 Quarterly Journal of Speech
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rqjs20

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To cite this article: John M. Murphy (2004): The language of the liberal consensus: John F. Kennedy, technical reason, and the “new economics” at Yale University, Quarterly Journal of Speech, 90:2, 133-162
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0033563042000227418

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The Language of the Liberal Consensus: John F. Kennedy, Technical Reason, and the “New Economics” at Yale University

John M. Murphy

On June 11, 1962, President John F. Kennedy addressed the economy at Yale University. This essay explains the symbolic charge of his economic rhetoric, a persuasive campaign that enjoyed considerable success and marked the first time that a president took explicit responsibility for the nation’s economic performance. I argue that the president crafted the authority to take command of the economy through construction of a liberal ethos, the use of dissociation, and a definition of the times. His arguments, in turn, were invented from the liberal matrix that dominated politics in the mid-twentieth-century United States and represent the ways in which that mode of discourse develops a historically contingent and politically powerful form of technical reason. President Kennedy’s speech illustrates a set of strategies that can raise the status of one political language above its competitors in the process of public argument.

Keywords: John F. Kennedy; Invention; Liberal Consensus; Technical Reason; Ethos; Dissociation; Time

The president lost his legendary cool. For months, John Kennedy and his Secretary of Labor, Arthur Goldberg, had labored to restrain labor, specifically, the wage demands of the United Steelworkers. In both a letter to their president, David J. McDonald, and in the 1962 Economic Report, the president proposed that wage gains be limited to productivity advances. If wages went higher in the bellwether steel industry, Kennedy reasoned, prices across the economy would jump and inflation would ensue. He made the same point to the presidents of the major steel corporations and added that, should the steelworkers accede to his advice, then the
executives should waive a price increase. On April 6, 1962, the steelworkers signed a restrained contract, one that raised wages only the 2.5 percent warranted by productivity growth. In Kennedy’s mind, improved efficiency funded that raise and, therefore, no price increase was necessary to accommodate the rise. He and his advisors celebrated, sure that they had slain the inflation dragon in its cradle. On April 10, the president of U.S. Steel, Roger Blough, walked into the Oval Office and handed President Kennedy a press release announcing a 3.5 percent price increase. Kennedy was incensed.¹

“You have made a terrible mistake,” he snapped at Blough, “you double-crossed me.” After a shaken Blough left, Kennedy turned to Goldberg and said, “He fucked me. They fucked us and we’ve got to try to fuck them.” He called McDonald and told him, “Dave, you’ve been screwed and I’ve been screwed.” In a remark the White House leaked to reveal the depth of the president’s anger, he said, “My father always told me that all businessmen were sons-of-bitches, but I never believed it till now.”² His public language was hardly less restrained although less obscene. He led off an April 11 press conference by deploring the price increase, a “wholly unjustifiable and irresponsible defiance of the public interest.” He listed the sacrifices made by other Americans, including the “four [who] were killed in the last two days in Vietnam.” At this “serious hour in our nation’s history,” Kennedy said, “the American people find it hard, as I do, to accept a situation in which a tiny handful of steel executives whose pursuit of private power and profit exceeds their sense of public responsibility can show such utter contempt for the interests of 185 million Americans.” Reporters gasped, but John Fitzgerald Kennedy was not done. He portrayed the increase as a threat to national security in the midst of the Cold War and concluded: “Some time ago I asked each American to consider what he would do for his country and I asked the steel companies. In the last 24 hours, we had their answer.”³

Over the next 72 hours, the president orchestrated a ferocious public opinion campaign against the price rise. Cabinet members detailed the effects of the increase on their areas of responsibility, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara moved contracts to steel companies who had held the line on prices, and Attorney General Robert Kennedy spoke darkly of anti-trust actions, price collusion, and grand jury investigations. The FBI hauled people in for questioning at three in the morning. Robert Kennedy later acknowledged, “It was a tough way to operate. But under the circumstances, we couldn’t afford to lose.”⁴ Big steel surrendered. David Lawrence, editor of U.S. News and World Report called the president’s acts “quasi-Fascism,” but most Americans seemed to share Robert Frost’s joyful response: “Oh, didn’t he do a good one! Didn’t he show the Irish all right?”⁵ Polls revealed 73 percent approval of the president’s overall job performance and a disapproval rating of only 22 percent.⁶

It is a fine story, but apart from the stock plot of a leader’s heroism, it is barely comprehensible to contemporary ears. It comes from another world, a world in which unions swung a big stick, business executives suffered under a liberal lash, corporate heads cleared price increases with U.S. presidents, cultural norms decreed that duty should come before profit, and, perhaps most bizarre, a world in which
citizens felt confident that the government could direct the U.S. economy. It comes from a world with a language that justified liberal policy. It comes from a world in which government was not the problem but the solution to our problems.

It is that language that I wish to explore in this essay. For at least a quarter of a century, liberals, progressives, progressive liberals, populists, populist liberals, populist progressives, centrists, democratic centrists, new Democrats, Greens, and the like have sought to justify their desire for government action in the absence of an accepted idiom for that ideology. Liberals speak no language with which to name themselves or justify their desires. That was not true in 1962. Although many scholars have detailed the lineaments of the liberal consensus that held sway in the mid-twentieth-century United States, few have explored this consensus in textual action, the words that enacted governmental deeds. To unpack that language requires a concrete instance in which a political actor justifies an affirmative government’s role in a mixed economy. My point of entry into this language will be a speech delivered shortly after the steel crisis, President Kennedy’s “Commencement Address” at Yale University on June 11, 1962, known also as “The Myth and Reality in our National Economy.” Although the public reaction to this speech was not all that he desired, it set in motion a “going public” campaign that resulted in a major tax cut. At the beginning of this effort, one poll showed only 42 percent of Americans in support of a tax cut while 43 percent thought it was a bad idea. Another showed 72 percent opposed to the proposal. By the end of the process, 65 percent approved of the tax cut and only 17 percent opposed the policy.

More important, however, was the shift in public discourse. For the first time, H. W. Brands notes, “Kennedy assumed on behalf of the federal government the responsibility for managing the national economy.” Previous presidents had hinted at this stance or implicitly taken the responsibility while explicitly denying that they were doing so, “but not until now had any administration openly claimed a mandate for manipulating tax and spending policies to spur the economy to faster growth.” Richard Reeves termed it an “extraordinary performance,” and James Giglio called it “one of his most thoughtful speeches.” I contend here that Kennedy invented from his cultural milieu the rhetorical materials to justify the government’s management of the economy or, more precisely, the president’s management of the economy. The rhetorical force of this text rests in its deployment of linguistic strategies—ethos, dissociation, and time—that transformed ideology into action, that recast the terms of the liberal consensus into a powerful public language.

That discursive movement indicates ideology and idiom cannot be separated in the rough and tumble of political debate. Ideologies, such as the liberal consensus, cannot enter a room. They are carried by rhetors, who, in turn, work with inherited words. James Boyd White writes: “The ways we have of claiming, establishing, and modifying meaning are furnished to us by our culture, and we cannot simply remake to suit ourselves the sets of significance that constitute that world.” In this view, the languages of politics become the resources with which a people can maintain a collective life, giving meaning and significance to “the emerging human story that is charted and thematized by rhetoric.” This story, as Thomas Farrell points out, is
not entirely under the rhetor’s control. It is shaped not only by his or her choices, but also by the “reflective judgment” of the audience as it considers the policies and languages that craft a collective existence. Together, speakers and audiences work with old words, accepting, changing, and transforming them in light of common experience. One task, then, for the critic of public address is to focus on the moments in which one language gains a temporary and contingent ascendancy over others. Such a text becomes persuasive not only because it gains the audience’s “intellectual assent to the truth of certain propositions,” but also because, as White notes of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections*, it encourages them to “see things in the world as he presents them in his text, to think and feel about them as he does, and to form a community … that is grounded, in part at least, on this text and speaking its language.” John Kennedy, too, wanted us to speak his language, one invented from the material of the past and crafted to suit the needs of the present. He wanted us to grant to his words the status and authority necessary to bring about political and economic change. To a remarkable degree, he was successful.

