

The Power of Speaking: Rhetoric in American Public Life

An Online Professional Development Seminar

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from the National Humanities Center

GOALS

- To provide new materials and approaches for use with students
- To demonstrate the role rhetoric plays in public discourse

UNDERSTANDINGS

Rhetoric, properly understood, is the *best* way in which we think and draw conclusions *in language* concerning any issue of complex evidence and appearances--e.g., the financial meltdown and recession, action in Libya, taxes and deficits--that is, concerning any issue we can't reduce to pure logic or quantitative reckoning alone, any issue in which there's no single, accepted authority.

The language of *effective* politics, public affairs, and policies is *conscious, crafted, inventive, and aware of its audience*. "Rhetoric" in its true signification doesn't mean cynical manipulation or spin--that's the proverbial "empty" or "mere" rhetoric. Yet, rhetoric means more than good persuasion. It's the systematic study and art of using language, logic, psychology, and ethics to frame, analyze, understand, explain, *and* persuade.

In America, rhetoric was traditionally allied with moral philosophy and practical wisdom--this is how Jefferson, Madison, Douglass, Lincoln, and Susan B. Anthony understood it. In U.S. and world history, rhetorical power drives reform, revolution, and reaction.

Rhetoric plays a part in every major crisis and social movement in U.S. history. It's a fundamental discipline for law, religious teaching of any faith, and academic learning. It's a prerequisite for (though no guarantee of) all great leadership. It's essential to democracy.

FROM THE FORUM Challenges, Issues, Questions

- How has public rhetoric changed over time? Has it been dumbed down to meet the needs of a society that reads less and less?
- How does public rhetoric frame issues and shape our perceptions of them?
- What do the founding documents of our nation, the rhetoric of political campaigns, and the long arc of civic and social justice have to teach us about such concepts as liberty and justice, ourselves, our local communities, our nation as a whole, our individual and collective role in a global society?
- Is the power of a text's language and ideas, i.e. the Pledge of Allegiance, made stronger by being spoken often in public, or is it diminished? Do the memorization and repetition of a text lull us into rote regurgitation without thought or feeling, or do they so embed a set of ideas and attitudes in our mind that they become an unconscious part of the way we interpret experience?

Framing Questions

- How in these excerpts (and in documents you might teach) does language reveal more clearly the actual reality of a given situation? Why can't a speaker just say, "Here's the way it is"?
- How can language create a new idea, concept, or policy?
- Why do we need to interpret language? Why isn't it always perfectly clear to everyone exactly what the words everyone has in front of them mean?
- How can language establish a community of solidarity, making the audience a moral or political agent, ready and willing to do something--e.g., go or not go to war, vote a certain way, support or oppose legislation? Similarly, can language sow discontent and divisiveness?



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Research Interests

British literature from 1660 to 1830, comparative Romanticism, criticism and critical theory, and German and English literature from 1750 to 1830

Selected Works

Saving Higher Education in the Age of Money
2005

The Committed Word: Literature and Public Values
1999

Coleridge: the Early Family Letters
1994

Forming the Critical Mind: Dryden to Coleridge
1989

3 Types of Rhetoric

- Deliberative or Political or Advisory
- Judicial or Forensic or Legal
- Ceremonial or Epideictic or Eulogistic or Declamatory

5 Canons of Rhetoric

- Invention or Argument *inventio*
- Organization *dispositio*
- Style *elocutio*
- Memory/memorization *memoria*
- Delivery *pronunciatio*

5 Parts of a Discourse

- Introduction or Exordium *exordium*
- Narrative or contextual story *narratio*
- Argument(s) *confirmatio and its parts*
- Rebuttal or Counter-Argument(s) *refutatio*
- Conclusion *peroratio*

Modes of Persuasion

- Logos (syllogistic reasoning: enthymemes)
 - Ethos (not reputation but character as evinced in the work or speech)
 - Pathos

Common Topics

- Definition (genus and division)
- Comparison (similarity, difference, degree and kind)
- Relationship (cause & effect, antecedent & consequent, contraries, contradictions)
- Circumstances (possible and impossible, past fact & future fact)
- Testimony (authority, testimonial, statistics, maxims or proverbs, law, precedent)

A useful book is *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, Edward P.J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors (Oxford University Press), 4th ed.

Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

(performative; logos as a syllogism)

... We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . . that . . . that . . . That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it; and to institute new Government. . . .

...

The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny. . . . To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.—He has . . . [“He has” about 14 times]. Acts of pretended Legislation:—For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us [“For” repeated about 8 times]. He has . . . [“He has” again about 5 times].

...

