Rhetorical Techniques for Negotiating Ideologies
An Analysis of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “A Time to Break Silence”

This document was the final research paper in Dr. Chris Burnham’s History of Rhetoric course (518). It is a rhetorical analysis of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s anti-Vietnam speech “A Time to Break Silence,” and was my first attempt at a rhetorical analysis.

The Writing Process

In this paper I used ideas from two prominent figures we studied in History of Rhetoric: Aristotle, arguably the founder of Western rhetoric, and Augustine, who drew on much of Aristotle’s work in his own writings on rhetoric and theology. Aristotle’s rhetoric seemed more familiar when I took the course, probably because most people have heard and/or used the terms ethos, logos, and pathos before. But Aristotle is much more complex; his Rhetoric discusses not only the modes of persuasion (ethos, logos, pathos), but also the types of rhetoric (judicial, deliberative, and epideictic), topics of discussion, and forms of argument and figures of speech (enthymeme, syllogism, maxims).

For this paper, I focused on Aristotle’s notion of judicial rhetoric, which deals with past events, the wrongdoers and the wronged, accusations met with defenses, and has, as its end goal, the determination of the just and unjust. Dr. King adopts a judicial tone when talking about the US’s actions in Vietnam, proclaiming injustices and assigning blame. Edward Appel’s close look at the context of the speech, which came late in Dr. King’s life, reveals that his use of judicial rhetoric was the culmination of a shift in his style and tone, from hopeful to tragic, that occurred throughout the 1960s as the situation in Vietnam escalated and the civil rights movement was stifled by segregation and social attitudes.¹

Another idea from the course that I applied in my analysis of Dr. King’s speech is Augustine’s emphasis on the deeds of the rhetor. Augustine worked in a Christian tradition, and his emphasis on the deeds of the rhetor stems from Jesus’ teaching that deeds are more important than words. Augustine applied this concept to rhetoric, and argued that the deeds of the rhetor do more to elevate his or her ethos than any amount of grandiose speech can. In effect, Augustine says we must practice what we preach, and that, once we do so, we may express ourselves in any style necessary because our deeds are beyond reproach.

Dr. King’s commitment to non-violence and Christianity and his work for civil rights created enormous ethos for him. As the civil rights movement faltered and Dr. King became increasingly disillusioned, it became more difficult for him to balance his ethos with his changing attitudes. With “A Time to Break Silence,” many people in the US, including news outlets like Time and the Washington Post, felt that Dr. King had reached the limits of what he could get away with saying based on his ethos. Some people felt that Dr. King had gone too far in his attack on the US in this speech, despite his demonstrated commitment to non-violence and to creating a better country.

I enjoy rhetorical analyses because they look beyond the text itself to discover meaning and effectiveness. Rhetorical analysis looks at the history and context, the audience, and the history and motivations of the speaker or writer. If one were to examine “A Time to Break Silence” and judge it based solely on the content of the speech, it might be difficult to find problems, tensions, or other negative issues. The speech is superb and well-crafted; it uses several types of argument and draws precedence from a variety of sources. When the analysis is expanded to include elements outside the text itself, a much richer – and contentious – picture emerges. Dr. King’s speech may have been masterful, but was the timing right? Did he misjudge
his audience? A rhetorical analysis reveals the strategies that Dr. King used to deal with these and other issues, and provides a richer understanding of the speech and its place in history.

Dr. King was arguably one of America’s greatest rhetors, and I am a great admirer of his work and of the writings and speeches that formed the backbone of his efforts. I actually decided to use one of Dr. King’s speeches for this paper well before I had given any thought as to how I might approach this rhetorical analysis assignment. As a masterful rhetor, any of his speeches would provide ample material for a rhetorical analysis, and “A Time to Break Silence” was no exception.