General Douglas MacArthur’s Farewell Address to Congress

After 52 years of service to the United States, General Douglas MacArthur was dismissed from his position of Commander of the United Nations in April 1951 by President Truman. Although MacArthur had been let go on charges of insubordination during the Korean War, he remained one of the most celebrated commanders in U.S. military history and his removal from office did not prevent Congress from extending an invitation to him to speak before both houses. Such an invitation to a dismissed general was unheard of at the time, proving the respect MacArthur had generated during his more than half a century of service. While MacArthur’s farewell address to Congress was ceremonial in nature, acknowledging the end of a remarkable career, elements of political and forensic rhetoric are very evident in the speech. Approaching the speech raises the question of how a ceremonial speech can incorporate political and forensic rhetoric into the speech’s body.

For Aristotle, the divisions of rhetoric that a speech could fall under were political, forensic and ceremonial (Aristotle 1358b). But in the 2,500 years since Aristotle designated his divisions of rhetoric, the lines have blurred and speeches rarely conform perfectly to one of Aristotle’s divisions. The Farewell Address to Congress shows ceremonial elements as MacArthur reflects on his achievements in a long career, political elements when MacArthur describes the situation in China and how the U.S. should approach the situation, and finally demonstrates forensic elements as MacArthur explains the situation in China that lead to his dismissal by President Truman.

To identify the concepts in the artifact, I slowly read through MacArthur’s speech, marking places that I felt conformed to Aristotle’s specific definitions of the divisions of
rhetoric. Because the divisions of rhetoric are jumbled together in the Farewell Address, identifying the concepts in the speech was a matter of deciding if a section of the speech matched certain matters, questions or characteristics of Aristotle’s divisions. Throughout the artifact I found examples of each of Aristotle’s divisions of rhetoric. While the speech begins and ends with elements that match Aristotle’s definition of ceremonial rhetoric, the majority of the speech fits in political rhetoric, with a small section of the speech being best characterized as forensic. After determining which general division of rhetoric of Aristotle best fit a section of the speech, I then had to look closely at each division of rhetoric to figure out which characteristics of ceremonial, political or forensic rhetoric were evident in the particular section.

Aristotle defines ceremonial speech as “a display that either praises or censures somebody” (1358b). He goes on to say that a ceremonial speech can be broken into either characteristics of virtue and vice or noble and base, which he considers the “objects of praise and blame” (1366a). MacArthur’s speech begins and ends with ceremonial elements and these sections best conform to Aristotle’s definitions of noble and base. According to Aristotle, a ceremonial speech is noble when the speech discusses actions that are praiseworthy, done for the sake of others and that will be remembered after the person who is being praised has died (1366a). Base, on the other hand, is when a speech acknowledges “the onlookers for whom such a speech is put together are treated as the judges of it” (1391b).

MacArthur begins his speech with the speech the base remark of “Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, and Distinguished Members of the Congress,” which is MacArthur’s way of acknowledging his audience and inviting them to judge the speech he is about to present (MacArthur 1 para. 1). In the entire speech, MacArthur’s only other base remark, “good bye,” is given at the very end of the speech (9). The majority of ceremonial rhetoric in the speech then is
noble in definition. In the opening of the speech, MacArthur states “I stand on this rostrum with a sense of deep humility and great pride – humility in the weight of those great American architects of our history who have stood here before me. . . .” (1 para. 2) This line is noble in nature because it links MacArthur with past Americans who have been praiseworthy. After the opening two paragraphs, MacArthur employs noble ceremonial rhetoric only twice more in the entire speech. At one point, midway through the speech, he praises his decisions in Asia by saying “this is a military estimate as to which I have yet to find a military leader who will take exception” (3 para. 4). The speech ends on a ceremonial and noble note with MacArthur reflecting on his years of service and assuring his audience that, in a praiseworthy manner, he has left the troops in Korea “splendid in every way” (9 para. 1).

