

**Vaccine Hesitancy and Biden's Rhetoric**

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### **Abstract**

Within the setting and context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study uses Ernest Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) framework to analyze fantasy themes which emerged from the rhetoric of the American President, Joe Biden, regarding vaccinations. The main question of this study is why President Biden's rhetorical vision either chained out and was accepted among the American public resulting in increased vaccination or failed to chain out resulting in Americans refusing to become vaccinated. To answer this question, a selection of artifacts consisting of examples of President Biden's rhetoric are gathered, and using those artifacts, SCT fantasy themes are developed. Three SCT fantasies are delineated and explored to answer the central question of this study. The first fantasy theme which emerged from President Biden's rhetoric is: "President Biden assumes the role of a sanctioning agent, portraying and positioning himself as a war time President who will lead America through one of its darkest hours." The second fantasy which is developed in this study is: "President Biden encourages Americans to become heroes by partaking in the battle against COVID-19 by becoming vaccinated, while unvaccinated Americans are demonized as villains." The third fantasy which emerged from President Biden's rhetoric is: "President Biden portrayed contradicting narratives to the "official narrative" as existential threats to America and the current political order." Using these three fantasies, this study then develops explanations why proponents of President Biden's rhetorical vision accepted it, and why opponents of his vision rejected it.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, vaccines, fantasy themes, Biden, rhetoric.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge and glorify my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He paid for my sins and the sins of the world when he died on the cross and rose to life three days later—defeating the power of sin and death. I am forever thankful for my God, the King of Kings, Lord Jesus Christ.

I would like to extend a warm thanks to Dr. Cecil Kramer for his diligence, consistency, and leadership not only for his role in the creation of this paper but for his longstanding efforts and contributions at Liberty University.

I would also like to thank Dr. Kirk and Dr. Mallory for their assistance in the development of this study.

Another warm thanks to my family, for all their love and support.

This paper is dedicated to anybody searching for truth.

“My son, if you accept my words, and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding—indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God” (Proverbs 2: 1-5).

## Chapter 1

### Background & Problem of the Study

Since early 2020, America has experienced what became a global pandemic of the diseases caused by the virus, COVID-19, or also known as the “Corona Virus.” Since it’s onset, American society, and indeed the global community, has been living through the impacts of this pandemic. Even though we have not yet had a lot of time to digest and assess, we know that the consequences of COVID-19 are significant.

Although there were cultural, rhetorical, and ideological divides in America before the pandemic, these divides have widened and have become ever more intensified by the effects of the pandemic. The Department of Homeland Security claimed that there is increased societal strain due to pandemic-related stressors (DHS, 2021). Heated public debate and division around various facets of the disease have included: the origins and attitudes towards the virus, health measures utilized to stop the spread of the virus, guidance from governing bodies, accusations of wrongful political motives, politics in general, misinformation, censorship, varying forms of leadership, mask usage, lockdowns and their implications, economic challenges deriving from lockdowns, massive government spending, suspension of civil liberties, and other issues related to vaccinations. The debates being had are not often held in public amphitheatres with a moderator facilitating separate teams of ideologues both openly and fairly crafting arguments to win over public opinion but rather take place via mass media, social media, and on smaller scales in individual discussion.

One of the most poignant and ongoing heated debates is around the vaccines that were created, ostensibly, to resolve the pandemic. Public opinion related to the COVID-19 vaccinations differ in many respects. The debate covers a broad spectrum and includes many

perspectives including, but not limited to, whether the vaccines are effective, whether they are safe, whether they were created ethically, which company's vaccine is best, how long the vaccine is effective for, whether there are more effective alternatives, whether vaccines should be mandated, and if so, in which jurisdictions, along which lines, and on whose authority.

Vaccine mandates have been particularly divisive. Even if a vaccine skeptic is convinced to take a COVID-19 vaccine, the idea of forcing everyone to do so by public or private mandates does not sit well with many Americans (Anderson, 2021). This paper focuses on the American setting; however, this ongoing cultural drama crosses borders, cultures, nations, and governments reflecting the similarities in the COVID-19 experiences across the globe.

Scientists, political leaders, community leaders, social media commentators, media personalities, and masses of individuals all chime in on differing sides of the debate and yielding various perspectives for discussion including public health, politics, and civil liberties. The decisions of Americans regarding the vaccine have been varied.

In this paper an attempt will be made to answer the question of why many Americans have rejected President Biden's calls to receive the COVID-19 vaccination and booster shots by studying President Biden's rhetoric and reasoning as to why Americans should be vaccinated. President Biden's public statements are presented to show an ideology and dramatization which shows the social reality of the pandemic as he frames it. After President Biden's narrative is formed from news statements, speeches and social media releases, analysis will be presented as to why many Americans either accepted or rejected his reality and why his vision was successful or failed with the American people. To carry out the study, Ernest Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) will be utilized. SCT assess how rhetoric creates a world of reality through narratives within groups or individuals. These narratives or "fantasies" create a world of

reality upon which decisions are made. Bormann's theory and criticism model is based on the idea that communication constructs reality (Bormann, 1982). He argues that as individuals develop or create a consciousness and develop a community that shares their rhetoric, they share in a vision which relies on fantasy themes, which are key factors in their sharing of new fantasies to explain/understand unfolding events around them. In other terms, "fantasy themes tell a story that accounts for the group's experience and that is the reality of the participants" (Foss, 1999, p. 123). As group members, or group leaders, share fantasies over and over they build a rhetorical vision, also known as a fantasy type (Foss, 1999). If a listener accepts a fantasy, this is referred to as a "chaining out" of that fantasy, and if a listener rejects a fantasy the fantasy has failed to chain out.

A general assessment of the vaccination efforts to end the COVID-19 pandemic is relevant to this study. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the United States started vaccination efforts as of December 14, 2020. The CDC reports that as of April 6, 2022, 563.4 million vaccine doses have been administered in the United States (CDC, 2022). 77.1% of the total American population have received at least one dose, and 65.7% of the population has been fully vaccinated. Being "fully vaccinated," according to the CDC means that an individual has received "the second dose in a two-dose COVID-19 vaccine series (such as the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines) or one dose of the single-shot Johnson & Johnson's Janssen vaccine" (CDC, 2022). As of April 8, 2022, completely unvaccinated Americans are 22.9% of the American population.

In many instances, American dissenters, those not willing to take a vaccine or a booster shot, are choosing to suffer the various penalties imposed on them for not taking the vaccine. It is important to ask why the narrative created by President Biden fails to be accepted by a large

population of America, especially if opponents of his narrative end up experiencing hardship as a result. Is resisting President Biden's vision and refusing a vaccine a natural response to any restraint on personal autonomy, concern for individual health and potential side effects from the vaccine, conscience concerns from a biblical, spiritual, or religious worldview, concerns about the motives of for-profit drug companies, an ideological disagreement, or a combination of concerns? As scientists on both sides of the debate present their cases, governing bodies, and leaders such as President Biden offer their pleas to the public to get vaccinated.

President Biden has been one of the most ardent and vocal voices during this pandemic in support of vaccinations as a solution to the problems of the pandemic. In the words of President Biden sent out via Twitter: "the words of a President matter, no matter whether they're good, bad, or indifferent, they matter" (Biden, 2020). How a leader communicates can drastically impact the success or failure of the leader's mission and the success or failure of the leader and his objectives and/or his organization. In this case the leader is the President, and the organization is the whole country. President Biden has influential power in America and to a much lesser degree, in the world. It is a worthwhile exercise to assess the efficacy of the President's public statements to answer the question of why unvaccinated Americans chose to refuse the COVID-19 vaccine in the face of powerful rhetoric and pressure to do so.

President Biden has been an influential participant in American politics for a long time, and he has served the American public as an elected official since 1970. Biden served as a New Castle County council member for two years before becoming a United States Senator in 1972. President Biden won re-election six times, to become the longest serving senator in Delaware history. Biden ran for president in 2008, becoming the running mate of President Barack Obama and ultimately the Vice President of the United States. After serving for two terms as Vice

President, Joe Biden ran against Donald Trump in the 2020 election and was elected to the office of the President of the United States (Duignan, 2022).

Joe Biden is the President of the United States of America and is arguably the most powerful politician in the world. Regardless of one's political inclination, or their opinion of Joe Biden himself, they may very well admit that as the President, his comments hold significant weight in the national and international public sphere. As president, Biden has multiple types of power. He has the bully pulpit power (the ability to argue, encourage, and influence by virtue of his status and prominence in media) and through his enumerated constitutional power through which he can force certain segments of the population (i.e., military, and federal employees) to do as he says via administrative agencies and executive orders. Clearly, many Americans have bought in to the President's coaxing and accepted the invitation to be vaccinated. Likewise, a sizable portion of Americans have, at least so far, rejected the President's overtures, mandates, demands, and messaging to encourage vaccination. This study seeks to discover what about the communication techniques and fantasy themes that President Biden utilizes that lead to both an acceptance of such messages and to an increase in American dissent against the vaccination fantasy theme.

An important aspect of the divide among Americans regarding their decision to either become vaccinated against COVID-19 or to not become vaccinated is the palpable American ideological divide. An ideology is a collection of related perceptions closely intertwined with rhetoric and the chaining out of fantasy themes. Utilizing the concepts espoused in SCT and the framework of fantasy chaining, this study identifies ideological differences in Americans which undergird the resulting social divide regarding vaccinations and may help to explain why symbolic convergence has failed to take place.

