

Rhetorical Savvy and Political Civility

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It is a pleasure to be speaking before an audience that came to hear a lecture with both "rhetorical" and "political" in the title, and I assume you came voluntarily! My students here at Wilkes University will find it hard to believe. Or, perhaps you came to witness the "final words" of Jane Elmes-Crahall. Many members of the local political scene, and some of my Wilkes colleagues, will find that hard to believe, as much as they might want to. What will not be a surprise is that I never intend to give a "final word lecture"—ever. As a rhetorician, I fully intend to use all of my skills to provoke discussion, to spark debate, and to empower people who have allowed others to speak for them. Beginning here, tonight.

Just to illustrate how extraordinary this rhetorical situation is, I would like to share the analysis I did of this audience.

Almost all of you are registered and voted in last November presidential election, and plan to vote in the Pennsylvania Primary Election on May 20, 1997. We will be selecting nominees for dozens of local, municipal, and county offices, as well as state-wide judgeships. Most intriguing are the local and Luzerne county-wide elections. Our local newspaper headlines almost scream for reform; no, an actual political revolution to restore a sense of civility to the political process. Nearly every day we can read about the latest ethnic and religious slurs used by one elected official to describe another candidate for office. And, we can read purple prose from screamfests or chair throwing incidents at last night's school board meetings. And, we can review instance-after-instance of unethical conduct by our elected officials followed by denial-after-denial by those same officials.

Because many of you have regular contact with your local and state elected officials, occasionally political candidates seek you out to discuss certain issues. As well educated, well read professionals, you routinely give speeches, write guest commentaries, and conduct meetings on the job

and in your community. And, at least one-half of you have proficiency in using the Internet, e-mail, and other electronic media.

In this speech I will be reminding you just how important it is for a public speaker to know her audience. As citizens you are distinguished from your peers by your activism, rhetorical savvy, and access to computer technology. In 1997, more than ever before, civic duty needs to be redefined and reaffirmed and extended for most Americans, including those of us who practice active citizenship.

From the beginning of this nation our motto has been, "E Pluribus Unum...Out of many, we are one." Yet, today, a great divide has been carved across the American electorate, separating those who try to stay informed participants in our democracy from the majority of Americans who are nonparticipating and angry.

In 1996, the nonpartisan League of Women Voters surveyed Americans who were likely to vote, and those who were not. They noted that the current "composite" American voter is likely to be female, over 40 years of age, college educated and married. She is likely to believe that government should play an active role in helping families. However, she is becoming very angry because she feels government has failed her. Nearly 70% use words like "frustrated," "disgusted," and "disillusioned" to describe their feelings about politics and elections, and that is a much more negative attitude than they felt in 1992, or even 1994. Over 40% now pay little or no attention to government and politics, a significant decline from the recent past. In spite of their disillusionment with government, over 60% registered and voted in November.¹

With more than 8 million new or returning voters on registration lists because of "Motor Voter" legislation, we face a new challenge. How do we convince millions of Americans that casting an intelligent vote and electing local and county officials—or the U.S. President—are not acts that cancel each other out? There are millions of potential electors who think their vote will not make a difference and they pride themselves in not caring about voting. Of all the major professions in the country, they trust political officials the least. Even less than educators and journalists.

"Out of many, we are one?" We are facing a "dumbing down" of civic discourse which is more the fault of the electorate than the elected. Remember, voter or nonvoter, we put the elected officials in office.

If a public speaker knows she is facing an interested, informed, and insightful audience, she will prepare more fully and present a better speech. Why? Because the audience is rhetorically savvy and will hold her accountable for what she says. That's how public discourse should function. Likewise, if our political officials and candidates know they will

be facing audiences of rhetorically savvy voters who will hold them accountable for what they say, their campaign discourse will be notched up several pegs.

This evening I hope you join me in considering my claim that the major contributing factor to the lack of campaign civility in this nation is a failure of the electorate to develop and practice basic rhetorical literacy. I also believe that even those of us who are active in our political communities should not be considered extraordinary citizens. We are practicing what ordinary American citizens need to do to transform the political climate in our nation.

Let's go a bit more in depth in our discussion of the fractures running through the electorate. Many scholars in my field call this America's golden "information age." We are rich in magical electronic communications technologies. But, most Americans are dirt poor in basic human communication skills. And that is affecting the way we function within society, including the way we govern.

