

ETHICS IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

(Text of the Presidential Address delivered by Dr. Robert C. Jeffrey to the annual convention of the Speech Communication Association, Statler Hilton Hotel, New York City, November 11, 1973)

Three years ago when I accepted the invitation to be a nominee for Second Vice-President of the Speech Communication Association, I did so as a matter of duty to the Association with little serious thought of being elected. Upon learning of my election, I was forced to contemplate the rigors of the offices suddenly thrust upon me. Contemplation led to the realization of a commitment to edit the convention abstracts, the principal duty of the First Vice-President. These onerous chores could be endured, I concluded, if the thought of the presidential year were kept foremost in mind. I discovered that editing the convention abstracts was not as onerous as I had anticipated, and that planning the convention can be both pleasurable and rewarding, as well as time consuming. I have discovered more importantly, in the three years of official service to this Association, that accepting the demands of professional activity has proved, ultimately, to be its own reward.

Last December, with the first two years of service completed and Ted Clevenger's term approaching closure, I turned to the *Operations Manual* of the Association for assistance in performing the duties of the President. On the page titled "Guide for Presidents," Don Bryant stated one procedure succinctly: During the summer and fall of the Presidential year, "the President should compose an excellent Presidential Address for the national convention of such scope as the President thinks fit." He further advised: "Try out parts of it at regional and other meetings." The platform you provide me as President of the Speech Communication Association is a hearty source of professional satisfaction and, taking Don Bryant's admonition seriously, one I would like to capitalize on today in discussing a much neglected concept in the teaching and research in communication—the problem of ethics in public discourse.

Many of you at regional or state conventions have heard me refer to several events and practices in our world today that threaten our ethical communication conduct. One of those practices is the employment, with tax monies, of an "Executive Flunky," if you will, as a mouthpiece for the President of the United States. Mr. Ziegler in the present administration holds this post. As communication strategists we have passively and uncritically accepted this practice, thereby harboring and condoning the institution of a Presidential Scapegoat, an institution that permits our highest elected officer to test public opinion in a quasi-official

fashion. If reaction to the statements attributed to the President is negative the President can deny responsibility for the statement. With this simple mechanism of public statement by proxy we encourage both deliberately designed deception and abrogation of responsibility.

By permitting our highest elected officials and those they appoint to administrative posts to classify information as confidential, and by placing no constraints on those public servants, we deny the public information necessary for proper decision-making in the democratic process. Equally as reprehensible and deplorable is our national administration's malfeasant efforts to weaken the integrity of the press by deliberate design. At this convention last year, *New York Times* writers Robert Semple and James Naughton concluded that the present administration has been so successful in undermining the credibility of the press that the public refused to acknowledge the Watergate saboteurs once exposed. That, of course, was prior to the Watergate Hearings. The word "coverup," however, has now become a household word and extends beyond the Watergate matter to areas perhaps yet to be discovered.

These practices are among many that lead inevitably to the conclusion that the American public refuses to demand an ethical responsibility from its leadership. It is a frightening prospect, and one that Richard Nixon viewed with alarm in 1970 when, recalling the bombing at the University of Wisconsin in that year, he said, "... what corrodes a society even more deeply than violence itself is the acceptance of violence, the condoning of terror, excusing of inhuman acts in a misguided effort to accommodate the community standards to those of the violent few."

If we substitute the words "crime" or "irresponsibility" for the word "violence," we arrive at the basis for my remarks this afternoon.

The corrosive effect of the acceptance of deception has led to the cheapening of authority in America in recent years. Too many broken promises, too many empty words, too little real achievement of vital objectives, too many inept or insensitive or inexplicable decisions made by untouchable officials in unreachable institutions—all of these have undermined both the integrity of and our respect for the figures who lay claim to executive leadership and executive "privilege." This disintegration of administrative morality and accompanying public impertinence extend beyond the American Presidency to leadership in the universities, corporations, unions, and organized religion. Some of the practices of our profession have, in my opinion, contributed, however subtly, to this impalement of national morality.

First, the research emphasis in human communication has, for over a decade, been behaviorally oriented, accompanied by

an abandonment in many academic programs of a healthy and balanced orientation with interest in humanistic and ethical aspects of communication. Historically, technological progress has always led in its wake agonizing political and social change, and even though earth's complexion has changed every minute since it first took off around the sun, what is so shockingly new about our changing world is that where it once changed imperceptively, it now convulses and heaves and shatters and reconstitutes itself before our very eyes. Reflecting this scientific upheaval is the behavioral and objective orientation in communication research in which the *human* as individual is often neglected and the *mass* as individual is subjected to experimentation and manipulation.

