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# Discourse and the Democratic Ideal

## **Abstract**

The "most characteristic function of a man of practical wisdom is to deliberate well" wrote the author of the rhetoric text that anchors Western discussion of public discourse. In the society envisioned by Aristotle, the end of rhetoric was judgment (*krinate*).

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

# Discourse and the Democratic Ideal\*

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**T**he “most characteristic function of a man of practical wisdom is to deliberate well”<sup>1</sup> wrote the author of the rhetoric text that anchors Western discussion of public discourse. In the society envisioned by Aristotle, the end of rhetoric was judgment (*krinate*).

Two tendencies in contemporary presidential campaigns deflect us from the Aristotelian ideal. First, by depriving us of access to a mind at work expressing itself in language, the widespread use of ghostwriters clouds our ability to judge the *ethos* of the speaker. At the same time, the abbreviated forms that now characterize campaigns minimize both deliberative rhetoric and its mainstay, traditional argument. Lost in the process is some of the electorate’s ability to judge the person who would be president and the merits of the policies he forecasts.

The shifts in how our leaders communicate affect their ability to lead as well. Throughout history, theorists of communication have noted the educative value of forging thought into language. Most have agreed with Francis Bacon that “reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man and writing an exact man.” What is less noted is the value of sustained contact with a set of ideas. As he considered their meaning in speech after speech, on occasion upon occasion, Daniel Webster’s concept of both the Constitution and the law matured. So too did Lincoln’s grasp of the meaning of war, union, liberty, and country.

The Gettysburg Address expresses an intricate universe in memorable language because Lincoln had absorbed the legacy of the founders, understood the principles on which government must rest, and had fathomed the importance of fraternity to the body politic. Had his earlier speeches been ghosted, his address at Gettysburg might have been neither little noted nor long remembered.

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\* Read 13 November 1992. Portions of this article are drawn from the author’s books *Dirty Politics* (Oxford, 1992) and *Eloquence in an Electronic Age* (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>1</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141b, 7–14.

Likewise, Jefferson's précis of American principles in the Declaration of Independence is the by-product of years of thought, reading, and writing on these same issues. In Woodrow Wilson's writings as a college professor, we see the Fourteen Points foreshadowed. Had he not considered such matters repeatedly, again and again faced a blank page, pen in hand, and learned from critics, opponents, and audiences who responded to the early incarnations, I suspect that the reasons and language for which that war was fought would have been not only different but less memorable.

A contemporary search for a Wilson, a Lincoln, or a Jefferson yields a very small number of public figures willing and able to undertake the difficult process of crystallizing thought in language. One such was Martin Luther King, Jr., whose "I Have a Dream" speech embodied lived ideas forecast in earlier speeches, letters, and essays. In jail, at the pulpit, in rallies, King had reached for the language that would invite audiences to understand the common humanity of blacks and whites and the meaning of making real the promises of democracy. The eloquence of that speech flows from King's command of a rich rhetorical tradition, from his ability to voice his own and his people's convictions, and from his unrelenting struggle to enable his audiences to witness the world as he had come to experience it.

When a politician enters a forum clutching a text, public discussion is likely to be replaced by declamation. In the process, the existential risk that once accompanied public argument is lost and with it the susceptibility to persuasion that comes of mind confronting mind rather than script confronting script.

By divorcing the speaking of ideas from conception of them, ghost-writing also clouds our ability to know the person who would lead. Where Walt Whitman could say of his work, "Who touches this touches a man," President Bill Clinton might more appropriately say, "Who touches this speech, touches David Kusnet, Paul Begala, Bob Boorstin and, perhaps, Bill Clinton."

Ghosting not only enables leaders to conceal what we need revealed but also, by providing words on demand, transfers policy-shaping powers to individuals more skilled in the nuances of language than legislation. In a White House haunted by ghosts, those elected to lead are inclined to cede constitutionally specified powers to those selected to write.

