

# Rhetorical Democracy

## Discursive Practices of Civic Engagement

*Selected Papers From the 2002 Conference  
of the Rhetoric Society of America*

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Bakunin, Hitler, Tojo, and Satan. September 11, 2001 was equated with December 7, 1941. Terrorism became part of a larger allegory—a tale of good versus evil, order against chaos, as the characters wrestled at the edge of the abyss at the end of the world.

Terrorist rhetorics feed into the rhetorics of democracy, as we and other democratic societies engage in a great debate, asking what we should do now. One body of opinion suggests that World War III is upon us. According to this narrative, Western civilization itself is under attack. It is faced with radical evil and needs to use whatever force is required to eradicate it. The many people who die—innocent as well as guilty, civilians as well as soldiers—are the necessary cost of maintaining American freedom and Western civilization. The United States, to recall the words of earlier times, will pay any price, bear any burden, to make the world safe for democracy.

The story is clear, but the path in the real world is uncertain. As U.S. military forces deploy for action across the globe, critics wonder if vast military actions are likely to achieve their aims. Can all of the guilty be so easily located in the distant mountains and deserts of the world? Is bombing completely innocent civilians consistent with our values? Do not these people also have individual biographies, collective metaphors and allegories? Will we encourage our allies or repel them? Will we persuade the billions of people in other cultures that they want to be our partners? Do we wish to follow policies that risk escalating the already terrible losses toward the very much higher casualty levels of World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam? Although one could ask the same questions of those who undertook the attacks, we can, for the moment, only try to answer them for ourselves.

There are other stories, other questions. How will our actions produce a world in which terrorism is less likely to grow, a terrorist antiworld? We still focus narrowly on our immediate response to the terrorist attack. How do we remain true to ourselves and our long-term vision for our own open society? How do we work to create a more democratic, just, and peaceful future for ourselves and for all the other people on this planet? Do we do this alone or in a discourse with our democratic allies? Do we widen the violence against our enemies or restrict it?

The standard story of international relations suggests that world politics is a struggle for power in an amoral field of forces. A new postrealist understanding tells a more rhetorical story, seeing international relations as part of a global interpretive struggle for meaning. It is not yet clear how terrorist rhetorics and rhetorics of democracies play through each other. It is, however, obvious that the rhetorics of terrorism and democracy are major parts of emerging twenty-first century worlds of meaning.

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### The Triumph of Consolatory Ritual Over Deliberation Since 9/11

Dana L. Cloud  
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In the 1990s I wrote about the character of American public life during the Persian Gulf War:

The American nation was figured as a unitary body—the body anti-politic—in need of comfort and reassurance. The framing of responses to the war in terms of emotional support represented a therapeutic displacement of political energy, effectively cordoning off and muting the voices of opposition to the war, thereby protecting the fragile social space from the anger of protesters. (*Control* 86)

If I was worried then, I am even more so now in the context of American foreign policy and the crisis of public deliberation since 9/11.

In this chapter, I only sketch the barest outlines of that crisis, its causes, and its consequences. Most of all, I want to exhort rhetoricians to adopt a more public role in enabling critical deliberation of foreign policy and war. Rhetoricians have long been aware of the power of epideictic discourse—the rhetoric of consolation, identification, and social unity around shared values. Recently, Gerard Hauser has explored the didactic function of epideictic in laying the ground for political action. Hauser argues against critical scholars who bemoan the inherently conservative tendencies in ceremonial discourse. Instead, he notes epideictic's democratic potential: Discourses of praise and blame instruct publics in moral rectitude and establish common ground for action; and sometimes epideictic can be a vehicle for controversy and insight.

I do not mean to write off emotion, desire, and identification as key components of rhetorical action. But unlike Hauser, I tend to regard epideictic discourse, as least as it happens in late capitalist society, as inimical to or containing of *krisis*, the moment of judgment and action that depends on its cognate, criticism. Especially when collectives are mobilized for war, epideictic warrants a more skeptical approach. Without condemning all epideictic discourse, I would suggest that in such situations, it can be profoundly undemocratic because it rules inappropriate and unwelcome anyone offering questions, criticism, or a plea for rational thought.

