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Parrhesia: The Aesthetics of Arguing Truth to Power

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ABSTRACT: Parrhesia is the rhetorical figure of dissent par excellence. The essay argues that parrhesia is understood as risky argumentation within the rhetorical tradition. The relation of frank speech and flattery has been a core discussion about the predicaments of advocacy since Greece and Rome. Whereas Foucault models the term primarily from the aesthetic enactments of Euripides, the essay studies parrhesia as a mutually implicating struggle articulated in Sophoclean drama. Dilemmas of wartime dissent found in United States Congressional debate over Iraq are presented as a contemporary case study.

KEY WORDS: parrhesia, dissent, flattery, figure of thought, athuroglossos, opposition, Foucault, Diogenes, debate.

Parrhesia works ‘to insinuate, admonish, and reprehend, and may [justly] be called the Herald or Ambassador of speech, which is the onely forms that boldly deliverreth to great dignities and high degrees of men, the message of justice and equittie, fearing neither magistrates that persecute the law, nor princes that do abuse their kingdoms.’ Caution is advised for there often springs a ‘malice,’ ‘a contempt for his doctrine, and sometimes a punishment of his person.’

Peachem 1954, p. 115

Parrhesia is a figure of thought associated with speaking truth to power. The figure refers to dangerous assertions that are (1) sometimes made directly in the heat of the moment and (2) sometimes accompanied by a qualification—excuses invented spontaneously or by habit of equivocation. *Silva Rhetoricae*, for example, defines the activity as: “Either to speak candidly or to ask forgiveness for so speaking.” Parrhesia emerges from a communication predicament where, at one and the same time, an arguer is obligated to raise unwelcome claims while preserving a communication space that gives the interlocutor reasons to listen, rather than an excuse to react.

Whether parrhesiastic claims are raised before the authority of a single, powerful authority or within a forum before the demos, speaking truth to power always puts an interlocutor in jeopardy. The risk involved in offering critical claims to others, who are not likely to receive them well, is a defining predicament of advocacy.

Parrhesia was well-discussed within the classical tradition. The figure of “free speech” was discussed with great vigor within Greek rhetoric, Socratic dialogue, and subsequently in Roman philosophy and rhetoric (with skeptical and cynical variations).

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“One of the privileges which the Athenians prized very highly was ... the right of free speech. From the foundation of the democracy until the dangers of uncensored speech in the Peloponnesian War made some restraint advisable, this privilege remained unimpaired” (Pearson 1937, p. 41). Free speech is an ambivalent figure, though. Sometimes, parrhesia is found to be a praiseworthy effort of a speaker who brings frankness to a conversation or public issue, but its signature moment--as unvarnished, vernacular address spoken with urgency--is also sometimes considered a vice (Meeuwssen). Untutored and untimely speaking of what is on one’s mind can render situations volatile, fragmented, or more protracted than necessary. Whether the figure is embraced or reviled, parrhesia always signals the uttering of a communicative argument that opposes the settled views of the demos or of the powerful. Thus, parrhesia is the rhetorical figure of dissent par excellence.

Argumentation that balances critical assertion by adding exception-justifying apology occurs across a broad range of literature, poetry, history or oratory. In classical drama, the figure is archetypically situated in the narration of a speaker who is uncomfortable with the consequences of delivering bad news, and so turns to parrhesia, the “Messenger” or “Herald” figure of speech. The parrhesiastic act is a claim, made in support of a truth, before an other; this act of argumentation sets off an exchange or interaction within a dialogue, debate, drama, or interrogation. The figure puts interlocutors on notice of a **gap** between *what the speaker says is the truth* and *what he or she thinks passes falsely for truth among those who haven’t heard the news*, whose views are out of step with the times, or whose thinking is skewed and decisions not right.

