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# An Incubating Institution: Speaker and Gavel's Current Criticism Section and the Development of Twentieth Century Rhetorical Criticism

James Francisca Klumpp  
*University of Maryland, jklumpp@umd.edu*

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## **An Incubating Institution: *Speaker and Gavel's* Current Criticism Section and the Development of Twentieth Century Rhetorical Criticism**

James F. Klump

### **Abstract**

This essay traces the role of *Speaker and Gavel's* Current Criticism section in the development of the dramatic changes that marked rhetorical criticism and public address in the late twentieth century. The essay argues that critics restricted from old line journals found outlets and developed their critical skills through the publication of their works in *Speaker and Gavel*.

In the spring of 2013, editor Stephen Croucher wrote me asking that I contribute to the anniversary issue of *Speaker and Gavel* by providing "a retrospective on rhetorical criticism/and or critical rhetoric over the years and how it has developed/changed." I was delighted to do so. We all know that the scholarly work of a discipline evolves over the years, and we are quite good at recognizing the important people that have contributed to it. But we are less adept at recognizing the institutions that are equally a part of that story of change. I was delighted at the invitation because it would allow me to report the importance of *Speaker and Gavel* in the history of scholarship in rhetorical criticism in the early years of its publication.

To begin the story let us go back fifty years, to the merger of Delta Sigma Rho and Tau Kappa Alpha. Three streams of history will come together to tell our story. First, the story of the journal. *Speaker and Gavel* was a new journal, supplanting Delta Sigma Rho's *The Gavel* and Tau Kappa Alpha's *The Speaker*. Charles Goetzinger of the University of Colorado became the new journal's first editor. The first issue was dated November 1963. Publication of essays in rhetorical criticism and public address was dominated at the time by two national journals, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* and *Speech Monographs*, and four regional journals in the speech discipline. Although *QJS* published nearly exclusively rhetorical studies, the others published material from throughout the areas of study that occupied the interests of members of the Speech Association of America. Only two outlets offered opportunity to publish book-length monographs: salable textbooks and rare sponsorships by the Speech Association of America. Pages to publish the scholarship of rhetorical critics and public address scholars were very limited indeed.

The second story is the social context of the 1960s, the decade of greatest social upheaval of the last half of the century, a time of great turmoil in the United States and the world. The civil rights movement that had begun in the 1950s began an era of activism that spread through the crucible of the anti-Vietnam War movement, the so-called counter-culture, the free speech movement, and finally the women's movement. The air was full of rhetoric. It came

from Presidents, from leaders in Congress, from the pulpit, from the college campuses, from bullhorns on malls and lawns, from music venues, phonographs, and radio speakers, from those – quiet and noisy – engaged with neighbors and strangers in circles of consciousness. All sought to understand their times and change their world through their voices. To breath the air of this world was to attend to varied voices and orient to their complicated tones. The exigence of the day was to come to terms with the cacophony of this disrupted social fabric.

The third story, developments in rhetorical criticism, requires expanded treatment. The dominant practice of criticism of the day was governed by Thonssen and Baird's (1948) *Speech Criticism, the Development of Standards for Rhetorical Appraisal*. As their title indicated the objective of criticism was (1) to develop standards for good practice, and (2) assess performance using those standards. This normative sensibility was later termed neo-Aristotelian criticism because of the importance of Aristotle's *Rhetorica* in the standards articulated by these two authors (Black, 1965, 27-35).

Mostly, however, the debt to Aristotle was the model of rhetoric in which the calculating rhetor was at the center. In the Thonssen and Baird system rhetoric was an instrumental art managed more or less successfully by a rhetor who had a purpose foremost in mind and a fixed catalog of techniques at his disposal. To meet the purpose, the rhetor calculated the strategic choices which produced the rhetorical message. Thus, the focus was on the leadership that fell to effective rhetors. Criticism judged rhetors on their mastery of the rhetorical art.

Implied in this neo-Aristotelian system was a second scholarship: the development of a studied canon of effective rhetors and messages. Stimulated by the two volume series, *History and Criticism of American Public Address*, edited by William Norwood Brigance (1943) under the auspices of the Speech Association of America, this scholarship identified the key speakers and speeches in the history of the United States and provided assessments of them. In the process it contributed to the development of standards for effective speech, but also made the case for the importance of rhetoric in the history of the country.

Such was the dominate scholarship in rhetorical studies as the 1960s dawned. The focus of the study was a normative effort toward developing standards and judging speakers and speeches. But the history of the 1960s seemed to suggest that a broader range of rhetorical activity and a broader range of critical purpose was required. In response, a critique of the dominate tradition emerged during the decade.<sup>1</sup> Edwin Black is usually acknowledged to have been the key voice in energizing this critique. Black's dissertation from Cornell University in 1962 lodged the critique of neo-Aristotlianism. His book *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* drew on the dissertation when it followed in 1965.

