the people's troubles, and magnifying the evil intent of those in authority."¹¹ Lomas' analysis is similar to Gunderson's work in that it continues to focus on the negative characterizations of Kearney's rhetoric. Lomas highlights the "murderous images" in Kearney's rhetoric that threatened to run out the Chinese from California "if it takes the life of every man in California."¹² Lomas states, "noisy incendiary language gained attention..."¹³ Lomas' work demonstrates that populist rhetoric persuades the audience by using incendiary language to provoke fear of the enemy in the audience; the populist orators hoped that this strategy would mobilize the people in their favor.

The conservative rhetoric of George Wallace's populism received a significant amount of attention from rhetorical critics.¹⁴ Lawrence Rosenfield's piece analyzes the rhetorical themes in George Wallace's 1968 presidential election race. Rosenfield argues that Wallace was limited because of the "persuasive limitations associated with the archetypal anti-aggressor rhetorician."¹⁵ Through a comparison with anti-aggressor Patrick Henry, Rosenfield highlights the themes of Wallace's rhetoric. Both men,

comments Rosenfield, “enlisted emotionally charged god and devil-terms to stoke up a mechanical passion.”¹⁶ God-terms were described as an enlightened people, good people, law and order, illustrious citizens, and local government. Devil-terms were described as intolerable oppression, tyranny, pseudo-intellectuals, blackmail, and the usurpations of power.

David Carter’s writing on George Wallace’s speech concerning the Civil Rights Bill also identifies a similar rhetorical strategy that Carter calls “the strategy of heroes and villains.”¹⁷ Carter comments, “we create heroes and villains for they aid in the formulation or reinforcement of the basis for action in the minds of the listeners.”¹⁸ Villains are the personifications of events, institutions, and individuals that threaten our well-being. Heroes attempt to remove the threat. In short, “we follow heroes; we fight villains.”¹⁹ The villain in Wallace’s rhetoric was the expansion of a “faceless federal government imposing legislation” upon the people. Carter’s piece offers an examination of how populist rhetoric constructs the villains and the heroes. Wallace described the Civil Rights Bill as “an extension of the foul, menacing forces tearing at the bedrock of our political system.”²⁰ This rhetorical strategy is consistent with Lomas’ argument that populist rhetoric magnifies the evil intent of the enemy.

Carter also notes how Wallace constructs the hero: one who is courageous and the protector of freedom and liberty. The evil institutions, in this case the Supreme Court, know no bounds and can only be hindered by the resolute power of the hero. The hero will triumph, according to Wallace, because “we will wield the power that is ours—the power of the people.”²¹ Carter and Rosenfield identify a strategy used by populism:

associate “the people” with concepts of good and defend them from the enemy by identifying them with concepts of evil.

Rhetorical scholarship on populism developed to focus on the positive ethos of American populism instead of the “generally negative ethos” that was the focus of Gunderson, Lomas, and the Wallace writings. Howard Erlich’s argument is that the generally negative connotations associated with populism ignore the “paradoxical” character of populism that is both contradictory and coexistent. Erlich admits that “rhetoricians have not been alone in this treatment of Populism” and that “students of other disciplines also share responsibility for the generally negative conception of Populism.”²²

A central argument of Erlich’s is that, in all the prior publications, rhetorical scholars saw “little difference between Populism and demagoguery.”²³ Rhetorical scholars are quick to draw a “straight line from Ben Tillman to Huey Long...from Bryant to Gerald L.K. Smith...and Senator McCarthy.”²⁴ The scholarship on populism, Erlich argues, has painted the populist story in a one-sided manner. Erlich explains some themes that exist within Populist discourse that allow the scholars to make this conclusion.

Erlich highlights the use of conspiracy. For example, the preamble of the People’s Party platform held that the farmers were victims of unnatural events or conspiracy. The use of conspiracy rhetoric is used to argue that populists would rather blame their misfortunes on a “gigantic scheme of spoliation” than themselves.²⁵ In addition to the belief in conspiracy theories, people could be divided into two classes: producers or nonproducers.²⁶ This dichotomy can be understood as the division between the wealthy

and the working class or the millionaires and the masses. A central element of this division is that “there is no middle ground.”²⁷

The lack of a middle ground results in another theme for Erlich. Populism is “the most pervasive-fear of an impending apocalypse.”²⁸ The Omaha Platform demonstrates this theme; it states, “we meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin...the sword of Damocles never hung by a slenderer thread than does the false system today.”²⁹ The elimination of a middle ground removes the possibility of compromises and pushes the populist rhetoric towards a confrontation. This theme will be discussed in greater depth with Jeremy Engels work later in the chapter.

Erlich’s work differs from the prior scholarship because he highlights populism’s “other side.” Elrich states, “public speaking was a central element in the Populist attempt to win adherents to their cause.”³⁰ The need of populism to rally people to believe in their cause and persuade them with rhetoric emphasizes the “paradox” of populist rhetoric. On one hand, populism relies on the creation of division and the elimination of compromise. Southern Populists were concerned with preserving rural traditions and a Jeffersonian vision of America. A critical part of that agenda was reviving the myths of the pre-War South. On the other hand, populism must persuade its audience and find allies in order to sustain its strength. The Southern Populists sought a political alliance with black farmers. Black farmers were once characterized as part of the conspiracy that threatened the Southern tradition. Yet, the times changed and required a political alliance with the black farmers to strengthen Southern Populism. The paradox exists in the ability of populism to rely on its divisionary rhetoric, but at the same time, call for an alliance with an unlikely ally. Elrich offers a unique insight on populist rhetoric that is particularly relevant to this

master's thesis. President Obama struggles with a similar paradox. He invokes populist rhetoric that creates divisions between Main Street and Wall Street; at the same time, he needs to garner support from the financial industries and special interests in order to pass sweeping financial reform legislation. As I show in the following chapter, this is a paradox that allows Obama to reinvent populist rhetoric.

Michael Lee's article in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* provides additional insight into the themes of a populist rhetoric. He argues that populist rhetoric can be defined by four argumentative frames. Lee specifies: "populism begins with the constitution of a virtuous 'people,' then envisions a robust 'enemy,' decries the current 'system,' and finally finds the promise of reform in 'apocalyptic confrontation.'" ³¹ Lee's comments, "the advancement of populism is constituted by alterations in the focus and content, not the structure, of populist activism." ³² This distinction separates Lee's work from prior scholarship because he establishes a structure for the populist argumentative frame that is consistent throughout his various examinations of Huey Long, George Wallace, and the People's Party.

Lee's first theme of the populist argumentative frame is a stable and definable "people," which Lee argues are portrayed as heroic defenders of "traditional values." ³³ In populist rhetoric, "the people" tend to be characterized as ordinary, plebian, and hard-working Americans. The basic characteristic of "the people" in the populist argumentative frame is the notion that "the people" are common and thus share a common language and a common desire that can be universalized. Given the addition of research on the rhetorical construction of the people, I discuss this theme in depth later in this chapter.

The second theme of the populist argumentative frame is to identify an “enemy.” The “people” united under a collective fantasy that seeks to remove the enemy from power and restore the traditional values that were corrupt by the elites, according to Lee.³⁴ The enemy is defined in opposition to the people. If the people are honest and hardworking, then the enemy is characterized as deceitful and exploitative. As prior scholarship highlighted, George Wallace’s rhetoric is an example of enemy creation; Lee offers an account of Wallace’s rhetoric against “big government.”

The third theme of the populist argument frame is to decry the system. In order to accomplish this task, populist orators identify how the system is supposed to work. This process tends to rely on a reference to the intent of the Framers of the Constitution or a description of American traditions and values. The People’s Party saw the intrusion of plutocratic interests such as the national bank, the paper money system, and unregulated corporate control of railroads as a sign of corruption in the system.³⁵ In the 1890s, Ignatius Donnelly denounced the political party system because it had deviated from the celebrated democratic past of the United States. Donnelly believed that the Constitution established the United States government to serve the interest of the people not the interests of a select group of elites. Lee argues that the “latent philosophy of U.S. history...undergirds the third theme in the populist argumentative frame.”³⁶

Once the system and its source of corruption are identified, populist rhetoric implements its fourth and final phase consisting of an apocalyptic confrontation. Populist rhetoric is used to create a vision of an impending clash of civilizations. As Lee argues, apocalyptic confrontation is used as a vehicle for revolutionary change.³⁷ In order to provoke this confrontation, populism eliminates the possibility of compromise and

negotiation.³⁸ This process forces “the people” to resolve the injustices caused by the elites with a revamping of the overturning of the system. The design of populist rhetoric is to motivate and encourage activism toward the confrontation. Lee describes the apocalyptic confrontation by using Huey Long’s “Share Our Wealth” program. This aggressive tax plan levied a tax on property exceeding one million dollars and distributed the wealth to the working class. Long provokes an apocalyptic confrontation by describing a zero-sum battle between the “top” and the “bottom” and the “Lords” and the “Slaves.” He declared, “the rich people of this country...will not allow us to solve the problems.”³⁹

Construction of the “People”

As should be clear by now, an essential theme of the populist narrative is the construction of “the people.” The rhetorical scholarship on the construction of “the people” focuses on constitutive rhetoric. Michael McGee described the rhetorical constitution of “the people” as more process than phenomenon.⁴⁰ “The people” are not defined by one objective reality. In contrast, McGee argues that “the people” are constituted by many contradicting political myths.

Political myths lie at the heart of the collectivization process.⁴¹ By defining the traditional values, beliefs, and cultures of “the people,” the rhetor attempts to seduce his or her audience to participate in the collective fantasy. McGee describes political myths as seeds of collectivization that stay dormant in the popular reasoning only to be ignited by a speaker’s attempt to constitute an audience.

Once the political myth is invoked, constitutive rhetoric calls upon the audience to set aside their individuality and buy into the collective narrative that the rhetor constructs.

McGee comments, “The entire socialization process is nothing but intensive and continual exercises in persuasion.”⁴² Persuasion is used to convince the audience to buy into the political myth that has been set before them.

McGee argues that “the people” *are* the social and political myths they accept.⁴³ Because there will always be a conflict between objective reality and political myths, McGee explains that the speaker must persuade the audience of their political myth with convincing themes, tropes, and appeals. This political myth gives specific meaning to a society’s ideological commitments; it allows the speaker to reinvent the objective reality to better fit the speaker’s political intentions. McGee comments, “So long as ‘the people’ believe basic myths, there is unity and collective identity.”⁴⁴

Maurice Charland expands upon McGee’s argument of a constitutive rhetoric.⁴⁵ Charland describes a case study of Quebec to explain how people are constituted in discourse. Prior to the foundation of the *Movement Souveraineté-Association* (MSA), the people of Quebec were termed “Canadiens français.” The MSA declared: “Nous sommes des Québécois.” That declaration constituted a different identity for the people of Quebec. On one hand, “Québécois” allow the people of Quebec to claim the right to a sovereign state. In contrast, “Canadiens français” ties the history of the Quebec to its relationship with France.

