

A Kinder, Gentler Nation: Education and Rhetoric in the Bush Era

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The present political climate and new social agendas for education deserve more critical meditation than they usually receive at professional meetings and in scholarly journals. For, unless we think that the conditions for teaching and for making rhetoric are immutable over the centuries since Plato and Aristotle theorized these activities, *or* unless we think that conditions change but education and rhetoric stand apart from history, how can those who teach and think about rhetoric plan and understand our work without an assessment of its role in the social process—including a particular society's political climate and agenda for education?

I offer no fruits of specialist research or new theory, just my efforts as an intellectual and citizen to locate our professional work on a historical map of its context. To do that, I decided, out of infinitely many possibilities, to scan the doings and sayings of Mr. Bush and his associates on education and culture to see how they articulate the tremendously appealing slogan, repeated dozens of times since Mr. Bush's acceptance of his party's nomination, "a kinder, gentler nation." What does he take to be its deficits in kindness? How does he propose to amend them in the arena of education? What rhetoric do he and his speechwriters use to explain this administration's projects?

This approach would show how political authority construes and constructs our situation, and later I will address that subject. But first, the final phrase in my title calls for some independent construal of that situation, against which to measure the project of our national leadership. What *is* the "Bush era," apart from what Mr. Bush says it is? As a dissident intellectual, I would have no difficulty laying out such a vision, and you know in advance pretty much what it is. To relate it to our present concerns, however, I decided to anchor it in a collage of facts: the news; first, because the news is what most of us use to read the era we live in; second, because the news comes at us in a disjointed form highly characteristic of public discourse in this era; and third, because, in my view, any serious proposal for education, rhetorical education in particular, would have to address the task ordinary citizens face in resolving collages of news into pictures of our historical moment that can guide writing and other action within and beyond it.

The Daily News and the Rhetoric of "Issues"

So here goes: my notes on the 8:00 a.m. news, March 15, 1989, early in the Bush era.

In Michigan, says the Sierra Club, the lakes are poisoned, the fish contaminated, water birds deformed; the Great Lakes themselves are still in sorry shape. Dioxin, PCBs, pesticides. Continued legal dumping of toxic wastes into Boston Harbor is running ahead of clean-up efforts. Cyanide in Chilean grapes; economic disaster for Chile. Apples banned from school cafeterias in New York and California—again, pesticides. Another cease fire in Beirut; fifty more dead. A Middle Eastern hijacker is on trial in this country—a trial made possible by "long arm legislation" that lets the United States go after foreign terrorists. Millions on strike against austerity measures in Brazil; two hundred injured. The Oliver North trial may be blocked again by the government's demands for secrecy. William Bennett places a ban on import of semi-automatic weapons and declares the District of Columbia a high-intensity drug area, as well as the murder capital of the nation. (The National Rifle Association says Uzis are legitimate sporting guns.) The space shuttle is troubled by electrical problems. Eastern Airlines suggests travel alternatives for paid-up passengers. Bush responds to charges of inaction—says *Congress* is foot-dragging on his proposed bail-out of Savings and Loans and that he is coming forward with cuts in the capital gains tax. Meanwhile, more money was withdrawn from S&Ls in January than in any previous whole year. Tony Randall, Roberta Peters, and other celebrities march in Albany to protest cuts in support for the arts. The Dow Jones Industrial Average is unchanged. The weather will be warm and windy.

Apart from the placement of environmental news at the beginning—a special concern of this newscaster—the 8:00 news on March 15, 1989 was about what one might hear any morning or evening, a good barometric reading on the climate of the Bush era. Some stories were missing from that newscast: nothing on the budget or trade deficits, nothing on the fight over reproductive rights, nothing on the saga of Bush's nominees for Secretary of Defense. Otherwise, the ten-minute broadcast surveyed a canonical range of "issues": the environment, Third World conflicts, terrorism, activities of our secret government, drugs, violent crime, space exploration, labor struggles, corporate failures, the presidency, taxes, the economy. Every news junkie can easily file stories like these in their appropriate compartments, parcel our history out into, precisely, "issues."

How do we make historical sense of this CAT scan? Indulge me as I pursue a rhetorical strategy in which we English teachers have all been thoroughly instructed: looking for unity in a seemingly fragmented text.

