

## Chapter 5

# Imagining U.S. Democratic Values in Commencement Addresses

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter begins with an assumption that while democracy means the people rule, how the people are supposed to rule is both always in need of articulation and subject to change over time. Given this, this chapter explores the rhetoric of commencement addresses delivered at various colleges and universities between 1935 and 2012 to examine the ways in which democracy is imagined. What an analysis of these 158 speeches reveals is that democratic citizenship has increasingly become understood as the ability to pursue individual happiness and success. Moreover, such a vision of citizenship has been given to young adults through the increasing use of personal narratives instead of arguments derived from shared or universal values. Such changes in how the American people imagine democracy ultimately present the nation with some important challenges for self-governance.*

### INTRODUCTION

In June 1940, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt addressed the graduating class at the University of Virginia as their commencement speaker. His topic that day was a question he felt certain the young people were asking themselves. According to Roosevelt, it was “a question that asks, not about the future of an individual or even of a generation, but about the future of the country, the future of the American people” (Roosevelt, 1940, June

10). Roosevelt offered his answer to this question with a focus on a single word, an American ideal—freedom. Freedom was, he believed, the response to those telling the American people “that the ideal of individual liberty, the ideal of free franchise, the ideal of peace through justice, are decadent ideals.” As he closed his speech, the President assured the class of 1940 that “the love of freedom is still fierce and steady in the nation today.”

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Sixty years later and a half a country away, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist David Halberstam addressed the University of Michigan's class of 2000 during their commencement exercises. His primary topic that day was something he feared "we now almost take for granted, the ascent of the good life in this country" (Halberstam, 2000, April 29). He told the graduates they were "fortunate enough to live in an affluent, blessed society, not merely the strongest but the freest society in the world," but he also cautioned them that this strength and freedom were not a simple guarantee for everyone. Indeed, he warned his audience that "when the question of inclusion or exclusion, one of the most basic to the concept of a state, has arisen over the years...not everyone has been in accord." And yet he held on to his belief "that this great American ideal, to be more just, to be more inclusionary,...has given us not just strength but much of our common purpose."

Here are two notable Americans—one a president of the United States and the other a prominent public intellectual—offering their thoughts for graduating college students, each presenting his understanding of American democracy. Anyone who has ever heard a major college commencement speech might find these observations about democracy rather banal. And yet each speaker—two men well respected by many of the American people—felt the need to deliver them anyway. Why? Because they understood that what it means to be an American and act as a democratic citizen are not clearly defined matters. Indeed, as some have noted in recent years, the American nation and the practice of democracy are both ideas, perhaps ideals, that must be imagined (Anderson, 1991; Taylor, 2007). As a result, they must constantly be re-imagined for each new generation of Americans.

This chapter explores the ways in which the nation's political and intellectual leaders have imagined American democracy between 1935 and 2012. In order to do so, we have chosen as our texts 158 commencement addresses delivered at various colleges and universities across the nation, including a minimum of at least two

different speeches per year. Using DICTION to analyze these speeches, we have asked a rather straightforward set of questions: How have the nation's political and intellectual leaders presented the norms, practices, and values of American democracy over time? How have these images of American democracy changed across the 77 years of this study? And with what sorts of civic and political impressions might the graduating students have walked away following their commencements?

Our argument is that the answer to these questions reveals a nation that increasingly turned away from the dominant and universal democratic values of an earlier time and toward an increasingly personalized form of citizenship. To make this argument, this essay moves in four parts. In the next section, we flesh out assumptions about the imagined nature of American democracy and make a case for the importance of examining commencement speeches as key examples of epideictic rhetoric. In the following section, we turn to the analysis itself to show how the commencement addresses in this study reveal both how America became a far more complex, fragmented place over time and that in place of a more unified set of values graduation speakers turned increasingly to positive, personalized narratives. Finally, in the conclusion we turn to some final thoughts on why such changes might be worrisome for the nation's democratic public sphere.

## **IMAGINING AMERICAN DEMOCRACY**

While one could argue that the United States is clearly defined as a constitutionally-based federal republic made up of approximately 314 million people spread out across 50 states and the District of Columbia, what it means to be and act like an American defies such easy classification. That is, America, like all modern nations, is an idea that must be made to mean something. This is the very point Benedict Anderson (1991) has made

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