This first chapter of the paper presents the background of the study, articulates the problem of the study, describes the study's significance, and presents an overview of the methodology used to analyze and explore this topic.

### **The Professional Significance of the Study**

This study is significant to the field of communication because it looks at communication from the top American governmental leader which has drastic importance to American lives and culture. The decisions the federal, state, municipal governments, and corporate American organizations make regarding the COVID-19 pandemic directly impact the mass public. Shutting down international flights, closing all but "essential businesses," masking, and requiring vaccinations show a portion of this impact. For such important decisions where the mass public is involved--such as with public health and particularly with vaccinations, a cohesive and appropriate communication strategy is required (Biasio et al., 2016).

This study examines President Biden's communication intended to increase vaccinations in the American public. It is possible to identify both strengths and weaknesses in how President Biden was able to utilize his position of authority to influence opinions and regulate vaccine requirements. When public officials such as President Biden take drastic opinions and then change those opinions (whether or not that change is properly warranted) public trust can be impacted. The rhetoric and narrative emanating from the highest echelons of power in America are of crucial importance. It is important that leaders get their communication strategy right. If they fail to use an effective strategy or if they portray themselves as inconsistent, there are consequences. If public trust in government representatives—if not in the institutions they represent themselves—falters and diminishes, this could lead to a reduced acceptance of other government policy initiatives to address other domestic concerns (Chanley et al., 2000).

In this study, an understanding of how communication to the public can impact public trust is also examined to facilitate further discussion about the current and ongoing pandemic and its impacts. By attempting to analyze the elements of President Biden's rhetoric regarding vaccinations, and understand how this has impacted dissent, it may provide a useful tool for both communication professionals as well as political leaders.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in light of what has been previously described, there exists a degree of uncertainty and a lack of clarity regarding the truth on the topic of vaccinations and public trust in government leaders and agencies (such as the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization). This study will bring about an increase in understanding of "why" the President uses specific rhetoric and the research will offer clarity to the cultural split in narratives and understanding regarding the COVID-19 vaccinations and, to a degree, the pandemic in general.

Due to the vastness of the range of this public debate, the core of this study is limited to a rhetorical analysis of certain comments made by President Biden during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While there are many individuals and organizations who have offered their insight and opined on all aspects of the pandemic, the development of fantasy themes will focus on comments made by President Biden. Exceptions may be made if comments are found from individuals falling under the President's Executive branch or are seen to be speaking on behalf of the President. Exceptions are also made in Chapter 5, where an explanation and analysis of the chaining out of President Biden's fantasies are given.

The rhetorical vision created by President Biden will be constructed from public announcements, reports on television, and various social medias. Using SCT in this study will allow us to see how the President's comments about the unvaccinated, and vaccinations in

general, promote a specific narrative which includes heroes, villains, emotions, and attitudes (Bormann, 1972). More specific questions related to the elements of the “drama” will help bring understanding to how President Biden creates reality.

Once an understanding of how President Biden has framed this collective narrative is established, an understanding of where Americans would fall within that narrative may be realized. An attempt will be made to ascertain how that common understanding aided (or hindered) in the decision-making process of getting (or not getting) vaccinated.

The main function of this analysis is to understand whether a symbolic convergence has happened and whether President Biden’s comments and narrative chained out across the whole of the American public. An examination of those claims that positively and negatively chained out to create a reality will be examined. Conclusions as to why President Bidens “fantasy chains” were successful or unsuccessful will be presented and is the major contribution of this study.

## Chapter 2

Ernest Bormann's communication theory, Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) describes how recurrent dramatized or dramatizing messages lead to collective fantasy themes within a group. Fantasy themes provide or add to the formation of a shared identity and group consciousness (Bormann, 1983). A fantasy theme is a dramatized or dramatizing message that portrays characters involved in action within a setting that accounts for and explains human experience (Bormann, 1972). Humans have a natural theory making ability, and "Humans respond readily to the impetus of the why question, and in doing, theorize, that is, provide a why explanation of phenomena ... Communication scholars do that, too, as they develop theories to provide communication-based explanations of communication phenomena" claim Cragan and Shields (1995, p. 18) (Bormann et al., 2001, p. 271). This study will attempt to do that by using SCT, which analyzes how group members assign meaning to their life experiences through the way they talk, the stories they tell, and the rituals they practice as they create a social construct or a collective understanding of reality (Deetz, 2001). Bormann et al., (1996) describe how the development of a social consciousness is "guided by the principle of explanatory power." SCT operates under two assumptions that (i) communication constitutes reality, and (ii) communication allows for individuals to make or create a shared sense of reality within groups through meaning convergence (Vaughan, 2009).

The process that SCT follows includes dramatizing messages, fantasy chaining, fantasy themes, fantasy types, and a rhetorical vision (Bormann, 1985). Dramatizing messages involve individuals introducing "brief examples of humor, wordplay, and figures of speech, or more elaborate analogies, fables or narratives" (Zanin et al., 2016, p. 440) which may lead others to communicate similarly and partake in the fantasy. This is called fantasy chaining. When these

messages occur over and over, it results in what is called a fantasy theme, and is a frame of reference for the group. Fantasy themes provide understanding of past and future group actions.

As a group of individuals creates several fantasy types, that group then has a rhetorical vision, which unites various methods of communication to give a wider view of reality (Bormann, 1985). Bormann explained that rhetorical visions have five major elements: “1) *dramatis personae* (the actors in the story). 2) a plotline (what occurred), 3) a scene with descriptive details. 4) a sanctioning agent (someone or something with authority such as an agreed upon sense of morality) and 5) a master analogue (core values and cultural structure)” (Zanin et al., 2016, p. 440).

One of the key aspects to SCT is the fantasy development. Fantasy themes are used to develop the symbolic convergence. Fantasy theme development for this study is in Chapter 4. The fantasy theme is the fundamental unit of communication for symbolic convergence, which refers to a dramatizing message that may be established in various forms such as “a pun or other word play, double entendre, figure of speech, analogy, anecdote, allegory, fable or narrative” (Bormann, 1985, p. 130). It is expressed in a simple, single phrase, or a sentence, or an entire paragraph of text (Bormann 1980). “When fantasy themes combine with a setting, characters, and actions, together they provide a credible interpretation of reality, and a rhetorical vision is constructed” (Hossain et al., 2019, p. 567)

Furthermore, Shields’ (2000) study explained the SCT’s ability to expound upon how special communication theories arose as the product of rhetorical visions that include norms, conventions, and customs for standard involvement in a particular communication style. SCT evaluation in this paper will rely on shared consciousness, which requires looking for the fantasy themes that are created by President Biden.

A study was done in 1979 by Foss, which explored the social conflict in America over the debate for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution. Foss's study is relevant to this study because it explores a poignant division/debate in America through rhetorical visions and fantasy themes. During the 1970's, many Americans wished to pass the ERA to ensure equal rights for women, and other Americans wished to save traditional womanhood. This social division, Foss writes, is a "conflict between two world views that are created by the rhetoric generated by each side" (Foss, 1979). She continued and claimed that "the discourse formulated and presented by proponents and opponents of the ERA may create perceptions that-whether they correspond to reality or not- are more influential than the arguments presented to the public" (Foss, 1979. p. 275). Foss relied on Bormann's SCT fantasy theme analysis to conduct her study of the rhetorical world, or visions, of the opponents and proponents of ERA. Foss wrote that it is "fundamental to the world that the proponents of the ERA have created through their rhetoric is a grassroots scene in which the common, undistinguished majority is supporting the ERA" (p. 277). In the proponents of the ERA's framing of the narrative, such as Senator George McGovern's, a scene is set: "The barrier that restricts a woman's life is invisible, based on unspoken assumptions. It is like a glass wall" ... "An open society cannot close the doors of opportunity to half its citizens" (p. 277). Foss (1979) explains that:

the formulation of these scenes by the proponents enables them to establish sacred and profane spaces in their world. The sacred ground is the new, ready-to-be-explored world, a world which gives rise to the opening of gates to women and to grassroots support for participation in this world (p. 277)

Where, in contrast the "profane ground, of course, is the home, symbolic of entrapment and imprisonment" (p. 277). The argument goes along these lines that "women want to and should

engage in all activities of the world, including military service for example, are consistent with the sacred setting of the world rather than the home” (p. 278). Proponents of the ERA also used rhetoric to explain opposition to their efforts. They viewed and portrayed their opponents as “villains with no understandable motive for opposing the amendment” (p. 280). The opponents of the ERA who were women were categorized as middle-class white women, who were considered to hold a minority view. Foss (1979) explains that the proponents’ views of themselves differ drastically from their views of the opponents. The qualities they ascribe to themselves are positive; thus, they turn into the heroes of their world (p. 281). On the other side of the social debate regarding the passing of the ERA, there is a world created by the opponents.

The world created by rhetoric of the opponents of the ERA is in contrast with the proponents’ vision because they view the safe domain for women to be the home (p. 282). One vivid account of the world outside the home where women are treated equally with men regarding military service is provided by Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr., who described a world in which “women will be slaughtered or maimed by the bayonets, the bombs, the bullets, the grenades, the mines, the napalm, the poison gas, or the shells of the enemy” (Foss, 1979, p. 282). Bette Jean Jarboe, who was the founder of the International Anti-Women’s Liberation League, writes: “Do you know what kind of horrible things the loose wording of that amendment could produce? It could lead to such things as communal bathrooms” (Foss, 1979, p. 283).