His efforts and his language have not always won plaudits. Two of Kennedy’s most perceptive critics, Philip Wander and Bruce Miroff, nicely represent the adverse judgments. Wander, addressing this discourse in the context of Kennedy’s foreign policy, terms his style “technocratic realism” and traces its genesis to the Progressive Era. This discourse assumes, Wander argues, that the people cannot understand the “complex” choices that leaders face in a mass society. The world is a difficult place, and a realistic calculation of U.S. interests is needed if the nation is to survive and prosper. The political process is too messy for such analysis; the democratic leader is ill-suited for such calculation. Thus, ordinary people are not consulted, and the “technocrat” emerges “out of the university intellectuals, government bureaucrats, and skilled professionals” who make up administrations. The nation needs not a principled prophet but rather “a skilled, tough expert … one whose mind is unclouded by violent and dangerous emotions, one who is wise, analytical, precise.” Bruce Miroff, commenting on the Yale speech, attacks Kennedy’s “powerful elitist and managerial impulses.” In his brief for “technical” management of the economy, Miroff detects disdain for left and right: “Both stood condemned by their partisanship and ignorance; at best, they could only confirm the wisdom of handing economic affairs over to the President, his professional advisors, and those responsible statesmen in business and labor who followed the cues from Washington.” In a judgment consistent with his thesis that Kennedy ignored the public education opportunities offered by his office, Miroff claims that, under such a regime, democracy suffers and the elite rule. He writes that Kennedy “instituted an era in which corporate profits and corporate power soared.” To put it another way, both scholars apparently assume that the great Progressive debate between Walter Lippman, advocate of popular ignorance and expert rule, and John Dewey, advocate of popular education and expert subservience, came to a head in this administration. Lippman won.

Nor has any combination of the words “technical,” “reason,” and “expert” fared much better since in rhetorical studies or in the larger world of the humanities.
During the late 1970s and early 1980s, discerning critics, including G. Thomas Goodnight, Thomas Farrell, Thomas Frentz, and Walter Fisher, condemned the ways in which technical reason, or variants thereof, intruded on public deliberation. The objections were political—experts should not rule in a democracy—and philosophical—the realm of rhetoric was not the realm of rationalistic reason. Rhetoric lost status in a technocracy ruled by rationalists supposedly devoted to the erasure of contingent truths. The advent of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and antifoundationalism in the humanities, dating at least from Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* and Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, reinforced the trend. Reason and rationality, even when those concepts were not attacked, were in bad odor. Most important, the liberal consensus failed in the polity: Kennedy died, Vietnam erupted, Johnson fled, Nixon schemed, the economy tanked, and Reagan rose. What more impetus did we need to dump the technocrats and their language?

It would take a bolder critic than I to rehabilitate technical reason; in fact, I agree with much of the bill of indictment. The stereotype of technical rationality that pervades rhetorical studies, however, does not fully describe the historically contingent discourse that emerged in this period. A close analysis of Kennedy’s text suggests that the loss of the liberal consensus not only displaced evil technocrats, but also a powerful argument for affirmative government. This discourse should attract the attention of liberals who now wander the political wilderness. Equally important, a study of the ways in which the texture of Kennedy’s contexts enabled and constrained his reason historicizes the object of our disdain. Rather than treating this discourse as a kind of “rational world paradigm” that lives through time and space, critics can approach it as an articulation of a moment, a contingent rhetoric which, when considered, may well have its uses in contemporary politics. As Isaac Kramnick and other students of the American Founding suggest, languages do not simply go away. They linger, shift, and give birth to new variants of themselves over the course of history. The liberal idiom reigned at a time of optimism regarding government’s competence, a faith unusual in U.S. history. The symbolic capacities of a language that nurtured such faith offer inventional resources to those interested in justifying an activist government. After an account of this context, I turn to the text, an articulation of the last language to win widespread assent for an activist government.

**Rhetorical Contexts**

In 1950, literary critic Lionel Trilling famously wrote, “In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation.” Trilling’s obituary for conservative thought proved less than prescient, but the tenor of the times in which he worked undoubtedly contributed to his extravagance. Liberal presidents and politics had led to military victory, economic growth, and ideological dominance. Everyday life in the United States
irretrievably changed as a result and what came to be known as the “liberal consensus” received much of the credit and blame. This cultural accord evolved out of the experience of total war and the resulting alteration in the role of government. It infused the rhetoric of John F. Kennedy.

The Liberal Matrix

We won the Second World War. That was not a foregone conclusion. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Western liberal democracy hovered on the edge of collapse. Nation after nation abandoned the pretense of parliamentary government, turned to strong men on black tanks, and prospered. Richard Overy writes:

> In reality democracy was narrowly confined in 1939—to Britain, France, the United States and a handful of smaller European and British Commonwealth states—and was even more restricted once the conflict got under way. Far from being a war fought by a democratic world to bring errant dictators to heel, the war was about the very survival of democracy in its besieged heartlands.21

At the start of the war, a strong case could be made that democracy did not work under modern conditions. Seven years of FDR had yet to lift the nation out of depression; seven years of Hitler had restored the economic health of Germany. As David Kennedy notes, the economic philosophy of the New Deal rested on the assumption “that the era of economic growth had ended.”22 The Depression, many economists felt, was not a transitory phenomenon, but the start of a new era. The economic frontier had closed, Roosevelt announced in his Commonwealth Club address, and the United States needed to change. Existing resources were to be managed, older workers and widows were to be shifted into retirement, and prices and wages were to be pushed up through cooperative agreements between unions and business. FDR said, “Our task now is not discovery or exploitation of natural resources, or necessarily producing more goods. It is the soberer, less dramatic business of administering resources and plants already in hand.” That less dramatic business had yet to put many people to work by 1939.23

Seven years of FDR left the nation a minor military power; seven years of Hitler restored Germany to military pre-eminence. The West failed to defend the principle and fact of liberal democracy in the Rhineland, Austria, Ethiopia, Spain, Czechoslovakia, Finland, and, by the end of the year, Poland. It took France’s fall to spur the United States to a draft. The nearly complete subjugation of the European continent failed to stir the citizenry to war. That unwillingness seemingly confirmed two decades of research concluding that U.S. citizens did not act rationally, did not educate themselves fully, and did not fulfill the responsibilities of good progressive citizens in a democracy.24 Could representative government rest on such a slender hope as these people? One had to wonder if they deserved their freedom and many commentators did so. Fascism and, yes, even communism seemed to offer those intelligent enough to see the only real ways for nations to survive in what had become a very tough world.
Yet we won the Second World War. That victory, once Americans discounted the not inconsiderable assistance of our erstwhile ally the Soviet Union, vindicated the qualities of U.S. culture most in doubt prior to the war. The people’s inability to speak as one, their inattention to political affairs, the pluralistic, even corrupt, babel of political parties, the capitalist system of privately engineered greed, the amateur soldier, all qualities once thought to have threatened national survival, became signs of a peculiarly pragmatic American genius. Government played a major role in organizing the war effort, but it acted, as it should, as a part, not a whole. The government married individual initiative to intelligent planning to outsmart, outproduce, and outfight the enemy. Totalitarian automatons could not stand against such a people. The lesson was clear: Individual genius alone was not enough nor was an overweening government. The nation should work together as a team (one of Eisenhower’s favorite words) to ensure continued success.

Despite Eisenhower’s nominal identification as a Republican, that consensus became the liberal consensus, defined against both the laissez-faire philosophy of pre-war Republicans (a view that lingered in William F. Buckley) and the collectivist philosophy of the Old Left (a view that lingered in Henry Wallace). It did not imitate classical liberalism nor, despite the stereotype, did it necessarily provide big government. Rather, it enacted its own obsession with making do. The matrix began with fundamental liberal principles and then turned to pragmatic application.

Consistent with the patron saint of the Democratic Party, liberals believed that all white men (they were getting to women and African Americans, but were not there yet) were created equal. In contrast to traditional conservative thought, people were seen as “infinitely improvable” and the government held some responsibility for creating the social conditions that allowed for such growth. Although the precise role of government was always at issue, it intruded far more into the affairs of its citizens than had previously been the case. Particularly after the New Deal, emphasis was placed on the utilitarian calculus of the greatest good for the greatest number. Concomitant with the rise of pragmatism, liberals emphasized experimentation, results, and progress. The truth of political propositions should be tested in practice rather than accepted because of tradition or morality. Given that people could learn, they were also seen as relatively rational and could understand their interests and aggregate those interests into the large tents that were political parties. Parties, and the elements of federalism, provided the institutions that made for a pluralist, representative government. Not everyone was rational about everything, but as a whole, it worked well.