At the same time that one-third of adult Americans have jumped onto the Internet, far too many remain rhetorically illiterate. Consider what we know about adult Americans and their basic rhetorical skills, including speaking, reading, writing and listening. Check any edition of the Book of Lists since the mid-1970s, and you will find the number one fear of Americans has been speaking in public—45% of us consider speaking in public as more frightening than dying!

The most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education's Literacy Report and the International Adult Literacy Survey indicates that over 47% of American adults fall into the two lowest levels of literacy. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) compared basic literacy levels of U.S. adults to those from Canada, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland. Only Switzerland and Poland had greater percentages of their adult populations in the lowest levels of literacy than the United States. The survey measured ability to read text, locate and use written information, and do simple math.² Over 90 million Americans are functionally illiterate. The 1993 U.S. Dept. of Education Report says, "their communication skills are severely restricted "when it comes to activities like writing a letter or participating in a job interview." Two national professional organizations in reading and language arts concluded that we have now reached double digits in the number of college freshmen who cannot read or write beyond the elementary school level. Survey after survey of employers indicate that America's college graduates do not "have the ability to write, speak, reason, and relate to others in a satisfactory manner to hold down a job."³

And, as a society, we are awful listeners. Listening, the communication skill we learn first, use the most, we are taught the least. Experts like Dr. Lyman Steil of the University of Minnesota/3M Corporation, estimate that we accurately comprehend only half of what we hear while the message is being delivered. Isn't that comforting for a lecturer who decided not to use visual supports to entertain her audience?

Many of us know how to plug in, log on, graze channels, and surf the net. It sounds like an off-beat Olympiad for couch potatoes. However, the low level of our human communication abilities is troubling—rhetorical illiteracy is creating one of the greatest societal divides of all. Most Americans avoid speaking in public. Nearly 40% of adult Americans are functionally illiterate, or close to it. We listen with only one ear. Tied to these basic rhetorical skills is critical thinking, and our ability to reason.

More than ever, I am determined to teach basic rhetorical skills whenever possible. My students tell me they can no longer listen to the news or watch a commercial without critiquing them from a rhetorical perspective. Their roommates get annoyed, but their professor is pleased when they hear an ad and proclaim, "That's a sequential fallacy! Where's your causal link?" But, what about the vast majority of our students, or the nation's pool of first-time voters? Maybe these students are registered to vote. Without rhetorical skills, can they distinguish fact from fallacy? And, do they know how to make decisions about what they see and hear in a campaign? How they decide is just as important as what they will decide on May 20.

Our misunderstanding of rhetoric, and its import to the democratic system, runs deep. GOP Presidential candidate Dole commented during the 1996 campaign that, "President Clinton demonstrates that rhetoric is easy, action is what counts."

Before we get too smug about how bad things are in the political sphere, let me remind you that the academy is the training ground for many of our leaders. Are we effective rhetorical role models? A colleague of mine actually said at a recent faculty meeting, "Let's stop talking and get on with decision-making." He doesn't seem to acknowledge that what we say is directly linked to how we think. Apply that insight to the following example of political editorial writing. Written in the midst of the last presidential campaign, the editorial claimed, "So widely accepted is this notion of civic decline that both Bill Clinton and Bob Dole have been exhorting Americans to pull up their socks...Rhetoric is free; programs cost money."⁴

Rhetoric is not free. And, rhetorical illiteracy is most certainly costly. In fact, the cost of rhetorical illiteracy is staggering in its affect on our people and on the democratic form of government. The cost of rhetorical illiteracy in this country can be measured in the widespread loss of public trust in government; it can be quantified by the number of times that decision-making bodies adopt poorly conceived and ineptly debated proposals; it can be measured by counting the tens of thousands of eligible voters who will stay away from the polls; it can be measured by the public cynicism resulting from negative campaign ads; and, it can be measured by pointing to all of the candidates who will be elected without opposition. Discourse and debate, not just by political candidates but by citizens as well, have long been the signs of American democracy at work. But no longer.

To understand how we got to this level of rhetorical and civic illiteracy in this nation, it is helpful to look at the analog for the American political model—the ancient Greek society that valued both the spoken word and democracy, a society that taught its people that the spoken word and democracy were forever linked.

