War Rhetoric, Defensible and Indefensible

Wayne C. Booth

What shall we do with powers, which we are so rapidly developing, and what will happen to us if we cannot learn to guide them in time?

—I.A. Richards

In the counsels of government we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

It’s not negotiable, and I don’t want to debate it.

—George W. Bush (in response to a question about the U.S’s Iraq policy)

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India . . . [and] the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.

—George Orwell

When originally drafting this essay, I first listed the topics I would try to cover:

1. Is war itself the inescapable destruction of all defensible rhetoric?
2. Does effective war rhetoric always depend, at least in part, on decep-
tion: what I like to call rhetrickery? (I'll refer to "militaristic rhetoric," good or bad, and "protest rhetoric," good or bad.)

3. How do we deal with the fact that war itself is an extension of rhetorical resources: drop an atomic bomb, or bomb some trains in Spain, or bomb a mosque in Falluja, Iraq, and the act conveys a rhetorical message to your enemy, changing their minds for better or worse?

4. How can protest rhetoric be conducted effectively during wars that are actually indefensible?

5. What role do the media play in shaping rhetorical debate about war?

6. What has been the effect on rhetoric of the media revolution, with the audience of any speech no longer simply local?

7. How have we Americans been educated and miseducated, rhetorically, about the glories of war? Why do so many of us now see all war as somehow glorious?

8. What, if anything, can be done about the fact that at this moment millions of kids all over the world, on all sides of all conflicts, are being taught that killing the enemy is the most virtuous of all acts?

9. How should academics deal with war rhetoric? How can we educate not just our students but our administrators and our enemies in how to distinguish good, defensible war rhetoric from cheap bombast, propaganda, bullshitting, rhetrickery?

Every item on that list still invites me now, along with others that occurred to me later. But each of the topics could require far more than my allotted twenty pages. Protest rhetoric, for example, deserves a full book.

War rhetoric is obviously a major subcategory of political rhetoric in general, which is in turn a subbranch of the vast domain of rhetoric and rhetorical studies in every area of life. Many of us rhetoricians these days, in contrast to most non-rhetoricians who prefer to equate rhetoric with rhetrickery, define rhetoric as referring to every conceivable resource, good or bad, for producing any effect on others. Its territory is thus, as Aristotle claimed, undefinable, since it includes almost every corner of our lives. Rhetoric is employed at every moment when one human being
Wayne C. Booth

intends to produce, through the use of signs or symbols, some effect on another—by words, or facial expressions, or gestures, or any symbolic skill of any kind.

- Are you not seeking rhetorical effect when you either smile or scowl or wink or give the finger when chatting with someone? As Longaville puts the claim about rhetorical power of physical gesture in *Love's Labours Lost,*

  Did not the heavenly rhetoric of thine eye,
  'Gainst whom the world cannot hold argument,
  Persuade my heart to this false perjury?

- Is not an artist aiming at rhetorical effect when she asks herself, “Will this stroke make the painting seem a better one, to the viewer?” (The point is more obvious when the stroke is deliberately shocking, as in the use of actual elephant dung in a painting.)

- Wasn’t Shelley justified in celebrating poets as the unacknowledged legislators of mankind—poems being among our strongest resources for changing others?

- Are not those who study the “rhetoric of music” justified? Nothing produces more effect on others than a well-composed and performed song or symphony.

- Are not most war initiatives intended to send a message, seen by the attackers as “saying” either “surrender or you are doomed,” or “you can see that we are a supreme power and that to oppose us will be fatal”?

In a recent short book, I try to cover, quite hopelessly, that entire territory, with only parts of one of the eight chapters dealing with our subject here, the rhetoric of war. As I’ve thought about what to say here, I’ve rebuked myself for not making the rhetoric of war much more prominent in that book, now out of my reach. Why the rebuke? Because the rhetoric of war provides the clearest examples of influential political rhetoric—the clearest examples of how rhetoric makes (and destroys) our realities. As a branch of what Aristotle labeled “deliberative rhetoric,” war rhetoric transforms our futures. Changing the present in order to change the future is everyone’s political goal. Everybody knows that political argument changes our world day by day, often causing disasters and only sometimes preventing them. And war rhetoric is by far the most influential form of it.1
Whenever we try to discuss seriously the floods of war rhetoric that drown us daily, we face three major problems:

• the banality of both the subject itself and of the most dramatic examples of the good and bad kinds. “You deplore our floods of war rhetrickery? What’s new about that?” “You place Churchill’s ‘blood, sweat, and tears’ speech on the good side? Surprise!” “You consider it scandalous when President Bush either lies or is duped by claims about weapons of mass destruction? What a revelation!” “You are sure that Saddam Hussein was actually lying day in, day out? Just plain boring!”

• more troublesome, the inescapable bias of any critic who pronounces any piece of war rhetoric as good or bad, “defensible” or “indefensible.” No critic of rhetoric can escape bias. Am I among those who are appalled by most of President Bush’s self-serving policies and self-touting speeches? Obviously, I am. So why should any reader trust my claims that too much of Bush’s rhetoric is rhetrickery?

• the fantastic complexity of problems, motives, and audiences faced by every sincere political rhetor. Even the most honest among them must do some accommodation to the special interests and emotional commitments of particular audiences—adapting arguments and emotional appeals to the special interests of this or that group.