Modern conditions, however, required several caveats. The most important emanated at various times from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a Kennedy advisor, and John Kenneth Galbraith, a Kennedy advisor and the U.S. Ambassador to India. Both argued that the advent of the large industrial corporation changed the landscape. In Schlesinger’s terms, liberals needed to use “Hamiltonian means for Jeffersonian ends,” or in Galbraith’s terms, liberals needed to trust “countervailing powers.” That is, government, as well as the people’s institutions it nurtured (such as labor unions) must be robust enough to balance big business. Lest such countervailing
combat get out of hand, however, all parties needed to work together to achieve the one fact that had won the war and promised to win the peace as well: economic productivity.

The war revealed what the New Deal had not. John Maynard Keynes was right. The government could stimulate the economy such that demand for products grew, the producers financed the products, the workers were paid for making the products, and their pay, in turn, chased yet more products. This was a happy circle. Yet the devil in the details, as Joseph Schumpeter understood, was innovation. The corporation stifled ingenuity and entrepreneurship, reducing the genius to the organization man. Without innovation, without new products, services, and ideas, much less the advertising to sell the ideas, demand would eventually fail and not even the government would be able to keep growth going.27

The American system, a product of the newly declared American century, solved the problem. The clash of countervailing powers produced the innovations, from tail fins to mass consumer credit, that pushed the economy forward and created growth. Much as the battles between political factions paradoxically created stability, so, too, it was argued, did the fights between economic actors. As they struggled, ideas bloomed, productivity grew, and the United States became the envy of the world. Not only did The Liberal Tradition, as Louis Hartz put it in 1955, guarantee political stability, but it also created economic growth.26 The two were intertwined; the same logic ruled in both arenas, that of checks, balances, countervailing powers, controlled reform and innovation, a vision that traced its roots to Madison’s Federalist # 10.

Equally important, unlike traditional capitalism, the U.S. version encouraged social justice. Growth made it possible to meet needs out of newly produced resources. The U.S. could grow its way out of class conflict, defy Karl Marx, and provide a good living for everyone. The production miracle that had won the Second World War, energized the 1950s, and seemed poised to win the Cold War made it possible to imagine that this nation would make all people economically equal. Liberals felt it their duty to defend this vision against communism and to go forth and make disciples of all the world, baptizing them in the name of the American Dream.

Such a vision seems impossibly naive to us now, but it was real enough to many in this era. Critical to this perspective, however, was the growth of scientific thinking, of rationality in service to politics. As Michael Weiler says, “In science, pragmatists found a perfect complement…. Science faced the future without prejudice, ready to discover and to understand.”29 Much like the ways in which scientists and soldiers rationally attacked the difficulties that threatened the war effort, so, too, were they deployed to confront the problems that shadowed the peace. Ideas could take one only so far. They needed to be examined, developed, rationalized, and put to work. Genius might start the process, but rationality would make it useful. Moral and ideological beliefs slowed the process and were not at all useful.30 Rather, compromise developed through the pragmatic exchange of ideas between people of good will would solve the nation’s problems. Victory in war vindicated this perspective as
did the spread of this mode of thought through the vast expansion of university education after the war.\textsuperscript{31}

The liberal matrix received perhaps its clearest description in Daniel Bell’s \textit{The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties}. As he ruefully noted in an appendix to a later edition, “There are some books that are better known for their titles than their contents. Mine is one of them.” The title certainly made the book famous, and its dogmatism set in motion a series of attacks on its thesis. Bell acknowledged that, asserting that some saw a defense of “technocratic thinking,” but, with some justice, denied the claim.\textsuperscript{32} It is better to see these essays as a description of technocratic reason rather than as a defense of it. In fact, Bell’s analysis, as good as it was, faded in the face of his rhetorical skill. Bell’s was a realist discourse in which he used the data to explain the world as it was—a world without ideologies, one that worked through “technical decisions.” Despite his protests, Bell seemingly endorsed this view:

\begin{quote}
The tendency to convert concrete issues into ideological problems, to invest them with moral color and high emotional charge, is to invite conflicts which can only damage a society…. It has been one of the glories of the United States that politics has always been a pragmatic give-and-take rather than a series of wars-to-the-death.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

Technocratic reason, then, was authorized by the nation’s history—by the American insistence on pragmatic results. To be this sort of pragmatic liberal was to celebrate the glories of the United States. This was a different world from our own.

If the people were that practical, then glories should matter less than results. They were astonishing. Whatever the name of the discourse—the end of ideology, the liberal consensus, the liberal matrix, technocratic thinking, pragmatism—it worked. In the late 1940s, the United States had 7 percent of the world’s population and produced 42 percent of its income. Americans made 57 percent of the world’s steel, 43 percent of its electricity, 62 percent of its oil, and 80 percent of its automobiles. One might object that the war made for a special circumstance; untroubled by postmodern questions of agency, liberals would respond that they made those circumstances. They won the war. With the exception of a hiccup at the end of the war, the economy refused to give in to fears of a new depression. It rolled forward into the 1960s, producing “a quarter century of sustained growth at the highest rates in human history.”\textsuperscript{34}

What was most remarkable, of course, was the change in people’s lives. That change reinforced the efficacy of the liberal matrix. Americans bought homes; they did not rent them. That alone was new to the polity, but there was more. James Patterson summarizes the bonanza:

\begin{quote}
In the five years after the war Americans were presented with such new items as the automatic car transmission, the electric clothes dryer, the long-playing record, the Polaroid camera, and the automatic garbage disposal unit. Rising numbers of people were buying vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, electric ranges, and freezers. Millions bought frozen foods, which were marketed widely for the first time. It was a booming new age of “wonder” fibers and plastics: nylon for clothing, cheap food wraps, light new Styrofoam containers, inexpensive vinyl floor coverings, and a wide array of
\end{quote}
plastic toys. Between 1939 and 1948 clothing sales jumped three-fold, furniture four-fold, jewelry four-fold, liquor five-fold, household appliances, including TV, five-fold.35

What we now recognize as a modern life, with the “normal” conveniences, came into being in these years. All of it was brought to the depression generation courtesy of liberal economics and leadership.

Yet even that was not the whole of the story. Scientific and technical breakthroughs arrived with the nightly news. Much was hoped for from atomic power; miracle drugs, such as penicillin, moved from wartime use into general practice; and respect for science, medicine, and experts soared. Perhaps most symbolic was the destruction of polio. The disease that people feared because it struck their children, the disease that claimed FDR, the disease that caused panic nearly every summer, was vanquished. An epidemic in 1952 afflicted nearly 58,000 and killed 1,400. In 1962, there were 910 cases. Science worked.36

It is difficult for contemporary readers to grasp the sweep of this transformation and, as a result, the faith and optimism open to Kennedy as he prepared his argument. The contrast to the pre-war period could hardly be greater. Then it was assumed that the era of growth was over; now it was known that growth could continue. Then it was assumed that the people fell short of expectations; now it was known that they could rise to the occasion. Then it was assumed that the government could do little to change the economy or society; now it was known that the government could create jobs and cure disease.

As the 1950s ended, however, doubts arose about whether the government was doing enough. The unease came from several sources. First, the economy suffered a sharp recession in 1958 and, although it continued to do well by later standards, the ensuing recovery was slow and rough. Second, the nation’s chief rivals appeared to be outperforming the United States. The Soviet Union sent Sputnik into space and sent their economic growth rates nearly as high. The countries of Western Europe, embarking on the path that would someday lead to the European Community, also posted higher growth rates than the United States—and did so through more explicit macroeconomic control than the United States had chosen. The nation, through a series of education and development acts, committed itself to work yet harder. Finally, the dissatisfaction was amplified by quasi-governmental/foundation reports that decried the lack of national goals. They claimed that the country needed to plan more carefully and move more vigorously. John F. Kennedy read these political tea leaves with great interest.37

The New Frontier

A relatively undistinguished junior senator from Massachusetts, Kennedy nonetheless commanded a considerable national audience in 1960. The wealthy son of a controversial New Dealer, a war hero, an experienced official, an award-winning author, a gallant candidate for a vice-presidential nomination, and a consistent
winner in state elections, John Kennedy was neither the unqualified, overstimulated dolt his worst critics later created nor the warrior prince portrayed by his fervent admirers. He was a solid prospect, one who benefited because the favorite source of Democratic presidential candidates, the governor’s chairs, had temporarily dried up. He also had a fine feel for public language. He seemed to understand that the one way to beat an incumbent administration in a peaceful and prosperous time, absent a scandal, was to change the subject from what we had done to what we could have done, from achievement to potential. Eisenhower built a strong military; Kennedy insisted on a better military. Eisenhower started a space program; Kennedy insisted on a better space program. On every subject, he promised greater challenges, higher achievements, more of everything, a new frontier if only the country would respond to his call. Kennedy’s call met with just enough response to win election.38

Along with more of everything, candidate Kennedy had promised high economic growth. President Kennedy now needed to deliver. Unfortunately, neither Kennedy knew anything about the economy. On this point, memoirs, recollections, and biographies are perversely proud: John Kennedy knew almost nothing about money. In fact, he disdained the chase for the almighty dollar, probably, as Reeves put it, because his father had won the race for him.39 Kennedy never saw a paycheck, never balanced a checkbook, seldom handled money, and had no sense of how much money it took to live an average life. Fortunately for him, macroeconomic policy had little to do with those issues. Unfortunately for him, he knew little about that, either.