I will focus my comments on the connection between rhetorical savvy and cultural civility by exploring two questions: (1) What lessons should we learn from the classical Greek theories of "civic discourse?" and, (2) What can we do about both declining rhetorical literacy and campaign civility?

In the preface to his translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, George Kennedy wrote about rhetoric in 5th century B.C. Greece, "Democratic government was emerging in Athens and some other cities, based on the assumption that all citizens had an equal right and duty to participate in their own government."⁵ Beginning with Isocrates, the learned sophist of 5th century B.C., and continuing with the writings of Aristotle, the Greek rhetoricians taught their students to use a combination of three proofs to persuade audiences—ethos, pathos and logos.

"Ethos," the proof that emanates from the character of the rhetor, was needed to establish the speaker's credibility. "Pathos," the emotions felt by speakers and audiences, was needed to establish emotional common ground. But, they made it clear that "logos" was the most important of the proofs and the heart of the Greek rhetorical culture. Translated as "the Word," or as "thought-plus-expression," logos evolved into the systematic study of argument or reasoned discourse. Emphasis on logos meant that the Greeks spent time discussing which topics were worthy and which topics were unfit for public debate. Now, there's a lesson for us.

A contemporary American audience will probably ask why logos reigned supreme among the three proofs. Isn't the perception of a speaker's character and reputation vital to her or his effectiveness? Of course. Isn't it possible to deliver an elegant, brilliantly argued speech and totally fail to understand what the audience's needs are? Of course.

But, in Athens, citizenship was limited to an elite. And, when your audience is very much like you, enjoys most of the same intellectual and recreational pursuits, and shares similar values and standards of ethical conduct, ethos was seldom emphasized as a proof in public debate.

To the Greeks, character attacks and ad homonyms were classified as serious fallacies in deliberative argument—unethical appeals to be avoided. Isocrates wrote that character attacks were used only when speakers failed to use their reasoning skills. To us, they are commonplace campaign themes that dominate speeches, debates and ads.

In ancient Athens, speakers were not overly concerned about using "pathos" to establish common ground. Emotional responses by audiences were easier to interpret than in our more diverse, democratic society. The classical rhetorical scholars listed dozens of emotions considered motivational appeals available to orators, offering a single sentence definition. They didn't elaborate.

Aristotle, who was considered one of the first scientists, didn't find a need to analyze motivational appeals—they were fairly obvious. The Greek rhetoricians also suggested that if a speaker did his preparation well, it was likely that he would achieve his desired result. The emphasis was on the speaker's content. They may have been somewhat naive in that regard. Their teachings may have also contributed to our tendency to think that mass audiences can be mindless sheep swayed by elegant delivery.

At this point in America's political history, it appears that we are losing our skills in reasoned discourse, what the Greeks called "logos." As a result, deliberative rhetoric—traditionally the stuff of public debate and decision-making—has given way to vacant, ritualized, ceremonial media events. With the weakening of "logos," American campaign rhetoric now relies on a hybrid of "ethos" and "pathos"—a mind-numbing combination of character attacks and messages designed not to offend mini-markets of American political consumers. Welcome to the era of rhetorical illiteracy and campaign incivility!

Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion." In his books on Rhetoric, Aristotle instructed Greeks on how to carry out their dutiful and rightful roles as citizens. Free Greek males and their sons were taught the principles of

rhetoric and democracy. The major policy decisions were decided in large public assemblies like this one where any adult Athenian male citizen who wished to speak, could. In the absence of lawyers, when an Athenian wished to seek justice in the courts, he argued his own case before juries of 200 or more of his peers; and, he defended himself in court. Citizens were public speakers. Citizens were legislators, judges and ambassadors. Citizens were politicians. Rhetoric was not the discipline of scholarly critics; it was the skill practiced everyday by citizens.

It is important to remind ourselves that only "free Greek males" were the citizens of Athenian democracy. Theirs was clearly a "gendered democracy" which excluded women from democratic rights and duties. Slaves were excluded, and there were many slaves in Athens. "Out of many, we are one" was easier to achieve by excluding the "many" from the Greek democracy.

The historian Thucydides, a student of Isocrates, said of civic responsibility in Athens: "We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all."