Figures of thought are often categorized as manners of expression that intensify the meaning of words. For example, a trope is regarded generally as “an artful deviation from the ordinary or principal significant of a word,” while a scheme is generally thought “an artful deviation from the ordinary arrangements of words” (*Silva Rhetoricae*). Words supplement cognition by drawing attention to some aspects of a situation while cloaking others. In this light, parrhesia is a figure of thought that clothes bad news with an anxious denial of responsibility and a supplication not to be punished. Parrhesia dresses up unattractive criticism in a disguise of tasteful counsel for a wise man. In tone, the figure is apologetic; in structure, this genre of argumentation justifies forgiveness, by way of apology, for an offense yet to be given. The figure does more than constitute a genre of argument, however. The study of cases of parrhesia creates windows into the shifting predicaments of critical argumentation, communicative reasoning that strives to unite belief, duty, opposition, and communication. Discourses of parrhesia are enduring places to appreciate the challenges of dissent.

Figures of thought may be investigated as forms of argumentation that structure the anticipations and meanings within human communicative relationships. In classical times, parrhesia is a figure that situates critical advocacy in mutual but distinctive risks between advocate and addressed. Jonathon Simon (2005) explains: “The right of parrhesia meant that speakers with a personal knowledge of the folly of choices made by the sovereign (whether democratic public or king) could confront leaders with their failures. The Athenian tradition demanded that sincere parrhesiastes be heeded and left unharmed, but the risk of a less worthy response (i.e., retaliatory violence) also guaranteed the reliability of critique.” The advocate who offers poor advice--or even good advice without opening a space for the public or decision-maker to appreciate the

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argument on its own merits--would not get heard and could be punished. Responding to criticism with punishment is always fallacious, but does it always appear unreasonable? The leader who listened to insults without retaliation could lose respect, but he who would not entertain counsel could not test reigning ideas against honest objections. The success of offering bad news or criticism depended both upon the quality of the arguments proposed as well as preserving a communicative space within which disagreement could be deemed productive.

What does parrhesia say about human communicative relationships under the stresses of advocacy? How is it that speaking freely, frankly or boldly has almost always been valued as the ideal, but free speech is represented as an ambivalent or risky action in the particular case? Parrhesia is praised in philosophy, literature, and rhetoric of the classical world and again found as a value in the Renaissance and early modernity (Parkin-Speer, 1981)--but at the same time freely speaking is a communication activity that is not everywhere under all circumstances praised, particularly in time of war.

This paper will work on these questions in three ways. First, I will turn to the classic example of Sophocles' *Antigone* which appears to be a test case in the dangers of parrhesiastic argument. The play offers an aesthetic modeling of the predicaments of reconciling familial and dynastic norms during times of war in classical Greece. Second, I will review Michel Foucault's effort to recover and transform the figure of parrhesia into a meta-narrative supporting a postmodern minimalist politics of cynicism. Finally, I will recover the figure as part of the rhetorical tradition by addressing for contemporary times the issues of frank speaking before the authority of leaders and the demos in time of war. In comparing a figure of thought across three historical periods and three examples, one taken from drama, the second from philosophy, and the third from war-time practice, I engage the contextual study of argument to inquire as to the communicative predicaments that are distinctive and common to cultural moments of formulating argumentation as disagreement, criticism, and dissent.

ANTIGONE

Antigone is a play in which the characters are driven by the communicative predicaments of parrhesia. In brief, the drama concerns the decision of a young woman to bury her brother in spite of a king's decree. Antigone is betrothed to the king's son, Haemon, and her decision to follow her own vision of a higher law rather than Creon's rule of state has consequences that result in a spreading family tragedy. A number of dialogical arguments are available for analysis, but I select a passage in a crucial part of the play which features a stichomythia between king and prince, father and son, over the king's decision to banish Antigone. The passage reveals the inherently hazardous situation involved in advocacy argumentation where the authority of a sovereign and the opinion of the people are conflicting and dissent arises.

