

Chapter 7

Commander– or Comforter–in–Chief?

Examining Presidential Rhetoric in the Wake of Mass Shootings

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ABSTRACT

After mass shootings, various claims makers enter the national discourse to understand why these events happen and how best to respond to them in respect to policy and prevention. Among these individuals is the President of the United States, who often offers commentary meant to unify the nation in the aftermath of such tragedy and calm the fears of a nervous public. The influence of presidential rhetoric has long been contested among scholars, though it has yet to be examined in the context of mass shootings. Accordingly, this chapter seeks to understand the nature of such responses to these events in respect to the language choices made by the President, the context in which these messages are framed, and how these contribute to a broader understanding of mass shootings. Remarks offered by presidents in response to mass shootings are analyzed for 32 attacks occurring between 1966 and 2014, with attention paid to patterns within and between the various presidents. Potential policy implications and a broader social contextualization of these commentaries also are explored.

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Commander- or Comforter-in-Chief?**INTRODUCTION**

At approximately 9:35 on the morning of December 14, 2012, a gunman entered Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut and opened fire, first in the hallway as school administrators tried to stop him, then in two separate classrooms (Barron, 2012). As law enforcement closed in on the scene, the shooter committed suicide (Barron, 2012). A total of 20 first grade students and 6 adults, including the school's principal, had been killed (Barron, 2012). Within minutes, the story of the shooting had begun to permeate news outlets, taking hold of the nation's collective attention.

Like other shootings that had come before, including those at an Aurora, Colorado movie theater and a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin less than five months earlier, questions began to circle about the event. Audiences wondered who the shooter was, how they could have committed such a horrific attack, and whether another attack was possible in their own communities. In addition to following various news sources about the event, seeking information and updates, many tuned in to see how then-President Barack Obama would comment on the shooting. At approximately 3:15 p.m., less than six hours following the shooting, he addressed the nation from the White House's Press Briefing Room:

So our hearts are broken today, for the parents and grandparents, sisters and brothers of these little children and for the families of the adults who were lost. Our hearts are broken for the parents of the survivors as well, for as blessed as they are to have their children home tonight, they know that their children's innocence has been torn away from them too early and there are no words that will ease their pain.

As a country, we have been through this too many times. Whether it's an elementary school in Newtown or a shopping mall in Oregon or a temple in Wisconsin or a movie theater in Aurora or a street corner in Chicago, these neighborhoods are our neighborhoods, and these children are our children. And we're going to have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics. (Obama, Newtown, December 14, 2012)

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Like he had with prior shootings, and like presidents who came before him who had to offer similar remarks in the wake of these events, President Obama chose his words carefully as he addressed the nation about Sandy Hook. For the majority of individuals who heard or read his remarks, they never directly will experience or be impacted by such a tragedy. Accordingly, they forge their opinions and understanding about the event based solely on the information they receive from claims makers – either those in a primary capacity, such as the president, or those considered secondary level, such as the media. In one poll, for example, respondents reportedly perceived the Sandy Hook shooting to be reflective of broader social problems in the nation (Washington Post-ABC News Poll,” n.d.). Researchers (e.g., Elsass, Schildkraut, & Stafford, 2014) also have found that the amount of news media one consumes also is influential in shaping such opinions.

The way in which the President chose to frame the news of the shooting had broader reaching impacts beyond simply informing the nation of the attack in Newtown. As Zarefsky (2004) notes, a main function of presidential rhetoric is to create political reality. How events such as mass shootings are understood comes from the way in which they are defined by those with the power and ability to do so (Best, 1987, 2006; Zarefsky, 2004). Furthermore,

[t]he definition of the situation...highlights certain elements...for use in arguments and obscures others, influences whether people will notice the situation and how they will handle it, describes causes and identifies remedies, and invites moral judgments about circumstances or individuals. (Zarefsky, 2004, p. 612)

Thus, not only is presidential rhetoric in the wake of mass shootings useful in helping to inform the nation about the events, it also is instrumental in shaping public responses to the tragedies as well.

Given the immense power and influence the Commander-in-Chief yields, understanding their rhetoric about mass shootings is particularly important. This chapter explores such commentary offered in the wake of mass shootings from 1966 to 2014, representing what Duwe (2005) identifies as the second wave of mass murder in the United States. Consideration is given not only to different facets of the presidents' commentary in the wake of mass shootings, but also how the rhetoric changes over time. We also consider the broader implications of the framing of these events for public audiences.

Commander- or Comforter-in-Chief?**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE****Claims Making and Agenda Setting**

In the United States, social problems or other conflicts often are defined by claims makers, or those individuals who have the power to identify a particular issue and convince the public of the validity of their concern (McCombs, 1997; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weaver, 2007). The President of the United States arguably is one of the most influential claims maker as they have the means, power, and opportunity to bring issues before a national audience (Schildkraut, 2014, 2016). Acting as primary claims makers, presidents often promote such discussion through the media, who serve as secondary claims makers, or those who are further removed from the issue at hand (Best, 1989; see also Zarefsky, 2004). Collectively, this process is known as agenda setting, which refers to the method used to define and prioritize certain issues as important, or, in some cases, more important than others (McCombs, 1997; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weaver, 2007). With the power of identifying what issues or conflicts are most important, the President also acquires the ability to shape how these events are interpreted and responded to.

Utilizing strategic rhetoric to influence public opinion on an issue is not a new tactic. In 1794, President George Washington created an excise tax on whisky that led to an uproar among the public (Zarefsky, 2004). In addressing this issue, the president declared that boycotting the tax was akin to rebelling the newly created federal government in an effort to gain support from constituents. Similarly, after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, President Bush instinctively stated, “we are at war,” as a response to the events (Zarefsky, 2004). Within weeks, troops had been deployed to the Middle East in an effort to seek out those who had perpetrated the attacks (Zarefsky, 2004). In 2001, the majority of the American public approved of these efforts, yet as time progressed, such support drastically waned (Newport, 2003).

Once a claims maker sets the agenda and defines a problem as such, a moral panic potentially can develop and presidents strategically use proactive rhetoric during their speeches to promote related policy changes in response to the public’s reaction (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Hawdon, 2001). In relation to mass shootings, for example, the disproportionate amount of attention from the public and media alike have led to the demand for policies aimed at reducing the likelihood of future attacks (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Springhall, 1999). From zero-tolerance policies in schools to regulations and restrictions on firearms, the call to action often is echoed by presidents as they address the nation in the aftermath of such tragedies (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Zarefsky, 2004). At the same time, how the president chooses to frame the event also can have a significant impact on the public’s interpretation of the attack, as most individuals never will directly experience these tragedies, and

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subsequently, claims makers, including the president, serve as their main source of information (Duwe, 2005).

Presidential Rhetoric

As a primary claims maker, a president's rhetoric is mutually powerful and influential to the audience; thus, there are various roles that a President must fill while speaking to the public. Presidents that are considered successful rhetoricians employ specific speech strategies in accordance to their agenda and what they choose to address (Clementon, Pascual-Ferra, & Beatty, 2016; Eshbaugh-Soha & Collins, 2015). Depending on the situation at hand, a president can either utilize low or high intensity rhetoric (Clementon, Pascual-Ferra, & Beatty, 2016). Low intensity rhetoric is less emotional and direct compared to high intensity rhetoric that hinges on exaggerated statements aimed to incite a reaction from the audience (Clementon, Pascual-Ferra, & Beatty, 2016).

To provide operational definitions for these terms, researchers explain, "in a high-intensity message of both emotionalism and directness, a politician might say: 'This election is the most important election of your life.' And as an example of a low-intensity message of indirect, unemotional language, a politician might say: 'This election presents a choice between two contrasting visions for our country.'" (Clementon, Pascual-Ferra, & Beatty, 2016, p. 593). During George W. Bush's second inaugural address, for example, he utilized the words 'freedom,' 'free,' and 'liberty' 49 times, demonstrating to his audience the seriousness of his plan to grant Iraq freedoms that had been revoked post-9/11 (Roof, 2009). After analyzing this speech, the repeated use of words related to freedom illustrates President Bush's application of high-intensity rhetoric. Thus, his inaugural address employed the continual use of more impassioned language, a notable exception from his typical rhetoric (Clementon, Pascual-Ferra, & Beatty, 2016).

