

# The President's Textual Relations

By KENNETH CMIEL

**W**HEN George W. Bush took to the airwaves to speak about stem cell research, he performed a presidential duty with a long, hoary tradition behind it: urging the nation to confront a moral issue fundamental to its future. But how he spoke says a great deal about the means Americans use to persuade each other at the opening of the 21st century.

The speech was cited by political analysts as a defining moment for the new president, and indeed, since it was his first national, prime-time address as president, it did much to establish Mr. Bush's public persona and clarify the tone of his administration. Other presidents have addressed the nation on vital matters — George Washington in his Farewell Address, Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural, Jimmy Carter in his "malaise" speech. Mr. Bush's exposition of the ethical dilemmas surrounding stem cell research may not have the long-term gravitas of those well-known speeches, but it is part of the same genre.

Yet the president did two remarkable things in his speech. First, he freely admitted he had to wrestle with the ethics of the issue. Second, he carefully recited arguments of the differing points of view. Both strategies are extremely rare in the annals of presidential speechmaking. Chief executives like to be decisive, seeing their words as action, a way to move the nation in a specific direction. Historically, presidential oratory is short on soul searching. By highlighting the complexities of the issue, Mr. Bush established himself as a baby-boomer president, using boomer oratory.

George Washington's 1796 Farewell Address to Congress is best known for its caution against getting politically involved with Europe. But the speech largely pondered how the nation would hang together. Could regions and factions keep from breaking the new republic into pieces? Temperamentally, Washington wasn't too far from our current president. Patriotism, respect for religion and skepticism about radical political innovation were Washington's themes. But unlike Mr. Bush, Washington did not hover over his own ruminations. After quickly mentioning his "reflections" on the subject, Washington then spoke firmly and confidently for well over an hour about what he thought the country needed to know.

While Washington was sure and paternal; Mr. Bush tried to succeed by grappling. Stem cell research is a "difficult and complex issue." The more we know, the "less certain" we are. Experts suffer "widespread disagreement." Even as he made firm declarations about the sanctity of life, Bush highlighted the conundrums. Even the certainties don't save the nation from uncertainty.

This is new. Ronald Reagan's words, just

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President Bush sought to persuade the nation to follow his views on the stem cell debate.

as much as Washington's, were unaffected by personal moral dilemma. President Bill Clinton might have been a notorious discussor but he kept this backstage in White House bull sessions. In public, he was smooth and assured.

Mr. Bush's rumination speaks to the issue, the man, the times. Stem cell research is indeed complicated. To admit uncertainty is no weakness. And for a president who has no pretensions to being an intellectual, it doesn't hurt to advertise he has gone to school on the topic. But there is one more thing: the second baby-boomer president, perhaps instinctively, sees that personal authority no longer comes from being a father figure to the nation. He can't be like Washington, or even like George Bush, his own father. Credibility is now won by joining in the nation's anxieties. You win by showing we're in it together. Mr. Clinton felt our pain. Mr. Bush shares our confusions.

A large part of Mr. Bush's speech was his careful recitation of both sides of the argument. He acted as the nation's schoolteacher, explaining, in simple, straightforward prose, what the stakes were. But he also painted a picture of a nation divided. Experts disagreeing; families agonizing; "even many of the same faith" reaching "different conclusions."

This last is not a part of presidential oratory. It has been far more common for presidents to assume a national community exists and to present disintegration as a threat. Washington, in 1796, spoke of the common "habits, manners and political principles" of the American people. Franklin D. Roosevelt, in the 1936, defended "the average man" against a band of "economic royalists." President Reagan promised to transcend special interests and represent "this breed called Americans."

Even where it was patently absurd, this was the trope adopted. As the Civil War drew to a close, Lincoln was desperate to claim a shared community. "Both sides read the same Bible and pray to the same God," he asserted in his Second Inaugural Address.

Mr. Bush, however, spoke not of shared beliefs but deep disagreement, reporting the sort of divide that cable guys like CNBC's Chris Matthews focus on — two nations, elites versus working stiffs, the coasts versus the heartland.

**Y**ET unlike a pugnacious talk show host, Mr. Bush was looking to conciliate. That is what made his neutral recitation of the different sides so important. At least on this issue, Mr. Bush can't affirm community by calling the nation back to its common core, the way Washington, Lincoln or Roosevelt did. The divides are too deep.

Here, though, the nation can find community by listening to each other. Respectfully hearing the other side is a way to make the divides palatable. It is a standard technique in business management — making sure everyone feels listened to. Mr. Bush, a Harvard Business School graduate and former C.E.O., is, no doubt, well versed in this sort of tactic. In a country where there is no common culture, we don't agree, we can just listen.

There will be other occasions where the president can ritually affirm community. But Mr. Bush's address on stem cell research was a reminder of how hard it is to use standard oratory when faced with today's broad cultural divides. It is also a reminder that Mr. Bush, like his immediate predecessor, is a boomer president facing boomer credibility issues. These presidents will have to find their own voices.