Haemon begins by saying that he does not wish to claim necessarily that his father, the king's views are wrong. Indeed, since intelligence is a gift from the gods, it is always in the logos to work out. But, "it is not in your nature to foresee people's words or actions or the objects of their censure; for your countenance is alarming to a subject when he speaks words that give you no pleasure." To the contrary, Haemon himself claims that he is able to hear the public discuss the unpopularity and criticism of injustice

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for punishing Antigone. Haemon works to create space for his father to change his opinion, assuring the king that he is a loyal son, and that thinking one's self to be right is but a mood. "It is not shameful for a man, even if he is wise, often to learn things and not to resist too much. You see how when rivers are swollen in winter those trees that yield to the flood retain their branches, but those that offer resistance perish, trunk and all. Just so whoever in command of a ship keeps the sheet taut, and never slackens it, is overturned and thereafter sails with his oarsmen's benches upside down." Haemon's metaphors offer a space which introduces the possibility of reconsidering an opinion, gently and poetically. Creon is in no mood to listen, and to the plea he responds: "So men of my age are to be taught sense by a man of your age?" The risks of advocacy follow in the mutually constructed failure of parrhesia to open authority to reason. The stichomythia is searing. Haemon responds to the king's insult that the argument should be valued not by dismissing its source but by thinking on the merits.

Creon: Is it a merit to show regard for those who cause disorder?

Haemon: It is not that I would ask you to show regard for evildoer.

Creon: Is not she afflicted with this malady?

Haemon: The people of Thebes that shares our city does not say so.

Creon: Is the city to tell me what orders I shall give?

Haemon: Do you notice that what you have said is spoken like a very young man?

Creon: Must I rule this land for another and not myself?

Haemon: Yes, there is no city that belongs to a single man!

Creon: Is not the city thought to belong to its ruler?

Haemon: You would be a fine ruler over a deserted city!

Creon: This man, it seems is fighting on the woman's side.

Haemon: If you are a woman; because it is you for whom I feel concern.

Creon: You villain, by disputing against your father?

Haemon: Because I see that you are offending against justice!

Creon: Am I offending when I show regard for my own office?

Haemon: You show no regard when you trample on the honours due to the gods!

Creon: Contemptible character, inferior to a woman!

Haemon: You will not find me vanquished by what is shameful.

Creon: Well everything you say is on behalf of her.

Haemon: And of you and me, and of the infernal gods!

Sophocles, *Antigone* 730-749.

The argument is a self-compounding destruction of the possibilities of collaborative reason. Creon wants agreement from his son and proposes that Antigone be viewed as a replaceable adornment. Haemon not only holds on to his betrothed but raises the stakes by telling Creon that his own behavior in this case is a test of his ability and power to govern. The collaborative refusal by the son to diminish the status of his claim to champion Antigone combined with the father's intransigence turn a disagreement over particulars into a shouting match. Haemon argues with the frankness of a loyal son, but the dialogue ends up reducing him to "rage and despair" (Kitto 1966, p.128).

Tragedy creates an aesthetic space to model the predicaments of communicative argument, in this case the dignity of the king and the views of the people are dramatized by the playwright, Sophocles, as containing the seeds of irreconcilable conflict. The crucial importance of a successful parrhesiastic exchange is modeled in the failures of Antigone to justify herself before Creon, and of Haemon to find agreement with Creon. At last, Terrisias the advisor persuades the king that the harm he is doing outweighs the

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good, but the king's concession is too late to prevent the tragedy. Thus art models the dangers of human relations not easily negotiated by words. *Antigone* continues to be a widely read and studied play. Telling truth to power can entwine interlocutors into positions where incalculable suffering is instigated for each despite the best of reasons.

