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FROM #STOPTHESTEAL TO AN INSURRECTION: A FANTASY THEME
ANALYSIS OF THE DISCOURSE SURROUNDING THE 2020 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION

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A Thesis presented to the faculty of Arkansas State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Guy Riggins

FROM #STOPTHESTEAL TO AN INSURRECTION: A FANTASY THEME ANALYSIS OF THE DISCOURSE SURROUNDING THE 2020 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The focus of this thesis is to understand the ways in which Donald Trump perpetuated widespread claims of election fraud throughout the 2020 election. I use Fantasy Theme Analysis to examine connections between the rhetorical strategies of #StopTheSteal and the speech Trump gave on January 6, 2021. I argue that Trump facilitated the development and evolution of a shared rhetorical vision of a democracy under attack by perpetuating the fantasy themes of a biased media and an imminent unlawful transfer of power. I argue that the rhetorical strategies developed by #StopTheSteal were evoked during Trump's speech at The Ellipse, which may have contributed to the insurrection. Political leaders have the responsibility to influence how things are remembered in American history. The fantasy themes perpetuated by Trump established a tone of action, which may have constructed a foundation for violence to occur.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

On January 6, 2021, thousands of Donald Trump supporters gathered at The Ellipse, a large park adjacent to the White House, in hopes of overturning Trump's defeat in the 2020 presidential election (Lucas, 2022). Trump led his supporters to believe that his victory could be secured if they were able to disrupt the joint session of Congress which had assembled to count electoral votes, formalizing President-elect Joe Biden's victory (e.g., Mascaro, Jalonik, Clare, & Andrew, 2021; Reeves, Mascaro, & Woodward, 2021).

The Trump-supporting demonstrations had been going on in Washington D.C. for days prior (Carless, 2021), and the planning for the January 6th rally started as far back as December 18, when Trump tweeted the following message on social media: "Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!" Also in December, Trump met with members of the House of Representatives to discuss strategies for Congress overturning the election results on January 6 (Zanona, 2021). These overt strategies prompted journalists and election officials to warn the American people that armed militias would almost certainly be provoking violence at the nation's Capitol Building on January 6 if Trump continued to perpetuate the narrative of a stolen election (Blake, 2021).

Noteworthy political figures offered remarks before Trump at the "Save America" rally and made specific allegations of election fraud. Rudolph Giuliani, during his speech, went so far as to suggest the following: "Let's have a trial by combat." Trump was the

last speaker at the rally, eventually calling on his supporters to march toward the Capitol building in order to secure his victory.

The riot was one of the most injurious days for law enforcement since September 11, 2001 as over 140 Capitol Police officers were injured. Controversy continues regarding the death count of January 6. Some argue that deaths caused by medical emergencies suffered at the time should not be attributed to the riot itself, while others argue that such deaths should be counted since the riot acted as an instigating factor and inhibited individuals from seeking immediate medical attention during their medical emergencies (Schmidt & Roadwater, 2021). Take, for example, the contention surrounding the death of Capitol Policeman Brian Sickman, who experienced two strokes during the insurrection but died of “natural causes” the following day (Isenberg, 2021). Over the course of the afternoon the building was cleared. At 7:15 p.m., leaders of Congress were told that the building had been secured and was ready for reentry (Leonnig & Rucker, 2021). Congress reconvened, and at 3:24 a.m. January 7, Joe Biden’s electoral college win was confirmed by Congress (Leonnig & Rucker, 2021).

The people that attacked the Capitol Building were long-time supporters of Trump, evangelical Christians, far-right militants, and white supremacists. Many of these individuals came to the “Save America” rally while representing specific fringe movements, including the Boogaloo movement, Three Percenters, America First Movement, Stop The Steal Movement, Blue Lives Matter, Proud Boys, QAnon followers, and other far-right organizations (Hesson, Parker, Harte, 2021). Despite the outcome of January 6, the majority of Trump’s supporters continued to believe that he won the election (Grofman, 2022).

Justification of the Study

The far-reaching appeal of Trump’s rhetoric regarding alleged election fraud is evidenced in the sheer volume of supporters that turned out on January 6, 2021. This study seeks to explore the rhetorical mechanisms by which Trump was able to persuade his supporters into believing the election was stolen from him by the President-elect Biden. Considering the unique historical conflict surrounding the Twelfth Amendment, this study seeks to contextualize Trump’s misinformation campaign as a means to exploit the ambiguity of the Twelfth Amendment by empowering Vice President Trump to exercise “unilateral authority” over the proceedings and securing the presidency for Trump. (Trump, 2021).

Before January 6, 2021, our nation’s Capital Building had never been seized in a violent revolt. Since this movement was composed of strategic misinformation campaigns across various like-minded alt-right conspiracy groups (e.g., Frenkel, 2021; Hesson, Parker, & Harte, 2021; Blake, 2021), it is important to unpack the broader worldview of these individuals in order to understand what connects these scattered campaigns so effectively. As such, scholars should begin to explore the persuasive methods used in these communities so that we can better understand the value systems that allow such narratives to take root and flourish. Furthermore, it is important to consider the possibility that many Americans continue to believe that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from Trump, and such beliefs could lead to an event like the insurrection on January 6, 2021. While Trump’s rhetorical strategies have attracted significant scholarly attention (e.g., Jameison & Taussig, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Terrill, 2017; Ott & Dickinson, 2020; Nasco, Shapiro, & Block-Elkon; 2020; Hariman, 2021;

Hayes, 2021), the scholarly community has yet to systematically explore and unpack the connections between Trump's subtle calls for revolution and the violence that occurred on Capitol Hill that day. This study aims to tend to that gap in the literature by rhetorically analyzing Trump's discourse through a Fantasy Theme methodology.

The Fantasy Theme methodology derives its critical orientation from Ernest Bormann's (1985) Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT), which operates under the fundamental assumptions of attribution theory, because it concerns the attribution of meaning to symbols in order to make sense out of them. SCT helps explain the recurring forms of communication within a shared group, illustrates why group consciousness develops and is maintained, and explains the processes of how individuals share these common symbolic realities (Bormann, 1985).

Fantasy-Theme Analysis is operationalized by SCT. Bormann uses the word fantasy to describe "the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need" (Bormann, 2001 p. 5). Words, phrases, or statements, Bormann (2001) explains, are all linguistic and rhetorical elements that can compose a Fantasy theme. Fantasy themes endeavor to define past events, predict future occurrences, or to interpret present events that are significantly removed from the actual activity of the group (Bormann, 2001). What Bormann refers to as a Fantasy "chain" describes the snowball effect in which a fantasy triggers a chain reaction among a group, which creates the potential to result in more and more members of the group contributing to the creative interpretation of events that are socially organized in a way that makes the most sense to the group (Bormann, 2001).

This study argues that the insurrection of January 6, 2021, was a predictable consequence of the fantasies that were perpetuated by former President Trump during his time on the campaign trail and in office. From the Republican primaries in 2016 to Trump's loss in 2020, Trump relentlessly offered his supporters creative interpretations of election-related events that perpetuated conspiratorial narratives of election rigging and voter fraud (Zanona, 2021).

While other scholars have exposed the violent consequences of Trump's unique rhetorical style (e.g., Jameison & Taussig, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Terrill, 2017; Ott & Dickinson, 2020; Nasco, Shapiro, & Block-Elkon; 2020; Hariman, 2021; Hayes, 2021), this study aims to contextualize the insurrection of January 6, consequently to Trump's broader rhetorical vision. Trump systematically developed a group identity among his supporters and exploited their collective understanding of events by catering misinformation to fit into the false narratives perpetuated within the group. Despite being founded on falsehoods, the fantasies shared by Trump's supporters are uniquely difficult to disprove for those who continue to be influenced by such misinformation.

Introduction of Artifacts

This study applies Bormann's (1980) Symbolic Convergence Theory to two artifacts using a Fantasy-Theme Analysis methodology. These artifacts include the discourse surrounding #StopTheSteal from Twitter and other social media platforms as well as Trump's speech on January 6, 2021. In analyzing the discourse surrounding #StopTheSteal, it is my goal to look at various types of social media to trace the complete trajectory of the evolution and development of this phenomenon, rather than looking at one social media platform in isolation. Additionally, statements are gathered through an

exploration of the lawsuits filed against the insurrectionists, which also gives meaningful insight into the persuasive mechanisms of the common fantasies shared among Trump-supporting alt-right groups.

The inclusion of the pleas in the conclusion serves dual purposes: in the case of individuals who continue to adhere to Trump's fantasies, the aim is to illustrate the existence of a sophisticated and shared interpretation of events that support Trump's win of the 2020 election. For the rioters that have renounced their belief in the insurrection's validity, the purpose of examining their statements is to seek to understand the process that led the individual to realize that Trump's reality is based on falsehoods.

In exploring these claims, this thesis unfolds in four broad movements. First, the thesis begins with a discussion of the historical context surrounding election disputes of the American presidency, highlighting the U.S. Presidential election of 1800 between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams and the U.S. Presidential election of 2000 between Al Gore and George W. Bush. Examining the broader and historical context will help in providing insight into Trump's interpretation of Pence's role during the certification process of the 2020 election. This context helps to explain Trump's advocacy regarding Pence's actions on January 6, 2021 and the constitutional reasoning on which Trump's calls for action were based. After establishing a context for disputed presidential elections, the thesis examines the rhetorical scholarship on Trump. Although many scholars are concerned with the violent consequences of Trump's rhetoric (e.g., Jameison & Taussig, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Terrill, 2017; Ott & Dickinson, 2020; Nasco, Shapiro, & Block-Elkon; 2020; Hariman, 2021; Hayes, 2021), the scholarly community has yet to explore the real-world perspectives of individuals that continue to adhere to his

conspiratorial narratives. Moreover, scholars have yet to examine Trump's discourse from the theoretical perspective of Fantasy Theme Analysis in an attempt to understand the attitudes and worldviews of his base.

Following an examination of the literature on Trump, the next section of the thesis discusses the unique applicability of Fantasy Theme Analysis (FTA) to this particular study. In addition to describing the methodology's theoretical framework and procedure, I provide examples of how scholars have employed this theoretical approach. FTA is contextualized as a method of rhetorical analysis and is shown to be a valid and reliable way of conducting rhetorical analysis (Foss, 2009).

While FTA has been described as a potential means by which scattered phenomenon can be connected without the use of participant methodologies (Foss, 2009), rhetorical scholars have left this quality untested – possibly because there has yet to be a widespread campaign or protest movement based on falsehoods that resulted in a violent gathering of multiple subgroups of people. The development of such a gathering warrants investigation into the shared goals of the individual participants. A significant limitation to a rhetorical inquiry into this event is the abundance of identifiable rhetorical movements at the insurrection. This issue presents the rhetorical scholar with the daunting task of reconstructing each movement's narrative in order to understand their motivations – FTA allows the collective, not individual, motivations to be uncovered by examining the connections between symbolic cues.

This thesis demonstrates the utility of an FTA approach in scattered, yet highly coordinated rhetorical situations. I show that an FTA approach is uniquely applicable to rhetorical situations in the presence of incontrovertible evidence of a shared goal among a

scattered group of people. Since the insurrection was composed of groups with differing perspectives, is important to understand what overarching persuasive mechanisms empowered separate group to take a collective action together.

I use FTA to argue that Trump’s rhetorical vision systemically empowered the scattered development of a movement to undemocratically remove our government from power. While such efforts were not successful, they caused irreparable harm to the integrity of our democracy. I hope to contribute to the field by validating FTA as a way for rhetorical scholars to reconstruct the shared goals of emergent violent groups in order to identify the catalyst of their collective action. I hope that an earlier identification of scattered groups that share common goals may facilitate the emergence of organic countermovements that prevent the emergence of a violent overthrow of our democracy.

An FTA approach, in the presence of overwhelming evidence of a shared goal, allows the researcher to subvert the reconstruction of the individual movement. I therefore justify the need to make connections between the shared goals of these movements based on the observable consequences of the collective action taken by thousands of people on January 6, 2021.

The analysis unfolds in two chapters, starting with an examination of the rhetorical strategies that galvanized the “Stop The Steal” movement to describe its development into what Bormann might call a “rhetorical vision.” In the first analytical chapter, the #StopTheSteal movement is contextualized as a go-to rhetorical strategy for Trump during election cycles. #StopTheSteal is contextualized as an emergent and scattered political movement and discussed in terms of its contribution to the development of a shared symbolic reality among various groups. Fantasy themes are

gathered from the #StopTheSteal movement by examining recurring dramatized symbols. The violent characteristics of the movement, something that evolved throughout multiple elections, makes it a good example of a rhetorical phenomenon that is scattered, yet meaningful and substantial. The chapter historically contextualizes the movement and describes its development into a fantasy theme shared and perpetuated by multiple groups of people, eventually leading to Trump's remarks on January 6, 2021. Trump's tweets, the description of the #StopTheSteal Facebook group, and statements made by politicians to the press serve as artifacts for analysis. While these artifacts are scattered, linking them together using common themes helps us reconstruct the rhetorical vision that they share.

The second analysis chapter applies the themes gathered from the first chapter of analysis to Trump's remarks on January 6, 2021, in order to illustrate the recurring symbols that Trump used to incite his followers into a dramatized state of chaos. This examination of Trump's speech from January 6 makes connections between #StopTheSteal and the various participating groups of the insurrection using the symbolic cues found in both Trump's remarks on January 6 and the #StopTheSteal campaign. The investigation of this artifact strengthens the applicability of FTA by identifying Trump's use of cryptic language and symbolic cues from the #StopTheSteal movement, which he capitalizes on and exploits throughout his speech. This chapter ultimately demonstrates the presence of a shared group fantasy on January 6 and shows that Trump used vague symbols from the #StopTheSteal movement to promote the evolution of the gathered groups into a collective violent insurrection without issuing explicit directions.

The conclusion chapter contains brief analysis that contributes to FTA by describing the everyday perspectives of individuals who have renounced their beliefs in

Trump's falsehoods yet participated in the insurrection. This includes statements made by participants of the insurrection to serve as examples of the decay of this shared symbolic reality. This strengthens the theory by drawing parallels between the feelings described by Bormann among group-shared fantasies and the feelings described by those who participated in the insurrection, but eventually renounced such beliefs. As participants describe the decay of the drama which preoccupied them to the point of violence, they evidence the presence of a powerful persuasive force in the form of a shared rhetorical fantasy. This final chapter concludes this thesis by reconstructing the broader fantasies shared by this group of people. In doing so, it examines a broader rhetorical vision from three perspectives: a years-long public relations campaign "Stop the Steal", a pivotal speech on January 6, and the pleas made by those who were arrested during the riot. Ultimately, it will provide insight into Trump's long-term playbook, Trump's tendency to incite violence while speaking, and some real-world perspectives of individuals that participated in the insurrection.

This chapter has provided a roadmap for the organization of this thesis. The following chapter will provide some important historical background information that is necessary to understand the rhetorical vision that Trump perpetuated. Special attention is paid to federal election disputes to facilitate a better understanding of the unique historical context surrounding the Twelfth Amendment. A literature review follows to explore the recent studies of Trump's rhetorical strategies.

Historical Context of Disputed Elections

Twelfth Amendment

The independent nature of the office of President is one of the most important characteristics of a democracy. However, hundreds of years of partisan influence has allowed the Twelfth Amendment to act as a vehicle for our democracy to become a unique parliamentary system operating under the guise of a democracy with fair elections (Appleby, 2011). As the amendment was intended to pacify grievances from both parties regarding the outcome of the election of 1800, it is suggested that the partisan conflicts surrounding the development of the amendment contributed to its limitations (Colvin & Foley, 2009). In other words, while it was intended to enhance the Constitution, the amendment's ambiguous nature has allowed it to be manipulated. This section begins with a brief overview of the Twelfth Amendment and then moves into a historical discussion of the amendment's development after the election of 1800 and its function during the disputed presidential election of 2000.

The Twelfth Amendment tends to shortcomings with the original Constitution. The first measure requires members of the electoral college, or electors, to distinguish between votes for President and Vice-President when casting their votes. The amendment also briefly describes the role of the President of the Senate. This role is vaguely described, as the amendment states that the votes are transmitted from the electors to the President of the Senate. While the amendment specifies that this process takes place in the presence of the House of Representatives, it only specifies that the president of the Senate open all certificates. It does not specify who counts them or how they are counted but merely states that "the votes shall then be counted" (U.S. Const. art. XII). The

amendment also outlines the procedure for choosing the president in the case of a tie in the electoral college. If no person reaches a majority in the electoral college, the three candidates with the most votes are put on a ballot for the House of Representatives to choose from. If the House of Representatives is unable to choose, the incumbent vice president becomes the president, and the Senate chooses the vice-president.

Since the Twelfth Amendment was only debated in the wake of specific circumstances, the interpretation of these guidelines became increasingly biased throughout history by the competing interests of the two major political parties (Appleby, 2001). Although discussions regarding the resolutions to election disputes should prioritize the independence of the office of president, partisan state-chosen electors have become increasingly concerned with benefitting politically from these situations, demonstrating a troubling partisan influence on the office of President (Appleby, 2001).

The Twelfth Amendment has been subject to debate multiple times throughout our nation's history (e.g., Colvin & Foley, 2009; Foley, 2016; Wright, 2017). Colvin and Foley (2010) identify the Twelfth Amendment as a "ticking time bomb" and discuss the specific historical development of the legislation (Colvin & Foley, 2009). Colvin and Foley (2009) ask the important question regarding the Twelfth Amendment:

"If there was some sort of controversy in electoral votes (whether an elector has a defect or whether there are competing electors), could the Vice President or Congress –whichever is the final federal counting authority under the Constitution – go behind the certificate submitted by the state?" (Colvin & Foley, 2009 p.482).

Douglas (2013) points out that states are responsible for determining the validity of their electoral votes as well as settling disputed election contests. In a case-study review of contested state elections, Douglas (2013) takes note of the irony of an electoral system that largely neglects to describe guidelines for post-election disputes over a

federal position (Douglas, 2013). Most states lack a clear protocol to follow in the case of a disputed presidential election (Douglas, 2013). In the absence of federal protocols, states are responsible for qualifying what is acceptable in terms of election guidelines. The absence of federal guidelines necessitates an agreement between the two political parties within the state to settle a disputed national election, but the deadlines outlined in the Constitution do not take the slow negotiations of a two-party system into account. As a result, the Twelfth Amendment may leave insufficient time for states to effectively manage both the development and execution of dispute protocols (Douglas, 2013).

A disputed election is one that is not settled by the end of the election day (Foley, 2016). This should inherently be viewed as problematic, as the purpose of an election is for the people to choose a leader. Not only does a leader need to be chosen, but it is also imperative that the process gives the office legitimacy. The perception of unfairness in elections has historically resulted in consequences like assassinations and protests (Foley, 2016). The precarious issue of disputed elections rests on the two political parties recognizing the other as a legitimate competitor (Foley, 2016). Without a respect for the other party, our system does not outline procedures to follow in the case of both political parties remaining in disagreement over a disputed presidential election (Foley, 2016).