The economy refused to wait for the president’s education. Unemployment remained high, moving up to nearly 7 percent in 1961.40 Growth stayed low, hitting only 1.1 percent in the first quarter of 1962, and the balance of payments deficit deteriorated, prompting a flow of gold out of the United States.41 Inflation had risen to 2.5 percent a year, more than twice the average of Eisenhower’s second term.42 As a Democrat, Kennedy wished to spend more on everything from defense to agriculture, and yet he knew that he could not politically afford a deficit higher than the high of 12.8 billion dollars run up by Ike in 1958.43 That commitment was likely to conflict with his plans. The stock market drifted lower throughout Kennedy’s first years in office, climaxing on Blue Monday, May 28, 1962. Nearly 21 billion dollars in value disappeared during the biggest one-day drop in the market since 1929, a fact The New York Times helpfully shouted in their headline the next day.44 Business leaders blamed a White House that had socialized the means of steel production during the April crisis—or so they claimed. During the 1960 campaign, Kennedy promised a five percent annual growth rate, a drop in unemployment, and a reversal of the balance of payments deficit.45 In his first 16 months, he delivered around two percent growth, a rise in unemployment, and a continuing balance of payments deficit. John Kennedy knew he was in trouble.

His economic advisors told him why. As was his wont in foreign policy, President Kennedy had filled his economic Cabinet with gray Republicans and southern Democrats (such as Douglas Dillon as Secretary of the Treasury) to reassure the country that he was no radical. He then filled his staff with young, controversial scholars such as Walter Heller and James Tobin. Paul Samuelson and John Kenneth
Galbraith, the two most prominent Keynesians in the country, kibbitzed from afar. Heller, in particular, focused on a tool popular among the Keynes school, now called the “new economics”—the “performance gap.”

That was the difference between what the economy was producing and what it could produce at full employment. If the budget balanced or moved too far toward balance before full employment (defined as four percent unemployment), then the government was taking more out of the revenue stream than it was putting into that stream, even if it ran a deficit. Apparent deficits did not matter as much as real surpluses or deficits, “real” defined as what the budget would look like in full employment. Big deficits were good in slow times because they kept money in the private sector that “real” balanced budgets would pull out, money that could be used, Heller thought, to create five million jobs. The 1962 budget slowed the economy because it would be in surplus if there was full employment. Now, there was not a surplus because unemployment was higher than four percent, but to get to that four percent, the nation should act as if the budget was in surplus—we should spend more. The traditionalists did not see it that way because they could not see past the apparent deficit to the real surplus. The “new economics” understood the economy clearly, the government possessed the fiscal tools, and, as a result, the administration could manipulate those levers to create high economic growth. Consistent with the liberal ethos that characterized the times, activist government could shape private initiative for the public good if that government acted rationally and, yes, scientifically.

The president came to believe the economists. Unfortunately, Congress remained dubious and the people unsure. Balanced budgets had enticed nearly every president. Kennedy came to office determined to balance his budget because that was what every president wanted to do and every household had to do. One could not keep spending beyond one’s means. The power of that misleading analogy between federal and family budgets was extraordinary. Kennedy needed to defy that conventional wisdom and explain to the people the need for budget deficits—confirming every stereotype about those Democrats and your money, a rhetorical obstacle faced by nearly all liberals since World War II. To achieve this end, the president also had to do what Miroff said he never did. He needed to educate the citizenry. He chose to begin that campaign on June 11, 1962, at Yale University.

New Words, New Phrases

The occasion was commencement. Commencement calls for epideictic rhetoric, a speech that requires a relatively high style, a focus on the present (past and future figure as they inform the present), and a goal of contemplation. Such speeches invite audiences to consider communal life and, although the values they learn may dispose them to one act or another, they are not asked to act because that would disturb the unity that is presumed in such moments. A form of epideictic rhetoric, commencement addresses focus on strategies of transition; they perform the wisdom and rites necessary to move the audience from one stage of life to another.
President Kennedy liked commencement addresses. He saw his entire administration as a ritual of transition, a movement from one generation to the next, and that fit well with graduation speeches. He habitually spoke in a high style, given the low norms of the day, and a university setting encouraged him to speak as historian, teacher, and statesman. He liked those roles and used college campuses to deliver some of his better public speeches. He spoke on space at Rice University in 1961, on military policy at West Point in 1962, addressed the economy here and, in perhaps his finest hour, redefined the Cold War in his 1963 American University address. What the latter address, in particular, had in common with the Yale speech was Kennedy’s effort to offer a new way of talking about an old set of problems. The existing cultural configuration, including the common experience of the war, the increasing reach of government, the analysis of respected intellectuals, and the spread of prosperity, provided him with materials for invention. The evidence suggests that he was personally committed to that process. Accounts indicate that many White House speech writers had a hand in the composition, but that Kennedy edited the draft several times while in the White House and wrote entirely new sections during the plane trip to New Haven. He had listened carefully to Heller and the rest. The time had now come to see if the student could become the teacher.

A Liberal Ethos

*Ethos*, Aristotle emphatically asserts, may well be the most potent source of persuasion. Yet in a caveat that has puzzled scholars for centuries, he also insists that if *ethos* is to be artistic proof, if it is to persuade, we must consider only a rhetor’s character as it is presented in the speech. That injunction seems counterintuitive; we know speakers before they speak and, it would seem, we should take that knowledge into account. Aristotle, Thomas Farrell suggests, understands that point. But Aristotle also knows that character “is not something that is constant or prior to rhetorical success. Rather, character in public must constantly be re-formed and performed through the rhetorical choices we make in engaging responsible others.”

Advocate and audience transform each other through the mutual cultivation of judgment as they consider the urgent, unsettled matters that are the province of rhetoric. Yes, they come to the speech with qualities of character, but those qualities are crafted anew in the texture of the discourse.

For Kennedy, the matter concerns the unsettled state of the economy. As president and rhetor, he needs to craft an *ethos* which embodies the faculty of judgment he would bring to economic concerns. Two exigencies make this work particularly imperative. In this time, as Godfrey Hodgson among others has noted, the president has assumed a central role in liberal visions of the polity; the Supreme Court reacts rather than acts, and Congress is controlled by a conservative coalition of Republicans and southern Democrats. For the nation to move, and move with the speed required in the modern era, the president needs to take charge. Kennedy crafts such a president-in-the-text. In addition, he advocates management of the economy; if we are to entrust *him* with that task, we need to see the qualities of character he would
bring to the endeavor. He performs and embodies those qualities before and with his audience.

Irony suffuses the opening. That may seem a strange strategy for a moment often reserved for ingratiation, but it makes sense. Irony is the dialectical or dialogical trope.\textsuperscript{51} It achieves effect through indirect reference and enjoins the audience in a conspiracy; all of us, irony says, are bright enough to know that the joke makes a point. The president achieves ingratiation and enjoins the audience in his cause when he says, “Let me begin by expressing my appreciation for the very deep honor that you have conferred upon me. As General DeGaulle occasionally acknowledges America to be the daughter of Europe, so I am pleased to come to Yale, the daughter of Harvard. It might be said now that I have the best of both worlds, a Harvard education and a Yale degree” (470). The analogies between old world and new, between Harvard and Yale, and between DeGaulle and the president compress into a few short sentences Kennedy’s acknowledgment of identification and division. The shared substance between the terms paradoxically encapsulates powerful tensions—humorously expressed. Thus, Kennedy implies, disagreements need not be disagreeable. Rivals may be allies and yet remain adversaries. The same may be true of Kennedy and his audience. After all, as he speaks to a Yale audience, he slyly prefers the “best”: the substance of a Harvard education and only the appearance of a Yale degree.