At each stage of a president's political career, the importance of rhetoric can be examined. Presidential candidates who cannot successfully differentiate which style is appropriate for a given situation, for example, may affect their chances of winning the election (Clementon, Pascual-Ferra, & Beatty, 2016). This was found to be the case in 1964 when Barry Goldwater was thought to have lost the election to Lyndon Johnson because of his inability to use low-intensity rhetoric (Clementon, Pascual-Ferra, & Beatty, 2016). In the same vein, presidents who overly use high-intensity language, despite the context of their speeches, often are viewed by the public as less trustworthy or credible (Clementon, Pascual-Ferra, & Beatty, 2016). Accordingly, considering that presidents speak publicly to benefit their agenda and reach maximum exposure for their message, an accurate understanding of speech

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is essential to success (Clementon, Pascual-Ferra, & Beatty, 2016; Eshbaugh-Soha & Collins, 2015).

One context in which this can be considered is how presidents discuss matters before the Supreme Court in their broader remarks. Eshbaugh-Soha and Collins (2015) examined presidential statements regarding Supreme Court decisions from the administrations of Eisenhower through Obama. The researchers found that presidential rhetoric was influenced significantly by that leader's potential for reelection (Eshbaugh-Soha & Collins, 2015; see also Clementon, Pascual-Ferra, & Beatty, 2016). Presidents strategically chose to comment on Supreme Court decisions when their political agenda was supported; simultaneously, the timing of their comments largely depended on which group of people they wanted to influence (Eshbaugh-Soha & Collins, 2015).

In instances where the President discussed a matter before the Supreme Court had announced their decision, the primary goal was to bring attention to the case to gain support, as justices occasionally are receptive to public opinion (Eshbaugh-Soha & Collins, 2015). Thus, presidents are aware of the impact that their rhetoric has on the public and thereby utilize this power attempting to influence rulings that otherwise are out of their control. Once the Supreme Court rules on a matter, presidential rhetoric shifts to promote policy goals and, in applicable conditions, their reelection (Eshbaugh-Soha & Collins, 2015). This study demonstrates the adaptation of presidential rhetoric that is specific toward the President's goal at the time of their speech (Eshbaugh-Soha & Collins, 2015).

Presidential Rhetoric Utilizing Religiosity

Traditionally, the United States' presidents also identify with people through religious rhetoric, and appearing insincere in this area often predicts a resulting unfavorable public opinion (Johnson, 2012; Roof, 2009). For society to perceive the President as a credible speaker, trust must be established throughout the numerous contexts the Commander-in-Chief will speak within (Clementon, Pascual-Ferra, & Beatty, 2016). Throughout history, some presidents have utilized religious rhetoric to distinguish the "good" from "evil." Roof (2009), for example, suggests that "Reagan, the actor, understood the power of words and symbols and used them effectively for political purposes" (p. 290). Similarly, President Obama also understood the significance of religion in persuading the public and consistently implemented faith throughout his campaign and term in office (Frank, 2014; Johnson, 2012; Siker, 2012). The repetitive use of this strategy implies that recognizing the importance of religion in the United States is a crucial component to envisioning the entire picture of presidential rhetoric.

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Prioritizing faith in presidential speeches appears to be a habitual approach meant to display a connection of policy reforms to the faith that many Americans value (Johnson, 2012).

Ofulue (2002) examined the speech given at a White House Prayer Breakfast by President Clinton and identified his promotion of policy agenda with an encouragement for unity between political and religious leaders. During one Easter speech, President Obama cited socioeconomic problems that prevent Americans from paying their mortgage, higher education, and even grocery bills (Johnson, 2012). Upon discussing these issues and proposed policy reforms, the President then validated his claim by referencing the emphasis on community relations and helping people in need that reoccurs throughout messages of faith (Johnson, 2012). Considering Presidents Clinton and Obama's tendency to gravitate toward high-emotional language, their use of religious rhetoric to connect with the public is rather predictable (Johnson, 2012; Roof, 2009). Although evaluating the effectiveness of incorporating religious speech to achieve policy goals may be problematic due to the number of variables at play, similar patterns of deliberate presidential rhetoric are identified during crises.

Presidential Rhetoric in Times of Crisis

While presidential speeches are rhetorically persuasive in most circumstances, times of crisis can evoke a different outcome, such as a moral panic, depending on how an event is addressed (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Hawdon, 2001). Even between presidents of different political backgrounds, there are similar patterns of how their crisis rhetoric evolved after an event occurred (Davis & Gardner, 2012). Hawdon (2001) describes one of the best examples of a president inciting moral panic. Despite drug use declining during the 1980s, President Reagan's "War on Drugs" led America to believe that drugs were still a prominent issue in the country, thereby causing a moral panic (Hawdon, 2001). Like previous studies imply, President Reagan likely continued to speak on these matters to create additional policy reforms (Clementon, Pascual-Ferra, & Beatty, 2016; Eshbaugh-Soha & Collins; Hawdon, 2001), including mandatory minimum sentences, habitual offender laws, and the reduction of judicial discretion in sentencing decisions. Creating a moral panic among the public requires a sense of urgency and proactive rhetoric promoting immediate change, and these components are all identified in President Reagan's speeches regarding the "War on Drugs" (Hawdon, 2001).

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Depending on a president's reaction to an event, the public's concern either can be enhanced or deescalated (Burns & Crawford, 1999). When an issue is causing the public distress, creating a moral panic requires less convincing by the President, thereby giving them the power to take advantage of tragedies to benefit their political agenda. While speaking after a mass shooting, President Clinton defined these events as a serious problem sparked from ineffective gun legislation and an irresponsible entertainment industry (Burns & Crawford, 1999). After 13 lives were claimed at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, the public's fear of sending their children to school was heightened, and President Clinton utilized this fear to endorse stricter gun control, parental responsibility, and increased sanctions for juvenile offenders (Burns & Crawford, 1999). His language instilled the idea that school shootings were a social problem that could be fixed by new legislation, and, after his term, future presidents followed his lead by addressing the "usual suspects" of gun control, violent media, and mental health (Amsden, 2014; Burns & Crawford, 1999; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Stafford, 2015; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014).

Throughout history, presidents have used their position as claims makers to define what constitutes a crisis or social problem, and this typically is done with emotional language that promotes a need for change (Amsden, 2014; Dow, 1989; Zarefsky, 2004). Just as strategies of speech alter between contexts, many presidents also implement additional rhetorical styles while addressing a crisis. During a memorial address concerning the Tucson shooting in 2011, President Obama focused on warm messages of the victims and only briefly touched on the three usual suspects (Amsden, 2014; Frank, 2014). By and large, the speech was considered an unquestionable success by most Democrats and over half of Republicans (Amsden, 2014; Frank, 2014). Although the approval ratings of President Obama's speech likely resulted from his focus on the victims, brief comments that mention the need for civility in politics indicated that his goal of creating policy change still was present (Amsden, 2014; Frank, 2014).

Addressing the victims of a shooting typically receives high public approval, thereby giving a president clear incentives to do so; it also gives the public the necessary tools to move on from a traumatic event that affects the entire country (Amsden, 2014; Dow, 1989). Dow (1989) explains that despite school shootings only may affect one community directly, the death of any American can create confusion, fear, and a demand for change among all citizens. Assigning meaning to an event, identifying a cause, and developing policy-related responses all are elements that presidents typically address to assist the public in coping with traumatic events (Dow, 1989). This applies not only to mass shootings, but other national tragedies as well.