Election of 1800

The election crisis of 1800 is regarded as an early failing of the Constitution and represents one of the fundamental issues with our partisan system of government, because a single representative ultimately decided the outcome of a national election (Appleby, 2001). During the election of 1800, the Democratic-Republican ticket received more electoral votes than the Federalists. The Democratic-Republican electors selected

by the states each cast their electoral votes for Jefferson and his running-mate Burr but failed to specify which individual was to be elected to which position. Prior to the ratification of the Twelfth Amendment, the Constitution empowered the House of Representatives to elect the president in the case of such irregularities.

Instead of voting in congruence with the electors that compose the electoral college, the House of Representatives tied through multiple votes as the Federalists attempted to use this interpretive procedure to procure enough votes to win the election for John Adams. The electoral process was being tested heavily as it failed to establish a clear winner. James Bayard, a Federalist, would end up breaking the deadlock by voting for Jefferson, citing his desire to preserve democracy over continuing the partisan conflict that Bayard viewed as harmful to the integrity of the electoral system (Appleby, 2001).

After the election was settled, the Twelfth Amendment was eventually ratified to remedy the instigating issue by requiring the separation of ballots for the office of president from vice president (Appleby, 2001). This requires electors to create exhaustive lists that account for the votes from their states, including all people voted President, all people voted Vice-President, and the total number of votes for each. The amendment itself was subjected to a long cycle of partisan compromise that left neither side satisfied with the integrity of the electoral system. Unfortunately, the finished product only addressed this specific situation and further interpretation would need to be made to resolve future disputes, such as the disputes of 2000, when George W. Bush (R) ran against Al Gore (D) (Appleby, 2001).

Appleby (2001) draws significant comparisons between the election of 1800 and the election of 2000 to illustrate shortcomings with the constitutional provisions

regarding post-election disputes, including an increasing concern that individual acts of partisanship could have the power to influence the outcome of national elections.

Although a jump from 1800 to 2000 leaves many elections unmentioned, a comparison of the two is warranted because these two elections serve as the only federal examples for major disputed elections. By the time the election of 1800 sparked debate on how the process of disputing electoral votes should be undertaken, the two distinct parties were unable to resolve the interpretive role of the Vice President and Congress decisively (Colvin & Foley, 2009).

Election of 2000

Since post-election disputes in state elections follow the guidelines of the states in which they take place, there were no historical examples to look toward during the election of 2000 (Douglas, 2013). The presidential election of 2000 denigrated the integrity of the Supreme Court and Constitution by highlighting the partisan interpretations made possible by the Twelfth Amendment. Gore's victory over Bush relied on Gore's victory in Florida, and Gore's victory in Florida rested on him winning Broward County.

Many Republicans voiced concerns that the physical nature of the ballots unfairly influenced the count of the vote. The "hanging chad" controversy centered around a form of paper voting in which perforated marks or "chads" are punched with a pencil to vote. The interpretive nature of this argument is exemplified by the varying degrees of hanging chads that were described throughout the dispute. For example, a swinging door chad refers to a chad that has been punched but remains connected by one of its four sides. A tri chad, on the other hand, refers to a chad in which only one corner is completely

perforated. The controversy here centered around which hanging chads represented a valid vote, as Republicans argued that a single indentation, or dimpled chad, indicated a vote. They supported this argument by explaining that many of their elderly constituents were unable to completely punch through the chads, which opened the door for an interpretive discussion regarding each vote's validity.

This controversy prompted a recount of Broward and Palm Beach County. Republican Secretary of State Katherine Harris had constitutional authority to dictate when the state certified the electoral results, which she certified when Bush had the majority. Allowing the recount to continue may have allowed Gore to win, but Harris prevented this possibility by exercising her interpretive power to certify the results at her discretion. Gore immediately filed a suit with the Supreme Court to challenge the certification, but a conservative court ruled that Harris legally exercised her authority to certify the election.

Although the persistence of this amendment's issues was evidenced during the presidential election of 2000, Vice President Gore's concession prevented the development of a constitutional crisis (Colvin & Foley, 2009). Gore's decision to concede allowed him to avoid setting a precedent involving the interpretation of the Twelfth Amendment. Colvin and Foley (2009) speculate that Vice President Gore, as president of the Senate, was faced with a choice to either accept Florida's contested returns (which he personally opposed) and lose the election, or to reject the electoral votes and set a precedent regarding the role of the president of the Senate by preventing the votes from Florida from being counted; his only path to the presidency (Colvin & Foley, 2009).

The historical context of the Twelfth Amendment is of the utmost importance when considering the insurrection that unfolded at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. Without the ambiguity of the Twelfth Amendment, Trump would not have had an interpretive means of interrupting the nation's democratic process. It is only through the incremental weakening of our democracy's integrity that the Twelfth Amendment became a plausible strategy for the Trump campaign. The election of 1800 led to a weakened view of our democratic system because partisan influence was glaring in the conflict's resolution. Both elections of 1800 and 2000 dealt with emergent constitutional crises regarding the Twelfth Amendment. The election of 2000 demonstrated that partisan quarrelling throughout a constitutional crisis surrounding the Twelfth Amendment could become an endless process of bickering unless an actor, such as Vice President Gore in this particular case, would be willing to concede the race in order to spare the nation from conflict. It is important to note that the crisis regarding the election of 2020 was not circumstantially emergent, rather, it was perpetuated by the Trump campaign.

Throughout each election year, the Twelfth Amendment has empowered the position of Vice President by specifying their duty to count the certified votes. It does not, however, specify a limit or protocol for the Vice President to evaluate disputes. Constitutional scholars have suggested that the Vice President may have the power to unilaterally discount certified votes from being counted. The Twelfth Amendment both empowers the Vice President as an authority figure in the proceeding and fails to limit the scope of their influence on the certification process.

Literature Review of Trump's Rhetoric

The rhetorical strategies used by Trump during his campaigns and term in office have attracted significant scholarly attention. While some scholars warned that Trump's rhetorical strategies demonstrated harms to our nation's democratic integrity (e.g., Jameison & Taussig, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Terrill, 2017; Ott & Dickinson, 2020; Nasco, Shapiro, & Block-Elkon; 2020; Hariman, 2021; Hayes, 2021), many others argued that Trump relied on divisive emotional arguments and symbolic racial conflicts to appeal to his conservative base (e.g., Stuckey, 2017; McMillian, 2017; Kayam, 2018; Terrill, 2017; Hariman, 2021; Hayes, 2021). Some note that Trump's use of simplistic language and misinformation proved a highly effective way of mobilizing his supporters (e.g., Jameison & Taussig, 2017; Kayam, 2018). Scholars also recognize Trump's rhetorical positioning as an anti-political celebrity as an important factor in gaining, and maintaining, the support of the Republican party (e.g., Stuckey, 2017; McMillian, 2017; Kayam, 2018; Hariman, 2021).

Jamieson and Taussig (2017) illustrate the continuation of Trump's unique rhetorical strategies from his 2016 campaign into his first 100 days in office by describing his "rhetorical signature." Borrowing Frank's (2011) definition, they define rhetorical signature as "the symbolic marking distinguishing his mode of reasoning and expression from other presidents" (Frank, 2011, p. 617). Trump's rhetorical signature, these scholars maintain, is unlike any past president, particularly in the way he conceptualizes issues as abstract "good vs evil" conflicts (Jameison & Taussig, 2017; Kayam, 2018, Hayes, 2021). This influence is bolstered by other scholars who regard Trump's ability to oversimplify complex issues as a major appeal to his conservative base (e.g., Jameison & Taussig, 2017; Kayam, 2018; Hariman, 2021).

Until the Trump era, no president had dismissed large-scale evidence from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nor had we seen a president so reliant on hearsay, anecdotes, or unreliable information in partisan media outlets to support their policy. Scholars caution that the wave of right-wing populism sparked by Trump could signify a shift in politics away from celebrated inclusion of diversity and toward a guarded segregation of groups (Jameison & Taussig, 2017; Nasco et al., 2020; Hariman, 2021, Hayes; 2021).

Stuckey (2017) reinforces this argument by describing Trump's expressions of hope, which are often conveyed through a rhetoric of purification. This symbolic conflict is mentioned by other scholars and is predicated on the notion that the foundational fabric of our democratic system is reliable, but only if the injurious characteristics (which are largely perpetuated by non-whites) are removed by Trump (e.g., Stuckey, 2017; McMillian, 2017; Nasco et al., 2020).

McMillian (2017) pinpoints two critical characteristics of Trump's rhetorical strategy that allow his unique ideology to flourish. First, Trump evoked feelings of American exceptionalism and described the status quo as a damaged version of exceptionalism, promising his supporters that he would remedy their feeling of White disenfranchisement and "Make America Great Again" for them (McMillian, 2017). Secondly, Trump made compelling claims regarding the issues threatening American exceptionalism by isolating specific issues, such as the border wall between the U.S. and Mexico, and describing the ways they can be overcome in oversimplified terms such as vaguely suggesting that Mexico will pay for it. Although his remedies may be vaguely described, scholars find the power of Trump's marketing-like campaigns to be uniquely potent, as hashtags like #TakeAmericaBack or #DraintheSwamp trended across social

media outlets, and these topics proliferated on social media throughout his elections and term (McMillian, 2017; Hariman, 2021, Hayes; 2021).

Kayam (2018) describes a rhetorical strategy used by the Trump campaign as brainwashing, marketing, and selling (Kayam, 2018). Trump's revival of Reagan's slogan is the essence of his marketing strategy: "Make America Great Again" (Campbell, 2017). Later adding the slogan "America First," Trump's branding was predicated on the idea that America should be returned to a former glory. This collective understanding – that a virtuous United States is no more but could be revived – became the backbone of Trump's appeal to his supporters. Scholars view Trump's promise as a pledge to address his supporter's perceived victimhood of whiteness (Kayam, 2018; Nasco et al., 2020; Hariman, 2021).

Adding to the discussion regarding Trump's ideology, Johnson's (2017) critical article considers the characteristics that render Trump in the archetype of a demagogue. This article uses Roberts-Miller's (2005) definition of demagoguery: "Polarizing propaganda that motivates members of an in-group to hate and scapegoat some outgroup(s), largely by promising certainty, stability, and... an 'escape from freedom'" (Roberts-Miller, 2005, p. 462). Johnson (2017) explains that a demagogue considers their audience to be risk-averse and creates a sense of shared vulnerability and peril – much like we saw in Trump's campaign discourse (e.g., Johnson, 2017; McMillian, 2017; Stuckey, 2017). Other scholars have also argued that it is the feeling of such peril that a demagogue uses to encourage audiences to identify themselves as victims (Johnson, 2017; Mercieca, 2019). This allows privileged individuals to coopt a feeling of oppression and victimhood as they are encouraged to focus primarily on their own plights

while ignoring those of marginalized groups (Johnson, 2017; Mercieca, 2019). As such, Trump is adept at exploiting the fears of his constituents for political gain.

In addition to capitalizing on the perceived victimhood of his supporters, Trump appealed to a large portion of Americans by rebuking the rules of political correctness. Scholars have described an overall theme of negativity from Trump's 2016 campaign that proved remarkably effective as a rhetorical strategy (e.g., Stuckey, 2017; McMillian, 2017; Kayam, 2018; Terrill, 2017; Hariman, 2021). Not only did Trump's glaring insults towards other candidates communicate to his followers that he did not plan on behaving like a traditional politician in office, but it attracted heightened media coverage (Kayam, 2018). This demonstrated an anti-establishment, contrarian attitude and invited his audience to rebuke the same rules of political correctness without the fear of being socially chastised (e.g., Jameison & Taussig, 2017; Terrill, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Kayam, 2018).

Terrill's (2017) examination of Trump's campaign discourse also points out harmful consequences for racial equality as his rhetorical position rejects a responsibility to consider race. Trump ignored the significance of race by avoiding discussions of the topic in political discourse (Terrill, 2017). By rebuking any racial burden in his rhetoric, Trump sets a precedent and enables a broader challenge to societal norms and expectations that inform ethical practice of public speaking (e.g., Terrill, 2017; Nasco et al., 2020).

Rhetorical analysis helps explain how Trump was able to resuscitate discursive racial conflicts, which were comparatively dormant throughout President Obama's two terms in office (e.g., Terrill, 2017; Nasco et al., 2020). Following Obama's presidency,

Trump's campaign facilitated the emergence of a "post-post-racial" discourse, permitting Trump's followers to echo his racist and misogynistic beliefs (e.g., Terrill, 2017; Nasco et al., 2020). Trump's election validated his post-post-racial rhetoric as a socially appropriate way of thinking, shielding his supporters from the social chastisement that such rhetoric would likely be met with throughout President Obama's terms (e.g., Terrill, 2017; Nasco et al., 2020). Nasco, Shapiro, and Bloch-Elkon (2020) add to this discussion by describing the consequences of Trump's hate speech and vilification of non-Whites, his condemnation of mainstream media, his hate speech towards adversarial politicians, and the problems posed by Trump's praise for violent behavior (Nasco et al., 2020).

When he attended campaign rallies, Trump encouraged and commended small acts of violence in real-time. The rise of political violence throughout the "Trump Era" can be evidenced in three separate terrorist attacks committed by White Supremacists (Nasco et al., 2020). The first example of mass violence encouraged by Trump's rhetoric was the mass shooting that took place in Charleston on July 15, 2015, when a white supremacist shot and killed nine black people during a church service. As the frontrunning Republican nominee, Trump became the de facto opinion leader for the GOP and conservative voters, despite the violent implications of his rhetorical signature. South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley's comments to a South Carolina newspaper connect Trump's divisive rhetoric to the attack as the governor described her desire for Trump to communicate to his followers differently in order mitigate the violence caused by his divisive rhetoric (Nasco et al., 2020).

"I know what that rhetoric can do. I saw it happen... That's a different kind of anger. They're upset with Washington, D.C. They're upset nothing's got done..."

The way he communicates, that I wish were different.” (e.g. Haley, 2015; Adcox, n.d.).

Then, on October 26, 2018, Robert Bowers killed six people and injured six more in an attack on a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Before the attack, Bowers communicated about his disapproval of Trump through social media. However, since Bowers echoed terms used by Trump like “invaders” and “infestation” to describe immigrants, it is plausible to suggest that Bowers’ disapproval of Trump may have paradoxically stemmed from ideology perpetuated by Trump. This attack illustrates the persuasive power in the comingling of a leader’s divisive rhetoric and a follower’s creative interpretation of a rhetorical movement. A rhetorical fantasy can be shared by likeminded individuals that do not share a group identity (Nasco et al., 2020). The second attack suggests that the rhetorical strategies that had the potential to incite violence during the “Trump Era” may have also contributed to the violent actions of like-minded individuals whether or not they supported Trump.

The deadliest of these attacks occurred in 2019 and claimed the lives of 23 people in El Paso, Texas, where the Trump-supporting gunman admittedly chose the specific location in order to target Mexicans and other Latino people (Nasco et al., 2020). The gunman referred to Trump as a “symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose” in a text he wrote (Nasco et al., 2020). While none of the attacks can be attributed directly to anything the president said or did, these scholars point to the rise in deadly hate crimes that occurred under Trump’s rise to the presidency.

Viewed collectively, these three events underscore an important evolution in the “Trump era” with regard to domestic terrorism. While the first two attacks represent the

increasing violence fostered by Trump's rhetoric and its potential to function subversively, the third attack represents the first overt act of violence by a gunman who used Trump's rhetoric as a justification. Governor Haley's comments in 2015 suggested that Trump's rhetoric had disastrous consequences, and in 2019 a mass-shooting was committed by a follower of Trump in his name. Trump remarked on this event in terms of the loss of life but he did not acknowledge the rhetorical nature of the shooter's motivations.

Scholarly analysis of Trump's Twitter feed throughout his term argues that Trump's passion for Tweeting created a consistent line of communication between the president and his supporters (Hariman, 2021; Hayes, 2021). This is congruent with scholarship regarding Trump's communication in traditional channels, which suggests Trump evoked emotions and gained the trust of his supporters by using communication methods in a non-conventional, anti-establishment manner (e.g., Stuckey, 2017; McMillian, 2017; Kayam, 2018).

On January 6, 2021, millions of Americans watched as armed protestors stormed the nation's Capitol. What came to be known as "the insurrection of January 6, 2021" represented the culmination of years of Trump's harmful rhetorical strategies (Spence; 2021, Hayes 2021). Although current literature has focused on the rhetorical strategies that Trump has employed throughout his elections and term, scholars have yet to systematically reconstruct the story that many of his supporters continue to believe. The culmination of Trump's divisive rhetoric into an actual insurrection calls for a methodology of rhetorical examination that takes into account the interactivity of the leader's rhetoric with the follower's creative interpretation.

Given the persistence of conspiratorial narratives, rhetorical scholars should search for evidence of shared fantasies among fringe groups or specific conspiracy-believers to better understand the relationship between individuals and opinion leaders. With regard to Trump supporters, scholars have identified the following sub-groups as those responsible for contributing to the development of the #StopTheSteal movement: QAnon followers, Three Percenters Movement, Boogaloo Bois, ideological followers of the far-right, and other hyperpartisan activists and media outlets (Blake, 2021; Holt, 2021). Rhetorical examination of the insurrection of January 6, 2021 could provide insight into the shared perspective of the demonstrators and answer questions regarding how they came to believe in this united rhetorical vision.

Trump's rhetoric is well-described by current literature. Rhetorical studies have shown that Trump's anti-political personality is a hallmark of his success. As Trump describes himself as a masculine underdog, his post-post-racial discourse encourages his audience to embrace a sense of victimhood and rebuke ethical standards of speaking. While other studies have solidified the notion that Trump's rhetoric has harmful consequences, the focus of this thesis is to understand the persuasive mechanisms that have contributed to a foundation of violence within a group. The current literature invaluablely supports this thesis by describing the harms of Trump's rhetoric.

A Fantasy-Theme Analysis helps to reconstruct fragmented realities because it frees the researcher to search for connections between the shared worldview of individuals and groups. Such a methodology is necessary to effectively reconstruct the fantasies that led to the insurrection of January 6 because the various groups that converged on the Capitol did not identify as a collective group, yet they shared a common

goal. An FTA approach enables the researcher to position a shared reality as a participatory relationship between leader and follower.

This approach helps explain how leaders gain influence. As leaders discuss the behaviors of their followers, the leader describes guidelines for their actions, yet the leader allows enough narrative room for followers to creatively interpret how they should accomplish their collective goals (Haslam, Reicher, Gaffney, Steffens, Packer, & Platow, 2021).

Taking the insurrection as evidence that separate groups can be systematically persuaded by an opinion leader to share a common goal and enact an overthrow of government, this study endeavors to expose the systematic development of a government coup by Donald Trump throughout his rhetorical vision of a democracy under attack.