Skill in deliberative rhetoric by Athenian citizens was essential for the survival of their democracy. And, skill in deliberative rhetoric by America's citizens is essential for the survival of our democracy. Their democracy was built on an elite, homogeneous society that valued rhetorical competency above all other intellectual and artistic skills. We are a much more diverse society that is still looking for a cultural ethos to hold our communities together. And, we are a society that does not appear to value or practice rhetorical competency.

It is very unfortunate that the meaning of rhetoric was deconstructed after the ancient Greek and Roman periods to mean delivery and style, devoid of substance and argument. Clearly, that is not what the Greeks taught, or practiced. It is very difficult for some of us who are rhetoricians to listen to expressions like, "that's rhetoric, not reality." We know that what we say is an act with consequences, for which we are accountable. We know speech is powerful, with the potential to do both great good or great evil. We know the magical nature of language. 'Sticks and stones...but words will never hurt me.' Really? What about bristle language, hate speech, obscenity, and slander? So powerful is speech that the first amendment to our Constitution was written to guarantee our freedom of expression. So powerful is speech that we have slander laws that make it illegal to use "false" claims in language to tarnish someone's reputation and character. So powerful is speech that thousands of people can be persuaded, be converted, be inspired, be devastated, be offended, and be

educated by the spoken word. Maybe it is the power of the spoken word that makes it so frightening to Americans. As rhetors, we concentrate a great deal on the many channels that we can use to inform and to convey our messages. We acknowledge the vital role of audience-to-speaker interaction. It takes time to learn, practice and become proficient in the low-tech, high-risk art of rhetoric.

We are currently fascinated with the array of electronic media that define the American "information age." Compared with traditional rhetorical skills, it doesn't take much time to learn, practice and become proficient in the high-tech, low-risk world of electronic media. What rhetorical skill level is needed for using the internet? We should be debating if the Internet is a wonderful new tool of democracy, capable of taking government to people, and people to their government? Both national political parties put their presidential campaigns on-line in 1996. The "new technologies" of cable, Internet and television bring unfiltered as well as very carefully targeted campaign messages to mass audiences.

There are a number of cyber-skeptics, however. In "Silicon Snake Oil," Cliff Stoll warns that the Internet has been overrated as a tool for educating voters and future voters. He argues, "...there is a wide gulf between information and knowledge. Knowledge means understanding; you can't download understanding from an FTP site. What's missing from the WWW are editors, critics, reviewers, reporters."

Like many of you, I use the Internet as a tool for gathering information in my teaching and research. I find it to be the most scatological research process I use. It can lead to wonderful surprises, and it can be a huge waste of time. Now that the Internet also offers music, animation and great visuals it is a compact multi-media center capable of totally absorbing an individual's time and attention. Is the Internet the latest evolution in public discourse? Will it help the commonweal? We will have to wait and see. But for now it does not require the same rigor in critical thinking, speaking, writing, reading and listening as traditional rhetorical genres.

The Society of Professional Journalists found that the most severe declines in newspaper readership and television viewership were among the young—the young computer users to be specific. According to the SPJ report, "As a group those who went on-line three or four times a week showed one of the largest declines in reading and viewing traditional media."⁶

And, what rhetorical skill level is needed for television viewing? The very lowest. Sadly, television—which is by far the dominant communication medium in our culture—remains basically a one-way channel for

transmitting messages to a mass audience. According to the Society of Professional Journalists, more Americans get their "news" from television than from newspapers. Television news is also rated as more believable than print news, according to the same SPJ study. Americans welcome television news "personalities" into their homes and develop relationships with the newscasters, accepting without question what some commentators say and do. And when political ads are aired during the news, for many viewers they bleed together. The accuracy of the news broadcast blends with the assertions of the ad. And, "newsads," as the Dean of the Annenberg School, Kathleen Hall Jamieson calls them, are perceived to be accurate in content.

Which brings me to one of the most recent adaptations of political campaigning to television. Did any of you watch GOPTV during the 1996 Republican Convention? The National Republican Committee pumped \$1.2 million into the campaign to stage their own television coverage, and to purchase air time on two cable stations. What's next? Donkey TV for the Democrats? Locally, it was on Ch. 15, the Family Channel. In their official statement, the NRC said they wanted "unfiltered" coverage that was "free from liberal media bias."