Davis and Gardner (2012), for instance, examined 124 of President George W. Bush's speeches concerning two crises that occurred in the United States: the 9/11 terrorist attack and Hurricane Katrina. President Bush exhibited key features of

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charismatic rhetoric: emphasizing a collective identity among Americans, establishing similarity between the public and himself, and referencing faith to support his agenda (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Upon utilizing charismatic rhetoric, President Bush's approval rating initially increased after these events; however, his inability to adapt his rhetoric style over time appeared to have a decrease in public support (Davis & Gardner, 2012). Hearing similar messages in the same rhetoric style ultimately caused a numbing effect on the public and President Bush did not recognize this after 9/11, leading him to utilize the same strategy years later in response to Hurricane Katrina (Davis & Gardner, 2012). This indicates that the public is both mutually receptive and critical of presidential speeches during times of crisis. Subsequently, implementing the best strategies for public speaking is crucial to overcoming such trying times and earning public approval.

METHODOLOGY

Given the overwhelmingly visceral reactions that the public has in the wake of mass shootings, an examination of how the presidents respond to such tragedies is warranted. The present study is guided by the following research question: *How is the discourse on mass shootings facilitated by the President of the United States in the aftermath of an event?* To answer this question, presidential remarks following mass shootings from 1966 to 2014, representing the second wave of mass murder (see, for example, Duwe, 2005), were examined. The shootings were identified using Schildkraut and Elsass' (2016) definition:

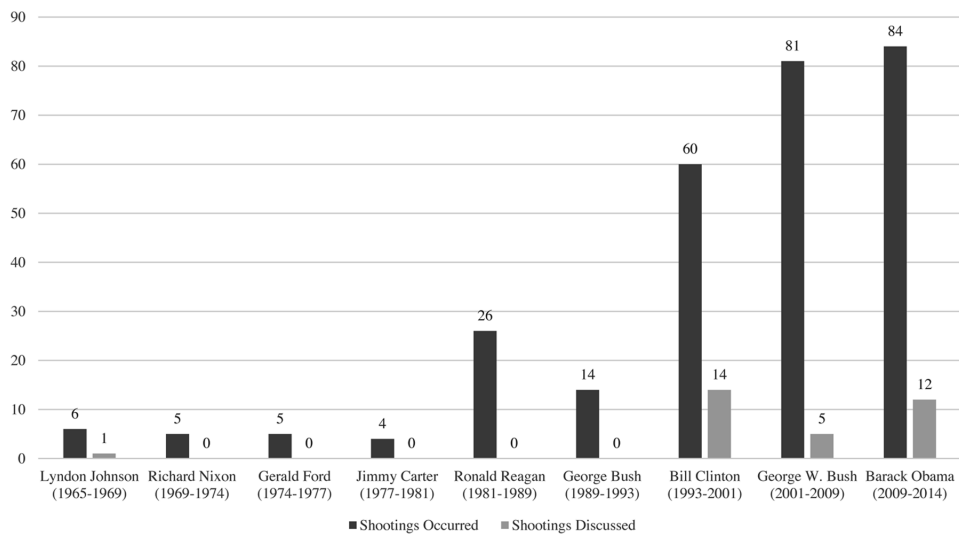
A mass shooting is an incident of targeted violence carried out by one or more shooters at one or more public or populated locations. Multiple victims (both injuries and fatalities) are associated with the attack, and both the victims and the location(s) are chosen either at random or for their symbolic value. The event occurs within a single 24-hour period, though most attacks typically last only a few minutes. The motivation of the shooting must not correlate with gang violence or targeted militant or terroristic activity. (p. 28)

During the study period, a total of 285 shootings occurred (see also Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). Attributes of each event – including the date of the attack, the President in office, and the type of location (e.g., school, workplace, etc.) – were recorded.

Commander- or Comforter-in-Chief?**Data Collection**

Once the shootings had been identified, the researchers assembled a list of presidential remarks specifically related to these attacks. These speeches were collected from the American Presidency Project’s database, housed at the University of California – Santa Barbara, which archives over 120,000 documents related to presidential rhetoric (Woolley & Peters, 2017). The database was searched using the term “shooting” and a date range of 30 days, including the day of the attack. The keyword search was designed to eliminate the possibility of “false negatives,” which can occur when a search term is too limited, thereby omitting results because they do not meet certain criteria (Deacon, 2007; Soothill & Grover, 1997), such as the name of a particular location (e.g., Sandy Hook Elementary School). The collection period of 30 days has been identified by previous researchers (e.g., Muschert, 2002, 2007; Schildkraut, 2012, 2014; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014a) as the average lifespan of media coverage of mass shootings; conceivably, it would be expected that as most presidential speeches regarding these events are disseminated through the media, a similar examination period is warranted.

Figure 1. Distribution of shooting events and speeches by president



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Once the speeches were downloaded, they were organized by shooting and reviewed to ensure that at least one sentence discussed the event, as in certain cases, reference to the shooting was secondary to other topics of discussion. Accordingly, as word counts were tallied, only the parts of remarks referencing the shootings or related responses specifically were included. Of the 285 shootings that occurred during the study period, only 11.2% ($n = 32$) were discussed in some capacity by the President in office at the time. Figure 1 displays the number of shootings per administration, as well as how many were referenced by the corresponding president. In addition to a majority of shootings not being discussed, more than half of the presidents (55.6%) also did not make any statements about attacks occurring during their time in office.

The final dataset included 82 separate speeches, totaling approximately 50,000 words. Of these, 50 (61%) focused solely on the shooting; the remaining 39% referenced an attack in the context of another purpose of the speech. As indicated in Table 1, one-half of the shootings ($n = 16$) were mentioned in just one speech; the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School was mentioned in the most remarks ($n = 10$). Content of the speeches related to the shootings ranged from just 33 words (the 1998 shooting in Newington, CT) to 13,110 words (Columbine), with a mean of 615 words per shooting. Those attacks occurring in schools also were more likely to receive lengthier speeches, averaging 802 words per remark. By comparison, those shooting occurring at workplaces (658 words), churches (499 words), and other locations (370 words) garnered less attention from the presidents. Further, though President Clinton gave more speeches than the most recent leader (14 compared to 12), President Obama's remarks were considerably lengthier (more than 350 words longer) than the earlier Commander-in-Chief. President Johnson offered just one remark following the 1966 University of Texas Clock Tower shooting, lasting just 55 words, while the more recent President Bush's speeches averaged less than 500 words each.¹ The majority of speeches occurred on the day of (29.3%) or day following (19.5%) the shooting, though some remarks extended as far out as 29 days after the respective attack.

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Shooting	Year	President	Speeches	Words	Avg. Length
Schools (n = 14)					
Columbine	1999	Clinton	10	13,110	1,311.0
Conyers	1999	Clinton	3	1,148	382.7
Fort Gibson	1999	Clinton	1	105	105.0
Jonesboro	1998	Clinton	1	570	570.0
Lancaster County (PA)	2006	Bush 2	1	416	416.0
Newtown	2012	Obama	4	4,436	1,109.0
Red Lake	2005	Bush 2	1	314	314.0
Santee	2001	Bush 2	1	186	186.0
Seattle	2014	Obama	1	853	853.0
Springfield	1998	Clinton	7	3,673	524.7
Taft	2013	Obama	1	2,373	2,373.0
University of Texas	1966	Johnson	1	55	55.0
Virginia Tech	2007	Bush 2	3	1,082	360.7
West Paducah	1997	Clinton	1	560	560.0
TOTAL			36	28,881	802.3
Workplaces (n = 6)					
Fort Hood	2009	Obama	6	4,861	810.2
Fort Hood	2014	Obama	3	1,587	317.4
Newington	1998	Clinton	1	33	33.0
Seattle	1999	Clinton	1	64	64.0
Wakefield	2000	Clinton	1	69	69.0
Washington, D.C.	2013	Obama	2	2,593	1296.5
TOTAL			14	9,207	657.6
Places of Worship (n = 2)					
Fort Worth	1999	Clinton	2	1,575	787.5
Oak Creek	2012	Obama	2	419	209.5
TOTAL			4	1,994	498.5

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Shooting	Year	President	Speeches	Words	Avg. Length
<i>Other (n = 10)</i>					
Atlanta	1999	Clinton	1	141	141.0
Aurora	2012	Obama	6	2,889	481.5
Binghamton	2009	Obama	1	67	67.0
Hicksville	1993	Clinton	2	714	357.0
Los Angeles	1999	Clinton	5	1,176	235.2
Omaha	2007	Bush 2	1	84	84.0
Overland Park	2014	Obama	4	1,158	289.5
Tucson	2011	Obama	4	3,333	833.3
Washington, D.C.	1998	Clinton	3	697	232.3
Washington, D.C.	2009	Obama	1	99	99.0
TOTAL			28	10,358	369.9

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013) was used as the principal analytic tool to examine the presidents' remarks. Content analysis more broadly, whether used by scholars in communications or other disciplines, allows researchers to critically analyze language and texts presented by claims makers (Bell, 1991; Berg, 2007; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998), such as national leaders. Further, this technique is considered by scholars to be both systematic and reliable in its process (Berg, 2007; Muschert, 2002; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). More broadly, content analysis enables researchers to categorize data of various forms (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998), allowing them to identify patterns and themes from which they can draw meaning (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; Berg, 2007). An important aspect of content analysis is the fact that it is both unobtrusive and nonreactive (Bell, 1991; Berg, 2007; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). As such, the researcher has no influence over the creation of the data being examined, as they (in this case, the speeches) are analyzed after their production has completed (Bell, 1991; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998).