The sacred ground for the opponents is the home. This would mean that the profane grounds for opponents of the ERA is “the man’s world outside the home, including the battlefield and factories in which women work as hard and as long as men” (p. 282). The opponent’s rhetoric creates a world in which actions are taken to preserve tradition and order.

Opponents see themselves as trying to maintain established and traditional social customs and institutions against the offensive progress of reform. Foss (1979) claims that:

characters who act in the world created by the opposition are consistent with the opponents view of the traditional as good and the new or different as potentially evil. Opponents see supporters of the ERA, who deviate from the traditional woman's role as "libbers" who support the feminist movement (p. 283).

It was common for comments to be made such as "don't you boys give in to those libbers." In both sides of the debate, the other side is the opponent to the way things ought to be. Foss writes:

Different elements motivate the proponents and opponents to create their particular worlds ... The differences between the motives of the two sides can be seen further in the philosophical distinctions implied by the two motives ... The creation of the two conflicting rhetorical worlds by the proponents and opponents of the ERA leaves little or no common ground on which argumentation can occur or through which an understanding of the opposing viewpoint can be reached. ...

Each side's rhetoric is not only a threat to the other's way of making sense of the world, but also is a reason to defend strongly their particular world. Once the two sides in a controversy have developed worlds that are in total conflict—with different notions of the settings, characters and acts in these worlds—the traditional modes of argumentation and persuasion are not likely to be effective in dissuading participants from their worlds.

(Foss, 1979, p. 288)

Similar to the cultural, and rhetorical divide that was present in America during the debate over the ERA, Americans appear equally if not more divided in rhetoric surrounding the debate around vaccines. In both the cultural divide in the 1970's and the cultural divide now

there is a rhetorical building up of a “world” in which there are heroes, safe spaces, dangerous outside realms, etc.

Bormann et al., (1997) investigated individual’s preferences for certain kinds of narratives and fantasies. They asked the question of why people share fantasies. Bormann writes that “SCT asserts that in all communication contexts where the source produces dramatic messages the audience members may, under certain conditions, become involved in the dramatic action” (Bormann et al., 1997, pp. 254-255). Bormann explains that in some instances, listeners respond to dramatized messages or rhetoric with apathy, and when that happens the dramatization remains an individual event rather than a group fantasy chain. However, sometimes others in the group respond to the message with excitement and expand/add to it, “the tempo of the conversation quickens, others join in, and a chain reaction takes place (p. 255). The result of this chaining is a shared group fantasy. Bormann makes a distinction between a message that includes dramatization and the shared group fantasy that is created by audience members actively “appropriating, modifying, and sharing the drama publicly” (p. 255). “Dramatizations that are shared result in the symbolic convergence process and create common ground that serves to unite the participants” (p. 255). When this symbolic convergence has taken place, the sharers of the fantasy include the dramatization as part of his or her consciousness. However, not every member or listener is a monolith or thinks the same way about dramatized messages. Sometimes listeners actively reject the message, or narrative. “They may reject it with nonverbal shows of displeasure or with verbal ridicule or anger, or by poking fun, sneering, and in other ways indicating their rejection of the depiction” (p. 255).

Bormann (1997), relying on Bales’ work in (1970), explains that there are a number of processes that account for group fantasy sharing. Individuals might bring psychodynamic

concerns to a communication situation, and if those concerns are not tapped into, it would result in disinterest or active rejection, while conversely if those concerns were related to the fantasy would be shared (p. 256). A second process that accounts for fantasy sharing is that “a group of individuals might develop common problems in the course of working and communicating together that are so tension-producing and threatening that the members are reluctant to discuss them directly. Group members may manage this tension by discussing the problem indirectly by employing imaginative language” (p. 256). Thus, as a member dramatizes a scenario in another place that reflects the current here-and-now issue, “then the members are predisposed to create a fantasy chain by participating in the drama” (p. 256).

Bormann (1997) adds to the two processes above a third explanation to the group fantasy sharing concept. He discusses a case study in which a female member had written in her diary a fantasy which related to her group experience. She depicted each member of her group as an animal or a bird in her diary. She showed a different member quietly, and this member encouraged her to read the fable to the rest of the group. This member did so, quietly at first, but then kept on as the group responded—tentatively at first, then increasingly participative. They injected comments and howled with laughter. Bormann writes that it was:

her skill in writing it, plus her skillful analysis of the group’s interpersonal relation problems contributed to the chaining of the fantasy. Another person might have used the same analogy and presented it in such an inept fashion that the members would have been bored by it” ... “The essential point is that the conscious artistry with which the message was designed and delivered was a factor in whether or not it was shared (p. 256).

These three explanations of why people participate in shared group fantasies do so at an interpretive level. Bormann explains that:

In order to explain a communicative event, an investigator needs to study a host of details relating to the individuals who participate in the fantasy chain, the context of past experiences, the here-and-now problems facing the group, the content of the communication, and so forth (p. 256-257).

Bormann (1997) warns that an attempt to analyze communication must guard against the dangers of over interpretation. While Bales and Bormann's theories are useful, they operate under the assumption that, unless someone can conclusively prove otherwise, "the variations in predisposition to share fantasies are extremely large if not infinite" (p. 256). Even if there are an infinite number of possibilities of "why" someone partook in a group fantasy, these theories are generalizations that help critics to understand in a more specific sense.

There are criticisms of SCT in the academic world. There are three problematic assumptions that must be paused for the theory to move forward, namely "a) an egalitarian assumption of fantasy themes and rhetorical visions, b) a prosocial bias, and c) a conflict-free depiction of rhetorical visions" (Olufowote, 2006, p. 460). Bormann in his (1972) work depicted all members as having equal power and access to the creation and chaining of fantasy themes (Zanin et al., 2016). It was argued by Olufowote that dramatic messages and rhetorical visions are not "power neutral" but are often there to serve the benefit of specific members of the group, particularly the ones in power. This critique would lend credence to the idea that President Biden, the leader of America, had ample power to craft a rhetorical vision regarding vaccines and how that fantasy chain may have had ripples in the collective psyche of Americans.

Bormann in his 1983 and 1985 works claimed that multiple rhetorical visions do not peacefully co-exist in groups. But rather, visions are continuously in competition with one another, eventually leading to the destruction of some rhetorical visions. But Endres (1994)

found that multiple visions could, in fact, co-exist inside of one organization. He wrote that multiple visions did not necessarily attempt to explain the same phenomena, but rather complemented one another by emphasizing separate but pertinent issues inside the organization's symbolic reality (Endres, 1994). The work in this study will operate under the assumption that just as there are competing political narratives in America, and just as there are two dominant political parties and ideologies in America, so too are there at least two dominant perspectives and rhetorical visions regarding vaccines in America.

Ernest Borman wrote about some of the criticisms that were made about his theory in the 1980's. He defended his framework of fantasy analysis saying that it "proved to be the prospectus for a large, systematic and integrated program of research" (Bormann, 1982, p. 289). He wrote that "a total rhetoric consists of both discursive material and fantasy themes" (p. 290) leading him to conclude that SCT would provide a "richer explanation of the connection between message content and audience consciousness than any of the current explanations regarding rhetorical theory and criticism could provide" (Bormann, 1982, p. 290). He also stated that a viable rhetorical vision must "accommodate the community to the changes that accompany its unfolding history" (p. 292). He continues "The rhetoric must deal with the anxieties aroused by times of trouble, by the evil defined within the social reality. The rhetoric must deal with changing circumstances and social conflict" (p. 292) And "communication is how the community makes and implements plans and interprets its success and failure. In much of the functioning rhetoric, therefore, problem-solving communication, argument, logic, evidence, proof, and refutation play a prominent part" (Bormann, 1982, p. 292). Bormann adds that "The sharing of fantasies within a group or community establishes the assumptive system portrayed in the common rhetorical vision and contributes to the special theory associated with the

community’s communication style” (p. 292). For instance, Bormann references the Puritans and their rhetorical vision which had given the most prominent authority to the word of God—the Bible, rather than evidence of the senses. To the Puritans the Bible was a legitimate source of revealed knowledge. The Puritans subscribed to a vision which shared the fantasy where God or a God like figure inspires mortals to write a sacred text (Bormann, 1982, p. 292).

In a paper titled “Story and science – how providers and parents can utilize storytelling to combat anti vaccine misinformation” written by Shelby and Ernst (2013) it is claimed that the “success of the anti vaccine movement is due to the fact that they have told a better story” (p. 1796) According to this paper, anecdotal incidents of terrifying vaccine side effects permeate quickly growing online communities which Shelby and Ernst describe as “echo chambers” (p. 1796). The sites, and social media groups which house the anti-vaccine communities are not “platforms for a single doctor’s efforts at reputation rehabilitation” ... but rather social media sites which “encourage story swapping and link-sharing” (p. 1797).