Charland argues that the White Paper of Quebec provides a different narrative for the people of Quebec. The White Paper “outlined a proposed new political order in which Quebec would be a sovereign state associated economically with Canada.”⁴⁶ Instead of defining the people of Quebec as part of Canada, the White Paper redefined the people as sovereigns of Quebec and not Canadians. Narratives constitute the subjects of the text

into reality. The concept of “the people québécois” was unthinkable before the White Paper outlined them as a distinct population. Charland explains that collective identities formed on rhetorical appeals depend upon rhetoric; “the people québécois” exists only through an ideological discourse that constitutes them.⁴⁷ In Quebec, there is a diverse set of ethnicities and communities that inhabit the area. The White Paper posits that these various collections of people could unite under one singular banner as “the people québécois.”

Constitutive rhetoric is positioned and constraining. The subjects that reside within the narrative are not freely defined. Charland argues that the endings of narratives are fixed before the telling. The narratives serve a particular purpose and seek to produce a particular identity. Freedom is illusory because the narrative is already spoken or written, according to Charland.⁴⁸

Central to Charland’s argument about constitutive rhetoric is Kenneth Burke’s theory of identification. According to Burke, man is a symbol-using animal.⁴⁹ Humans can only understand the world as it relates to the symbols that surround them. Reality is built upon “nothing but our symbol systems.”⁵⁰ The symbols that we use and are taught change how we view the reality around us. Symbols can be misused, tricked, and manipulated.

Burke presents his theory of identification in *The Rhetoric of Motive*. He argues that while A is not identical to his colleague B, A can be persuaded to identify with B. Burke calls this process “consubstantiality.”⁵¹ Consubstantiality is a method of identification that allows individuals who are at odds with one another to identify as a group. Identification is used to confront the implications of division.

Identification is necessary precisely because there is division.⁵² Burke comments, “If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity.”⁵³ Rhetoric persuades an individual by identifying individual’s interests. This process works “insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his.”⁵⁴

Burke argues that even autonomous activities cannot be completely free from identification. His example of the shepherd illuminates this point as he explains, “the shepherd, *qua* shepherd, acts for the good of the sheep, to protect them from discomfiture and harm. But he may be ‘identified’ with a project that is raising that sheep for market.”⁵⁵ Intended or not, identification permeates through every activity.

Rhetoric’s concern is the manipulation of men’s beliefs for political ends.⁵⁶ Burke draws a distinction between poetic language, scientific action, and rhetorical language. Poetic language is symbolic. Scientific action is a preparation for action. Rhetorical language is inducement to action.⁵⁷ Identification aids the inducement to action if it seems favorable to the audience.

McGee and Charland’s constitutive rhetoric offers unique insights into how a populist rhetoric can interpret an identity of a diverse set of communities and posit a singular “people.” It is the constitution of this “people” in populist rhetoric that I wish to examine. The “people” in populist rhetoric are usually defined by the characteristics of being “ordinary, simple, honest, hard-working, God-fearing, and patriotic,” as Lee argues.⁵⁸ Populist rhetoric appeals to these characteristics as an effort to create a collective identity for the audience. The constitutive process of constructing the identity of “the people” relies on a collective fantasy envisioned by the speaker.

History of “The People”

I seek to provide a picture of “the people” that is characteristic of the historical populist movements. The act of defining the people is embedded in the history of the United States; after all, the Founding Fathers’ famous incantation of “we the people” set the tone for American history. As Kazin describes, “the people” was “the homogeneous bedrock of America, the foundation upon which ‘a natural aristocracy’ of the talented and virtuous, guided by a Constitution designed to limit democratic participation, would erect a great and just nation.”⁵⁹ It is thus only fitting that the question of “the people” be considered an integral part of the rhetoric of populism.

While my analysis explores the broad concept of “the people” as it has been used throughout the history of populism, it is by no means a comprehensive approach. My analysis focus is on “the people” conceived as part of the working or middle class. This focus is relevant because of Obama’s rhetorical construction of people, which targets the working class Americans.

Producerism is seen as the main pillar of “the people” as they have been characterized by populist movements. Producerism can be seen in Jeffersonian era praises of individuals who used hammer and hand to promote the industrious part of the community.⁶⁰ “The people” that were produced by the vision of producerism were generally characterized by hard work and humble origins. Producers tended to include craftsmen, small merchants and manufacturers, and farmers from all across the nation.⁶¹

When the People’s Party was established in 1892, “the people” took on the characteristics of debt-ridden farmers who sought an alliance with the middle class of America in order to ward off the elites.⁶² Henry Lloyd described the People’s Party as “a

party that the people can trust.”⁶³ The Greenback movement of the late nineteenth century focused its concerns with the wealth-producing classes. These people were described as industrious, prudent, self-denying, ingenious, shrewd and honest.⁶⁴ These descriptions show that the concept of producerism was not lost upon the Greenback movement.

The success of the populist parties during this era depended on a platform that recognized the values of the producer class. As Kazin comments, “nearly every platform—whether from the Knights of Labor, Agricultural Wheel, or Anti-Monopoly Party—hailed the ‘industrial masses’ or ‘working classes’ of both field and factory and cursed their ‘plundering’ enemies.”⁶⁵ The Knights of Labor was an organization that consisted of and was run by the wage earners. As a result of this logic, the Knights of Labor barred the participation of bankers, land speculators, lawyers, liquor dealers and gamblers; the primary reasoning behind this restriction was the argument that those professions did not break a sweat when generating their wealth.⁶⁶

Additional rhetoric used to describe “the people” illustrated by Leonidas Polk, a Confederate general. Polk symbolized his conception of “the people” by referring to “the great Northwest, great South, and great West.”⁶⁷ These regions were characterized by hard working farmers and industrious producers, and thus became a symbol of “the people” and their ideals. In addition to the isolation of particular regions, “the people” were also described as “the toilers”, “the industrial classes,” and “farmers and laborers of the entire country” by various politicians who sought to construct an identity for “the people.”⁶⁸

The rise of the progressive movement (1890s to the 1920s) created an alternative definition for the concept of “the people.” Instead of relying solely on the American

public as producers, the progressive movement utilized synonyms such as “citizens” or “the public” to establish their identity of the people.⁶⁹ The intent behind this change, according to Kazin, was to create a broader banner to unify the American people, rather than isolate whether or not one made a living performing manual work.⁷⁰ The strategy of inclusion for the sake of the greater public interest caused the populist movement to accept the transition to unite a larger movement.

The 1920s saw the rise of a Catholic populist movement. The Catholic movement “demanded respect for manual workers and curbs on speculative wealth; they warned that increasing the powers of a centralized state could lead to communism,” according to Kazin.⁷¹ Despite the differences that the Catholic populist movement exhibited from past organizations, the central theme of producerism was kept intact and continued to characterize the populist movements of the early twentieth century.

During the Great Depression, Charles Coughlin, a Roman Catholic priest and influential radio voice during the Roosevelt administration, continued the populist tradition of constructing the people as the wealth producing classes. In *Social Justice*, a paper published by Coughlin, a cartoon depicted the troubles of Coughlin’s conception of “the people” struggling against a maze of oppression that threatened to suffocate “the people.” True to the populist narrative, “the people” represented in the cartoon consisted of farmers, laborers, taxpayers, small merchants, and independent manufacturers.⁷² With the weight of an economic recession crushing the struggling middle class, the populist movements of the Great Depression era continued to paint the picture of the hard working producer.

The rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s provides another familiar example of a populist image of “the people.” The CIO rose to power due to the failure of labor unions to stand up against the strength of the American manufacturing giants.⁷³ The CIO published a heroic image of its constituency with “Joe Worker.” The CIO attempted to unify the entire wage-earning population with “Joe Worker” representing a hero that welcomed the participation of “able-bodied poor as allies for social change.”⁷⁴ This move for inclusion deviated from past attempts to separate the middle class movement from the unskilled workers that made up a crucial part of the CIO’s constituency.

As the CIO movement developed, the leadership made it clear that their goal was to establish an “industrial democracy.” The industrial democracy relied on evoking three identities of the industrial worker: the consumer, the patriotic democrat, and the vanguard of liberalism.⁷⁵ This movement was predominantly characterized by heroic images of manual workers, described by Kazin as “Herculean, bare-chested workers striking hammer blows against employers.”⁷⁶ These images reflect a central theme of the populist narrative: the ability of the middle class to rise up and demand change from the corrupt elites.

Envision a Robust “Enemy”

The rhetoric scholarship on enemy construction focuses on two theories. The first is Kenneth Burke’s theory of identification and the common enemy. The second is Jeremy Engels’ argument about enemyship. In his influential essay “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’”, Burke analyzes the rise of Adolph Hitler and his methods of persuasion.⁷⁷ Burke argues Hitler’s ability to unify a social movement that consisted of

many divergent populations stemmed from the creation of a common enemy. Men who can unite on nothing else can unite on the basis of a foe shared by all.⁷⁸ Burke traces the rise of an “international” devil in Hitler’s rhetoric and argues that the materialization does not require proof. Once the common enemy is established, the rhetorical game sweeps the need for hard evidence under the rug.⁷⁹

The strategy of justification used by Hitler’s rhetoric is one of reason. Hitler advanced his cult of war in the name of humility, love, and peace.⁸⁰ Burke argues that given the choice between the rhetoric of war and peace, the astute politician will choose to fight in the name of peace. This choice allows the speaker to hide the intent of their rhetoric by masking the discourse as rational or good-willed.

Burke summarizes Hitler’s unification device with four characteristics. First, inborn dignity is stressed as an attribute of *all* men.⁸¹ This inborn dignity is attainable only if the men choose to engage in the right thinking and the right living. Hitler used this device to argue that the Aryans can only be elevated to their inborn dignity through the domination of inferior races.

Second, Burke highlights the projection device. This device is a curative process that dissociates oneself from societal ills by establishing a scapegoat.⁸² By casting off the weaknesses and flaws of a society upon an exterior group, the projection device allows the speaker to mobilize his audience against the scapegoat. Burke explains the appeal of this device as “the individual properly realizes that he is not alone responsible for his condition.”⁸³ This strategy removes the responsibility of the audience and places the burden upon the shoulders of the identified scapegoat.

The third feature of the unification device is symbolic rebirth. Once the scapegoat has been cast out and identified, the movement is now ready to move forward towards a goal.⁸⁴ This rebirth process seeks to retell the history of the audience in order to separate them from the scapegoat. Through this process of purification, the audience begins to differentiate themselves from the scapegoat.

Finally, the unification device requires a commercial use. This act is one of persuasion. In Hitler's rhetoric, he shifted the blame for the economic ills upon the scapegoats (the Jews). This process reorders the priorities and concerns of the nation to make them more favorable to the speaker. Instead of worrying about an impending economic collapse, Hitler persuaded his audience that economic factors were "only of second or even third importance"; he highlighted the political and moral factors as the most important concern.⁸⁵

The emphasis on difference and oppositions is also used to divide the people from their common enemy. Aryans represented "heroism" and "sacrifice" while the Jewish people were characterized with "cunning" and "arrogance."⁸⁶ These contrasting characteristics were used to build the superiority of the Aryans over the lesser races.