How did the lakes, the harbor, the fish, the birds, and the apples get contaminated? That's easy. People acted as they are supposed to act in our system, seeking profit in the universal market that regulates our well-being

with its invisible hand, a market that positions nature as an adjunct to the accumulation of capital and to which pollution is an “external cost.” The grapes tainted with cyanide? That’s less obvious, since at the time of my writing no one who’s telling knows how it happened. But the Chilean government attributed the sabotage to communist subversives and will surely use this as an occasion to intensify repression of its opponents. In any case, the event is a huge setback for the government in its project of enacting Milton Friedman’s economics—its alternative to popular democracy. One needs only a little historical memory to recall how that government of murderers and torturers came to power in 1973: through a coup supported by *our* government, in *its* project of keeping the world open to accumulation of capital and closing off any alternatives to that system—eliminating what Noam Chomsky calls the “threat of a good example.”

This motif threads together a number of the morning’s stories, supplying a good deal of unity to our text. Strikes and riots in Brazil? A direct consequence of austerity measures imposed by the logic of international capital and Third World debt, as administered by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The Justice Department’s obstruction of the Oliver North Trial? A direct consequence of the government’s incessant efforts, legal and illegal, to reopen Nicaragua to the free movement of capital and end the “threat of a good example” there. The prosecution of the hijacker? Surely warranted by fairly general standards of humane conduct; but we must also understand the “long arm legislation” that enabled this trial as part of a concerted effort to define all violent opposition to the hegemony of U.S. capital as “terrorism,” to be sharply distinguished from the violence of “freedom fighters” and of “authoritarian regimes” in such countries as El Salvador. Finally, what about the endless fighting in Lebanon? No doubt it is richly overdetermined, and I will claim only that *one* cause of that sad country’s disintegration is the nearly unwavering support given by our government to Israel in its fight against Palestinian independence, even when that fight led to bombings and invasions of Lebanon—again, part of the project of keeping challenges to the U.S. order at bay.

With this deep structure of unity in mind, I turn now to the domestic stories in my text. President Bush’s pledge to reduce the capital gains tax is an obvious link—part of his commitment, and that of one elite faction in the society, to remove any obstacles that would limit the power of big capital to write the script of our future. Another manifestation of the same strategy is Bush’s appeal for a quick bailout of the thrifts, which in spite of their nickname offered a feast of high interest to many affluent people, who will now gain relief from the adverse consequences of just that risk-taking which is supposed to justify profit. A third consequence of that strategy is the distress of Eastern Airlines and the much greater distress of its workers, a result both of the deregulation of capital in this area and of the buoyant speculation that has pervaded the corporate scene in its recent cowboy phase,

from Texas Air to the S&Ls themselves. This freeing-up of capital has, of course, also had the effect throughout the past twenty years of sharply increasing the division between rich and poor, which is structurally necessary to our economic system—hence the deepening pathology of our cities, including the narcotization of the poor, the murder rate in the District of Columbia, and the thirty-fold rise in import of assault weapons, a necessary business tool for the efficient capitalist enterprise of drug sales that has arisen to fill a space abandoned by *legal* capitalism.

The text begins to look rather seamless. What of the loose ends? I could easily bring the news item about the shuttle *Discovery* within the scope of my critical reading, but I'll spare you. The weather? I need hardly remind you that every forecast of warm days in March now feeds anxieties about the greenhouse effect. If these turn out to be warranted, then even the weather becomes part of the broadcast's master narrative, a story of a particular social system and its abrasions and tensions.

Thinking Critically about the News

I will shortly use the two remaining loose ends to connect this story to my main subject. Before that, let me offer three glosses on the analysis, glosses necessary to thinking critically about the news. First, although the 8:00 news samples the atmosphere of a day in the first year of the Bush administration, none of the conflicts, problems, or issues assembled there has arisen this year, or even this decade. Second, and on the other hand, none of them is eternal; in fact, though I have referred them to movements of capital, none is even coextensive with industrial capitalism, the dominant system of the last 150 years. The intolerable chemicals and wastes, the drug wars in the cities, the unproductive corporate takeovers, the rickety debt structure, what is called "international terrorism," the immiseration of Third World economies and peoples, and the elaboration of the national security state are all postwar developments: most go back only to the 1960s, or so, in their present form. This period of time, I somewhat perversely declare, is the Bush era; my task is not, then, to define a particular presidency, or to attack Republican presidents more generally. And third, I submit that, taken together, the items that graced my breakfast on March 15 have their roots in a deepening crisis for our social order, for hundreds of millions of poor people around the globe, and for the globe itself as a support for civilized life. Not everyone would put the matter as I have, seeing the "text" as symptomatic of a civilization out of control; but most people who listen to the morning news or read a newspaper can see at least some unpleasant handwriting on the wall.

