

Sample Student Rhetorical Analysis

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An Argument of Reason and Passion: Barbara Jordan's "Statement on the Articles of Impeachment"

On March 9, 1974, the U.S. House Judiciary Committee began an impeachment hearing against President Richard Nixon for his role in the cover-up of the Watergate scandal. On July 25, 1974, Congresswoman Barbara Jordan stood before this committee and delivered an 11-minute speech known as "Statement on the Articles of Impeachment." The argument of this speech is that the president should be impeached because his actions threaten both the Constitution and the people of the United States. Jordan states, "It is reason, and not passion, which must guide our deliberation, guide our debate, and guide our decision." Subsequently, she uses a strong logical argument that she supports with appeals to both her credibility and the audience's feelings of patriotism for the Constitution.

The context of Jordan's speech is important for three reasons. First, the charges against Nixon and his impeachment case were controversial because he was a Republican president and the committee was mostly Democratic. The burden was on Jordan to show that the case for impeachment was not a partisan issue. Second, the speech was televised. Jordan was speaking not only to the committee—an audience well informed about the topic and mostly in support of her argument—but also to a television audience that was not as informed and potentially hostile. Finally, although Jordan was already known in Texas politics, she was new to Congress, and she was a low-ranking member of the committee. Consequently, she had to prove her ethos to both the committee and the wider television audience who did not know her.

At the heart of Jordan's argument is her insistence that the Constitution is important because it protects the rights of the American people. Therefore the Constitution itself should be protected. Thus impeachment is the proper punishment for a president or other leaders who upset the balance of power and act against the Constitution. Using evidence from the North Carolina and Virginia Constitutional

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Conventions, she shows that impeachment is used only for “great misdemeanors” and that we need the branches of government to check the powers of each other. Her next task is to show what these misdemeanors are and to show that Nixon has committed them. Here she appeals to logic in that she not only explains each misdemeanor in full and matches the president’s actions to each one, but she also cites reputable sources such as James Madison, who wrote the *Federalist Papers*; the South Carolina Ratification Convention; and Justice Joseph Story, who as a justice under Madison was known for his work explaining the states’ powers under the Constitution. In addition, she emphasizes each point by starting with a key quotation by one of these figures, such as James Madison: “A President is impeachable if he attempts to subvert the Constitution.” Then she describes the president’s actions that illustrate this quotation—in this case, he told his associates to commit perjury, to hide evidence, and to bribe a judge—and stresses the point with the same quotation she used earlier: “A President is impeachable if he attempts to subvert the Constitution.” This repetition of the quotation makes the connection both clearer and more memorable to the audience.

Jordan shows that she has an extensive knowledge of the Constitution and of the facts in the impeachment case, which gains her credibility as someone who can speak knowledgeably on the subject. She also shows her credibility as a citizen, as well as an African-American woman who relies on the Constitution and the Constitutional process for protection. She says that when the Constitution was completed, “I was not included in that ‘We, the People.’ I felt somehow for many years that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton just left me out by mistake. But through the process of amendment, interpretation, and court decision I have finally been included in ‘We, the People.’”

Jordan also addresses the concern that the impeachment case is partisan, an allegation that could damage the credibility of the committee. She recognizes that “the drawing of political lines goes to the motivation behind impeachment,” but such a large crime should transcend party lines. She backs this assertion by quoting Woodrow Wilson, who said, “Indignation so great as to overthrow party interest may secure a conviction; but nothing else can.” Jordan continues, “Thus, party pettiness cannot, and will not, stand in the way of the committee member’s jobs as representatives of the nation: We are trying to be *big*, because the task we have before us is a big one.”

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Jordan claims that passion should not be a part of the impeachment proceedings, but she uses her passion for the Constitution to connect to her audience's emotions and sense of patriotism: "My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total. And I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution." She stirs her audience's emotions by repeatedly creating the sense that the Constitution is in physical danger of being destroyed. Not only is it in danger of being figuratively destroyed by Nixon's crimes, but also a failure to impeach him could also destroy the document's integrity. She makes this destruction literal when she says, "If the impeachment provisions will not reach the offenses charged here, then perhaps that eighteenth-century Constitution should be abandoned to a twentieth-century paper shredder." This dramatic image encourages the audience to imagine Nixon actually shredding the Constitution as he ordered the shredding of documents that could link him to crimes. In addition, she makes the American people responsible; "we," meaning both the committee and the television audience, might as well be shredding the Constitution to bits if Nixon is not impeached.

Jordan makes a strong case for impeachment by first appealing to logic and then using her passion for the Constitution to connect to her audience's patriotism. Significantly, because this speech was also televised, Jordan also emerged to a national audience as a powerful speaker. Her clear, rhythmic style is both dramatic and easy to follow. Jordan's reputation as a powerful speaker continues to this day, as does the importance of her speeches, such as this one and other keynote addresses she made throughout her career. In particular, this argument for exercising the checks and balances within our government in order to protect the Constitution and the American people from possible tyranny is an argument that resonates with events today.

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Works Cited

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