We have been "scientifically" aware, however, since the turn of the century that no objective reality exists, that every perception of objectivity, regardless of the sophistication and precision of our measuring instruments, in the final analysis, is determined by individual perceptivity and capability. It is amazing that since Planck's discovery of Quantum Theory in 1900 the "scientific" world has recognized the reciprocity between the scientist as individual and the world he seeks to control, and yet, we in Speech Communication are propagating as "new," "progressive," and "innovative" a view of human behaviors strangely reminiscent of 19th century scientific thought.

Related to the emphasis on scientific investigation of communication behavior is a second practice contributing to the ethical and moral decline in our communicative society—an extreme concern with the development of images in leadership roles. As Daniel Boorstin so eloquently put it, "the making of illusions which flood our experiences has become the business of America." The sophistication of contemporary illusion *making* results from the subjugation of individual identity to group profile, inevitably leading to excesses in promoting products for human consumption and images for leadership roles. Encouraged by such falsified profiles of human behaviors, experimentation on changing human behavior on the basis of group norms rather than individual reasoning has become paramount. If, in persuasion, there were more concern for the integrity of the individual, there might be less need for truth in lending laws, truth in advertising laws and fairness in campaign practices legislation.

In speech criticism, our research and publications reflect a near obsession with tracing the development of images in political campaigns, resulting in an abrogation of our responsibility to students and the public. We no longer demand accuracy of statement, and too often train our students to be experts in the art of plotting the creation of deceptive practices rather than unmasking

continued, page 15

Jeffrey, cont. from page 3

and indicting those practices. The loss of respect for the spoken word, an inevitable product of image making, has led former Attorney General John Mitchell, referring to the Nixon Administration, to assert, "You will be better advised to watch what we do instead of what we say." This statement led Richard Harris, in his book *Justice*, to remark that the statement was "the most astonishing admission of high level duplicity in government history."

A third practice of teachers and researchers in communication that has contributed to the lack of concern for ethical and moral responsibility on the part of American leadership is our growing preoccupation with the superficial dimensions of non-rational discourse, body rhetoric, the rhetoric of the streets, the rhetoric of numbers. Wayne Booth, recognizing both the rhetorical validity of such acts of persuasion and their inherent dangers, asserts: "... a case could be made for the claim that we live in the most rhetorical age of all time, if by rhetoric we mean whatever men do to change each others minds without giving good reasons for change." Booth's extension of what constitutes rhetoric demands a return to an ethical consciousness.

An integral part of a new rhetorical theory must be a renewed consideration of ethics in public discourse. This consideration must of necessity revert to a discussion of Aristotle's determinants of a moral act. Father Lawrence Flynn succinctly describes the Aristotelian Determinants of a moral act in a 1957 article in the *Speech Teacher*. He reasons first that a moral act is dependent upon the establishment of a human act. He writes, "A truly human act proceeds from a rational agent who knows what he does and chooses freely to do it. The power to reason, which distinguishes men from brutes, underlies man's recognition of a means-to-end relationship. So, before we choose means-to-end we must know the end, the means, and the relation between them. To perform human acts we need knowledge and human choice. . . ."

To determine the goodness or badness of a human act, however, requires an analysis of the object, the act, the intent of the agent, and the circumstances surrounding the act. Consequently, in determining the ethics of a public statement, it is necessary to analyze what the speaker does, why he does it and the circumstances under which he does it. The measurement of effects of a public utterance may offer historical fact, but reveals nothing of the utterance's ethical structure. Even though the speaker's purpose or ultimate end is good, Aristotle would require that the rhetorical devices, techniques, methods, or fact pass the test of morality according to the three determinants. If the end sought by the speaker is good, the act of achieving that end is unethical if the speaker selects unethical means. Likewise, even

though means to achieve an end are ethical or good, the end itself may be bad. Consequently, to judge the goodness or badness of a speech or other communicative act, all of the determinants must be satisfied. Deliberate falsification is morally faulty because it frustrates the natural purpose of speech in a democratic society which is to transmit judgments to auditors, and because it interferes with the auditor's judgment capabilities.

Since the human act, to be judged morally, must be deliberate and free, one might suppose that an unconscious misrepresentation or falsification that may result in a partial distortion or complete misrepresentation through ignorance would be excused. However, a speaker must assume the responsibility for his statements and, consequently, do all that is possible to remove his ignorance before making the statement. Ignorance cannot be claimed as an excuse unless it can also be shown that the speaker did what was within his power to remove that ignorance. Father Flynn would have us ask the question, "Did he use care proportionate to the importance and gravity of the situation?"

It has been, and can be argued that the logical and emotional aspects of rhetoric are amoral, that they derive their morality from the good or bad intent of the speaker or agent. The use of logic in a particular discourse may be bad, but it is not morally bad unless the intent of the user is bad. The problem, then, is to determine the intent of the communicator or agent.