This chapter has described the historical context of disputed federal elections and the conflicts surrounding their resolution. In doing so, this chapter has given some insight into the fundamental principles that are valued in an electoral system, such as the ability to choose a leader on election day. The background on the elections of 1800 and 2000 is useful because they are the only examples of federally disputed elections prior to the Presidential Election of 2020. This chapter has also discussed Trump's rhetorical strategies in attempt to provide insight into his persuasive appeal. The next chapter explores the methodology used in this thesis and describes the applicability of FTA to this thesis by providing a brief review of studies that have used FTA to conduct rhetorical analysis.

CHAPTER TWO

FANTASY THEME ANALYSIS

Methods

Fantasy-Theme Analysis (FTA) was introduced by Ernest Bormann (1972, 1980, 1982, 1983) to study messages created through the interactions of small groups – which “chain out” into broader societal contexts (Kendall, Kendall & Kah, 2006). Bormann (1985) constructed a fantasy-theme methodology of rhetorical criticism that is helpful for understanding the decision-making processes of groups. Bormann designed this methodology to capture the rich meaning of discourse by allowing researchers to treat conversations and transcripts of small group meetings as rhetorical artifacts (Foss, 2009). Utterances, speeches, conversations, and stories could all contribute to the development of a fantasy theme, broadening the possibilities for the rhetorical scholar to collect artifacts that allow them to reconstruct such a fantasy.

A group maintains agency over a fantasy by choosing who it is shared with and the manner in which it is shared. The constant and nuanced evolution of our language is an important variable to consider when employing FTA. Since the nature of a fantasy is ever-evolving, FTA’s dynamic nature makes it a viable way to reconstruct the shared vision of a group through an examination of various artifacts. The guided, thematic methodology of FTA allows the researcher to reliably piece scattered phenomena into a picture of a group’s shared rhetorical vision.

Drawing on the work of Robert Bales (1970), in his book *Personality and Interpersonal Behavior*, Bormann focuses on the ways in which dramatized communication forms and creates social reality for groups of people. While Bales (1970) developed a dozen ways to categorize content analysis on small groups, Bormann was primarily concerned with the category that Bales describes as one that “dramatizes.” This description, among other qualities, is marked by a speeding of tempo in conversation and a building of excitement among participants (Bormann, 1972). For example, imagine two sales associates at an electronics store discussing a new smartphone launch. As they discuss the new features, they begin to muse to one another regarding the upcoming features on the next year’s update. To the onlooker, this would appear to be a conversation in which they are invested and interested. The like-minded perspective of the employees provides a knowledge base and interest in the topic that is inviting. Imagine that the specifications of the new device are only marginally better than its predecessor, but the employees dramatize these changes as significant advancements in technology that warrant the purchase of a new device. Now imagine a third coworker approaches the two, unaware of the new product launch, to see what the excitement is about. It is likely that an appealing narrative would be dramatized by the two, and a likeminded perspective might be adopted by the third employee toward the new product as the other two invite them to see the launch in a similar way.

Bales (1970) work also provides a way to examine messages for insights into the group culture, motivation, emotional style, and cohesion (Bormann, 1972). Bormann further developed the idea of fantasizing, which was coined by Bales, into Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) and a Fantasy-Theme Criticism methodology (Foss, 2009).

“Fantasy” refers to an imaginative and creative interpretation of a circumstance that answers a rhetorical question, or provides for a psychological need (Bormann, 1985). SCT, the theory on which FTA is based, operates under two fundamental assumptions: The first premise holds that communication creates reality. Second, the theory proposes that symbols create reality, and individual meanings of symbols can merge to form a shared consciousness (Foss, 2009). SCT, and therefore FTA, treats humans as storytelling beings that share fantasies and, as a result, build collective consciousness that create shared social realities (Bormann, 1985).

Take gas prices for example. As prices soared in 2001, individuals made sense of this by looking towards the geopolitical theatre of the Middle East (Kaidy, 2001). Oil production plummeted as the United States invaded Iraq (Kaidy, 2001). The first premise of SCT is demonstrated as the military conflict and increase in gas prices converge in meaning through the storytelling of opinion leaders through mass media (Bahador, Moses, & Youmans, 2018). By 2007, the three primary concerns of the American people were (respectfully) the economy, the war in Iraq, and gas prices (Jones, 2008). The second premise of SCT suggests that this rationale would have started with the way a few people made sense of these events and the discourse that proliferated from them (Bormann, 1985). This could have been a presidential statement, or even a singular opinion leader in the media. As this story repeats, a shared reality is constructed and a collective consciousness is built (Bormann, 1985).

SCT can further help to explain how groups use symbols to collectively identify with one another. According to Bormann (1985), symbolic convergence describes an interpretive situation in which a group commonly experiences unique aspects of a shared

reality. A group fantasy results via this shared reality, facilitating more dramatizations of more messages among group members. A fantasy theme refers to the content of these dramatizing messages, which sustain a chain of reactions among the group members (Bormann, 1985). As a fantasy theme continues to chain out, FTA guides us through observing the development, evolution, and decay of dramas that preoccupy groups and change behavior (Bormann, 1972). These characteristics mean that a fantasy chain analysis has deep and valuable explanatory power regarding group behavior (Bormann, 1972).

Members of a group that empathize, improvise on the same theme, or respond emotionally, both mirror the group's larger goals and simultaneously make those themes public (Bormann, 1972). In addition to revealing motives and dramatic themes, the process of fantasies chaining out legitimizes values and attitudes held by the group and tests shared religious and political dramas (Bormann, 1972). Bales (1970) describes the powerful psychological impact that these groups can have on their participants:

“The culture of the interacting group simulates in each of its members a feeling that he has entered a new realm of reality – a world of heroes, villains, saints, and enemies – a drama, a work of art. The culture of a group is a fantasy established from the past, which is acted upon in the present. In such moments, which occur not only in groups, but also in individual responses to works of art, one is ‘transported’ to a world which seems even more real than the everyday world. One may feel exalted, fascinated, perhaps horrified or threatened, or powerfully impelled to action, but in any case, involved. One’s feelings fuse with the symbols and images which carry the feeling in communication and sustains it over time. One is psychologically taken into a psychodramatic fantasy world, in which others in the group are also involved. Then one is attached also to those other members” (Bales, 1970 p. 152).

Bormann (1972) argues that these influences are not limited to traditional small-group interactions but rather take root in larger groups hearing public address. This occurs as dramatizations proliferate in small groups, which are then integrated into public

speeches and the broader discourses that are broadcast across mass media, thereby reaching an even wider audience. Take, for example, Trump's performative and dramatized description of Hillary Clinton as a "nasty" woman throughout his campaign. Perhaps if a close advisor to Trump verbalized that sentiment, it resonated with him, and so he began to dramatize that ideation in order to proliferate such beliefs among his followers. Not only does this sustain the sense of community within the group, it encourages civic actions and abundantly provides the group with a dynamic social reality of heroes, villains, emotions, and attitudes (Bormann, 1972).

Bormann (1972) coined the term *rhetorical vision* to describe the composite dramas that capture larger groups of people in symbolic reality, opting for the term "chain" to describe the way fantasy themes link and spread throughout groups. As symbolic realities link and spread, the fantasy theme chains out. Likewise, a successful persuasive campaign will result in fantasy themes chaining out to form a rhetorical vision (Bormann, 1972). The emergence of the rhetorical vision indicates that the plot lines can be evoked through multiple contexts and result in a standard response to the original fantasy chain (Bormann, 1972).

Take, for example, the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003. As President George W. Bush rallied support for military intervention, he perpetuated a rhetorical vision that Iraq was a global danger due to the attacks on 9/11 and due to his concern that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (van der Heide, 2013). Bush evoked both of these plots to justify the invasion, despite the fact that both would historically be regarded as falsehoods (van der Heide, 2013). For this example, consider the emergence of the rhetorical vision that Iraq was an aggressive threat that needed to be neutralized. Imagine

reaching this conclusion due to a belief that Iraq was responsible for the 9/11 attacks, but not a belief that they possessed weapons of mass destruction. Now imagine that you do not believe Iraq was responsible for the 9/11 attacks, but that the country possessed weapons of mass destruction and intended to use them. In either case, one accepts Bush's advocacy of invasion – yet both plotlines turned out to be falsehoods. This represents a good example because the two narratives worked in tandem to bolster support for the invasion even though both would turn out to be untrue. The multiple plots worked together to increase the number of people that shared the emotional response, supporting the eventual invasion. This means that there is a great potential for a constellation of falsehoods to work together disparately, but also in unison, to promote a larger vision.

Bormann (1972) organizes the interpersonal processes of meaning-making into a broader system of communication by explaining the process through which rhetorical visions are created.

First, a small group of people that share compatible psychodynamic dispositions confer regarding a mutual issue. Then, a theme is dramatized by an individual in the group. If this sentiment is resonant with other group members, it will begin to chain out. More dramas chain out as more members feel charged and become enthusiastic. Over time, this creates a more common symbolic reality, which leads to the inclusion of more heroes and villains (Bormann, 1972).

Occasionally, the motivations behind the group's fantasy theme will include a need to make the broader public aware of their enlightened perspective (Bormann, 1972). This will typically be accomplished by the group crafting artistic messages for traditional media channels. Often, members of a group will model their messages in a way that

resembles the drama that motivated them to identify with this group. This is achieved by using in-group symbols in discussions appropriate for different publics. The discourse is applicable enough to evoke emotion and thought in a general public, yet the discourse is specific enough that onlookers identify an in-group member by their use of symbols and coded language (Bormann, 1972). Through this process, the rhetorical vision proliferates to a larger public until a rhetorical movement develops (Bormann, 1972).

Bormann (1972) explains that small groups of people, in the face of unchangeable forces such as natural disasters, can feel hopeless and lost. In response, it is common for a group to invent fantasies to provide members with a sense of safety. This sense of safety is influenced by one's adherence to the fantasy. As a fantasy acts to help the group to feel protected from the imminent circumstances, it eventually becomes a rhetorical movement since it functions as a way for the collective group to interpret the situation in a common way. Such influence is bolstered by what Bormann described as the "supportive warmth of like-minded companions within the group" (Bormann, 1972 p. 400).

Because a functional rhetorical vision considers common-sense experiences, it is able to overwhelm rational thinking within individuals that are drawn to the dramatic action, even when they observe contradictory evidence (Bormann, 1972). While this influence is often marginal, there are cases in which exceptionally zealous groups can develop and sustain rhetorical visions that have a very limited appeal as a result of their unique nature (Bormann, 1972). For instance, most people do not believe the Earth is flat, although The Flat Earth Society serves to connect like-minded "free-thinkers" to support Flat Earth Theory (Flat Earth Society). While the following is not large, the rhetorical

vision that this group shares is powerful because of the unique nature of its appeal (Bormann, 1972).

Once a body of discourse has been developed into concrete dramas, a critic can extract a social reality from within the rhetorical vision and examine social relationships and motives. The critic can examine the qualitative influence of the rhetorical vision as though it was a lived reality for the individuals participating in the vision (Bormann, 1972). An examination of how these people relate to one another, how their hierarchies are organized, how they enact their beliefs, and how they were originally compelled to dramatic action can lead to important insights to understanding a movement and its followers (Bormann, 1972).

Bormann (1972) explains how Cassirer (1946) provides rhetorical critics with a way to examine the relationship between discursive materials and fantasy themes by describing that myth, art, language, and science appear as symbols - not just figures representing a given reality. Instead, these symbols act as powerful forces that construct a world of their own (Bormann, 1972; Cassirer, 1946). Bormann (1972) writes about the earlier work of Cassirer (1946) which he supplements with Langer (1946) to drive his point. It is important to conceptualize language as humanity's fundamental process of reason, yet it reflects humanity's propensity for mythmaking more than one's penchant for rationalization (Bormann, 1972; Cassirer, 1946).

For Cassirer (1946), language can be thought of as the symbolization of thoughts. Two separate conditions compose the symbols of our thoughts: discursive logic and creative imagination (Cassirer, 1946). In other words, our language can become symbols of our reasoning or creativity. One condition may be employed as a means of achieving

the other. Consider, for example, the way a logical argument is more persuasive with an emotional appeal, just as an emotional argument is made stronger with logical implications. In both of these conditions, the mind is a powerful and creative tool, but it expresses itself in different forms (Cassirer, 1946).

Even in cases where there is distinct evidence of specific events, different explanatory fantasies may be employed to account for the same observable outcome (Bormann, 1972). In the face of chaotic or haphazard situations, there is more room for group members to interpret observations in congruence with their own beliefs of the events. In these situations, the fantasy theme develops into the primary explanatory mechanism for the circumstance (Bormann, 1972).

Because the rhetorical vision is emotionally resonant with group members, Bormann (1972) argues that a critical analysis of emotional appeals is inherent in FTA.

Determining a group's justification for action is possible through investigating the rhetorical vision of the group. The motivations are not typically communicated by the group but instead exist in the dramatic expression of the fantasy theme that has been employed by the group to defend their perspective (Bormann, 1972). While traditional methodological approaches may focus exclusively on the agency of the audience or of the rhetoric of the leader, an FTA approach allows the researcher to examine the relationship between leader and follower in terms of their influence on one another (Cragan & Shields, 1992). Bormann (1972) explains that the fantasy theme analysis invites the researcher to examine what might appear to be disparate artifacts as an assemblage rather than viewing artifacts in isolation.

Bormann began to study the process of sharing fantasies while studying the way people dramatize messages in groups. Bormann noticed while investigating a group's use of puns, word play, etc., that some narratives seemed to stoke the narrative energy of the group while others seemed to sap the storytelling vitality (Bormann, 1985). That is to say, some rhetorical strategies have the potential to increase the proliferation of a given story within the group while other strategies may diminish the story's rhetorical potential.

Extending the aforementioned example regarding the associates at the electronics store, consider input from the third employee as something that could build excitement versus a remark that might come across as a drag. An agreeable, like-minded individual might join the conversation and begin discussing the new smartphone in terms of the values already identified by the two participants such as camera quality or battery life. They could discuss the sorts of features they anticipate from an updated model. While they may agree or disagree regarding specifics, their joint participation in the discussion demonstrates a like-minded perspective on the topic.

Now imagine that the third participant is the first to remark on the increased carbon footprint of the new product and tries to steer the discussion toward the topic of cyber-waste. The other two employees nod their heads at the remarks but do not build on the sentiment because they prefer to focus the discussion on the new product features. The third participant detects their disinterest, follows suit and begins to discuss some rumored changes to the design he has read about on social media. Instead of continuing to show disinterest, the other two associates seem drawn to this contribution, and one even cuts the other's remarks short in excitement to discuss their interpretation of the meaning of the possible changes. In this example, the outsider perspective competes with the

dominant and controlling narrative within the group. The outsider perspective is shifted as they are influenced by the appeal of the two like-minded people, bolstered by the dramatized conversation the two engage in. It is not the authority of the likeminded two, rather, their appeal, that invites the third individual to shift their contrary perspective so they can take part in the camaraderie. Through visualizing this interaction, one can see the trial-and-error structure of narrative involvement whereby the efforts of one conversant are mediated by the other participants. This effect is mirrored in Bormann's (1985) description of group dynamics. As a linguistic survival-of-the-fittest determines which narrative a group of people accept and use to make sense of phenomena, narratives and stories compete for participation and attention in subtle ways, often taking the path of least resistance (Bormann, 1985).

Bormann (1985) offers a description of the psychological process that allows a drama to take root. Drama can be as simple as a narrative that describes a series of interrelated incidents which includes a good and bad actor. The audience becomes invested in the character that demonstrates attractive qualities. Through the identification the audience has with an admirable character, the audience becomes emotionally invested in the dramatization (Bormann, 1985). Large audiences can collectively share a fantasy, thereby experiencing the same emotions while regarding the same characters as heroes and villains, and interpreting certain facets of their experiences in a similar way (Bormann, 1985). While it may be difficult for participants to analyze their own fantasies, non-participants can look towards rhetorical artifacts to make sense of the community's shared consciousness. Identifying recurrent dramatizing material provides the rhetorical critic with evidence of symbolic convergence (Bormann, 1985). Word play, narratives,

figures, and analogies within the group's meetings are important to look toward while identifying dramatizing materials (Bormann, 1985).

When a group shares fantasies, individuals come to develop common meanings and emotions regarding symbolic cues. Symbolic convergence is evidenced when a symbolic cue's relationship to the group's common meaning is not understood outside of the context of the group (Bormann, 1985). This rhetorical phenomenon becomes a form of membership for group-members, as only they will understand the significance of certain cryptic symbols as a result of the fantasy that they share (Bormann, 1985). For example, the Flat Earth society collectively regards information that challenges their worldview as "scientism" and dismisses such evidence in preference to their own. In an interesting reversal, the Flat Earth Society reinforces the shared fantasy of the group by rhetorically positioning their ways of knowing as true and accurate while condemning the methods of mainstream science as biased and misinformed. An outsider may be unaware of the meaning of "scientism" in this context, but to the members of the Flat Earth Society, this symbol has converged with the group's monolithic distrust of mainstream science. This symbol's place in the group's discourse perpetuates the existence of a shared reality and acts as a way to unite other individuals that identify with a similar worldview. While an outsider might understand this symbol to mean "pseudoscience," it would not immediately be clear that the group is referring to a mainstream body of knowledge as "scientism" without first understanding the rhetorical strategies and symbols of the group.

Fantasy Theme Analysis can expose the mechanisms by which some groups of people continue to adhere to a rigid or skewed interpretation of reality. Systematically

grouping and unpacking these themes might bring a new perspective to the scholarly community. Specifically, with regard to this thesis and the false notion that Donald Trump won the 2020 election, fantasy theme analysis works to reveal how such narratives continue to fit new events and experiences into a shared worldview. What Bormann (1985) terms “chaining out” might also be thought of as snowballing. For example, take the slogan “Let’s Go Brandon,” which originated with an announcer at a NASCAR event and soon proliferated through various memes across social media. The slogan, which is code for “Fuck Joe Biden,” has gained considerable traction with Trump supporting conservatives. The dramatization of this message is found in the unexpected nature of the symbol; onlooking Trump supporters watched with glee as the announcer failed to hear what was being chanted – As those in attendance at the NASCAR event echoed the chant, a playful and unforeseen interpretation emerged and later spread across social media by the broader group. This incident represents the way symbols come to represent groups through dramatic events and how they chain out into broader social contexts through dramatic action and interpretation. The chaining-out, or snowballing, of this symbol occurs in the very telling of the story, exemplifying the way simple symbols can be dramatized among a shared group. An isolated phenomenon evolved, to use Bormann’s FTA term, into a broader theme or vision that proliferated through multiple contexts such as social media, clothing, and advertising. This allowed Trump supporters to further coalesce with other like-minded people.