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The NVivo 10 software package was utilized in the present study both for organizational and analytic purposes. Following their collection, the speeches were loaded as individual documents within the project with the appropriate attributes (e.g., location, president, word count, and how many days occurred between the shooting and the remark itself) assigned to each for classification purposes. Both researchers on the project independently read through each speech after their loading, making memos and notes of recurrent themes. Following the read-throughs, the researchers then met and reviewed the memos, ultimately using them as a basis for creating a codebook.

A systematic random sample (every fifth document) was drawn for the purpose of a check of intercoder reliability, totaling an initial sample of 15 speeches. Each researcher then independently coded the texts for the various themes they had identified. In the present study, the unit of analysis was individual sentences, which can provide scholars an element of context when examining a particular theme (Berg, 2007). Coding for individual words or phrases can cause the context or meaning to be lost without the additional information, while using larger units of analysis, such as a paragraph, may cause research “clutter” for the coder as too many ideas can be conveyed (Berg, 2007).

Upon completion of the independent coding of the sample documents, NVivo was used to calculate a Kappa coefficient for each theme, which serves as a measure of intercoder reliability. Upon review, it was determined that nearly half of the themes coded yielded a Kappa coefficient below 0.6, which, according to Landis and Koch (1977), is a rule of thumb for an acceptable reliability agreement. The researchers met and discussed potential issues within the codebook and meanings of each theme, altering the guide as needed for clarification. The speeches then were recoded and the reliability check re-ran; all Kappa coefficients subsequently were found to exceed the 0.6 benchmark.

ANALYSIS

Remarks by presidents about mass shootings in their aftermath often center on six broader themes, as outlined in Table 2. Discussion of the persons involved in the attacks, including the victims and perpetrators, is the most commonly referenced theme, accounting for nearly 35% of all items coded. Commentary offered about warning signs and potential causal factors, including what researchers (Schildkraut,

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Elsass, & Muschert, 2016; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014b) have coined the “usual suspects,” collectively accounts for approximately 32% of codes. To a lesser extent, presidents also have offered remarks on case updates (16.5%), their personal feelings about the tragedies (9.0%), and offering thoughts and prayers (7.8%). Each of these themes is explored further in the following sections.

Case Updates

Given the immense power and standing of the Commander-in-Chief, these individuals often have up-to-the-minute information about ongoing investigations as they unfold. Accordingly, when commenting on shootings before the nation, citizens often look to them for details on the attacks beyond what may be offered in press conferences held by law enforcement or other information reported by the media. When offering such updates, the presidents traditionally have been cautious in providing information, often opting in most cases to stick to basic and verified facts about the cases:

We’re still gathering all the facts about what happened, but we do know that police have one suspect in custody. (Obama, Aurora, July 20, 2012)

The FBI and the Department of Justice are working to coordinate relief through the Federal Crime Victim Assistance Fund. We’re working closely with State, local, and tribal authorities to provide counseling, help with funeral arrangements, and other assistance. (Bush, Red Lake, March 26, 2005)

Simultaneously, the presidents also have cautioned audiences to wait for facts, rather than rushing to draw conclusions about the shootings before information becomes available:

Table 2. Distribution of main themes (nodes) by references

Theme	N	%
Case Updates	307	16.5
President’s Feelings	168	9.0
Thoughts and Prayers	145	7.8
Victims and Perpetrators	651	34.9
Warning Signs	275	14.8
The Usual Suspects	318	17.1
TOTAL	1,864	100.1

Note: Variable frequency percentages may not total to 100.0% due to rounding error.

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But in terms of what could have, should have been done and what this means for other issues, I think we have to wait until all the facts are in. (Clinton, Atlanta, July 30, 1999)

We don't know all the answers yet, and I would caution against jumping to conclusions until we have all the facts. (Obama, Fort Hood, November 6, 2009)

Beyond providing breaking details of the cases, initial remarks by the presidents often offer praise for authority in respect to those responding to the tragedies. Specifically, these speeches, particularly in the initial comments, routinely include acknowledgement of the efforts of bystanders, first responders, federal authorities, and local and state government representatives, all of whom have a part either during or in the immediate aftermath of the shootings. At the same time, the presidents also pledge the assistance and resources of the federal government, as well as the support of the nation as a whole. In fact, though President Johnson failed to offer any case updates in his remarks on the 1966 shooting at the University of Texas (UT), he did extend support to the Austin community: “Our hearts go out to the families involved and to all who are suffering. We want to assure you of any person or official assistance that would in any way be helpful” (August 2, 1966).

Presidents' Feelings

Once the presidents have set the scene with details of the shootings, the discourse often turns to comments about how they themselves are processing the tragedy. Three terms emerged as continually utilized by Presidents Bush, Clinton, and Obama – expressing sadness, shock, and concern for the communities where the shootings occurred, the victims, and their families. They, along with President Johnson in his remarks after the UT shooting, offered their feelings as a united front with their spouses. Such comments also often served as the opening line to their overall remarks, leading with recognition of the magnitude of the tragedies that just had occurred.

As with other themes examined throughout this study, both Johnson and Bush were relatively limited in their remarks about their feelings. Presidents Clinton and Obama, however, used each opportunity they spoke to highlight how they made sense of the shootings. Both shared sentiments related to their respective events – of being heartbroken and feeling sorrow for the individuals who were lost or injured. Both also found positive aspects in the responses to the shootings. President Clinton, for example, said that he was both pleased and impressed with the work of those involved in the initial response and that he was inspired and hopeful for those who were affected. Similarly, President Obama remarked that he felt honored to help those who had been impacted, in awe of the accomplishments of those who had been

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lost, and determined to help make a change. In a speech after the 2012 shooting at the Aurora, Colorado movie theater, however, it was a remark by President Obama that perhaps best sums up how presidents see themselves when offering rhetoric in the wake of these events:

I confessed to them that words are always inadequate in these kinds of situations, but that my main task was to serve as a representative of the entire country and let them know that we are thinking about them at this moment and will continue to think about them each and every day and that the awareness that not only all of America, but much of the world is thinking about them, might serve as some comfort. (Obama, Aurora, July 22, 2012)

Humanizing the Tragedy

One interesting aspect that emerged out of the presidential rhetoric about their feelings after the shootings was how they humanized the tragedy; that is, how did they make the people involved and the experience of grieving what had taken place relatable to themselves and others. President Bush, for example, remarked that “Our schoolchildren should never fear their safety when they enter to a classroom” (October 3, 2006). President Clinton echoed similar sentiments following the 2000 Conyers shooting, as did President Obama after Sandy Hook in 2012, thereby extrapolating the lives lost to all children of the same age. The problem with such a statement is that it offers no context to crime rates in American schools. Research has indicated, for example, that schools are one of the safest places to be. Furthermore, the relative risk of a K-12 student in the United States falling victim to a school shooting is less than one in five-ten thousandths (Schildkraut, Elsass, & Stafford, 2015). Without offering such context, however, it gives audiences the perception that their children are at a greater risk of victimization.