This movement continues through the first five paragraphs. The president says that he is “particularly glad to become a Yale man because as I think about my troubles, I find that a lot of them have come from other Yale men.” He traces graduates from “Roger Blough, of the law school class of 1931,” with whom “I have had a minor disagreement” to Henry Ford to John Hay Whitney to William F. Buckley to Henry Luce—all of whom have caused him “troubles,” and yet the troubles are ironically reduced by understatement. There are “some complaints,” and “I also sometimes displease.” He even has “some trouble with my Yale advisors. I get along with them, but I am not always sure how well they get along with each other.” He concludes by noting that “this administration which aims at peaceful cooperation among all Americans has been the victim of a certain natural pugnacity developed in this city among Yale men. Now that I, too, am a Yale man, it is time for peace.” He offers to smoke the “clay pipe of friendship with all my brother Elis, and I hope that they may be friends not only with me but even with each other” (470).

Irony and understatement open the speech and achieve their effect through enactment of the appropriate liberal ethos. All participate in the consensus, and so all share substance even as they dispute particulars. Disagreements are ironically understated, a move which indicates their seriousness (irony is reversal) but also the attitude with which one should treat public debate. In Kennedy’s view, political rhetoric requires humor, joy, and laughter as well as a willingness to learn. John Kennedy’s ironic performance anachronistically embodies Richard Rorty’s liberal ironist and, one suspects, is a conscious or unconscious model for that philosopher.\textsuperscript{52} The two visions also intertwine with ideal images of scientific and academic
community; members debate, learn, disagree, laugh, and progress. Kennedy’s opening foreshadows the attitude with which he seeks to imbue the immediate audience and the country as it debates economic policy. Equally important, he is the model for this debate. He asks the audience to argue as he is arguing and to approach the nation’s problems in a posture of “peaceful cooperation.”

The liberal stance, the president is careful to note, aligns nicely with the mission of the university: “I speak of these matters here at Yale because of the self-evident truth that a great university is always enlisted against the spread of illusion and on the side of reality” (470). He quotes “your President Griswold” in support of that idea and notes, “But in the wider national interest, we need not partisan wrangling but common concentration on common problems. I come here to this distinguished university to ask you to join in this great task” (471). The latter line implicitly recalls his widely-praised inaugural address and “enlists” the audience, the “new class” as it were, of professionals, managers, white-collar workers, and educated people, in his effort.53 Given the epideictic occasion, the president engages them in what amounts to a seminar. They will not “wrangle” over the political merits of proposals but will instead examine the evidence and concentrate “dispassionately” (471) on the common problems.

As the president continues, his adverbs and adjectives reinforce the ironic liberal stance and open mind he shapes for himself and audience. Issues now are “more subtle and less simple” than in the past. He wants to “talk about [economics] carefully and dispassionately.” We must “find ways of clarifying this area of discourse”; we should adopt “a more sophisticated view”; “sensible and clearheaded management” is needed. Many “well-informed and disinterested” people disagree. In fact, there “are certainly matters … which government and business should be discussing in the most sober, dispassionate, and careful way if we are to maintain the kind of vigorous economy upon which our country depends” (470–5). These descriptions depict both the scientific community and the liberal polity. There are no matters of principle here, no politics of personal destruction, no crusades for justice, and no speaking truth to power. There is, instead, a careful attitude of inquiry and an ironic sense of personal limitation, although the nation, once we “start a serious dialog” will achieve “unrivaled economic progress” (475). Many heads are better than one. We cured polio. We can make a booming economy.

Such is the justification for free scientific inquiry, but as a philosophy of government, it lacks a clear foundation in value or faith. We want growth in the economy, but from where does a liberal ironist draw the authority to lead the polity? And how do we know we have reached the “right” answer, if that answer is not based on principle, value, or tradition? President Kennedy must find some way to ground his discourse, to assure the public that his approach is right, and to answer those questions.

Myth and Reality

The answers flow from empirical observation of the world or, in the case of rhetoric, from imitation of that form of scientific argument. Kennedy’s speech crafts authority from his superior observational and analytical skills—from his ability to see reality
more clearly than his rivals or the audience, although the audience will put those skills into practice as they learn from him. Kennedy’s discernment results from “finding ways to separate false problems from real ones” (471). “Ways” implies a method that shapes reliable and valid observation. Method, however, should not be thought of in a strictly scientific sense. In public speech, President Kennedy’s ethos and argument intertwine to craft a sensibility that takes argumentative shape as dissociation and its cognate forms.

Dissociation, Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca say, is a form of division in which a unitary term is divided into two parts; the parts are revalued and “our conception of reality” is thereby remodeled.54 A key version of this strategy, and perhaps the most important owing to its ubiquity, is the appearance/reality pair. We resolve incompatibilities that we notice through attributions of appearance and reality. Some things appear to be true and some things “are” true. They exist on different levels; thus, the incompatibility can be resolved. Significantly, however, it does not eliminate either one. Both remain, but assume revised places in an altered scheme of reality. That the speaker sees through appearance to reality makes this an excellent way to create authority. The speaker discerns what others do not; s/he deserves to lead.

John Kennedy’s legitimacy rests on his ability to read the world in the most efficacious manner and he demonstrates that ability through a series of dissociations, as the thesis suggests: “I want to particularly consider the myth and reality in our national economy” (471). There may seem to be a debate about economic policy, but the “dialog between the parties … is clogged by illusion and platitude and fails to reflect the true realities of contemporary American society” (471). It is not a debate at all because there can be no clash between platitude and truth, myth and reality. To have a “real” discussion, one must separate the appearance of a debate from the reality of the key issues facing the nation. Kennedy proposes to do so.

So the speech is one large dissociation. The first section works through “three great areas of our domestic affairs.” The president dissociates the myths and realities regarding the size of the government, the use of fiscal policy, and the matter of public confidence in the government (471). Each area contains dissociations and divisions; “the myth … that government is big, and bad,” for instance, is disputed through three arguments. Each one resembles dissociation, even if not a perfect exemplar (471–2). The second part turns to two more “of the real questions on our national agenda” (473), the relationship of the budget to growth and the relationship of interest rates to growth and the strength of the dollar. Each is discussed through analysis, division, and dissociation. The process never ends. Kennedy relentlessly and analytically carves the economy, much like a chicken that needs to be fried, dissociation and division leading to more dissociation and division, piece after piece falling into the pot. In modernity, few other approaches could seem so scientific.

Yet distinctions are not enough. He must establish his authority, the grounds for his claim that he understands reality and his rivals do not. Fortunately, dissociation helps to achieve this goal. In many cases, when speakers distinguish between appearance and reality, they forward a status argument. Reality, in Western cultures,
possesses a far more powerful symbolic charge than appearance and Kennedy takes advantage of that as he considers the economic languages available to the nation. To paraphrase Robert Hariman’s argument on the use of dissociation to denigrate rhetoric as appearance and extol philosophy as reality, John Kennedy restructures “the received unity of all [economic] discourse into separate realms of appearance and reality.”55 In so doing, the president lifts the regard in which his language is held and marginalizes competing discourses. They reflect only the “myths” of “illusion” without “the discomfort of thought” while his speech “reflect[s] the true realities of contemporary American society” (471).

Significantly, however, Kennedy acknowledges that the “myths” have an “excuse for existence” (471). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca note that dissociation “preserves, at least partially, the incompatible elements.”56 Some lament, for instance, that the government has grown. But that is not enough; logic that stops there does not work well enough. Government has grown, but

for the last 15 years, the Federal Government—and also the Federal debt—and also the Federal bureaucracy—have grown less rapidly than the economy as a whole.... less than industry, less than commerce, less than agriculture, less than higher education, and very much less than the noise about big government. (471–2)

The key is relative growth. It may appear that government has grown, but it has grown less than everything else and so, in real terms, it has declined. He notes that “the national debt since the end of World War II has increased only 8 percent, while private debt was increasing 305 percent” (472), a number that reverses the analogy between government and household. Both have dropped into debt but the government is more virtuous than the household. The president refutes the opposing argument through dissociation, yet retains it and its proponents within the new reality. They are logical, and they have a point. They have failed only to pursue that logic carefully enough, a flaw, but certainly not one that eliminates them from the community.

