

**Through Children's Eyes:
Political Socialization, Images of the President,
and Rhetorical Strategies
In Children's Letters to Lyndon B. Johnson**

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Introduction

Every week, thousands of letters written by children were sent to President Lyndon B. Johnson. Many of these letters are scattered in the multitudinous boxes stored in the archives of the Johnson President Library. While doing research on another project, I came across one such letter. It went like this:

Dear President Johnson
Why was there a silver rights bill? Why did all the
people not want the color people in white people schools?
The color people have a right in our schools I think.
I wish you would send me a picture of the White House
Love
Donald¹

In another letter, I read,

Dear Mr. President,
I haven't written [sic] to you before. I don't like
your long speeches because I can not see my cartoons and other
programs. Please don't have to [sic] many long speeches. Still your
[sic] a good President
Love,
Marie B.²

As well as enjoying the charm of such letters, I think viewing a presidency through children's eyes may yield unique insights into that presidency as well as into children's political communication and socialization.

Collecting letters from the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Austin, Texas, was not a simple process. None of the letters are catalogued, and so they were found by randomly choosing boxes containing file names, and then searching those files for letters written by children. I have examined 258 letters written by male and female children between the ages of seven and fourteen years, and from states as far apart as Florida and Alaska. Before discussing those letters, let me place this essay in the context of previous scholarship on letter writing.

Previous Research

To date, there has been scant attention paid to letter writing in the communication discipline. Most of that research centers on the rhetoric of ancient or medieval letter writing. Hariman offers a reading of Cicero's letters as a literature of political thought, suggesting that they are the "story of a public figure."³ Conley proposes that the connection between rhetoric and letter writing was recognized as early as the fourth century A.D.⁴ Both Hill and Kane studied "dictamen," the medieval rhetoric of letter writing, associating the development of the art with the rebirth of civil law in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁵ Hill points out that the teaching of rhetoric from 1100-1300 A.D. consisted primarily of the study of dictamen. A popular text was Bouncompagno's *Rhetoric Antique* in which students were advised how to write letters requesting money from relatives.⁶ Dictamen was not a new theory, but a significant re-working of classical doctrine dealing with the Ciceronian divisions of salutation, exordium, narration, petition, and conclusion.⁷

Henderson points out that, "although the letter may seem a trivial genre" to the twentieth-century scholar, it was central to composition training in the Renaissance and Reformation schools.⁸ It should not be overlooked here, either, that the rise of the Belletristic Movement, in the eighteenth century, sought to instruct students how to become effective practitioners in written as well as oral communication.⁹

Grade analyzed 500 Civil War letters of confederate soldiers, concluding that they revealed three dominant themes: love of home, region, and God.¹⁰ Fulkerson examined the public letter as rhetorical form in Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail,"¹¹ and Taylor studied the publication of Oppenheimer's personal correspondence.¹²

On the other hand, there has been a great deal of social scientific research on children's communication. To give only a few examples, Klinzing and Haslett found that children rely heavily on visual context in their attempts to communicate.¹³ Delia and Clark examined the way children adapt to listeners,¹⁴ Hewes and Evans critically examined theories of egocentric speech in children,¹⁵

and Riccillo suggested that there was a developmental hierarchy in children's communication as well as in linguistics.¹⁶

It would appear that, apart from this paper, no research has been carried out on children's letters to the president, at least in the communication discipline. In other disciplines, such as English and Education, writing as an educational tool for children has been examined in depth. To date, though, I have found two sources only that deal specifically with children's letters to the president. One is a small book which, published in 1964, consists of a few selected letters to the White House interspersed with illustrations by the cartoonist, Charles M. Schulz.¹⁷ The other is an article in the magazine, *Parent*, in which the author records how he invited children to write letters to President Bush. He concluded that very young children see the president as a friend, 9-11 year olds are interested in social issues, and 12-13 year olds are opinionated.¹⁸

In 1960, Hess and Easton published a germinal report of their study of elementary school children, grades two through eight.¹⁹ They suggested that a child's concept of an authority figure, such as a president, developed from a variety of sources including parents, books, and television, emphasizing that the office of the presidency seemed to influence children's images of the president more than the president's individual characteristics.