Yet, little in our daily life forces us to decipher the handwriting, or to imagine taking stock of our situation under the sign of unitary crisis, or to act collectively to remake our world. The news itself doesn't, with its atomization of history into stories and issues and its subservience to the powers that

be. The scene around most of us doesn't. Unless you live in an inner city or poor rural area or devastated industrial town, your daily rounds probably give you, in less extreme form, a picture like the one I see in Connecticut: signs in each store and restaurant window begging for kids and grandmothers to come work there; new building and renovation everywhere; yuppie shops proliferating. The stock market says "everything normal," "business as usual"—that's the message of one of the two remaining items in the March 15 news: Dow Jones Industrial Average unchanged. The long postwar corporate boom continues, with the crash of '87 just a blip in memory. Where is critical understanding to come from?

This brings me to the final loose end in my critical explication: the item about artists marching in Albany. Arts support is being cut, too—at least in New York. The point I want to make, however, is that culture figures in the news as an extra, as one activity competing with others for support, as a special interest of Tony Randall and Roberta Peters, as another fragment in the postmodern mosaic of the news, not otherwise related to Brazil or the S&Ls. Culture is leisure time; culture is entertainment; culture is that which redeems the world of work, of politics, of weapons and fighting. This placement of culture in the news corresponds to its quasi-official placement by the Bush administration, or at least by Lynne V. Cheney, Chairman (as she calls herself) of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her report, *Humanities in America*, appeared in the final months of the Reagan administration, but she remains in office and her report stands as the Bush administration's latest position on that part of culture represented by the humanities.

In it Cheney stresses again and again the universality, the timelessness, the transcendence of culture: "Literature, philosophy, and history have long appealed for the truths they offer, not truths about passing matters, but insights into what abides. . . . about what it means to be human: to be mortal and to mourn mortality for ourselves and those we love; to know joy and find purpose nonetheless; to be capable of good and evil, wisdom and folly" (7). Contesting attempts (by such people as myself) to emphasize the social and political embeddedness of culture, she sees it as detached from history, concerned with precisely "those questions to which the human condition perennially gives rise" (8). To quote her once more on this theme: what gives the humanities "their abiding worth are truths that pass beyond time and circumstance; truths that, transcending accidents of class, race, and gender, speak to us all" (14). To one who sees class, race, and gender as "accidents," the exercise of power and the movement of history will also seem largely apart from culture. And axiomatically, noble culture, along with humble rhetoric and humbler composition (of which the report makes no mention) can hardly be expected to supply critical insight into the exercise of power and the forces that move history, precisely through the agency of class, race, gender, and other socially constructed categories.

Mr. Bush himself is given to talk, in his educational messages, of “timeless values which span the generations,” quoting Faulkner on “the old verities of truths of the heart” that characterize our society (Mississippi State University commencement, 13 May 1989). I stress the Bush administration’s adherence—at least verbally—to this canon of bourgeois ideology in order to suggest that in its advocacy of education it could hardly represent the *substance* of humanistic education as valuable for amending the fragmentations of information and culture that surround us, as in the morning news; for fostering critical analysis and engaged rhetoric; or for encouraging holistic comprehension of the forces at work in our history. Yet, of course the man who would be known as “the education president” does—must—see *some* connection between education and the improvement of our historical chances. Otherwise, there would be little point in his posing education as one route to a “kinder, gentler nation.” If that route does not pass through the goal of a critically informed citizenry active on its own behalf, where *is* the nexus between improved education and our future well being?

The answer will surprise nobody, and I ask your indulgence as I now expatiate on the obvious, only because it seems to me healthy at times to lift the obvious out of its reassuring banality and to remind ourselves that the banality of social arrangements is itself a historical and cultural construction, not a timeless inevitability.

