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## Barbara Bush and her Commencement of Unification

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Modern society is characterized by a splitting dichotomy. On one side stand those who believe in a moral order higher than themselves and who conserve their social and political liberty in honor of this order. On the other stand those who value individual liberty far greater than any such moral order. More often than not, the lifeblood of modern society is manifested in a sociopolitical war between these two poles. In recent history, however, one person sought to tame this culture war. On June 1st, 1990, Barbara Bush, former First Lady to then-president George H. W. Bush, delivered a commencement address to a group of liberal students at Wellesley College. The effect of her speech far surpassed the ceremonial tradition of a commencement address. Rather, in a feat of historical precedence, it unified both conservatives and liberals under one common goal: to dash rigid societal stereotypes and pursue individual dreams. Throughout her speech, Barbara Bush captivates the emotions of her audience by utilizing her charming temperament, establishing authentic believability, and genuinely resonating with their values.

Bush was not the first choice for a commencement speaker, and the largely liberal audience protested the idea of a conservative speaking at their graduation. According to journalist and author Andrew Ferguson in an article published by the Washington Examiner, a significant number of the graduating class penned and signed a petition to the school's president expressing their opposition. "To honor Barbara Bush as a commencement speaker," they wrote, "is to honor a woman who has gained recognition through the

achievements of her husband, which contravenes what we have been taught over the last four years at Wellesley” (Ferguson). As indicated by several moments of intense applause scattered throughout the televised recording, however, her profound words bested her battered reputation.

By way of summary, Bush gives a brief, utilitarian introduction, congratulating the class of 1990 and transitioning directly to the body of her address. She begins this larger portion of her speech by indicating her appreciation for Wellesley College and the purpose for which the school stands. Throughout the rest of her speech, Bush uses her idea of Wellesley’s purpose-driven spirit—to embrace diversity and promote self-identification—to undergird her primary arguments. After acknowledging this purpose and praising the school, she suggests three life choices for the class of 1990 to consider: influence the world, value joy in life, and embrace human relationships. She incorporates these three values into the context of the ever-changing pursuits of modern society, inspiring the graduates to embrace these commitments regardless of what society thinks. Bush offers a final call to action that directly relates to the Wellesley spirit, motivating the class of 1990 to embrace their differences and chase their dreams to reform the unrealistic prejudices and stereotypes espoused by modern culture. Finally, she concludes her address by thanking her audience for the opportunity to speak.

Over the course of her address, Bush appeals to ethos by using her genuine public presence to establish authentic credibility. Her nonverbal execution in this regard is pleasantly ironic. In general, her facial expressions and tone of voice seem nearly unprofessional, inserting goofy smiles and quirky vocal inflections into her speech, all under the façade of a dignified scholarly robe. These unconventional techniques, whether purposeful or not, make Bush’s speech notably enjoyable to watch. More importantly, they mold her public image into a cordial and amicable figure who honestly desires to connect with her audience. To further bolster her reputation as an authoritative speaker, Bush makes two references to her own experience. First, she mentions her previous invitation to Wellesley College ten years before to speak about “[her] experiences in the People’s Republic of China.” By pointing out her history with Wellesley, she both

establishes a personal connection with her audience and implies her positive reputation with the school. Second, toward the end of her speech, Bush confirms her political status by hinting at her marriage to the then-president of the United States. She does not expatiate upon this, however, cognizant that this very fact caused several in her audience to protest just weeks earlier. On top of all this, Bush demonstrates her ability to speak effectively by utilizing consistent, professional word choice, grammar, and syntax. In general, both her verbal and nonverbal communication skills evidence a robust appeal to ethos.

Since Bush's speech is considered epideictic (ceremonial) rhetoric, appeals to logos do not play as important of a role in the effectiveness of the speaker as do appeals to ethos and pathos. Where they do show up, however, Bush uses rhetorical appeals to reason to her benefit. She accomplishes this in three primary ways. First, she uses meaningful imagery to connect with her audience. At the beginning of the main body of Bush's speech, she references a story in which a little girl desires to identify as a mermaid. Bush relates this innocent desire to pursue one's dreams with Wellesley's commitment to promote social diversity. At the end of her speech, she recapitulates this imagery, explaining how societal stereotypes "show too little tolerance for those who want to know where the mermaids stand." Her audience responds to this statement with a vigorous round of applause, signifying her success at captivating her audience by way of effective imagery. Second, Bush offers an organized, well-reasoned tripartite vision for the class of 1990 as mentioned above. This vision both agrees with the Wellesley spirit and resonates with her audience's liberal mindset. Third and finally, Bush uses effective word choice and rhythm to more easily connect with her audience. One example of exceptional word choice appears toward the end of the body of her address when she encourages her audience to cherish human connections. Bush says, "Your success as a family, our success as a society, depends not on what happens in the White House, but on what happens inside your house." This clever parallel structure both evidences a robust word choice and an effective understanding of her audience's values. These three examples of Bush's rhetorical appeal to logos, though not as evident

as her appeals to ethos and pathos, demonstrate her desire to connect with her audience.

Considering the epideictic nature of her speech, it is natural that Bush's strongest rhetoric appears in her appeal to pathos. One of the most effective aspects of her rhetoric is that she chooses a topic that is both appropriate to the occasion and that resonates with her audience's values. Bush does not seek to persuade the audience to adopt a certain worldview or accept a political stance. Rather, she dedicates the bulk of her rhetoric to piquing her audience's emotions and delivering a speech that they will remember and apply to their lives. One way in which she executes this emotion-centered rhetoric is by utilizing emotion-driven rhetorical devices. At the beginning of the body of her speech, she uses particularly effective parallelism, saying, "Wellesley, you see, is not just a place but an idea—an experiment in excellence in which diversity is not just tolerated, but is embraced." This parallel structure contrasts concrete ideas with abstract ones, indicating that Wellesley's spirit reaches far beyond a physical campus. The class of 1990 undoubtedly resonated with this sentiment. Later on in her speech, Bush uses epiphora to emphasize her call to action: "the winner of the hoop race will be the first to realize her dream—not society's dream—her own personal dream" (italics added). Not only does this use of epiphora reinforce her speech's purpose, but it also harmonizes with Wellesley's purpose and her audience's feelings. Both of these rhetorical devices coupled with a meaningful topic that resonates emotionally with her audience lend to Bush's rhetorical appeal to pathos.

In her commencement address at Wellesley College, Bush utilizes all three rhetorical appeals to connect with her audience. First, she uses her authoritative credentials and genuine believability to appeal to ethos, showing awareness of her audience's expectations. Second, she employs effective word choice and meaningful imagery to appeal to logos, strengthening the psychological bond with her audience. Finally, she wields powerful rhetorical devices and emphasizes a compelling purpose to appeal to pathos, captivating the innermost emotional values of her audience. Barbara Bush's speech, however, is not just a feat of rhetorical prowess; it is a symbol of social unification. Not often does a conservative speak to a group of

liberals and receive a standing ovation. Bush's address exemplifies the idea that unification between the left and the right is not only desirable but achievable.

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