On topic after topic, President Kennedy analyzes stereotypes that impede rational public debate, crafts questions that address “real” economic issues, and indicates his willingness to discuss them ad nauseam. He performs his ability to see through illusion to reality and submits his evidence to judgment from his audience. Dissociation, in this instance, imitates empirical argument, those literature review claims that previous research is incoherent and this is the way the world works.57 By using dissociation in the contexts of his speech and his modern culture, Kennedy crafts a scientific credibility.58 He sees the world clearly, and that matters in modernity. Dissociation marks his discourse as “central to” U.S. society and marks others as “confused, inarticulate, flawed.”59 The ranking relies not only on these dissociations for its justification, but also on a larger disjunction. The nation has entered a new time, one in which the economy poses “basically an administrative or executive problem in which political labels or clichés do not give us a solution” (474).
To recapitulate, President Kennedy uses this speech to begin a campaign for a tax cut. He wants a tax cut because he believes in the new economics. He believes through careful and intelligent application of fiscal policy the government or, more directly, the president, can speed up or slow down economic growth. At this time, the economy needs a stimulus, and so that is what the president wants. Unfortunately for him, few others believe his economists. Despite the slowly growing fund of post-war economic data, most people, especially members of Congress, believe the economy to be outside of government control, either because the government cannot do that or because the government should not do that. As the beginning of his campaign, this speech is designed to assert that control. To do so, Kennedy, imbued with the liberal matrix, crafts a careful, ironic ethos, one that, it turns out, sees the world better than rivals as shown through a series of dissociations. Implicit in the dissociative logic, however, is another division, one meriting autonomous critical consideration: Kennedy's use of time.

Time enters into rhetorical action in a number of ways. The sophists argue that effective rhetoric embraces a sense of kairos—that it comes at a good time, that the rhetor understands when it is appropriate to speak. That is an external sense of time, the place of the speech in the audience’s time, yet it is also clear that texts generate an internal sense of time. The speech unfolds over time and shapes audience responses in time. The text may also model time for the audience, representing the “times” in such a way that the audience will accept the internal sense of time as the most appropriate representation of time in the world. These movements in time entangle time with ideology. Celeste Condit contends,

the rhetor must move the audience (in time) through the ideological constellation or dominant public vocabulary that constructs the particular rhetorical problem she or he (and/or the society) faces. Each of the moves the rhetor makes is a disposition of a reigning ideological constellation, and it shifts the audience into new “places” where, because of new perspectives, key terms take on new significance.

Audiences know the times in which they live through a persuasive presentation of the new place they inhabit because of the change in time. To write in Hariman’s terms, to distinguish between times is to rank the times—to attach high regard to one definition of the times and denigrate other discourses.

So it is in Kennedy’s time. The president posits a sharp break in U.S. history, a breach between past and future, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, pre-modern and modern societies. He deploys the dissociation of time early in the speech. After that offer of a pipe of friendship, he continues the good humor by turning to “earlier links” between the “institution of the presidency and Yale” (470). He comments happily on William Howard Taft and John C. Calhoun, the two relevant characters, but then abruptly changes tone: “Calhoun in 1804 and Taft in 1878 graduated into a world very different from ours today” (470). The tonal break imitates the breach in time. The chief difference between now and then, he says, results from the issues they addressed. They and “their contemporaries spent entire careers stretching over
40 years in grappling with a few dramatic issues on which the Nation was sharply and emotionally divided, issues that occupied the attention of a generation at a time” (470). That is not the case in 1962: “Today, these old sweeping issues very largely have disappeared” (470). Instead, Kennedy argues,

the central domestic [note the qualification] issues of our time are more subtle and less simple. They relate not to basic clashes of philosophy or ideology but to ways and means of reaching common goals—to research for sophisticated solutions to complex and obstinate issues. (470–1)

Kennedy’s examples are revealing. Taft and Calhoun, as personifications of an earlier generation of Yale graduates, struggle for decades over a key issue. One receives the image of a lifetime crouched over a flickering lamp. Calhoun on slavery comes immediately to mind. Today, by contrast, the United States must “face technical problems without ideological preconceptions” (475). Fundamentals are not in question. In the midst of the liberal matrix, all Americans know what they want—it is a question “of ways and means of reaching common goals” (471). Those ways and means, in turn, involve careful, sensible, technical solutions—the sort of “research” valued by the scientific community. Past issues concerned ideological clashes of armies by night; present issues concern research of enlightened scholars by day.

Modernity, in other words, presents a different sort of challenge. The extent of the break in time is reinforced by the consistency of Kennedy’s language. Throughout the speech, he refers to the lingering languages of the past as myth and the challenges of the present as reality or as “true realities.” He displays a fine ability to remain within that lexicon. Every generation must “disenthrall” itself from myth (471); “incantations” will do us no good (475); “myths are legion” in this area (472). Words connoting the past describe the past and are joined to “preconceptions,” “ideologies,” and “exhausted and irrelevant” “stereotypes” (470–3). “Truth,” “reality,” “hard thought,” and “careful assessment” dominate our condition as does a clear and nuanced sense of judgment. Take, for instance, his description of the discernment that must be brought to bear on the budget, a definition that sounds like nothing so much as practical wisdom:

Each sector, my point is, of activity must be approached on its own merits and in terms of specific national needs. Generalities in regard to Federal expenditures, therefore, can be misleading—each case, science, urban renewal, education, agriculture, natural resources, each case must be determined on its merits if we are to profit from our unrivaled ability to combine the strength of public and private purpose. (472)

A better presidential statement on the “end of ideology” can hardly be imagined. Choices are scrutinized fully. Policy can bring “profit.” This is possible because of “our unrivaled ability to combine the strength of public and private purpose.” The liberal matrix lives in this address; we think, we choose, and we progress.

Example and analogy buttress his argument. As Kennedy nears the end of the speech, he is now willing to define the key issue, one that, in subsequent speeches, will lead to his call for a tax cut: “How, in sum, can we make our free economy work
at full capacity—that is, provide adequate profits for enterprise, adequate wages for labor, adequate utilization of plant, and opportunity for all?” (475). Putting the “real” issue in the form of a question encourages audience participation yet captures the high ground in advance of the debate. The discussion is open to all, but the debate is structured on the president’s pragmatic terms—making the economy work at capacity becomes the given goal and the debate focuses on the means, not the end. These are the issues we “should be talking about,” and “the example of Western Europe shows that they are capable of solution—that governments, and many of them are conservative governments, prepared to face technical problems without ideological preconceptions, can coordinate the elements of a national economy and bring about growth and prosperity—a decade of it” (471).

In contrast, the “conversations I have heard in our own country sound like old records, long-playing, left over from the middle thirties” (475). He admits that debate “produced great results, but it took place in a different world with different needs and different tasks. It is our responsibility today to live in our own world, and to identify the needs and discharge the tasks of the 1960s” (475). An affirmative example and a negative analogy demonstrate the expediency of the president’s position. Western Europe, even when led by conservatives, understands the times and responds appropriately to them. The United States has not done so and the example and analogy suggest the “needs” the United States must address to advance.

The most significant need does not concern policy but rather the language with which we discuss programmatic choices. Consistent with his epideictic purpose, he does not violate the occasion with concrete prescriptions. Those will come later. Rather, he proffers the language in which the debate should be conducted, a language he describes and enacts in the speech. Despite the realist flavor of the address, Kennedy’s conclusion resists the ultimate hallmark of the realist style: He refuses to conceal the textuality of his discourse. Rather, he claims that discussion “is essential,” and he hopes that recent debates “may represent the start of a serious dialog of the kind which has led Europe to such fruitful collaboration among all the elements of economic society and to a decade of unrivaled economic progress” (475). Obviously, he grounds his discourse in the “real” problems of U.S. society, and the speech reveals the president’s penchant for realism noted by other scholars. Yet it is a peculiarly pragmatic form of realism, inflected by the liberal consensus. Kennedy’s language is superior, he argues, because its realism is proven by its success; the language works, as the example of Western Europe shows. There are no abstract epistemological tests. There are, instead, criteria for evaluation based primarily on effect: Does the economy grow? He readily admits his language is a language and that it can be improved through debate and discussion. He argues, however, that it will work better than other languages. It will produce the greatest good for the greatest number.