The Rhetoric of Educational Excellence

The answer may be found in many places, but most compactly in the message George Bush sent to Congress on April 5, 1989 with the educational program he had promoted since before he took office: the Educational Excellence Act of 1989. There Mr. Bush says, “I believe that greater educational achievement promotes sustained economic growth, enhances the Nation’s competitive position in world markets, increases productivity, and leads to higher incomes for everyone.” That’s it. Before you are overcome with drowsiness, think just a bit about these four social purposes of education, the *only* ones advanced for this showpiece legislation. “Sustained economic growth” means, does it not, a continued, indefinite expansion of Gross National Product, measured in the usual way, with no critical examination invited of this index of felicity, certainly not of the “external costs” I mentioned in my summary of lake, harbor, and food poisoning at the top of the morning news. (In fact, the more poisoning the better, for the GNP, since the belated remedial measures taken will themselves generate more goods and services, from oil-spill cleanup equipment to hospital and insurance bills.) Ditto for the second goal: enhancement of our competitive position in world markets, which means increasing that part of the GNP garnered outside our borders. The third goal, increased productivity, reduces to increasing the ratio of exchange value to labor costs—that is, more effi-

ciently using people's time at work, by purely monetary criteria of efficiency. The fourth goal, higher incomes for all, sounds at first unexceptionable (I'm not one who denies any link between money and happiness), until you consider that quite a number of Americans make over a million dollars a year while many millions make around one percent of that.

This observation leads to one of the two additional points I want to make about the reasons Mr. Bush sees for having a good educational system: that none of those reasons even hints at alteration of the status quo—just more of the same, including the further degradation of labor that lurks behind the term “productivity.” A critical education might lead young citizens to question some features of that status quo, and even to be unfitted for the kind of employment that awaits most of them. “The longer our graduation lines are today, the shorter our unemployment lines will be tomorrow,” Mr. Bush said in his address to Congress on February 9, 1989. But even if this were true—and history gives us no cause whatsoever to believe it—we may wonder what sort of education we can create by gearing it uncritically to preservation and development of present social arrangements.

And social arrangements marching to a purely economic beat—that's the other point I want to stress. For all Mr. Bush's and Ms. Cheney's inspirational remarks about education and about timeless human values, those are left magically to blossom in the garden of culture, while concrete help to education seeks economic ends. “The Nation must invest in its young people,” says Mr. Bush, “giving them the knowledge, skills, and values to live productive lives” (message to Congress, 5 Apr. 1989). This sounds fine, unless you take seriously the literal, economic meanings of “invest” and “productive,” as I do, and as I believe the Bush administration does. There is a chasm between the reasons it gives for spending more federal money on education (roughly two percent more) and the kinds of spiritual betterment it expects to accrue from better schools. That chasm does not divide goals that are necessarily in contradiction to each other: one may work at alienating “productive” tasks all day and see a production of *King Lear* at night, taking solace from its transcendent vision and perhaps even dimming the anger one might feel at accidents of class, race, gender, and the marketplace. Indeed, that is a familiar social role for culture. What the chasm excludes is any organic connection between work and leisure, between public and private, between economic and political, between education and any empowerment other than what comes via the paycheck.

Well, when a president asks the Congress to appropriate funds, it may be inevitable that he offer an economic justification for doing so. Furthermore, one cannot judge a bill by the rhetoric used to promote it, and I want now to examine briefly the actual provisions of the Educational Excellence Act of 1989. There are just seven of them. The first and most costly—it would account for more than half of all funds appropriated—is for rewards of up to \$500,000 to “Presidential Merit Schools,” schools that show the most im-

provement in the achievement of their students, the elimination of drug use, and the reduction of drop-out rates. Second, and the second most expensive, is support for “Magnet Schools of Excellence,” schools with special purposes and approaches that draw students from throughout a district, rather than just from a contiguous neighborhood. Schools focusing on science and math are given particular mention. Third (I depart now from the order of these measures in the Act itself), is a provision for \$5,000 awards to about fourteen hundred excellent teachers each year; fourth, is for 570 college scholarships of \$10,000 each to new high school graduates who will study science, engineering, and math in college. I group these together because they best exemplify one of four announced “principles” behind the program: recognition of excellence. Mr. Bush rests a lot of confidence in such incentives, in recognition of special achievement, and in the emulation that such awards will inspire among those who do *not* receive them.

The provision for magnet schools also enacts a second principle: that of increasing “flexibility and choice.” While magnet schools expand choices for parents and children, a fifth proposal increases choice for *schools*, by supporting the development of alternatives to the usual paths of certification for teachers and principals. As Mr. Bush has said in several speeches, he thinks it intolerable that “a John Updike or an Alex Haley” would be ineligible to teach in classes that read their books because of rules imposed by educational bureaucracies. In spite of these examples, it is clear that the main aim of this provision is to bring scientists, engineers, and businessmen into the classroom to help make up what the administration perceives as a catastrophic deficit in technical education.

The third principle is using federal money to help those most in need, and the Act’s final two provisions connect most tightly to it: one would offer grants to urban schools that develop programs to eliminate drug use among their students, and another would help black colleges increase their endowments.