Often it is possible to determine the intent of the agent by the arguments assembled in the message. For instance, most rhetorical critics would consider Nixon's 1952 "Checkers Speech" logically unacceptable as a defense for misusing campaign funds. Few, however, have questioned the ethical base of the speech or the morality of the act. The general public response to the speech then, as now, lauded it as a monumental rhetorical effort. This kind of critical acceptance justifiably places the term rhetoric in dubious quarters.

Much to his credit, Barnett Baskerville wrote in his analysis of the Vice-Presidential speaking in the 1952 campaign that the "Nixon affair" served to unify a divided Republican party and elevated Richard Nixon to a prominence seldom enjoyed by a Vice-Presidential candidate. He also observed, "It seems to this observer that the phenomenal public reaction to the original charge to the speech itself and to subsequent counter charges, revealed an alarming preference to appearances rather than realities, a widespread preoccupation with legality rather than morality, and a subordination (by Democrats and Republicans alike) of ethical considerations to political expediency." The period of the early 1950's might well serve as the reference point for the beginning of the deterioration of responsible public discourse in the high levels of government.

Hal Gulley wrote in *Today's Speech* in 1970, that "... America's public statement-making is less dependable, reliable, and candid than it was two decades ago; that we are witnessing a national drift toward irresponsibility toward public utterance. In some areas of our national life, we cannot now be certain that we believe what some people are saying." Gulley's report contained an alarming exposure of the cavalier attitude with which government officials view high level duplicity. He quoted former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Arthur Sylvester, as saying "It is the government's inherent right to lie if necessary to save itself when faced with nuclear disaster; this is basic."

We, as a nation in 1973 have been brought to the brink of moral and ethical deterioration in our government. No one in this audience need be reminded of the general and pervasive political debauchery associated with the amorphous term "Watergate." Testimony of men respected for their place in government has revealed the exalted place of the lie and of deceit. James Reston wrote in the *New York Times* "Future testimony from Messrs. Mitchell, Erlichman, Halderman, and Dean may throw more light on who is lying and who is telling the truth. Meanwhile, it is probably better to follow Paul Porter's skeptical advice: 'I don't say these men are liars. . . it's just that they have such respect for the truth that they use it sparingly.'"

In this time of national despair and uncertainty, we should not neglect to celebrate the system of justice that has revealed the unethical conduct of some of our more respected leaders. Our system of justice may be slow in its process, but it offers assurance of ethical certainty in its results.

The real question, however, is not whether the guilty will vindicate the innocent. The question is, rather, "Where lies the culpability for having arrived at this near disastrous condition?"

Every man, a president included, must be accountable for his acts and responsible for his statements. But if the President acts or speaks irresponsibly, those who elected him to office are not free of guilt if the evidence of irresponsibility was available at the time of election. Richard Nixon's questionable ethics have been observable for over two decades. But in those two decades, academic critics and scholars in communication have been more concerned with the technologies of communication than with its ethics. Richard Nixon was and continues to be a "technician" in manipulating public attitudes for self-aggrandizement. Our own publications reflect a preoccupation with Nixon's predictability, his appeals to audiences, his mastery of the television medium, and so on. Few articles, however, have analyzed the ethics or morality of his statements. It is a sad commentary on the state of rhetoric in the academy when we admit that

continued, page 16

Jeffrey, cont. from page 15

ethical studies of the Nixon rhetoric are more readily available in the press than in scholarly journals. Traditionally, rhetorical critics have, in fact, recognized and accepted their charge as analysts and reporters of ethical conduct. The Fourth Estate, however, and not rhetorical scholars, first alerted the American public to Nixon's special brand of Administrative Rhetoric. Kenneth Burke has used the term "Administrative Rhetoric" to explore the ethical dimensions of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. He contends that:

Machiavelli's *The Prince* can be treated as a rhetoric insofar as it deals with a producing of effects upon an audience. Sometimes the Prince's subjects are his audience, sometimes the rulers or inhabitants of foreign states are the audience, sometimes particular factions within the State. If you have a political public in mind, Machiavelli says in effect, here's the sort of thing you must do to move them for your purposes. And he considers such principles of persuasion as these: either treat well or crush; defend weak neighbors and weaken the strong; where you foresee trouble, provoke war; don't make others powerful; be like the prince who appointed a harsh governor to establish order . . . ; do necessary evils at one stroke, pay out benefits little by little; sometimes assure the citizens that the evil days will soon be over, at other times goad them to fear the cruelties of the enemy; be sparing of your own and your subjects' wealth, but be liberal with the wealth of others; be a combination of strength and stealth (the lion and fox); appear merciful, dependable, humane, devout, upright, but be the opposite in actuality, whenever the circumstances require it . . . in order that you may get the advantage of good advice without losing people's respect, give experts permission to speak frankly, but only when asked to speak; have a few intimates who are encouraged to be completely frank, and who are well-paid with rewards.