Well, what about C-SPAN, or CNN? What is most frightening is that GOPTV is under almost any definition an example of political propaganda. They hired a former TV anchor from Philadelphia to ensure the look and sound of a credible broadcaster. They used reporters on the floor of the convention, who would ask cream puff questions of selected delegates. I saw a GOPTV reporter ask one young delegate, "What do you think young voters like yourself need to know about Bob Dole's personal heroism?" Now, it's that a tough question! They did back stage interviews. There was no pretense of balance, or even acknowledgement of other points of view within the GOP. A viewer without media savvy would tune in and think they were watching network coverage. It walked like a duck, talked like a duck, but smelled like something else entirely. This is a development we need to watch very closely in future campaigns.

Several years ago another political communication study readily caught my attention because it offered proof of the persuasive impact of television ads as a substitute for more complex, higher-order political messages.⁷

The University of Pennsylvania study found that political ads provide almost one-third of the information voters used in deciding how to vote. A powerful source of political information came from ads, which averaged 20 seconds and were primarily negative, attack ads. Knowing what we know about political tv ads, isn't it frightening to realize their claims are accepted as fact by many American voters?

Also, consider what happens to human conversation when the television is on? Recently, my husband and I were visited by several family members. Our 8 year-old niece was watching Nickelodeon on television when I came home from my office. As my sister-in-law and I began sharing events of the day with each other, my niece sighed loudly, then gave us an angry look, and finally turned up the volume to drown out the annoying conversation. She was letting us know the TV show she always watches at that time was more important than anything we had to say. What is the effect of watching television while eating meals? Usually, live human talk takes place during commercial breaks and ends abruptly when the programming resumes, even in mid-sentence.

Just as many Americans have adjusted their conversational "rules" and daily schedules to make the television the center of their in-home communication, so have political campaigns adjusted to television's rules. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications wrote in her book, *Dirty Politics*: "The best way to teach the structure of most contemporary political persuasion is to invite students to examine Jay Leno's monologues."

Modern day speech writers tend not to be speakers, or professional writers for that matter. They write ad copy and television scripts. They support 20 second spots with metaphors, that are often shown in visual and not verbal form. If text is used, it consists of personal narratives, one or two folksy anecdotes, and a character attack on their opponent. The formula is clear. With no clear referent, and no transitions from one quote to another, listeners are given little help from the candidates' speech writers in following a line of argument. Perhaps no line of argument is there. I'm still not sure where sound bytes and punch lines fit into a model of argumentation. Are they the claim, a form of supporting evidence, or the line of reasoning?

Political speeches and political conventions are now designed for television news coverage, not for serious decision-making or for generating discussion with and by voters. Spontaneous political discourse with voters is very risky, so it is avoided by most candidates. And, why should candidates put themselves at risk when there is little evidence that most voters care enough to even show up at major political events? Our "ordinary" citizens have become campaign spectators, albeit increasingly hostile spectators. And, think how most public speakers react knowing they are going to face an openly hostile, ill informed audience. Many try to avoid the situation.

Jamieson recalled comments by a Reagan campaign staffer who used surveys and focus groups to determine which issues engaged the American voters. Then the Reagan campaign avoided bringing up those issues.

Taking a stand on a controversial issues was, according to the consultant, "political suicide." Commonplace "themes" were designed to be ambiguous enough to allow almost everyone to interpret them in a non-offensive way. My rhetorical training taught me that intentional ambiguity was a fallacy, a flawed use of language to hide a weak argument. American campaign rhetoric has ceased to be argument or "logos" centered; it has adapted to a one-way televised, visual format; and it discourages or avoids settings which nurture critical public discussion.

Which brings me to the question many of you are probably asking—what can we do to improve rhetorical literacy and campaign civility in this nation? We begin by digging deeply into the greatest source of power in our democracy—over 196 million eligible voters. An American electorate with solid rhetorical skills—public speaking, critical listening, solid argumentation, and writing—that is what is essential for bridging fractures within our democracy. I believe the most important lesson we should learn from the ancient Greek democratic example, is that solutions to societal problems must directly involve the citizenry as advocates, speakers, writers and leaders.