The fourth principle—are you still with me?—is “accountability,” and all the Act’s provisions give at least lip service to the measuring and monitoring of educational “progress.”

Thinking Critically about the Educational Excellence Act

Now I will offer some commentary on these proposals and principles; but since my comments will all be critical, let me begin with two ameliorative remarks. First, Mr. Bush has been judiciously modest in his claims for this legislation, saying repeatedly that he does not regard it as a panacea, only as a beginning—mainly as a governmental stimulus to local efforts, many of them voluntaristic, which he thinks far more important. And second, I do not myself see these measures, should they become law, as antagonistic to kindness, gentleness, or improvement in some education for some people.

They will foster some learning and promote some happiness. They may even boost support for education around the country, through the smile of presidential and congressional favor. Certainly many of our schools are disaster areas, and I would not want to discourage the *effort* to improve them, or the *interest* of a president in education. The aim of my critique is to suggest that nothing in the Act will have much of an impact on the educational system; that such impact as it has will be consistent with its economic motivation; that it will firm up the present mal-division of labor, power, wealth, and privilege in our society; and that it will in no way help students penetrate the mysteries of the Bush era or of its representation to us in the media and in the schools so that those students might in time take intelligent command of their collective future. I hope they will find means to do that, but it won't happen through the efforts of the education president.

Take a step back from the details of the Act, and some dubious features come into perspective. "Accountability," for instance—an attractive idea in the abstract—turns out to require from school administrations even more intervention in students' lives than is now the case. I suppose that most schools already try to limit the sale and use of illegal substances within their walls; imagine what new schemes they might devise to police their young charges, given the incentive of a possible half-million dollar grant that depends on creating a "drug-free environment." Who wants to say a good word for crack cocaine? Not me; but since the administration insists on seeing drug use as mainly a law-enforcement problem, I suspect that its attitude will prove addictive to school officials hopeful of presidential recognition and congressional dollars. Again, I can't believe that similarly inspired efforts to reduce drop-out numbers will be solely directed toward making school more appealing rather than making its avoidance more painful. Finally, crucial to both the principle of accountability and that of excellence is reliance on testing. Most teachers I know already consider standardized tests a baneful influence on real learning, and this Act promises to deepen their entrenchment even further.

Take another step back, and you can see in the Act a continuation of the Reagan administration's retreat from a commitment to desegregation. I am for support of black colleges, but singling them out to receive the *only* benefits given to higher education under the Act suggests a willingness to settle for "separate but equal" at this level, and ignores the main crime against racial equality in higher education: that through quiet neglect or institutional racism, the already-small numbers of black college students have been declining further in recent years. If this sounds like paranoia, consider also that the Act also specifically exempts would-be "magnet schools of excellence" from having desegregation plans—an explicit retreat from previous legislation about such schools. Excellence takes precedence over racial equality. Again, a careful reading of the Act reveals that all its incentives to excellence put private and public schools and their students on

the same footing. One does not need to be a fan of our public school system to note that hundreds of private schools have sprung up in recent years expressly to maintain segregation and white privilege. Others maintain religious segregation and pursue religious ends; while still others—the oldest, most prestigious ones—enact de facto segregation by social class, in spite of the democratic intentions of some.

Take another step back, and that last fact of our present educational system comes into full view, stoutly reinforced by the Bush proposals. The principle of choice, as manifested in the plan for magnet schools, will not only result in greater specialization (the bane of Lynne Cheney, by the way, in her attack on wayward academic humanists), but will foster an ever more sophisticated scheme of tracking that puts students with different destinies not just in separate classrooms but in separate schools: college-bound scientists here, technicians there, nurses yonder, and social detritus way back there, magnetized by poverty and pathology. The principle of excellence means, I am sure, that some schools and their students will rise while others sink to fill the vacated position. How could it be otherwise, when the schools *must* educate a large number of students for the dead-end lives that are structurally entailed for millions in our economic system. “Education is a ladder,” says President Bush to those at a dinner of the United Negro College Fund (9 Mar. 1989), but he does not explain how everyone can climb that ladder when there are only so many places at the top and in the middle, and so many others at or near the bottom rungs.