As Kennedy closes, he justifies the choice to disenthrall ourselves from the past, as one might expect of this ironic man, by resorting to the past. Who better to disclaim history’s burden than the founder of enlightened liberalism in the United States? “Nearly 150 years ago Thomas Jefferson wrote, ‘The new circumstances under
which we are placed call for new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old
words to new objects’” (475). The emphasis on exigence and language reflects the
president’s determination to bring a new language to bear or, in Condit’s terms, to
move us to a new place requiring a changed public vocabulary. In his view, the old
languages have seduced us; the speech calls for new discourses for new circum-
stances. One might expect this appeal to work well at a commencement address
because that audience wishes for a new world in which they will have power and
success. As this generation of Americans becomes “part of the world … we will
generate a vision and an energy which will demonstrate anew to the world the
superior vitality and strength of a free society” (475). Old purposes—the revelation
of a shining city on a hill—can be achieved with new words, as it always has been
from Jefferson to Kennedy.

Speculative Conclusion

This essay began with several concerns. I sought to explain the symbolic charge of
John Kennedy’s economic rhetoric, a persuasive campaign that enjoyed considerable
success. Not only did it turn public opinion, it also shifted presidential rhetoric
regarding the duties of government in a modern economy. For the first time, a
president took explicit responsibility for the nation’s economic performance, and
that is the sort of discursive shift that rhetorical critics should chart. He could do so
because the liberal matrix that formed his cultural milieu gave him inventional
resources that helped him to justify his claim to authority. Kennedy wove out of
those discourses a powerful argument for an activist government, and that is the
kind of rhetorical creativity that should intrigue us. In a larger sense, this case
illustrates rhetorical means by which rhetors can give status and authority to their
words amid the jostle of political languages. It remains to assess that language, its
results, and its capacity to speak to contemporary problems.

Kennedy’s success evolved from several factors. If consistency matters in rhetoric,
then he deserved reward. This speech represents his typical public argument and tells
us much about his high rhetorical reputation. The strategies detailed here marked
much of his rhetoric. In his nomination-acceptance address, he claimed, “For the
world is changing. The old era is ending…. The New Deal and the Fair Deal were
bold measures for their generations—but this is a new generation…. It is time, in
short, for a new generation of leadership.”64 Barbara Warnick charts such strategies
in the Houston Ministerial speech, Philip Wander calls his foreign policy rhetoric
“technocratic realism,” Theodore Windt underlines the rationality of the American
University address, and Steven Goldzwig and George Dionisopoulos label him a
“romantic pragmatist.”65 John Kennedy campaigned and governed on the argument
that he saw a new world more clearly and understood needed policies more fully
than did his opponents. The implicit arrogance of that posture was relieved by the
authoritative ethos he developed, an ironic stance which consistently emphasized his
humor, his willingness to listen to alternative arguments, and the rationality with
which one should undertake public tasks.
This discourse evolved out of his culture. Beginning, perhaps, with Stephen Lucas’s call for critics to consider the “linguistic context” of speeches, rhetorical studies has seen a steadily increasing concern with the invention sources of public discourse. This re-invention of the historical aspect of public address emphasizes not only the traditional factors of immediate context and speaker biography, but also the “intertextual matrix” out of which and through which rhetorical acts emerge. Invention, however, does not occur solely from within the confines of a linguistically determined universe. Concrete material interests, authorized intellectuals, social forces, and particular classes as well as popular discourses work to shape the rhetorical situation and the appropriate exigencies and constraints for political rhetors to consider. In this instance, my reading emphasizes the ways in which Kennedy’s good reasons emerged out of the dialogic interaction of cultural discourses—the “end of ideology” movement, the liberal matrix, the faith in government, the fear that the nation was falling behind its competitors, and the cultural authority of scholars such as Daniel Bell and John Kenneth Galbraith—made prominent at this time by a multitude of material and social forces. These discourses provided compelling explanations for the growth of the nation and its economy in the post-war period, interpretations that not only made sense, as it were, but also rooted their authority in yet older traditions. The striking resemblance between the market model as articulated by Galbraith and Schlesinger and James Madison’s political model in *Federalist # 10* cannot be overlooked in this regard, nor can the work of commentators such as Louis Hartz, who made of “America” a liberal nation from its birth to the American Century. At the same time, however, a language cannot emerge as authoritative in the culture unless its capacity, its *dynamis*, is brought into existence through a speaker’s concrete and considered engagement with an audience. President Kennedy’s speech, exemplifying his ability to establish, claim, and modify the liberal matrix, shaped him, in S. Michael Halloran’s terms, as “a kind of living embodiment of the cultural heritage.” Such an *ethos* is a powerful resource in political debates.

Politics, in turn, was the arena in which Kennedy operated, and that is one answer to his critics. Bruce Miroff is right: John Kennedy sought to marginalize competing rhetors and place himself in the middle of the political spectrum. Much like Abraham Lincoln at Cooper Union, President Kennedy wanted to build a powerful coalition in support of his policies, and he did so through strategies designed to grant status to his language and incoherence to competing words. That is what presidents do with their rhetoric. As Maurice Charland writes, “Rhetoric is not as such politically insensitive or inherently allied to the powerful and the ‘right.’ Rather, rhetoric is pragmatically impatient before what it considers ineffective political and intellectual practice.” Those who critique the president for seeking power miss the point. At this moment, Kennedy’s particular rhetorical preferences, the cultural discourses from which he drew, and the problems he faced convinced him that these sorts of argument were likely to work. One can hardly blame a president for being a pragmatist; that is, a citizen can only hope, part of the job description.

At the same time, this mode of discourse calls for evaluation. It positions the
audience as a collection of liberal, rational individualists, a “people” who would be familiar to denizens of the Enlightenment. The liberal consensus assumes a difficult, complex, and gray world, one in which all citizens agree on fundamental principles, but one which also requires careful thought, extensive research, and prudent acts. It therefore puts a premium on rational argument, scientific evidence, and, not least, pragmatic accommodation in the face of difference. It assumes good will on the part of those who participate in public debate and is “shocked, shocked” by those who refuse to abide by the rules of civility, whether on the left or the right. It is easy to understand the complaints of those, from Richard Weaver to Martin Luther King, Jr., who saw little room for themselves in the reform rationality of the times. Equally important, the increasingly powerful role assumed by the federal government and exalted by Kennedy undoubtedly sapped the ability of “countervailing powers” to balance the influence of the modern corporation. The very ways in which this discourse positioned its audience as rational individuals undermined the capacity of other discourses to highlight the necessity for collective life and action.

Indeed, the individuality posited by this discourse extended to the president himself. In this text, he emerged as the central figure, as the one force capable of judging the ebb and flow of the economy and making the necessary adjustments, once granted that power by the electorate. Kennedy believed that the hackneyed “rising tide” would lift all boats, even if, as he probably knew, the yachts rose higher than the rest. Corporate profits soared during these years, as critics charge, but so did the size of the middle class. Economists Claudia Goldin and Robert Margo call the post-war period the “Great Compression” because of the narrowing gap between the rich and ordinary Americans. Although wealth ticked up during Kennedy’s years in office, the real income of average families grew by 30 percent between 1960 and 1968. That compares to a nine percent growth between 1979 and 1997. Economist Paul Krugman, for one, credits “the Kennedy tax cut, which started the boom of the 1960s.” The liberal consensus was a rare period in U.S. history when income inequality declined as overall income rose. Yet the authorizing discourse that put these policies into place rested ultimately on the persona who enacted them. Absent this compelling figure able to see, judge, and act so effectively and pragmatically, the discourse had little rhetorical resonance.

Compelling to me, at any rate, and that should be part of the critical process. The usual critique of John Kennedy aims at his personal recklessness and lack of conventional moral fibre. If his public career comes under attack, it is generally owing to his few accomplishments. That Philip Wander and Bruce Miroff contest Kennedy’s rhetoric and the ideological assumptions it embodies is noteworthy. Few scholars do so and one of the reasons, I suspect, is that Kennedy argues in the way that most of us would like to argue. I believe that the majority of academics are liberals, not in the sense of overweening government power, but in this sense, in a yen for the subjectivity offered by the liberal matrix and enacted by John Kennedy—funny, ironic, active, sceptical, intelligent, discerning, and enmeshed in the warm bath of other such people.

Celeste Condit reminds rhetorical critics that we should not universalize our
linguistic norms, much less our yens I suppose, to all people.\textsuperscript{77} John Kennedy's rhetoric is a nice example of the conflict between alternative critical communities. For Wander and Miroff, Kennedy's constant resort to the authority offered by rationality makes him unsavory at best and elite at worst. When technocrats rule, the people lose. This view of rationality, appeals to “complexity,” and so on, runs throughout rhetoric and, as I briefly pointed out, the humanities as a whole. In contrast, I have argued that this language—the ethos Kennedy built, the dissociations he deployed, the disjunction in time he posited—created his authority. It justified the president's assumption of the power to manage the economy and, as a result, intervene directly in social problems.