FOUCAULT'S RECOVERY

Michel Foucault recovers the figure of thought in a set of lectures delivered at the University of California at Berkeley in the fall term of 1983. The lectures were part of a seminar entitled "Discourse and Truth." Foucault does not treat the older tragedies that model the communicative predicaments of truth telling. Rather, he begins his inquiry with the appearance of the word made prominent in the plays of Euripides, then proceeds to select examples from the Greek and Roman rhetorical traditions. Euripides' plays are read as parrhesiastic games where characters try to play a game of self-discovery within conflicting terms of *logos*, *genos*, *nous*, and *mathesis*. To these plays, Foucault first brings the move of Socratic philosophy, to deploy parrhesia while working to convince the reader that he is simply pursuing matters as they stand. In the end, these matters of life (*bios*) are most identifiably embodied by Diogenes. Let us follow how the position develops.

First, note that Foucault denies that parrhesia is a rhetorical figure at all. He claims that "in parrhesia, the speaker makes it manifestly clear and obvious that what he says is his own opinion. And he does this by avoiding any kind of rhetorical form which would veil what he thinks. Instead, the parrhesiastes uses the most direct words and forms of expression he can find." (1983, p. 12) This is because speaking truth in a situation that involves asymmetry of power relations is always risky. "Whereas rhetoric provides the speaker with technical devices to help him prevail upon the minds of his audience (regardless of the rhetorician's own opinion concerning what he says), in parrhesia, the parrhesiastes acts on other people's minds by showing them as directly as possible what he actually believes" (1983, p. 12). Rhetoric is the mechanical production of sanitized speech; parrhesia is the human activity of risky speaking. Thus Foucault strips the rhetorical tradition of its foremost trope of advocacy.

Second, Foucault justifies the non-rhetorical definition of the figure with a peculiar definition that at one and the same time both *denies* the communicative quality of the figure while *affirming* its status as confrontational speech in situations of social inequality. He recognizes that the trope is grounded in a conflicted situation between interlocutors, of course. "The commitment involved in parrhesia is linked to a certain social situation, to a difference of status between the speaker and his audience, to the fact that the parrhesiastes says something which is dangerous to himself and thus involves a risk, and so on," he says (1983, p. 13). Yet, by defining the act in relation to the self-perceived duty of the speaker, he constructs a one-sided and limiting definition of the trope. "In parrhesia, the speaker is supposed to give a complete account of what he has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks. The word parrhesia, then, refers to a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says." (1983, p. 12) True, parrhesia is a word for the relationship between the speaker and what he or she says. It is also much more. The activity of parrhesia is also uttering an argument that an unwanted claim is in fact true, and that the rejection of the truth of the

claim--as well punishment of the person who makes it--is a compounded fallacy. Foucault does not recognize the relational claim embedded in the older dramatic traditions of Sophocles (and Aeschylus). Rather, he wishes only to feature the relation between a claim and the willingness of a person to commit to a self-discovered truth in spite of all opposition—a theme modeled in different ways by Euripides art.

Third, Foucault's strategic definition of parrhesia, when examined critically, yields a relation between the philosopher's own favorite classical figure, Diogenes, and the postmodern strategies of oppositional argument. Cynics render truth-telling a game of performative doubt in the service of an uncompromising and unforgiving challenge to social convention. Ordinarily, by contrast, adherence to the propriety of everyday communicative reasoning signals an interlocutor's willingness to engage in an exchange on equal terms in reasonable conversation. From a cynical standpoint there is always an unbridgeable gap between the duty to express what one knows and the social expectations to act or to conform to what society expects to be said. For a cynic, all reasonable disagreement is tantamount to hypocrisy. "Reasonable disagreement"--the words amount to a lure, a fiction, an oxymoron. So claims to reasonable argument always present a test. Genuine argument is performed only by refusal to participate in any of the codes of social convention Whether bathing with sand or performing some very private act in a very public place, a cynic puts on display his (or her) own honesty by refusing to participate in everyday life, thereby signaling (ambiguously) a concern for the self over a regard for society.