This is the core of my critique—an all-too-familiar one, for which I claim no originality. Whatever else it does, education helps reproduce the social system that sponsors it. In slave society, the children of slaves will be educated to remain slaves. In feudal society, serfs will be educated to be deferent and to be ignorant of all but their appointed tasks. In a capitalist society, things will be a good deal more complex, and indeed more benign, for capitalism demands free labor, specialization, and within limits equal opportunity. But never equality itself, only the phantom of equality; and when the phantom is in good working order, it plays its own part in convincing those near the bottom of the ladder that their position owes to their failure to climb briskly enough, and that the ladder itself is, like death, joy, and evil, a trans-historical inevitability.

The Bush proposals nourish the phantom. Ceremonies for schools of excellence and excellent teachers and science scholars will be an annual pageant of endless possibility. “The system works,” they will say, “because look!, the old Jefferson School, once a slough of despond, is now a humming hive of novice computer programmers”; and “Look! Jane Jefferson got out of the ghetto and is now a molecular biologist at Harvard.” But the ghetto will still be there, and the slough of despond will have moved twenty blocks away, to the Jackson School. There will be merit schools *and* there will be hell-holes with no textbooks, lots of crack, violent gangs, and guards patrol-

ling the hallways. There will be science scholars *and* scholars of the social abyss. There will be good black colleges *and* millions of black kids with no shot at college. Says Mr. Bush, "We will never accept the notion that vast numbers of illiterate and undereducated Americans can be offset by a well-educated elite. That is not the American way" (Union, NJ, 13 Apr. 1989). Nearly true: it is the American way to accept it but not *admit* it.

To return to my starting point: the stated rationale of these proposals thoroughly expresses *business* values. The proposals themselves mask those values in a language of equal opportunity and social harmony. They also invite far more business involvement in the schools, through alternative certification, partnerships of industry and school boards, and Mr. Bush's much touted voluntarism. Business values, whatever the good intentions of particular businessmen, structurally demand small elites, many competent subordinates, and a pudding of ideology and police repression for the rest of the citizenry. The pudding is called democracy or hegemony, depending on your point of view. Either way, a main ingredient is the ideological premise that we in education can make school a cure for systemic inequality and the accompanying pathology. I don't believe it. But it is far older than the Bush administration or the Reagan administration; indeed, it is more typically a canon of liberal than of conservative belief. One of the education president's tactics in his educational rhetoric is to align himself with liberals and their traditional hopes for a kinder, gentler society.

The Discourse of the Bush Era

This rift between underlying strategy and the mode of its public justification seems to me responsible for two notable features of Mr. Bush's rhetoric, not only in his statements on education, but very prominent there. I want to take note of these features before moving on to the implications for *our* theorizing and teaching of rhetoric in the Bush era. Mr. Bush himself has no monopoly on one of these styles: the erasure of division and conflict, the assertion of common purpose. Many national leaders—but far from all: think of Mrs. Thatcher—adopt this soothing appeal, and its devices are familiar. There is sweeping use of the totemic and all-leveling "America" and "Americans" ("America needs and wants the creativity of the young"; a "better educated America") and its inseparable partner, the homogenizing "we," which always masks difference but is especially confusing when, as often, Mr. Bush uses it to imply that the agency of his administration is the cooperative agency of all the people: "We can take a stand and say, 'We don't do drugs'" (Lancaster, PA, 22 Mar. 1989). There is the appeal already mentioned to old verities and values, unimpaired in their power over decades or even centuries: we are united, presumably, in our adherence to family, compassion, neighborliness, and so on—united not only with one another

but with our ancestors (though, in fact, the system Mr. Bush champions has put most of those values under impossible strain). There is the ritual invocation of God and the rhetoric of piety, with never a hint that not all citizens are believers or that those who believe hear their God—their Gods, rather—speak in discordant political voices. Finally, Mr. Bush adds his own inflection to this incorporative rhetoric with his insistent folksiness: his dropping of “g’s” (surely not the dialect he learned at Yale); his penchant for quoting Yogi Berra; his homey references to the “Silver Fox”; his ponderous, joshing asides, through which he effaces the difference between a wealthy, aristocratic president of the United States and the common people. (In passing: this appeal strikes me as heavily male, resonating of tavern and locker room; I wonder how it goes down with common *female* people.) Through this rhetoric of commonality, Mr. Bush projects a hologram of democracy and equality.