President Obama also showed that beyond being the leader of one of the most powerful nations in the world, he also was an individual who filled a variety of other roles. After several shootings, for example, he emphasized his role as a father when trying to underscore the importance of children’s lives being lost:

I’m sure that many of you who are parents here had the same reaction that I did when I heard this news. My daughters go to the movies. What if Malia and Sasha [President Obama’s daughters] had been at the theater, as so many of our kids do every day? (Obama, Aurora, July 20, 2012)

And each time I learn the news, I react not as a President, but as anybody else would: as a parent. (Obama, Newtown, December 14, 2012)

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President Obama also underscored himself as a husband in explaining the role he assumed when meeting with the victims and their families after the Aurora shooting. In separate instances, all three presidents spoke of themselves as American citizens, sharing the grief of a nation, as exhibited in this quote from President Clinton following the shooting at Thurston High School:

Like all Americans, I am deeply shocked and saddened by this tragedy, and my thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families. Like all Americans, I am struggling to make sense of the senseless and to understand what could drive a teenager to commit such a terrible act. And like all Americans, I am profoundly troubled by the startling similarity of this crime to the other tragic incidents that have stunned America in less than a year's time: in Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Pearl, Mississippi; and Edinboro, Pennsylvania. (Clinton, Springfield, May 23, 1998)

Two additional methods of humanizing the tragedy also were found to be interwoven in the presidential rhetoric, each employed by different leaders. President Clinton led the charge in highlighting that no communities in America were immune to such violence, a trend that was noticeably more common in his remarks following the Columbine shooting:

And I think I can't do better than what Patricia Holloway said, the commission chair: If it can happen here [in Littleton], then surely people will recognize that they have to be alive to the possibility that it could occur in any community in America, and maybe that will help us to keep it from happening again. (April 20, 1999, emphasis added)

Conversely, rather than focusing on communities being equal in terms of ability to experience a mass shooting, President Obama instead emphasized the individuals and their respective character and personality traits, as discussed more in a later section, to humanize them as individuals that others could relate to. In either instance, the framing of these shootings as potentially impacting anyone at any given time allowed them to resonate more personally with audiences.

Thoughts, Prayers, and God

A standard response in the aftermath of these events, one utilized by all four remarking presidents, is to offer condolences in the form of thoughts and prayers. In doing so, it provides a moment of consideration not only for the victims and the community, but also for individuals to work to make sense of the tragedy in their

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own way. In some cases, guidance was offered as to who should be remembered (e.g., the victims and their families), yet in others, just a general call for reflection about the greater meaning of the tragedy was presented. Similarly, though limited in use (just 25 total references), Presidents Bush, Clinton, and Obama ended their speeches asking God to bless over the victims or the nation.

An interesting departure from this, however, has been found in the speeches of President Obama. Going beyond the traditional thanking of God or asking him to bless those touched by the tragedy, President Obama often incorporates Scripture into his speeches in the wake of mass shootings, many times that take the role of national eulogies (see Frank, 2014; Siker, 2012). Depending on the position he is trying to advocate, he can select different passages for his speech. Following the 2011 shooting in Tucson, for example, President Obama relied on Scripture from Job as he commemorated the victims (Frank, 2014; Siker, 2012). In doing so, he maintained a neutral tone that appealed to Democrats and Republicans alike, as he called for contemplation rather than the allocation of blame (Frank, 2014). Conversely, when commenting on the Sandy Hook shooting, President Obama utilized text from 2 Corinthians, which allowed him to memorialize the victims while simultaneously calling for action against gun violence, and, to an extent, the weapons themselves (Frank, 2014). By countervailing Scripture with eulogizing the victims, as Frank (2014) notes, President Obama is able to create a platform from which to introduce policy and reform.

Perpetrators and Victims

As noted, the largest segment of references coded in the remarks centered on those individuals involved in the attacks – the offenders and the victims. Interestingly, despite totaling a collective 651 references, just a mere fraction of these (1.4%) referenced the shooters themselves. Specifically, only nine mentions of the perpetrators were found over all the presidential remarks, associated with just four different shootings (Aurora, Fort Hood, 2009; Thurston High School, and Washington, D.C., 1998). Not surprisingly, these remarks were found to be made about perpetrators who survived the attacks, being taken into custody by law enforcement rather than committing suicide or being killed by police. Both Presidents Clinton and Obama remarked about bringing the perpetrators to justice and using the necessary resources to do so, though the former was nearly four times as likely to reference the gunmen.

Conversely, much of the attention given by all of the presidents who made remarks about these events (Johnson, Bush, Clinton, and Obama) focused on the victims of the tragedies. Victims can be disaggregated into two types – direct, referencing those immediately involved in the shootings, and indirect, or those who are part of the larger community where the attack occurred. Discussion of the individuals directly

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impacted by the event was considerably more common, accounting for nearly 67% (n = 435) of all remarks made about the persons involved. Indirect victims still garnered a considerable amount of attention, accounting for the remaining 32% (n = 207) of references made by the presidents.

Another interesting trend emerged with relation to discussion of the victims. Whereas other types of remarks examined throughout this chapter were found in the context of the higher profile events, such as Columbine, Virginia Tech, Aurora, and Sandy Hook, acknowledgment of the victims was found to be linked to discussion of nearly each of the 32 shootings in the dataset. Specifically, reference to the direct victims was made by three of the four presidents (President Johnson did not directly reference any specific victims, either individually or collectively, in his short remarks about the 1966 UT shooting) in all but three of the shootings. Aside from the UT shooting, President Clinton excluded references to the direct victims in his remarks about the 1993 Long Island Railroad attack, as did President Bush in his comments about the 2006 shooting at the Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania. With respect to indirect victims, the remarks made about the 2000 shooting at Edgewater Technology in Massachusetts by President Clinton were the only to exclude reference to this group. Speeches made by all of the presidents about the remaining 31 shootings each acknowledged the broader group of individuals impacted by the attacks.

Whereas President Clinton was more likely to discuss the potential causal factors for these attacks and related responses, as discussed later in this article, President Obama was considerably more likely to talk about the people, or more specifically, the victims, impacted by these events. In fact, his references to those victims directly involved in the attacks were more than 5 times as commonplace as President Clinton and 10 times as frequent as President Bush.² Indirect victims garnered more than 3, 6, and 60 times as many remarks by President Obama as compared to Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Johnson, respectively. In addition to the number of references, the manner in which these victims were discussed also differed among the presidents.

Previous research (e.g., Schildkraut, 2014, 2016) has found that in media coverage of these events, direct victims are most commonly referenced as an aggregate, or total number of victims. In some instances, even as direct victims, individuals wounded or killed in the attack will be discussed in vague terms. For many of the shootings in the present study, the remarks made by the presidents followed similar suit. For nine of the attacks, however, the coverage made reference to specific victims.

In his remarks, President Bush was the least likely to use this technique. In fact, only one victim in one shooting – Derrick Brun, a school security guard killed in the 2005 shooting in Red Lake, Minnesota – was referenced specifically by name. More commonly, those presidents who chose to remark about specific victims made sure to reference each of those individuals killed by name: President Clinton did this following the attacks at Heath High School (1997) and the United

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States Capitol (1998), whereas President Obama did so following the shootings at Fort Hood (both in the 2009 and 2014 incidents), Sandy Hook (2012), Tucson (2011), and the Washington, D.C. Navy Yard (2013). In some instances, such as the remarks following West Paducah and Sandy Hook, the presidents did not provide a considerable amount of detail on each victim but did ensure that all names were mentioned so that they were included.