Burke argues that "it may well be that people, in their human frailty, require an enemy as well as a goal."⁸⁷ This appeal opens up space for the "curative" rhetoric of unification: establish a fictitious devil-function, create a scapegoat to shoulder the burden of social ills, and construct slogans to demonize the opposition. The example of Hitler provides an insight on how national unity can be created under false pretenses by powerful rhetoric.

Burke's theory of the creation of the common enemy offers an insight into how populist rhetoric constructs the "elites" as an enemy of "the people." Populist rhetoric relies on the construction of a common enemy and seeks to mobilize "the people" against that enemy. Dennis Kearney identified the Chinese as a threat to the well-being of hard-working Californians.⁸⁸ Incendiary language is used by populist rhetors to demonize the enemy and places the blame for the societal ills faced by the people on the shoulders of the elites. The corruption of Wall Street bankers is highlighted by populist orators as responsible for the economic hardships felt by the working class American.

Jeremy Engels' *Enemyship* contributes to the rhetorical literature concerning enemy creation. Engels uses Thomas Paine's 1776 *Common Sense* publication to establish the definition of enemyship. Enemyship consists of three parts: naming, estrangement, and escalation.⁸⁹ Enemyship uses naming to strip the enemy of its positive characteristics while the negative is amplified.⁹⁰

Naming is the process of identifying someone to play the role of the enemy.⁹¹ The enemy is stripped of positive characteristics while their negative characteristics are amplified. The process of naming is used to essentialize the enemy; one Tory or "Indian" is just as bad as another, according to Engels.⁹² In an interview on CBS's *60 Minutes*, Obama used traditional populist rhetoric to characterize the enemy by stating "I did not run for office to be helping out a bunch of fat cat bankers on Wall Street."⁹³ In the Jacksonian era, similar rhetoric was used to describe the money power elites who were the enemies of the 1850s populists. As Kazin argues, "by calling the enemy 'octopus,' 'leech,' 'pig,' or 'fat cat,' a populist speaker suggested that 'the people' were opposing a

form of savagery as much as a structure inimical to their interests. Character assassination was always essential to the rhetorical game.”⁹⁴

The name-calling of the Wall Street lobbyists and firms is a crucial part of naming the enemy. By engaging in rhetorical character assassination, the populist narrative facilitates the ability of the people to eliminate the possibility of compromise. Much like the dehumanizing process of a war game, demonizing the enemy with rhetorical attacks creates the enemy as inferior and without positive characteristics. This process enables the possibility for the killing of the enemy, whether literally or figuratively.⁹⁵

The populist narrative tends to brand a similar set of enemies as the target of its rhetoric. The Jacksonian era populists feared “the money power” and “monopolies” that dominated their time. As Kazin describes, money power “signified a non-productive, immeasurably wealthy octopus whose long, slimy tentacles reached from private firms on both sides of the Atlantic to grasp every household, business, and the seat of government.”⁹⁶ The money power that plagued the Jacksonian era was depicted as a far reaching and insidious power that corrupted the hard work of everyday Americans.

The narrative offering pervasive and corrupt elite carried on to the Gilded Age. The late nineteenth century was by the top of the American population accumulating a vast wealth. That as the rising industrial age generated capital and new innovative technologies, concern began to rise amongst the labor unions and disenfranchised members of America’s working class. The focus of the concerns was not necessarily the generation of wealth, but the means of which that wealth was obtained. According to Kazin, the populist movement was concerned primarily with “the theft of honest labor and hard-won property, not the particular brand of financial fire it spouted.”⁹⁷

Labor unions were not the only members of the historical fight against money power. Christian movements joined the fray in the late nineteenth century with concerns that the corrupt corporations had lost the spirit of Christianity and, with that, the ideals of charity and brotherhood.⁹⁸ The religious movement that joined the chorus of voices in opposition to the corruption of wealthy was a powerful addition to the populist movement. The use of Christian vocabulary was integral to communicating with the masses because it was seen as the only way to speak with great emotion of societal ills, as Kazin argues.⁹⁹

During the Great Depression, the role of the villain was played by concentrated wealth, as portrayed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.¹⁰⁰ The President was not the only person to identify the old populist enemy of money power. Coughlin was quick to assign the responsibility for the Great Depression to the corrupt and wealthy by saying “It’s a *money* question.”¹⁰¹ For Coughlin and his populist movement, the “money-changers,” which referred to the powerful members of the banking and finance industry, were seen as utterly immoral and unpatriotic.¹⁰² The traditional populist enemy of money power and concentrated wealth is a persistent theme throughout the history of populist narrative.

The Congress of Industrial Organizations explained the plight of middle class Americans at the hands of the elites rather eloquently when John L. Lewis declared the central question of the populist movement as “whether the working population of this country shall have the voice in determining their destiny or whether they shall serve as indentured servants for a financial and economic dictatorship that would shamelessly exploit our resources.”¹⁰³ The rhetoric used by Lewis is powerful because it establishes a

zero-sum relationship between “the people” and “the elites.” The choice is not between peaceful coexistence and domination, but revolution and indentured servitude.

The elimination of the middle ground is a rhetorical move that Engels views as central to the construction of enemyship. As Engels argues, Thomas Paine used rhetoric to incite an American movement because “Paine denied that they could coexist with the British enemy.”¹⁰⁴ Enemyship “erases the possibility of communication and facilitates the perception that the relationship is broken beyond repair,” as Engels argues.¹⁰⁵ This process of enemyship is called estrangement.

The last part of Engel’s enemyship is escalation. Engels notes that, “escalation works largely through tropes of imminence and inevitability as rhetors make it appear that the coming crisis is unavoidable.”¹⁰⁶ An apocalyptic trope can be presented as an impending crisis that puts the nation on “the verge of moral, political and material ruin” as the Populist Platform declared.¹⁰⁷ Engels argues that “among the available means of escalating the danger of the enemy was the rhetorical strategy of forecasting a future catastrophe if something was not done about the enemy right then.”¹⁰⁸ This escalation strategy was used by George Wallace as he believed that “an apocalyptic conflict was necessary to restore God’s ‘people’ to their rightful perch,” according to Lee.¹⁰⁹ Wallace warned of a United States where “thugs roamed the streets with impunity” and “cowardly politicians, bureaucrats, and distant federal judges capitulated to these loathsome forces.”¹¹⁰ By depicting a future crisis, Wallace attempted to push “the people” into confrontation with “the elites” before they could inflict damage upon the United States.

In the next chapter, I apply the themes and tropes of populist rhetoric to Obama’s Cooper Union speech. Recall that these themes and tropes include a virtuous people, a

vilified enemy, a division between evil and good, a call for redemption and an apocalyptic confrontation. I investigate this speech by paying close attention to the way Obama constitutes the people and the enemy. Once that division is established, I explore how Obama bridges this division in order to achieve an apocalyptic confrontation despite seeking cooperation from members of the enemy.

Endnotes

¹ As quoted in Michael Kazin, The Populist Persuasion: An American History, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 28.

² Robert G. Gunderson, "The Calamity Howlers," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 26 (1940): 401-411; Charles W. Lomas, "Dennis Kearney: Case Study in Demagoguery," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 41 (1955): 234-42; Howard S. Erlich, "Populist Rhetoric Reassessed: A Paradox," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1977): 140-51; Ronald Lee, "The New Populist Campaign for Economic Democracy: A Rhetorical Exploration," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (1986): 274-281; Thomas R. Burkholder, "Kansas Populism, Woman's Suffrage, and the Agrarian Myth: A Case Study in the Limits of Transcendence," *Communication Studies* 40 (1989): 292-307. Michael J. Lee, "The Populist Chameleon: The People's Party, Huey Long, George Wallace, and the Populist Argumentative Frame," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006): 355-78; Ron Formisano, "Populist Currents in the 2008 Election," *The Journal of Political History* 22 (2010): 237-55; Ritchie Savage, "Populist Elements in Contemporary American Political Discourse," *The Sociological Review* 58 (2010): 169-88

³ Kazin. 5-6.

⁴ Ibid. 6.

⁵ See Lisa Foster, "Problematic Populism in Public Address: Bruce Springsteen's The Rising and the Power of National Unification in Post 9/11 America," *Conference paper presented at the National Communication Association* (2008). 1-22. See also Larry Smith, "Propagating Political Worldviews Through Narrative: Bruce Springsteen's 'Darkness on the Edge of Town,' 'The River,' and the Emergence of Rock Populism," *Conference paper presented at the National Communication Association* (2007). 1-27.

⁶ Kazin. 5-6.

⁷ See Gunderson (1940)

⁸ Gunderson. 402.

⁹ Lomas. 237.

¹⁰ Ibid. 239.

¹¹ Ibid. 241.

¹² Ibid. 238.

¹³ Ibid. 239.

¹⁴ Lawrence W. Rosenfield, "George Wallace Plays Rosemary's Baby," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 55 (1969): 36-44; John J. Makay, "The Rhetoric of George C. Wallace and the 1964 Civil Rights Law," *Today's Speech* 18 (1970): 26-34; David A. Carter, "Rhetorical Criticism as a Teaching Tactic for Public Speaking: George Wallace and the Civil Rights Bill," *The Florida Speech Communication Journal* 7 (1979): 1-6; Stephan Leshner, *George Wallace: American Populist* (Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 1994); Lloyd Rohler, "Conservative Appeals to the People: George Wallace's Populist Rhetoric," *The Southern Communication Journal* 64 (1999): 316-22.

¹⁵ Rosenfield. 36.

¹⁶ Ibid. 37.

¹⁷ Carter. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. 3.

²¹ Ibid. 5.

²² Erlich. 141.

²³ Ibid, 143.

²⁴ Ibid, 142.

Not all of the people included in this example are accurate portrayals of populist rhetors. Ben Tillman was the Governor of South Carolina in the 1890s. Tillman presented himself as a friend of ordinary white farmers. Huey Long was the Governor of Louisiana in the early 1900s. Long proposed the Share Our Wealth Program, which was a wealth redistribution program with the motto “Every Man a King.” William Jennings Bryan was a presidential candidate in the early 1900s that campaigned off of a populist platform. Gerald L. K. Smith was a leader of the Share Our Wealth movement during the Great Depression. Joseph McCarthy was a senator during the 1950s. McCarthy’s pursuit to root out Communism, known as McCarthyism, involved the use of demagogic rhetoric.

²⁵ Ibid. 142.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 145.

²⁹ Ibid. 145.

³⁰ Ibid. 146.

³¹ Lee. 358.

³² Ibid. 356.

³³ Ibid. 358.

³⁴ Ibid, 359.

³⁵ Ibid. 361.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid. 362.

³⁸ Ibid. 362.

³⁹ Ibid. 365.

⁴⁰ McGee. 242.

⁴¹ Ibid. 243.

⁴² Ibid. 242.