Rather than commit the fallacy of ambiguity, I recommend a very pragmatic action that has the potential to transform thousands of people into active citizens, to enable active citizens to refine their rhetorical skills; to improve campaign civility by holding political officials accountable for what they say; and to make political campaigns more enjoyable. Our goal: each active citizen will bring one more marginal or inactive American into the fold before the next election. "Out of many, we become one...one by one."

THE DINNER TABLE REVOLUTION, D-T-R for short. Think about the kind of conversation that occurs at a dinner table when the background noise is turned off and a group of people gets together. Dinner table conversation usually does not result in angry shouting; people talk about events of the day in civil tones. When political issues become the stuff of our daily dinner table conversations, we will be in the midst of a revolution that could transform the American political system.

Here's my 5-step DTR plan:

(1) First of all, bring political discussions to the dinner table, if not daily then at least three times a week. Don't apologize, just pass the salad and say, "Let's try something different tonight. I read in today's paper that the chair of the county commissioners said we do not need a code of ethical conduct in Luzerne County, there is no need. What do you think?" Now, that's a fun topic.

It is true that for some people the introduction of political issues may be disruptive, even startling. But, they will adjust if they want to eat. If you usually dine with family, make sure the kids are present for the political conversations—they will model their level of civic involvement on what they see from you. And, occasionally invite a few guests. Guests bring in new opinions and the conversation may chain out in surprising new directions.

Practice ahead of time. We often rehearse what we say when we ask a favor, apologize, or make an excuse. Let's get comfortable with "lead-ins" for D-T-R political conversations. For example, "What's for dinner?" That's a good question and it reminds me. It's almost time for the primary election. So, for the main course I prepared grilled back-boneless chicken. Try it. And, what do you think about the "so-called" tax reform legislation passed by the General Assembly?" You need to decide which policy issues really concern you. What issues affect you the most? If the local school board proposed to raise property taxes to pay for a new school, how will that affect you? What do you know about the quality of the public education children in your district get or how your school board operates? How do you feel about the recent welfare reform that was signed into law? How many individuals will lose government support as a result? What will happen to them? Who will pay? Are your opinions based on facts or stereotypes? Come up with at least 3 substantial political issues that directly affect you, and learn about them.

Next, call your local League of Women Voters or some other credible, nonpartisan source of information about the political process and legislation. You want to make sure every eligible voter at your dinner table is registered, so ask for several voter registration forms. And, ask the League for enough copies of the local Government Directory and Voters' Guide for all of your dinner companions. Put one at each place. Their information gives you the who, what, where, how, and when of getting in touch with local public officials. You will have to come up with the answer to the "Why" question—that's your responsibility.

The table looks great, so get seated and get started. Keep an open mind, and begin polishing your rhetorical skills. Get ready to really listen to the opinions and ideas other family members and friends bring to the discussion. Whenever possible, extend on your arguments and spell out why a particular issue is important. Initially, your companions are definitely going to ask why you are adding political spice to the meal. You need to articulate some good reasons.

(2) The second stage is a more formal variation on the "Dinner Table Revolution." And, it may take some advanced planning. This is something

I tried about 20 years ago when I was on the faculty at Clarion University in northwestern Pennsylvania. It was 1976 and Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter agreed to several presidential debates. On the evening of each debate, eight of us met in someone's home for dinner, then watched and discussed the debate. We deliberately turned off the TV after the debate and did not listen to the commentators' analyses.

We usually invited a fifth couple, people the "host" knew were not as politically involved as we were. Political debate dinner parties can be adapted to pot luck suppers, pizza parties, church or synagogue socials, etc. They can involve two people, or twenty. But, when the debate comes on, the focus shifts from dinner party to political discussion and decision-making.

(3) Third, make direct contact with candidates to make them aware of your interests. Attend a local meet-the-candidates get together in your community. Take some friends with you, and decide ahead of time to be active participants. Each of you should ask questions of the candidates who are there. If nothing else, ask what qualifies each one for the office they are seeking. And, ask them questions about their position on policy issues that matters the most to you. Listen critically. If they evade your question, persist with a follow-up. If they promise reform, ask for particulars such as source of funding. If they say they will cut taxes, ask how they propose basic services will be paid for, and who will be affected by the cuts. Ask what they plan to make their top priority for the year ahead.