Rhetoric surrounding vaccinations differs widely among proponents and opponents, for instance: the words “immunity” “health” and “freedom” might have different meanings to different individuals depending on their perspective. Just in an analogous way a hieroglyphic text/image describes an idea, some words (even if they have official definitions) can act similarly. Rhetorical theorist Tim Borchers says that “ideographs are words or phrases that are “pregnant” with ideological commitment—for example, “liberty,” “rights of privacy,” or “religion”” (Borchers, 2006, p. 182). There is a great deal of meaning packed into words like health or freedom, with preconceived notions and suppositions that help concrete sets of meanings. Freedom to someone who is a vaccine dissident might mean freedom to choose what they put in their body, freedom to reject what they would call an experimental jab--as the vaccine

shot has been colloquially deemed by many. Someone like President Biden might describe freedom as the right to live without fear of sickness, or fear of death from COVID-19. Both sides might use the word “freedom” and both sides have attributed different meanings into the word. One new phenomenon which was not considered when SCT was first created is the dissemination of ideas and rhetorical visions through social media (Zanin et al., 2016). The ability of ideas, concepts, news, fantasies, and visions to move around is almost immediate. The President could speak at a livestream news event, and Americans can watch his speech from their phones, whether they are at home on their WIFI or are out and about in public using cellular data. It is not implausible to imagine that the dissemination of rhetorical visions is possible at a much higher and larger scale in the 2020s than was previously thought possible in the earlier stages of the development of SCT before social media and the internet were pervasive and commonplace.

Shelby and Ernst (2013) reference a study done in 2012 which was published in *Science*, where researchers found that online comments on science articles had a significant negative impact on science understanding. In the study, approximately two thousand people were tasked with reading a neutral news article about nanotechnology. The article also had a comment section full of invented comments either positive or negative about the technology. All subjects read the same article, but half read the article with positive comments, and half read the article with negative comments. Reader’s interpretations of possible risks associated with the nanotechnology differed significantly, depending on the attitude of the comments that were posted with the story. Just the tone of the comments added to a particular article can make a substantial impact on the way that the audience responds to and thinks about the technology (Shelby & Ernst, 2013). Although this paper is written well before the outbreak of COVID-19,

the concepts of social media driven “echo-chambers” and vast growth of rhetorical dramatizations and fantasies regarding vaccines are relevant. Shelby and Ernst (2013) also describe different anti-vaccination narratives permeating through stories, such as “vaccine reactions” which affected the writer or of friends moving from certainty to doubt about the safety of vaccines. The authors claim that there are some anti-vaccine proponents such as nurses and doctors, and the comments made from those medical professionals are meant to suggest that there is significant disagreement about the safety of vaccinations in the medical and healthcare communities that they work in, which helps to create more fear and doubt regarding vaccines (Shelby & Ernst, 2013).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, American social media companies which some refer to as “Big Tech” have been censoring “misinformation” at the request of the Biden Administration (Concha, 2021). In an opinion piece written by Mike Davis in Newsweek, Davis claims that the result of censorship regarding “misinformation” is a growing mistrust of the government and the claims that the government makes about the vaccine (Davis, 2021). He claimed that:

Everyday Americans are being censored by our social media giants when they ask questions or oppose the prevailing narrative. This censorship, intended to tamp down on ‘misinformation,’ is instead a leading source of vaccine hesitancy and fuels the fires of conspiracy theories (para. 1).

There are even instances of highly qualified doctors such as Dr. Robert Malone, the inventor of mRNA vaccines (Dolgin, 2021) being censored by social media companies (Barkoukis, 2021).

Bormann (1996), regarding censorship claimed that:

The Principle of exploding free speech asserts that given a significant period of sustained censorship there often follows an explosion of counter-rhetoric in the informal channels. The pattern is that the newly surfaced rhetorical visions will result in an outbreak of creative energy, solid achievement, high moral purpose, crackpot activity, silly behavior, and a thorough challenge of the dominant rhetorical vision. The American free speech movements of the 1960s repeated the pattern set by historical precedent (p. 20).

Other academic studies have explored the concept of vaccine hesitancy during the COVID-19 pandemic. One group of researchers (Thelwall et al., 2021) explored vaccine hesitancy on English language Twitter. Other research concluded that Republicans were more likely to refuse vaccines than Democrats (Reinhart, 2020). Some of the main reasons Americans did not wish to receive the COVID-19 vaccinations were/are that the timeline for the creation of the vaccine was rushed, they wished to wait to confirm the vaccine was safe or they simply do not trust vaccines in general (Reinhart, 2020). In other studies, general vaccine hesitancy is linked with conspiracy theories, valuing personal freedom or a level of disgust regarding blood and/or needles (Hornsey et al., 2018). Before the COVID-19 pandemic it was understood that anti-vaccine sentiment came from libertarian Republicans and also individuals from the political left who prefer alternative medicine over pharmaceuticals (Crow & Stacey, 2020). However, during the Covid pandemic it was found that accounts that posted themes associated with right wing politics accounted for 79% of hesitant tweeters in that study (Thelwall et al., 2021 p. 7).

In Bormann's 1996 work in which he analyses symbolic convergence theory regarding rhetoric during the cold war, he states that "when events become confusing and disturbing, people are likely to share fantasies that provide them with a plausible and satisfying account that makes sense out of experiences" (Bormann, 1996, p. 3).

Next is an explanation of the methodology which is to be utilized according to SCT and fantasy themes that will allow for the analysis of President Biden's comments.

### Chapter 3

The main function of the fantasy theme development in Chapter 4 is to identify key instances of communication that President Biden engaged in regarding vaccinations during the COVID-19 pandemic to explore his rhetorical vision. This chapter will be an overview of the steps the author will take to put together the various comments from President Biden in the form of fantasy themes, used in creating a reality, or a narrative for the American public.

Fantasy theme analysis will be used as the base theory to formulate the social reality of President Biden's rhetorical vision. The theory assesses how rhetoric creates narratives within a group to build identities and a common reality among its members. This common reality forges a basis for decision making and action. By placing the narratives together, a comprehensive vision comprised of fantasy themes may be formed representing President Biden's reality. As Foss (1999) explains: "fantasy themes tell a story that accounts for the group's experience and that is the reality of the participants" (Foss, 1999, p. 123).

Three fantasies will be identified, and heroes, villains, emotions, and attitudes will be elaborated upon. The analysis will come from elements of the "drama." Questions, which come from Bormann's (1972) work, which can aide the development of the dramatization are:

Who are the heroes and the villains? How concrete and detailed are the characterizations?

To what, or who are the motives attributed? How are the members of the rhetorical community characterized? For what are the insiders praised, the outsiders or enemies castigated? What values are inherent in the praiseworthy characters? (p. 401-402).

The typical scenarios will be identified. Many of the following questions from Bormann's (1972) work will also be useful in developing the dramatization:

What acts are performed by the ultimate legitimizer? The neutral people? The enemy? Who is sanctioned and praised, who is censored? What lifestyles are exemplified as praiseworthy? What meanings are inherent in the drama? Where does the insider fit into the great chain of being? How does the movement fit into the scheme of history? Which emotional evocations dominate the drama? What motives are embedded in the vision? Would the committed work for or resist legal action? Violence? Would they resign this life to get ready for an afterlife? (p. 402).

Bormann (1972) offers a description of how a critic can conduct a fantasy theme analysis:

A critic can take the social reality contained in a rhetorical vision which he has constructed from the concrete dramas developed in a body of discourse and examine the social relationships, the motives, the qualitative impact of that symbolic world as though it were the substance of social reality for those people who participated in the vision. If the critic can illuminate how people who participated in the rhetorical vision related to one another, how they arranged themselves into social hierarchies, how they acted to achieve the goals embedded in their dreams, and how they were aroused by the dramatic action and the *dramatis personae* within the manifest content of their rhetoric, his insights will make a useful contribution to understanding the movement and its adherents (p. 401).

Once an understanding of President Biden's framed collective narrative has been developed, it can be understood where Americans fall within that narrative, and an attempt will be made to ascertain how that common understanding aided in the decision-making process of getting (or not getting) vaccinated.

From this analysis the critic will come to understand whether a symbolic convergence has happened. In other words, did President Biden's comments reinforce American's beliefs and reassure them they made a good choice in getting vaccinated? Or did people reject his rhetorical vision and become further entrenched against his fantasy? In the fifth and concluding chapter, an analysis consists of why proponents of President Biden's rhetorical vision supported that vision, and an analysis is also made to ascertain why opponents of his vision rejected it.

The general standard this study will use to choose which statements to analyze is whether the author believes President Biden's comments aided in the development of a rhetorical vision regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccinations. The timeline of President Biden's comments starts at the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020 and are through to present-day Spring 2022.

With a consideration towards reducing redundancy, the actual comments themselves are not listed here in chapter 3. The context of the comments as well as the citation are given in the listing of the artifacts:

1. Multiple comments are taken from President Biden's Inaugural address to America on January 20, 2021, the comments are taken from a transcript by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC, 2021).
2. A statement made at a CNN townhall hosted by television host Don Lemon in July of 2021 (Dale and Subramaniam, 2021).
3. Comments from President Biden on Thursday the 16th, December of 2021 at the White House following a COVID-19 press briefing (Malloy and Vazquez, 2021).
4. A statement made in an interview with CNN's Anderson Cooper, on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021 (Villereal, 2021).