In its Socratic version, the activity of parrhesia clearly articulates a sense for self-regard, by pursuing a dialogue that opposes the shallowness of public opinion to the duties of perfecting self-knowledge. Foucault has regard for Socratic exchange, but he strives to go beyond the abstractions of even the most productive philosophical dialogues to an "ethos" created in living out one's opposition. Thomas Flynn draws the link: "Foucault's marching in demonstrations against penal injustice, his presence at a protest in favor of Vietnamese 'boat people' and the like are precisely the parrhesiastic acts that require no warrant except the perceived danger to commonly valued human freed-autonomy in concrete circumstances" (1989, p. 196). In its performance of cynical confrontation, public display constitutes a politics of opposition through an interlocutor's refusal to engage in traditional forms of argument, forums of discussion, or partnerships of deliberation. Outrageous policies deserve to be confronted with outrageous acts! This assumption shrinks the duty of argumentation to a *tu quoque* charge of mutual unreasonableness. Cynics speak the truth "at great personal risk (unlike the rhetor)," Foucault concludes. "Their deliberate unconventional lifestyle made of their lives a veritable liturgy of truth telling" (2001, p. 195).

Foucault prefers the trenchant anti-war politics of Euripides in his poetic condemnation of empire. He also pays homage to the witty, irreverent confrontations of Diogenes in the unconventional search for truth; however, Foucault also recognizes that in the rhetorical tradition, too not all dramatic dissent is appreciated as an act of duty, conscience, or thoughtful opposition. Athuroglossos or athurostomia (mouth without a door) is a figure of frank speech; but, whereas speaking truth to power is the product of minimalist, unvarnished directness, athurostomia speaks frankly in the vernacular manner with untrained excess. Like flatterers, speakers can go on and on expressing views; yet unlike flattery, this form of excessive speech is neither disciplined nor do its words

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disguise truths or veil motives. Rather, *athuroglossos* confuses the duty for frank disclosure with what's running through one's mind; speaking without constraint does not guarantee apt, timely, and effective expression. As classical authors noted, the demos produced speakers who spoke up and spoke out for their own interest as the people's good (Foucault 2001, pp. 68-69). Free speech protects and encourages popular rhetoric, argumentation by those who can neither distinguish that which is to be said with appropriate effect, "or the circumstances and situations where speech is required from those where one ought to remain silent" (2001, p. 63). Not all 'honest talk' counts equally, it seems for the classical writers or for the skeptical view. The practice of direct, vernacular expression raises questions of weight: *Which speech activities are serious argumentation from a truth realized within the self and which are mere un-thoughtful release of words or gestures?*

The rhetorical tradition has addressed this issue in its full complexity (Ahl 1984). At the opposite end of populist dissent is courtly flattery (a term that may be taken as the opposite, too, of parrhesia). Flattery, like thoughtless, excessive speaking, is a communicative vice to be sure. However, flattery is far from frank speech; rather, the flatterer's claims conceal criticism and formulate praise in hyperbolic terms. If unsophisticated, quarrelsome speech is a problem in democratic Greece and republican Rome, the problems and duties of parrhesia shifted to suit the predicaments of empire. "In discussions of friendship in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the central issue of trustworthiness or sincerity among friends, and especially on the part of the subordinate partner in the relationships, who has the motive to exploit flattery in the hope of personal gain." (Konstan 1995, p. 334). Flattery is argumentation offered where a claim is made where there is no risk taken to provide critical counsel, to honestly share personal evaluations, or to disclose unpleasant news and views—however timely, urgent and apt such information may be.

In the movement from a democracy to empire, according to David Konstan, the meaning of parrhesia shifted from "freedom of speech to personal candor, from a political right to a private virtue." (1995, p. 334). When an interlocutor must speak the truth to one in power, raising dissenting claims takes courage. Dissent is a performance of duty that is successful, only when a critical claim can be made in such a way as to save face--for the target of critical argumentation--by opening a reasonable space to shift opinion and to recognize a different truth without a loss of face. This is a complicated maneuver. Indeed, in the interests of getting an authority to recognize a major truth an interlocutor may have to construct a minor fiction—claiming that the target's initial error was an understandable mistake that everyone makes or that the authority had 'really' believed the critical view all along.