To summarize, the lack of interest in researching children's letters to the president may have to do with some of the difficulty in gaining access to them or even the idea that it may be a trivial pursuit. I hope that this essay demonstrates that an analysis of such letters is a possible and promising pursuit that yields rich insight into the Johnson Presidency as well as children's communication.

The next step in this project was to try to make sense of the letters collected. To do so, I followed the lead of McLaughlin who, in editing a collection of selected and unsolicited letters to Thomas Jefferson, clustered them into what he hoped were useful and revealing patterns.²⁰ McLaughlin states that the eyes of historians are "myopic" in that they tend to perceive what is large and conspicuous.²¹

For the remainder of this paper, I will intentionally concentrate on certain large themes discovered in the letters examined. In this instance, the myopia may have a lot to do with previous research I have carried out²² as well as a limited selection of letters. Even so, I think the identification of conspicuous themes will provide added insight into the historical record of the Johnson Presidency as well as into children's communication. I will now provide a summary of the historical background surrounding the letters; a discussion of what I think are the most interesting patterns revealed by their careful reading; and a conclusion that addresses the implications of this study as well as directions for future research.

Historical Background

Lyndon B. Johnson took his oath of office of the presidency on board Air Force One, November 22, 1963. Behind Johnson, and shielded by a curtain, was a casket containing the slain body of President John F. Kennedy. As Vice-President, Lyndon Johnson had lived under the shadow of John F. Kennedy for almost three years. Three weeks before the assassination of Kennedy, an American-backed coup had resulted in the murder of the Prime Minister of South Vietnam, Diem, and his brother, Nhu. Ironically, Johnson had argued against the coup, only to inherit its ramifications a short time later.²³

Lyndon Johnson had always been more at home in the domestic arena than in foreign policymaking. In his first year of office, he was able to oversee the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, as well as the 1964 Equal Opportunity Act, which was the first major piece of legislation in the president's War on Poverty program. Nevertheless, the Vietnam War increasingly dominated the Johnson Presidency. In 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed, greatly increasing presidential war power. It was also in 1964 that Johnson, running against Senator Goldwater in the presidential election, was elected in a landslide. In July 1965, Johnson announced a plan for introducing United States ground forces into Vietnam. For the next three years, Lyndon B. Johnson watched as the Vietnam War overtly soured, as anti-war protests grew increasingly larger and more violent, and as his "Great Society" proposals unraveled and were usurped by the war that was killing and maiming thousands of young Americans. In March 1968, President Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election.

Analysis of Letters

In examining the selected letters, four major patterns emerged: 1) children's responses to the John F. Kennedy Assassination; 2) their responses to the Vietnam War; 3) varying images of the president; and 4) the way they couched their requests with compliments. First, their responses to the John F. Kennedy Assassination.

The John F. Kennedy Assassination

Over 15% of the letters collected made direct references to President Kennedy. Some of them requested photographs of the Kennedy family, and some expressed enthusiasm for the Kennedy Presidency and deep sadness on his death. Eleven year-old Kathleen M. wrote, "when I heard that President Kennedy died I did not believe [sic] it but then I know it was true [sic]. And then I said well as long as we have a good president to take over..."²⁴ Similarly, Karl C. writes in 1966, "You are a nice president. But it is sad how you became president of America. John F. Kennedy was a nice president."²⁵ Bobby C. shows less finesse when he asks a string of leading questions: "did you know

the late President Kennedy like a friend? Was he a nice talker and talked about interesting things? What is one thing he talked about?"²⁶

Other children were more overtly opinionated in their comparison of the two presidents. Fourteen year-old Janet S. wrote, "I am still very sorry about that great tragedy of our late President Kennedy...I know you will never take the place of our late President Kennedy."²⁷ In 1964, a very angry twelve year old, Holly L., wrote:

My family is democratic, and naturally we voted for Kenedy [sic]. My personal opinion is that he was one of the top Presidents of the United States. We voted for you because we thought you would be the next best thing. But I guess we were wrong. Maybe we should have voted for Goldwater.²⁸

The letter ends with a protest against the Vietnam War, and with the rather precocious admonition, "and don't send me back any dumb educational booklets."