⁴³ Ibid. 247.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 245.

⁴⁵ Charland, Maurice. “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of Peuple Québécois.” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (1987). 133-150

⁴⁶ Ibid. 135.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 139.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 141.

⁴⁹ Burke, Kenneth. Language As Symbolic Action (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966). 3

⁵⁰ Ibid..5

⁵¹ Burke, Kenneth. The Rhetoric of Motive (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1950). 20-21

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- ⁵² Ibid. 22.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid. 55.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid. 27.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid. 41.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid. 42.
- ⁵⁸ Michael J. Lee, “The Populist Chameleon: The People’s Party, Huey Long, George Wallace, and the Populist Argumentative Frame,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 92 (November 2006), 358.
- ⁵⁹ Michael Kazin, The Populist Persuasion: An American History, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 13.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid, 13.
- ⁶¹ Ibid, 14.
- ⁶² Ibid. 28.
- ⁶³ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid, 34.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid. 35.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid. 37.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid. 38.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid. 51.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid.
- ⁷¹ Ibid. 111.
- ⁷² Ibid. 121.
- ⁷³ Ibid. 136.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid. 137.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid. 143.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷⁷ Burke, Kenneth. “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” in The Philosophy of Literary Form (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973). 191-220.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid. 193.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid. 194-195.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid. 199.
- ⁸¹ Ibid. 202.
- ⁸² I am using the curative process and scapegoating to refer to the process of displacing responsibility and blame for societal ills on a particular group of people.
- ⁸³ Ibid. 203.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid. 204.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid. 208.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid. 219.
- ⁸⁸ See Lomas (1955).
- ⁸⁹ Jeremy Engels, Enemyship, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 21-22.
- ⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Engels. 23.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ “Obama Slams ‘Fat Cat’ Bankers”, *The Wall Street Journal* (December 14, 2009), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB126073152465089651.html>

⁹⁴ Kazin. 16.

⁹⁵ Robert L. Heath. Realism and Relativism: A perspective on Kenneth Burke (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), 224.

⁹⁶ Kazin. 31.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 32.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 33.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 110.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 119.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 139.

¹⁰⁴ Engels. 50.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 22.

¹⁰⁶ Engels. 22.

¹⁰⁷ Lee. 362.

¹⁰⁸ Engels. 104.

¹⁰⁹ Lee. 372.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

COOPER UNION

On April 22, 2010, Obama arrived in Cooper Union to deliver a speech in support of his financial reform plan. Cooper Union has been host to many political speeches, the most famous being Abraham Lincoln's 1860 speech when he addressed the controversial issue of slavery and propelled himself into the presidency. President Obama's Cooper Union speech positions him to follow in the footsteps of Lincoln. Obama introduced his second major reform initiative: legislation to strengthen the regulations on the financial industry and Wall Street. This "high-profile" speech was seen by commentators as "part of an aggressive campaign to pass the legislation."¹ The Republicans had been through a long fight with the Obama administration over healthcare legislation. Scott Brown's victory in Massachusetts was credited as a display by the American people that they would not accept massive spending during a time of economic angst.² This speech represented Obama's address was a response to the economic populist fervor sweeping the country: it sought to create new allies to help pass his new legislation.³

Obama's speech can be characterized by two major themes. One theme is the failure of responsibility. Obama calls upon his audience to help him resolve "a financial crisis as dire as any we've known in generations." That crisis is one that was "born out of a failure of responsibility -- from Wall Street all the way to Washington -- that brought down many of the world's largest financial firms and nearly dragged our economy into a second Great Depression." This "failure of responsibility" plays a central role in Obama's speech; if the United States and its people do not learn from the lessons of prior crisis,

they will “doom ourselves to repeat it [economic crisis].” The failure of responsibility exists on multiple levels: the American public, Wall Street, and Capitol Hill. I argue that Obama uses this failure of responsibility to echo populist themes and tropes as well as reinvent the divisions between Wall Street and Main Street. At the same time, Obama is able to keep within the boundaries of populist rhetoric.

Another theme of Obama’s speech is the path to redemption. As discussed in the previous chapter, the remedy of injustice and bringing about a final confrontation plays a central role in populist rhetoric. Obama builds upon the failure of responsibility and offers his financial regulatory reform as a solution. While doing this, he also pushes the responsible people and their allies into a confrontation with the irresponsible elites. He achieves this by creating a new dividing line between good and evil; that line is seen through a commitment to responsibility. This stage fulfills the requirements of populist rhetoric.

Failure of the People

Obama constitute his audience as “the people” who care about hard-work and earning success. The design of the bill is to look out for the “ordinary people.” As Lee comments, “the ordinary versus elite binary is identifiably populist in its form.”⁴ Obama describes the people as “innocent people and innocent businesses” who have been victims of “collateral damage.” In keeping with traditional populist rhetoric, Obama isolates “Main Street” as a characteristic of the people. Main Street refers to the average American citizen. In order to get a more detailed description of Obama’s constituted audience, I note that Obama describes “the people” not as the CEOs, country club members or the entrepreneurs, but instead as the citizens who are “paving their

driveways,” “selling houses” or “using your home equity to start a small business...” As McGee theorized, people are the social and political myths they accept.⁵ Obama wants his audience to buy into the image of the people as the average American struggling against the economic crisis.

Obama’s characterization of “the people” as ordinary is consistent with prior populist rhetoric. However, being ordinary means that the people also have the tendency to make mistakes. The American public is not perfect. When Obama blames the failure of responsibility for the economic crisis, he does not leave the American people unscathed from this criticism. Obama had a choice to focus his criticism on Wall Street and the special interest in Washington. Instead, Obama says,

...this plan would enact the strongest consumer financial protections ever. (Applause.) And that's absolutely necessary because this financial crisis wasn't just the result of decisions made in the executive suites on Wall Street; it was also the result of decisions made around kitchen tables across America, by folks who took on mortgages and credit cards and auto loans. And while it's true that many Americans took on financial obligations that they knew or should have known they could not have afforded, millions of others were, frankly, duped. They were misled by deceptive terms and conditions, buried deep in the fine print.

The responsibility of the financial crisis is not put solely on the shoulders of the Wall Street firms. Obama calls out the American people for the irresponsible financial decisions they made “around kitchen tables.” Many Americans took on obligations that they were unprepared to handle. While Obama backtracks to blaming the manipulative schemes of Wall Street, it is important to note that Obama refused to let the people think

they were not part of the problem. By identifying some of the people as irresponsible, Obama indicates that the financial reform legislation is designed to help teach them responsibility.

Failure of Wall Street

Obama identifies the next locus of irresponsibility as the financial industry. As the previous chapter discussed, populist rhetoric identifies the elites as the institutions and individuals that exploit the people.⁶ However, in order to have an effective rhetoric, Obama admits that he needs the help of the financial industry. The traditional enemy of the people must, he argues, become an ally of the populist fervor, offering justification (legitimization) for Wall Street as an institution. In the opening of his speech, Obama remarks, “It really is good to be back, because Wall Street is the heart of our nation’s financial sector.” As the previous chapter discussed, the calamity howlers of the early populist movements used demagoguery and incendiary rhetoric to attack the “wolves of Wall Street.”⁷ Populist rhetors historically painted the banks, financial institutions, and Wall Street as the enemy. One can look at Andrew Jackson’s language and rhetoric that he used during the rechartering of the Second Bank of the United States as a point of contrast between traditional populist rhetoric and Obama’s divergence. Like Obama, Andrew Jackson identified the financial elites, whom he called “money power,” as the enemy of the American people.⁸ Jackson did not believe it made sense for private business to maintain a stranglehold over public funds. This relationship between the public good and private institutions was an evil that, in the eye of Jackson, exploited the hard work of the American people and left the levers of power in the hand of the financial elites.

There are some similarities between Jackson's approach to money power and Obama's treatment of the Wall Street lobbyists. Both presidents saw the exploitative nature of the groups as a threat to the public. Just as Obama described the financial industry lobbyists as a deceptive group of individuals who sought to corrupt politics for selfish reasons, Jacksonian money power was seen as "a non-productive, immeasurably wealthy octopus whose long, slimy tentacles reached from private firms on both sides of the Atlantic to grasp every household, business, and seat of government."⁹ However, Jackson's rhetoric painted the banks as unequivocally evil. Obama's speech in Cooper Union created the possibility of good and utility for the financial institutions. Obama stated that without the financial institutions "our house will continue to sit on shifting sands, and our families, businesses, and the global economy will be vulnerable to future crises." Instead of an unequivocal rejection of "money power," Obama sees an opportunity to build bridges and create allies within the historical enemy of the people.

Wealth alone is not a sufficient condition for the existence of the enemy. After all, the American Dream is seen as the stories of rags to riches, where a poor immigrant comes to the United States and is able to work their way into a successful economic future. The accumulation of wealth is not a concern of the people; instead Obama focuses on the process through which the wealth is achieved:

Now, Americans don't begrudge anybody for success when that success is earned.

But when we read in the past, and sometimes in the present, about enormous executive bonuses at firms -- even as they're relying on assistance from taxpayers or they're taking huge risks that threaten the system as a whole or their company is doing badly -- it offends our fundamental values.

Only when the wealth is obtained through the exploitation of the system or the people does the wealthy offend “our fundamental values.” Note that Obama identifies “our” values as opposed to “my” values. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the process of identification occurs when the rhetor convinces the audience that they share the same set of values and beliefs.¹⁰ The actions of the executive are not ones that solely violate the president’s belief. The violation offends a universal value that both Obama and “the people” can relate to. Enemyship acts as a safety valve for citizen resentment.¹¹ This process works similarly to Burke’s theory of the scapegoat. By using rhetoric to convince the American public that the enemy threatens core American values such as private property and liberty, politicians are able to form broad coalitions to mobilize against the enemy.¹²

Obama’s rhetoric uses the “curative process” of dissociation. Burke believes that a scapegoat is established by casting off the weaknesses and flaws of society upon a limited group of people.¹³ In order to allow diverse and potentially conflicting groups to engage in collective action, this process of identification is used to mobilize the audience against the scapegoat. Obama’s use of the scapegoat functions in two ways. First, the scapegoat is not the entirety of the financial industry. While it would have been easier to place the burden of the economic crisis on the shoulders of the whole industry, Obama comments, “some -- and let me be clear, not all -- but some on Wall Street forgot that behind every dollar traded or leveraged there’s family looking to buy a house....” The people should not blame “all” of Wall Street, but instead, they should be concerned with “some” of Wall Street that exploited the people. Obama provides an opportunity for

members of Wall Street to ally themselves with the people by dissociating themselves with the “some.”

The process of purification begins when the audience begins to differentiate themselves from the scapegoat.¹⁴ The scapegoat is defined by Obama’s rhetoric as the parts of the financial industry that engages in “highly-leveraged, loosely-monitored gambling” that jeopardizes the well-being of the “innocent.” In order to continue the process of dissociation, Obama assures the audience that “there are a lot of companies that use these instruments to that legitimate end” which is identified as the ability to “allay risk and spur investment.” If the financial industry has the best interests of the public in mind, then Obama argues that there is nothing to fear from his legislation. Only the evil manifestations of Wall Street should be concerned by the developments.