We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms. . . .

...

We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity. . . .

...

We, therefore . . . in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States.

(deliberative; logos; topics of definition, division, cause and effect, antecedent and consequent, circumstance)

By a faction I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority . . . who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.

There are **two methods** of curing the mischiefs of faction: **the one**, by removing its causes; **the other**, by controlling its effects.

There are again **two methods of removing the causes** of faction: **the one** by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; **the other**, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests. . . .

. . .

The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man. . . .

. . .

The inference to which we are brought, is, that the *causes* of faction cannot be removed; and that **relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its effects. . . .**

. . .

(deliberative; logos; topics of definition, division, cause and effect, antecedent and consequent, circumstance)

By what means is this object attainable? Evidently by one of two only. Either the existence of the same passion or interest in a majority at the same time, must be prevented; or the majority, having such co-existent passion or interest, must be rendered, by their number and local situation, unable to concert and carry into effect schemes of oppression. . . .

From this point of view . . . it may be concluded, that a pure Democracy . . . can admit no cure for the mischiefs of faction. . . .

. . .

A Republic, by which I mean a Government in which the scheme of representation takes place . . . promises the cure for which we are seeking. . . .

. . .

. . . The Federal Constitution forms a happy combination in this respect; the great and aggregate interests being referred to the national, the local and particular, to the state legislatures. . . .

. . .

Hence it clearly appears, that the same advantage, which a Republic has over a [pure] Democracy, in controlling the effects of faction, is enjoyed by a large over a small Republic—is enjoyed by that Union over the States composing it.

What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?

Frederick Douglass, July 5, 1852

(ceremonial, deliberative; ethos, logos, pathos; 5 parts; rhetoric *as interpretation*)

1. [**Introduction** (exordium):] “Mr, President . . . nor grace my speech with any high sounding exordium. . . . I will proceed to lay them before you.”
2. [**Narration** (narratio):] “This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. . . . I leave, therefore, the great deeds of your fathers to other gentlemen whose claim to have been regularly descended will be less likely to be disputed than mine!”
3. [**Argument** (confirmatio):] “My business . . . is with the present.” [America false to its past and present—slavery “the great sin and shame of America!” Equal manhood; no argument actually needed; injustice; barbarity; hypocrisy; internal slave trade.]

[so-called **pathetic part**:] “Here you will see men and women reared like swine for the market. . . . and never forget the deep, sad sobs that arose from that scattered multitude. . . . I was born amid such sights and scenes.”

[**return to Argument**: Fugitive Slave Law; religion and the church responsible.]

What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?

Frederick Douglass, July 5, 1852, cont'd.

(ceremonial, deliberative; ethos, logos, pathos; 5 parts; rhetoric *as interpretation*)

4. [**Refutation** (refutatio):] against claim that slavery is “guaranteed and sanctioned by the Constitution.” Moreover, “I hold that every American citizen has a right to form an opinion of the constitution, and to propagate that opinion, and to use all honorable means to make his opinion the prevailing one. . . . I defy the presentation of a single pro-slavery clause in it.”
5. [**Conclusion** (peroratio):] “I, therefore, leave off where I began, with *hope*.” A vision of globalization, William Lloyd Garrison’s poem “The Triumph of Freedom.”

A House Divided, Abraham Lincoln, June 16, 1858

(deliberative, forensic; argument up front; logos; evidence and induction)

“A house divided against itself cannot stand.” . . .

I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*.

. . .

It will become *all* one thing or *all* the other.

. . .

. . . contemplate that now almost complete . . . **piece of machinery . . . compounded of the Nebraska Doctrine, and the Dred Scott decision.** Let him consider not only what work the machinery is adapted to do, and how well adapted; but also, let him study the history of its construction, and trace . . . the evidence of design, and concert of action, among the chief bosses, from the beginning.

A House Divided, Abraham Lincoln, June 16, 1858, cont'd.

(deliberative, forensic; argument up front; logos; evidence and induction)

[Lincoln narrates and enumerates **three points gained by this machinery**: no slave or descendant can ever be a citizen; neither Congress nor a territorial legislature can exclude slavery from a territory; holding a negro as a slave in a free state is not subject to U.S. courts, only to state courts of “any slave state the negro may be forced into. . . .”]

. . .

We cannot absolutely *know* that all these exact adaptations are the result of preconcert. But when we see a lot of framed timbers . . . and when we see these timbers joined together [by Douglas, Pierce, Taney, Buchanan], and see they exactly make the frame of a house or a mill . . . it is impossible to not *believe* that Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James all understood one another from the beginning . . . before the first lick was struck. [The speech contains a fine conclusion or peroration.]

The Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln, November 19, 1863



(ceremonial, forensic; logos, with the undercurrent of deepest pathos)

The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our power to add or detract. . . . It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

F.D.R., First Inaugural, March 1933

(ceremonial, deliberative; imagery; call to act)

This is a day of national consecration. . . . Practices of the unscrupulous money changers stand indicted in the court of public opinion. . . . They know only the rules of a generation of self-seekers. They have no vision, and when there is no vision the people perish.

The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. . . .

Restoration calls, however, not for changes in ethics alone. This nation asks for **action, and action now**. Our greatest primary task is to put people to work . . . **treating the task as we would treat the emergency of a war**.

The task can be helped by [“can be helped by” stated 5 more times]. We must act and act quickly.

. . . **There must be a strict supervision of all banking and credits and investments. There must be an end to speculation with other people’s money. . . .**

There are the lines of attack. . . .

[If Congress fails to act and the crisis continues] I shall ask Congress for broad executive power **to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe**.

. . . The people of the United States have not failed. . . .

Four Freedoms (Lend-Lease Act), F.D.R.,

January 6, 1941



(deliberative; topic of division; globalizing principles; style and sound)

In the **future** days which **we** seek to make secure, **we** look **forward** to a world **founded** upon **four** essential human **freedoms**.

The first is freedom of speech and expression—**everywhere** in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—**everywhere** in the world.

The third is freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—**everywhere** in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear—which, translated into world terms, means a worldwide reduction of armaments . . . [so] that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—**anywhere** in the world. . . .

Since the beginning of our American history we have been engaged in change, in a perpetual, peaceful revolution which goes on steadily, quietly, adjusting itself to changing conditions without the concentration camp or the quicklime in the ditch.

(deliberative about deliberation; ethos; topic of division)

. . . I speak as a Republican. I speak as a woman. I speak as a United States senator. I speak as an American. . . .

The nation sorely needs a Republican victory. **But** I do not want to see the Republican Party ride to political victory on the Four Horsemen of Calumny—Fear, Ignorance, Bigotry, and Smear.

. . . As a woman, I wonder how the mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters feel about the way in which members of their families have been **politically mangled in Senate debate—and I use the word *debate* advisedly**. As a United States senator, I am not proud of the way in which the Senate has been made **a publicity platform for irresponsible sensationalism**. I am not proud of the reckless abandon in which unproved charges have been hurled from this side of the aisle. I am not proud of the obviously staged, undignified countercharges which have been attempted in retaliation from the other side of the aisle. . . .

As an American, I am **shocked at the way Republicans and Democrats are playing directly into the communist design of “confuse, divide, and conquer.”**

. . . As an American, I want to see our nation recapture the **strength and unity it once had when we fought the enemy instead of ourselves.**

Farewell Address, Dwight Eisenhower, January 17, 1961

(ceremonial, deliberative; judgment; valedictory admonition;
virtue of citizenry)

... the need to maintain **balance** in and among national programs—**balance between** the private and the public economy, **balance between** cost and hoped for advantage, **balance between** the clearly necessary and the comfortably desirable, **balance between** our essential requirements as a nation and the duties imposed by the nation upon the individual, **balance between** actions of the moment and the national welfare in the future. Good judgment seeks balance and progress.

...

... We have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions.

In the councils of government, **we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence**, whether sought or unsought, **by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.**

We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. **Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with out peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together. [Eisenhower goes on to urge disarmament negotiations.]**

Inaugural Address, John Kennedy, January 20, 1961

(ceremonial, deliberative; logos, ethos; style; solidarity)

And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which **our** forebears fought are still at issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.

We dare not forget that we are the heirs of that first Revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to **friend** and **foe** alike. . . . Let every nation know, whether it **wishes** us **well** or ill, that **we** shall **pay** any **price**, bear any burden, meet any hardship, **support** any **friend**, oppose any **foe** to assure the **survival** and the **success** of liberty.

So **let us** begin anew, remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. **Let us** never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate.

. . . **In your hands**, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. . . .

And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.

Speech at Berlin Wall, John Kennedy, June 1963

(ceremonial, forensic; logos; the symbolic)

Two thousand years ago the proudest boast was “*Civis Romanus sum.*” Today, in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is “*Ich bin ein Berliner.*”

...

What is true of this city is true of Germany. . . . So let me ask you, as I close, to lift your eyes . . . to the hopes of tomorrow, beyond the freedom merely of this city of Berlin, or your country of Germany, to the advance of freedom everywhere, beyond the wall to the day of peace with justice, beyond yourselves and ourselves to all mankind.

