An Equal Opportunity

Lyndon B. Johnson’s speech on equal voting rights for Negroes, called “We Shall Overcome”, was delivered on March 15, 1965. Throughout this speech, Johnson uses a variety of strategies in order to persuade our nation to pass a bill changing the law to give Black people more rights to vote. Some of these strategies include the order in which Johnson presents the items of the issue, the use of pathos to appeal to the readers’ emotions, logos, and building up his credibility as a spokesman. Johnson starts out his speech by saying “I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of Democracy. I urge every member of both parties, Americans of all religions and of all colors, from every section of this country, to join me in that cause”.

By Johnson begging his speech by calling on the “dignity of man” and the “destiny of democracy.” He grabs the attention of his audience and of anybody who considers themselves a respectful citizen towards their nation. He then goes on to invite everyone to come together as one and to disregard where you’re from, your religion and color. Johnson categorizes us as Americans, which we all are because we live in America, but what he means by “Americans” is much more complex. By referring to all people of our country as one initial group, he is setting a standard of equality, which is the core purpose of his speech. When he finally gets to his solution to the problem, he has already set the audience up to pass the bill in which he is proposing. The audience would almost feel guilty for not clearing the new law because one would be “denying America and dishonoring the dead who gave their lives for American
freedom.” He has arranged the argument in a way that makes it almost impossible to reject what he has to say.

Johnson also uses a significant amount of pathos throughout his address to persuade the audience to agree with the bill he is trying to pass. He addresses this problem as one the whole Nation should be concerned about not just the north, the south or the Negro population. He reminds us of all the Americans around the world risking their lives for our freedom; he refers to them as “guardians of our liberty.” He uses examples of registrars being extremely unfair towards the Negroes when they apply to vote. He mentions how they will find any excuse to not let a black person vote such as someone not spelling out their middle name on the application or because they abbreviated a word. Sometimes registrars would even make a Negro recite the whole constitution and “even a college degree couldn’t be used to prove that one could read or write.” He uses these examples so whites can see the naked truth about the wrong doings towards people of color. He is hoping that these unjust acts are enough to emotionally capture the hearts of America and pass a bill changing them forever. Johnson hits hard on being patriotic towards our country, the Land of the Free. Johnson also uses many other examples of pathos throughout his speech to reach out to the hearts of the American people. He states many times that he believes that the Americans can change the future not only for us but also for all generations to come. Johnson believes so heavily on this matter and is so emotional towards the fact that it’s on the American people to take charge of their country and to fight for what is right.

In another instance where Johnson enhances his argument through the audience’s emotional response is near the middle of his speech. Johnson explains to the white people of America how they are denying their children and their selves a future and education because
they are too worried about hatred and fear towards the black community. This is a good argument because it makes whites realize what they have done in the past and what they will continue to do to future generations if they don’t resolve the issues of racism now. What parent doesn’t want a future for their child? Johnson is getting the population to recognize that passing the bill allowing everyone to vote regardless of the color of their skin will benefit all.

Not only does he use pathos but he uses logos as well. He takes lines straight from the constitution proving that Negroes do hold the right to vote. He is vary factually with his statements and has proof and gives the people examples of how America should be. Johnson quotes “All men are created equal,” government by consent of the governed,” “give me liberty or give me death.” The constitution is a document that all citizens of the United States must live by and it includes people of every color. It proves that just because some people are white, they do not have the right to treat other races differently. The constitution stands for equality and unity in all things, voting being one of the most important therefore you cannot be denied the chance to vote because of the color of your skin. Johnson also talks about our troops fighting every day for our freedom and reminds us of those who have died to keep our country a democracy. These are facts that no true American can disagree with.

Johnson is a credible writer of this piece because he is the president of the United States and is standing up for all the people of his country, the same people that put him in office. Johnson uses a significant amount of ethos throughout his speech. For example, at the beginning of his address he invites all people of the nation to listen and agree with him, making himself credible to multiple groups. By not leaving anyone out he gains credit from all inhabitants of this land. Near the end of his speech is where he mainly increases his credibility by naming all the great things he wants to do for our country and by specifically stating exactly
what kind of president he wants to become. He tells America he wants to be the president who educates young children, feeds the hungry and helps the poor, and he wants to end hatred among his fellow men. The last three paragraphs of his speech strengthen his credibility too. He names leaders of multiple states and of both parties who fully support his address. Johnson also uses a great amount of ethos when he tells the American people that we cannot wait any longer and that they must act now. Johnson states,

We have already waited 100 years and more and the time for waiting is gone. So I ask you to join me in working long hours and nights and weekends, if necessary, to pass this bill. And I don't make that request lightly, for, from the window where I sit, with the problems of our country, I recognize that from outside this chamber is the outraged conscience of a nation, the grave concern of many nations and the harsh judgment of history on our acts. (Paragraph 18)

He asks the nation to share the task of passing equal voting rights with him, taking apart in what is going on in common America.

Throughout Johnson’s speech, We Shall Overcome, he uses many persuading strategies to influence America into passing a bill that will change equality laws on voting. Johnson takes charge in his speech wanting to make a difference in the world and wanting the bill of freedom to change the way people think, feel, and react in society. Johnson makes it very clear that even if the bill is passed the battle will never be over. The American people will still have to continue fighting for their freedom and fighting for what they know and believe to be right. Through the order he sets up his argument, pathos, logos and ethos, Johnson makes it seem as if there is no other option than to pass the bill he is presenting. Personally as a reader I have
gained such a greater respect of what was happening at the time Johnson gave his speech. It is amazing to see what a single person can do to motivate a group of people and in this instant America as a whole. He hits on all three main strategies formulating a great rhetorical speech.
Works cited

Johnson, Lyndon. *We shall overcome*. President Lyndon B. Johnson - March 15, 1965

http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/johnson.htm