A shared group consciousness must be established before a fantasy theme can chain out. This means that a shared group consciousness is a precursor to the development of a rhetorical vision, or even the development of a meaningful symbolic

cue (Cragan & Shields, 1992). As an individual molds their personality to fit into the surrounding culture of the group, the individual begins to conceptualize themselves in terms of their place within the group. This process of self-adapting to the broader culture influences the individual's roles, norms, and decision-making (Beebe, Masterson, Harris, & Sherblom, 1986). In terms of the leader's persuasive ability, fantasy theme artistry refers to a speaker's ability to present circumstantial interpretations of events that are attractive enough for others to share them. When speakers present situations as attractive, they capitalize on narratives that are important to the audience, so they can begin to turn the listeners' opinions in their favor (Cragan & Shields, 1992).

Scholarly Applications of Fantasy Theme Analysis

Scholars have used Fantasy Theme Analysis (FTA) to explain how shared realities lead to group activities, decisions, and collective identification (e.g., Bormann, Cragan & Shields, 2001; Duffy, 2003; Frey & Sunwolf, 2004; Kendall, Kendall & Kah, 2006; Messner & Vail, 2009; Horila 2021). Some scholars have used FTA to investigate divisive rhetoric in traditional media (Messner & Vail, 2009), while others have used FTA to expose paradoxical consequences in the messages of non-governmental organizations (Engstrom, 2009). These scholars demonstrate FTA's use in understanding phenomena across multiple disciplines, using discourse to examine the formation and maintenance of groups. As the literature shows, this theoretical approach offers a robust means of exploring the formation and function of symbols within a likeminded group.

Multiple studies that examine internet-based platforms use FTA to explain how subversive and harmful cultures develop in online environments (Duffy, 2003; Kendall, Kendall & Kah, 2006; McCabe, 2009). The influence of online discourse is found in the

speed with which this process takes place. Online environments facilitate the emergence of shared group realities like no other form of media (e.g., Duffy, 2003; Hammers, 2007, Zanin et al., 2016). Participating in dramatizing messages online has unique appeal. Because other users interact with and echo similar sentiments, elements like humor and inside jokes increase the persuasive nature of shared messages and make them more consequential (e.g., Duffy, 2003; Hammers, 2007; Zanin, Hoelscher, Kramer, 2016).

Duffy (2003) examines rhetoric from hate-groups found across multiple web channels to describe the characteristics that enable their messages to spread. For such an analysis, Duffy (2003) explains, the researcher must conceptualize the internet as a powerful means of persuasion that people use to make sense out of their environment. In the context of hate groups, the persuasive nature of the internet is a characteristic that takes advantage of one's need to make sense of a situation. Hate groups capitalize on this influence by making logically fallacious arguments that predicate their sensemaking on hateful bias towards others. In lieu of a more preferable way of making sense of an event, an individual will likely be persuaded to adopt a similar mindset to that of the hate group in order to make sense of a circumstance (Duffy, 2003).

Duffy (2003) provides a means for examining the development of extremist worldviews through online discourse. As the internet allows hate groups to reach audiences that would otherwise be inaccessible, extremist worldviews have become easier to share (Duffy, 2003). This method uses Bormann's FTA to understand the worldviews expressed by hate group web sites, as well as their potential for persuasion (Duffy, 2003). Given the focus on shared creation, Duffy (2003) has demonstrated that FTA is an insightful way to investigate online hate groups.

Wu and Zhu's (2017) Fantasy Theme Analysis conceptualizes social media alongside traditional media in order to describe the cooperation of the two types in the development of a rhetorical vision. Their study endeavors to represent the symbolic landscape of various media responses, which allows for the development of a broader rhetorical vision across multiple channels, showing how one medium can work in conjunction with another (Wu & Zhu, 2017). This work looks at a group's voice in terms of both mainstream media and online discussions to evaluate their symbolic realities (Wu & Zhu, 2017). While this study deals with Chinese values and communication, it demonstrates the utility of FTA in understanding the cooperative effects of multiple media responses (Wu & Zhu, 2017).

As the literature shows, FTA can be used to demonstrate the presence of a likeminded group of people in divisive contexts. In a similar vein, observing the discourse of a group taking collective action in divisive circumstances should reveal the existence of a shared rhetorical vision. Current scholarship focuses on FTA primarily with online discourse or in traditional media, leaving an unexplored gap for phenomena that exist simultaneously online and in traditional circumstances with the exception of Wu and Zhu (2017). The social media movements preceding the insurrection of January 6, 2021 warrants exploration of the online precursors to the riots. Similarly, Trump's speech should be contextualized as a precursor to the insurrection. In cases where there is an observably like-minded group undertaking collective action, FTA can be used to trace the narratives and themes that underpin the broader group's perspective.

This chapter has discussed the relevance of FTA to the current thesis and has given some background on how FTA has been used by scholars to engage in

rhetorical inquiry. The next chapter introduces #StopTheSteal and contextualizes it with regard to Trump's rhetorical strategies. Fantasy themes will be gathered through the examination of artifacts such as tweets and Facebook posts. As my analysis will show, the rhetorical vision that emerges is that of a democracy under attack. This rhetorical vision is supported by two fantasy themes: a bias media and an imminent unlawful transfer of power.

CHAPTER THREE

#STOPTHESTEAL

Given the unique and dynamic nature of #StopTheSteal, the discourse it came to encompass and embody has been referred to in several ways. Journalists have struggled to establish a universal definition for this phrase, often using multiple words or terms to provide a justification. Some refer to it as a “slogan” that gained traction from the online presence of the website www.stopthesteal.com and the “Stop The Steal” Facebook group while acknowledging that the phrase also proliferated as a hashtag (e.g. Nguyen, & Scott, 2020; Perez, & Hatmaker, 2020). Painted on poster boards and t-shirts, it has been suggested that this phrase represents a protest movement (Nguyen, & Scott, 2020; Sullivan, 2020). A few journalists have even referred to “Stop the Steal” or #StoptheSteal as a campaign (e.g. Black, Devine, Griffin, Kuznia, 2020; Doerer, 2020; Romm, Stanley-Becker, Dwoskin, 2020).

Here, in this chapter, I argue that conceptualizing #StopTheSteal as an element of Trump’s rhetorical vision regarding elections is necessary to fully understanding the persuasive appeal of #StopTheSteal as a hashtag, movement, or campaign. The development of a rhetorical vision of a democracy under attack proliferated through Trump’s deployment of two specific fantasy themes: media bias and an unlawful transfer of power. #StopTheSteal represents a group fantasy well, because it is found across several Trump-supporting political groups (Hesson, Parker, & Harte, 2021). As Bormann (2001) reminds us, the sharing of such fantasies facilitates the spread of information that

reinforces a group's beliefs. Therefore, information shared by #StopTheSteal evoked common beliefs across these various groups of likeminded people. This application of FTA to the movement demonstrates the convergence of #StopTheSteal with a broad rhetorical vision: democracy is under attack. This rhetorical vision is supported by the two aforementioned fantasy themes gathered in this chapter.

The removal of content associated with #StopTheSteal makes tracing its development across social media difficult. Looking back, however, to the origin of this slogan and its development into a rhetorical vision can help us to better understand where its adherent's beliefs are rooted. Since #StopTheSteal proliferated across a constellation of discursive fields rather than one central artifact, we can look toward analysis offered by journalists during its development to describe #StopTheSteal's relationship with Trump's rhetorical strategy to supplement this gathering. The fantasy theme that emerges here centers on media bias, shared between #StopTheSteal and Trump's tweets. Shane (2017) has shown that media bias is a common theme of both Trump supporters and followers of the #StopTheSteal movement. The other primary fantasy theme, that an unlawful transfer of power is imminent, is evidenced to be shared by Trump and the #StopTheSteal campaign through this chapter's comparison of his tweets and the "Stop The Steal" group's description on Facebook.

"Stop the Steal" has made its way into both of Trump's campaigns (Holt, 2021). Roger Stone, a close advisor to Trump, introduced the phrase with a website during the 2016 presidential election in order to defend Trump's Republican primary nomination and the possibility of a subsequent Hillary Clinton win (Hayden, 2020). Since Trump won the Republican primary in 2016 but still suggested fraudulent activity occurred, his

supporters may regard this first iteration of #StopTheSteal as a successful and meaningful way to purify the Republican party in the face of an election that was nearly stolen by Trump's adversaries.

Three days into the Republican primary, Trump lost the Iowa caucus to Senator Ted Cruz and Tweeted the following: "The State of Iowa should disqualify Ted Cruz from the most recent election on the basis that he cheated – a total fraud!" (Trump, 2016). These sentiments quickly proliferated. Take, for example, Trump's retweet of Ann Coulter regarding the Colorado primary on April 9: "@AnnCoulter: GOP is trying to steal nomination from the winner (Trump) not block an insurgent catching up 2 frontrunner (Sanders)" (Trump, 2016; Coulter 2016). Five days after Trump retweeted Coulter, over two hundred Trump-supporting demonstrators protested the perceived unfairness of the Republican National Convention at the Colorado state capital building in Denver. After Cruz's victory in the state, supporters adopted Trump's claims that a corrupt state caucus system caused their candidate's failure. Protestors chanted for hours and demanded that the Republican National Committee either conduct an emergency poll or that Colorado's delegates should be excluded from the nominating convention in Cleveland.

This suggests that, early-on, Trump was able to appeal to his supporters through social media in order to gather and mobilize them in-person. Trump's retweet of Coulter demonstrates the appeal of a fantasy theme shared between individuals. People that share a rhetorical vision dramatize fantasy themes in order to appeal to likeminded individuals and expand their group. This particular dramatization of a fantasy theme is uniquely attractive as the speakers communicate using symbols that both reinforce and show their

membership to an in-group. Such an appeal is made more powerful when the speaker's goal centers on recruiting and inciting more like-minded people. More than three thousand retweets of the Trump-retweeted Coulter remark demonstrate the strong appeal of their interaction among likeminded people (Trump, 2016; Coulter 2016). The protests in Colorado show that the rhetorical strategy used by Trump's supporters could quickly transform and spread across social media and other outlets.

Cassirer (1946) explained that people use both discursive logic and creative imagination to make sense of phenomena. Trump proliferated an interpretation of discursive logic while leaving room for his supporter's creative explanation of events. Trump's retweet of Coulter's claims invited his supporters to adopt the discursive logic of events and share their creative imagination of the events with Trump and others online, creating an echo chamber for his rhetorical vision to circulate and recirculate. The retweets, likes, and replies to these tweets compose a scattered collection of discourse, in which rhetorical visions co-develop to explain a commonly observed outcome using their own interpretation of events (e.g. Bormann, 1972; Trump, 2016; Coulter 2016).

As Bormann (1972) suggested that a group of people will not make their motivations known to a broader public if it better serves their purpose to conceal their motivations, it is plausible that Trump hesitated to assert that his supporters should #StopTheSteal early on. If Trump had done so, it would have communicated unethical motivations to a broader public and could have potentially prompted a swifter and more substantial response from his critics. Symbolic cues, therefore, were used by Trump and other Republicans to vaguely refer to these ideas in abstract ways, making the group's motivations and magnitude more difficult to understand to outsiders (Bormann, 1972).

Bormann (1985) explains that a symbolic cue can be a code word, phrase, slogan, or nonverbal sign. It can refer to a real or fictitious place, it may arouse tears or evoke anger, hatred, love, and affection as well as laughter and humor. Not only do these symbolic cues work to conceal characteristics of the group, but also the communication and use of these symbols reinforces the feeling of belonging of members within a small group.

While the protest event in Colorado included a relatively small number of demonstrators, the strong appeal of the hashtag #StopTheSteal made it a powerful symbol of Trump's rhetorical vision, which was immediately adopted by Trump's online following (McMillian, 2017; Hariman, 2021, Hayes; 2021). Given the overwhelming victory of Ted Cruz in the state, this protest is perhaps the first historical example of a demonstration that resulted in Trump's perpetuation of falsehoods regarding election results. This event could be considered a critical moment in Trump's development of two primary fantasy themes: media bias and an unlawful transfer of power.

To Trump's supporters, the fantasies of a biased media and an unlawful transfer of power worked together to uphold a larger truth, that is, democracy is under attack. This rhetorical vision was developed by Stone's #StopTheSteal campaign in 2016 and would eventually evolve into the insurrection during Trump's January 6 speech. Applying FTA to what we know about #StopTheSteal may help us to better understand the movement's contribution to the development of a violent rebellion. Reality is created through communication, which often includes symbols. The meanings of these symbols converge, contributing to the development of a shared consciousness (Bormann, 1985). Evidence of such convergence can be seen in the repeating trend of #StopTheSteal; its repeating

pattern increases the influence of the phrase's rhetorical power because it contributes to the development of a group identity over time (Bormann, 1985).

The fantasy theme of unlawful transfers of power is extended to the next use of "Stop the Steal" during Florida's 2018 midterm elections. Kellyanne Conway, a former campaign manager and consultant to Trump, told multiple news organizations that Trump had evidence to confirm that Democrats attempted to "steal" the Florida midterm elections (Smith & Vitali, 2018). On November 10, 2018, Trump tweeted: "Trying to STEAL two big elections in Florida! We are watching closely!" (Trump, 2018). Here we see Trump symbolically cue #StopTheSteal using a vague reference to the movement, "STEAL." Since Trump distanced himself from the named #StopTheSteal campaign and hashtag specifically, I argue that his distance represented a systematic strategy that allowed the campaign to grow and proliferate as an organic grass-roots movement developed by people that shared concerns about the election's fairness. Trump was able to symbolically, yet vaguely cue his audience to the movement by making sense of the suggested election rigging at hand in the same manner as the movement.

Trump used Twitter to symbolically and vaguely cue the narratives circulating throughout these alt-right sites and at campaign rallies, thereby perpetuating falsehoods that were consistently removed by Twitter and Facebook without explicitly evoking them (Baines, Ittefaq, & Abwao 2021). On August 18, 2018, Trump tweeted: "Social media is totally discriminating against Republican/Conservative voices. Speaking loudly and clearly for the Trump Administration, we won't let that happen. They are closing down the opinions of many people on the RIGHT, while at the same time doing nothing to others....." (Trump, 2018). To Trump's followers, this communicated early-on that he

identified with their shared beliefs while vaguely communicating to them that Twitter's censorship forced their creative interpretation of his words. This tweet provides Trump's audience with a reason to creatively imagine what issues led Trump to call on their help. It also invites the audience to ponder the qualities of the issues, as they imagine how the concealment of their shared worldview could benefit both themselves and Trump.

Here I argue that the description of the #StopTheSteal Facebook page represents the fantasy theme of an unlawful transfer of power, which is shown to be evoked by Trump in the following Tweet from the day before the insurrection, January 5, 2021:

“Washington is being inundated with people who don't want to see an election victory stolen by emboldened Radical Left Democrats. Our Country has had enough, they won't take it anymore! We hear you (and love you) from the Oval Office. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!” (Trump, 2021).

The description for the #StopTheSteal campaign's Facebook page reads as follows:

“Democrats are scheming to disenfranchise and nullify Republican votes. It's up to us, the American People, to fight and to put a stop to it. Along with President Trump, we will do whatever it takes to ensure the integrity of this election for the good of the nation.”

As the self-described page discusses “scheming Democrats” and that it aims to preserve the “integrity of the election,” we can identify the same themes in Trump's Tweet, as he evokes the beliefs that Democrats are plotting to “steal” the election. Although the initial #StopTheSteal movement was engineered by Trump's advisor Roger Stone, it appeared to others as a campaign independent of Trump, allowing him to interact with the slogan as though it was a likeminded person that he identified with.

Similarly, the Coulter re-tweet, while separate, added rhetorical potency to the larger meaning of #StopTheSteal. This gives the symbol a greater potential to chain-out and facilitate a dramatic interpretation of contested elections, like Florida's midterm elections in 2018.

At the time he won the Republican nomination, #StopTheSteal was not a term used by Trump. Instead, it was a seemingly independent campaign slogan that exemplified the claims made by Trump. In other words, the slogan did not start with Trump, but it came to capture the essence of his larger and broader political campaign and, in doing so, it incited his base by capitalizing on the fears and anxieties of his supporters. It is important to consider Stone's proximity to Trump throughout the development of #StopTheSteal, as it demonstrated Trump's knowledge and influence over the expansion of his rhetorical vision. The evolution of #StopTheSteal continued in 2020 during the primary election between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. During a press conference on September 23, 2020, Trump explained that the ballots were a "disaster" and that he wanted to expedite the appointment of Associate Justice Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court due to a "scam" the Democrats were planning for the election. Trump's proximity to #StopTheSteal coincides with the development of online environments that his supporters used to organize in groups (Holt, 2021).

The following tweets exemplify Bormann's (1985) assertion that those who share in a fantasy do so in an appropriate tone and with appropriate feeling. In other words, members would not laugh at a tragic dramatization, nor would they groan at a humorous one. This psychological situation, being caught within a narrative, is compared by Bormann (1985) to being engrossed in a novel, film, anecdote, or even identifying with a

sacred myth. The rhetorical critic must extract and identify convergent fantasy themes by looking for recurrent dramatizing materials. Such materials could include word play, narratives, figures, or analogies (Bormann, 1985). On December 10, 2020, Trump Tweeted: “Why didn’t the Fake News Media, the FBI and the DOJ report the Biden matter BEFORE the Election. Oh well, it’s OK, we won the Election anyway - 75,000,000 VOTES!!!” (Trump, 2020). The connection between the fantasy themes of a biased media and an unlawful transfer of power is seen in this first tweet. Trump evokes these fantasy themes underscoring #StopTheSteal by claiming that he won the election, blaming both media and government agencies for his loss – while the two fantasy themes work to support the larger vision of a democracy under attack. These fantasy themes uphold this vision by supporting narratives of votes not being counted and elections being rigged.

Bormann’s (1985) description of engrossed narratives helps to explain how seriously individuals began to take Trump’s remarks, while others struggled to see the persuasive power in the movement. As a leader sets the appropriate tone for the shared fantasy, they reinforce their shared worldview. Trump reassured his followers of the election victory and encouraged them to rebuke challenging information by evoking the two fantasy themes of a biased media and an unlawful transfer of power. The fantasy theme of a biased media is glaring in Trump’s denouncement of the “Fake News Media” in this tweet, converging their culpability in this matter with the “FBI and the DOJ” to provide his audience with the narrative that misinformation was enabling enforcement agencies to contribute to an unlawful transfer of power.

On December 11, 2020 founder of the Oath Keepers, Stewart Rhodes, sent a private message in a chat titled “Dec 12 DC Security/Leadership” regarding President-Elect Joe Biden. In the correspondence, Rhodes stated, “It will be a bloody and desperate fight. We are going to have to fight. That can’t be avoided.” (*United States of America v. Joshua James*, 2021). In the message recorded from December 11, 2020 within the court filing, a belief in unlawful transfer of power manifests in the follower’s interpretation of Trump’s advocacy. Rhodes claimed that the insurrection was intended to counteract an actual government coup from Trump’s adversaries.