Flattery refuses the duty of telling truth to power, absolutely; nevertheless this discourse of unqualified and false agreement—the failure to argue when argumentation is warranted--has its own risks, too. In fact, the communicative challenge the flatterer faces is daunting; one must always outdo rivals and one's self. Blandishments in time become received as stale and predictable. Rivals, indeed, go further. If one complement is good, two are better; if one defect can be turned into a virtue, then the challenge to the flatterer is not only to ignore the truth, but to create a beguiling range of fictions. The danger in this strategy is that at some point the target of these false claims will begin to see these progressively more far-fetched blandishments as mockery rather than praise.

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Foucault does not candidly treat the rhetorical tradition in its complexities of competing risks of free speech. His narrow definition of parrhesia works to forward his own preferences for frank gesture. Cynicism affiliates with several distinctive genres of argumentation: preaching self-denial, scandalous acts of opposition, and provocations inviting dialogue. Foucault does find in the ambiguity between untutored, relevant opposition and mindless prattle the seeds of democratic crisis—who is to listen to dissenting argumentation in a democracy? How will flattery of the demos by those who clothe words in apparently untutored manner be criticized? However, rather than embrace the richness of the rhetorical tradition that has considered the predicaments of frank speech and flattery, democracy and empire up through early modernity, he turns to dissent as a performance art of the self. Even in opposition, speaking too much or too little, however, pulls the subject back squarely into the realm of rhetorical concerns where the prospects of sharp disagreement have to be balanced against *athoroglossos* in the particular case, and where the volatility of criticism has to be measured against the irenic possibilities of more tactfully articulated and engaging change of opinion within a sustained communicative relation.

HONEST SPEECH IN TIME OF WAR

The question of dissent is never more stressed than in time of war. Debate is difficult when lives are at issue. Modern nations at war routinely turn the industries of mass communication and the offices of state into propaganda machines. Nevertheless, in democracies, debate during wartime does take place. The choice to continue or to end a conflict is not an easy issue. Politicians find it stressful to equivocate on positions, dismiss the issue as inconsequential, or hide opinions—even while at the same time the events of war—as understood by families who suffer loss and as framed by a variety of mass media representations—are unpredictable, day by day, and mount with cumulative effect. When the United States Congress and the President are of the same party, public dispute in the national capital dwindles because the channels of discussion are blocked by the ruling party. When Congress and the President are not from the same party, and when there is no end in sight to a war that is costing lives and draining treasure, public debate erupts. In wartime debates, parrhesia plays a central role. The question of dissent turns on what in light of the sacrifices that have been made one has a duty to say and what opinions, in spite of personal feelings are not reasonable in light of the circumstances.

Consider recent speeches that Representatives in the United States Congress presented on February 13, 2007 on whether to limit President Bush's efforts to sustain a troop "surge," as he called it, in Iraq. The predicaments of parrhesia shape the arguments throughout.

Nancy Pelosi is clear in opening the debate. There is no good news: "the war will enter its fifth year, causing thousands of deaths, tens of thousands of casualties, causing hundreds of billions of dollars, and damaging the standing of the United States in the international community. And there is no end in sight." The message is critical and clear: "The American people have lost faith in President Bush's course of action in Iraq, and they are demanding a new direction." It is "his escalation," not a "troop surge" that is the center of a debate to be conducted. The speaker presents "the President's

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escalation proposal” as a personal proposition to increase war. As a proposal, it is the constitutional right and duty of “each” representative in Congress to evaluate and decide. Thus, Pelosi works to avoid the charge of frivolous debate while at the same time putting the onus for bad news on Bush policy. To secure this premise she quotes Robert Taft a Republican Senator from Ohio who only weeks after Pear Harbor championed “criticism” in time of war and Bush himself who claimed to “welcome” debate.