The preceding letters demonstrate how Johnson, having lived under the shadow of Kennedy for almost three years as Vice-President, seemed destined to be haunted by the Kennedy persona both inside and outside the White House. Within the White House, there were numerous reminders of the heroic figure of a martyred president. No matter how hard Johnson tried to emulate his predecessor, he was usually compared to him in an unfavorable way. As early as January 1964 a survey was distributed on Johnson's leadership and on political trends. Johnson was rated quite highly, but Kennedy scored higher on eight out of thirteen categories.²⁹

Adding to the rather unfavorable comparisons of the two presidents were persistent rumors whispered in the corridors of the White House. Some of the rumors involved a conspiracy linking the CIA with the assassination.³⁰ Others contained narratives alluding to Lyndon B. Johnson as Macbeth. Jack Valenti, Special Assistant to the President, recalled: "Maybe he [Johnson] felt that the Kennedy phantom which ran down every corridor in the White House all the years we were there would come alive like Banquo's ghost at every one of these press conferences and they would compare him unfavorably with Kennedy."³¹ The journalist, Stewart Alsop, remarked that, from the beginning, there was a feeling that Johnson was a Macbeth and that his claim to the presidency was "inherently illegitimate."³²

The allusions to Macbeth were part of the aforementioned nagging narrative that haunted Lyndon Johnson. Because he was a Texan, and because the assassination took place in Dallas, Johnson was somehow behind the event much in the way that Macbeth had plotted the deaths of King Duncan and his General, Banquo. Providing evidence that children, too, were tuned in to this

narrative, S.G. wrote in 1966, "Think you are a very good person but someone in my building said you had President Kennedy shot. But I do not think so."³³ Perhaps more subtly, Judy D. writes, "Some time I hear people say that the Kennedy family and Johnson family were not good friends."³⁴ Hiding reasons behind her questioning of Johnson, Karen D. in 1967 asked, "If November 22, 1963 hadn't been on the calendar, where do you think President Kennedy would be today?"³⁵

Such letters are interesting because they demonstrate how President Kennedy's assassination was so internalized by these children that, even four years later, it was still on their minds. They demonstrate, also, the distinct relationship between perceptions of White House insiders and those of the public outsiders. The Kennedy phantom may have pursued Johnson down the corridors of the White House, but it was (and still may be) a looming presence in the national arena. The Kennedy Presidency was a lodestone for judging Johnson and, as such, it may have been one of Johnson's greatest rhetorical constraints. Even by some children, President Johnson was perceived as a kind of usurper, destined to govern a constituency whose loyalties seemed to lie buried with a dead leader.

The Vietnam War

Most of the letters referring to the Vietnam War were written between 1966 and 1968, presumably as the war took a turn for the worse, and as protests against the war became more frequent. In many respects, the letters reflect an image of what was a split in U.S. society.

Many of the letters were in support of Johnson's Vietnam policy. For instance, David W. wrote, "the only reason I am not in Vietnam is because I am only fourteen years old. I think you should continue the war in Vietnam."³⁶ Of more interest to this study, though, is the way children repeat themes that dominated the communication of President Johnson and his advisors. A major metaphor that dominated the discourse of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson's administrations regarding the Vietnam War was the Domino Theory.³⁷ Accordingly, some of the children repeated the metaphor back to Johnson. Thus, Debra B. wrote, "I hope you can get Vietnam and China to stop fighting. And I hope that if they get as far as Australia that we can help a lot."³⁸ Denise A. wrote, "although Vietnam is a very small country it is a keyblock to the advancement of communism. If Vietnam goes so will Thailand and the rest of Asia."³⁹

Lyndon B. Johnson had his own country-western version of the Domino Theory which went like this: "If you let a bully into your front yard one day, the next day he'll be on your porch, and the day after he'll rape your wife in your own bed."⁴⁰ James M. repeated, "I feel the way a guy who is over there now felt and said, if I've got to fight a commie war, I'd rather fight it there than in my

own backyard.”⁴¹ The same thirteen year old then added whimsically, “I don’t know if I’ll feel that way come 18.” Note the lack of guile or what is just plain common sense in this young man who so clearly recognizes that it is easier to beat a war drum from afar than to have to play it on the battlefield.