Because I have been revising this paper since 2003, and because I was personally appalled when the U.S. invasion of Iraq was first threatened and then carried out (with consequences that, as I write in April 1 of 2004, seem to confirm my predictions), many of my examples will seem to some readers by now—whenever “now” is—not just outdated but obviously biased. We can be sure, though, that the cheating and distorting I report, by both leaders and protesters, will go on occurring in all future wars and war threats. The need for hard thought about how to distinguish defensible war rhetoric from rhetrickery will never go away.

We could spend hours on questions #5 and #6: how our media reinforce political rhetrickery, especially in wartime. Passionate “proofs” for this or that false belief, proofs both verbal and visual, can be found in every morning paper, in every weekly magazine, on every news channel—to say nothing of conversations over dinner. Deceptive war rhetoric is found even in ostensibly objective political science journals. A few of the better journals, like The Boston Review, aim for an airing of all sides
in a particular quarrel, but even in these one finds the effects of bias in the editing. Thus, we need deeper rhetorical education, not just about the media but about all public utterances and images.

In dealing with that, we should face question #7 on my list: how are we educated and miseducated, from infancy on, in our responses to war rhetoric? Why have we become a nation so vulnerable to war rhetoric, even when, as in conquering the Philippines or pursuing President Kennedy’s Bay of Pigs Cuban goof, the cause is highly questionable? Why are so many Americans still today defending our prolonged massacres and self-sacrifices in Vietnam? Why are so many of us indifferent to fact or hard thought, so long as the plea is made to “kill those enemies, no matter what”? It’s as if we are ready to embrace any cause that will land us in the noble task of killing off the labeled enemy. How is it that so many of us would embrace President Bush’s saying, not long ago, as he faced the rise in guerilla attacks: “Bring ‘em on”?—as if to say, “the more killings, the better our cause?”

Even today (April 2004), with many defenders of our attack backing down, most public rhetoric assumes, as President Bush’s press conference performance stressed (April 13, 2004), that war is noble. Negotiation, diplomacy, even deterrence, are not. Indeed, anti-war rhetoric has been for the majority, until recently, by definition unpatriotic: a surrender to weak nations like France and Germany and Russia. Why that mass gullibility? My answers are shaky, but I hope challenging.

The first one is too obvious to spend much time on: all of us Americans have been created and shaped by wars. Whether we would be better or worse if we hadn’t fought our many wars, there’s no question but that we’d all be radically different. Many of us would not even have been born if, say, the Colonies had lost the revolutionary war, or if the South had won the Civil War and formed another nation, or if we’d lost the Spanish American war. We would all be radically different if we hadn’t fought the Nazis. And millions of now nonexistent Americans would have been conceived by those men not killed in those wars. We are what we were made to be by those wars, and by our mutual preaching about their glories. For those who approve of our recent preemptive war, all of that militaristic rhetoric training from the past will seem defensible, even religiously devout. But for those who oppose it, believing that a majority of Americans, including the Congress, were sucked in by rhetrickery, much of that implicit training seems disastrous.

A second, somewhat less obvious explanation, related closely to the first, is the way in which we have not just been literally made and remade
by war but have all been subjected, from infancy on, to colorful, thrilling militaristic rhetoric. Even those few of us raised by pacifist parents have been flooded not just with pro-war speeches but with pro-war movies, and with poems and songs recited or sung in school—a majority of them dramatizing the glories of pious warfare, not the horrors of it.

What was I thinking, for example, when, as a Boy Scout in the mid-1930s I would worship our flag—actually kneeling before it and singing "The Star-Spangled Banner"? Well, I was thinking thoughts like this:

Their [the enemies' and protesters'] blood has wash'd out their foul footstep's pollution. . . .
Blest with vict'ry and peace may the heav'n-rescued land
Praise the power that hath made and preserv'd us a nation!
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto, "In God is our Trust,"
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

What were we being educated to believe, as we sang that song? Obviously that to be brave in fighting war is always in the service of God, "that power that hath made and preserved us a nation." It was our warfare that had won our independence, and it is our ability to conquer, when "our cause it is just" that underlined our long history of "noble," brave, triumph in the name of God.

I could quote scores of other songs that taught us, often thrillingly, that to go to war is the way to go. In the Spanish-American war, everyone was taught: "Boys, rub your steels and pick your flints. To Arms—to Arms—to Arms! His [that is, Santa Anna's] martial law we will put down.

. . . Huzza—huzza—huzza!" Our songs in the Civil war taught Northerners that "marching through Georgia," killing Southerners, was noble, and taught Southerners that fighting back, singing "Dixie," was perhaps even nobler. Not just the Marines but those who sang their songs were taught, with "Anchors Aweigh," to "Rollout the TNT, Sail on to victory, and sink their bones to Davy Jones"—and by "the Halls of Montezuma" that. . . . but I must now move on, resisting equally appalling (or thrilling—take your choice) quotations from England's "Rule Britannia," France's "La Marseillaise," and—worst of all—"Deutschland uber Alles.

Some of the militaristic rhetoric that too many of us have embraced, consciously or unconsciously, is much more skillful even than those national anthems. The most striking examples—though perhaps less
influential—are provided by politicians' speeches, real or invented by dramatists and movie makers. Caesar's "Veni, vidi, vici"—I came, I saw, I conquered—has survived internationally as one of the cleverest bits of militaristic rhetoric of all time. Shakespeare's inventions of speeches by war leaders are almost all brilliant. Can we really question the excellence of Henry V's way of winning his audience into noble, pious battle?