On December 18, 2020 Trump re-Tweeted the following: “RT @BuckSexton: The most dangerous opponents of free speech in America today are mainstream journalists and social media companies...” (Trump, 2020). In this re-tweet, Trump adds to an existing conversation by reinforcing the fantasy theme that mainstream media is biased to support a coup against him. Bormann (2009) explained that the process through which small groups fantasize can be applied to the way dramatizations of public messages proliferate through broader groups. As Trump set the tone for his audience’s shared fantasy on Twitter, he shaped the way his followers made sense of these issues in small groups. By virtue of this process, Trump shaped the appeal of his future dramatizations by matching the tone he previously set.

Pro-Trump online news articles circulated across social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, compelling supporters to take action to stop the steal (Holt, 2021). As such, actions Trump only alluded to or vaguely described fell within the creative interpretation of his supporters, but their actions and response demonstrated that Trump could compel them to action. The protest in Colorado provides one insightful example.

Trump's evocation of #StopTheSteal in response to his loss led them to peacefully demonstrate at the state capital and did not lead to a violent protest. That is to say, while the rhetorical vision was potent enough to call these protestors to action, it was nonviolent. As an emergent rhetorical vision, the participants were not completely exalted into what Bormann (1970) might call "a world of heroes versus villains." Participation in this fantasy did not necessitate violent action on their part that day. In other words, they did not see themselves as a last resort to save the United States' democracy from eternal corruption, but their demonstration evidences their participation in the development of the same rhetorical vision seen on January 6. In a situation in which there is no "good vs evil" imperative or leader, the group is left to interpret their own standards of action, success, and failure (Bormann, 1972). While this event demonstrates the evolution of #StopTheSteal, more examination is needed to explain how this symbol became a rallying cry for a violent rebellion against the United States.

Taking a moment to reconsider Bormann's (2009) application of small-group dramatization to broader publics, the protest in Colorado is a crucial example of #StopTheSteal's appeal. The protestors at this event represented only a small margin of individuals that believed in #StopTheSteal's message. Bormann (2009) explained that, even at a distance, the participation in a rhetorical vision prompts us to vicariously experience a way of life. The participation in such a rhetorical vision can be seen in an individual's contribution to a composite drama. In this case, people that lauded the Colorado's protestors on Twitter had the potential to vicariously experience the way of life of the protester. This protest serves as an example of a small group's fantasy being dramatized and extrapolated into a larger public. As users contributed to the rhetorical

vision, their vicarious experience of the shared drama caught them up in the storyline, creating a common culture among the broader group.

The establishment of an alternative fact-seeking environment would set the stage for the years-long development of #StopTheSteal into a rhetorical movement, its evolution into violent insurrection, and its eventual decay. As the power of FTA can be found in its capacity to describe the development, evolution, and decay of the dramas that concern these groups, the #StopTheSteal movement represents the significant development of a drama that would evolve into the insurrection. By extension, Trump's remarks on January 6 would epitomize the evolution of the same drama, and finally, the pleas made by those arrested for their role in the riot are appropriate to represent what Bormann (1972) termed the decay of such drama. I argue that the development, evolution, and decay of these dramas occurs in an eb-and-flow manner. Throughout each stage, interactions fueled by multiple perspectives compete for dominance over the others. In this case, the location of the group's discourse being an abundance of alt-right social media sites meant that the narrative's competition for dominance centered around the creative interpretation of events, not the logic on which the individual movements were founded (Cassirer, 1946). In effect, this galvanized the development of the shared vision. Should the underlying rhetorical vision of #StopTheSteal have eventually become the dominant perspective in the country, the development and evolution of the strategy would have led to an eventual decay of that vision. The vision, which connected these smaller groups, would have naturally decayed after its climax. If the goals were achieved, the movement would lack a reason to continue to dramatize narratives (Bormann, 1972).

The decay of “Stop the Steal” as a rhetorical vision is cyclical and shows that it can re-emerge after its decay. The eb-and-flow effect of decay is exemplified in Clinton’s concession to Trump in 2016. Close to the election Trump tweeted “If this election is close, THEY WILL STEAL IT.” (Trump, 2020). Although #StopTheSteal was a developed strategy the campaign was using, Trump’s win over Clinton attenuated this strategy’s rhetorical potential because there was no need to call anyone to action. This eb would later flow into the interpretation that Democrats did indeed try to steal the election in 2016, but that the Republican voters were able #StopTheSteal by overwhelming the Democrat’s efforts to rig the election with the Republican voter turnout. In light of the magnitude of this campaign, I suggest that an absolute decay of such a large movement is unlikely, but that a significant reduction of its deployment and influence describes the fantasy’s decay as negotiated by Bormann (1972).

The pervasiveness of the #StopTheSteal movement should be conceptualized with a similar duality. As mainstream media outlets covered Trump, particularly in their efforts to delegitimize Trump’s positive attributes and spotlight his shortcomings, they inadvertently played into his narrative of a biased and untrustworthy mainstream media. As the #StopTheSteal movement proliferated among Trump-supporters, mainstream media continued to delegitimize the movement without acknowledging its persuasive merits. Throughout multiple elections, these feelings of media bias facilitated an exodus of Trump-supporters away traditional media and sent them towards online groups of likeminded individuals from which to seek their news. The consequences of this exodus could linger through future elections.

#StopTheSteal has become a primary rhetorical strategy used by Trump and his close allies anytime votes are being counted. Across its development, this symbol shows that shifting patterns within a group can influence the way group consciousness collects, continues, declines, and disappears. The symbolic convergence between #StopTheSteal and the group fantasy that an unlawful transfer of power was imminent, over time, facilitated a shift in the meaning of the group's action. Facilitated by a migration to alternative social media, the meaning of the symbol shifted, and the motivations of the participants became more specific while their symbolic cues became more vaguely focused (Bormann, 2001). Examination of the movement can also help outsiders understand the influence that group consciousness has on meanings, motives, and communication inside the group in the presence of its vague symbolic cues (Bormann, 1985). These symbolic cues are found in the fantasy themes of a biased media and an unlawful transfer of power, where the group's interpretation of these cues is evidenced in the collective action they undertook on January 6, 2021.

Trump's distance from the slogan, campaign, hashtag, protest, etc., necessitated group activities to make meaning of their collective identity. Fueled by Stone's claims, a myriad of like-minded groups developed across the internet, pluralizing the broader assumptions of the #StopTheSteal playbook into a collection of denominations that featured their own creative interpretation of certain details while sharing the fundamental fantasies that underpin the broader rhetorical vision of #StopTheSteal. As Trump tapped into and evoked the fantasy themes of #StopTheSteal without claiming ownership of the slogan, he contributed to its appeal by echoing sentiments between himself and the movement. Trump, however, evaded accountability for the slogan's overt harm to

democracy as it proliferated and grew across social media because he was only vaguely connected to it through symbols, which were understood only by the in-group. Trump was able to exploit the appeal of #StopTheSteal by converging his rhetorical strategy with the attitudes and beliefs of those who identified with the hashtag, yet the vague overlap of this convergence allowed his supporters to conceal the magnitude of the insurrection. Due to the severity of the attack and evidence for the systematic and vague scattering of symbolic cues related #StopTheSteal's development, I argue that #StopTheSteal should be considered a broader rhetorical movement that is scattered, which has roots in a campaign originally started by Roger Stone.

While Twitter and Facebook facilitated the emergence of #StopTheSteal, the violent undertones and directives associated with the hashtag did not gain traction until the migration to alt-right social media sites like Parlor or 4chan (Tran, 2021). Consequences of Twitter's failure to quickly remove such content may be seen in the widespread belief in these claims. By not immediately removing #StopTheSteal content, Twitter legitimized the movement as a political sub-group of people instead of a dangerous fringe group. I argue that #StopTheSteal's persuasive appeal as a symbolic cue was bolstered by the hashtag's removal because it played into the group's fantasy that the media is biased. Bormann (1985) would have considered such a fantasy as archetypal, as these fantasies have both the sense-making advantages of generalization and the persuasive power of specific information (Bormann, 1985). Removal of the content could be generalized as a consequence and byproduct of media bias, yet it evokes the idea that the rhetoric's presence on social media could be problematic to the goals of those who disagree. The sense-making advantage of such a fantasy is made more powerful when

individuals are able to organize their personal experiences alongside the community that adheres to the group fantasy (Bormann, 1985). Bormann (1985) called the organization of this experience a script, as members negotiate their experience using the archetypal fantasy, allowing the community to generalize about a specific event without the abstractness that comes with generalizations (Bormann, 1985).

The privacy afforded by alternative and fringe social media sites enabled Trump supporters to reinforce their beliefs in an environment outside the purview of traditional media outlets as they organized their scripts. The platform shift empowered these individuals to dramatically co-interpret current events with like-minded individuals in ways that fit their preexisting perception of reality, fueled by their excitement with the new group. While traditional social media outlets may have spotlighted the fringe nature of some of these alternative sites, it actually breathed more life and legitimacy into the platforms for Trump supporters who were already skeptical of mainstream news.

Evidence of #StopTheSteal's contribution to the development of a highly persuasive and subversive rhetorical vision can be seen in the justification of its de-platforming of the movement across mainstream social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. The order in which these events unfolded also contributed to its persuasive influence: as group members begin to see an environment as biased against their worldview, they begin to seek out likeminded communities (Bormann, 1985). #StopTheSteal was not hindered by its de-platforming, but rather, progressed into online spaces like Parler and 4chan that welcomed like-minded perspectives and, like Trump, shared a collective distrust for traditional social media.

Bormann (1982) explained the power of the theoretical framework that underpins FTA, STC, noting that such power stems from humanity's proclivity to make sense of phenomena in relation to people with specific personality characteristics or motives, prompting people to entertain the perspectives of the people that make decisions and act. Making sense of these events in terms of human activity enables people to promote narratives of blame or responsibility. This allows people to make sense of events in terms of who is guilty or who is innocent because it includes a sensemaking process that requires an individual's interpretation of another human's actions (Bormann, 1982).

The fact-checking and censorship of misinformation that mainstream social media such as Facebook and Twitter engaged in shaped the migration of the groups' discourse from one online platform to the next. Such censorship extended the fantasy theme that mainstream media is biased to extend to mainstream social media as well (Tran, 2021). As users sought safe discursive environments that welcomed their interpretation of events, Trump's supporters were able to avoid information that challenged their interpretation of current events and were provided with a safe forum for dramatizing the narratives that continued to preoccupy their group. This exemplifies Bormann's (2001) assertion that likeminded people tend to pursue relationships that are compatible with their worldview and avoid those that could challenge their interpretation of certain events. Fact-checking and removal of misinformation regarding rigged elections and COVID-19 would lead to platforms like Parler and 4chan being adopted by like-minded individuals as they were seen by their users to value free speech and truth compared to Twitter and Facebook (Baines, Ittefaq, & Abwao 2021).

These alternative social media sites provided forums for Trump's followers to interpret the events that led to their removal from Twitter and Facebook. Remember that Bormann (1982) argued that people make sense of events in terms of human activity in order to promote blame or responsibility. By tweeting that "Social media is totally discriminating against Republican/Conservative voices" (Trump, 2020), Trump made sense of #StopTheSteal's removal from social media as a consequence of social media's character or personality. By portraying social media in this way, Trump facilitated the discussion of social media's role in the current events among his followers. Trump perpetuated this specific way of conceptualizing these issues but did not offer a creative interpretation regarding their specific role in the events. This likely acted as an appealing feature of the rhetorical vision to Trump's audience, as his vague explanation necessitated their creative interpretation through discourse on alternative social media. This discourse, when observed by other members, represents an appealing and dramatized narrative. Bormann (1972) explains that whenever occasions seem so chaotic and indiscriminate that a community has no clear observational impression of the facts, members are given free rein to fantasize within the assumptions of their rhetorical visions without inhibition. By summarily removing content associated with #StopTheSteal but failing to denounce the movement or explain the benefit of its removal, followers of #StopTheSteal were left to interpret what led to this event, shaped by the person-like sensemaking of social media that was perpetuated by Trump's tweets. This may have contributed to Trump's followers feeling silenced and disenfranchised by social media, as they conceptualized their perpetuation of misinformation as a difference of opinion.

Bormann (1972) demonstrated the usefulness of fantasy theme analysis in terms of examining two stories that reach climax at the same time. Bormann's (1972) endeavored to bring a conscious analysis to a phenomenon he acknowledged was observable and tacit. Bormann's (1972) essay described, using fantasy theme analysis, how the dramatization of unfolding events created a social reality for the individuals who are engrossed in the storyline. Similarly, I endeavor to bring a conscious analysis to a tacit phenomenon as I argue that the narratives regarding #StopTheSteal reached a climax along with Trump's speech. #StopTheSteal represents a developed storyline, through which the dramatization of unfolding events created a social reality for the movement's adherents. Bormann (1972) explained that messages cast in-person give a more structured, understandable, and meaningful interpretation of the storyline. This supports the idea that Trump's speech on January 6 acted as a way for Trump to attribute motives, purposes, and causes to people within the broader storyline during his remarks. This examination of #StopTheSteal is a prerequisite to understanding how the dramatization of its fantasy themes may have led to the insurrection.

This chapter has discussed #StopTheSteal in terms of Trump's rhetorical strategies and contextualized the slogan as an element of Trump's rhetorical vision. This chapter gathered two primary fantasy themes: biased media and unlawful transfers of power, which underpin the rhetorical vision that democracy is under attack. The next analysis chapter discusses the continuation of the fantasies gathered in this chapter that underpin the broader rhetorical vision perpetuated by #StopTheSteal in terms of the movement's evolution into the insurrection of January 6, 2021. This analysis focuses on the speech Trump gave in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021. The symbolic realities

shared by groups online and in-person demonstrate the way traditional mediums work in tandem with social media to increase the appeal of social movements (Wu & Zhu, 2017). As such, the symbolic realities vaguely cued by Trump's remarks on January 6 are paralleled with the rhetorical vision associated with the emergent #StopTheSteal vision.

CHAPTER FOUR

INSURRECTION SPEECH 2021

After Trump's loss of the 2020 election, the outgoing president met with members of the House of Representatives to consider a plan of action intended to empower Congress to challenge the election results on January 6 (Zanona, 2021). Election officials and journalists warned the country that Trump's strategies could provoke violence at the Capitol Building, as armed militias were organizing in response to Trump's claims of a stolen election (Blake, 2021). In the days leading up to the demonstration, Trump-supporting rallies took place in Washington D.C. (Carless, 2021). The groundwork for the gathering can be seen as early as December 18, when Trump tweeted: "Big Protest in D.C. On January 6th. Be there, will be wild!" (Trump, 2020). Thousands of individuals gathered at The Ellipse in an endeavor to overturn the 2020 election results (Lucas, 2022). Composed of evangelical Christians, far-right militants, and white supremacists, many of the Trump-supporting crowd members came to the "Save America" rally as representatives of alt-right movements such as the Boogaloo movement, Three Percenters, America First Movement, Stop The Steal Movement, Blue Lives Matter, Proud Boys, QAnon Followers, and other far-right organizations (Hesson, Parker, Harte, 2021).

Some consequences of the ensuing riot include at least five deaths, 140 injured Capitol Police officers, and over 700 arrests (Zou, & Logan, 2022). The subsequent proceedings have shown that the damages to the Capitol Building exceed 1.5 million

dollars; over fifty subpoenas have been delivered regarding the five lawsuits filed against the riot's participants (Zou, & Logan, 2022). Even in the wake of this aftermath, many Trump supporters continue to believe that he won the election (Grofman, 2022).

In this examination of Trump's speech at the Ellipse on January 6, 2020, I draw on the two fantasy themes gathered in the previous chapter—a biased media and unlawful election—to explore the connection between #StopTheSteal and Trump's speech in the evolution of the insurrection. Scholars that have used theories of group dynamics to explain the disinhibited violence that took place during the insurrection recognize that both #StopTheSteal and Trump's speech are linked to group actions (e.g. Samuelson, 2022; Winget, & Park, 2022). While these examinations help to explain how the group became violent, they are limited in their ability to reconstruct the specific worldview of the individuals who participated. I argue that #StopTheSteal evolved from a post-election dispute strategy into a violent insurrection during Trump's speech as he capitalized on the fantasy themes of a biased media and an unlawful transfer of power. This conceptualization endeavors to reconstruct the meaning of Trump's speech in relation to #StopTheSteal by demonstrating that the two fantasy themes gathered in the previous chapter were magnified by Trump during his remarks on January 6 as he directed his followers to take action.

As Trump opened his address, he bewailed the media's representation of his audience. "The media will not show the magnitude of this crowd," Trump insisted, "We have hundreds of thousands of people here, and I just want them to be recognized by the fake news media" (1). Trump reinforced the idea of a biased media when he encouraged his audience to share the event with a broader public: "Turn your cameras, please, and

show what’s really happening out here, because these people are not going to take it any longer” (1). Trump continued to condemn the media, when he stated, “The media is the biggest problem we have, as far as I’m concerned, single biggest problem – the fake news and the big tech” (2). The consequences of these issues are described as Trump asserted “they rigged an election. They rigged it like they’ve never rigged an election before” (2).

Trump’s speech on January 6 echoed the sentiments and appeals that have come to define #StopTheSteal. Viewed alongside the artifacts analyzed in the previous chapter, the statements above reveal the extent to which Trump capitalized on the two rhetorical fantasies that he developed with #StopTheSteal into the ensuing riot. Next, Trump praised his followers, saying, “It’s just a great honor to have this kind of crowd and to be before you and hundreds of thousands of American patriots who are committed to the honesty of our elections and the integrity of our glorious republic” (3). Trump reinforced the group’s shared perspective that an unlawful transfer of power is imminent, when he asserted, “All of us here today do not want to see our election victory stolen by emboldened radical left Democrats” (3). Reinforcing the theme of a biased media, he added, “and stolen by the fake news media,” and ultimately arrived at the declaration that “We will never concede. It doesn’t happen. You don’t concede when there’s theft involved” (3).

Trump’s advocacy, that his audience “never concede,” can be linked to Bormann’s (2001) assertion that fantasy themes are developed to fulfill needs. Trump communicated a need to shift the status quo, when he demanded, “We will not take it anymore and that’s what this is all about” (4). Trump credited his followers with the

development of a rhetorical strategy: “And to use a favorite term that all of you people really came up with, we will ‘stop the steal’” (4). This event represents Trump’s first public use of the phrase “stop the steal,” which he only evoked twice throughout his speech, once in the beginning and once more at the end. By crediting his followers with this slogan, Trump both endows his audience with a sense of accomplishment and evades culpability for the movement. Trump promised to expose evidence “proving that we won this election, and we won by a landslide. This was not a close election” (4). While Trump explained that their purpose for gathering centered on avoiding an “election victory stolen,” he simultaneously blamed Democrats and the media – evoking the fantasy themes of a biased media and an unlawful transfer of power.