A speaker's problems are compounded when the sentences are the product of a covey of writers. When a speaker's words are scripted by a conglomerate of speechwriters, subtle but detectably different personae begin to speak through the mouth of the same person, a fact hardly reassuring to those seeking to find the person behind the public candidate.

George Bush's 1988 acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention combines the subtle lyricism of poet turned speechwriter Peggy Noonan with the punch-in-the-gut one-liners of media adviser Roger Ailes. It is jarring to hear Bush's gentle elegy to the burdens of the office in one breath and in the next, in 1988, "Read my lips, no new taxes," and

in 1992, "My dog Millie knows more about foreign policy than either of those bozos."

Just as the ghostwriter makes it more difficult for us to judge the candidates through their speech, the demise of the speech as a rhetorical form makes it more difficult to weigh the merits of their proposals. The televised general election speech to the national audience actually disappeared in 1988. With few exceptions prior to that year, candidates used their convention speeches to forecast the themes of the fall campaign and their election eve speech to recap those themes. In the process, that final campaign speech gave the candidates the opportunity to step back from the harsh language and divisive appeals of the campaign to employ a rhetoric forecasting governance. In 1988 neither major party candidate delivered the traditional half-hour statement to the nation. Nor did the final threesome in 1992.

A good public policy speech defines the nature of the country's problems, explains their origins, lays out the available solutions, argues the comparative advantages of one over the others, shows how this solution addresses the causes, and then dramatizes the solution in ways that make it memorable to a mass audience. At no point in the fall 1992 campaign did either candidate deliver such a speech in prime time over television to the American people.

How can I make such a claim when the world knows that Independent H. Ross Perot spent over thirty million dollars of his own money to offer half-hour presentations to the nation? Because those half-hour expositions were not speeches in any traditional sense of the word.

What the billionaire from Dallas delivered were "phantom speeches." I borrow the notion from that used to describe an amputee's sense that the missing limb is still twitching, itching, and attached. Those ransacking their memory for a real policy speech can harken back to LBJ's "We Shall Overcome" speech to Congress, JFK's speech on disarmament at American University, or any of FDR's fireside chats. More recently, Ronald Reagan commemorated D-Day memorably in the ceremonial form (*epideictic*) at which he excelled.

And as recently as the campaigns of 1960 and 1980 one can find such policy speeches in the repertoires of the major candidates. But in recent years the spot has replaced the speech as the preferred rhetorical form of the campaign. Serious policy speeches are reserved for governance. Indeed, such speech acts as the inaugural, the state of the union address, and the veto message are staples of governance. The speech has become a form through which presidents govern but in which candidates do not campaign. Where campaign speeches assert, the rhetoric of governance argues.

Because they employed a length we usually associate with a televised presidential address, were delivered by a candidate directly to camera, and offered chart after chart of what appeared to be evidence, we mistook Ross Perot's phantom speeches for the real thing. Ross Perot's half hour "infomercials" on the economy, on his upbringing and accomplishments, and on the weaknesses of his opponents were spot ads knit

together with such transitional headlines as “Oops” and “The Dead Farmer.”

Those who mistook Perot’s string of spots for speeches confused data with evidence. In chart after chart, Perot offered histograms and graphs undignified by an argumentative structure that would knit them into argument. More interesting is the fact that the data indicating a pervasive problem were structurally unrelated to the solutions he offered.

Where Perot served up the phantom speech, Clinton offered home-movies and a family album. Where Perot aggregated charts, Clinton sewed biographical snapshots into a convention film and then patched it together with scenes from the bus tours to create a half-hour election eve ad.

The bio-ad invites us to assume that because we can identify with Clinton’s biography, we should be willing to trust his undisclosed plans on health care, education, and the economy.

“I was born in a little town called Hope, Ark., three months after my father died,” begins a representative portion of the video.