5. A comment made in an address to the American people, on September 24, 2021 (Towey, 2021).
6. A comment made in an address to the American people, on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021 (Monroe-Hamilton, 2021).
7. Comments made at an address at the White House, September 9, 2021 (Nazaryan, 2021).
8. Comments made from the East Room of the White House on August 18, 2021 (Smith-Schoenwalder, 2021)
9. Comments made on July 16, 2021, speaking to the press gallery on the White House lawn (Cathey, 2021).
10. Comments from a presidential address to the nation on September 9, 2021 (MLive, 2021).
11. Comments from President Biden on September 16, 2020, in a speech given in Wilmington, Delaware (Karson et al., 2020).
12. Comments made by former New York Mayor Bill de Blasio on August 3, 2021 (de Blasio, 2021).
13. Comments made by President Biden from a speech announcing vaccine mandates on September 10, 2021 (Benson, 2021).
14. Comments from the White House COVID-19 response team on July 16, 2021 (White House, 2021).

## Chapter 4

Using Bormann's SCT framework, three fantasies are discussed and developed in this chapter. The three fantasies are based on comments made by President Biden which emerge as a rhetorical vision that explains the social reality experienced by Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Fantasy 1: President Biden assumes the role of a sanctioning agent, portraying and positioning himself as a war time President who will lead America through one of its darkest hours.**

The first question to be asked is what is the setting in which the fantasy and social reality takes place? The setting is America in which a deadly disease is spreading, fear permeates the nation, death tolls are rising, businesses are shattered, as a silent killer stalks the nation. President Biden paints this picture where America is experiencing trauma similar to those instances in American memory which invoke a sense of a grand emergency. During his inaugural speech, President Biden exclaimed:

Few people in our Nation's history have been more challenged, or found a time more challenging, or difficult, than the time we're in now. Once in a century virus that silently stalks the country. It's taken as many lives in one year than America lost in all of WW2.

Millions of jobs have been lost, hundreds of thousands of businesses closed. (BBC, 2021)

President Biden is drawing the connection to the collective psyche of America in how they understand what it would have been like, or what it was like (if they are old enough) to live through a war-time experience. Although this may or may not have been intentional, the "war time" presidential vision is further demonstrated by the imagery revealed during the inaugural speech of President Biden at the United States Capitol, which was surrounded by 25,000

National Guardsmen (Liebermann et al., 2020). Considering this imagery, and based on the President's rhetoric, President Biden is indirectly painting a portrayal of himself as a war time president. The American people are called to unite with their President to do battle with their common enemies. Among those enemies is the COVID-19 virus. Further along in President Biden's inaugural speech, he says: "through the Civil War, the Great Depression, World War[s], 9/11, through struggle, sacrifice, and setbacks, our "better angels" have always prevailed. In each of these moments, enough of us came together to carry all of us forward. And we can do so now" (BBC, 2021). The invocation of America's most significant challenges, which one might consider America's "darkest days" and the connection with the current COVID-19 experience of Americans is an invitation from President Biden to become the heroes of our time. The use of war time rhetoric certainly evokes a particular call to action. "The use of military terminology to describe different aspects of the pandemic and justify the need for a strong state, leader, centralised decision-making system and sacrifices from its citizens is required during any war" (Kumar, 2020). This rhetorical framing of the pandemic as a war also justified the use of drastic measures such as lockdowns, which were believed to stop the reproduction of the virus, and slow the spread of the pandemic (Sault, 2020). In his inaugural speech, President Biden continued:

My fellow Americans, in the work ahead of us, we will need each other. We will need all our strength to persevere through this dark winter... We will be judged, you and I, for how we resolve the cascading crises of our era. Will we rise to the occasion? Will we master this rare and difficult hour? Will we meet our obligations and pass along a new and better world for our children? I believe we must, and I believe we will. (BBC, 2021)

By explaining the experience of Americans as one in which they are engaged in a fantastic struggle, one of life or death, President Biden is positioning himself as a leader who must do

what it takes to protect America and Americans, no matter the cost, and is also positioning Americans to accept his invitation to rise to the occasion.

**Fantasy 2: President Biden encourages Americans to become heroes by partaking in the battle against COVID-19 by becoming vaccinated, while unvaccinated Americans are demonized as villains.**

Bormann (1972) directs critics to ask who the heroes are, and conversely who the villains are—either by implication or explication (p. 401). President Biden scripted the heroes and villains. President Biden explained to Americans that “if you’re vaccinated, you’re not going to be hospitalized, you’re not going to be in the ICU unit and you’re not going to die.” He continued later and said that even if vaccinated people do “catch the virus,” they are “not likely to get sick.” He continued and claimed that the vaccines “cover” the Delta variant of the virus: “You’re not going to get Covid if you have these vaccinations” (Dale & Subramaniam, 2021). With hindsight, having more information to rely on (such as the facts that Covid vaccines do not stop transmission of COVID-19, a vaccinated individual can still get sick, be hospitalized, and potentially die with Covid) the validity of these comments is in question, and indeed the truth of these statements have been debated in the media.

However, these statements were directed at the American public and had an impact on how Americans viewed the pandemic and their role in the drama. Americans were told by their President that if they take the Covid vaccine, they can, at least as is in their power and sphere of influence, slow the spread of the pandemic. Putting the agency of heroism in the hands of the participants of this vision allows for them to partake in what may be interpreted as a noble cause. If becoming vaccinated means that an individual cannot become infected with the virus, then not only are they safe and strong, and not only have they done their duty, but they have also helped

save their loved ones, their neighbors, their fellow Americans. That is the stuff of heroes, to which they had been called by their President. In addition to the President's narrative, large social media companies also contributed to the narrative. When vaccines became available some social media companies offered options to show that you were vaccinated and had done the right thing, such as Instagram's "lets get vaccinated" sticker, rolled out on March 16, which would "help people show their support and share accurate information around the COVID-19 vaccine" (Instagram, 2021). An outlet such as Instagram's "lets get vaccinated" sticker was a factor in creating an avenue for the heroes to prove they were heroes and created an environment supportive of the chaining out of President Biden's fantasy theme by reinforcing the hero role and bolstering the connection between being vaccinated and being a hero.

Within President Biden's dramatization of the pandemic, the vaccinated are portrayed as the heroes, and conversely, the unvaccinated are presented as the villains. However, it appears that there is an escalation and shift in President Biden's rhetoric. At first, unvaccinated Americans received a gentle admonition when President Biden contrasted them shirking their duty to the vaccinated American who were doing the heavy lifting for the nation. President Biden's rhetoric, at least earlier on in the pandemic, may have been weighted more heavily towards encouraging the positive personas in the drama towards heroism, rather than demonizing the negative personas. President Biden offers encouragement to the vaccinated when he says: "the vast majority of Americans are doing the right thing" (Towey, 2021). While the vaccinated received a rhetorical pat on the back from President Biden, and perhaps patted themselves on the back at some point or another, the unvaccinated received increased scolding on multiple occasions.

The fantasy needed a villain and the unvaccinated filled that role in President Biden's narrative. The unvaccinated were told that the continued pandemic was their fault. President Biden places responsibility on the shoulders of the unvaccinated when he said: "this is a pandemic of the unvaccinated, and it's caused by the fact that despite America having unprecedented and successful vaccination program, despite the fact that for almost 5 months, free vaccines have been available in 80,000 different locations, we still have nearly 80 million Americans who have failed to get the shot" (MLive, 2021).

Despite the efforts of President Biden and the organized efforts of his administration, for some reason, there were still large numbers of Americans who refuse to take the "shot." President Biden's narrative had to double down on the culpability of the unvaccinated (whether or not the science backed that up is another issue). The President emphasized their villainy and clear moral responsibility, "the unvaccinated overcrowd our hospitals, are overrunning emergency rooms and intensive care units, leaving no room for someone with a heart attack or pancreatitis or cancer" (MLive, 2021). The not-so-subtle implication of this statement is that heart attack victims, or victims of pancreatitis or cancer did not choose to end up in the emergency room, but rather they are victims of a person who did choose to be there by refusing to become vaccinated. The unvaccinated had been given ample opportunity by the sanctioning agent (President Biden and his administration), but had thus far refused protection, thereby choosing to overcrowd the hospitals and push health care infrastructure to the brink of disaster. President Biden describes unvaccinated Americans as a "distinct minority of Americans, supported by a distinct minority of elected officials" who are "keeping us from turning the corner." President Biden referred to this as "pandemic politics" which are "making people sick" and causing "unvaccinated to die." He continued and stated that "we cannot allow these actions

to stand in the way of protecting the large majority of Americans—who have done their part. I want to get back to life as normal” (MLive, 2021).

The villains, or the unvaccinated, are portrayed as individuals who do not care about those they love, the vulnerable, and greater society at large. When discussing concerns that some individuals view the vaccine as a matter of personal freedom, President Biden mocks that point of view and reframes it by saying: “I have the freedom to kill you with Covid” (Villereal, 2021). He is portraying the mindset of a villain, who is more concerned with their own perception of freedom in comparison with a concern to protect the health of strangers, and by neglecting the health of strangers, is killing them via proxy. In this fantasy, villains are portrayed as having a callous disregard for life. It is useful to have multiple derogatory terms for the villains: the villains were the anti-vaxxers, science deniers, patient zero, and covidiot. The heroes on the other hand, were the vaxxed, the boosted, the jabbed, and they were stepping up to the plate by doing a simple task which allegedly protected them and greater society. The heroes are portrayed as team players, and patriots. The villains, as selfish, at best either ignorant or lazy, and quite likely, malfeasant.