But this lies all within the will of God,
To whom I do appeal, and in whose name
Tell you the Dauphin I am coming on
To venge me as I may, and to put forth
My Rightful hand in a well-hallowed cause.
(I, ii. 289–93)

(Shakespeare's play does do some questioning of Henry V's noble cause, and critics are divided about whether from the beginning he his questioning it.)

Such speeches are thrilling—to the right local audience: my country, right or wrong. And they were thrilling to me when first read—before I became a critic of war rhetoric. Just as Hitler's wild speeches thrilled millions of Germans, war speeches by Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill thrilled me, and President George W. Bush's and Prime Minister Tony Blair's celebration of the Iraq attack apparently thrilled a majority of Americans (while alienating most of the rest of the world). The very thought of patriotic war violence somehow ignites passionate, heart-pounding agreement, often including the belief that God is Himself speaking.

We could lament many other self-righteous rhetorical demonstrations that our cause is always the just cause—for example, our Oath of Allegiance. 4 (More than a full essay could be spent on the anti-war songs and movies and poems that some of our wars, especially Vietnam, have produced.)

What I've said so far may make me sound like a total pacifist, which I am not. My high school history teacher, an embittered veteran of World War I, did question my patriotic singing of war songs and converted me to pacifism by demonstrating that full war was a disastrous result of successful but misleading rhetoric, on both sides. But my total pacifism was soon destroyed by the Nazi threat; we had no real choice but to fight Hitler and the Japanese. As a college student, I wrote
articles and did radio shows laden with passionate pleas (often, when viewed now, mere rhetrickery) for us to enter the battle against Hitler. (Am I now 100% certain that my judgment was right? No: only 99.9%. Who could ever predict what would have happened if we had let Hitler win?)

So, obviously, I cannot claim that all of that militaristic rhetoric unjustified. Would I attack the patriotic songs we sang in World War II? How could I?

The Good and the Bad of It

Reserving for later the problem of “accommodation-to-audience,” skills all rhetors must practice (what some might simply label “technique,” the choice of this metaphor or cliché or synonym rather than that one), what are the differences between justifiable war rhetoric and the stuff we should publicly condemn—or at least personally resist? What standard do we use in judging rhetorical quality?

The most obvious standard we all apply is that of success. If a speaker wins strong support for a cause that we embrace, we celebrate the rhetoric, even if we spot technical flaws. But if the speaker drives the audience away, we tend to proclaim the speech or article or TV image a failure, regardless of the skill exhibited. For many rhetoricians throughout history, this has been the sole, comfortable criterion, especially in time of war. Though rhetoric that leads to successful diplomacy rather than war is frequently praised—at least when the enemy is not a total threat—most efforts are judged according to their success in uniting those potentially on one side or the other. A leader seeking support for defense feels no impulse to demonstrate that he or she has really listened to the enemy and is trying to get the enemy to listen—except of course to hear the threat and retreat. Standards of success are thus localized: did the speech win this audience, on this occasion?

Judged by the success standard, Edmund Burke’s amazing effort to achieve conciliation, in two major speeches in 1774 and 1775, was poor rhetoric. But judged by a second standard—did he really make a powerful case that every listener should have been swayed by?—they prove when read now to be absolutely amazing. Almost nobody paid any real attention to his powerful arguments against British policies in two wonderful speeches questioning the taxes on Americans and recommending conciliation. To me they are among the most admirable speeches of all time. Burke could be fairly sure not only that his rhetoric would fail, which it did, but also that he would suffer some punishment for being unpatriotic.
But he valued arguing for the right cause over mere winning. And he did all that anyone could at that time do to accommodate to his audience: the king and parliament. They chose not to listen.

Some war orations can be judged as amazingly skillful because successful, as are most of Shakespeare’s inventions of speeches by war leaders. Can we really question the excellence of Henry V’s skill in winning his audience, into battle?

The very thought of patriotic war violence somehow ignites passionate agreement, often including the belief that God is Himself speaking. Such rhetoric works—on those who are ready to receive it and thus already inclined to “join up.” Shakespeare knew that Henry V’s audience was already on the king’s side. He could portray the king as knowing that the enemy would probably never hear his words; he had no need to think about how those words might inflame his enemies or even attract larger numbers to the enemy’s cause.

Two Modern Revolutions

Too many political leaders these days seem unaware that rhetorical corners like Henry V’s are by now extremely rare. They orate as if unaware of two major “revolutions” that have complicated every moment of war rhetoric. Everyone must be at least dimly aware of these two transformations. Why they are so frequently ignored is a mystery.

1. The Loss of Localized Audience

The media have by now produced an inescapable expansion and multiplicity of audiences. What a rhetor says to Congress or Parliament will be heard and judged or misjudged not just by those present, or by those in other countries—in effect, by the global village. The words and images will be heard and viewed all over the world, on TV and radio and even on newspaper front pages. What would Shakespeare have had Henry V say if he were writing today, knowing that not only the French but potential friends or enemies in other nations would hear his words?

A major result is that obvious accommodation to specific audiences now becomes much more politically dangerous than it used to be. Any speaker’s enemies can easily check on what was said last week to a different audience, and then declare the speaker dishonest. Democrats have been catching President Bush in these conflicts again and again, and now Republicans are attacking presidential candidate Senator John Kerry for embracing one position this week to this specific audience, and then saying something rather different next week to that specific audience.
Thus accommodation to any specific audience, even one as large as "patriotic American" or "anti-Republican" is now easily exposed.