Freedom is indivisible, and when **one** man is enslaved, **all** are not free. . . .

All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and therefore, as a free man, **I** take pride in the words “*Ich bin ein Berliner.*” [a syllogism]

Congressional Address, Lyndon Johnson, March 15, 1965

(deliberative; refutation; ethos mixed with pathos—logos but not in this extract)

To those who seek to avoid action by their national government in their own communities, who want to and who seek to maintain purely local control over elections, the answer is simple: Open your polling places to all your people. Allow men and women to register and vote whatever the color of their skin. Extend the rights of citizenship to every citizen of this land.

My first job after college was as a teacher in Cotulla, Texas, in a small Mexican-American school. Few of them could speak English, and I couldn't speak much Spanish. My students were poor . . . They knew even in their youth the pain of prejudice. . . . I often walked home later in the afternoon, after the classes were finished, wishing there was more that I could do. . . .

Somehow you never forget what poverty and hatred can do when you see its scars on the hopeful face of a young child.

A Crisis of Confidence (the 'malaise' speech), Jimmy Carter, July 15, 1979

(forensic? hortatory; tone)

It is a crisis of confidence. . . . We can see this crisis in the growing doubt. . . .
The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social
and political fabric of America. . . .

Our people are losing that faith . . . losing our confidence.
. . . too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. . . .
The symptoms of this crisis of the American spirit are all around us.

. . .

We know the strength of America. **We are strong. We can regain our unity.**

. . .

Little by little we can and we must rebuild our confidence.

Republican Nomination Acceptance, Ronald Reagan, July 17, 1980

(ceremonial, forensic; running dialogue; ethos; tone)

The major issue in this campaign is **the direct political, personal, and moral responsibility of Democratic Party leadership**. . . . They say that the United States has had its day in the sun, that our nation has passed its zenith. They expect you to tell your children that the American people no longer have the will to cope with their problems, that the future will be one of sacrifice and few opportunities.

My fellow citizens, I utterly reject that view.

. . .

I ask you to trust that American spirit which knows no ethnic, religious, social, political, regional, or economic boundaries. . . .

Some say that spirit no longer exists. But I've seen it—I've felt it—all across the land. . . .

The time is now to resolve that the basis of a firm and principled foreign policy is one that takes the world as it is and seeks to change it by leadership and example, not by harangue, harassment, or wishful thinking. [Reagan then quotes F.D.R. about waste and spending in government, from F.D.R.'s own nomination acceptance speech in 1932.]

To the World's Muslims, Cairo, Barack Obama, June 4, 2009

(deliberative; ethos, logos, pathos; topic of division; 5 parts; awareness of audience)

[Introduction, then Narration:] We meet at a time of tension . . . I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world. . . .

. . . **No single speech can eradicate years of mistrust**, nor can I answer in the time that I have all the complex questions that brought us to this point. . . . As the Holy Koran tells us: “Be conscious of God and speak always the truth.” That is what I will try to do . . . and firm in my belief that the interests we share are far more powerful than the forces that drive us apart.

Part of this conviction is rooted in my own experience. I am a Christian, but my father came from a Kenyan family that includes generations of Muslims. As a boy, I spent several years in Indonesia and heard the call of the azaan at the break of dawn and the fall of dusk. As a young man, I worked in Chicago communities where many found dignity and peace in their Muslim faith. . . .

So I have known Islam on three continents before coming to the region where it was first revealed. . . .

. . .

To the World's Muslims, Cairo, Barack Obama, June 4, 2009, cont'd.

(deliberative; ethos, logos, pathos; topic of division; 5 parts; awareness of audience)

So, let there be no doubt: Islam is part of America. [American holds that regardless of religion, race or station in life we share the hope for peace and security, education, family, community, faith:] **These things we share. This is the hope of all humanity.**

Of course, recognizing our common humanity is only the beginning of our task. **Words alone cannot meet the needs of our people. These needs will be met only if we act boldly in the years ahead. . . .**

[Seven issues or divisions of the **argument**: extremism (Iraq, Afghanistan); Palestinian-Israeli conflict; rights and responsibilities of nuclear weapons; democracy; religious freedom; women's rights; economic development and opportunity.]

[**Refutation**:] I know there are many—Muslims and non-Muslims—who question . . . [but] you [young people] have the ability to remake this world.

[**Peroration**:] All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort—a sustained effort—to find common ground. . . .

The Holy Koran tells us . . . The Talmud tells us . . . The Holy Bible tells us . . . And may God's peace be upon you.

Final slide.

Thank you