President Biden conveys the narrative that taking the vaccine is a good moral choice. Conversely, not taking the vaccine is immoral. The consequence of the immorality and hesitation on the part of those who fail to receive a vaccination is that the rest of America must live in fear. The President stated, “The unvaccinated also put our economy at risk because people are reluctant to go out, because they’re worried they’re going to get sick” (Monroe-Hamilton, 2021). The fear that is imposed upon the vaccinated population is, as President Biden claims, a factor in the economic turmoil facing Americans. President Biden adds:

I've tried everything in my power to get people vaccinated. For folks who haven't gotten vaccinated, get it done, we have a plan. We have the tools ... We just have to finish the job ... I know the vaccination requirements are tough medicine, unpopular with some, politics for others. But they're lifesaving. They're game-saving for the country. It's about life and death, that's what it's about ... its about being patriotic, doing the right thing.

(Monroe-Hamilton, 2021, para. 5-13)

President Biden acknowledges the considerations of those who did not wish to get vaccinated, referring to the vaccines as tough medicine, which, as unpleasant as it may appear, is necessary to fight COVID-19. President Biden acknowledges that there is a political element related to dissent against his vaccination program. President Biden himself, before he was elected President, was wary of the politicization surrounding vaccines and it could be argued that to an extent he participated in that politicization when he said, "I trust vaccines, I trust scientists, but I don't trust Donald Trump" (Karson et al., 2020). Although this statement is made before Joe Biden was elected president, it still helps in understanding that politicization of vaccines was a factor in the drama and the fantasy themes.

The villains in this dramatization were scolded further by President Biden when he said, "we've been patient, but our patience is wearing thin... and your refusal has cost all of us" (Nazaryan, 2021). President Biden shows not just how he feels about the unvaccinated, but he uses the word "we" to explain that it is not just him and his administration who are tired of those who refuse the vaccine, but it is greater society who has grown impatient. The heroes and their sanctioning agent have "had it" with the villains. The villains are costing all of society. This mentality is in line with actions taken by officials at various levels of power in America. Vaccine requirements, or mandates, became commonplace throughout America during the pandemic.

Villainous Americans were denied access to many goods and services that were previously available to them before the pandemic. Vaccination requirements were implemented in cities like New York City and many others such as San Francisco, New Orleans, Boston, and Philadelphia (Porterfield, 2021). The Mayor of New York during the pandemic, Bill de Blasio, gave a press conference on August 3, 2021. In his speech he discussed new vaccine requirements in New York city in a way that dovetailed nicely with the President's themes:

This is a miraculous place literally full of wonders. And, if you're vaccinated, all that's going to open up to you. You'll have the key. You can open the door. But, if you're unvaccinated, unfortunately, you will not be able to participate in many things. That's the point we're trying to get across... This is crucial because we know that this will encourage a lot more vaccination. (de Blasio, 2021)

It was not only government officials which implemented vaccine mandates, though, private businesses and many corporations also implemented vaccine requirements in some form such as American Express, Amtrak, Anthem, BlackRock, Carhartt, Cisco, Citigroup, Columbia Sportswear, CVS Health, Deloitte, Delta Air Lines, DoorDash, Equinox, Ford, Goldman Sachs, Google, Jefferies, Lyft, McDonalds, Meta, and the list goes on (Messenger, 2022). Many Americans chose to comply with the vaccine requirements, and many others went as far as to lose employment due to their refusal of the vaccine.

Vaccination mandates were cited by President Biden as a means of protecting people from other people rather than protecting Americans from a public health concern. President Biden claims in a speech announcing his vaccine mandate plans on September 10, 2021, that the mandates are necessary to protect his heroes from perpetrators. The President claimed the need to "protect vaccinated workers from their unvaccinated coworkers" (Benson, 2021). This

comment makes it seem as though unvaccinated individuals are infecting and harming vaccinated people. It could be surmised that by using this type of rhetoric there was an element of shaming and Presidential influence to try and coax the unvaccinated to not want to “harm” people.

**Fantasy 3 President Biden portrayed contradicting narratives to the “official narrative” as existential threats to America and the current political order.**

Shortly after the vaccines were released, it was thought that being vaccinated would prevent a person from getting sick from COVID-19. And, as has been previously stated, President Biden echoed this narrative when he said, “you’re not going to get Covid if you have these vaccinations” (Dale & Subramaniam, 2021). With many individuals sick in the hospital with Covid, it was thought that America was experiencing, and as President Biden said: a “pandemic of the unvaccinated” (Cathey, 2021). President Biden, however, claimed that it was not just Covid that was killing people, but also social media platforms that allowed misinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding vaccines to flourish which resulted in reduced vaccination rates and were killing people. “They’re killing people. I mean it really—look, the only pandemic we have is among the unvaccinated. And they’re killing people” (Cathey, 2021).

In a press briefing held by the White House COVID-19 response team and public health officials, on July 16, 2021, it was claimed that 97% of Americans being admitted to hospitals were unvaccinated (White House, 2021). In that same press briefing, it was claimed by a Mr. Zients that the Biden Administration was “taking disinformation and misinformation head on.” He continued, “we continue to see efforts to deliberately mislead the American people about the

importance of vaccination. Those who peddle and promote these dangerous lies are harming the very people who are most at risk and furthering a pandemic that has already taken more than 600,000 American lives” (White House, 2021). President Biden’s Surgeon General Dr. Murthy spoke next at this presser discussing health misinformation where he claimed that “health misinformation has cost us lives” and that “we’re telling technology companies that we expect more. We’re asking them to operate with greater transparency, to modify their algorithms to avoid amplifying misinformation, and to swiftly and consistently take action against misinformation super-spreaders on their platforms” (White House, 2021). The use of the word “super-spreaders” is interesting as that terminology, at least in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, has typically been used to refer to the spread of the virus itself. Surgeon General Dr. Murthy further claimed that “misinformation robs us of our freedom to make decisions for our health based on science and facts.” This rhetoric is in line with President Biden’s fantasy theme in which contradicting narratives pose an existential threat not only to public health, but to the authority of the government and the political order.

Whether you were a scientist, a doctor, or a trucker, if you were vocally against the COVID-19 vaccinations, and/or being unvaccinated within this rhetorical vision, this meant that you were carrying on the pandemic and in turn causing a continuation of the widespread suffering, sickness, and lockdowns. Many Americans believed that the pandemic would only continue to impact the unvaccinated, which may have, at least initially, motivated many Americans to get vaccinated. But in order for the goal of vaccinating all Americans to be achieved, the Biden Administration had to counter the threat of misinformation and disinformation.

The continuous top-down pressure to trust the “science” or “official narrative” was in line with the fantasy rhetoric from President Biden. It was important to create a moral imperative to “trust the science” because the science, or at least the official narrative parading as infallible truth, directed Americans to become vaccinated. The unvaccinated were widely encouraged to trust the vaccines, and the scientists who made them.

As a result of the top-down pressure from the Biden Administration to clamp down on narratives and information that contradicted the official narrative, many instances of censorship, particularly involving large social media companies, have been documented. One example is Facebook slapping a “fact check” and “missing context” label on a British Medical Journal’s paper on Pfizer vaccines, resulting in reduced distribution/reach (CensorTrack, 2021). Another example is Facebook removing the official page for the Great Barrington Declaration, which was a “prominent group of international disease experts who have been critical of COVID-19 lockdowns” (CensorTrack, 2021). YouTube deleted Dr. Peter Mccullough’s and Dr. Robert Malone’s interviews with podcaster Joe Rogan where they discussed COVID-19 in America. Dr. Peter Mccullough is a Cardiologist and Epidemiologist, but his discussion about COVID-19 in America resulted in a Big Tech removal of his content for “medical misinformation” (CensorTrack, 2021). Twitter removed Dr. Robert Malone (the inventor of mRNA vaccine technology) for his questioning of the efficacy and safety of the COVID-19 vaccine (Evans, 2021).

Big Tech companies working in lockstep with President Biden’s agenda not only engaged in censorship of dissenting narratives and facts, and individuals, but engaged in a centralization of the “official narrative.” Instagram, for instance, created the “COVID-19 Information Center” which helped “connect people around the world with authoritative COVID-19 information”

(Instagram, 2021). Facebook let its users know if they had interacted with “dangerous coronavirus misinformation,” and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg wrote that “through this crisis, one of my top priorities is making sure that you see accurate and authoritative information across all of our apps” (Orutay, 2020). Instagram claimed that “if posts on Instagram contain claims that violate our COVID-19 and vaccine policies, we remove them. For posts that have not been debunked by health experts, we apply informational labels about vaccines and COVID-19 generally” (Instagram, 2021). The official Instagram information referred to the CDC, NIOSH, HHS, WHO, and UNICEF as recognized health organizations. The Instagram COVID-19 information center, relying on official government resources, also claimed that vaccine side effects are usually mild.

Though mild responses such as soreness, swollen arms, fever, body aches and headaches are common responses to the COVID-19 vaccines, there have also been many adverse side-effects such as Myocarditis and Pericarditis as well as blood clots (Maragakis & Kellen, 2021.) Over the course of the last few years there has been a wide unaffiliated coalition of medical professionals, constitutional freedom advocates, and politicians who provided countervailing narratives and alternative fantasy chains to that promulgated by the White House. Many of these medical professionals, advocates, and politicians were censored during the pandemic as they posed a direct threat to the chaining out of President Bidens fantasy theme.