The end of the liberal matrix and the diminution of that language by conservatives, scholars and others removed the rationale for an activist government. It also removed the subject position offered and required by that discourse. We no longer seem to believe that anyone, or at least any politician, can manage a complex world so well.\textsuperscript{78} Of course, many events intervened. But no subsequent language has fully replaced that discourse. Liberals and even leftists lost a good deal when they lost this language. If one undermines reason, one dissipates the claim to “see” the world better than rivals. That argument has traditionally constituted liberal authority to invoke an activist government. If one “knows” the world, one can effectively and efficiently act in it. If one cannot know, then government programs are useless at best and counterproductive at worst.

The prospects for an invigoration of this language seem slight as I write these words. Yet key premises of liberalism have remained in place and linger into the present.\textsuperscript{79} In particular, the conservative critique of the liberal consensus, as opposed to the poststructuralist argument, is concerned less with the ontological claim that no one can manage the nation and more with the political claim that no government official should manage the nation. Even that assertion has appeared less often during President George W. Bush's administration, which has significantly expanded the reach of the federal government into areas such as primary education and homeland security and justified its ability to act effectively in those contexts.\textsuperscript{80} Once one accepts the ability of government to act effectively, the question becomes the ends for which it should strive. In that atmosphere, the language of liberalism finds itself on firmer ground because its assumptions about government action are compatible with the cultural norms. In addition, the fiercest critics of this administration rely, in part, on several strategies detailed here. For instance, The New York Times columnist Paul Krugman consistently emphasizes his ethos as a professional economist, deploys statistics to demonstrate the gap between the president's reality and reality, and argues, as the subtitle of his most recent book suggests, that we have lost our way in a new time.\textsuperscript{81}

Krugman's rhetorical choices undoubtedly reflect his personal preferences, but they may also have something to do with the times. I have emphasized the direct antecedents to Kennedy's speeches. Yet, as Phillip Wander points out, technocratic reason also evolved in competition with prophetic dualism, the discourse of a Manichean world. In that black and white vision, there are only two sides, and if you
are not with us, then you are with the terrorists—or liberals. In the face of such arguments, resort to a language emphasizing the complexity of the world and the need for rational political judgments seems an appropriate choice. One can accept fundamental American values and the cultural consensus, as John Kennedy did, but argue that the means used to enact those values are too crude for a complicated world. None of this is to say that the language of the liberal consensus will appear again. As is the case with all old/new languages, it will need to be reconstructed to meet the needs of a new century through the practice of public address. John Kennedy understood that task very well.

Notes


[2] There are odd discrepancies over the obscenities Kennedy employed. My account follows Reeves until the businessmen remark. Reeves reports that as “pricks” (which would be consistent with the macho sexual imagery), as does Dallek, but it was leaked and became famous as “sons of bitches,” particularly when Kennedy, in an unusual display of a tin ear, said that his father had referred only to steel men, not all businessmen, as if that would make it better. Schlesinger also offers “bastards” as a favored Kennedy epithet for businessmen. Kennedy could never remember whether he called them sons of bitches, or bastards, or pricks, distinctions without a great deal of difference. Reeves, President Kennedy, 296; Schlesinger, Thousand Days, 584; Dallek, Unfinished Life, 484.

[3] Reeves, President Kennedy, 297.
[5] Reeves, President Kennedy, 298, 303.


Quoted in Kennedy, *Freedom*, 373.


See Hodgson, *America*, 76.


For rhetorical critics, Richard Weaver’s writings are a useful index of the extent of this consensus by virtue of his deep dissatisfaction with it. In his famous “Ultimate Terms” essay, he decides that the god term of the era is “progress” and sarcastically notes that “it will validate almost anything.” In *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, that essay was preceded by a powerful attack on “The Rhetoric of Social Science.” That essay, in turn, was preceded by a lamentation for the lost, spacious rhetoric of the nineteenth century. There was little place for Weaver’s traditional conservatism in the liberal consensus. See Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (South Bend, IN: Regnery/Gateway, Inc., 1953), 212.

For this analysis, see Ricci, *Tragedy*.


The statistics and the quotation are found in Patterson, *Grand*, 61.

Patterson, *Grand*, 70.

Patterson, *Grand*, 67, 320.

Hodgson, *America*, 67–84. Oddly, given the later tendency of critics to see all of Kennedy’s policies through the prism of the Cold War, he was constantly comparing the United States to Western Europe. The last two pages of the Yale speech return to that theme repeatedly. See also Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 295.

One of the better accounts of the campaign is still to be found in Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*. The classic account is Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1961).


Giglio, *Presidency*, 125.


Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 295.

Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 295.

Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 316.
This discussion of the performance gap is based on Reeves, President Kennedy, 316.

Wilbur Mills, chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, was particularly recalcitrant. See Reeves, President Kennedy, 333.

There are a great many studies of epideictic rhetoric. Among the more useful summaries are:


Farrell, Norms, 80.

Hodgson, America, 100–6.

Kenneth Burke provides the classic contemporary account of irony in A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 511–17. Of particular interest here is Burke’s insistence that an ironic sense of history “would be a dialectic of characters” in which one language would never obliterating another. Rather, we should “note elements of all such positions (or ‘voices’) existing always, but attaining greater clarity of expression or imperiousness of proportion of [in?] one period than another.” In that sense, I trace the strategies through which Kennedy accords to his language the “imperiousness of proportion” in the public sphere that he desires for it.


See Schlesinger, Vital Center, for a discussion of the “new radicals” that constitute this audience. See also Depoe, Schlesinger, although Depoe emphasizes Schlesinger’s debt to Reinhold Niebuhr’s version of original sin and the “children of darkness” more than seems appropriate. Again, that is likely owing to the emphasis on the Cold War.


Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, New Rhetoric, 413.

For instance, the last two questions he considers in the speech, the budget and interest rates, reduce alternative discourses to incoherence. In each case, Kennedy proves the “complexity” of contemporary society and the “irrelevant[cy]” of “political labels and ideological approaches” through resort to incompatibility. He cites exactly opposite economic prescriptions from sources such as “Senator Proxmire, who is ordinarily regarded as a liberal Democrat” and a “well-known business journal” among others to show that complex phenomena defy ideological solution—the same factors lead to opposite recommendations, an obvious incoherence and one that occurs regularly when people are blinded by ideology: “Both may be right or wrong. It will depend on many different factors. The point is that this is basically an administrative or executive problem in which political labels or clichés do not give us a solution” (474).

Roger Stahl has recently noted the paradox of dissociation; he argues that it often acts as the grounds for argument and as a technique of argument. In the face of dissociation’s “emphasis on metaphysics,” distinctions such as ground and technique “show a tendency to collapse, and we are left at times with dissociation as a kind of rhetorical transference, one that permeates the approach, the means, and the conclusion. In this way, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca highlight linguistic configurations themselves as central to decision making.” To accept Kennedy’s linguistic configuration is to accept at least the rationality of his


[71] Charland, “Rehabilitating,” 469.

[72] Many sources discuss liberalism’s traditional problems with collective life. Kramnick, for instance, goes so far as to say that liberalism “encompasses no idea of community or quest for the common good.” Republicanism, 15.


[75] The centrality of the great leader to this version of liberalism is readily apparent in the work of one of its leading intellectuals, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. See, for instance, his argument that great men (and they are men) provoke seismic shifts in U.S. history in *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1986).

[76] I am not sure that is a fair critique. The case against Kennedy is summarized and the case for Kennedy is made in *Paper, Promise and Performance*.


[79] Although the 1968 election irretrievably shattered the liberal coalition, the language continued to exert power well after that time. For instance, Stephen Ambrose was among the first to write a revisionist history of the Nixon administration, arguing that he put in place a number of domestic reforms, from environmental policy to affirmative action mandates, dear to liberal hearts. See *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician 1962–1972* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).


[81] Krugman, *Great Unraveling*. It is worth noting that Krugman has been equally contemptuous of those liberals who fail to hold the appropriate credentials or argue from fallacious grounds. He rose to public prominence partly because of his withering assault on “pop internationalists,” particularly former Clinton Labor Secretary Robert Reich. Facts, Krugman generally argues, will lead us to the promised land. See *Pop Internationalism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).