The other rhetorical strategy I want to mention is a bit harder to characterize. Start with the slogans and catch phrases that pepper the president’s speeches: the famous one I used in my title and the equally famous “thousand points of light”; “voluntary service”; the “education President”; the presidency as a “bully pulpit”; the “new breeze blowing” through our society; “the American family”; “simple family values”; “collective will”; “power in the hands of the people”; “God bless the teachers”; and so on. These are like benchmarks that organize and orient his thoughts. They signal themes to which he returns almost no matter what the context: voluntarism, incentives, excellence, competitiveness, and always the scourge of drugs. (In an off-the-cuff chat with teachers and officials at a model school in Rochester, Mr Bush’s *only* substantive contributions were on drugs and on American competitiveness abroad, both introduced quite tangentially to the agenda of the proud teachers.) These slogans and themes, through iteration, claim a kind of epistemic authority; whatever can be referred to one of them gains credibility. They anchor the discourse, giving it fixed bases to touch and a set destination.

This, I think, ties in with a striking feature of Mr. Bush’s own style, one that he superimposes on his prepared speeches: the predominant use of “and” as connective between sentences, as if each thought constituted a link in a chain already forged:

And . . . we want to help those most in need, targeting federal resources . . . where they can do the most good. And we want to waive some of the regulations for poorer communities . . . a kind of performance-driven, partial deregulation of education if you will. And we’ll give you the flexibility, and you show us the results. And I bet they’ll be outstanding. And . . . we need to promote accountability in education for everyone. And that means teachers. Yes, and we want to work with educators—how to objectively and fairly measure results. (Union, NJ, 13 Apr. 1989)

The flow moves from benchmark to benchmark, forgoing argument in

favor of an associative predictability, as if the truth were already fully captured in catch-phrases and themes.

I now will make a broad conjecture, quite beyond proof. This rhetoric of social harmony, associative logic, buzz-words, and totemic themes not only answers well to the conflation of liberal and conservative ideology in the Bush program, it corresponds to much in the commercial discourse of the Bush era—the era of late capitalism. Think of the happy homogenizing talk of advertisements, so often addressing us as “America,” invoking the “great American road,” telling us that “America” is doing this or that. Think of the incessant offers to ameliorate socially produced ills like loneliness, invidiousness, and alienation through individual consumption—of mouthwash, of beer, of telephone calls. Think of the plethora of totemic associations put forward to assist us in achieving group identities against the backdrop of homogeneity: become, because you already *are*, a Marlboro man, a Virginia Slims woman, a member of the Pepsi generation, the kind of woman who wears Chanel, a member of the oat bran health confederacy. You or I could go on indefinitely, so pervasive is the rhetoric of common purpose and individuality, of buzz-word and associative logic, of consuming—personal solutions that can never make the problems go away because the roots of the problems are historical and social. At some level, Mr. Bush and his writers have probably understood that this kind of persuasion is, after a hundred years of brand-name advertising, a native idiom for Americans. Most can shift out of it, of course; but it’s always available for us to fall into when the mind is idling, when we are watching a president or a commercial message on television, or listening to the 8:00 a.m. news with *its* reified themes and familiar buzz-words. Rhetoric in the Bush era participates in the notorious depthlessness of postmodernism.

Teaching Rhetoric in the Bush Era

I want to suggest some directions for thought and talk about conceptualizing and teaching rhetoric in the Bush era. I will suggest lines of thought rather than pursue them, not just because space is short, but also because I am myself too far removed from the centers of concern in your professional life to do more than suggest. I believe that the field has moved more than a few notches in the fifteen or so years since I was last seriously involved in it, and has moved in what I would consider fruitful ways. Doubtless, many teachers are still segmenting rhetoric into hundreds of small “skills,” and concentrating on the production of texts cut to measure. But I believe that in the journals and in conferences and in many important books the discussion has moved to another phase—or, more probably, a number of new phases. It’s my impression that in *these* venues process triumphed over product some years back. If so, that’s a favorable sign for our teaching of rhetoric in this era because rhetoric-as-process invites a constant rethinking

of one's own and, presumably, other people's premises; it resists the smooth slide toward neat, predictable conclusions of the sort that drive Mr. Bush's Madison Avenue rhetoric. The notion of process allows ample room for *invention*, of a puzzling, self-reflective, critical sort (though, of course, it does not guarantee that kind of invention). Furthermore, I gather that process has become associated with what some writers (I think of Berlin and of Knoblauch and Brannon) have called "epistemic" rhetoric, an outlook that sees writing and language itself as constitutive of the world, not as transparent windows on an already-given reality. That augers well, too, for students' chances of penetrating the fog of ready-made associations "out there," for finding themselves empowered to reshape the reality handed them by media and the discourses of authority.