I remember living in that old two-story house where I lived with my grandparents. I remember going to my grandfather’s grocery store and a big jar of Jackson cookies that were on the shelf. It was a wonderful little, small town where you know it seemed that everybody knew everybody else. And, ah, it was segregated like all Southern towns were then. And I remember my grandmother and grandfather opposing the closing of Central High School to keep Black students out. They were for integrating the schools. It was interesting. My grandfather had a grade school education. And my grandmother had graduated from high school, from a tiny little school out in Badkar Arkansas.

Clinton’s wife, Hillary appears and says,

His grandmother just valued education above all else. And from the time Bill was in a high chair she had you know like playing cards tacked up on the drapes in the kitchen area where she fed Bill. She would tell him what the numbers were and she would read to him all the time so that he was able to read at a really young age in part because his grandmother valued it so much and helped him so much.

The camera cuts back to the presidential aspirant. “They didn’t go around and see the world and become broadminded; they did it out of the depths of their experience and their heart and I was always really proud of them.”

What of the specifics of a health, education or economic growth plan?

In 1963 that I went to Washington and met President Kennedy at the Boys Nation Program.

And I remember just, uh, thinking what an incredible country this was—that somebody like me, y’know, had no money or anything would be given the opportunity to meet the President.

That’s when I decided that I really could do public service, ‘cause I cared so much about people. And I worked my way through law school, with part-time jobs, anything I could find.

After I graduated, I really didn't care about making a lot of money. I just wanted to go home and see if I could make a difference. We've worked in education and health care, to create jobs, and we've made real progress.

Now it's exhilarating to me to think that as President, I can help to change all our people's lives for the better, and bring hope back to the American dream.

The speech is not the only victim of contemporary politics. With it has gone its integral element: argument. The notion that the end of rhetoric is judgment presupposes that rhetoric consists of argument—statement and proof.

Morselized ads and newsbites consist instead of statement alone, a move that invites us to judge the merit of the claim on the *ethos* of the speaker or the emotional appeals (*pathos*)—enwrapping the claim. In the process, appeal to reason (*logos*) one of Aristotle's prime means of persuasion—is lost. With it goes some of the audience's ability to judge.

Network news accustoms audiences to assertion, not argument. Over time it reinforces the notion that politics is about visceral identification and apposition, not complex problems and their solutions. It also accustoms politicians and quoted academics to think and speak in assertions.

I must confess that I speak from experience. In 1978 I was invited to appear on network television for the first time. Wanting to do a good job, I was particularly careful in the pre-interview to define my terms and lay out the available evidence for my arguments. After talking with me for more than a half hour, the producer of the segment laughed and said, "Look professor, I know you are an expert in this area. That's why we want you on the show. But when we say you are an expert, it means you are an expert. You don't have to tell us how you got to your conclusions, just give us the bottom line."

With few exceptions, "soundbite" is a synonym for "assertion." Whether it is warranted by evidence cannot usually be known by the reader or viewer. By certifying the interviewee as an "expert," reporters ask their audiences to take the existence of evidence on faith.

Speechwriters produce and candidates deliver what is rewarded with newsplay. Over time, assertion—not argument—has become the norm for candidate speeches. Indeed, the goal of the campaign comes to be getting the same soundbite into the soundbite hole of each of the networks. Interestingly, that soundbite is not necessarily the candidate's central idea. More often it is an attack on an opponent.

If the goal of a speech is producing a widgetlike soundbite in a prefabricated environment, then some facets of argument fall to the wayside. One does not dare note the legitimacy of anything the opponent has done or said. Doing so runs the risk that that moment of equanimity will be the one played on news. Banned, too, is discussion of substantive similarities between candidates. One does not accurately summarize the case for the other side, even if only to rebut it. Nor ought one to tie evidence to one's claims lest in the process the claim expands beyond the size of the soundbite slot and as a result is shunted aside. "Stepping on



your own message" is shorthand for letting the reporters or the opposing campaign shape the content of your soundbite.