Although it would be easy to consider MacArthur’s Farewell Address to Congress ceremonial in nature, more than half of the speech is best defined as political under Aristotle’s definitions of rhetoric. Aristotle explained that political speech “is about things to be done here after that [the orator] advises, for or against” (1358b). Throughout the speech MacArthur strives to explain the situation in Asia so that his audience can make an educated decision about how to handle the situation. While Aristotle lists five matters of political speech, MacArthur’s speech conforms mostly to two: peace and war, where the orator discusses “the military strength of his country, both actual and potential strength; and further, what wars his country has waged, and how it was waged” (1359b) and national defense, where the orator knows “all about the methods of defense in actual use, such as the strength and character of the defensive force and the positions of the forts” (1360a).

MacArthur’s speech strives to explain the peace and war component of political rhetoric as he explains the background information about China, the Philippines and Forsoma, therefore
exhibiting his knowledge of the environment in which the current war is being fought. He also speaks of the lowly living conditions the Chinese and how, in 50 years, the Chinese military has evolved into a formidable force, spelling out his knowledge of the conditions leading to the war. The speech delves into issues of national defense when MacArthur specifically lays out how the United States needs to approach the situation in Asia. “Any predatory attack from Asia must be an amphibious effort,” MacArthur says, adding the practical application element of Aristotle’s national defense matter of political rhetoric (3 para. 2). Throughout the speech, MacArthur further explains the politics of his actions by saying how involvement in the Pacific is to the United States’ strategic advantage. He also plays up the national defense aspect by stating that any attack from mainland Asia would be a major failure (3 para. 2). All these examples speak to how the U.S. should or shouldn’t do something, making these sections of the speech political rhetoric.

Finally, MacArthur turns to forensic rhetoric toward the end of his address. Because MacArthur is addressing the Congress after being released from service by President Truman on charges of insubordination for leading troops to the border of China without Truman’s permission, MacArthur feels he must also use the speech to defend his past actions. As Aristotle defines rhetoric dealing with “‘wrong-doing’ as injury voluntarily inflicted contrary to law” as forensic, this portion of MacArthur’s speech is most definitely forensic (1368b). Aristotle said that there are three questions forensic rhetoric answers, “first, the nature and number of the incentives to wrong-doing; second, the state of mind of wrongdoers; third the kind of persons who are wronged, and their condition” (1368b).

To answer the first question of nature of the wrongdoing, MacArthur states that in his eyes “[the] decision from military standpoint, proved a sound one” (6 para. 1) and that his
decision “created a new war and an entirely new situation” (6 para. 2). In defense of his state of mind when leading troops so close to China, MacArthur says “apart from the military need, as I saw it, to neutralize the sanctuary protection given the enemy north of the Yalu, I felt that military necessity in the conduct of war made necessary” (6 para. 4). In answer to the final question of forensic rhetoric, that of the condition of those wronged, MacArthur speaks in his defense by saying “We could hold in Korea by constant maneuver and in an approximate area where our supply line disadvantages of the enemy, but we could hope at best for only an indecisive campaign with its terrible and constant attrition upon our forces if the enemy utilized its full military potential” (7 para. 2). Throughout the speech MacArthur defends himself by saying that his actions will eventually have benefits for both the U.S. and Asia.

So how do elements of political and forensic rhetoric play into a ceremonial speech? Although MacArthur’s speech is delivered at a very unique occasion, it does offer some insight into this question. The Farewell Address to Congress shows how the elements of each division of rhetoric can be blended into one distinctive speech. While the speech answers questions of MacArthur’s wrongdoing, thus fitting into the forensic category, the speech also provides political insight into the war in Asia. In addition, the speech also reflects elements of the noble and base, making it eligible for classification in ceremonial rhetoric. That is the final speech of MacArthur and his last chance to change his rendering in history may explain why MacArthur utilizes all three of Aristotle’s divisions of rhetoric. Or perhaps it is a testament to changing times since those of Aristotle, implying that modern speeches no longer conform to just one division of rhetoric. MacArthur’s speech proves that a speech can be comprehensive and persuasive while still switching on and off between Aristotle’s three divisions of rhetoric.

MacArthur, Douglas. “Farewell Address to Congress.”
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/douglasmacarthurfarewelladdress.htm>