A recently released documentary, Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the Iraq War, traces with actual TV footage how President Bush "accommodated" his claims about weapons of mass destruction, as his American audience became more and more aware of the shakiness of the evidence for them. At first he was "absolutely certain" that Hussein had nuclear weapons of mass destruction, ready to be released any day now. But by June of 2003 his phrase was "programs of mass destruction." And by the time of his State of the Union address in 2004, the phrasing was "weapons of mass destruction-related program activities." As the audience's awareness of the problem expanded, the rhetoric was transformed, as it was when people began to question his embrace of the "Mission Accomplished" slogan after the first Iraq victory: I didn't do it; it was the Navy (Greenwald).

2. Delocalization of War Itself

As a result of the development of weapons of mass destruction, and thus the threat of mutual annihilation, war is no longer merely local, promising a clear victory to one "side" or the other. When Henry V attacked France, no other nations bothered much about it. When he spoke about the plan of attack, no leader in Asia or the Near East would have responded, even if they could have heard his speeches; none of his weapons threatened them. "The world" went its own manifold ways; soldiers fought only other soldiers, with no available planes or rockets to spread the attacks on to civilians, and no possibility to wreak havoc by wrapping a bomb around one's waist.

When President Bush declared war on an "axis of evil"—Iraq, Iran, and North Korea—and then led a preemptive war on Iraq, his words and the technologically advanced attack were performed as if old-style war still were possible. But his words were overheard—though probably not really listened to—by the whole world. Considered militarily, this revolution in what "war" means has been acknowledged in almost everything that leaders like Bush and Blair have said: the "war" on terrorism is a worldwide war, and weapons of mass destruction are a rising threat everywhere. Considered rhetorically, however, their speeches have still been mainly aimed locally, at those already fired up in support of a war. President Bush has occasionally attempted to avert full hatred of all Muslims, as if working to achieve worldwide peace and full democracy everywhere. But most of his words referring to those "out
there," the opponents and potential opponents, have been words of threat or hate, employing the military revolution as if the media revolution had not occurred.

Whatever the conscious goal inspiring the rhetoric might have been, the effect was generally to increase rather than diminish the number of enemies. When asked about the rise in protest bombings in Iraq, his response was "Bring 'em on."

It is not that the importance of winning friends has always been ignored. When Secretary of State Colin Powell appointed Charlotte Beers as the State Department's Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy, the proclaimed goal was to convince the Arab world that we were not what they thought we were: the enemy of Allah and all Arabs. She was to redefine "who America is, not only for ourselves under this kind of attack [September 11], but also for the outside world." Huge sums were spent trying to capture a sympathetic Arab audience by getting us "branded" as standing for real freedom. But the effort had no success: "Attempts to market the United States as 'brand freedom' came into conflict with a U.S. tendency to talk rather than listen" (Rampton and Stauber 12-13).

Thus, the two revolutions—they could be dubbed awkwardly as "medial globalization" and "globalization of weaponry"—have transformed the narrow audience of classical wartalk into a multiplicity of audiences. By now, some audiences who are not listened to by the speaker will respond as did leaders in North Korea back in April 2002 after President Bush declared them part of the "axis of evil" and thus implied that they must be destroyed. Under the headline "Embracing the Rhetoric of Armageddon," one newspaper reported leaders in North Korea as responding: "We will resolutely wipe out the aggressors and reduce them to a forlorn wandering spirit. [We will] turn the stronghold of the enemy into a sea of fire" and "take 1000-fold revenge" (1). We have recently been informed about how teachers in North Korea are being required by the government to train all pupils to hate America. Addressing that local audience, the leaders do not seem aware that such teaching may, in the long run, lead to the destruction not just of America but of all their children.

Such Pro-War-Against-America sentiment is spreading throughout the world, produced by those who have actually been able to hear or view the pro-war speeches of Bush and Blair. They inevitably answer his careless metaphors with open threats, often even more frightening than those on our side. As I don't have to tell you, as the occupation continues, the rhetoric of the Iraqis and other Muslim nations has become increas-
ingly vitriolic against America. Would they be talking and acting as they are if President Bush had thought a bit harder about the wide range and deep convictions of his real global audience? Did he and his advisers ever think about the difference between how Shiites would hear his celebration of imposing democracy and how Sunnis would hear it?

In short, the task of judging war rhetoric, both ethically and technically, has been expanded by the two revolutions to include our having to face not just the effects on any local audience but also the effects on the future of the entire world. If leaders win massive local support, using Henry V's kind of rhetoric, while simultaneously other leaders around the world are using similar glorious localized rhetoric in hateful response, has the rhetoric in any sense truly succeeded? Rhetors on all sides in any conflict of nations can only win if their words and images portray effective thinking about how they will be heard outside the local domain, and how they imply some chance of improving the world's future. Only if they have listened to the international audience, thinking hard about both the local welfare and the welfare of the world, can their words be judged as not only successful but totally justifiable.