Another key metaphor in the Johnson Administration was communism as a disease. For example, Michael Forrestal wrote of the infection of the “cancer of communism,”⁴² and George Ball stated, “We cannot be sure how far the cancer has infected the whole body politic of South Vietnam.”⁴³ Similarly, Deborah P. offers her version of this theme as she writes, “a sort of poem”:

War is like some vicious disease
that spreads throughout your body
without ever knowing it.
The germ under your body is communism.
Yes communism is the disease the
Viet Cong are fighting for.⁴⁴

It is fascinating how Deborah understands the literary appeal of the metaphor as she adapts it to her poem, and how she personalizes the metaphor with her allusions to the germs in your body. Communism, under the surface, covert, not seen, but wreaking havoc. She, and other like children, give credence to the universal appeal of certain metaphors as powerful rhetorical devices. The writings of Giambattista Vico imply that metaphors are “fables in brief.”⁴⁵ This, then, may also account for their appeal to some children.

It is interesting, too, to consider how key themes such as the Domino Theory and the disease metaphor were transmitted to children. Presumably, messages from the Johnson Administration were either heard or read directly by children or were transmitted by other means such as family, friends, or teachers. In which case, it is quite remarkable how unchanged those messages seem to be. For example, Lyndon Johnson’s campaign theme against Goldwater in 1964 was one of “peace.” This, too, was picked up by a child who writes, “we are lucky to have a president like you fighting the communists and trying to make peace for everyone.”⁴⁶ The children’s letters, therefore, become examples of how key themes in private communication, as in the private discourse of President Johnson and his advisors, are diffused into the public sector, possibly chaining out in families, schools, and playgroups, only to be regurgitated back to the White House. Indeed, this “chaining effect” could be a prime example of the efficacy of Symbolic Convergence Theory in explaining how certain communities come to share values, attitudes, and beliefs.⁴⁷

Not everyone, though, accepted the Johnson Administration’s Vietnam policy. Some of the children’s letters reflect the deep division in society over the Vietnam War as well as demonstrate a very special mixture of pathos and

childlike wisdom, giving credence to the ancient adage, “out of the mouths of babes...” An 8th grade student wrote:

...my neighbors had their son in Vietnam until one day when his truck overturned and exploded... he lost most of his stomache [sic] and both of his legs. This man risked his life for his country...yet he could not vote because he was underage. Why do these young men have to fight for their country when they can not even vote?⁴⁸

The same idea is echoed by three young females who add, at the bottom of their letter, “P.S. our brothers are almost eighteen and we don't want them to go.”⁴⁹

Demonstrating that he had seen the march on Washington, April 16, 1967, and that he questioned the truthfulness of the peace theme, a junior high student asked, “you wanted to have peace made and said that you would do anything to preserve it. Hanoi asked you to stop the bombing. Why have you not stopped it?”⁵⁰

One of the most moving letters regarding the Vietnam War was sent by Laura B. in 1966.⁵¹ It reads:

Dear Mr. President,
 If I could make a speech about this bad war
 I would say.
 We should not have this war it should be stopped yes
 it should.
 And just think of all the children with no dady [sic]
 and momys [sic] with no sons. If everybody was in this
 war nobodys dady [sic] would be here.
 I hope that you can help us with this question. Can you
 help us.
 I've got lots of question [sic] but this is my biggest.
 can you. [sic]
 My dadys [sic] worried.
 My momys [sic] worried.
 And I'm worried.
 I guess you'r [sic] worried to [sic]
 And the people on the other side to [sic]
 Thy'r [sic] worried to [sic].
 Thy'r [sic] dady's [sic] are getting heart [sic] to [sic]

The letter is the cry of a helpless child. She writes, “if” I could make a speech, implying a lack of voice for which her letter intercedes. Summing up what may be the extent of her linguistic power, she states that the war must be stopped

because, very simply, it's "bad." Within her limited world, the ramifications of the war are simple, too. The war means the loss of daddys as well as the sons of mommys. With childlike insight, she recognizes that, if "everyone" went to war, no daddys would be left. Revealing that hers is a family view, she tells her reader that they are all worried. Then, showing what I think is remarkable empathy, she acknowledges that the president must be worried as well as "the people on the other side" because their daddys are getting hurt, also.