Each of us can find specific instances of these administrative rhetorical strategies in the Nixon speeches. They are identifiable as early as 1948 when, in his senatorial campaign, he goaded the public to fear the cruelties of the enemy and assured the voters that the fear would end with his election. The strategies are even more identifiable today with the crumbling of popular respect for the man and his rhetoric.

As communication critics and educators, we failed in our responsibilities to officially oppose those practices when they became so blatantly evident. We persist in that failure today. In the ten hours of deliberations of the Legislative Council at this convention, not a single resolution was introduced to condemn the unethical practices of the Nixon administration for withholding information from the public for political and

private purposes; for deliberately deceiving the public with false statements as in denial of bombing in Cambodia when, in fact, it occurred; for refusing to supply tapes, notes and correspondence relating to possible criminal activities; for taping private conversations without the knowledge of the parties being taped; for other acts relating specifically to the free flow of information and privacy of communication that should be the central concerns of teachers and scholars in speech communication.

This temerity in speaking to the corrupt communication practices of the present national administration reveals an abrogation of our role as protectors of ethical communication. If there is one thread that binds together all of the varied interests in our association, it is a dedication to free and responsible speech. Yet, when that freedom and responsibility is abridged or threatened, we fail to act. In this case, the excuse that we must act only in areas of professional competence cannot be claimed as a defense by those who would oppose censure resolutions by this association.

Last year, at this convention, the Legislative Council passed a resolution declaring that "it is the role of the Speech Communication Association, defining itself as a humanistic organization, to be concerned with the communication process and how that process affects human beings; that since those in political power make decisions affecting millions of people, those people have a right both to know those decisions and to offer information and well-considered opinions on them; that in the past it has been apparent that government plays a substantial role in determining the limitations of freedom of speech and the amount of information made available to the public; and that there is a need to study government use of communication, whether it involves abridgment of free speech, failure to communicate to the electorate, or responsible use of communication channels." With this expression of concern for government's use of communication controls, our purpose should be to monitor it and to condemn or praise as the case may warrant.

It may well be true that the moral and ethical permissiveness of the present administration has, as Russell Baker wrote, so accustomed us "to accepting mendacity as a normal condition of life that we assume it is natural for everybody to lie to us, even our best man." But ethical permissiveness, even in a just cause, corrodes the soul; and condoning it can corrode a nation. As Adlai Stevenson once asserted, "Those who corrupt the public mind are just as evil as those who steal from the public purse."

As teachers and scholars in communication, our purpose should be to develop respect for ethical communication and a healthy disdain for deception in and corruption of public discourse. Henry Wieman and Otis Walter wrote in 1957 ". . . Eth-

ical Rhetoric has the promise of creating those kinds of communication which can help save the human being from disintegration, nourish him in his growth toward uniquely human goals, and eventually transform him into the best that he can become." That should be our paramount goal as teachers and scholars in communication.

Peripatetic President

The West Texas Speech Association and the El Paso Speech Association combined forces to host a reception for more presidents than many believed existed.

On Thursday evening, October 4, as a highlight of the 48th Annual Convention of the Texas Speech Association meeting in El Paso, five Texas presidents were signally honored: Robert C. Jeffrey, of the Speech Communication Association (and Executive Secretary of the Texas Speech Association); Wayne Thompson, of the Southern Speech Communication Association; Noyce Burleson, of TSA; Ramona Peebles, of the West Texas Speech Association; and Ruth Bassett, of the El Paso Speech Association.

Although there has been no research accomplished to substantiate the notion, it is believed this "penta-president party" is the first of its kind whereby national, regional, state, sectional, and local executives from the same state were so recognized.

Report of the 1973 Association Nominating Committee

The Nominating Committee* of the Speech Communication Association submits the following nominations in keeping with Article VI of the Constitution and Article IV of the By-Laws.

For Second Vice-President (one to be elected)

Wallace Bacon, Northwestern University
Marcella Oberle, California State University at Los Angeles

For the Legislative Council (four to be elected for three-year term)

Jerry Anderson, Western Washington University
Donald Cameron, California State University, Northridge
Gary Gumpert, Queens College
Janice Sargent, Clemson University, South Carolina
Kenneth Sereno, University of Southern California
Arthur Smith, SUNY, Buffalo
John Yeast, Vero Beach High, Florida
George Ziegelmuller, Wayne State University

*1973 Nominating Committee Chairman, P. Judson Newcombe. A full roster of the Nominating Committee will appear in a future issue of *Spectra*.