At the University of Texas, where I teach, the voices of progressive faculty were smothered in the thick consolatory space of mourning that followed the attacks of September 11. Several days after the attacks, journalism professor Bob Jensen published an op-ed in the *Houston Chronicle*. Jensen argued that if we found the indiscriminate targeting of civilians to be beyond justification on U.S. soil, we should also find it to be so in Afghanistan, where, if history were any guide, U.S. bombs would kill many innocent civilians. The President of the University of Texas, Larry Faulkner, published a scathing response in the *Chronicle*. Faulkner's letter, apparently provoked by a great deal of negative mail regarding Jensen's piece, attacked Jensen as a "disgusting" "undiluted fountain of foolishness" whom no-one takes seriously anyway.

Many of us among the progressive faculty found this public denunciation of a member of Faulkner's own faculty to be quite chilling (Cloud, "Jensen vs. UT"). Faulkner's letter was an emotional diatribe that did not respond meaningfully to the arguments and evidence that Jensen's writing presented. Rather, Faulkner cast Jensen out of the university community, designating his own employee as outside the fold. Interestingly, other faculty and alumni shared Faulkner's view on the basis of defining community in emotional and epideictic terms after September 11. The Chair of the Faculty Council, for example, told me that he thought Jensen was right to raise questions, but he should have waited a respectable number of days or weeks before violating the bubble of mourning. It was unclear in his remarks how long one should wait, as a nation prepares for and executes a war, to raise questions of life and death.

Today, it is impossible to watch television, go to a movie, drive down the street, or listen to politicians talk without being sucked into the imagined unity of American nationalism. Recently, I purchased postage stamps at my credit union. The teller gave me a sheet of American flag stamps, each of which bore the motto "UNITED WE STAND." Politely, I asked her whether there were any other choices for stamps. In a huff, she said no. When I began to inquire about something else, she directed me to a different window for assistance. Perhaps we ought to explore the postage stamp as epideictic discourse.

At my daughter's school musical, we were invited to sing along with the finale number, "God Bless America," which invokes not only national unity but a theistic one as well. Risking my daughter's playdates and any future I might have on the PTA, I stood, silent and uncomfortable as everyone around me belted out their sense of belonging. Images of the American flag accompany appeals to grief and fear from the West Wing (both real and fictive) to Spiderman. Despite a growing and vocal antiwar movement (most visible in Washington, D.C. on April 20, 2002 and February 15, 2003), there is not much cultural space for critical thinking or dissent about the war on terrorism. Meanwhile, the United States is gearing up for another war on Iraq, when the last one (and the subsequent sanctions) have left more than 2 million civilians dead and the entire nation bombed to rubble (Pollack). Certainly, epideictic discourse will play a role in mobilizing publics in support of this new war, too.

However, it is not the genre of epideictic that is to blame for uncritical nationalism. The impulse to national unity is a product, in part, of the tight-fisted

corporate control over the media. Ninety percent of United States media outlets are owned and controlled by just four corporate media conglomerates. Media scholar Robert McChesney writes, "The corporate media system, in conjunction with the broader trappings of a modern capitalist society, necessarily generate a depoliticized society, one where the vast majority of people logically put little time or interest into social or political affairs" (xxxi).

The influence of corporate media in cultivating depoliticized citizens is backed up, as Gramsci suggested long ago, by the power of the state in its crackdown on civil liberties at home and abroad. "You are with us or you are with the terrorists," George W. Bush said, effectively criminalizing dissent and questioning. The war on terrorism has required not only media propaganda but massive witchhunts, secret detentions, roundups of thousands of Arab and Arab American immigrants and citizens; military tribunals, proposals for legalized torture, retinal ID cards, and internal passports; harassment and discipline of students, professors, and media reporters who speak out; a new racial profiling that has led to attacks and deaths; delay in visa processing for thousands of innocent immigrants; and many other repressive acts. The USA Patriot Act allows sweeping antidemocratic actions, including searches of citizens and noncitizens without probable cause, detention of immigrants without a hearing, e-mail and Internet spying, and tremendous expansion of government powers to spy on and prosecute political protesters, dissenters, and organizations (Cohn 19-20).