When Prime Minister Blair, for example, addressed the U.S. House of Representatives on July 17, 2003, he revealed a splendid ability to employ arguments and flourishes that would appeal to the strongly pro-war majority of Americans—and impress even those of us who oppose his views. He had in effect listened to many Americans, his "local" audience, in advance. Even while opposing his views, I found his talk far superior to anything Bush has said, and must judge it "high quality win-rhetoric—of the narrow kind." But he had apparently failed to think hard about his British audience, most of whom would hate—or so my guess is—his pandering to American power. (He did incorporate several deep criticisms of Bush's unilateral policies, but so subtly that most of the media didn't even mention them the following morning.) Was Blair not concerned about how America's enemies in England would respond to his hyped-up praise of America as England's best friend? Obviously, success with the House of Representatives was his primary goal—and he won, in that narrow sense.9

Similarly, when President Bush was feeling challenged in mid-July 2003 about the evidence for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, his answer was, "There is no doubt in my mind that Saddam Hussein was a threat to the world peace. And there's no doubt in my mind that the United States did the right thing in removing him from power" (emphasis added). In other words, "I don't need to listen to any dissent. You should just listen
Wayne C. Booth

...to me. I will not consider the evidence that may have produced doubt in your mind, since there is no doubt in mine. And I assume that you'll take my own certainty as hard evidence.” When he addressed the U.N. on September 23, 2002, what was heard was all self-confidence about what would hook Americans; but only a fraction of the media made the point that his words “were aimed more at a domestic audience than the world community” (“Bush”).

What the two revolutions require, then, is that we must rethink all of our ideas about what is justified and what is contemptible accommodation to audiences. Every important bit of war rhetoric is intentionally or unintentionally addressed now to a worldwide audience. And our future depends on politicians who can find ways of addressing that larger audience instead of talking only of “crusades” against “evil” adversaries.

In short, we can no longer depend on clever localized rhetoric—whether about wars or about world trade. Our leaders must learn to listen to, or imagine, the arguments of all “sides,” actually considering global welfare as finally determining the welfare of the speaker and the localized audience.

The consequences of failures to listen are so obvious as hardly to deserve listing. By now (who knows when “now” will be by the time this is read?) we are seeing the consequences of strongly localized war rhetoric, whether from leaders, followers, or protesters. They fall into four main kinds:

- Opponents of even the noblest cause can too often find examples of rhettrickery defending that cause, thus “proving” that the “enemy” is contemptible. “If my enemy’s cause is supported by that kind of blind irrationality or immoral accommodation to audience prejudice, what further proof do I need that the cause is both stupid and cruel?” When a protest poster calls President Bush an “asshole” or “evil,” all hawks feel confirmed in their support: “those doves are blind, cruel idiots.” When a leader’s defender condemns all critics as “unpatriotic,” or even labels them as “traitors,” the leader’s critics rightly feel that they have strong evidence that their opposition is justified.10

- Partisans on all sides become unjustifiably skeptical of everything said on the other side. Instead of listening and making critical distinctions, everything said is reduced to deception. For many doves, absolutely nothing said by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld or the President can be trusted. The same is true for most non-Americans. A reporter in London’s Financial Times wrote: “Mr. Rumsfeld is the shock jock of diplomacy, the
Howard Stern of American policy. It is a disgraceful indictment of the Bush administration that this man has become the most identifiable spokesman for the U.S. foreign policy” (qtd. in Allen and Loeb). But that extreme claim is mistaken: even a Rumsfeld should be listened to, distinguishing his sound points from the faked. Meanwhile, in the same way, hawks judge every protest statement as dogmatic, blind anti-patriotism that does not deserve to be listened to. Thus, all chances of dialogue are destroyed.

• The mistrust on both sides gets absurdly exaggerated. Instead of merely suspecting some lying or fudging or mild suppression of evidence, the suspicion is extended to charges of criminality. When President Bush rejected Inspector Blix’s further pursuit of whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, thousands of his opponents, here and abroad, assumed that his motive was simply to be able to plant those weapons secretly and then tell the world.” At last we’ve found the evidence proving that we were right in our preemptive strike.” None of us who mistrust him have any evidence that he would ever go that far to deceive us, but his less-vicious deceptions implanted the stronger (and absurd) suspicion. When he went on month after month, saying things like, “Yes, we have now found the weapons of mass destruction,” and, on May 1, 2003, that “In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed,” while “still having work to do in Iraq,” more and more “listeners” decided that nothing he said could be thoroughly trusted. Many extend the charge to “it’s all deliberate lying,” overlooking the likelihood that he probably believes most of what he says, only later discovering how his dogmatic commitment misled him. So the total suspicion can be misleading and destructive.

We thus all risk falling into mistrust of some statement that is actually both true and important. Writing in spring 2004, how can I predict what our future judgment of all this militaristic rhetoric will be?

• Suspicion about deception has always increased in wartime because wars require increased deception. But this time the effect has been one of the strongest ever, as journalists find their own lives depending on victory and their own professional status depending on reports favorable to the White House. As David Bauder put it, “With the reporters quite literally depending on the military for their lives, there was the real possibility it could cost them their objectivity. One congressman has openly criticized the U.S. administration for not adequately censoring what journalists report from the war. And journalists’ spontaneous self-censorship is magnified. The result has been a grotesque increase in mistrust of all media reports, on all sides.
After the dramatic scene of Saddam Hussein’s statue crashing down, treated by U.S. media as an unquestionable sign of victory, Hussein or his minions sent out a flood of images and claims that his side was still winning—passionately declaring that Bush, the “sick dog,” was talking “garbage” and losing. The lies issued by Hussein’s defender, Mohammed Diab Ahmed, became, understandably, a prominent farcical target for many American journalists convinced of U.S. victory. U.S. spokesmen exaggerated every such seeming triumph and played down every anxiety in ways that all of our enemies—along with all of us protesters—saw as equally absurd. And at every moment the media were profiting from the daily explosion of vitriolic extremes on all sides and Orwellian doublespeak by this or that moderate.