In a few lines, a child's letter captures all of the pathos, futility, and even insanity of war. The letter is rhetorically powerful in that, as well as plucking at our emotions, it has a coherent logical appeal that appears to reside in a kind of enthymematic reasoning. Such reasoning moves from the general premise that "war is bad" because "daddys are killed," to "everyone is worried," then projects the audience to the only practical solution, "Mr. President, stop it!" Although there is no way of finding out how much help the child had in writing the letter, it is still an example of a form of childlike reasoning that demonstrates an almost instinctive rhetorical awareness.⁵²

In sum, the letters concerning Vietnam are normative in the way they reflect key themes of Vietnam War discourse, and in their reflection of the polarization of North American society. They are novel in the way that, although on the one hand they seem to greatly simplify the war, some of them also seem to grasp, with a childlike wisdom, its futility.

Images of the President

In many of the letters, the image of the president takes on god-like qualities of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. Children expected Johnson as "head of the world,"⁵³ to do something about the killing of animals; to teach them about the space program and flying a spaceship; to arrange their hiring as an astronaut; to take away all the guns except those belonging to soldiers and police; and to send them a "copy of everything" he had.⁵⁴

This president-god is benevolent, too. Barbara M. wanted Johnson to arrange the visit of a rock star to a home for the disabled;⁵⁵ eleven school children wanted him to reinstate their afternoon recess;⁵⁶ Douglas E. wanted him to clarify whether it was correct to use "transportation as an adjective to modify car."⁵⁷ The president, therefore, is perceived as world-leader, problem-solver extraordinaire, teacher, and Santa Claus.

At the same time, however, he is not so high that he cannot stoop to be their friend. Adelaide P. writes:

Dearest President

I am a twelve year old girl named Adelaide I hope you
remember me. About 2 years ago you sent me a book called a

visit to the white house it is very interesting but it got wet and
I can't flip the pages. I was hoping I could have another.
Your friend⁵⁸

Cynthia B. writes, "...you are my very best friend...always know I love you."⁵⁹ As their friend, the president is never too busy to send them photographs, personal messages, books, and to visit their homes. It is these dimensions that endow the president with certain Santa-like qualities, as he presides over an army of elves who, working in the basement of the White House, somehow manage to grant their wishes.

Other children, though, appear to appreciate the realistic demands of the presidency. In 1966, Denise A. wrote:

You are now going through a great ordeal of worries and problems, but I suppose every day in the presidency is worries and problems...well I just want you to know that someone appreciates your efforts. I can understand if a person would begin to wonder if anyone cared, with all those protests right in-front of the White House.⁶⁰

William C. wrote, "I am 8 years gold...we pray in church for peace in the world and we also pray that your job will not be as hard for you as it seems."⁶¹ Cindy JoA., a seven-year-old Brownie scout, put her empathy into the form of a poem:

Dear Mr. President
I'm writing you to say, it seems your job gets harder every single day.
Wouldn't it be simple sir, if the whole world could be
A member of the Brownie scouts, Just like me.⁶²

Fred M. has, perhaps, a more "down to earth" image of the presidency as he writes, "Thank you for being such a great President. I bet your [sic] glad to leave office. I think I'd like to be president. What is your poodle's name?"⁶³

Glimpses of children perceiving some of the more personal characteristics of President Johnson are rare; however, some of the attempted humor used by children may be an indication that they sense Johnson's reputation for tall stories and raunchy humor.⁶⁴ Bill S. irreverently asks how "all the birds are doing" and then invites Johnson to a "hoedown, or a party, well...we'll have a blast."⁶⁵ Nancy B. writes, "I hope you don't get mad, but the kids at school make up a joke about you. It's what do you get when you put your finger in the President's ear. (answer)—Johnson Wax."⁶⁶ Fourth grader, Kevin T., ends his letter with "I like you a lot. Was the other Johnson [presumably Andrew Johnson b. 1811] your brother?"⁶⁷

Requests Couched in Compliments

The following letter was written in 1964:

Dear President Johnson Dec. 11, 1964
 I am so glad you and Humphrey won the election.
 You are the man for the job. I am so happy you won.
 Love Donald.
 P.S. I wish you would send me a picture of you and Humphrey.
 P.S. I wish you would send me a picture of your dogs.⁶⁸

The striking thing about this letter is that it is only one of about a hundred in which the child requests a favor in the context of a compliment. The letters overwhelmingly demonstrate how children either know instinctively (or have been taught by their parents) that any request for a favor – either for photographs, information, or for visits – should be accompanied by some kind of ethical appeal, showing goodwill to the audience.