Taking their recognition of the direct victims even further, two of the presidents chose to provide more in-depth details about the individuals themselves while simultaneously referencing each person. President Clinton first did this in his discussion of the Capitol shooting, where he made sure not only to reference the two officers killed in the attack, but also to provide details about who they left behind, their career history, and their personal interests, such as religion and sports. President Obama offered similar context in his remarks following the shootings at Fort Hood (2009 and 2014), Tucson, and Navy Yard. Even though these shootings had more fatalities than the Capitol shooting, with 13, 3, 6, and 12, respectively, President Obama made sure to highlight each victim with discussion about their interests, their careers, and what had brought them to the site that day:

A New Jersey native, Phyllis Schneck [one of the victims] retired to Tucson to beat the snow. But in the summer, she would return east, where her world revolved around her three children, her seven grandchildren, and 2-year-old great-granddaughter. A gifted quilter, she'd often work under a favorite tree, or sometimes, she's sew aprons with the logos of the Jets and the Giants to give out at the church where she volunteered. A Republican, she took a liking to Gabby [Giffords] and wanted to get to know her better. (Obama, Tucson, January 12, 2011)

In most instances, he provided each victim with equitable attention; Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, wounded in the Tucson attack, was a notable exception, presumably due to her government connection. By highlighting the different facets of these individuals and their personalities, the presidents not only are able to reinforce the loss of these people to society, but also allow for an outlet whereby other people who share similar traits can put themselves in the shoes of the victim (a process which indirectly speaks to the idea of humanizing the tragedy, as discussed earlier).

As noted, all four of the presidents who offered remarks in the aftermath of these tragedies also acknowledged that victims existed beyond those who were killed or wounded. These indirect victims often are more plentiful and can expand across multiple layers of space, getting broader as one extends further away from the epicenter of the attack (see also Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014a). At the closest level to the tragedy, the presidents often acknowledge family members of the victims (both killed and wounded), as well as others that may have been present at the location but

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not directly injured in the attack. In a broader sense, they often also recognize those individuals affected beyond the site of the shooting, including the broader community (e.g., city or town, company in the event it was a workplace, or school population) as a whole. Finally, in rarer instances, the presidents also acknowledge the potential impact of the shooting on the American public at large, giving consideration to those that may be grieving beyond the immediate community. In sum, there are many people affected by these events aside from those who experience the attack, and the presidents skillfully recognize all who grieve in their comments about the shootings.

Warning Signs and Causal Factors

As time passes and more information becomes available, the public turns to the president for additional information to try and understand why these tragedies occur. In response, the president seeks to answer the “why” question as best they can. At the same time, however, they must be cognizant of the weight their message carries. Few people ever directly experience such an attack, so claims makers, including the President of the United States, are the main source of information. If not addressed correctly, there potentially could be unintentional consequences stemming from the misinformation shared with the public, up to and including a moral panic (see, generally, Burns & Crawford, 1999; Elsass, Schildkraut, & Stafford, 2014; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Stafford, 2015; Springhall, 1999).

In attempting to answer the “why,” presidents are faced with trying to determine the motivation behind the shootings. As these questions often come in the immediate aftermath, where little time for investigation has passed, it leaves the presidents at a crossroads – should they speculate a motive to appease public inquiry or not? In some respects, enough material has been collected as part of the investigation to give the presidents support for a potential motive. Following Columbine, for example, President Clinton suggested that the shooters were prejudiced against certain groups, including blacks and Hispanics, and often felt as if they were outcasts at their school (April 22, 2009). While the first part of that claim may have been correct, the latter was inaccurate as the shooters were liked by many and had a close circle of friends (Cullen, 2009; Larkin, 2007). Racial motivation also was cited as a potential catalyst for the 1999 shooting at a Los Angeles area Jewish Community Center in remarks offered by President Clinton (August 12, 1999). When motivation was referenced by both Presidents Bush and Obama, however, they opted not to speculate as to the reason for the shooting, instead acknowledging that the true catalyst for the attacks may never be known.

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In the same vein, the presidents may be asked to speculate about potential warning signs the shooters emitted. By identifying warning signs that were present prior to the attacks, members of the general public would be better suited to identify future offenders and potentially thwart another shooting. President Clinton referenced warning signs (n = 23) approximately four times as frequently as Bush (n = 2) and Obama (n = 4) combined. Across all three presidents, however, no specific warning signs were identified as being present prior to the shooting. Instead, each called for the need to develop threat assessment protocols to help identify potential warning signs that could predict violent behavior (see also O'Toole, 2000; Reddy, Borum, Berglund, Vossekuil, Fein, & Modzeleski, 2001).

Together, the identification of motivation and warning signs can be used to develop potential prevention strategies. A total of 213 references were made by Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama regarding such measures. President Bush, in his limited number of remarks, also referenced prevention strategies the fewest number of times (n = 8). His primary call to action was generally improving school safety and working together to reach prevention strategies in his remarks about the shootings at Red Lake (2005), the Amish schoolhouse (2006), and Virginia Tech (2007). In his remarks, President Obama also emphasized the overarching need for prevention, calling for the general repairing of laws that may have allowed incidents at Fort Hood (2009), Aurora (2012), Sandy Hook (2012), and Taft Union High School (2013) to occur. He was, however, somewhat realistic in his call to action in these cases:

...[T]here's no law or set of laws that can prevent every senseless act of violence in our society... The fact that we can't prevent every act of violence doesn't mean we can't steadily reduce the violence and prevent the very worst violence. (Obama, Newtown, December 19, 2012)

Whereas Presidents Bush and Obama broadly called for action in their speeches, President Clinton was far more specific in the proposed prevention strategies he offered through his rhetoric. In nearly every remark made, he offered some push for concrete measures that could reduce the possibility of another attack. While many of these references centered gun control, mental health, and violent media regulations (discussed further in the next section), President Clinton also posed a bevy of other measures including, but not limited to, zero tolerance policies, school uniforms, metal detectors, tip lines, curfews, and anti-truancy policies, many of which were implemented in schools across the nation after Columbine. He challenged individuals with prevention strategies, suggesting that students should reach out to their classmates more, parents should be held accountable for their children, and schools should employ more uniformed officers and trained personnel.

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Another notable difference between President Clinton and his two successors was that he was the only person to push a specific law in his rhetoric. Expressly, in remarks after the shootings at Thurston High School, Columbine, and the Los Angeles Jewish Community Center (the latter of which was perpetrated by an adult), President Clinton seized the opportunity to promote his juvenile crime bill. Originally introduced in 1997 by Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, the bill included provisions for closing the gun show loophole through required background checks, requiring child-safety devices (e.g., trigger locks) on handguns, restrictions on assault weapons (which currently largely were banned at the time), expansion of juvenile crime prevention programs, and allocating funding for tougher enforcement of juvenile crimes (S. 10, 1997). Though the legislation died after its original introduction, it was reintroduced in subsequent sessions and heavily supported by President Clinton. An updated version (S. 254, 1999) was reintroduced four months prior to Columbine; its House counterpart, H.R. 1501 (1999), came the day after the shooting. Once it made it to the floor and following 10 days of deliberation, the bill ultimately was passed – on the day of the May 20, 1999 shooting at Heritage High School in Conyers, Georgia (Franken, 1999). It is possible that the successful passage of these highly controversial measures could be attributed, at least in part, to President Clinton’s use of school shootings as a platform for drumming up such support.

The Usual Suspects

When seeking to identify causal factors in the aftermath of mass shootings, claims makers often have focused on what Schildkraut and colleagues refer to as the “usual suspects” (see Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014b). More specifically, when trying to explain why these events have occurred, the rhetoric typically focuses on issues related to gun control-gun rights, mental health, and violent media (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014b). The use of these themes by the presidents also was evident. Consistent with previous research, discussion of guns (both control and rights measures) was the most common of the three, accounting for approximately 65% of references to the usual suspects. Discussion of issues related to mental health accounted for nearly 18% of references, whereas violent media (17%) was the least commonly referenced.

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The debate between gun control and the right to carry often emerges (or, perhaps more accurately, reemerges) quickly after news of a mass shooting breaks. Those individuals who advocate for stricter control measures base their arguments on the idea that such restrictions would have prevented the shootings from occurring (see, generally, Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). Conversely, gun rights proponents contend that the presence of armed citizens would be sufficient either to deter a shooter or to mitigate the injuries if an attack did take place. Still, despite this debate being among the hottest to arise from mass shootings, it was found to be included in remarks by only two presidents – Clinton and Obama – who approached the same issue (gun control) from two starkly different perspectives. Interestingly, despite that the deadliest mass shooting in the dataset (Virginia Tech) occurred during his administration, President Bush elected not to comment on the topic.