Obama describes only “a few companies” that “made out like bandits by exploiting their customers” instead of a vast and overwhelming conspiracy of financial industry lobbyists seeking to undermine the people. Traditionally, money power is seen in populist rhetoric as uncompromising and part of a vast network of corruption, as Kazin notes.¹⁵ While he deviates from the common populist characterization, Obama maintains the theme of the elites. He sees the Wall Street industry as an ally against the elites whose “business model depends on bilking people.” Obama’s characterization of the corrupt and greedy section of Wall Street is consistent with a populist conception of the elite.

The second way in which Obama uses the scapegoat is to partially shift responsibility away from the people and their allies for the economic crisis. Some of members of the public are responsible for their own demise in the financial crisis. These are the people whom Obama identifies as Americans that “took on financial obligations

that they knew or should have known they could not have afforded.” However, Obama argues, “millions of others were, frankly, duped. They were misled by deceptive terms and conditions.” These “millions” were exploited and tricked by the members of the financial industry looking to make a profit off of risky investments and misinformation.

Not all of the companies were complicit in the exploitation of “the people.” Absolving the responsibility for a few of the companies is critical to Obama’s strategy to create an alliance between the people and Wall Street. If all the members of the financial industry were universally responsible for the exploitation of the people, then Obama would be unable to find a middle ground or allies to cooperate within the industry. Instead, Obama identifies parts of the financial industry that were not culpable for the exploitation. Obama blames the current regulations on the financial sector as being “so opaque” and “so complex” that “the firms didn’t understand them.” By identifying “the absence of clear rules” as part of the cause for the economic turmoil, Obama tries to sell the belief that some of the companies did not engage in malicious practices. According to this narrative, these companies could not have known the consequences of their actions because the regulations did not provide a clear picture. By placing the blame on the system rather than the companies, Obama opens up the prospect of a solution that can involve changing the system instead of the companies.

In place of the plotting exploitative industry supported by special interest, Obama presents a different narrative. The decisions made by the Lehman Brothers and the rest of the financial giants were not made as part of a malicious plan. According to Obama, these decisions took place in “hurried discussions in the middle of the night.” These words attribute the economic disaster to poor management and human nature as opposed to an

overarching conspiracy to crush Main Street. Lee argues that the rhetoric of a “conspiracy against the aboriginal integral virtue of the farmer” was a critical part of the apocalyptic confrontation in the Kansas populist discourse.¹⁶ In order to expand his alliance with “legitimate companies,” Obama argues that the financial reforms are “designed to respect legitimate activities but prevent reckless risk taking.” He wants to protect the benevolent members of Wall Street and isolate the harmful members.

Obama’s compromising characterization of Wall Street is that it opens up the possibility of reconciliation. As the previous chapter discussed, enemyship requires estrangement. Estrangement requires the elimination of the possibility of cooperation or reconciliation to be impossible. By targeting “some” instead of “all,” Obama leaves open the possibility that “some” of Wall Street serves the interest of the American people and can cooperate with Obama to establish his policies.

Obama’s words, far from eradicating the possibility of cooperation, beg for its existence. There is a moment in his speech where Obama shifts the audience of his speech from “the people” to “the enemy” and this is the message he delivered: “When I speak to the titans of industry here -- because I want to urge you to join us, instead of fighting us in this effort.” President Obama issues a plea to the financial industry to become the ally to his project. Instead of engaging in the “us vs. them” dichotomy that characterizes populist rhetoric, Obama attempts to reconcile with the financial industry and seeks grounds for cooperation.

As the previous chapter argued, Obama’s rhetoric is deployed in a populist manner only if there is an elimination of the middle ground between the people and the enemy. At first glance, the Cooper Union speech seems to be an indication that Obama is

creating a middle ground for cooperation; this move would undermine the potential of Obama's populist rhetoric if it were true. However, Elrich argues that populism relies on the paradox, referenced in chapter two. On one hand, Obama needs to use divisionary rhetoric in order to unite his audience against the elites. On the other hand, he needs the cooperation of some members of the traditional elites in order to move his financial reform legislation forward. Just as Southern Populism was reinvented to appeal to African Americans who were traditional part of the alienated group, Obama's rhetoric reinvents populism by redefining the boundaries of the elites.

Obama achieves this by creating a dividing line between two groups. On one side, there is the traditional ordinary and innocent people and the members of the financial industry that Obama describes as necessary and well intentioned. On the other side, there are the newly defined elites. These elites are the members of the financial industry that wish to maliciously exploit the people. In order to offer the olive branch to the allies in the financial industry, Obama assures his allies that "the only people who ought to fear the kind of oversight and transparency that we're proposing are those whose conduct will fail this scrutiny." If the elites in the financial industry are willing to play by the rules, they will be a welcomed ally in the fight against the recklessness and the greedy. "The people" are contrasted to the elites. The people are innocent, albeit irresponsible. The elites are greedy, uncaring, and reckless. Obama is successful in reorienting the traditional divisions of the people and the elites to create allies among historical enemies.

Gunderson argues that Gilded Age Populism mobilized through a shared agrarian experience. Obama mobilizes his "people" through the shared failure of responsibility. By identifying the failure of responsibility as a problem that persists from the government

all the way down to the people, Obama constitutes the people as similar to members of Wall Street and the government. The people are defined by their antithesis, the flawed elites. If the people are honest and hard-working, then their opposite are devious and lazy. In order to define the elites, populist rhetoric looks at the differences between the elites and the people. Obama's declaration that the responsibility is shared highlights similarities with Wall Street instead of differences and, therefore, narrates a commonality between the two groups.

Obama calls out to the audience of financial industry leaders and lobbyists and offers an alliance. He urges members of Wall Street to join him, "instead of fighting us in this effort." Obama's expectation is that they will cooperate because these reforms are "not only in the best interest of our country, but in the best interest of the financial sector." As was discussed previously, identification unites divergent groups by creating a shared interest and a common enemy. According to Obama, both the financial industry and the people have an incentive to abet the passage of the financial reform bill for their own interest. In addition to this shared interest, Obama highlights the danger of irresponsibility not only to the people, but to the health of the financial industry. If some members of Wall Street are able to play the risky game and gamble, the rest of the financial industry will suffer as well. By linking the fate of financial industry with the people, Obama creates a common enemy for both groups and hopes to unite them against the irresponsible members of the financial industry. Big business is feared only because of their "unaccountable economic and political influence."¹⁷ If the Wall Street firms can be accountable, then perhaps Obama can find a useful ally.

Another criticism Obama highlights is that: “Instead of competing to offer confusing products, companies will compete the old-fashioned way, by offering better products.” First, Obama’s reference to the “old-fashioned way” of competition points to an American tradition. Throughout the speech, Obama describes his vision of “old-fashioned” America. Obama argues that the American economic system only works if “our markets are only free.” Without the freedom from corruption and exploitation, the traditional economic system does not serve the people. That is why the safeguards established by Obama’s legislation are important.

Second, Obama’s characterization of the business practices of the companies reveals the underlying motives of the financial institutions. Note that, in order to get ahead in the market, companies chose to offer “confusing products.” One example of the “confusing products” is seen by credit cards that offer a labyrinth of conditions, stipulations, and hidden fees that are clouded in a veil of technical language and fine print. These products are compared to the “better products” offered by the old-fashion way of competition. The purpose of the confusing products is to manipulate and exploit the innocent investors with a plethora of advertisements, management tricks, and business facades. The companies that choose to promote and sell the confusing products do not have the best interests of the people in mind. Instead, the motive behind this marketing scheme is purely selfish. The priority for the companies is their own gains not the well-being of the investors. In many cases, the companies earn a profit through the abuse of the hard-earned dollars of the investor.

Failure of the System

While there are flaws with the financial institutions and their recklessness, “we also need reform in Washington.” Decrying the system is one part of the populist narrative. The system (Congress and the democratic voting process are just a few examples) is held to an ideal that is rooted in the American tradition. Obama highlights “a strong financial sector that helps people to raise capital and get loans and invest their savings. That’s part of what has made America what it is.” These words illustrate an attempt to invoke the traditions of an American free market system. Hard working people engaged in a fair economic system can rise above their humble origins and find success. Obama decries the free market as being corrupted from its original intent. According to Obama, “a free market was never meant to be a free license to take whatever you can get, however you can get it.” As discussed in the previous chapter, the redemption of traditional American systems that are corrupt or ineffective at serving “the people” is a crucial aspect of decrying the system.¹⁸

As is typical in populist rhetoric, Obama paints the daily workings of Capitol Hill as corrupt and plagued by special interests. The debates over financial regulation have “seen battalions of financial industry lobbyists descending on Capitol Hill...to influence the outcome of this debate.” The lobbyists do not travel a road paved with good intentions. Instead, they rely on “misleading arguments and attacks that are designed not to improve the bill but to weaken or to kill it.” The battle against engrained special interests that are determined to undermine the people through the use of manipulation and malicious intent is consistent with the populist rhetoric definition of the enemy. As the previous chapter highlighted, Kansas populism saw a division between the wealthy and the working class. The working class feared a conspiracy by the wealthy and the financial

institutions to exploit them.¹⁹ There is a need for immediate action to correct the flawed system. Obama worries that the “bipartisan process” will “buckle under the weight of these withering forces.” Despite seeing “business as usual in Washington,” Obama declares, “I believe we can and must put this kind of cynical politics aside. We’ve got to put an end to it. That’s why I’m here today.”

Populist rhetoric relies on a redemptive vision.²⁰ Obama outlines the conditions of redemption; “Until the millions of our neighbors who are looking for work can find a job...we may be able to claim a technical recovery – but we will not have truly recovered.” Obama declares, “even as we seek to revive this economy, it’s also incumbent on us to rebuild it stronger than before.” Obama’s vision for a successful reform is the protection of the ordinary citizens and to improve on the economic system that currently exists. Obama argues that his financial regulatory reform is consistent with traditional American values. The tension between “the desire to allow markets to function without interference” and “rules to prevent markets from falling out of kilter” is described by Obama as a debate that has existed “since the founding of this nation” and “what has allowed our country to keep up with a changing world.” By identifying the tradition of this debate as a core function of America’s foundation, Obama’s rhetoric engages in the redemptive process of populism. This process is achieved by verifying that the financial regulatory reform is consistent with the tenets of the nation.

Lee comments, “Until the role of the system is introduced, audiences are left with the seemingly eternal struggle between good and evil.”²¹ The concern of populist rhetors is that the system that was designed to uphold justice now serves the corrupt and special interests. Obama says that he believes “in the power of the free market.” The free market

allows people to raise capital, successfully invest, and promote economic growth. Obama uses the free market to describe American ideals to his audience. However, Obama warns that these ideas are threatened by corruption. He states that “a free market was never meant to be a free license to take whatever you can get, however you can get it.” Obama fears that businesses have taken the search for economic growth and profit to the extreme. Instead of reflecting a true free market, this profit-seeking strategy pillages the economic field without regard for accountability or the well-being of the American people.