I argue that Trump’s use of the phrase “stop the steal” fulfilled his desire to gather support by addressing two of his audience’s psychological needs: to clearly identify Trump as the figurehead of the #StopTheSteal movement, and to hear Trump share his evidence of the events that lead to the “steal.” Trump’s identification with #StopTheSteal at this preliminary moment in the speech dramatized the setting and made the narrative uniquely appealing. Trump denounced the election’s integrity, when he claimed, “Nobody knows what the hell is going on” (6). “There’s never been anything like this,” he assured his audience, and “[w]e will not let them silence your voices” (6). As Bormann (1970) showed that dramatized communication is a powerful way to create and form social realities for groups of people, Trump’s dramatization made his speech more resonant with listeners.

Turning back to “Let’s Go Brandon” proves insightful. Similar to the way the patrons of the NASCAR race began to creatively re-interpret the phrase to symbolically

converge with “Fuck Joe Biden,” Trump’s speech on January 6th drew people into a shared symbolic world and communicated to them that some actions were needed to save democracy. Unlike the insurrection, the NASCAR event should be attributed to happenstance since Trump led the interpretation of the crowd in D.C. In order to understand the influence of this dramatized discourse, it is crucial to conceptualize the insurrection as a product of the dichotomy between Trump and his audience, mediated by #StopTheSteal. Scholars of FTA have shown that the relationship between leader and follower is a powerful discursive environment for dramatized narratives to be created and shared within a group (Cragan & Shields, 1992). Just as the interpretation of the announcer lead to the audience’s creative interpretation of events at the NASCAR race, Trump’s use of symbols developed by the #StopTheSteal movement were magnified during his speech, which invited, and may have ultimately incited, his audience to interpret this as a justification for violence. The limitation of this example can be seen in the fact that the NASCAR announcer was misinterpreted by the audience, while the interpretation that Trump guided his audience to may have been more calculated.

By tapping into the audience’s awareness of electoral integrity and describing the country as a glorious republic, Trump exalted his followers into a world of heroes and villains. This narrative was stoked by Trump’s praise of his close advisor Rudy Giuliani paired with his denouncement of the Republican party. “He’s got guts, unlike a lot of people in the Republican Party,” Trump asserted of Giuliani (8). Trump made suggestions for Vice President Pence and the actions he should take in order to preserve democracy, highlighting the interpretive gaps in electoral process left by the vague language of the Twelfth Amendment. Trump explained, “if Mike Pence does the right

thing, we win the election. All he has to do. All – this is from the number one or certainly one of the top constitutional lawyers in our country” (9). Trump continued to defend Pence’s authority to meet his demands: “He has the absolute right to do it. We’re supposed to protect our country, support our country, support our Constitution and protect our Constitution” (9). Trump began to position Pence as a potential hero or villain, dependent on Pence’s actions, when he acknowledged, “States want to revoke. The states got defrauded. They were given false information. They voted on it. Now they want to recertify. They want it back. All Vice President Pence has to do is send it back to the states to recertify, and we become president, and you are the happiest people” (9). Bormann (1985) explains that symbolic convergence is evidenced if members of an audience experience similar emotions, regard the same people as heroes and villains, celebrate the same actions, and interpret elements of their experiences in the same way.

Since Pence had already communicated to Trump that he did not intend to discount the votes in question, Trump’s remark preemptively positioned Pence as a villainous actor. This identification of hero figures and villains, along with the identification of the setting as the heart of the nation’s democracy, further exalted Trump’s followers into a dramatized narrative in which they may have viewed their own actions as critical to the nation’s integrity. This was bolstered by the immediacy that Trump communicated during his speech. The dramatization of the actors, the setting, and time helped Trump ennoble his followers and compel them to take violent actions. Trump used the location to evoke feelings of patriotism and fear in his audience, when he asserted, “...we will not let them take the name off the Washington Monument. We will not. Cancel culture” (11). Trump then suggested that the Biden administration symbolizes

a cultural crisis. “You know, they wanted to get rid of the Jefferson Memorial,” he warned, telling the audience “Although with this administration, if this happens, it could happen. You’ll see some really bad things happen” (11). Trump continued to refer to historical monuments, positioning himself and his audience as protectors of these monuments and the values he associates with them. “They’ll knock out Lincoln too, by the way,” Trump charged (12). “They’ve been taking his statue down,” he continued, “[b]ut then we signed a little law. You hurt our monuments, you hurt our heroes, you go to jail for 10 years, and everything stopped” (12). As Trump praised his own efforts to preserve these monuments and the ideologies they symbolize, he began to empower his audience to take action. “We’ve gathered together in the heart of our nation’s capital for one very, very basic and simple reason: to save our democracy,” he asserted (13). Trump highlighted the audience’s need to take action by explaining, “We want to go back, and we want to get this right because we’re going to have somebody in there that should not be in there and our country will be destroyed, and we’re not going to stand for that” (13).

As Bormann (2001) showed, fantasy theme artistry is utilized in order to facilitate interpretation through communication. Trump capitalized on the fantasy themes underscoring #StopTheSteal to facilitate his audience’s interpretation that violent actions were necessary that day. As Cragan and Shields (1992) have shown, shared group consciousnesses is a precursor to a fantasy theme chaining-out. Perhaps Trump’s use of #StopTheSteal to organize his audience allowed him to employ their shared rhetorical vision to coalesce and spread his interpretation of events. This notion is supported by the idea that Trump’s rhetorical vision acted as a way to unite multiple subgroups of scattered people during his speech. This tangible growth of group consciousness,

observable in the crowd's gathering, both reduces uncertainty and allows people to conceptualize themselves in terms of their place within the broader group (Beebe, Masterson, Harris, & Sherblom, 1986).

Trump spoke vaguely about issues he attributed to the "steal," providing a variety of narratives that support the fantasy themes of a biased media and an unlawful transfer of power. "For years," Trump proclaimed, "Democrats have gotten away with election fraud and weak Republicans, and that's what they are" (14). "There's so many weak Republicans," he asserted (14). Trump continued to villainize outsiders and exalt his followers by describing their admirable qualities: "But just remember this. You're stronger. You're smarter. You've got more going than anybody, and they try and demean everybody having to do with us, and you're the real people" (14). Through parallelism, Trump elevated his audience and credited them with the nation's virtues as he communicated that the nation is broken due to others: "You're the people that built this nation. You're not the people that tore down our nation" (14).

Bormann (1985) explains that the dramatization of a narrative increases its appeal, particularly when such a dramatization includes actors that represent heroes and villains. Since Trump positioned himself as an individual appointed by the audience to guard democracy, he assumed a savior role and positioned his political opponents as villains attempting to steal the nation's government. Bormann (1985) describes group roles, explaining that the emergence of a leader within a group will prompt other group members to conceptualize their role within the group. In fact, any discussion of a member's perceived role within a group will prompt others to ponder their own role. This

means that Trump's assertions positioned him as the peoples' chosen leader, leaving his supporters to conceptualize their role as supporters and defenders of Trump's leadership.

Think back to Trump's tweet on November 10, 2018, which represents a fantasy theme gathered in the previous analysis chapter. This theme, that an unlawful transfer of power is imminent, is found in Trump's speech as he identifies with the movement at the beginning and end of the speech. We can look to the fantasy themes gathered in the previous chapter to show the vague ways Trump associated himself with the movement without identifying his membership in the group. Trump's tweet is evidence of a vague, symbolic relationship with the movement. "Trying to STEAL two big elections in Florida! We are watching closely!" (Trump, 2018).

As Bormann (1985) has shown, the increasing internalization and discussion of a fantasy's narrative will cause it to become more vaguely focused as the plot is reinforced through repetition. By the time Trump delivered his speech on January 6, he only needed to vaguely cue the fantasy theme of an unlawful transfer of power to evoke the vision that the election was stolen. This suggests that Trump's rhetorical strategy invited the audience to creatively interpret the events leading up to that day as incontrovertible truths. Trump dramatized his remarks as he gave the appearance that he was finally able to be explicit about what exactly had occurred, enabled by the tremendous support he said that he observed in the crowd.

Trump offered vague narratives to explain his need to save democracy. "But this year, using the pretext of the China virus and the scam of mail-in ballots," he asserted, "Democrats attempted the most brazen and outrageous election theft." (16). Trump was not explicit at this time about the mechanisms by which fraudulent activity occurred due

to mail-in ballots, blaming “explosions of bullshit” (16) for his subsequent loss in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Georgia. After a vague explanation, Trump switched gears and used Romney’s loss in 2008 to suggest a history of fraudulent elections, explaining “They didn’t go look at the facts,” as Trump makes sense of the nation’s predicament by suggesting, “All over the world, they talk about our elections” (17). “They say we don’t have free and fair elections,” Trump exclaimed as he shifted from a fantasy theme of an unlawful transfer of power to a fantasy theme of biased media, noting, “And you know what else? We don’t have a free and fair press” (17). Trump employed a highly dramatized strategy as he welcomed the crowd and described their need to gather. Trump shifted to a vaguer narrative as he described ballot issues, quickly evoking fantasy themes to reinforce his audience’s shared interpretation of events. By proposing that other countries observed these election issues, Trump perpetuated the fantasy themes of a biased media and an unlawful transfer of power by suggesting that an outside perspective observed them as well. These fantasy themes, bolstered by their development within #StopTheSteal, become a persuasive means by which the audience might accept Trump’s rhetorical vision.

Trump’s campaign developed this slogan and positioned him within the broader group as the chosen leader, while capitalizing on #StopTheSteal to perpetuate his worldview. #StopTheSteal’s development into a seemingly organic movement allowed its rhetorical power to develop in a scattered way. By the time of his speech, Trump capitalized on this rhetorical power by evoking the phrase in a manner that joined these shared perspectives into one large narrative. As he vaguely alluded to #StopTheSteal throughout its development, Trump’s fantasy theme artistry on January 6 allowed him to

suggest that he was aware of the audience's desire for violent retribution and condoned it. As early as 2016, Trump shared his perspective that riots "weren't necessarily a bad thing," depending on the perspective of the individual (White, 2016).

As Bormann (1985) distinguished themes that stoke narrative energy and those that reduce it, the online development of #StopTheSteal represented a years-long process that allowed the Trump campaign to observe the emergence of fantasy themes and determine which resonated with certain publics and which ones did not. This allowed Trump to determine which fantasy themes would support a rhetorical vision of a democracy under attack. Trump used these same themes to systematically summon the violence in D.C. As Trump conceptualized his place within the movement and identified with it, and the audience was able to become even more invested in Trump through what they saw as a demonstration of admirable qualities.

Trump continued to evoke the fantasy theme of media bias, when he noted, "Our media is not free. It's not fair. It suppresses thought. It suppresses speech, and it's become an enemy of the people" (18). Trump identified this as "the biggest problem we have in this country" (18). Trump heightens the dramatization of the narrative as he positions Pence once more as a potential hero or villain, depending on his actions. "We're going to have to fight much harder, and Mike Pence is going to have to come through for us" (18). Trump continued to dramatize the moment as critical to the integrity of democracy. "And if he doesn't," Trump suggested, "that will be a sad day for the country because you're sworn to uphold our Constitution" (18). As he set the stage for the actions that will need to be taken if Pence fails to uphold democracy, Trump explained, "Now it is up to Congress to confront this egregious assault on our democracy" (18). "We're

going to walk down to the Capitol,” he encouraged the audience, “and we’re going to cheer on our brave senators, and congressmen and women” (18). Trump further dramatized the narrative by reminding the audience that there are both heroes and villains in this situation, “and we’re probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them because you’ll never take back our country with weakness” (18).

This is evidence of the fantasy theme used by Trump since the Republican primary in 2016, that is, an unlawful transfer of power is imminent. Like the tweets from 2016, Trump’s speech on January 6 is also vague in terms of explaining the mechanisms by which these alleged fraudulent activities took place. Take another look at Trump’s tweet from the 2016 primaries: “The State of Iowa should disqualify Ted Cruz from the most recent election on the basis that he cheated – a total fraud!” (Trump, 2016). This reinforces Bormann’s (1985) notion regarding an increased discussion of a fantasy resulting in the development of vaguer narratives. As the subgroups that composed Trump’s audience looked to alt-right social media sites to exhaustively explain the actions taken by their rivals, Trump evoked the coalescence of the broader group in D.C. In doing so, he signaled to subgroups through symbolic cues of #StopTheSteal. These symbolic cues were linked to Trump through his activity on Twitter. As Trump’s rhetoric converged with #StopTheSteal on January 6, Trump identified with #StopTheSteal but suggested that it was independently developed by his supporters.

As Trump dramatized this event, Bormann’s (1972) focus on the ways communication forms social reality helps to illustrate the attraction of such discourse when paired with the illusion of another actor. Think back to the example given in the methods section regarding the employees at an electronics store. In this example, an

energized narrative emerged between two employees and a third employee was attracted to this dramatized discourse, so they adopted the interpretation of the new product launch shared by the other two employees. Bormann (1972) explains that the attraction to drama comes from observing interactions between individuals.

Trump made sense of #StopTheSteal as a separate entity, although his campaign originated the strategy. Trump's remarks created the illusion of a second opinion leader that he performatively interacted with for the group to observe. Within this mock interaction, the dramatization of discourse between the speech and #StopTheSteal's rhetoric became uniquely appealing to the audience. As Bormann (1972) described dramatized communication as something that increased tempo and a build-up of excitement, Trump's performative suggestion of a dichotomous interaction on January 6 made his calls to action dramatized, appealing to his followers as they observed the presence of an in-group and sought membership in the group. In this way, such an approach may have facilitated the evolution of the insurrection among non-violent protestors as they conceptualized themselves as part of a larger group. As the audience became increasingly dramatized, the formerly non-violent members of the group might have shifted their behavior to fit in accordance with their violent peers.

As Bormann (1985) explained, the emotional investment of an audience depends on speaker's admirable qualities. Toward that end, the identification the audience shares with those admirable qualities increases the investment in the narrative. In other words, the more the audience identifies with the speaker, the more appealing listeners will find the speaker's dramatized narrative. Such a large audience can interpret their experiences in a common way as they share fantasies and regard the same characters as heroes or

villains (Bormann, 1985). Evidence of this shared perspective can be found by identifying recurrent dramatized material. Bormann (1985) explains that this can look like word play in shared narratives, common figures, and prevalent analogies within the group's meeting.

Meandering stories, vague anecdotes, rhetorical questions, and self-talk fill the spaces between the fantasy themes that Trump adheres to throughout his speech. Trump thanks members of the House for no specific reason, digressing to describe Hillary Clinton as the "single most unhappy" person in the country (28). Trump circled back to thank "our 13 most courageous members of the US senate," while consoling Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue's loss by claiming, "it was rigged against them" and acknowledging "[t]hey fought a good race" (29). "They never had a shot," Trump lamented (29).

Trump contrasted these virtuous politicians with those who have led the country "down the tubes" (31). Trump demonstrated his admirable generosity by vaguely explaining that congressional leaders advocated for a reduced stimulus package of \$600 in response to the pandemic, while claiming to have proposed a \$2,000 payment: "I said, 'Give them \$2,000. We'll pay it back. We'll pay it back fast. You already owe 26 trillion. Give them a couple bucks. Let them live'" (31). Trump drew a parallel between this suggested disagreement regarding the stimulus with his claims of election fraud, while he built himself as a character with admirable generosity through his advocacy of an increased stimulus package, leveraging those qualities as a reason for his audience to find preferable his narrative regarding election fraud. "As you know the media has constantly asserted the outrageous lie that there is no evidence of widespread fraud," Trump asserted

(33). Trump increased drama by estimating the crowd as “hundreds of thousands of people,” and prefaced his continued explanation by stating “[d]on’t get angry with me because you’re going to get bored because it’s so much” (33). Trump reinforced a primary fantasy theme, when he asserted, “The American people do not believe the corrupt fake news anymore” (33).

Trump cited the media’s uncooperative attitude towards his rhetorical style as evidence of a failed democracy. “It’s called suppression,” he proclaimed, “[a]nd that’s what happens in a communist country.” (34) Trump strengthened the appeal of his next remark by evoking the fantasy theme of a biased media: “Where is Hunter? They don’t talk about him.” (34). As Trump vaguely described Hunter Biden’s connection to conspiracies regarding international energy trading, he employed the attractive nature of the fantasy theme of a biased media to make his claims about Hunter more persuasive to his audience. Already having prefaced these remarks with a fantasy theme of media bias, Trump circled back to this theme after making the claims by arguing “No, they don’t talk about that. No, we have a corrupt media” (36).

Next, Trump capitalized on his dramatization of the two primary fantasy themes by offering creative interpretations of Georgia’s gubernatorial race, digressing to discuss his former friendship with Oprah, and even musing about Brian Kemp’s stature in regard to his former position as an offensive lineman. Trump flowed into describing his displeasure with the Supreme Court, explaining that the court rules against him because the media has villainized him. Trump explained that the court does not want to be associated with him as a result of the media’s coverage of their appointments: “And the only way they get out is to rule against Trump. So let’s rule against Trump, and they do

that. So I want to congratulate them” (40). Trump used this narrative to return to a primary fantasy theme, when he stated, “it shows you the media’s genius” (41), simultaneously legitimizing the artistry of the news media while stoking the narrative energy around corruption.

Trump spent the next portion of his speech reiterating numerous claims regarding specific swing states. “In Pennsylvania,” Trump explained, “the Democrat secretary of state and the Democrat state Supreme Court justices illegally abolished the signature verification requirements” (45). He then suggested their reason for doing so, noting “[b]ecause they want to cheat” (45). Trump hastily listed the statistics associated with his claims, stating that “in Pennsylvania you had 205,00 more votes than you had voters,” which reinforced his claim that “Pennsylvania was defrauded” (46). Trump then claimed that “Over 8,000 ballots in Pennsylvania were cast by people whose names and dates of birth match individuals who died in 2020 and prior to the election” (46). The statistics regarding Pennsylvania continue, as Trump claimed that votes were “cast by out of state voters” and that “more than 60,000 ballots in Pennsylvania were reported received back. They got back before they were ever supposedly mailed out” (47). Trump continued to describe the issues in Pennsylvania, claiming that “an enormous illegal ballot-harvesting operation” connected to nursing homes resulted in over twenty-five thousand ballots being illegally cast. The last claim Trump makes regarding Pennsylvania - “400,000 ballots appeared from nowhere, right after the election” (48) - led Trump the conclusion that “they want to recertify their votes” and his explanation that “the only way that can happen is if Mike Pence agrees to send it back” (49).

Trump explained that Pence should obey the Constitution: “And you are, because you’re protecting the country and you’re protecting the Constitution” (50). Trump reinforced the fantasy theme of a biased media and warned the audience of the consequences of inaction. “You will have an illegitimate president, that’s what you’ll have,” Trump warned, and “we can’t let that happen” (51). Trump increased the persuasive nature of his message by reinforcing fantasy themes. “These are the facts that you won’t hear from the fake news media” because “[i]t’s all part of the suppression effort,” he stated (51).