Thus, the American culture of consolation—antagonistic to controversy, history, and evidence-based reasoning—is cultivated even more strongly during wartime. I do not mean to blame ordinary people themselves, whose grief, shock, and horror on and since September 11 are real and honorable. Of course, some consolation is appropriate under such circumstances. However, I am targeting for critique the cultivation in politics, the news media, and popular culture of an addiction to epideictic. Identification feels good, whereas arguing with people in mourning while feeling devastated oneself does not. When the members of Congress sang "God Bless America" on the Capitol steps, it sent a clear message to the American public: Put aside your partisan disputes. Feel better. We're going to war!

In this context, rhetoricians need to prompt the asking of some key questions for deliberation: *What are the actual U.S. motives and goals in this war?* There is some evidence that the United States had been pressuring the Taliban in Afghanistan long before September 11 to cooperate with plans for a new oil pipeline from the Caspian Sea through the country. The world, its people, and its resources are fair game for transnational corporations. But these corporations still have national home bases to which their profits inexorably flow. When movements or rival states threaten a nation-state's transnational corporations' or geopolitical interests, that nation-state may respond with domestic policing or foreign military intervention. War is the face of globalization that reveals it to be little different than the imperialisms of any other capitalist period. But now, just as during the Persian Gulf War, the U.S. public is not encouraged to think beyond the stated motives of vengeance and elimination of terrorism.

What are the actual and likely consequences for ordinary people of this war? It is not likely that the war on terrorism will end terrorism. More likely, it will exacerbate the anger and despair of Arabs and others in countries affected by the austerity required of ordinary people by globalizers, the rain of bombs, the cruelty of sanctions, and the support of the United States in the Middle East for something that should be specified for what it is: colonialism and apartheid. In the process of achieving its economic and geopolitical aims, the United States has already caused the deaths of thousands of innocents, including as many as 3,800 people in Afghanistan, according to University of New Hampshire economics professor Marc Herold. As the London *Guardian* reported:

Based on corroborated reports from aid agencies, the UN, eyewitnesses, TV stations, newspapers and news agencies around the world, Herold estimates that at least 3,767 civilians were killed by US bombs between October 7 and December 10. That is an average of 62 innocent deaths a day—and an even higher figure than the 3,234 now thought to have been killed in New York and Washington on September 11. (Milne 16)

University of Texas professor Jim Fishkin found, in a widely publicized experiment in deliberative polling, that when ordinary people are provided with enough information to deliberate and form well-reasoned opinions, they do so (Wolf). My colleague Jim Aune thinks political economists of the media are naive to believe that ordinary people, provided with more and better information, would automatically be more critical deliberators. I, on the other hand, see some cause for optimism: Rhetoricians have the resources to foster the dissemination of information from multiple points of view in public. In addition, we have the skills of criticism to expose propaganda and consolation as inadequate forms of discourse in a democracy. For this work, we need the tools of modernist ideology critique, including depth hermeneutics. *Depth hermeneutics* refers to the idea that there are some knowable realities underneath ideological discourses and that critics ought to be in the business of digging through the dirt to find them. Alternatively, given that we cannot know those hidden realities without understanding them in systems of signification either, the idea of depth hermeneutics is to expose and analyze contradictions in the answers we can find to the important questions. Especially during a war, hegemonic rhetorics exhibit the characteristics of propaganda, an old-fashioned but useful word describing opposition-silencing, agenda-obscuring texts.