In order to paint the on-going battle between the people and special interest, Obama pushes for a bill that “represents significant improvement on the flawed rules...despite the furious effort of industry lobbyists to shape this legislation....” Obama describes the actions of the industry lobbyists as a threat to his efforts to reign in the unaccountable members of Wall Street. Here, he shows that the financial industry is not looking to cooperate. They do not want to produce a bill that brings responsibility to Wall Street. Instead, the financial industry will fight the bill and try to manipulate and change it in order to weaken the provisions. This fact is used as evidence by Obama that some parts of the financial industry do not have the best interests of the American people in mind. More importantly, the resistance of the financial industry shows that there is no room or will for cooperation. As the previous chapter discussed, this is the process of estrangement: the elimination of the possibility of cooperation. Once estrangement occurs, populist rhetoric moves toward pushing this irreconcilable battle into confrontation.

Recovery

After Obama has defined the crisis of responsibility and outlined how the people, Wall Street, and financial institutions fall along the lines of responsibility, he prepares his audience for confrontation. Obama states:

But you're here and I'm here because we've got more work to do. Until this progress is felt not just on Wall Street but on Main Street we cannot be satisfied. Until the millions of our neighbors who are looking for work can find a job, and wages are growing at a meaningful pace, we may be able to claim a technical recovery -- but we will not have truly recovered.

Obama is describing the financial situation as a work in progress. According to this argument, all of the measures that have been taken by the Obama administration have only served to stem the bleeding of the economic crisis not resolve it. The recovery of Wall Street is an insufficient condition for recovery. In order for the public and America to completely recover, Obama believes that Main Street has to see the dividends of the recovery. Without this critical component, the process is incomplete. Obama displays this argument by making a distinction between “technical recovery” and being “truly recovered.”

A technical recovery is defined by a turnaround in growth that Obama notes is the fastest turnaround in “nearly three decades.” This growth is compared to the economic damage from a year ago; Obama describes eight million jobs that have been lost, trillions of dollars in savings gone, and businesses were shutting down across the nation. Although the economy has been steadily improving, the growth does not merit a true recovery. The concept of being “truly recovered” is an indication from Obama that the road to recovery has only been partially fulfilled. It is another way in which Obama calls

his audience to action by showing them a job that needs to be finished. With his rhetoric, Obama sets the conditions for his audience can be satisfied with the economic recovery. Populist rhetoric only functions if there is a crisis that demands immediate action; Obama meets this criterion by labeling the recovery job as incomplete.

Obama declares that it is “incumbent on us to rebuild it [the economy] stronger than before.” The word “incumbent” means morally binding or obligatory; by choosing to use this word, Obama is defining the responsibilities of the American people and himself. Reforming the corrupt institutions is not a problem that can be kicked down the road. Action is an imperative. Recall that populist rhetoric functions by propelling the people to act against the injustices of the elites. Just as George Wallace demanded that the Southern population rise up against the imperial orders of the Supreme Court, Obama demands the people create a more responsible financial institution.

Recall that the process of escalation warns the audience of an impending crisis that will beset the people if the enemy is not confronted. Reckless practices that are unconstrained by responsibility “threatened our entire financial system.” If left unchecked, Obama believes that the entire fabric of American society will remain under a constant threat of collapse. Obama engages in crisis rhetoric when describing the consequences of not implementing the financial reform. Responsible financial reform is needed in order to ensure that “we can wind down one firm if it gets into trouble without bringing the whole system down or forcing taxpayers to fund a bailout.” This statement is helps Obama build up an impending conflict. In a nightmare scenario where the firms fall in a chain reaction, the threat to the American people comes in the form of tax-funded bailouts. The hard-earned money that is contributed to the federal government would not

be used on benefiting its citizens, but making up for the risky mistakes of the wealthy. This is a scenario that Obama describes as “unacceptable to you, the American people.” This pushes the people and their allies further along the path toward confrontation.

The financial reform legislation is designed to resolve this crisis by creating a battle between the responsible and the irresponsible. With tools outlined in the legislation such as consumer financial oversight, transparency measures such as the Volker Rule, and a management strategy for risky banking, Obama hopes to forge practices that turns Wall Street into an institution that uses financial instruments to a “legitimate end.” The choice to cooperate with Obama and his allies is on the table for the Wall Street firms. Whether or not they will cooperate will demonstrate if they are a legitimate enterprise or an institution that seeks to bilk people for profit. There is no middle ground between those two options for Obama. With an impending crisis at hand, Obama’s olive branch to the Wall Street is the iron fist within the velvet glove; cooperation is not an option but a demand by Obama. Any other outcome would wreak havoc on the essential institutions that provide stability in the economy.

Endnotes

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- ¹ “Obama using Cooper Union speech in New York to push for bank reform.” *The Washington Post*. (April 19, 2010). p.
<http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2010/04/obama-will-push-for-bank-reform.html>
- ² “Does He Feel Your Pain?”, *The New Republic*, January 20, 2010, p.
<http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/he-doesnt-feel-your-pain?page=0,1>
- ³ “Obama's Cooper Union Speech: President Urges Wall Street Support For Reform,” *The Huffington Post*, (April 22, 2010), p.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/22/obama-cooper-union-speech-financial-reform_n_547456.html
- ⁴ Lee. 357.
- ⁵ McGee. 243.
- ⁶ Kazin. 7.
- ⁷ Robert G. Gunderson, 408.
- ⁸ Kazin. 19
- ⁹ Kazin. 31
- ¹⁰ Burke (1966). p. 6
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Engels. 31
- ¹³ Kenneth Burke (1973), 202.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. 204.
- ¹⁵ Kazin (1995), 31.
- ¹⁶ Lee. 362
- ¹⁷ Lee. 360
- ¹⁸ Lee, 358.
- ¹⁹ Erlich, 142.
- ²⁰ Lee, p. 350.
- ²¹ Lee. 361

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored Michael Kazin's argument about populist rhetoric and applied it to Obama's Cooper Union speech. I argued that Obama sought to use populist themes, tropes and rhetoric to persuade the financial industry to cooperate with his financial regulation legislation. My analysis builds upon the existing literature on populist rhetoric. Elrich argued that populism was a paradox because of the necessity of populist rhetoric to divide the people from the elites, but also to seek new allies. This thesis shows Obama's Cooper Union as an example of that paradox in play.

Given that populist rhetoric has existed throughout a span of hundreds of years, my analysis sought to provide an explanation of how populist rhetoric exists today. There are a plethora of similarities between traditional populist rhetoric and Obama's art of persuasion. The existence of an innocent and exploited people is a constant in the 1890's populism and persists in Obama's rhetoric. As I discussed in earlier chapters, the division between the people and the elites still resides in the difference between producers (working class) and non-producers (power financial institutions). The use of traditional themes of populist rhetoric should not be taken for granted. Such rhetoric is an indication that this form of persuasion is pervasive and persistent.

In September 2011, President Obama proposed a legislation that would raise taxes on Americans who earn more than one million dollars a year to help pay for his estimated three trillion dollar deficit reduction plan. This plan has been called the "Buffett rule," after billionaire and philanthropist Warren Buffett.¹ This plan represents an extension of

Obama's populist rhetoric that I analyzed in Cooper Union. In Cooper Union, I argued that Obama reinvented traditional boundaries of populism (people versus the elites) in order to forge an alliance with members of the Wall Street firms. While Wall Street and "money power" have been seen in populist rhetoric as the undeniable enemy of the people, the olive branch extended by Obama sought to resolve this paradox.

Obama created two distinct sections of the financial industry. On one hand, the financial industry was essential to the well-being of the American economy and the health of the nation as a whole. However, this role of the financial industry only existed when the industry acted in a responsible manner. On the other hand, Obama argued that there was no place in his alliance for the parts of the financial industry that engaged in reckless, irresponsible, and crooked practices. Responsibility became the highlight of Obama's financial regulation reform. By setting up clear guidelines and a consumer financial agency, Obama sought to provide the tools for both the consumers and Wall Street to engage in responsible financial behaviors.

Even in his Cooper Union address, Obama referenced Warren Buffett's warning about the potential of derivatives to become "financial weapons of mass destruction." It is not a coincidence that Obama harkens to Buffett to strengthen his argument for the responsibility of the wealthy. Buffett argues that the wealthy members of American society should support and distribute the wealth to benefit the rest of the American population. One example of this commitment is Buffett's demand that billionaires donate a portion of their wealth to charity.² In reference to his proposal for distribution, Buffett wrote, "At the latest, the proceeds from all of my Berkshire shares will be expended for philanthropic purposes by 10 years after my estate is settled. Nothing will go to

endowments; I want the money spent on current needs.”³ Buffett argues for a class of the wealthy that uses their money in a responsible manner and for the public good. In addition to his demands to his billionaire colleague, Buffett has also commented that his tax rates are too low and that the federal government should increase taxes on the wealthy.⁴ By associating his proposal with the ideals of Warren Buffett, Obama continues to demand responsibility as his dividing line between allies and enemies.

Pundits such as *Politico* commentators Glenn Trush and Scott Wong have begun to comment that Obama has “found his inner populist.”⁵ During an interview with ABC, Obama criticized Bank of America’s plan to impose a five dollar debit card fee. He argued that this policy was another example of how the powerful financial institutions mistreated the working class Americans. Articles have already begun characterizing Obama’s comments on the Bank of America fee as a “kitchen-table argument” and Trush and Wong believe that Obama is using the Bank of America to “show a more combative side at a time when the faltering economy is even more of an issue.”⁶ Far from falling into irrelevance as the campaign trail heats up, concerns about populism and Obama’s populist rhetoric are only increasing.

The New York Times described Obama’s recent push for his jobs bill as “seizing populist mantle.”⁷ The Republicans have labeled Obama’s proposal as “class warfare.”⁸ Obama responded to those accusations by declaring, “If asking a millionaire to pay the same tax rate as a plumber or a teacher makes me a class warrior, a warrior for the middle class, I will accept that; I’ll wear that as a badge of honor.”⁹ This is the first explicit indication by Obama that he views himself as a “warrior for the middle class.” In Cooper Union, Obama made demands on behalf of the middle class; however, there was no

explicit recognition that Obama considered himself engaged in class warfare. As his campaign continues, it is unquestionable that Obama's populist rhetoric will become more defined and will continue to evolve as he seeks his reelection.