In the midst of the exciting, frenetic, perhaps even chaotic 1960s, the demands for the assistance of rhetorical scholars in interpreting the upheaval opened new opportunities for critics. But the notion that neo-Aristotelianism seemed too limited for these new purposes and the opportunities that sprang from them motivated the emerging scholarship in rhetoric and public address. Like Black, critics went looking for new ways to approach rhetorical moments and their artifacts. Black had pointed the way to genre criticism. New excite-

ment in the theory of Kenneth Burke was also ripening. But theorists in the discipline were multiplying other possibilities. And, part of the change was critics torn free from any set theory or method as a guiding constraint. The result was a blossoming of new critical experiments following the pattern (or resistance to pattern) that Scott and Brock (1972) called "eclectic" and "experiential" (pp. 123-127). In the phrasing of the day, "Let a hundred flowers bloom."

The publication stream of the time was not prepared to accommodate this expansion of critical scholarship. The limited number of outlets created two problems. First, the lack of pages simply meant that the expanded activity fostered by the excitement of the times met limits. The old criticism put no special emphasis on criticism of contemporary events, so work on the corpus and on historical speakers competed in scarce space, restricting efforts to understand the times. The sheer volume of criticism from the expansion produced its own bottleneck.

But in addition, the scarcity of pages emphasized high standards for reaching publication. Encased in an orthodoxy that over decades had developed common notions of quality and thus now defined acceptable critical practice, the gatekeepers of scholarship tended to do what such gatekeepers often do and privilege the familiar. For example, if one approached a criticism from a Burkean view, editors often challenged the critic to "name and justify your method." No such justification would be needed for a neo-Aristotelian view, but the newness of Burkean theory would itself require such delineation. Thus, the structure provided natural and obvious barriers to the new critics.

To be fair, however, these new approaches to criticism did not come fully developed and perfected in the critic's first try. Critics needed to develop their acuity and skill as scholars and as critics. In a condition of limited pages, such development could be frustrated by high rates of rejection. But perhaps more importantly, limited outlets isolated developing critics, robbing them of the benefits which reading the work of others and having others read your work offered. In short, for many reasons, the structure of publication created limits that could potentially bind up this explosion of work.

Into this moment stepped *Speaker and Gavel*. The very first issue of the journal carried an article by Harold Zelko (1963), "President Kennedy's Press Conferences: Some Observations." But criticism was not fully established until Wayne Brockriede assumed the editorship of the journal in November 1966. Brockriede and his editorial board of Robert L. Scott, Donald Torrence, and Robert O. Weiss opened the pages of the journal to criticism with a section entitled, "Current Criticism." Donald Torrence (1966), who became editor of this section within the journal, introduced the premier article by declaring, "With the essay below *Speaker and Gavel* begins what hopefully will become a regular series of brief critical essays on contemporary public speeches and debates. Such critical analysis ought to appear in print shortly after the event without the long wait for extensive research and development." Here was a license shaped for the time. First of all, contemporary events were privileged. No dead orators here! And, no mention was made of any purpose or method for the criticism. The door was open. All that was needed was insight or "critical analysis" and an event to

understand. Finally, the release from “extensive research and development” was an explicit release from the notions of debt to canon and explication and justification of particular methods.

The first essay published in the section was Robert L. Scott and Wayne Brockriede’s (1966) “Hubert Humphrey Faces the ‘Black Power’ Issue.” The essay was in the spirit of the new criticism. It was extensively researched and developed, seventeen notes in seven pages, but those notes were not to fit the analysis into the history of public address nor the confines of thinking on critical methods or rhetorical theory, but rather to document the linkages to the day and time. It was a quality essay and in every sense *current* criticism. It eventually found its way into Scott and Brockriede’s (1969) book *The Rhetoric of Black Power*.

Criticism of various lengths continued in subsequent issues. Torrence’s declared limit of one critical essay an issue lasted for only two years before the section expanded with two essays more typical. Approaches varied including classical approaches such as L. Dean Fadely’s (1969) “Dispositio in the Rhetoric of a Former Debater: George Corley Wallace,” generic criticism such as Bernard L. Brock’s (1969) “Richard M. Nixon’s Inaugural Address: A Critical Moment in History,” or Burkean approaches such as F. Michael Smith’s (1972) “Agnew’s Media Speeches: The Creation of a Scapegoat.” But insights came from additional and new sources. The current author’s essay, “Nonviolence and Black Power: Civil Rights as a Mass Movement” (Klump, 1969), borrowed from the writings of longshoreman-sociologist Eric Hoffer, and Judith S. Trent’s (1973) “Image Building Strategies in the 1972 Presidential Campaign” borrowed from the developing perspective of politics as image management. Ronald H. Carpenter and Robert V. Seltzer (1970) employed the analogue method developed by Lawrence W. Rosenfeld (1968), comparing John Kennedy’s rhetorical style to Richard Nixon’s adaptation of it.