So as the troubles in Iraq mount, rhetoric from the left is full of the word “quagmire,” while those on the right claim that using that term proves lack of patriotism. And now that the administrators have been caught in unquestionably dishonest rhetrickery about evidence for weapons of mass destruction, everyone on all sides is heating up and distorting the talk about it. We doves are feeling that there is no point in trying to listen to an administration that itself does not listen; all we can do is shout. And the pro-war crowd feels certain that whatever we say is stupid or downright evil. That’s what war does to our rhetoric, and the only real alternative to violence is what I call “listening-rhetoric” of various kinds, including downright diplomacy that includes bargaining. We have to choose, when conflict heightens, either to argue or fight. At a given tragic moment, listening-rhetoric disappears, violence takes over, and rhetrickery casts off all thought, on all “sides”—except about how to win.

**Why Some Forms of “Dishonest” Rhetoric are Justified**

What I have said so far underplays the plain fact that leaders on all sides are surely justified in inventing the best possible strokes for defending any cause they consider genuinely noble. In wartime especially, that the cause is just is tacitly “demonstrated” by the “fact” that “our” “noble” lives are being lost to “evil” enemies. And how can anyone say that it is wrong to employ lies—some addressed to the enemy, some to our own side—if those lies will finally save not just the lives of soldiers but of us at home? Lying effectively becomes an honorable weapon of war, rivaling in importance even our military strength. If I can save the world by lying effectively, is not the lie more honorable than truth-telling that leads to massive disaster?
That question leads us to really deep problems in any appraisal of war rhetoric. It is not only that you cannot issue judgments about it without employing your own rhetoric, which in turn hints at your own political biases. The deeper problem is found in the very nature of political leadership—a problem that has always been with us but that has been heightened by the multiplication of audiences produced in the revolutions I’ve mentioned. The troublesome fact is—to repeat what for many is too obvious to need mentioning—that even the most sincere politician faces daily choices among conflicting “goods,” sacrificing or betraying one good on behalf of another. And often that becomes a clear choice between two obvious evils.

Such conflicts have faced all leaders from the beginning—always earning them a bad reputation among moralists. All politicians, whether hoping to be sincere or not, find it necessary to hedge, waffle, dodge, mask, as they practice what we all practice as we choose among rival goods and evils.

As Aristotle put it, we all face the necessity of practicing *phronesis* (practical wisdom): learning how to balance this good against that good and come to some sort of Golden Mean. Such balancing often requires deliberate deception. For Machiavelli, such justified deception is a *virtue* in itself, even when it requires violation of other virtues.\(^{12}\) What the Jesuits originally labeled *casuistry*—they tend to avoid the term these days—is the balancing of virtues according to the conflicts in a given *case*. Not long ago “situation ethics” was a major study; it is still sometimes discussed, but not as often as the others I have mentioned.

Aside from such theoretical defenses, actual choices between two or more conflicting “genuine goods,” when either choice inflicts harm, are always hard to defend. Like each of us, politicians can never claim (though they often pretend to) that no harm was done by the necessary choice between “evils.” The only real defense they can offer is that they have faced the nasty choices by engaging in *genuine listening*, fully honest consideration of the arguments for the conflicting “cases.”

Many thinkers in most fields would support the deep-listening alternative as the only protection against the *excesses* of inescapable deception. A recent book, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, summarizes quite well my argument for listening-rhetoric: “Find a shared goal and you have both a good reason and a healthy climate for talking” (Patterson et al.). If you listen to the targets’ words so closely that you discover what they are arguing for, and why, you might then discover a good and a truth superior to the one you felt you
possessed when beginning. The “good of the nation” you thought you were honestly defending gets transformed. At the same time, by practicing some skillful accommodation to a variety of audiences, you can get them to listen rather than simply increasing their hatred for you.

It should not be overlooked, however, that one form of listening-rhetoric can produce one of the worst forms of deception. Really skillful rhetors can invent language that is intended to mean one thing to “insiders” while appeasing “outsiders. As Umberto Eco puts it, the speaker, by speaking in ambiguous terms,

is actually sending a message in code that emanates from one power group and [yet] is destined for another. The two [secret] groups, sender and receiver, understand one another perfectly well. . . . It is clear, moreover, that in order for communication between power groups to carry on undisturbed it must go over the heads of the public, just like the coded message passing between two armed camps in a war situation. . . . The fact of its not being understood by others is the indispensable condition for the maintenance of private relationships between power groups. . . . Political discourse in this vein, whatever the aims of the government in question, is anti-democratic because it leapfrogs the citizen and denies him any room to agree or disagree. It is an authoritarian discourse. Unmasking it is the only political activity that is worthwhile; the only real way to exercise rhetoric so as to create convictions rather than to induce subjugation. (85)

So the main point of my lament about bad war rhetoric is not that our politicians hardly ever speak the plain truth: they wouldn’t be where they are, and we would suffer bad consequence, if they were always “sincere.” The welfare of any country requires leaders skillful in casuistry. The point is that too often these days it is not conducted with a balance of rival public goods in mind but simply with a pursuit of this or that personal profit or benefit for some corner of “the world,” while harming the larger world: let’s have personal triumph (such as winning in an election) even at the expense of widespread public harm. And too few of us have been educated to spot that kind of deception in the service of distorted “goods.”

What we need most are (1) leaders who can avoid stupidly offending potential enemies, like labeling those Europeans against us as “old” and weak and those who are for us as “new”; (2) leaders who can balance local triumphs today—such as winning the next election—against the welfare of the world tomorrow; and (3) citizens who can detect the differences
between listening-rhetoric and rhetrickery, and conduct their supporting and protesting with rhetoric that can possibly be actually listened to.