Following the framework of Symbolic Convergence Theory and fantasy chains we can assess the impact of the President’s rhetoric on segments of the American population. It appears that the President’s messaging segmentation was intentional. The goal appears to promote, entice, coerce, or manipulate unvaccinated Americans to “do the right thing” and, presumably, the healthy thing, to become vaccinated against COVID-19. Having explored three fantasy

themes utilized by President Biden and understanding the rhetorical vision which played out among the American population, an analysis will be completed of “why” these fantasy themes failed to chain out among those who chose to remain unvaccinated.

## Chapter 5

As discussed previously in this study, Bormann tells critics that fantasy themes are dramatized or dramatizing messages that portray characters involved in action within a setting that accounts for and explains human experience (Bormann, 1972). As fantasy themes are developed, they either chain out and expand, or receive resistance and rejection. In this instance, it is both, among different portions of the population. Bormann also tells critics that for these fantasies to chain out, for a rhetorical vision to be accepted, and for symbolic convergence to occur, the fantasy themes must make sense to the listener and explain their experience as part of a larger picture. Especially when “events become confusing and disturbing, people are likely to share fantasies that provide them with a plausible and satisfying account that makes sense out of experiences” (Bormann, 1996, p. 3). The COVID-19 Pandemic has certainly been a confusing and disturbing time.

For many Americans, President Biden’s rhetorical vision matched their lived experience, and how they viewed the pandemic, thus his fantasies chained out broadly. America is not, however, an ideological monolith. Indeed, there are dominant frameworks of reality, shared understandings, shared meanings, but there are also competing meanings, understandings, ideologies, motives, and political parties. In this chapter, those who supported President Biden’s rhetorical vision will be referred to as “proponents” and those who oppose or rejected President Biden’s rhetorical vision will be referred to as “opponents.”

### **Support for President Biden’s Fantasies**

President Biden, during and through the pandemic of the virus COVID-19, has promoted a rhetorical vision as listed in the three fantasies identified in Chapter 4. Many Americans bought in to this rhetorical vision by accepting his “war time” leadership and his role as the sanctioning

agent, accepting his call to become heroes by becoming vaccinated, and accepted increased censorship in fighting the threat of “health misinformation.”

President Biden was elected to office by a majority of American voters. Although there is some debate regarding the validity of the 2020 Presidential election, that is not the point of this study, nor is it particularly relevant to the dramatization that has been explored, aside from being one reason why President Biden’s first fantasy may have been rejected by some Republicans. Democrats are the largest group of supporters of President Biden and are the most likely to buy in to the first fantasy in which President Biden portrays himself as a war time President who will lead America forward and ultimately win the battle against COVID-19.

Democrats were also “far more likely than Republicans to have received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose” (Funk & Gramlich, 2021). In a time of war, or a time that has been equated to war, sacrifices must be made, and if the sacrifices necessary are simply wearing a mask and getting vaccinated, proponents of the fantasy were happy to do their part. The reality of the uniqueness of the COVID-19 pandemic and the contrast with dark patches in American history quickly made a connection with Americans sense of responsibility to act in times of trouble.

The calling from President Biden to the American people to become heroes by becoming vaccinated chained out or linked with their existing beliefs and values. Proponents of President Biden’s vision hold collective action geared towards mutual benefit in high regard, and thus Biden’s fantasy linked with their existing beliefs. A paper written by Giubilini et al., in 2018, before the COVID-19 pandemic started, states that “individuals who have access to vaccines and for whom vaccination is not medically contraindicated have a moral obligation to contribute to the realization of herd immunity by being vaccinated” (Giubilini et al., 2018, p. 547). Proponents

of President Biden's fantasy believe that there is a moral obligation to become vaccinated for the betterment of society. Their moral obligation rests on a scientific belief that vaccines can and will get America to herd immunity despite the variants (Powell, 2021). The result of such a belief was an extrapolation of this moral obligation on the individual, unto the collective, hence vaccination mandates became commonplace, in fact, they were deemed necessary (Diamond, 2021).

The belief that vaccinations were life saving tools which would aide in ending the tumultuous period helped foster a pro-vaccine sentiment, and even perhaps a politicized sentiment as the impacts of the pandemic continued to be represented through political action across the nation. The positive view of vaccines is accompanied by a negative view of the unvaccinated. According to Pew Research, 77% of vaccinated Americans believe "their views are described at least somewhat well by the statement "people who choose not to get a COVID-19 vaccine are hurting the country"" (Tyson et al., 2020). The negative view of the unvaccinated is not just directed at the average resister, but also directed at sceptical government officials. Larsen et al., (2022) argued that vaccine hesitancy surfaced particularly among Republicans because Republican political leaders frequently downplayed the danger of Covid, some even promoting contested claims about the safety of the vaccine. The concept that those refusing the life saving vaccine were standing in the way of ending the pandemic reinforced the portrayal of vaccine dissenters as villains. The villain role for the unvaccinated was further reinforced by the rhetoric that the unvaccinated were clogging up hospitals and denying care to others. Commentator Howard Stern claimed that the unvaccinated were threatening his "freedom to live" and when it was suggested to him that getting the vaccination is a matter of personal freedom he responded: "F\*\*\* them. F\*\*\* their freedom. I want my freedom to live" He

continued and stated “so, like, if you have a heart attack or any kind of problem, you can’t even get into the E.R., and I’m really of a mind to say: look if you didn’t get vaccinated [and] you got Covid, you don’t get into a hospital” (Gentile, 2021). Howard Stern’s conception of freedom contrasts with the concept of freedom held by the opponents of President Biden’s fantasy but compliments the rhetoric of President Biden in which the freedom of the vaccinated is being infringed by the unvaccinated. Howard Stern’s comments are evidence of a chaining out of President Biden’s portrayal of the unvaccinated as villains. The proponents in the fantasy who had already done their part in ending the pandemic by becoming vaccinated and wearing a mask as best they could manage were reinforced by President Biden’s vocalized impatience towards the unvaccinated. Proponents believed that opposing government leaders, such as Republican Governors, who acted in contradiction to President Biden’s framework, were also villains and were reinforced of this fantasy by comments made by individuals like President Biden’s press secretary Jen Psaki who claimed that those Governors resisting President Biden’s vaccination campaign were “literally killing people” via their lies and propaganda (Gage, 2021).

Americans who respect and trust the narratives of the mainstream media, the government organizations, the “fact checkers” and official sources were disturbed and perhaps confused by the “conspiracy theorists” who shared contradicting narratives. Dr. Marc Grossman, an EMS director for New Hampshire’s HCA hospitals explained the reality of this when he claimed that:

Misinformation can be deadly. I know of a patient who refused to be vaccinated and got Covid. He started a course of Ivermectin and Hydroxychloroquine and went into renal failure. Covid is a potentially deadly medical condition that has turned political for no reason I can see. (Dandurant, 2022)

Individuals who share content that might encourage someone else not to get vaccinated, or to try alternative medicines were castigated along this line of thinking. An organization called the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) claimed that 12 people were responsible for 65 percent of anti-vaccine content on Facebook and Twitter and dubbed those individuals the “disinformation dozen” (Zitser, 2021). Notably, a member of the disinformation dozen was the nephew of former President John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy Jr, who is described by the CCDH as a prominent anti-vaxxer. The CCDH called on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube to “de-platform every member of the disinformation dozen with haste.” They claimed that “the most effective and efficient way to stop the dissemination of harmful information is to de-platform the most highly visible repeat offenders” (Zitser, 2021). President Biden’s fantasy that information, or misinformation/disinformation which challenged the official narrative was an existential threat easily chained out because of peoples existing beliefs that there ought to be a gold standard of information, censorship is justifiable when operating on the premise of saving lives, and centralization of life saving information was a critical function of a government in a time of “war.”

“Trusting the science,” or “trust the science” was a common phrase used throughout the pandemic, at least to proponents of Biden’s rhetoric, which may have meant accepting that there are limits to the understanding of complex issues for an average individual who hasn’t studied that topic in depth, and that there is value in relying on the experts. In most areas of science this is a simple and widely accepted concept. But regarding politicized science, such as has been portrayed by President Biden’s “life or death” rhetoric regarding vaccines, opponents pushing a contradicting narrative and those who criticize the science/scientists become not just ignorant, but malevolent. Dr. Anthony Fauci, a physician-scientist and immunologist and prominent figure

throughout the COVID-19 pandemic received much criticism—to which he responded: “So it’s easy to criticize, but they’re really criticizing science because I represent science. That’s dangerous. To me, that’s more dangerous than the slings and the arrows that get thrown at me” (Hoochman, 2021).

To proponents of Biden’s fantasy, or at least to individuals such as Dr. Anthony Fauci, criticisms of the science represented personal attacks as they believed that their narrative and their facts were solely representative of the truth. In this context, it is interesting to note that almost seven in ten republicans (68%) “say scientists’ judgments are just as likely to be biased as other people’s,” this number is up from 55%, which is what it was in 2019 (Tyson et al., 2021). It appears as though throughout the pandemic, trust in the official narrative and those who produce it has diminished, though among those who do trust the official narrative, the scientists, and the development of the vaccines, there is an indicator in whether someone would be willing to become vaccinated, for, “vaccination status is strongly linked with confidence in the vaccine research and development process” (Funk & Gramlich, 2021) and thus, the scientists, and the official narrative.