Securing the right and duty to debate in congressional office, American history, and presidential approval is not enough, however. As in all strong parrhesiastic argumentation, the speaker goes on to prevent opponents from closing off criticism by conflating opposition to the war with a lack of support for the troops. “As this debate begins, let us be clear on one fundamental principle: We all support the troops,” she says. Opposing the war does not mean demeaning the troops, and so in her speech she solicitously requests that the debate include discussion of whether the burdens placed on families and soldiers are excessive, whether the consequences of the war has been to make forces more ready. The answer is negative, of course. The reason for a war gone wrong is thus not the soldiers, but the administration which has not pursued necessary diplomatic efforts on a sustained basis; the American people understand this, and so should Congress through the debate. Thus, the House Speaker works to exact political costs on the Republican side of the aisle by turning the argument of harming soldiers away from its patriotic tones to issues of sacrifice and effectiveness.

John Boehner is familiar with exacting political costs through advocacy, and the representative from Ohio supports the war. The news from Iraq is not good, he admits at the outset of his address, “but war is never easy and almost never goes according to plan.” The fault is not the administration’s efforts to stabilize factions engaged in civil war, rather it is “al Qaeda and their supporters” who “frustrate our efforts to succeed” and who “because they cannot defeat Americans on the battlefield, al Qaeda and terrorist sympathizers around the world are trying to divide us here at home.” Blame the enemy for the war, not the politicians who will not support withdrawal from the conflict.

Boehner tries to open a space where support for an unpopular war is reasonable. He makes the unpopular appear reasonable through an analogy to another conflict, the American Civil War. Then, as now, public opinion was divided, then as now a President stood steadfast to wage conflict. The difference is that “then it was whether we should abolish the evil institution of slavery. Today it is whether we will defeat the ideology that drives radical Islamic terrorism.” Thus, Boehner tries to shift the debate from the narrower scene of Iraq and escalation to a global scene. “And we know what al Qaeda thinks when America retreats from the battlefield. They think that we can’t stomach a fight. This is why they haven’t been afraid to strike us whenever and wherever they have had the opportunity to do so.” Following the form of parrhesia, Boehner does not state directly the implication of his argument: that if democrats are not out and out cowards, they are at least fools. Rather, he characterizes democratic prattle as a “political charade” and confirms his position with a claim that, although obviously hyperbolic and false, is difficult to address openly: “Every drop of blood that has been spilt in defense of liberty and freedom, from the American revolution to this very moment, is for nothing if we are willing to stand up and fight this threat.” To withdraw now is to admit that 3,300 American lives have been wasted, and no one on the anti-war side is willing to take this idea on directly.

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John McHugh, a republican representative from New York, continues with support of the surge by accusing the Democrats of mindless speech. On the one hand, he claims that the unique resolution interfering with a “mission” of the Commander in Chief is unique and will be greeted with “whispers” by the President who can ignore the opinions of Congress. On the other, abroad, to our enemies, “It will say that America has no stomach for this fight. And somewhere in a cave in Afghanistan, or in a hut on the Afghan-Pakistan border, Osama bin Laden is going to smile.” The source of the confused speech of the democrats is likened to the American Civil War. Robert E. Lee tired of second guessing of his military leadership in the press said: “Apparently all my best generals had become journalists. Today, [McHugh observed]...apparently all of our best generals have become Congressmen. My colleagues, we are not generals. The constitution of this great Nation does not provide for 535 Commanders and Chiefs, yet that is the reality lost in the proposal...” Serious criticism requires expert standing in modern debate, and Congress is a political not a military institution; so, like civil war journalists its members commit athurostomia when they presume to discuss what is appropriate for winning a war.

Attacking the democrats for frank-but-misguided speaking, McHugh nonetheless ends his own address with a parrhesiastic gesture. In a curious passage, he reveals that over the weekend he took time to reread John F. Kennedy’s “Profiles in Courage.” In “those page our martyred President spoke: ‘In no other occupation but politics is it expected that a man will sacrifice honor, prestige, and his chosen career on a single issue.’” He urges that the House vote not flatter the public by following popular opinion against the war, but to vote as a matter of duty dictated by conscience. Thus, McHugh defends what will not be a popular commitment on his own part and implies—although he states explicitly that he is not making this accusation--that those who oppose the are merely pandering.

