

The University of Texas Commencement Speech with Admiral McRaven (Class of 2014) YouTube

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Introduction

In history, there are very few instances when a speech resonated deeply with millions of people, filling them with a sense of drive, enthusiasm, empowerment, inspiration, and courage to make decisions. In the new millennium, people are usually inspired by words that talk about changing the world as making the world a better place to live in is something that everyone should be made to believe they are capable of doing. One such rare instance when words touched the hearts of millions is when [Admiral William H. McRaven](#), former US Navy SEAL Commander, addressed a commencement to the University of Texas graduates in 2014. This paper analyses a well-known retired Navy SEAL Commander's commencement speech to the University of Texas students from a rhetorical and theoretical lens, building on the Pentadic Criticism method. The paper also discusses the limitations of the research and its future implications to shed light on how the present research can be further used to research the same artefact.

Thesis of the Research

In his commencement oration, Admiral William H. McRaven skillfully uses his experience breaking through his awards and success to inspire University of Texas graduates by emphasising the transformative power of small actions, leadership and resilience. Through the strategic use of rhetorical elements and his vivid storytelling technique, the former Navy SEAL constructs a compelling narrative that resonates with the audience, urging them to embrace responsibility, courage, and a purpose in their lives as they are all set to embark on their post-graduation journey.

The Objective of the Research

This research aims to theoretically and rhetorically analyse the commencement speech of former Navy SEAL, Admiral McRaven, to examine the symbolic motives and actions present in McRaven's impactful piece of oratory in order to understand the rhetorical significance of his speech and how this symbolism contributes to the overall message conveyed by Admiral McRaven.

Outline of the Paper

This paper is divided into three parts. The first section will analyse the actual speech transcript of Admiral William H. McRaven that he delivered during his commencement address and its important message, as well as a little background on who exactly Admiral William H. McRaven is and what he is popular for. The section theoretically analyses the commenced speech from the lens of the Pentadic Criticism method. The second part of the paper rhetorically analyses the particular lessons outlined by Navy SEAL McRaven and how each lesson connects with the students present during the speech, as well as the audience across the country, that won't soon be forgotten. The third section of the paper concludes the thesis argument of the research, limitations of the research, and future implications.

Theoretical Analysis of McRaven's Commencement Oration

McRaven's commencement speech in 2014 at the "University of Texas" at Austin transcends the typical platitudes that are often associated with graduation speeches in order to resonate with millions around the world. This speech offers valuable insights, life lessons, and rhetorical strategies which can be further dissected through Kenneth Burke's lens of Pentadic Criticism to support the claim that McRaven delivered his commencement speech to motivate Texas graduates toward impactful action. Employing Burke's Pentadic criticism, McRaven's strategic use of his motives, values, and implications in the speech makes it stand out for its authenticity, simplicity, and universal appeal, which constructs a call to action that resonates beyond the university walls. Through the exploration of five key elements under Pentadic Criticism, including "Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose", the Admiral's speech can be uncovered to shape a compelling narrative. This narrative can be uncovered through his diction, which Burke defines as the "neurological aspect of the human being" as the "ability of an organism to acquire language or a symbol system" (Foss, 2017) in order to empower Texas graduates to effect positive change in their own lives and the world around them.

Deveraux reflects that McRaven opens the speech with a vivid account of Navy SEAL training, which he states was a gruelling deal with the combination of challenges, teamwork, determination, and resilience (Deveraux, n.d.). Through the choice of this "act", McRaven frames life as the set for the overarching themes to compel graduates to understand that life is full of adverse challenges and how success hinges on the way human beings respond to a certain situation, to emphasise the fact that graduates should take responsibility for their actions. Pelepeichenko (2022) argues that McRaven's choice of the University of Texas as the setting for the speech as he remained an important part of the US Navy SEALs, serves as an important "scene" for the message that the Admiral politically wanted to convey as he draws upon the shared experiences, like the camaraderie of fellow officials in order to create a sense of unity among the audience. This serves as an important backdrop to reinforce the idea he wanted to convey that graduates are part of something larger than themselves (Pelepeichenko, 2022). Moreover, the Admiral's embodiment as the speaker lends credibility to his

words because of his former status as Navy SEAL commander. Through mentioning his status, he positions himself as an “agent” of change while sharing his personal anecdotes to invite graduates to follow his lead in order to humanise the life lesson (Layne, 2018).