### **Rejection of President Biden’s Fantasies**

The rejection of President Biden’s fantasy is represented by those who chose to reject the COVID-19 vaccination. As was mentioned earlier in this study, as of April 8, 2022, completely unvaccinated Americans consist of only 22.9% of the American population. There are commonalities among the demographics of those who rejected the vaccine which are consistent with ideological and political dissent from the beliefs held by those who chose to become vaccinated. As has been detailed previously in this study, unvaccinated Americans are more likely to identify as Republican (Kirzinger et al., 2021). In fact, “86% of Democrats and

independents who lean toward the Democratic Party have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, compared with 60% of Republicans and Republican leaners” (Tyson et al., 2021). To further emphasize the politicized nature of this divide, regarding President Biden, “about three-quarters of Democrats (74%) say he is doing an excellent or good job responding to the coronavirus pandemic, compared with just 15% of Republicans” (Tyson et al., 2021).

Conservatives typically, though not exclusively, identify more with individualism rather than collectivism. In an article on the website called “The American Conservative” it was claimed that “individualism is at the core of the American spirit, for better and for worse” (Dreher, 2019). The American cultural history is full of characters like John Wayne, representative of rugged, strong, individuals who don’t back down to tyrants. John Wayne is said to “represent so many facets of the American aesthetic that conservative voters find appealing” (Howard, 2016). Though not all conservatives would identify with characters like John Wayne, or describe themselves as “individualists,” the permeating culture of “freedom,” “liberty” and “God given rights” tends to be a more conservative ideology, and this ideology helps guide and frame choices for conservatives.

This individualism is a crucial factor in the rejection of the compulsory collective action fantasy of President Biden’s rhetorical vision. Those who rejected vaccination may reaffirm the value to act in a time of trouble, even to act collectively, as in President Biden’s war time fantasy, but President Biden’s fantasy failed to chain out because they thought the virus was only a minor threat, or even no threat at all. The “war time” call to action failed to chain out because the urgency and sense of emergency did not align with their view of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, 33% of Americans believe the virus is only a minor threat, and 6% believe it is not a threat at all (Tyson et al., 2021). In an article in the “Scientific American,” it was claimed that

believing COVID-19 was no worse than the flu was a persistent myth. The reason given for why this belief persists, is because “their leaders keep saying it” (Lewis, 2020). The author of this article continues: “In addition to his repeated false claims that COVID-19 is no worse than the flu, Trump has also said—falsely—that the numbers of deaths from COVID-19 are exaggerated.”

It is interesting that the author attributes those who disagree with the official narrative as followers of the former President Donald Trump. This would certainly appear to reinforce the idea that there is an obvious political division among the competing fantasy themes regarding the pandemic. This is an interesting irony, because former President Donald Trump takes immense pride in the development of COVID-19 vaccines, which were produced under his administration and by his direction, even though his supporters are typically the least likely to become vaccinated. A study published April 4, 2022, shows that an “online ad campaign featuring former President Donald Trump boosted vaccination rates in counties where rates of COVID-19 shots were lowest” (Larsen et al., 2022). It would be logical that if President Biden is the leader in his rhetorical vision, a vision rejected by many of his political rivals, that the leader of the Republicans—former President Donald Trump—would also be the leader of the opposing rhetorical vision. However, this doesn’t appear to be the case. At a rally in Alabama in August of 2021, former President Trump encouraged his supporters to get vaccinated: “And you know what? I believe totally in your freedoms. I do. You’ve got to do what you have to do, but I recommend take the vaccines. I did it. It’s good. Take the vaccines” (Smith, 2021). Boos rang out in the crowd, an uncommon phenomenon. Trump responded: “No, that’s ok, that’s alright. You got your freedoms.” This rhetoric reaffirms the concerns over bodily autonomy and freedom

which are concerns of the opponents, and while not disparaging his supporters on this point, Trump still encourages his followers to become vaccinated.

A common, reoccurring theme among vaccine dissenters is their major concerns about the pressure to take the vaccines, and the safety and efficacy of those vaccines. According to the Pew Research center, 88% of unvaccinated Americans agreed with the statement: “there’s too much pressure on Americans to get a COVID-19 vaccine” (Tyson et al., 2021). Although uncertainty regarding the vaccines and their effectiveness—particularly regarding waning effectiveness over time--may have naturally result in hesitancy, many of the opponents of President Biden’s fantasy were not just hesitant but refused the vaccines outright. One group called “Vax Watch,” which stands for “no forced vaccines, no mask mandates, no more lockdowns, and ending medical tyranny” claimed that:

Everything about our society’s response to COVID-19 has been built on incompetence, lies, and coercion. Vax Watch is committed to fighting back against the governments and organizations who hate you, want to strip you of your rights, and inject you against your will. Few have had the spine to oppose the strong arm of our corrupt system—until now. (VaxWatch, 2022)

President Biden’s fantasy of war time leadership, an invitation to become a hero, and enforcement of censorship cannot chain out among opponents who believe the government and its representatives “hate them,” wants to “inject you against your will” and who believe the system is corrupt. In fact, the measures that were imposed on the unvaccinated may have caused them to resist the vaccinations even more. Dotson and Tampio (2021) write:

If this rhetoric and these efforts lead to a de facto national vaccine mandate, it will backfire: Americans from all walks of life resist being told what to put into their bodies,

and many will resent any politician or institution that makes them get vaccinated, creating a crisis of legitimacy for any government, university or business that forces constituents, students or employees to get vaccinated... the more the government flexes its political muscles to urge or enforce vaccine compliance, the greater incentive there is for populist politicians to push back, reinforcing the idea that the fight over vaccines is a fight about individual liberty.

The more the government attempts to infringe on the rights that many, particularly opponents, believe to be inalienable, the more reinforced they are in their opposition towards President Biden's fantasy and the coercive tactics he employed to encourage vaccinations. By refusing to become vaccinated, opponents resisted the vision, though many have gone further than refusing vaccinations. The opponents who have been outright resistant to President Biden's fantasy and his calls to become vaccinated have indeed been a minority, but they have been extremely vocal. Though it's hard to measure, it may be fair to say that the protesting of vaccinations, lockdowns, mandates, etc. has become extremely popular across not only America but all around the world (Hinchliffe, 2021).

Though resistance of President Biden's COVID-19 dramatization has been visible among the unvaccinated through protests, outright refusal and dissidence, and acceptance has chained out among the majority of the American population which ended up becoming vaccinated, one crucial point not yet discussed in this study is the existence of a "third position," a group of Americans who do not fall into either category. For instance, there are Americans who may not have fully bought in to President Biden's rhetorical vision and did not view the pandemic the same way as President Biden, yet they chose to become vaccinated for other reasons. In some cases, those reasons may have been that these "third positionists" chose not to suffer the harsh

penalties of restricted travel and removed access to goods or services and in response, chose to become vaccinated. Others got vaccinated to keep their jobs, or perhaps to avoid conflict. In some instances, there may be Americans who, for any number of reasons, bought in to President Biden's rhetorical vision yet remain unvaccinated. Consideration for a third position is to account for Americans who would not be described as enthusiastic supporters of President Biden's dramatization nor outright dissident and rebellious to President Biden's vision.

As has been explored, there are plenty of reasons why some Americans resisted and rejected Biden's fantasy themes and rhetorical vision. In response to the research question of this study which asks why Americans either accepted or rejected President Biden's rhetorical vision regarding vaccines, the simplest, and most reductive way to answer this question is that Biden's explanation of reality either matched or did not match with the proponents/opponents understanding and framework of reality. Competing ideologies, viewpoints, and value structures that exist in the psyche of Americans all comprise the many reasons why vaccine dissent exists and why President Biden's fantasy failed to chain out among the opponents, and why symbolic convergence did not occur among all Americans.

### **Contributions**

This study contributes to the field of communication. First, this study shows how Bormann's SCT can explain power dynamics of leadership during a pandemic situation. There are several studies which analyze President Biden's rhetoric, and many studies which analyze the COVID-19 pandemic, but this study is unique in exploring the relationship between the two. This study also explores the rhetorical vision of President Biden's pandemic strategy, which is a valuable insight and reference for future related studies. The fantasy themes developed in this study may be useful for future analysis of President Biden's rhetoric and political strategies related to crisis situations.

### **Limitations of this Study**

The artifacts used to create President Biden's fantasy themes/rhetorical vision are not exhaustive, and the determining factor for the selection of the artifacts was subject to the discretion of the author. There are indeed many hours of speeches, interviews and comments made by President Biden which have not been included in this study. It is necessary also to mention that the personal sentiments of the author regarding vaccines may be revealed to contain bias, which may have unintentionally slipped through at times in this paper, however, great consideration was given to avoid inappropriate one-sidedness.

### **Considerations for Future Study**

It may be useful and beneficial to utilize Bormann's SCT framework to analyze President Biden's rhetoric regarding other "existential threats" poised to threaten America over the course of President Biden's presidency. Examples are social divisions regarding "climate change" and the proposition to transition American energy infrastructure away from fossil fuels, the role America has in the war in Ukraine and the rhetoric against Russia(ns), the role America has in the potential war in Taiwan and the rhetoric against China, the development of Government action regarding misinformation, and the social divide regarding abortion. Utilizing fantasy themes to analyze President Biden's rhetoric to develop his rhetorical vision may be useful for detailing what future actions Americans will take regarding these issues, and others which come to the mind of a future critic.

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