We also need a guiding normative ideal of critical rationality if we are to challenge the nation's consolation addiction. Poststructuralist discourse theory takes what is in the true—in other words, what is accepted as true—as what must be accepted as true in a relativized world. On this view there are no truths “behind” the discourses that constitute truth in themselves. Thus, there can be no finding out about Conoco's interest, backed by the U.S. government, in an oil pipeline route through Afghanistan from the Caspian Sea. There is no point in discovering that the United States was planning an intervention in Afghanistan months before September 11, 2001. We cannot count the bodies of dead people if they are less than human in the reigning imaginary. We cannot name the war, constructed as a war for freedom, as a series of futile atrocities in the interests of oil

companies. If Hussein and bin Laden are the dictators *du jour*, it is pointless to point out that the Taliban and Saddam Hussein were once friends and beneficiaries of the United States, or that there are countless other equally oppressive dictators who have been installed and buttressed by U.S. forces. Indeed, in a widely discussed article, conservative Sebastian Mallaby suggests that the U.S. need for a stable international scene and the failure of aid and development programs such as those overseen by the IMF and World Bank warrant a new imperialism in which the United States should impose its aims by force in every troubled nation. Mallaby argues that the United States might benefit by engaging in neo-colonial nation building.

Poststructuralist theorists, like wartime propagandists in a therapeutic culture, substitute identification for reasoning, image events for dialogue, and dissemination for deliberation as the key terms to describe how persuasion happens in late capitalism, replicating the dominance of epideictic over deliberation in American public life (DeLuca and Peeples; Greene). These theorists suggest that we resign ourselves to charting a hypermediated and irrational reality that is not, in any deep sense of the word, democratic. This work may accurately describe existing communicative practices in late capitalism. Yet, without a normative ideal of deliberation we cannot have a democracy. Deliberation includes the capacity to seek out and entertain multiple positions on a given event, the capacity to historicize events, the capacity to weigh competing evidence and reasoning and discard the less credible, the capacity to probe the motivation of discourses and adhere to those with the fewest privately motivated sponsors, and the capacity to take action based on this deliberative process. When pieces of what is “in the true” contradict one another, we must enable students and other citizens to decide who's most probably lying.

We can and must teach these skills to our students. Beyond that task, we have to find venues and media to encourage critical thinking among publics at large. We must disrupt the equations of war with justice and dissent with terror. We need to pay attention to instances in which exhortations to strong identification make for an ever-weaker democracy-cum-pep rally in which we have little relevance or influence. In a society without a deliberative public, we may as well all become therapists.

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## Citizen Rhetorics After 9/11: Back to Bidness as Usual

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Frank Beer's comment that rhetoricians should stick to studying rhetoric rather than focusing on the issues of other disciplines—journalism, political economies of media, political science, to name a few—is likely well intentioned. It is also strangely flattering: Rhetoricians are not frequently encouraged to do more of whatever it is we do, if "rhetoric" as a "discipline" is even conceivable to whomever—dean, department head, colleague, neighbor, editor, donor—is doing the encouraging... or the disciplining. Still, Professor Beer offers yet another means of contextualizing my comments on this panel, wherein I am charged with saying something about Citizen Rhetorics in general and, perhaps more specifically, about Radio Rhetorics or citizen discourses on the radio in particular in the wake of "the events of September 11."

I'll say by way of departure, then, that rhetoric is often most powerful when it is juxtaposed with other disciplines and practices. In addition to the commonplace—or, arguably, counterfactual-yet-normative ideal—of something called "public deliberation," rhetoricians need to address political economies of media when they make claims about "encouraging citizens to participate in democratic practices." Too often, even when citizens might want to "engage"—when they have something they want individually or jointly to say—they do not have the means of getting what they want to say or share or ask or wonder or do before the eyes or ears (i.e., into the attention economies) of others. So part of my message here is that the nefarious consequences for public discourse of the Communication Act of 1996 (see McChesney and others for what is now a standard critique) further complicate any vehement but perhaps facile celebration of or call for increasing citizen voices after 9/11. This leaves many students and other citizens, in the language of Sharan Daniel, "all dressed up with nowhere to go"—if they have had the experience or education to make them want to engage in communities of action. Indeed, without the very combination of rhetoric with other