The narrative of a suppression effort, reinforced by the fantasy theme of a biased media, is extended to Trump’s next claim that suppression polls in Wisconsin nearly caused his loss in the state. “Despite that, we won Wisconsin,” he continued, “[b]ut that’s called suppression because a lot of people, when they see that, it’s very interesting” (52). Trump switched away from describing the events that led to the “steal” in order to reinforce the fantasy themes that supported his broader vision. “And just like the radical left tried to blacklist you on social media,” Trump suggested, “every time I put out a tweet, even if it’s totally correct, I get a flag” (53). Trump strengthened the fantasy theme of media bias and extended it to social media, promoting his audience to creatively imagine his rhetorical needs as he states, “It’s very hard to get out a message” (53). Trump continued to suggest that “Republicans get rid of Section 230” (53). Section 230 represents the United States’ indifferent approach toward internet regulations. This contentious legislation protects social media conglomerates from the harms perpetuated by user-generated content (Dimitroff, 2021). The section states that “No provider or user

of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider" (47 U.S.C. § 230).

Trump further communicated that the current situation threatened his audience's way of life: "They also want to indoctrinate your children in school by teaching them things that aren't so" (54). As Trump described the events in the swing-states that led to his loss, he continues to weave the narrative of good versus evil to keep his audience in a dramatized world. Bormann (1972) explained that the demonstration of admirable qualities, paired with the foil of a villainous actor, is a powerful way to keep an audience engaged with a rhetorical vision. Trump dramatized a narrative regarding the war in Iraq to express that "weak congresspeople, the ones that aren't any good, the Liz Cheneys of the world, we got to get rid of them" (55). Trump villainized Cheney by stating "she never wants a soldier brought home," while portraying himself as a hero by claiming, "I brought them back home, largely back home, Afghanistan, Iraq" (55). Trump used this anecdote to perpetuate the concept of a dramatized world of heroes and villains, in which he is the savior figure. This narrative's location in the speech, between his claims regarding election fraud act as Trump's proof, functions as an invitation for his followers to see him as a hero of the story. The audience's identification with these admirable characteristics, according to Bormann (1972), increases their attraction to the speaker's rhetorical vision.

Trump continued to expound on the transgressions that led to his loss. "In Wisconsin," he maintained, "corrupt Democrat run cities deployed more than 500 illegal, unmanned, unsecured boxes, which collected a minimum of 90,000 unlawful votes" (55). Trump went on to say that "over 170,000 absentee votes were counted in Wisconsin

without a valid absentee ballot application,” in addition to his claims regarding Madison, Wisconsin, where “17,000 votes were deposited in so-called human drop boxes” (56). Trump accused the postal service of malfeasance, claiming that “workers in Wisconsin were also instructed to illegally backdate approximately 100,000 ballots” (57). Trump also perpetuated the issue of signature verification, as he argued that “Democrat party operatives entered into an illegal and unconstitutional settlement agreement” (57) that he claimed weakened verification standards and security procedures.

Trump moved on to his grievances with Georgia’s election, insisting that signature verification was needed because Fulton County “is known for being very corrupt” (58). Trump protested that “Georgia’s absentee ballot rejection rate was more than 10 times lower than previous levels, because the criteria was so off” (59). According to Trump, this meant that “they defrauded us out of a win in Georgia, and we’re not going to forget it” (60). Trump alleged that the water main rupture that occurred in Fulton County “was a total lie” as “election officials pulled boxes – Democrats – and suitcases of ballots from under a table” (61). Trump insisted that this fraudulent activity occurred in addition to the claim that “Over 103,000 ballots in Georgia were cast by individuals whose names and dates of birth match Georgia residents who died in 2020 prior to the election” (62). Trump listed statistics regarding votes of incarcerated people, unregistered voters, non-residents of the state, and underage voters. Trump also argued that “At least 80,000 ballots in Georgia were cast by people whose registrations were illegally backdated” (62). Trump fortified his evidence by claiming that “not a single swing state has conducted a comprehensive audit to remove the illegal ballots” (63).

Trump claimed that Arizona's election was influenced by similar wrongdoing. Trump stated that noncitizen voting occurred, that thousands of mail-in ballots were returned before they were sent, and that more votes were counted than registered voters. Trump argued that "one hundred and fifty thousand people registered in (Maricopa) County after the registration deadline" and that "One hundred three thousand ballots in the county were sent for electronic adjudication with no Republican observers" (65).

Trump quickly continued to list statistics as proof that fraudulent activity occurred, insisting that "In Clark County, Nevada, the accuracy settings on signature verification machines were purposely lowered before they were used to count over 130,000 ballots" (65). He continued to describe Nevada's issues, claiming that double votes, non-resident voting, and votes cast in the name of deceased people all contributed to his loss. "The margin in Nevada is down at a very low number," he insisted, stating that "[a]ny of these things would have taken care of the situation" (65).

Trump's issues with Michigan's election were similar to the other swing states. He argued that the secretary of state violated state law as they "flooded the state with unsolicited mail-in ballots" (66). Trump claimed that Michigan counted votes that were cast in the names of deceased individuals and that ballots from unregistered voters were counted. Trump cited observations by "poll watchers [who] observed canvassers re-scanning batches of ballots over and over again," which he alleges led to Detroit's voter turnout of "139% of registered voters" (66). In addition to using poll watchers as evidence, Trump claimed that in Michigan "Four witnesses have testified under penalty of perjury that after officials in Detroit announced the last votes had been counted, tens of

thousands of additional ballots arrived without requiring envelopes. Every single one was for a Democrat” (67).

As he continued to denounce the integrity of Michigan’s count, Trump touched on “the highly troubling matter of Dominion Voting Systems,” claiming that “In one Michigan county alone, 6,000 votes were switched from Trump to Biden and the same systems are used in the majority of states in our country” (69). Trump cited a letter he received from the chairman of the Georgia Senate Judiciary Subcommittee, Senator Ligon: “He wrote, and I quote, ‘The Dominion voting machines employed in Fulton County had an astronomical and astounding 93.67% error rate.’ That’s wrong 93% of the time” (70). Trump continued to quote the letter, eventually concluding that “the national average for such an error rate is less than 1% and yet you’re at 93%” (70). Bormann (1985) reported that group members who share a worldview tend to subconsciously categorize fantasy themes. This results in the audience communicating only about the general plot line of their shared worldview, while they spend little time exploring the details of the vision because those themes were subconsciously reconciled. This describes how Trump’s disparate examples worked together to bolster Trump’s worldview. As members subscribe to an archetypal fantasy, they are able to fit their unfolding experiences within their shared consciousness (Bormann, 1985). This makes challenging the worldview difficult for outsiders, and helps to reinforce the members’ shared vision.

As he begins to signal the conclusion of the speech, Trump switched his strategy away from describing the specific impacts of the fraudulent activity and began to suggest that actions could be taken to remedy the situation. “So I mean, I could go on and on about this fraud that took place in every state and all of these legislatures want this back,”

but Trump explained that he is limiting these details because “I love you and it’ freezing out here, but I could just go on forever” (71). Trump circled back to his original advocacy, suggesting that “Republicans have to get tougher” (73). He performatively criticized Republicans, saying they “want to play so straight, they want to play so, ‘Yes sir, the United States, the Constitution doesn’t allow me to send them back to the States” (73). In a clear response to Pence’s role in this constitutional ambiguity, Trump stated, “Well, I say, ‘Yes, it does because the Constitution says you have to protect our country and you have to protect our Constitution and you can’t vote on fraud” (73). Trump began to loosely suggest to his audience that their actions are necessary to preserve democracy as he told listeners “When you catch somebody in a fraud, you’re allowed to go by very different rules” (73).

As Trump reinforced the view that “this is the most corrupt election in the history, maybe of the world,” he called on Congress and state legislatures to “quickly pass sweeping election reforms” (74). Trump further dramatized the nature of the rally by stating “Today is not the end. It’s just the beginning” (74). Trump connected this dramatization to the #StopTheSteal movement: “With your help over the last four years, we built the greatest political movement in the history of our country,” explaining that “our fight against big donors, big media, and big tech are just getting started” (75). Trump exalted his followers into a world in which they are part of the most important moment in history by stating “This is the greatest in history. There’s never been a movement like that. You look back there all the way to the Washington Monument” (75). Trump reached a dramatic climax as he identified the time and place as the most important in history, he revealed his connection to what he has previously referred to as a

movement originated by his followers. “We must stop the steal and then we must ensure that such outrageous election fraud never happens again, can never be allowed to happen again, but we’re going forward” (75).

This section represents Trump’s second iteration of the phrase “stop the steal,” as it acts as both a form of wordplay and a means to evoke the narrative shared by the audience. Trump used this example as an analogy when he compared the current moment with the history of the United States, stating that “There’s never been a movement like that” (75). After he acknowledged the Washington Monument, Trump perpetuated an analogy to represent the country’s last hope to preserve democracy. The presence of this dramatized material evidences the existence of a shared rhetorical vision, particularly when one considers the presence of #StopTheSteal on audience members’ clothes, signs, and chants.

Trump shared his plans to “pass powerful requirements for voter ID” in addition to requiring “proof of American citizenship in order to vote,” along with the prohibition of unsecured drop boxes and “unsolicited mail-in balloting” (76). Trump also vowed to “restore the vital civic tradition of in-person voting” and supported the idea to “get rid of Section 230” (76). Trump used the next portion of his speech to vaguely describe his follower’s role in the remedy of the issues he has described, positioning them as part of the narrative of good versus evil. “Together we will drain the Washington swamp and we will clean up the corruption in our nation’s capital,” Trump charged to increase the appeal of his message (77). Trump then dramatized the presence of his audience: “Despite everything we’ve been through, looking out all over this country and seeing

fantastic crowds,” he extolled, “I think this is our all-time record. I think you have 250,000 people” (77).

Trump positioned his followers as heroic actors in the narrative he offered in his next statement, while signaling to them that they needed to creatively interpret his words in order to understand his meaning. “Looking out at all of the amazing patriots here today, I have never been more confident in our nation’s future,” he stated (78). Trump venerated his audience as the impetus of his confidence while communicating their need to creatively interpret his meaning: “Well, I have to say we have to be a little bit careful. That’s a nice statement, but we have to be a little careful with that statement” (78). Trump led his followers to interpret their role in remedying these issues as he advises them “If we allow this group of people to illegally take over our country, because it’s illegal when the votes are illegal, when the way they got there is illegal, when the States that vote are given false and fraudulent information” (78).

Trump continued to position the audience as heroic representatives of justice, as he proclaimed, “As this enormous crowd shows, we have truth and justice on our side” (79). Trump fostered a feeling of collectivity within the group, stating that “We have a deep and enduring love for America in our hearts” and makes sense of his audience as a single group. “Together,” he continued, “we are determined to defend and preserve government of the people, by the people and for the people” (79). Trump began to reach the height of narrative drama as he stated “Our brightest days are before us. Our greatest achievements still wait” (80). Trump vaguely signaled to his audience that they should take action by stating that “I think one of our great achievements will be election security because nobody until I came along, had any idea how corrupt our elections were” (80).

These remarks preface Trump's promotion of violent acts, as Trump left the heroes of the narrative to wonder how they will access the "brightest days before us" and what their greatest achievement will be. Trump explained "And we fight. We fight like hell and if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore" (80).

Trump began to conclude his speech by reiterating that "Our exciting adventures and boldest endeavors have not yet begun" and that "the best is yet to come" (81). Trump suggested his plans to his audience: "So we're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue, I love Pennsylvania Avenue, and we're going to the Capitol..." (82). Trump explained that his goal is to empower Republicans: "we're going to try to give them the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country" (82).

Thousands of people gathered at the Ellipse, leading to more than 700 arrests in connection to the Capitol breach (Zou, & Logan, 2022). Trump increased the development of a unified drama by overestimating of the size of the crowd that gathered to listen to his speech. The unification of multiple groups leads to a process of self-adapting to the larger group that influenced individual decision-making (Masterson, Harris, & Sherblom, 1986). This may help to demonstrate how non-violent groups of demonstrators were compelled to engage in the insurrection, as the convergence of the group into a unified whole allowed violent groups such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers to influence the decision-making of peaceful individuals.

Trump identified the moment as a critical time to prevent the destruction of democracy. As Trump argued about election fraud, he used the setting to make his case by citing past evils committed in distant places (voter fraud), which could only be rectified through an impending act of purification at the "heart of our nation's capital" (p.

2). This narrative form of current heroes being tasked with purifying the world of the evils committed by villains in the past, Bormann (2001) might say, is an archetypal dramatization that is highly appealing. Trump's dramatization, evidenced by these linkages, has been identified by Senator Mitch McConnell as a catalyst for the violence that occurred that day.

Sen. Mitch McConnell (KY) asserted the following during a Senate hearing in February of 2021: "There is no question – none – that President Trump is practically and morally responsible for provoking the events of the day...The leader of the free world cannot spend weeks thundering that shadowy forces are stealing our country and then feign surprise when people believe him and do reckless things." (Leonard, 2021). This statement suggests that other politicians acknowledged that Trump used vague symbols associated with #StopTheSteal to provoke violence during his speech even though he did not explicitly call for violence. The rhetorical vision that Trump evoked regarding #StopTheSteal functioned as a way to evoke a violent uprising without publicly calling for one. Since the country has laws and procedures to counteract such an overt abuse of power, Trump had to use creative and vague means during his remarks on January 6, 2021, to communicate his desire for his supporters to engage in illegal acts. In the absence of any legal recourse, it is difficult to imagine what else the outgoing president meant when he encouraged supporters to "fight like hell" (77) other than encouraging his audience to engage in violent acts.

Senator McConnell's assertion that Trump feigned surprise regarding the violence that occurred after his speech explains the distance from the #StopTheSteal movement that Trump's innocence precariously rests on. While Trump was, according to

McConnell, practically and morally responsible, it is readily understandable in terms of legal interpretation that Trump did not explicitly engage in an illegal act of sedition that day. In fact, McConnell voted to acquit Trump, arguing that he should not be charged because he did not continue to hold office.

In the wake of this riot, over half of the Senate voted to impeach Trump. While falling short of a two-thirds majority, the senators who supported Trump argued that he was not guilty of any illegal acts since he did not explicitly call for violence. This exposes an important feature of Trump's rhetorical strategy: to embolden his supporters to participate in ethically dubious behaviors while extending plausible deniability. Before the insurrection, Trump's rhetoric had already faced criticism for inciting violence, particularly towards minority groups as Trump scapegoated people of color throughout his campaigns and term on a broad range of social issues (Nasco et al., 2020). With the deadliest attack of a Trump supporter claiming the lives of 23 people, Trump was likely aware that his rhetorical strategies were perpetuating violent outbursts throughout the country. The setting of this address, a short distance to the Capitol Building, built a great deal of drama into Trump's remarks. This setting is important to the function of the broader rhetorical vision. Since the group is operating under the shared rhetorical vision that democracy is under attack, the specific setting in the heart of the nation's capital means that Trump's supporters have a unique opportunity to enact meaningful change by counteracting the fraudulent election practices used by Democrats and media organizations. The power of a shared fantasy is exemplified in the dramatization of the setting, where Trump capitalized on the location and moment in time as a critical point for democracy.

As “Stop the steal” became a trending topic on social media, Trump created uncertainty regarding the 2020 election results. In his January 6 address, Trump rhetorically positioned the “steal” as something that was currently happening, dramatizing the setting and giving his audience an impending sense that their actions were urgently needed to save democracy. Trump’s remarks represent the dramatic apotheosis of the vision adopted by his audience, evidenced in their unhesitating compliance to his instruction to march on Capitol Hill at the conclusion of his remarks. While Trump did not explicitly call for violence to occur on January 6, it has been noted that Trump urged his supporters to take action, despite the fact that no legal recourse existed after Congress accepted the results of the election (Blake, 2021).

This chapter has drawn links between the fantasy themes gathered from #StopTheSteal with Trump’s speech on January 6, 2021. This chapter has centered on the speech that Trump gave at The Ellipse on January 6. This chapter has shown that social realities shared online and in-person can work together to increase the magnetism of social movements by demonstrating that the symbols that Trump vaguely cued in his remarks were present in #StopTheSteal. As the thesis concludes, it will describe the relationship between the historical context of disputed elections with the insurrection, contextualizing #StopTheSteal as a coordinating factor and Trump’s speech as a catalyst for a dramatic apotheosis of the shared rhetorical vision.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the ways in which fantasy themes have been developed by Donald Trump and evolved into the insurrection of January 6, 2021. This analysis of the #StopTheSteal movement and Trump's speech from January 6 demonstrates that fantasy themes that emerged from both artifacts were developed by the movement and extended by Trump during the speech. The fantasy themes of a biased media and an unlawful transfer of power were collected in this thesis. The insurrection represents a dramatic climax to the rhetorical vision of a democracy under attack. Historically contextualizing this event with other disputed federal elections is crucial to understanding the perspective of the insurrectionists and the advocacy of their opinion leaders and the extent to which Fantasy Theme Analysis (FTA) may provide insight into unpacking such phenomena.

This thesis unfolded in four steps. After the introduction of artifacts and justification of the study, a discussion of disputed federal elections prefaced a literature review of Trump's rhetorical strategies. While there is a long history of contested elections across our nation's history, scholarship on Trump and the 2020 election is scarce, positioning this thesis as contributing to the growing body of literature. Second, the thesis introduced the methodology of FTA. This methodology was uniquely helpful for this thesis since it allows for a collection of scattered discourse to be examined and seeks to understand the motivations of groups. Third, in two separate chapters of analysis, fantasy themes were unpacked through an investigation of the discourse surrounding

#StopTheSteal and Trump's remarks prior to the insurrection on January 6, 2021. In the conclusion, I will revisit the important themes that emerged and expand on their significance.

This thesis began by examining the historical context of disputed elections, with emphasis placed on the U.S. Presidential election of 1800 between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. While the dispute surrounding the election of 1800 prompted constitutional scholars and legislators to develop the Twelfth Amendment, the election of 2000 can be conceptualized as a test of the interpretive gaps left in the Twelfth Amendment. Although these two elections were two centuries apart, they represent the two primary touchstones for contested U.S. Presidential elections. In 1800, the issue centered on an interpretive conflict regarding the electoral count's procedure. One party rejected the electoral votes from the states that did not specify which candidates were selected for president and vice president. This paved the way for the creation of the Twelfth Amendment. An interpretive issue, the hanging chads in 2000, exemplified the shortcomings with the nation's post-dispute protocols. These vague protocols allowed partisan election officials to certify vote counts at their discretion and secure the presidency over the winner of the popular vote.