Dana P. wrote that she thought Johnson's speeches were "very nice" and would he tell his wife that "she looked very pretty at Linda's wedding."⁶⁹ She then requested a family photograph. A lengthy letter by Carole Y. began with a paragraph description of the beauty of Washington, D.C., and ended with an invitation to the Johnson's to visit her small Texas town along with a hand-drawn map of the town with Carole's home prominently identified.⁷⁰

Carol A. writes that she doesn't know how the president manages to do so much work, that she especially likes the chandeliers in the White House, and then ends, "would you send some information on the White House?"⁷¹

Not all of the compliments are straightforward. For instance, Nancy S. writes, "God helped you to be president, but I don't know why."⁷² Myrtle K. tells Johnson, "we hard [sic] you were a teacher our teacher told us. We wish you were still a teacher now."⁷³ Another letter states, "I've watched you on television, I like to hear you say speeches. May-be you don't believe me but its true,"⁷⁴ and Dennis Y. informs the president that, in honor of him, he and his classmates were allowed to sharpen their pencils.⁷⁵

Children not only use compliments to seek compliance, though; they also use credentialing. Some identify themselves as patriotic. Others say they would have voted for Johnson if they'd been able to. Marie C. writes that she had convinced her teacher to vote for him.⁷⁶ Seemingly, Billy P.'s credentialing topoi are in short supply, but he lets the president know that he "almost got to be in a spelling test."⁷⁷ On the other hand, a confident Donald P. lets the President know that he is willing to be his "company manager" in return for a family picture.⁷⁸

The way children combine their requests with compliments and credentials would be another indication that they have some kind of rhetorical awareness. In

an Aristotelian sense, they are using ethical appeals that relate to establishing their goodwill toward their audience as well as their own credibility. In a Ciceronian sense, they are using a form of salutation. In a Machiavellian sense, they are practicing a child-like version of the courtier, and in a Social Scientific sense, they are using compliance-gaining strategies. In 1992, George Kennedy suggested that rhetoric as energy has to exist in a speaker before speech can take place, writing, "rhetoric is prior to speech historically and in biological evolution."⁷⁹ One of the major implications of this research may be that as well as studying tribal societies living in primitive conditions, as suggested by Kennedy, it may be important to study the rhetorical abilities of young children.

Discussion and Further Implications for Future Research

Collecting and analyzing children's letters to the president has been a fascinating, if unusual, project. As McLaughlin indicates, there is a kind of voyeuristic pleasure in reading other people's mail.⁸⁰ Aside from this pleasure, the study has produced some important implications for both theory and research in children's communication.

First, studying the children's letters has had a kind of epistemological function. They have produced some unique insights into the relationship of the president to his youngest constituents, not forgetting that these children grow up to be, perhaps, active citizens and voters. Their relationship to the president at this stage in their lives may predict their political activity in the future.

Additionally, the children's letters may indicate what are the most important issues for any given presidency. If the issue is relevant enough to be absorbed by young children, it surely has some greater relevance for the adult population. In this case, no new revelations were discovered; however, it was confirmed that the Vietnam War overshadowed Johnson's Great Society programs. In the letters surveyed, very few references were made to such programs. This study suggests, also, that the Kennedy assassination may have been a more powerful rhetorical constraint for Johnson than previously imagined. Future research might want to compare children's letters to different presidents in an attempt to grasp generational as well as presidential differences.

Second, some of the results of social scientific research and children's communication may be applicable to studies of children's letters to presidents. For instance, children seem to adapt their messages to what is their own personal construct of the listener or reader. Thus, there is the dominant image of the president as Santa Claus. There is an indication, too, that some of the children engage in a form of egocentric communication in which the discourse is not adapted to the listener at all.