**How Protesters Violate Listening-Rhetoric**

By now many readers must be worrying about my uncontrolled bias against current administration rhetoric. So can this protester claim that the rhetoric on his side is less corrupted than that of the leaders? I wish it were so. The future of all nations, and thus of the world, depends very much on the rhetoric of opposition movements, especially as they get strong enough to influence elections. Yet, we protesters are, as I have already illustrated, often as guilty of non-listening as our leaders. We forget that democratic resolution of conflict depends not on shouting down those who have the military power but on building up majorities of those who oppose the use of force and, by really listening to our potential friends or "enemies," whether powerful leaders or mere "citizens," finding ways to entice them into hearing our case.

As I write here now we can be sure that massive marches and strikes and e-mail campaigns are occurring around the world, *some* violent, *some* not, *some* successful, *some* not. Quite often it can be argued that the defeats are caused by the clumsy rhetoric of the protesters, often by misguided violence that alienates those who might have voted for them if they had practiced listening-rhetoric. If the protesters had really listened to their enemies, and modified their own words and actions to meet what they heard, they might have succeeded.

Sometimes mass democratic protests, as in the American Revolution, finally work—in a way. The Colonies didn't win through overpowering military victory; we won because of steadily increasing mass democratic support of our cause. Unfortunately, what we usually celebrate about the American revolution are the *military* triumphs, leading many to see the founding fathers as succeeding only because we fought so well. And this has produced a nation far too often inclined to see violence as the solution to all problems, as we saw above as I traced our military sons.

Whatever the historical causes, America now practices more violence per day, domestically, than most other nations, and some of our leaders talk as if we can finally establish a world in which our military power suppresses all others. It is thus hardly surprising that as we're trained to believe in violence on behalf of noble causes, we protesters too often put our points in terms that threaten blind violence or other forms of irrational excess. Assuming, sometimes justifiably, that the leaders will not listen to any *responsible* argument about their misdeeds or
mistakes, and thus that only violent threats will yield change, protesters tend to employ only threats: without change you will be hurt or killed.

Fortunately, in any democracy—or half-democracy, like ours—the threat need not be physical violence but simply lack of votes. Battles have often been averted by the mere accumulation of overwhelming voices in opposition. And that is where defensible rhetoric by protesters comes in. The future of every nation depends absolutely on the quality of argument practiced by those who desire change.

Most of our protests are full of two kinds of rhetrickery. On the one hand, too many who are appalled by a leader’s policies simply disguise their true opinions and side with whatever will sell their case and protect them from power punishment, while trying to sneak in some slight objections. On the other hand, many protestors blurt out their protest with no thought about how to earn full attention. Ignoring the arguments and convictions on the other side, and thus with no visible respect for the opponent and with little attention to broadening the grounds for protest, they simply demonize the enemy, thus guaranteeing that no dialogue will ensue. Even when the case is actually, “You must listen to us, because in fact we are far more numerous and powerful than you have recognized,” the claims are too often put in terms that seem contemptible to the other side. When anyone, not just a hawk, sees a poster saying “Bush is Satan,” is his mind going to be changed? Of course not.

In short, whether protesters are on the left, as is mainly true these days, or on the right, as most of them were when President Clinton was threatened with impeachment, they too often reveal the same flaws as we’ve seen in leadership rhetoric. I could cite scores of attacks worded in such a way as to ensure non-listening:

- Molly Ivins’ column, “Call Me a Bush Hater.” No potential critic of Bush will read that column or have her mind changed by it. It’s a stupid rhetorical error to head a column with that, when in fact Ivins actually says such things as “It is not necessary to hate George W. Bush to think he’s a bad President.”

- Gore Vidal’s recent overloaded, shrill attack on Bush’s policies: Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got to be So Hated. I accept most of Vidal’s fundamental points, but too often he falls into a clever rhetrickery that actually provides evidence for the other side. If I were pro-Bush, I would conclude: “lefties don’t think, they just shout.”
Of course, I could go on, citing book after book that sells widely by labeling everything President Bush says as lying—ignoring how often he speaks from the heart. Michael Moore often in effect destroys the protesters' cause by sounding almost as biased on the left as Rush Limbaugh sounds on the right.

To make my case for good rhetoric based on real listening-rhetoric would require a long, detailed analysis of at least one major speech—perhaps one of Nelson Mandella's speeches that saved South Africa from Civil War. Unfortunately, such defensible rhetoric is so rare these days that it can produce the gloomy response of a media-analyst like Eric Alterman. Reporting former Czech President Havel's speech to a joint session of Congress, on February 20, 1990, he wrote:

Havel entered the hall to a thunderous standing ovation. It was quite a moment, and even the tough guys in the press gallery were fighting back tears. This modest, diminutive playwright, fresh from facing down the guns of the Soviet empire and leading his country in a democratic revolution, had been invited to share his wisdom in the hall that sits at the rhetorical center of what was now, undisputedly, the most powerful nation in the history of the world. Never in my adult life had I witnessed so unambiguous a victory for the forces of sweetness and light. . . . He explored many of the great themes of personal and political responsibility with uncommon wit and originality. . . . I was being addressed by a political leader who felt no compulsion to speak down to his audience, to insult its intellect with empty-headed rhetoric and pander to its egocentricity with kitschy encomiums. (2)

Putting aside Alterman's confession of how depressed he felt when he started thinking about the rarity of such rhetoric on our scene, consider Havel's own lamentation about the decline of political rhetoric. Toward the end of his presidency of the Czech Republic in the fall of 2002, he discussed (without using rhetorical terms) what he sees as the decline of the good kinds of rhetoric. Expressing his hope for a return to the right kind, he "heralds" a hope for "a more humane world, one in which poets might have as powerful a voice as bankers." (4).