But developing the usefulness of eclectic methods was not the central advance of the era. That advance was the shift of the generating insight for criticism from the method with its canonical questions to the inquiring insight of the critic. The energy of this criticism emerged from the critic’s unique encounter with the object of his/her gaze. Robert L. Scott’s (1968) “Black Power Bends Martin Luther King” illustrated the power of what he and Bernard L. Brock (1972) called “experiential criticism” (pp. 123-27). Scott differentiated the themes of the civil rights and black power movements, and then read Martin Luther King’s rhetoric to illustrate for the reader the evolution in King’s discourse in response to the radical critique. Scott’s contribution was not a product of any particular method but of his insight into how to array the flow of history through which he was living to add understanding to the events. He textured King’s relationship to Black Power in a way that deepened the appreciation for how the historical moment was shaped.

This turn to insightful interpretation to deepen appreciation for the discourse of the society was so important because it marked criticism’s participation in a primary intellectual movement of the twentieth century: contextualism.<sup>2</sup> Contextualism highlighted the power unique to humans to construct the

meaning of their environment, and then enter and shape their world, using their capacity for language. Scholars driven by the precepts of this movement shaped what became known as “the linguistic turn.”<sup>3</sup> Obviously, such a perspective puts a premium on rhetoric. Persuasion recedes from the foreground and rhetoric’s power is relocated to the assembling of elements of environment into relevant context to develop the shared meaning with which people create their world through interaction. Thus, the critic obtains a role in the ongoing meaning-giving (Klumpp & Hollihan, 1989). Through the final half of the twentieth century the linguistic turn with its elevation of the critic and his/her project came to dominate criticism.

The turn from the focus on the speaker and the speech to the critic as a locus of insight also impacted the artifacts that were treated in the Current Criticism section. To be sure, the discourse of such leaders as Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, and Martin Luther King remained a primary concern. But other artifacts became the object of the critic’s gaze as well. David H. Smith (1970) examined the rhetoric of the anti-war movement and its impact on the Paris peace talks to end the Vietnam War. Wayne Eubank (1969) added to the section’s primary interest in politics by examining the 1968 Nixon election campaign as a complex campaign. Frank Venturo (1971) diffused the notion of leadership to the rhetoric of the Nixon administration, rather than just that of the president, to capture what he called “the rhetoric of illusion.” Ray Lynn Anderson (1972) examined science and its relationship to modern policy deliberation. Fern Johnson (1972) turned her critical eye on *Ms.* magazine. Larry Goodson (1979) examined the self-immolation of Vietnamese monk, Thich Quang Duc.

The centrality of the artifact as a focus of the critic, in fact, elevated the study of public address, but without the constraints of proving the canonical status of the discourse. As a result, events that traditional study of public address might have overlooked attracted attention, not so much for their intrinsic worth as for what they told us about something greater than themselves. Michael R. Hagan’s (1968) “A Debate on the ‘Death of God’” highlighted a seemingly inconsequential campus debate for its lessons about how humans dealt with issues of this character. Although one of the stated purposes of the Current Criticism section was to build the understanding of discourse in the contemporary moment, before the influence of the journal had ebbed even historical subjects were being published, such as Robert V. Friedenberg’s (1975) “Men of Wisdom or Builders of Babel: A Study of the Decision Making Process in the Constitutional Convention of 1787.”

By the early 1980s the strategies of criticism incubated in the pages of *Speaker and Gavel* had entered the mainstream of rhetorical studies. Several critics whose voices developed with the help of the smaller journal had now edited the old line journals such as the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. And new journals such as *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, *Critical Inquiry*, and *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* had appeared. And opportunities for critical books had begun to emerge in series at the University of South Carolina Press and the University of Alabama Press. To be sure, *Speaker and Gavel* continued its publication of criticism of contemporary events, but it was in the context of a more ma-

ture criticism. It had served a key role in developing the changes that became evident in these key decades.

When the needs of the discipline emerged, *Speaker and Gavel* was there. Roles such as that served by the journal are not always appreciated by those participating in the scholarly dialogue that they foster. But a great debt is owed to them by all critics. All of us who today feel the freedom to employ our critical faculties in the variety of ways that fill out our rhetorical understanding owe a debt of gratitude to Wayne Brockriede, Robert Weiss, Bernard Brock, and other editors of the Current Criticism section, and to the then young institution so vital to the developing criticism: *Speaker and Gavel*.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The best source for capturing the explosion of thinking on rhetoric is the 1970 National Developmental Conference on Rhetoric, particularly the reports of its working committees. Bitzer & Black (1971).
- <sup>2</sup> The most thorough explanation of the intellectual frame of contextualism is Stephen Pepper's (1942). For comment on its importance in communication see Ford and Klumpp (1985). See also Georgoudi & Rosnow (1985).
- <sup>3</sup> The term has become the dominant descriptive identifier of the movement. The most important work in focusing this attention and pulling the intellectual movement into coherence was Richard Rorty's (1967) collection by this name.

### Author Note:

James F. Klumpp is Professor of Communication at the University of Maryland. [jklumpp@umd.edu](mailto:jklumpp@umd.edu)