Baum argues that McRaven’s mentioning of small and mundane tasks of daily life, such as “making the bed”, seemingly emphasises the idea that small acts symbolise consistency and discipline (Baum, 2024). As McRaven focuses on the micro-level of daily life choices, his speech encourages graduates to recognise the “agency” that lies in the cumulative impact of these mundane tasks and acts in order to shape their own lives and the lives of people around them. Fishman & Johnson (2019) state that while McRaven challenges graduates to be “agents” of positive change in society, his ultimate purpose in sharing his personal anecdotes and delivering his speech to Texas students is to change the world (Fishman & Johnson, 2019). McRaven’s valuable life lessons, including embracing failure, measuring people’s actions by their hearts, and lifting up other people, emerged as the revelation of a broader purpose beyond personal success. Through these lessons, he delivers that even the smallest actions can ripple outward if people become agents of positive change (Molinaro, 2021).

Rhetorical Analysis of Admiral McRaven’s Commencement Speech

The former US Navy SEAL utilises different rhetorical strategies in his address to achieve his aim of conveying “essential” life lessons to the future of the United States, as the “majority” of the audience at the commencement ceremony is the young generation of America. He uses vivid storytelling techniques, rhetorical elements, and informal language to make his speech inspirational for the present audience and millions of people around the world, especially to deliver his message and lesson to a generation that is entirely unique from his generation. Admiral’s acknowledgement of ups and downs in life and how one generation can make the best use of a particular situation is reflected in his words as he says, “Know that life is not fair and that you will fail often. But if you take some risks, then the next generation and the generations that follow will live in a world far better than the one we have today” (McRaven, 2014) acknowledging the opposing position through the preemptive approach. He also shows the reason preceding the word “but” to counter-argue and to counterbalance the sentence in order to communicate why the particular situation in life requires an alternative approach.

McRaven uses “framing” as the rhetoric technique to present examples from his own experience in order to “draw upon” the reasoning power to inspire and teach learners some valuable life lessons. The technique of “framing”, as Swafford puts forward that the Admiral uses many semantic expressions like “most importantly” and “the fact that” to persuade the students, the audience, at the ceremony by asserting facts in his address to show the authenticity of his arguments “”, framing” the audience to appeal to their emotions in an essential way (Swafford, n.d.). Moreover, Admiral uses many semantic categories of words while telling stories about his personal life and experience in the

speech to redefine semantical words to suit his purposes. Admiral uses words like “serious girlfriend” and “young army officer”, in which words “serious” and “young” are semantically redefined to suit his purpose of identifying himself with the values that he reiterated in his story. The word “serious” he uses in speech often reflects that he was in a serious relationship with his girlfriend, and he wanted to marry her desperately when he was graduating from college. Similarly, the word “young” Admiral uses in his speech is the semantic expression of respect and honour for not just a young person by age here, but for the vigour, determination, and enthusiasm of the officer who was killed in Iraq.

In the commencement speech, renowned for its motivational and powerful rhetoric, Admiral utilises the rhetorical strategies of ethos, pathos, and logos to impart wisdom and connect with the audience. Using the strategy of ethos, the Admiral establishes his credibility with his background as a former commander of the US Special Operations Command and Navy SEAL to share his personal anecdotes in order to showcase his expertise and authority (Baker, 2018). Utilising the strategy of pathos, the Admiral discusses the triumphs and challenges of SEAL training to appeal to the emotions of graduates so that they can learn the importance of perseverance while resonating with the Admiral’s broader struggles in life (Epstein, 2021). Moreover, Baum (2021) argues that Admiral McRaven, while using the strategy of logos in his rhetoric, structures a logical argument around simple life, such as making your bed every morning to start a day with a completed task. Such simple life lessons he derived from his Navy SEAL training symbolise his attention to minute details and the importance of discipline (Baum, 2021). Garrison believes that the commencement address of McRaven is structured rhetorically to build momentum using a progressive series of valuable life lessons derived from the life of an orator as well as repetition of words to culminate in an inspiring call to action for the University of Texas graduates to change the world after their post-graduate endeavours (Garrison, n.d.).

Conclusion

The commencement speech that Admiral H. William delivered transcends the ordinary as he uncovered the life choices he made throughout his life as an important official in the Navy to inspire Texas graduates. Building on Burke’s Pentadic Criticism, the deliberate choices McRaven mentions in his speech are further uncovered, gaining insight into how his words resonate far beyond that sunny day at the University of Texas, Austin. By dissecting the rhetorical elements in the speech through the theoretical framework of Pentadic Criticism, Admiral’s call to action is reflected in empathy, discipline, and his purpose, continuing to urge people to make their bed and complete their mundane tasks to gradually change the world, for good. As an audience, we can all relate to his takeaway, visualising the notoriously difficult training that he went through to become a Navy SEAL Admiral, that no matter how difficult and challenging the situation is, the key is to keep getting back to put your inspiration into action.

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