Edward Markey, a Democrat from Massachusetts, refuses to expand the debate into the realms of historical analogy or the spaces of global terrorism. He is direct and uncompromising: “The war in Iraq was launched on the basis of false and misleading intelligence about a nonexistent nuclear weapons program. When the inspectors looked for nuclear weapons in all the most likely places, there was nothing there the President did the opposite of what the evidence would dictate.” This truth is not his own opinion, Markey claims, but rather a truth realized but denied by the administration: “The American people are now speaking out with one clear voice, in frustration and in anger, demanding change, demanding a new direction in Iraq.” A position that is popular is legitimate, and like Pelosi, neither he nor the people blame the soldiers for the mess. “Our troops continue to fight heroically to prevent Iraq from sliding into anarchy, but they are losing ground to a deep emotional cycle of religious strife and revenge that goes back 14 centuries. Our soldiers cannot be beaten on the military battlefield, but neither should they be faulted for failing to drain a political swamp.” The position co-opts what had been traditional Republican argumentation during the Clinton Administration when conservatives charged democrats with mindless justifications of intervention forcing democracy at the point of a gun.

Aware of the charges that the debate itself is frivolous because a nonbinding resolution opposing troop increases does not legally compel a president to abandon policy, Markey attempts to restore gravitas to the nights argumentation by noting that the

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nuclear freeze resolution during Reagan's arms build up was non-binding, too, but it had the effect of spurring the President to negotiate peace. "Republican Members have simultaneously denounced this resolution as silly and unserious, and, at the same time, have tried to prevent its passage? Why are they afraid of a nonbinding resolution?" The reason is that the resolution confirms the movement of what had been scattered dissent toward a mainstream position. "This war should never have been fought, period. It was a mistake, the American people know it was a mistake, our military leaders know it was a mistake and a bipartisan majority in Congress know it was a mistake."

The struggle between Congress and the President continues. The constitutional debate unfolds positions that ground and contest the right to speak freely. Many Republicans charge that the speech of the democrats is insensitive to the situation and encourages the enemy; it is inappropriate because it panders to what is publicly popular at the expense of what should be apprehended as authoritative opinion by the Commander in Chief who is informed by expert advice. Most democrats charge that the speech of the republicans denies news that needs an appropriate hearing and response, namely that the war is not necessary, useful or winnable exercise and the American people have recognized that it ought to be ended. These democrats deny charges of the frivolity of resolution through historical analogy to other resolutions and elevate public opinion to the virtue of democratic practice.

The analysis reveals that public debate concerns who has the right to tell truth to power in time of war. A representative democracy makes a compromise between the will of the people and that of the leaders of government. In an unpopular war, opponents ground frank talk in a demand for recognition of the primacy of the popular will and criticize leaders who would prolong struggle. Proponents ground frank talk in a refusal to pander to the people and a call to adhere to the wider, long-term interests of a nation. The aesthetics of telling truth to power from the point of view of Euripides and Foucault would figure one side as right and oppose directly the other as wrong. This is not the only perspective on debate, however. Just as Sophocles modeled the dilemmas of dynastic politics in the tragedy of *Antigone*, the critical study of justified dissent fashions a window into the dilemmas of public debate in the modern time of war. The figure opens up advocacy to the study of reflective communicative risk and genuine concern as beliefs and a sense of duty enter into contested argument; the figure also shows how argument mutually implicates advocates in contested, prolonged, and bitter struggle that transforms the realm of political debate. At times, telling the truth to power is a powerful personal gesture; yet, in times of war, it also reveals the very heart of democratic struggle caught up in debate.

[link to commentary](#)

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