We need more, and varied voices at political meetings. I am not advocating uninformed, single issue-based, nasty whining that often characterizes town meetings. I think in the past few years we have seen how quickly well organized fringe groups can dominate an entire party's platform or the nation's political conversation, and drive other people away from a public forum. I am advocating becoming the counterpoint voices to angry, uninformed zealots.

After each meet-the-candidate session compare reactions with your companions. Decide who gave the most direct, nonevasive answers, and who tried to sidestep the questions with ambiguous slogans, jokes, clichés, or other topics they came prepared to discuss. Why did they avoid answering the questions? Even if you disagreed with a candidate's response on an issue, do you think they would make an informed, ethical, effective representative of the electorate?

(4) Many of us here this evening are in positions to enact a fourth means of revolutionizing the American campaign process. If we belong to social, professional, religious and civic organizations, we could host or co-host nonpartisan political informational meetings. Design a format that best

serves the interests of voters. Agree to help negotiate on behalf of voters with the political candidates and the media representatives. Here in Wilkes-Barre, I have had the good fortune of designing formats and moderating dozens of local political debates and media events hosted by the nonpartisan League of Women Voters. We collaborated with local media and colleges in producing "voters service events" for judicial races, congressional debates, state senate and legislative contests, and a very divisive local referendum on whether to use public funding to build an arena-convention center.

Four years ago our Board decided all League of Women Voters-sponsored debates would have two additional partners, one from the area media and one of the local colleges or universities. We began building bridges. We tried live radio talk-shows and found an exciting "new" medium for political debating that reached a constituency that seldom joins in public debate because of being house bound. One radio station extended a legislative call-in debate to over 2 hours when the phone lines were still jammed at the end of the first hour.

And, we held a focus group adjoining a televised debate on a particularly bitter county-wide referendum. The focus group members, who are selected from voter registration rolls, watched the debate on a wide screen TV. From the focus group we learned voters can be very analytical. They all said their opinions changed more because of the discussion within the group than by the candidates' performances—they learned from each other. One reporter who sat in said about the experience, "This is where the key issues were argued, not in the studio. It was democracy in action." Political argument is not dead in the American electorate, but we must carve out safe spaces for it since most Americans are novices in rhetorical practice. The greater the direct voter-to-candidate interaction, the more important the political event will be for voters. And, our democratic process is expanded.

(5) Fifth, once candidates become elected officials, there is another important role for active citizens. It's called accountability. Become a school board monitor and volunteer to be a "stringer" and cover the municipal and county meetings as a reporter for your local paper. Attend legislative breakfast or lunches, write letters, use e-mail to contact your representatives with concerns and questions.

At least once during each election, write a letter to an editor or a guest commentary for a local paper or trade newsletter. Lay out a sound argument with claims, supporting proof, and clear reasoning. Avoid name-calling and false dichotomies—people hear that enough in political campaigns. Elevate the discussion! In your letter, ask questions that call

for responses from local officials and leaders. It's another rhetorical means for extending the political discussion.

Most elected officials will respond. And, they monitor the communication they get from their constituents. Legislators often conclude there is no need to justify a controversial vote because they do not hear from their constituents. They will assume silence means acceptance because that's what they want to believe. It is more likely to mean voters feel there is no point in objecting even though the legislator's vote did not represent their interests.

For years, many Americans felt our nation was best served by delegating major decision-making to those people who were better educated, better informed, and better suited to governing. However, in recent years, these same Americans have watched and listened to their elected officials and scratched their heads and said, "That seems like a stupid idea to me." We have lost more than patches of our hair; many have lost faith in elected officials to act on behalf of "ordinary" citizens.

We can restore civility to political discourse by first becoming rhetorically savvy. Aristotle defined rhetoric as "seeing all available means of persuasion in every given situation." We have so many amazing "means of persuasion" available to us that the Greeks never envisioned. We need to use the electronic media as rhetorical tools to give our citizens clarity of voice in the national political discussions. We need to improve the rhetorical savvy of individual American electors because only when ordinary citizens become critical, thoughtful, informed, articulate, and active participants in the political process can we expect our elected officials to conduct themselves with greater civility. "Out of many, we can become one."

So, beginning with dinner tonight, take an extraordinary act on behalf of "ordinary" citizens and ask, "Where's the beef?" Oh, I'm sorry. Wrong campaign.