On the other hand, some of the letters show a remarkable adaptation to their target audience that is worthy of further research both from a social scientific and rhetorical perspective. This idea leads me to my third point. Piaget's seminal

work on child psychology suggested that children do not have a rhetorical dimension.⁸¹ Donaldson has argued that, on the contrary, children can imagine the perspective of another if they see good reason for doing so.⁸² This study suggests that children may, at an early age, develop a kind of rhetorical sensitivity that may be worth studying in greater depth. Likewise, children's use of and understanding of metaphors may be an indication of their "rhetorical level."

Fourth, this study raises some provocative questions as to how themes, apparent in the private discourse of presidents and their advisors, chain out as far as children. Is there a way to trace the themes through their diffusion in speeches, through the media, to families, to schools, to children? Could Symbolic Convergence Theory have some explanatory power for this process that seems to link private to public communication?

This process, in fact, may have a lot to do with the final issue I want to raise. I think this kind of study has the promise of providing insight into the political socialization of children. Early literature on political socialization stressed the role of the family in the transmission of social attitudes. Later research indicates that cognitive processes and political attitudes may develop independently of family influence. According to Stevens, the entire political system may become the family "writ in large."⁸³ Thus, political socialization can be influenced by education, media, peer influences, as well as a charismatic leader. The letters indicate such a socialization process. They raise interesting questions such as how did the assassination of President Kennedy affect their political socialization? Was the writing of letters an indication of their desire to establish a political identity? In the case of protest letters, in particular, were they a way of giving a voice to a voiceless population? Are the letters indicative of the way culture is transmitted to children by inviting or enabling them to participate in a communal action? By inviting them to join the political club? In sum, the study of children's letters to presidents is a rewarding endeavor, and holds still more promise for those researchers who are willing to expend the effort of digging deeply into the archives of presidential libraries.

Notes

¹Donald P., undated letter to President Johnson, Box 61, Name File, White House Central Files. Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

²Marie B., Letter to President, February 27, 1967, Box 141, Name File, White House Central Files. Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

- ³Robert Hariman, "Political Style in Cicero's Letters to Atticus." *Rhetorica* Vol. VII, Number 2 (Spring 1989): 145.
- ⁴Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (New York: Longman, 1990): 94.
- ⁵See Sidney R. Hill, "Dictamen: That Bastard of Literature and Law." *Central States Speech Journal* Vol. XXIV, Number 2 (Summer 1973): 117-124, and Peter E. Kane, "Dictamen: The Medieval Rhetoric of Letter Writing." *Central States Speech Journal* Vol. XXI Number 4 (Winter 1970): 224-230.
- ⁶Hill: 122.
- ⁷James R. East, "Brunetto Latine's Rhetoric of Letter Writing." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* Vol. LIV, Number 3 (October 1968): 241-246.
- ⁸Judith Rice Henderson, "Erasmian Ciceronians: Reformation Teachers of Letter Writing." *Rhetorica* Vol. X Number 3 (Summer 1992): 274.
- ⁹Eds. James L. Golden and Edward P. J. Corbett, *The Rhetoric of Blair, Campbell, and Whately* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990).
- ¹⁰Rebecca Drake Grade, "Origin of the Lost Cause Argument: Analysis of Civil War Letters." *The Southern Speech Communication Journal* Vol. XLIX Number 4 (Summer 1984): 420-430.
- ¹¹Richard P. Fulkerson, "The Public Letter as a Rhetorical Form: Structure, Logic, and Style in King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* Vol. 65 Number 2 (April 1979): 121-146.
- ¹²Bryan C. Taylor, "The Politics of the Nuclear Text: Reading Robert Oppenheimer's *Letters and Recollections*." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* Vol. 78 Number 4 (November 1992): 429-449.
- ¹³Dennis R. Klinzing and Betty J. Haslett, "A Study of Young Children's Sentence Comprehension Ability." *Communication Education* Vol. 26 Number 1 (January 1977): 61-67.
- ¹⁴Jessie G. Delia and Ruth Anne Clark, "Cognitive Complexity, Social Perception, and the Development of Listener-Adapted Communication in Six-, Eight-, Ten-, and Twelve-year-old Boys." *Communication Monographs* Vol. 44 Number 4 (November 1977): 326-345.
- ¹⁵Dean E. Hewes and Dorcas Evans, "Three Theories of Egocentric Speech: A Contrastive Analysis." *Communication Monographs* Vol. 45 Number 1 (March 1978): 18-32.
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- ⁴¹James M. Letter to President, 1966. Box 228. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁴²Michael Forrestal, memorandum to John McNaughton, May 1, 1964. Box 4, Country Files – Vietnam, National Security File. LBJ Library.
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- ⁴⁴Deborah P. Letter to President, 1966. Box 61. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁴⁵Giambattisto Vico as quoted by A. Robert Caponigri in *Time and Idea: The Theory of History of Giambattisto Vico* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).
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- ⁴⁷According to Ernest G. Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory, "symbolic" suggests that humans deal with signs and objects to which are attached meaning, and "convergence" suggests that dramatic communication brings together two or more private symbolic worlds into a common view. That process is given the name of "chaining," the process by which individuals and groups of people come to share a specific world-view, a world of heroes and villains, a world of good and evil, a world of what should be embraced and what should be rejected, and so on. For a well-articulated discussion of this theory, see Ernest G. Bormann, "Symbolic Convergence Theory," *The Jensen Lectures*, Ed. John I. Sisco (The University of Southern Florida, 1983): 71-96.
- ⁴⁸Brian B. Letter to President, January 19, 1967. Box 288. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁴⁹Mary C., Mary M., and Patty T. Letter to President, March 1967. Box 551. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁵⁰Dennis B. Letter to President, April 20, 1967. Box 288. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁵¹Laura B. Letter to President, 1966. Box 141. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁵²See George A. Kennedy, "A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of General Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* Vol. 25, 1 (1992): 1-21.
- ⁵³Loleeta S. Letter to President, October 1966. Folder "Stack L-P." Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁵⁴Stefanie B. Letter to President, May 1966. Name File – Balleta. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁵⁵Barbara M. Letter to President, January 28, 1968. Box 343. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.