What are the possible cures for our massive practice of and surrendering to political rhetrickery, both by leaders and protesters? While admitting that nothing will ever fully clean up the mess, I can hope that more of us will pursue the following two points, expressing ideals that I wish I myself obeyed more rigorously.

First, we must train ourselves to judge war rhetoric fairly, by really
Wayne C. Booth

listening to the opponents and imagining ourselves into their true motives. We must judge no piece of rhetoric according to whether the judge and rhetor share the same “side” or whether a given audience was won over. Always include the question, “Did the rhetor listen to all the audiences crucial to the case?” Like a genuinely admirable legal judge, the critic should consider the “evidence for and against the case,” not whether the judgment will yield personal profit or confirm personal prejudice or get a narrow audience to shout “Bravo!”

Second, we must train ourselves to practice responsible, fair rhetoric that invites serious listening by our opponents. Instead of threats that increase their hatred or mistrust, we must learn how to offer evidence that we are sure deserves to be listened to.

Obviously, the rhetoric of the political world, more complex than ever before, cannot be fully cleansed, no matter how many of us pursue those two “commandments.” Conflicts will never be totally escaped. Even the practice of violent alternatives to listening-rhetoric will perhaps never disappear, we *homo sapiens* apparently having violence in our genes. For all we know, the horrors of World War III will arrive.

What is clear is that our future depends on victories of listening-rhetoric over mere threats of retaliation. We are genuinely threatened with expanded warfare (probably leading to the catastrophic use of weapons of mass destruction). Now that we live with “media globalization” and “globalization of weaponry” (not to mention current “warfare” about commercial globalization) our very survival, whether as democracies or tyrannies, depends on just how many citizens of the world—leaders or protesters, school kids or national leaders—are trained to be skillful in their listening, and thus more skillful and ethical in their responses. Good rhetoric is our only, or at least our main, alternative to war.

*University of Chicago*

*Chicago, Illinois*

**Notes**

1. It’s not surprising that from earliest times arguments about political choice have outweighed all other discussions of rhetoric. For a first-class treatment of political rhetoric, see Eco. For the best journal specializing in political rhetoric, see *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*. Every journal dealing with rhetorical matters is almost dominated by political concerns. For a useful anthology of diverse probings of public rhetoric, especially from politicians, see Rodin and Steinberg.
2. Going in at first is slightly more defensible, considering the fears of Communist dominance. But *staying* in, with President Johnson lying to us publicly while confessing privately his awareness of defeat—that is indefensible, the worst thing that Johnson, formerly one of my heroes, ever did.

3. And, writing on April 8, 2004, after the explosion of actual warfare this week, I can’t help wondering whether he has ever thought back on that “Bring ’em on.”

4. Our Oath of Allegiance provides further examples: “I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God. In acknowledgment whereof I have hereunto affixed my signature.”

5. The chief rival would be conflicts among religions—which too often lead to literal warfare. Our current international mess is at least partly inspired by the conflict in millions of minds between Christianity and Islam, with the long history of military conflict in the memories of many. And now that the American occupation in Iraq is prolonged, open violence, and perhaps open warfare, between Shiites and Sunnis seems more and more likely. For evidence of how frighteningly close we are moving to religious rather than merely political warfare, see the media coverage of the American Lt. General William G. Boykin’s speeches claiming that Muslims hate us because “we’re a Christian nation,” that they worship an “idol,” and that our “enemy is a guy named Satan” (“Rumsfeld). For a penetrating effort to listen to the realities of Christianity and Islam, seeking the common ground they share, see Lincoln.

6. A first-class example of skillful *localized* rhetoric was Condoleezza Rice’s speech before the September 11 Commission. It was brilliantly directed as a sermon to the choir: those who want to believe her. And it was full of what (from my no doubt biased perspective) seem appalling misreadings of the document discussed. The letter-columns next day revealed a total polarizing of the audience—passionate support and angry attack.

7. For a clever, brief analysis of presidential rhetoric, especially when it makes use of religious traditions and rituals, see Silverstein.

8. Each of the “revolutions” might be said to have begun long ago: with the invention of printing, followed by radio, and then TV; and with the invention of the first explosives capable of killing off those not engaged in hand-to-hand combat. Most sensitive leaders have been aware of the revolutions, inventing terms like President Eisenhower’s “military-industrial complex.”
9. For a close analysis of Blair's rhetorical skills, before the Iraq disasters, see Bull. The essay hails Blair as a master of what some call "equivocation," others "the rhetoric of modernization": "the intentional use of imprecise language" in order to "avoid conflicts." The book is an excellent anthology of essays appraising political rhetoric throughout the world, including Japan, the near East, and America.

10. Nobody escapes this problem. When I recently read a charge that all critics of President Bush's war push are "naive idealists," my immediate response was something like, "Now we have further evidence for my anti-war case: Yep, all the supporters are extremists." Only a bit later did I rebuke myself for biased overreaction.

11. See Rampton and Stauber 12–23.

12. For fine discussions of political casuistry see Garver. For a broader probing of casuistry, see Jonsen and Toulmin.

13. In a longer draft, I dwelt on his mistake in beginning with what sounds like a defense of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber, and his frequent self-centered complaints about journals turning down his articles.

Works Cited