Some political analysts such as Mark Schmitt at *The New Republic* are skeptical of Obama's populist platform. Schmitt believes that Obama's jobs bill is hardly "populist" because "the increase on millionaires was validated by a billionaire, Warren Buffet."¹⁰ This criticism misses the point. Populist rhetoric might have been traditionally outlined by "the people versus the powerful" as Schmitt argues, but this thesis opens up the possibility that populism can be redefined. While traditional divisions of the people and the elites could still have a functioning role in populist rhetoric, it is a shortsighted and an incomplete analysis of populism to constrain its most traditional form. As Kazin comments:

To call populist only the People's Party and its immediate antecedents is to neglect the potent tradition to which insurgents in the late nineteenth century added their own blend of economic dread and missionary zeal. It also leads to ahistorical debates about who is or is not a true populist, debates that are just an indirect way of announcing one's political opinions.¹¹

Instead, as this thesis shows, it is useful to investigate how modern politicians use and reinvent populist rhetoric. The answer to the question "Is President Obama a populist?" does not explain how Obama seeks to persuade as a populist. Even if his policies do not align perfectly with populist ideology, this thesis shows that there is an undeniable appeal by Obama to the use of populist tropes and themes.

Given the current state of affairs with the populist fervor and the upcoming 2012 election, this thesis provides a unique investigation of Obama's populist rhetoric. In order to achieve a victory in his election campaign, Obama will have to build bridges and allies despite his combative tone. His speech at Cooper Union demonstrates a template for populist rhetoric that Obama can build upon. Relying on divisive politics might have been a successful strategy for populists such as George Wallace and Huey Long. However, the political environment is quite different for President Obama. The passage of his landmark healthcare legislation only occurred after an intense partisan battle in Capitol Hill. The stimulus package vote in the House of Representative was an even clearer signal of the trench warfare that Obama faced passing his priorities. Not a single Republican voted for the proposal. It is becoming evident that Obama needs to find additional allies in order to be politically successful.

This master's thesis is by no means a comprehensive study of contemporary populist rhetoric. The purpose of this thesis was to highlight and expose the existence of populist persuasion in contemporary politics. There are still many lessons to be learned and discovered through the investigation of populist rhetoric. Below I highlight a few areas of interest that could perhaps expand this field of research: the Tea Party, the privilege of the president and Warren Buffett.

The rise of the Tea Party was discussed previously in chapter one. In contrast to Obama's rhetoric, the Tea Party represents the conservative side of the populist coin. This thesis only investigated Obama's rhetoric in the run up to the 2010 midterm election. History has us as witnesses of the collection of Tea Party candidates who were elected into office in November 2010. The power of this conservative movement cannot

be denied; I believe that the success of the Tea Party can at least be attributed, in part, to its conservative populist appeal.

If one were to expand upon the investigations found within this thesis, the Tea Party represents an excellent case study. The Tea Party exists as the antithesis to Obama's politics. While this thesis concludes that Obama reinvents populism in order to persuade more allies to join his cause, I surmise that an investigation might discover that the Tea Party benefits from populist rhetoric because of its incendiary and aggressive rhetoric. That study would supplement current scholarship's knowledge of populist rhetoric as both compromising, as shown by this thesis, and divisive.

Another area of investigation to expand upon this area of study lies within presidential rhetoric. George W. Bush graduated from Yale University, Obama graduated from Columbia University and Harvard Law School. Both of these presidents come from a background that some people would consider to be intellectually elite. However, George Bush was able to undersell his privilege in order to relate to rural and working class Americans. In contrast, Barack Obama was bombarded by criticism of his intellectual elitism and background as a focus of attack by his opponents. The ability to manipulate the perception of privilege is a rhetorical strategy used by presidents that warrants an investigation.

As this master's thesis highlights, a populist speaker attempts to identify with "the people." This audience is consistently defined as the ordinary and humble middle class. An expansion of this study would investigate how this identification process works when the politician is not part of the middle class. The threat of looking "out of touch" with the American people is a present danger for politicians.¹² The rhetorical strategy used to

manage these claims of privilege would be an integral part of establishing the ethos of a populist president.

I highlighted the current state of Obama's populist strategy early in this chapter. His use of Warren Buffett and the responsible wealth class represents another useful area of study. Obama reinvents the elites of Wall Street by creating a concept of responsibility. One question that this thesis does not address is what it means to be a responsible member of the wealth class. Although Obama outlines how Wall Street firms can engage the economy in a responsible manner, a deeper exploration of a Buffett style of responsibility could provide further insight on the "class" of people that Obama hopes to create.

At the time this thesis is being written, America is seeing the rise of a movement called "Occupy Wall Street." On the corner of West Broad Street and College Avenue in Athens, Georgia, a mass of individuals are holding up signs that state "We are occupying Wall Street" and "We are the 99%." The purpose of this protest movement is to denounce the "greedy corruption of the 1%" and "to restore democracy to America."¹³ There is a populist feel to this movement. This is a sign that the unemployed and the working class of Americans have become fed up with the exploitation and unmanaged power of the Wall Street elites. Already, newspapers have drawn parallels between the Populist movement of the 1890s and Occupy Wall Street.¹⁴ Whether this movement transforms into a significant political moment in history remains to be seen, but it is almost certain that no matter how these events turn out the Democrats and Republicans will have to learn to harness this increasing populist fervor.

Populism is indeed a flexible mode of persuasion. That fact is what makes it important for scholars to continue to investigate how populist rhetoric is conceptualized and deployed. This analysis of Obama's Cooper Union speech has taught us three important lessons. First, the rhetorical strategy of populism persists as part of a contemporary American political strategy. Second, the desire for cooperation and allies does not necessarily preclude a populist strategy. If one wishes to garner a new base of support with populist rhetoric, Obama's Cooper Union speech shows that populist rhetoric can be used to offer a compromise. This finding is in stark contrast to how the majority of newspapers and scholarships characterize populism as purely or solely a divisive rhetoric.

Endnotes

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² “Warren Buffett, Bill Gates to billionaires: Give away at least half your money,” New York Daily News (June 16, 2010), p. http://articles.nydailynews.com/2010-06-16/news/27067337_1_gates-and-buffett-billionaires-second-richest-man

³ Ibid.

⁴ Helen Cooper, “Obama offers plan to cut deficit by over \$3 trillion,” New York Times (September 18, 2011), p. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/19/us/politics/obama-plan-to-cut-deficit-will-trim-spending.html?_r=1

⁵ Glenn Thrush and Scott Wong, “Has Obama found his inner populist?” Politico (October 5, 2011), p. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1011/65177.html>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mark Landler, “Seizing the populist mantle, Obama pushes jobs bill,” New York Times (September 28, 2011), p. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/28/us/politics/obama-pushes-jobs-bill-in-denver.html>

⁸ Cooper. 2011.

⁹ Landler. 2011.

¹⁰ Mark Schmitt, “You call this populism? The new Obama is the same as the old Obama,” The New Republic (September 22, 2011), p. <http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/95205/obama-populism-deficit-reduction-election-2012>

¹¹ Kazin. 5-6.

¹² Levin. 19.

¹³ Christopher Ketcham, “Occupy Wall Street: The new Populists?” Los Angeles Times (October 6, 2011), p. <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-ketcham-occupiers-20111006,0,933662.story>

¹⁴ See Ketcham 2011; also Jonathan Weisman and Laura Meckler, “Occupy Wall Street Protests Presents Democrats With a Populist Puzzle,” Wall Street Journal (October 7, 2011), p. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204294504576615363705256494.html>

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APPENDIX

Text of Obama's Cooper Union Speech

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT ON WALL STREET REFORM

Cooper Union
New York, New York

11:50 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. Everybody, please have a seat. Thank you very much. Well, thank you. It is good to be back. (Applause.) It is good to be back in New York, it is good to be back in the Great Hall at Cooper Union. (Applause.)

We've got some special guests here that I want to acknowledge. Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney is here in the house. (Applause.) Governor David Paterson is here. (Applause.) Attorney General Andrew Cuomo. (Applause.) State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli is here. (Applause.) The Mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg. (Applause.) Dr. George Campbell, Jr., president of Cooper Union. (Applause.) And all the citywide elected officials who are here. Thank you very much for your attendance.

It is wonderful to be back in Cooper Union, where generations of leaders and citizens have come to defend their ideas and contest their differences. It's also good to be back in Lower Manhattan, a few blocks from Wall Street. (Laughter.) It really is good to be back, because Wall Street is the heart of our nation's financial sector.

Now, since I last spoke here two years ago, our country has been through a terrible trial. More than 8 million people have lost their jobs. Countless small businesses have had to shut their doors. Trillions of dollars in savings have been lost -- forcing seniors to put off retirement, young people to postpone college, entrepreneurs to give up on the dream of starting a company. And as a nation we were forced to take unprecedented steps to rescue the financial system and the broader economy.

And as a result of the decisions we made -- some of which, let's face it, were very unpopular -- we are seeing hopeful signs. A little more than one year ago we were losing an average of 750,000 jobs each month. Today, America is adding jobs again. One year ago the economy was shrinking rapidly. Today the economy is growing. In fact, we've seen the fastest turnaround in growth in nearly three decades.

But you're here and I'm here because we've got more work to do. Until this progress is felt not just on Wall Street but on Main Street we cannot be satisfied. Until the millions of our neighbors who are looking for work can find a job, and wages are growing at a meaningful pace, we may be able to claim a technical recovery -- but we will not have truly recovered. And even as we seek to revive this economy, it's also incumbent on us to rebuild it stronger than before. We don't want an economy that has the same weaknesses that led to this crisis. And that means addressing some of the underlying problems that led to this turmoil and devastation in the first place.

Now, one of the most significant contributors to this recession was a financial crisis as dire as any we've known in generations -- at least since the '30s. And that crisis was born of a failure of responsibility -- from Wall Street all the way to Washington -- that brought down many of the world's largest financial firms and nearly dragged our economy into a second Great Depression.

It was that failure of responsibility that I spoke about when I came to New York more than two years ago -- before the worst of the crisis had unfolded. It was back in 2007. And I take no satisfaction in noting that my comments then have largely been borne out by the events that followed. But I repeat what I said then because it is essential that we learn the lessons from this crisis so we don't doom ourselves to repeat it. And make no mistake, that is exactly what will happen if we allow this moment to pass -- and that's an outcome that is unacceptable to me and it's unacceptable to you, the American people. (Applause.)

As I said on this stage two years ago, I believe in the power of the free market. I believe in a strong financial sector that helps people to raise capital and get loans and invest their savings. That's part of what has made America what it is. But a free market was never meant to be a free license to take whatever you can get, however you can get it. That's what happened too often in the years leading up to this crisis. Some -- and let me be clear, not all -- but some on Wall Street forgot that behind every dollar traded or leveraged there's family looking to buy a house, or pay for an education, open a business, save for retirement. What happens on Wall Street has real consequences across the country, across our economy.

I've spoken before about the need to build a new foundation for economic growth in the 21st century. And given the importance of the financial sector, Wall Street reform is an absolutely essential part of that foundation. Without it, our house will continue to sit on shifting sands, and our families, businesses, and the global economy will be vulnerable to future crises. That's why I feel so strongly that we need to enact a set of updated, commonsense rules to ensure accountability on Wall Street and to protect consumers in our financial system. (Applause.)