- ⁵⁶Donald P. and ten others. Letter to President, February 1964. Name File – Pierson A-E. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁵⁷Douglas E. S. Letter to President, April 22, 1964. Box 3. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁵⁸Adelaide P. Letter to President, August 1967. Box 119. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁵⁹Cynthia B. Letter to President, November 1, 1966. Alaska Letters. Museum Collection. LBJ Library.
- ⁶⁰Denise A. Letter to President, March 26, 1966. Box 12. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁶¹William C. Letter to President, March 18, 1966. File “Cohen T.” Box 306. Papers of Lyndon B. Johnson. LBJ Library.
- ⁶²Cindy Jo A. Letter to President, July 28, 1965. File – “Anderson CO.” Box 152. Papers of LBJ. LBJ Library.
- ⁶³Fred M. Letter to President, December 1968. Box 228. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁶⁴Hess and Easton suggested in their 1960 article that children saw the president more in terms of the office than the person. Perhaps Lyndon Johnson’s personality was so big that even children saw him as a colorful individual.
- ⁶⁵Bill S. Letter to President, January 31, 1964. Box 630. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁶⁶Nancy B. Letter to President, undated. Box 141. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁶⁷Kevin T. Letter to President, undated. Alaska Letters. Museum Collection. LBJ Library.
- ⁶⁸Donald P. Letter to President, December 11, 1964. Box 61. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁶⁹Dana P. Letter to President, January 16, 1968. Name File – “Pierson A-E.” WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁷⁰Carol Y. Letter to President, June 1964. Box 6. Papers of LBJ. LBJ Library.
- ⁷¹Carol A. Letter to President, April 1964. Box 195. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁷²Nancy S. Letter to President, January 18, 1965. Folder “Stack—L.P.” Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁷³Myrtle K. Letter to President, undated. Alaska Letters. Museum Collection. LBJ Library.
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- ⁷⁶Marie C. Letter to President, October 28, 1964. Box 551. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁷⁷Billy P. Letter to President, March 9, 1967. Box 61. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁷⁸Donald P. Letter to President, 1964. Box 61. Name File. WHCF. LBJ Library.
- ⁷⁹Kennedy, 4.
- ⁸⁰McLaughlin, xiii.
- ⁸¹As discussed by Margaret Donaldson in *Children's Minds* (New York: Norton Co., 1978): 27.
- ⁸²Donaldson, 24.
- ⁸³Olive Stevens, *Children Talking about Politics* (Oxford: Martin Robinson, 1982): 157.