Of the 206 total references to guns, President Clinton accounted for most of the discussion (60.2%). The majority of these remarks were made in the aftermath of the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School, though he also referenced gun control measures following school shootings in Springfield, OR (1998), Fort Worth, TX (1999), and Conyers, GA (1999); on the Long Island Rail Road in 1993; and the 1999 shooting at Los Angeles Jewish Community Center. Conversely, the majority of President Obama's remarks followed the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. Additionally, reference to firearms were made following shootings at Fort Hood (2014), Taft Union High School (2013), Tucson (2011), and the Washington, D.C. Navy Yard (2013).

Topics by President Clinton ranged from zero tolerance policies related to bringing firearms to school, ease of access that children have to guns (including holding adults responsible in such circumstances), and tracking illegal weapons. He also suggested increasing the age of ownership of handguns from 18 to 21 and implementing a national system to limit purchases to one firearm per month. Conversely, President Obama focused on keeping the guns out of the hands of individuals who should not have access to such weapons. This was particularly noteworthy since the major discourse about several of the shootings occurring during his presidency – particularly Fort Hood, Sandy Hook, Tucson, and Navy Yard – emphasized the role of mental illness. Beyond the general conjecture related to guns, however, there were two main issues that both presidents addressed, but from opposing perspectives.

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The first of these was background check systems. For President Clinton, the issue of the “Gun Show Loophole” gained momentum after it was revealed that the Columbine shooters specifically scouted out private dealers at gun shows who did not run background checks for their friend to purchase firearms on their behalf, as neither were lawfully old enough to own the weapons at the time of the purchase (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014; Soragahan, 2000). Specifically, attempts to close the loophole would require all sellers at gun shows – both private individuals and registered dealers – to process a background check on the buyer prior to transferring the weapon. While attempts at closing the gun loophole had been made prior to Columbine, the shooting acted as a catalyst to not only renew but increase efforts to pass the legislation. In fact, different versions of the law were introduced either in the House or Senate nearly every year for 10 years following Columbine, including after President Clinton left office; none of the laws passed (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014). In his remarks, the president also suggested that background checks should extend to individuals who attempted to purchase explosives, despite that the Columbine shooters’ devices were made of regular household materials. President Obama, on the other hand, opted to focus on what he termed “universal background checks,” thereby uniformly applying the requirement to all sales and transfers rather than only those at gun shows. He also emphasized strengthening the background check system already in place, which President Bush had allocated resources for in his final year in office (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014).

The second area of attempted reform addressed by both presidents was the banning of large capacity magazines and assault weapons. Both presidents called for a limiting of the number of rounds (bullets) that the clips could hold. President Clinton focused on older magazines that were manufactured abroad. Conversely, President Obama emphasized the need to prohibit the use of more recent models and those that were modifiable, particularly after the Aurora gunman had used a 100-round drum in his shooting.

Discussion of restrictions to magazines paled in comparison to rhetoric focused on assault weapons. Both presidents called for the outlawing of semiautomatic assault weapons, including those used at Columbine, Aurora, and Sandy Hook. Their differences in perspectives, however, stemmed from the fact that during all but one year of Clinton’s presidency, the United States was under the Federal Assault Weapons Ban (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014). In addition to banning large capacity magazines (those holding 10 or more rounds), the Federal Assault Weapons Ban also clearly prohibited 19 specific firearms from civilian ownership (Singh, 1999). One

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such weapon barred under the ban, the Intratec TEC-DC9, had been used by one of the Columbine shooters (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014). The Federal Assault Weapons Ban included a sunset provision that allowed the law to lapse in 2004, 10 years after its enactment (Singh, 1999). Thus, by the time the discourse by President Obama shifted to banning assault weapons, he faced significant opposition from those in the gun rights camp, as well as such individuals who did not believe the law to be effective. Thus, despite calling for a renewal, a federal regulation on assault weapons still remains absent at the time of this writing.

Mental Health

In the aftermath of mass shootings, the discourse also often includes talk about the mental health of mass shooters (Schildkraut, Elsass, & Muschert, 2016; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014b). This stems from the common belief that in order for someone to carry out such an attack, they must be suffering from some form of mental disease or defect. Despite such conjecture, mental health was referenced more than three-and-a-half times as infrequently as guns, though often the two were discussed in conjunction with one another. Specifically, a number of the remarks made that referenced mass shooters and their mental status centered on keeping firearms out of the hands of individuals who should not have access to them.

Such remarks, however, ultimately failed to account for the larger issue that led them to acquire their weapons in the first place. The gunmen in both the Virginia Tech and Tucson shootings had well-documented histories of mental illness, yet due to reporting errors, passed the mandated background checks in order to acquire their weapons (see also Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014). Moreover, while President Bush, who was in office at the time of the Virginia Tech shooting, remained relatively quiet in his remarks, particularly in the context of mental health (just three overall references, two of which were linked to the Tech attack), he was the only president to successfully pass legislation aimed at addressing this very issue. In 2008, he signed into law the NICS Improvements Amendment Act, which designated over \$1.3 billion in federal funding for states to improve their reporting to the background check system (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014). Five years after its passage, however, just \$50 million had been appropriated and estimates suggested that more than a million records were still missing from the system (Brady Campaign Press Release, 2011; Witkin, 2012).

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More commonly, the remarking president spoke in broad terms about the issues of mental health in the country. While bringing light to an important issue, the generalizations made also were problematic. For example, the comments made by President Clinton following the shootings at Thurston and Columbine High Schools in 1998 and 1999, respectively, spoke broadly to issues of mentally ill children. Yet generalizing these larger issues in the context of these shootings is problematic because the presence of mental illness in the three shooters is speculative at best. One of the Columbine shooters had been prescribed the drug, Luvox, which is taken to treat obsessive-compulsive disorder (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014b). No clear link, however, has ever been found between psychiatric medication and mass shootings (Schildkraut, 2014). The other Columbine gunman, while believed to suffer from depression, never had been diagnosed formally by a mental health professional. The shooter in the Thurston High school event the year prior had exhibited signs of mental illness and attempted to use an insanity defense, only to later abandon it and plead guilty (Verhovek, 1999). As experts have noted, however, serious mental illness is found in only a small fraction of juveniles who commit murder (Barnard, 1999).

President Obama, in his remarks about the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting, also used the platform to discuss keeping firearms out of the hands of mentally ill individuals. The shooter in the case had Asperger's Syndrome, a highly functioning form of autism (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014b). Despite that individuals with this disorder rarely are violent towards people outside of their immediate family, fail to plan their attacks, and do not use weapons (Harmon, 2012), the speculation about mental illness as a causal factor for the shooting was found not only in the media coverage of the attack (see Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014b), but also in the President's remarks. Specifically, President Obama stated "that if we work harder to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people, there would be fewer atrocities like the one in Newtown" (December 19, 2012). His comments failed to point out that the shooter had not purchased his own weapons, instead using those which he had access to through his mother, who had acquired them through lawful means. In sum, by generalizing these events' linkage to mental health issues to all individuals who possess such characteristics, the presidents can give the perception that mass shooters are more commonplace and more attacks are possible, which can cause apprehension among the public that will garner support for any proffered solutions the president will offer.

Violent Media

The lesser emphasized of the usual suspects, violent media often enters the post-shooting discussion to help understand how individuals could commit such horrific acts of violence (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014b). Many in the wake of Columbine,

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including President Clinton, speculated that the amount of violence consumed by the shooters desensitized them to the effects of their actions, thereby enabling them to carry out their plan with little remorse. Despite that research has provided mixed support for the violent media-school shootings link (see, for example, e.g., Ferguson, 2008, 2014; Ferguson & Olson, 2014; Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Markey, Markey, & French, 2014), President Clinton still offered a two-prong approach in his remarks after Columbine:

We first have to try to get parents more control over the exposure of their children to the culture of violence. The second thing we have to do is to challenge the entertainment industry to minimize the use of gratuitous violence and not present it in a way that will desensitize people to the pain, the agony, and ultimately, the finality of violence.