Now, here's the good news: A comprehensive plan to achieve these reforms has already passed the House of Representatives. (Applause.) A Senate version is currently being debated, drawing on ideas from Democrats and Republicans. Both bills represent significant improvement on the flawed rules that we have in place today, despite the furious effort of industry lobbyists to shape this legislation to their special interests.

And for those of you in the financial sector I'm sure that some of these lobbyists work for you and they're doing what they are being paid to do. But I'm here today specifically -- when I speak to the titans of industry here -- because I want to urge you to join us, instead of fighting us in this effort. (Applause.) I'm here because I believe that these reforms are, in the end, not only in the best interest of our country, but in the best interest of the financial sector. And I'm here to explain what reform will look like, and why it matters.

Now, first, the bill being considered in the Senate would create what we did not have before, and that is a way to protect the financial system and the broader economy and American taxpayers in the event that a large financial firm begins to fail. If there's a Lehmans or an AIG, how can we respond in a way that doesn't force taxpayers to pick up the tab or, alternatively, could bring down the whole system.

In an ordinary local bank when it approaches insolvency, we've got a process, an orderly process through the FDIC, that ensures that depositors are protected, maintains confidence in the banking system, and it works. Customers and taxpayers are protected and owners and management lose

their equity. But we don't have that kind of process designed to contain the failure of a Lehman Brothers or any of the largest and most interconnected financial firms in our country.

That's why, when this crisis began, crucial decisions about what would happen to some of the world's biggest companies -- companies employing tens of thousands of people and holding hundreds of billions of dollars in assets -- had to take place in hurried discussions in the middle of the night. And that's why, to save the entire economy from an even worse catastrophe, we had to deploy taxpayer dollars. Now, much of that money has now been paid back and my administration has proposed a fee to be paid by large financial firms to recover all the money, every dime, because the American people should never have been put in that position in the first place. (Applause.)

But this is why we need a system to shut these firms down with the least amount of collateral damage to innocent people and innocent businesses. And from the start, I've insisted that the financial industry, not taxpayers, shoulder the costs in the event that a large financial company should falter. The goal is to make certain that taxpayers are never again on the hook because a firm is deemed "too big to fail."

Now, there's a legitimate debate taking place about how best to ensure taxpayers are held harmless in this process. And that's a legitimate debate, and I encourage that debate. But what's not legitimate is to suggest that somehow the legislation being proposed is going to encourage future taxpayer bailouts, as some have claimed. That makes for a good sound bite, but it's not factually accurate. It is not true (Applause.) In fact, the system as it stands -- the system as it stands is what led to a series of massive, costly taxpayer bailouts. And it's only with reform that we can avoid a similar outcome in the future. In other words, a vote for reform is a vote to put a stop to taxpayer-funded bailouts. That's the truth. End of story. And nobody should be fooled in this debate. (Applause.)

By the way, these changes have the added benefit of creating incentives within the industry to ensure that no one company can ever threaten to bring down the whole economy.

To that end, the bill would also enact what's known as the Volcker Rule -- and there's a tall guy sitting in the front row here, Paul Volcker -- (applause) -- who we named it after. And it does something very simple: It places some limits on the size of banks and the kinds of risks that banking institutions can take. This will not only safeguard our system against crises, this will also make our system stronger and more competitive by instilling confidence here at home and across the globe. Markets depend on that confidence. Part of what led to the turmoil of the past two years was that in the absence of clear rules and sound practices, people didn't trust that our system was one in which it was safe to invest or lend. As we've seen, that harms all of us.

So by enacting these reforms, we'll help ensure that our financial system -- and our economy -- continues to be the envy of the world. That's the first thing, making sure that we can wind down one firm if it gets into trouble without bringing the whole system down or forcing taxpayers to fund a bailout.

Number two, reform would bring new transparency to many financial markets. As you know, part of what led to this crisis was firms like AIG and others who were making huge and risky bets, using derivatives and other complicated financial instruments, in ways that defied accountability, or even common sense. In fact, many practices were so opaque, so confusing, so complex that the people inside the firms didn't understand them, much less those who were charged with overseeing them. They weren't fully aware of the massive bets that were being placed. That's

what led Warren Buffett to describe derivatives that were bought and sold with little oversight as "financial weapons of mass destruction." That's what he called them. And that's why reform will rein in excess and help ensure that these kinds of transactions take place in the light of day.

Now, there's been a great deal of concern about these changes. So I want to reiterate: There is a legitimate role for these financial instruments in our economy. They can help allay risk and spur investment. And there are a lot of companies that use these instruments to that legitimate end -- they are managing exposure to fluctuating prices or currencies, fluctuating markets. For example, a business might hedge against rising oil prices by buying a financial product to secure stable fuel costs, so an airlines might have an interest in locking in a decent price. That's how markets are supposed to work. The problem is these markets operated in the shadows of our economy, invisible to regulators, invisible to the public. So reckless practices were rampant. Risks accrued until they threatened our entire financial system.

And that's why these reforms are designed to respect legitimate activities but prevent reckless risk taking. That's why we want to ensure that financial products like standardized derivatives are traded out in the open, in the full view of businesses, investors, and those charged with oversight.

And I was encouraged to see a Republican senator join with Democrats this week in moving forward on this issue. That's a good sign. (Applause.) That's a good sign. For without action, we'll continue to see what amounts to highly-leveraged, loosely-monitored gambling in our financial system, putting taxpayers and the economy in jeopardy. And the only people who ought to fear the kind of oversight and transparency that we're proposing are those whose conduct will fail this scrutiny.

Third, this plan would enact the strongest consumer financial protections ever. (Applause.) And that's absolutely necessary because this financial crisis wasn't just the result of decisions made in the executive suites on Wall Street; it was also the result of decisions made around kitchen tables across America, by folks who took on mortgages and credit cards and auto loans. And while it's true that many Americans took on financial obligations that they knew or should have known they could not have afforded, millions of others were, frankly, duped. They were misled by deceptive terms and conditions, buried deep in the fine print.

And while a few companies made out like bandits by exploiting their customers, our entire economy was made more vulnerable. Millions of people have now lost their homes. Tens of millions more have lost value in their homes. Just about every sector of our economy has felt the pain, whether you're paving driveways in Arizona, or selling houses in Ohio, or you're doing home repairs in California, or you're using your home equity to start a small business in Florida.

That's why we need to give consumers more protection and more power in our financial system. This is not about stifling competition, stifling innovation; it's just the opposite. With a dedicated agency setting ground rules and looking out for ordinary people in our financial system, we will empower consumers with clear and concise information when they're making financial decisions. So instead of competing to offer confusing products, companies will compete the old-fashioned way, by offering better products. And that will mean more choices for consumers, more opportunities for businesses, and more stability in our financial system. And unless your business model depends on bilking people, there is little to fear from these new rules. (Applause.)

Number four, the last key component of reform. These Wall Street reforms will give shareholders new power in the financial system. They will get what we call a say on pay, a voice with respect

to the salaries and bonuses awarded to top executives. And the SEC will have the authority to give shareholders more say in corporate elections, so that investors and pension holders have a stronger role in determining who manages the company in which they've placed their savings.

Now, Americans don't begrudge anybody for success when that success is earned. But when we read in the past, and sometimes in the present, about enormous executive bonuses at firms -- even as they're relying on assistance from taxpayers or they're taking huge risks that threaten the system as a whole or their company is doing badly -- it offends our fundamental values.

Not only that, some of the salaries and bonuses that we've seen creates perverse incentives to take reckless risks that contributed to the crisis. It's what helped lead to a relentless focus on a company's next quarter, to the detriment of its next year or its next decade. And it led to a situation in which folks with the most to lose -- stock and pension holders -- had the least to say in the process. And that has to change. (Applause.)

Let me close by saying this. I have laid out a set of Wall Street reforms. These are reforms that would put an end to taxpayer bailouts; that would bring complex financial dealings out of the shadows; that would protect consumers; and that would give shareholders more power in the financial system. But let's face it, we also need reform in Washington. (Applause.) And the debate -- the debate over these changes is a perfect example.

I mean, we have seen battalions of financial industry lobbyists descending on Capitol Hill, firms spending millions to influence the outcome of this debate. We've seen misleading arguments and attacks that are designed not to improve the bill but to weaken or to kill it. We've seen a bipartisan process buckle under the weight of these withering forces, even as we've produced a proposal that by all accounts is a commonsense, reasonable, non-ideological approach to target the root problems that led to the turmoil in our financial sector and ultimately in our entire economy.

So we've seen business as usual in Washington, but I believe we can and must put this kind of cynical politics aside. We've got to put an end to it. That's why I'm here today. (Applause.) That's why I'm here today.

And to those of you who are in the financial sector, let me say this, we will not always see eye to eye. We will not always agree. But that doesn't mean that we've got to choose between two extremes. We do not have to choose between markets that are unfettered by even modest protections against crisis, or markets that are stymied by onerous rules that suppress enterprise and innovation. That is a false choice. And we need no more proof than the crisis that we've just been through.

You see, there has always been a tension between the desire to allow markets to function without interference and the absolute necessity of rules to prevent markets from falling out of kilter. But managing that tension, one that we've debated since the founding of this nation, is what has allowed our country to keep up with a changing world. For in taking up this debate, in figuring out how to apply well-worn principles with each new age, we ensure that we don't tip too far one way or the other -- that our democracy remains as dynamic and our economy remains as dynamic as it has in the past. So, yes, this debate can be contentious. It can be heated. But in the end it serves only to make our country stronger. It has allowed us to adapt and to thrive.

And I read a report recently that I think fairly illustrates this point. It's from Time Magazine. I'm going to quote: "Through the great banking houses of Manhattan last week ran wild-eyed alarm.

Big bankers stared at one another in anger and astonishment. A bill just passed... would rivet upon their institutions what they considered a monstrous system... such a system, they felt, would not only rob them of their pride of profession but would reduce all U.S. banking to its lowest level." That appeared in Time Magazine in June of 1933. (Laughter and applause.) The system that caused so much consternation, so much concern was the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, also known as the FDIC, an institution that has successfully secured the deposits of generations of Americans.

In the end, our system only works -- our markets are only free -- when there are basic safeguards that prevent abuse, that check excesses, that ensure that it is more profitable to play by the rules than to game the system. And that is what the reforms we've been proposing are designed to achieve -- no more, no less. And because that is how we will ensure that our economy works for consumers, that it works for investors, and that it works for financial institutions -- in other words, that it works for all of us -- that's why we're working so hard to get this stuff passed.

This is the central lesson not only of this crisis but of our history. It's what I said when I spoke here two years ago. Because ultimately, there is no dividing line between Main Street and Wall Street. We will rise or we will fall together as one nation. (Applause.) And that is why I urge all of you to join me. I urge all of you to join me, to join those who are seeking to pass these commonsense reforms. And for those of you in the financial industry, I urge you to join me not only because it is in the interest of your industry, but also because it's in the interest of your country.

Thank you so much. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America. Thank you. (Applause.)

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Educational Background

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Publications

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Seungwon Chung, "The African Union's Beleaguered Somalia Mission," *The Long War Journal*, July 20, 2010, p.
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