I don't mean to suggest that short assertive statements are necessarily superficial. When a voter is fully informed about an issue and needs only to know whether the candidate is of a like mind, such assertions as "I favor *Roe v. Wade*" or "I favor the death penalty for drug lords" are useful and efficient. But if the voter is seeking an understanding of the rationale that has led the candidate to this conclusion or is trying to determine which position to embrace, soundbites aren't very helpful. They can tell a voter *what* a candidate believes, but not *why*. And many issues are too complex to be freeze-dried into a slogan and a smile.

The saga of Clinton from boyhood to bus tour and Perot's charts from the heart functioned as surrogates for the speech. Where Perot's half hours on the deficit offered cascades of evidence anchored only in the mantra, "We are in deep voo-doo," a key Bush ad offered claims but only pseudo evidence. In the ad, whose words are lifted from Bush's convention speech, the incumbent president says:

The world is in transition. The defining challenge of the 90's is to win the economic competition. To win the peace, we must be a military superpower, an economic superpower and an export superpower. In this election you'll hear two ways of how to do this. Theirs is to look inward. Ours is to look forward, prepare our people to compete, to save and invest so we can win.

Here's what I'm fighting for: open markets for American products, lower Government spending, tax relief, opportunities for small business, legal and health reform, job training and new schools built on competition, ready for the 21st century.

Set in cold print, these sentences read as assertions. They also imply stark differences among the candidates where in fact none exist. Perot and Clinton can chant these incantations as surely as can the incumbent president.

But what interests me about this ad is our research that suggests that its pictures function as evidence for audiences. Where Perot offered phantom speeches, Bush is offering phantom evidence. It takes the form of evocative pictures of children pledging allegiance to the flag, cargo ships being loaded, and missiles being launched. Audiences that see the ad without these pictures recognize that Bush is making a series of assertions. Audiences that see the ad's pictures are more likely to report that Bush has shown that he has met those goals or indicated how he will meet them in the future.

What is important about this difference in perception, of course, is that the pictures have no evidentiary weight whatsoever. Because they appear where evidence is supposed to appear—after a claim—and because they are rapidly intercut—we mistake the sequence, the form if you will, for what it is not—argument.

All of this should matter because our system is designed to work through the clash of ideas, a clash best achieved through extended argument. It was through a process of trial and error that the country came



to defend the free play of argument in politics. The Sedition Act of 1798, passed by the Federalists, made it a Federal crime to "write, utter or publish . . . any false, scandalous and malicious writing . . . against the government of the United States." During the election of 1800, Federalist Secretary of State Timothy Pickering used this act to prosecute opposition Republican newspapers. The government "depends for its existence upon the good will of the people," argued defenders of the act. "That good will is maintained by their good opinion. But, how is that good opinion to be preserved, if wicked and unprincipled men, men of inordinate and desperate ambition, are allowed to state facts to the people which are not true, which they know at the time to be false, and which are stated with the criminal intention of bringing the Government into disrepute among the people."

By contrast, the Republicans held that in the clash of ideas, true opinion would prevail. The state could not be so menaced by words, they argued, as to justify the harm that could result from their suppression. After that brief experiment in limiting political debate, the founders came out for a free and open exchange of ideas.

The ideal was amply precedented. The philosopher Immanuel Kant termed it "the transcendental principle of publicness." "Let Truth and Falsehood grapple," argued Milton in "Areopagitica," "who ever knew truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter."

The argument for what some have called the "marketplace of ideas" also drew strength from the theorizing of two of the fathers of the Revolution: Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. In his 1731 "Apology for Printers," Franklin noted that "both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick." In 1801, Jefferson's inaugural reflected his support for the concept, "If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this union or to change its republican form," he wrote, "let them stand undisturbed, as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated, where reason is left free to combat it." The protections of political speech that govern contemporary politics are a legacy of this view.

Increasingly these protections are safeguarding soundbites and snapshots rather than speeches, protecting assertions rather than arguments, and defending phantom forms masquerading as proof. Increasingly the end sought by political discourse is not judgment but visceral identification. Were Jefferson and Franklin with us today, I suspect these tendencies would be the subject of their concern.