In response to the perceived effects of media violence and their culpability, several potential solutions were offered throughout the presidential comments. The first was the V-chip, introduced in 1999 and required on all televisions 13 inches or larger as of 2000, and allows parents to restrict programming for their children through an age-based ratings guide (Federal Communications Commission, 2016). The second attempt to regulate violence came in the form of preventing the sale or transfer (purchasing the item on another's behalf) of violent video games to minors. Several states, including California, Illinois, and Michigan, all passed such laws (Affholter, 2006; Buerger, 2006), only to have them struck down later as unconstitutional (Barrett, 2008). Through a series of challenges, California's attempt to regulate violent video games made it all the way up to the United States Supreme Court, where the law was ruled unconstitutional for a final time (*Brown vs. Entertainment Merchants Association*, 2011). Collectively, the legal challenges faced by such regulatory attempts may explain, at least in part, why President Bush failed to discuss any similar actions at all and President Obama kept his remarks about the potential causal link between mass shootings and violent media to a bare minimum – just three total references.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to understand the way in which the Commander-in-Chief speaks about mass shooting events in their aftermath. Such an examination is particularly warranted given the public reactions these events elicit (see, generally, Burns & Crawford, 1999; Elsass, Schildkraut, & Stafford, 2014; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Stafford, 2015; Springhall, 1999). In turn, these reactions have the ability to shape

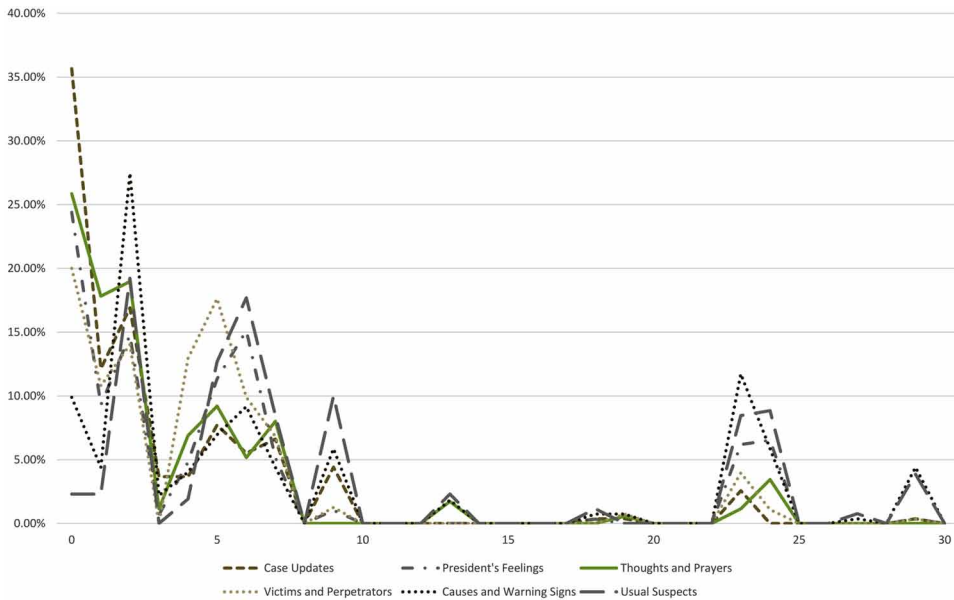
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policy and prevention strategies offered in the aftermath, which simultaneously are promoted by claims makers, including the president and the media. Consequently, the manner in which the presidents choose to comment on these events has the ability to define these events as social problems and influence how they are responded to (see also Best, 1987, 2006; Zarefsky, 2004).

In examining the presidential rhetoric following mass shootings, two important patterns emerge. First, with respect to which presidents are offering such commentary, it was found that the majority of leaders elected not to offer remarks after mass shootings. In fact, with the exception of President Lyndon Johnson's single brief statement after the 1966 shooting at the University of Texas, it was nearly 30 years before another president offered commentary in the wake of an attack. While President Clinton did choose to provide remarks following shootings earlier in his presidency, such as the 1993 attack on the Long Island Railroad, it was not until Columbine in 1999 that the trend of addressing the nation in the wake of such tragedies emerged.

For many, Columbine was considered a watershed event (see, generally, Larkin, 2009; Muschert, 2002). While other shootings had come before, including several more notable attacks in the two years prior, the rampage in Littleton often is considered to be the first of its kind and became a metric to which all other school and mass shootings are compared (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014a). Researchers, for example, have found that no other shooting, including those at Sandy Hook and Virginia Tech that were considerably more lethal, has surpassed Columbine in their respective amounts of media coverage (e.g., Muschert & Carr, 2006; Schildkraut, 2014; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014a). Thus, it is not unexpected that Columbine also represents a shift in how presidents offer rhetoric related to mass shootings in their aftermath.

The second key finding relates to the modeling of the rhetoric itself. Figure 2 shows the distribution of nodes by day. Several notable patterns in the remarks have emerged. First, in the immediate aftermath, the focus of the president is on providing case updates and offering thoughts and prayers to ease an apprehensive nation. To a lesser extent, in the initial hours and days, the presidents also discuss their feelings and offer commentary about those individuals involved in the shooting, with a primary emphasis on the victims, both direct and indirect. As the narrative evolves, the rhetoric shifts first to emphasize potential causes and warning signs, to ultimately focusing in on the usual suspects (guns, mental health, and violent media) that are most heavily related to policy discussions.

Commander- or Comforter-in-Chief?*Figure 2. Distribution of node groups by days after shooting*

The manner in which these comments are framed allows the audience receiving the information to focus on or highlight a particular aspect as most important (Zarefsky, 2004; see also Muschert & Carr, 2006; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014a). Initially, the emphasis on the case updates, presidents' feelings, and individuals involved enables the audience to grieve with the individuals and community at the center of the attack while simultaneously trying to make sense of what has occurred. As time progresses and the demand for answers increases, the rhetoric offered by the presidents also must shift to meet the needs of their audience. This culminates in a demand for action by the audience, which requires an additional shift from comforter to policymaker by the presidents.

At the same time, the patterns in Figure 2 also suggest that the rhetoric offered by the presidents in the aftermath of mass shootings follows a script. Certain patterns emerge and subsequently subside during the ebb and flow of the commentary offered, both by the president and the media. Inevitably, the rhetoric has become somewhat predictable to the audience. This can have broad reaching effects, including a loss

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of support for the president or the perception that no change is occurring aimed at addressing the problem of mass shootings. In respect to the media, the predictable patterns of coverage, through which the presidential rhetoric also is interwoven, may lead to a desensitization of audiences about these events, again furthering the perception that these events are commonplace and a routine part of the American cultural fabric. Thus, the question at the heart of the matter becomes whether the rhetoric from the president in the aftermath of a mass shooting can actually serve to inspire meaningful change or if it is simply a way to pacify an apprehensive nation and the accompanying media machine.

In order to make such a determination, researchers must continue not only to examine the rhetoric and claims making conducted by presidents in the aftermath of mass shootings, but also how the public receives and makes sense of such commentary. Neither the presidential rhetoric nor the audience perceptions of it exist exclusively nor in a vacuum, so the literature must consider potential reciprocal effects between the two. Doing so will allow for a more robust comprehension of these events and may provide greater insight into the support necessary to make meaningful progress in the wake of such tragedies.

The present study provides an important first step to this examination by reviewing how presidents have discussed school and mass shootings. This review, however, is not without its limitations. It is important to recognize that just like studies of media coverage of mass shootings (e.g., Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2017), the comments offered by the presidents were analyzed *prima facie*. As a result, any decision-making process that went into the creation of such rhetoric is not accounted for. Accordingly, it is impossible to say why the presidents chose to comment on some events rather than others and why they chose to prioritize certain people or issues over others. Still, as this study has illustrated, the role of Comforter-in-Chief is vital to understanding and responding to mass shootings in the United States.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ President Bush refers to President George W. Bush. His father and earlier president, George H. W. Bush, did not make any remarks in the aftermath of any mass shootings occurring during his administration, and therefore is excluded from the analysis.
- ² As noted, President Johnson did not make any reference to direct victims in his one short comment on the UT shooting.