Notes

1. E. Weir, "The '96 Vote: Listening to America's Hope and Anger," *The National Voter* (June/July 1996), 4-11.
2. E. Agger, "...but can they read and write?", *Communication World* (October/November 1996), 27-29. See: International Adult Literacy Survey at <http://www.statcan.ca/Documents/English/Media/Rel/IALS>
3. J. Leo, "The answer is 45 cents," *U.S. News & World Report*, (April 21, 1997), 14.
4. R. Stengel, "Bowling Together," *Time* (July 22, 1996), 35-6.
5. G. A. Kennedy (Ed.), *Aristotle On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1991, vii.
6. C. J. Feola, "Quick! Define journalist," *Quill*, (July/August, 1996), 18-19.
7. K. H. Jamieson (1992), *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction and Democracy*, NY: Oxford University Press.

Concerning the Speaker

Dr. Jane Elmes-Crahall is an associate professor of communications at Wilkes University, where she has taught since 1985. She and her husband, Brinley, reside in Larksville.

Jane is a graduate of Bloomsburg University, where she earned a B.A. in Political Science. She attended Ohio University's graduate School of Interpersonal Communication, concentrating in Political and Intercultural Communication. In 1991, she received her Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Communications from the University of Pittsburgh.

Jane began teaching at Wilkes in 1985 after serving as professor, director of forensics, and department chair of the Department of Speech Communication and Theater at Clarion University in western PA from 1974-1985. While at Clarion she coached the university's debate and speech team to over 1,300 intercollegiate awards in five years, including first place national team championships in 1975 and 1976.

At Clarion, she served as the Executive and Artistic Director of the Clarion Spring Festival of the Arts and Vice President of the Faculty Senate. She also received numerous awards for outstanding coaching and teaching, including a Commonwealth Teaching Chair in 1980—the highest award given by the state system of higher education for teaching excellence.

Since joining the Wilkes faculty in 1985, she has chaired numerous faculty committees and just completed her second term as Chair of the Faculty Affairs Council at Wilkes. From 1992-1994 she served as President of the Wilkes Faculty Women's Caucus, and has advised the Wilkes chapter of IABC since 1990.

Jane has authored over thirty convention papers and publications. Her last four publications dealt with political communication and the rhetoric of several nineteenth century women orators, including Deborah Sampson Gannett and Anna E. Dickinson.

She currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Cultural Council of Luzerne County and the Board of the League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania. Most area residents are probably familiar with Dr. Elmes-Crahall's role in local politics. Along with attorney Ruth Hughes and former-County Commission Chair Rose Tucker, she served a tumultuous term on the Luzerne County Board of Elections in 1995. Over the years she has moderated 16 political debates and candidates meetings sponsored by the local League of Women Voters.

In August, 1996, Jane was a featured speaker at New York state's prestigious Chautauqua Institution's Lecture Platform. Her lecture received a standing ovation from the Amphitheater crowd of over 2,500. Dr. Elmes-Crahall's lecture was part of Chautauqua's arts and humanities week, focusing on "The Value of the Spoken Word," and was the basis for this evening's lecture.

Concerning the Lecture

The premise of the Final Word Lecture is that the lecturer has only six months to live and would like to sum up a career of teaching and scholarship for colleagues, students, and friends. While the selected professor is, in fact, healthy, the hypothesized death adds urgency and focus to the lecture. The idea is borrowed from the University of Michigan's "Last Lecture."

The Final Word Lecture is given on the evening of Wilkes University's Faculty Recognition Day, at which faculty are lauded for their achievements as teachers and scholars. A number of awards, including the Carpenter Award for teaching, are announced at this annual event.

The Final Word lecturer is chosen by a committee of Wilkes professors and receives a \$1,000 award through the generosity of an anonymous donor. At a subsequent time, and at the donor's discretion, the title of the award and lecture series will be changed to include the donor's name.

Previous winners were:

- 1993 James L. Merryman
Reinventing Humanity for Survival in the Twenty-first Century:
Salvaging Our Best through Prehistory and Multiculturalism
- 1994 Dennis P. Hupchick
Nation or *Miller*? Contrasting Western European and Islamic
Political Cultures in the Balkans
- 1995 Donald R. Brand
Multiculturalism Revisited