It is also my impression that these tendencies join with an opening out of rhetoric into the social. Epistemic rhetoric has made contact with the broad intellectual movement sometimes called "social constructionism," which puts into question not only totemic associations and clichéd premises, but the very categories we use to understand and create our world. This can be healthy for the teaching of rhetoric in the Bush era if it does not descend into a purely academic critique. A heady thought: that our students might enter the public arena armed with some of the weapons of Foucault and of recent feminist theory.

Furthermore, rhetoric seems to be moving toward more local and textured examination of its social contexts. In *JAC* and the programs of recent conferences, I see a good deal of emphasis on discourse communities, communities of readers, and even the ethnography of composition classes—welcome movements toward the concrete social terrain of writing and away from academic rhetoric's traditional blindness to the institution within which it works. Likewise, I welcome the turn of scholarship in rhetoric over the past decade or so toward examination of its own history—not just an idealist history that traces lineages from Plato to McCrimmon, but a specific institutional history that may give practitioners a critical awareness of the contingency of our work and of its participation in wider social processes, including especially that of social reproduction. I hope that some of this consciousness will become available to students, too, just as the historical critique of canons has spilled over into some literature classrooms. Even the movement known as "writing across the curriculum," for all the pressure on it to serve narrowly professional ends, has also the potential for critical scrutiny of power and authority as they inhere in the different conventions of and constraints on writing.

Actually, I'm surprised to find myself sounding so upbeat. What I mean to say is not that these tendencies in rhetoric will necessarily or even likely pose a serious counterforce to the deadly reassurances of public discourse—you know well enough how much in professional life lies athwart such a possibility—but that much on the agenda of this profession at least has the

potential for resistance, even opposition, to the happy talk that in my view jeopardizes any real happiness in our future.

On the other hand, I do miss one essential ingredient of the kind of contestatory rhetoric we need to survive the Bush era. That ingredient is precisely the will to turn our practices toward more conscious critique of the smooth surfaces of postmodern discourse and late capitalist mystification. Such critique—and not on behalf of any orthodoxy, including my own—would require building into our subject a drive toward holistic understandings of the kind toward which I gestured in my initial reading of the morning news. It would call for building into rhetorical practice a consciousness of power, of conflict, of history, of ideology—just those things so likely to be left out, either because it is risky to let politics into the classroom, or because professional decorum insists that those concerns belong to other disciplines.

In other words, a liberatory rhetoric should align itself with critical thinking, in the broadest sense. There is, of course, a movement called “critical thinking,” strong and gathering force in secondary education. I had originally meant to devote some jaundiced remarks to the critical thinking movement, but that story will have to wait for another occasion. Just let me say that, most disappointingly if predictably, the literature of critical thinking is virtually silent on—precisely—power, conflict, history, and ideology, and in some instances comes close to recapitulating in different terms the trivialization and atomization of the basic skills and behavioral objectives movements that went before. If I thought my words might move some of you to put another item on your agenda, it would be engagement both theoretically and politically with the critical thinking movement, perhaps to help turn it in the directions richly developed by Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, and others. Indeed, Freire’s ideas and practices should have much more prominence in talk about rhetoric than I believe they do. The Bush era cries out for them.

Afterword: Spring, 1990

The Educational Excellence Act of 1989 moved through committee in the Senate with the usual deletions and additions. A revised version of the Act, costing one-hundred million dollars less than the original, passed the Senate on February 7, 1990. A great fuss arose in the House Education Committee, with the Democrats criticizing the Act as a band-aid measure and eventually proposing an alternative bill drawn on more traditional liberal lines. The fate of Mr. Bush’s educational proposals is now, at best, uncertain. His educational ideas remain the same.

Connecticut’s and New England’s febrile prosperity is for the moment a thing of the past. The help-wanted signs have come down, condos are glutting the market, and the banks are in trouble. So bounces the ball of capitalism.

More consequentially: as everyone has heard, socialism is now dead, capitalism is triumphant, and history is at an end. Let my irony not be read

as a slur on the bold revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe. People there need our hopes and help as they try to shake off the tyrannies and bureaucracies that claimed and tarnished the name of socialism. But they enter a world system whose tensions and crises grow ever more taut, more threatening to a decent future on the planet. Capitalism triumphant needs critical thought and liberatory rhetoric still more than capitalism militant in mortal combat with the Evil Empire. We will have to invent something new, or decay and perish. Can vision become a goal for rhetoric?¹

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Notes

¹This paper originated as the keynote address to the Eighth Annual Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition in 1989. I would like to thank John T. Harwood for graciously inviting me to speak.

Writing Program Evaluation

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