As a young country in the wake of a constitutional crisis, partisan legislators in the early 1800's adversarially developed legislation as opposed to working collaboratively as one body of governance. Although both parties acknowledged the necessity of the amendment after the election of 1800, neither party was interested in reaching a bipartisan solution. This combative process followed a Constitutional crisis, as the electoral process failed to establish a clear winner in 1800. As many Americans saw

the future of the country in terms of a far-reaching central government, others envisioned a country that prioritized states' rights. The disputes of 1800 represent the height of this political tug-of-war, as Federalists attempted to leverage interpretive gaps in the Constitution to secure their candidate's win. James Bayard's decision to break the deadlocked vote in the House of Representatives solved the immediate issue of the country's need to choose a leader, but the contentious process of settling this dispute lingered into the development of the amendment. Bayard's actions acknowledged the harmful impacts of partisan quarrelling on our nation's democracy as he cited the damaging nature of the disputes surrounding the election of 1800. Resolutions to partisan issues rely on political parties acknowledging one another as valid and legitimate (Foley, 2016). Bayard exemplified this idea by showing preference to a solution that favored the other party as opposed to continuing a crisis of the electoral system, which is what happened when Al Gore conceded in 2000. The Twelfth Amendment, while intended to make election procedures more clear, may have contributed to the partisan nature of the arguments surrounding the disputed election of 2000.

While there are rules and procedures regarding complaints made by representatives in the House, the Twelfth Amendment does not specify rules for the Vice President to object to the counting of electoral votes. Colvin and Foley (2009) discussed the amendment in light of this ambiguity, "If there was some sort of controversy in electoral votes.... Could the Vice president... go behind the certificate submitted by the state?" (Colvin & Foley, 2009 p.482). Colvin and Foley (2009) highlight the interpretive gaps in the Twelfth Amendment by suggesting that Vice Presidents may be able to reject

electoral votes at their own discretion, since the legislation fails to describe the Vice President's procedure in the case of a dispute.

Presidential elections should be a meaningful process. The controversy surrounding the election of 2000 continues to be a topic of debate for political scholars (e.g. Appleby, 2001; Butcher-Lyden, 2010; Colvin & Foley, 2009; Douglas, 2013). Gore's (D) platform represented a shift from Clinton's moderate politics and embraced a more liberal approach of governance, while Bush's (R) conservative agenda resembled the politics of his father, President George H. W. Bush. Gore's loss disenfranchised a majority of American voters, as partisan influences resulted in Bush's victory over the winner of the popular vote, illustrating how the Twelfth Amendment's vague nature can undermine the election process.

Although the 5-4 Supreme Court decision in *Bush v. Gore* is historically regarded as the deciding factor, Gore's decision to concede and preside over the Electoral College vote in 2001 ended the glaring constitutional crisis. Gore's participation in the certification process ultimately legitimized Bush's presidency. While members of the House of Representatives objected to the counting of Florida's electoral votes, congressional rules meant that Gore did not entertain the motion because no objections were signed by members of the Senate.

This suggests that, apart from entertaining a motion from Congress, Gore was in a position to potentially disregard the electoral votes from Florida. However, Gore conceded to Bush, making his counting of the electoral votes from Florida a non-issue, preventing Colvin and Foley's (2009) "what-if" scenario from being tested. Gore's concession also prevented a build-up of suspense leading up to the certification of

electoral votes on January 6, 2001. Gore's decision may have been informed by history itself, as Foley (2016) stated that the perception of unfairness in elections has resulted in assassinations and protests. Like Bayard's vote in 1800, Gore's decision placed a premium on the electoral system's legitimacy and a peaceful transition of power.

Although the dispute over the election of 2020 resembles those of the past, the most remarkable characteristic of the 2020 disputes is the foundation of misinformation. In this case, what was the impetus for challenging the electoral votes? The dispute was not an interpretive discussion, like the hanging chads in 2000, but instead relied on a rhetorical vision of a democracy under attack, predicated on the fantasy themes of biased media and unlawful transfers of power. Trump's advocacy to Vice President Pence prior to the insurrection exemplifies the ambiguity described in the quote above from Colvin and Foley (2009), since Trump encouraged Pence to exploit the gaps in the Twelfth Amendment in such a way that enabled him to discount electoral votes from states such as Georgia and Pennsylvania.

As opposed to basing arguments on interpretive evidence, Trump cited statements and complaints made by his supporters and garnered approval from the support of his constituents. Bormann's (1985) discussion of group dynamics explains the attraction of adopting a narrative that is shared by likeminded people, particularly when it is only vaguely alluded to. This signifies an in-group, prompting onlookers to shape their own selves in a way that makes them more attractive to the group. By leaving room for the new group members to interpret the minor details of the larger rhetorical vision they share, people are able to assimilate to the group while maintaining their sense of self. Although the assimilation to the group is incrementally shifting their perception and

behavior, the room left to interpret the minor details of the larger rhetorical vision preserves the members' sense of individuality.

The remedies to the broad issues Trump suggested to his audience regarding election fraud were remarkably powerful yet vague. Trump was passionate about what he wanted the audience to do, but vague regarding how they should proceed. For example: "We must stop the steal and then we must ensure that such outrageous election fraud never happens again, can never be allowed to happen again, but we're going forward" (75). Trump's marketing-like campaigns quickly proliferated across social media as trending topics. Trump communicated to his supporters that the country was in peril but could be revived into a virtuous place with the right actions, themes that ultimately underscored his "Make America Great Again" campaign. Trump bolstered the motivation of his audience by portraying himself as a victim of the media and unfair elections. By tapping into this sentiment, Trump invited his supporters, and ultimately his audience on January 6, to coalesce around the feelings of oppression and victimhood, which encouraged them to focus on their own plights while ignoring the marginalization of others.

As Trump's base is primarily white, the narrative of victimhood resonated for many since it rebuked any racial burdens of rhetoric (e.g. Terrill, 2017; Nasco et al., 2020). Trump's embrace of a post-racial discourse is exemplified in his perpetuation of the Birther Movement, a conspiracy theory related to President Obama's citizenship (Kelly-Romano, 2019). The movement challenged ethical standards of racial discussions and rebuked the notion of systemic oppression of people of color, identifying Obama's presidency as an indication of equality. The post-post-racial discourse that emerged throughout Trump's elections reflects a more uncouth approach with regard to these

challenges to ethical standards. As Trump neglected to consider any consequences of his rhetoric to people of color, he invited his audience to do the same. Early on, Trump communicated to his followers that he planned to challenge broad societal norms and expectations that inform ethical means of public speaking (Terrill, 2017). Trump's challenges to racial burdens of rhetoric may have been an attractive feature of Trump's rhetoric to his base. Trump laid the foundation for these challenges throughout Obama's presidency.

Part of Trump's mastery centered on the ability to create a consistent line of communication with his followers through Twitter and interacting with other users frequently, while inciting the anxieties and fears of his base. Governor Nikki Haley keenly identified the nature of Trump's rhetorical signature, when she stated, "That's a different kind of anger." (e.g. Haley, 2015; Adcox, n.d.). While Haley's statement surfaced in regard to a larger conversation concerning Trump's campaign rallies, she highlights the appeal of his rhetoric. Trump made his tweets available to an audience who could expand on his assertions and would ignore information that challenged their perspective. A fundamental element of their likeminded perspective includes the fantasy theme of a biased media, which significantly limits the in-group's perception of challenging information. This online relationship that Trump fostered with his supporters is of the utmost importance, especially in light of the way #StopTheSteal developed online and ultimately morphed into the insurrection. Although fact-checking may have revealed countless falsehoods to Trump's supporters, the relationship that Trump maintained with the audience acted as a persuasive influence that encouraged them to

rebuke challenging information, and interpret challenging information in a way that reinforced the shared rhetorical vision.

This thesis builds on FTA by reinforcing the notion that humans share fantasies, and consequently, construct collective consciousness to create shared realities (Bormann, 1985). In analyzing this phenomenon, Fantasy Theme methodology is preferable and insightful because it helps to account for the interactivity of the leader and follower's interpretation. FTA has helped to show how the participatory relationship between a leader and follower can develop and evolve into an event like the insurrection.

The online development of #StopTheSteal provided an environment for likeminded people to make sense of phenomena. Online, these narratives compete for attention and participation. In person, large audiences can share a fantasy and feel similar emotions while interpreting elements of their perspectives in similar ways (Borman, 1985). This thesis showed that Trump was able to symbolically cue his followers around the rhetoric of #StopTheSteal in order to incite them to gather in-person. Trump used narratives based on interpretive logic and ambiguity in order to leave room for his follower's creative interpretation of events. Such cues obscured the magnitude of the in-group and also reinforced group members' feelings of belonging because they are not understood apart from the group's context. Like an inside joke, these cues are not well understood by people who do not understand the symbol. In this way, such cues act as a way to preserve a sense of group identity and to indicate the existence of an in-group to outsiders.

Trump's distance from the initial conversation surrounding #StopTheSteal is an important characteristic of the circumstances leading up to the insurrection. As the

hashtag proliferated across social media with Trump's supporters and members of the Alt-Right, the movement came to be less associated with Trump and more with his followers. This represents a systematic strategy whereby Trump could distance himself from the slogan while making vague references to it. Simultaneously, it came to be associated with his support group as something of their own creation. The emergence of this dichotomy is made troubling by the fact that both rhetorical strategies presented Trump's fantasy themes of a biased media and unlawful transfer of power, and the rhetorical vision that they underpin: democracy is under attack. While this situation functions like a dichotomy, the true nature of the rhetorical vision is a monolithic narrative perpetuated by Trump. This is significant per FTA because of the simulation of a dramatized message between two actors. Similar to the way the example given in the methods section regarding employees at an electronics store demonstrates Bormann's (1972) assertion that dramatized messages are attractive to onlookers, Trump's dichotomy with #StopTheSteal created the appearance of a dramatized message shared between the two. This dichotomy likely made the dramatized messages highly appealing to Trump's base.

#StopTheSteal worked to both reassure Trump's followers of his victory and to discourage them from entertaining any challenging information. The fantasy theme of a biased media accomplished these goals because mainstream media was reporting that Trump had lost the election. Trump's rhetorical vision thrived here, as more reports of Trump's loss interacted with the fantasy theme of media bias in a way that indicated more bias to Trump's supporters. Trump's other fantasy theme, that the election was rigged, was thereby supported and protected by the fantasy theme of a biased media.

While these fantasy themes were separate, they worked in tandem to further legitimize one another for Trump's followers. This powerful circumstance led some people, like Stewart Rhodes of the Oath Keepers, to consider Trump's call to action a response to a government coup by Trump's adversaries. Just as Bormann (1972) showed that a group will continue the appropriate tone of a drama perpetuated by the leader, Trump set the tone for his followers' shared fantasy through his use of Twitter. His participatory relationship on social media shaped the way his followers made sense of the issues surrounding the election, which increased the appeal of the narratives he dramatized before the insurrection. Online, while users contributed to the development of the rhetorical vision by responding or reacting to the narratives, their vicarious interaction with the plot invested them in the storyline and created a common culture of people.

The migration of #StopTheSteal from platforms like Twitter and Facebook to alternative sites like 4chan and Parlor established a hidden fact-seeking environment that facilitated the unique development of the shared rhetorical vision. Such development is uniquely significant because of the violent actions it may have instigated. This thesis showed that FTA is an insightful way to examine conspiratorial rhetorical movements that manifest both online and in-person. This thesis strengthens FTA by applying the developmental principles of a rhetorical vision to the artifacts described in the analysis chapters; the online development of #StopTheSteal and the speech delivered by Trump at The Ellipse. FTA guided this thesis through observing the development, evolution, and decay of a shared drama that may have influenced the behavior of a large group. This offers insight into the utility of FTA in situations where a broad movement is observable, but its coordinating influences are not immediately understandable or recognizable. This

thesis has shown that #StopTheSteal is a movement that represents the development of the fantasy themes of a biased media and an unlawful transfer of power. This thesis has also shown the way Trump's remarks on January 6 capitalized on the same fantasy themes and morphed them into a highly dramatized rhetorical vision which may have prompted his audience to act violently. As existing FTA literature has focused primarily on the coalescence of fantasy themes into developing rhetorical visions, this thesis demonstrates the utility of FTA by tracing the evolution of fantasy themes from the developed rhetorical vision. This thesis has shown that such a reversal of operations is possible with FTA when there is observable evidence of a shared vision across a large group, like the insurrection.

The evolution of the fantasy themes perpetuated by #StopTheSteal into the insurrection exemplifies Bormann's (1972) assertion that the influence of participation in a likeminded group is made more powerful by the size of the group. In other words, larger groups are typically seen as more attractive than smaller groups, meaning the large size of #StopTheSteal made it a very appealing movement. Trump's remarks on January 6 demonstrate the emergence of a shared rhetorical vision, evidenced by Trump's evocation of multiple plotlines which may have elicited a response from his audience. This speech demonstrates the tremendous potential for a constellation of falsehoods to operate independently, yet also disparately in relation to one another, to promote a broader rhetorical vision. In addition to the reinforcement of the fantasy themes of a biased media and an unlawful transfer of power, which underpin the broader rhetorical vision of a democracy under attack, the influence of the gathering on January 6 was increased as a result of what Bormann calls the "supportive warmth of like-minded

companions within the group” (Bormann, 1972 p. 400). Conceptualizing #StopTheSteal as an element of Trump’s rhetorical vision allows for a discussion about how this phrase proliferated as a hashtag, a movement, and a campaign. The fantasy themes of media bias and an unlawful transfer of power helped to develop and solidify this rhetorical vision. The supportive warmth of these groups helps to explain how the rhetorical vision of democracy being under attack proliferated using #StopTheSteal.

To illustrate the idea of the decay of the shared rhetorical vision, this thesis draws connections between pleas made by arrested insurrectionists and the fantasy themes gathered in the two analysis chapters while demonstrating the existence of a dramatized, shared worldview. Douglas Jensen, a rioter charged with multiple federal crimes due to his actions at the Capitol on January 6, 2020, calls on this larger rhetorical vision as his reason for entering a plea of not guilty. Jensen explained to the court that he was deceived by Trump, and bought into a pack of lies (Payne, 2021). A court filing requesting dismissal explains the circumstances that made Trump’s vision appealing to Jensen. Jensen claims that a difficult childhood made narratives from QAnon uniquely compelling to him, and he believed he could help to eliminate pedophiles from society by demonstrating at the Capitol (Payne, 2021). While Jensen is not representative of the lot, his case demonstrates the extent to which Trump’s rhetorical strategy may have worked to tap into and capitalize on the fears and anxieties of his supporters. This case also illustrates the decay of the rhetorical vision, as the plea describes how the narrative that resonated with Jensen fell apart in the face of the legal action that was brought against him. In this case, Trump’s rhetorical strategy is positioned as dishonest and harmful to the individuals that shared this rhetorical vision.

Viewing Jensen's court filing alongside Bale's (1970) description of how such groups re-enforce beliefs among their followers might help to explain how Jensen became so adamant in his position. Just as Bale described, the shared culture between people interacting as a group creates a feeling that they have entered a new part of reality which is highly dramatized. Members may feel that they are part of a grand plot in a work of art, that they are exalted into a world of heroes versus villains, or their feelings of drama may be evoked. This may have been the case for Jensen, who evidently believed that his involvement in the insurrection was critical for the survival of democracy.

Bale (1970) also explained that the culture of such a group is established from the past, which is acted upon in a present situation. This creates a feeling within the group that the individual feels transported to a world that feels more real than their everyday life. This feeling may be one of exaltation, fascination, horror, or a feeling of being threatened. These feelings symbolically fuse with the symbols shared by the group, which sustains the feelings over time. Shared symbols act as a mechanism to psychologically pull the members of the group into a psychodramatic fantasy world in which other members of the group are involved – bolstering the individual's connection to the other members of the group.

The pervasive nature of such psychodramatic worlds can be seen in Jensen's case, as the narrative of election fraud was established long before the insurrection occurred on January 6, 2021. As a long-time follower of the movement, Jensen was predisposed to believing in the fantasies surrounding January 6 because they supported his existing world view from past elections. The exaltation that Bale (1970) describes is evidenced in Jensen's case, as he describes the feelings of his participation in these online groups as

something that gave him a sense of higher purpose. As Bormann (1972) conceptualizes rhetorical visions in terms of a life cycle, Jensen's plea that he was deceived by Trump's lies represents the decay of this vision. Although this example is limited to Jensen's case, further examination of other cases like Jensen's may yield more evidence of decay.

Trump's culture may be exemplified by the renewed use of the slogan "Make America Great Again," especially when considered with the development of #StopTheSteal. While Trump's rhetorical strategies evoked feelings from his base of their way of life being threatened, #StopTheSteal represented an element of their efforts to "Make America Great Again." This collection of marketing-like rhetorical strategies, paired with Trump's vague allusions to #StopTheSteal potentially worked to excite such feelings and emotions in his supporters. Their investment in this vision ultimately reached a fevered pitch on January 6.

As others have been charged with conspiring to carry out a coordinated attack on the Capitol, further investigation revealed that the majority of participants were not actively coordinating amongst themselves, yet their behavior demonstrated group integration. This evidence positions #StopTheSteal and Trump's speech as coordinating factors with regard to the insurrection, which could help to explain one of the primary means by which the broader group coalesced. The FBI found only a small margin of rioters that were closely formed militia groups (Hosenball & Lynch, 2021). This suggests that #StopTheSteal may have acted as an overarching symbol for this collective group and represented their commitment to restoring integrity to democracy, providing a rhetorical catalyst and communication apparatus for the broader group to coordinate as one.

The unique historical context of #StopTheSteal represents a growing movement of people across a spectrum of right-wing radicalization. The reality to followers of this group is grim: media is biased, and unlawful transfers of power occur, perpetuating the broader vision that democracy is under attack. On January 6, thousands of citizens bought into Trump's falsehoods in the belief that they were helping to preserve democracy. While hundreds of rioters have faced charges and jailtime for their actions during the insurrection, many have admitted that they were deceived and betrayed by the former president. This evidences the decay of the rhetorical vision among those individuals, supporting Bormann's (1972) conceptualization of FTA's lifecycle. Considering we hold the office of President in the highest regard, it could be seen as antithetical to punish citizens for actions that their commander-in-chief may have compelled them to take. In light of Trump escaping justice for his perpetuation of this harmful rhetorical vision, the scholarly community should seek to understand the mechanisms by which these rhetorical strategies take root and evolve, and ultimately endeavor to unpack the decay surrounding such shared dramatic visions.

By drawing connections between the vague narratives offered by Trump and the developing narratives of #StopTheSteal, FTA is shown to be an insightful way to explain how followers continued to fit new information into an existing worldview. This thesis adds insight to scholarship on FTA by showing the method's utility in investigating phenomena, like the insurrection, in which a large group taking collective action is observable. This thesis has shown that FTA can be used to trace narratives and themes that underpin a large group's perspective in which scattered phenomena coalesce with the evolution of a unified drama. This thesis used FTA to show that Trump's rhetorical

vision may have systemically empowered the scattered development of a movement to undemocratically remove our government from power. While such efforts were not successful, they caused irreparable harm to the integrity of our democracy. While scholars have drawn comparisons between the elections of 1800 and 2000 to highlight limitations with the constitutional procedures that describe dispute protocols, 2020 will certainly join these two in future discussions of disputed federal elections.

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