

MERE RHETORIC

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In the tradition of Literary Club titles, I have chosen one that could introduce nearly any subject. In this instance however my subject is in fact rhetoric. I am confident that every one of you here this evening already knows a great deal about the topic, and have, in fact, demonstrated that understanding in your writing. The OED describes rhetoric as, “the art of using language to persuade . . . part of the trivium,” which, along with logic and grammar, made up the basic liberal arts curriculum in medieval universities. To be considered a scholar, one had not only to master the conventions of communication and the means to sort through the often conflicting ideas presented by life, but also to be able to present one’s thoughts and conclusions in a manner likely to persuade the hearer.

But what about the “mere” part of mere rhetoric? Further along the OED says that rhetoric is, “elegance or eloquence of expression,” and then, “also ostentatious, artificial oratorical flourishes, mere rhetoric” as opposed to sober statement or logic. Here is the definition that Plato used to belittle the Sophists; those men of Greek civic life who, he claimed, used oratorical tricks to make the lesser case seem the greater. Plato had a pretty definite idea about the nature of reality and he was pretty sure that there was no room for a bunch of jabbering sophists in his cave for the shadow show. And for those who, like Plato, believe they already know the nature of reality, the difference between right and wrong, and the proper course for civilization to follow, all that discussion and argument are likely to seem like a waste of valuable time, an unnecessary side-show, mere rhetoric.

For the rest of us, indeed for anyone whose faith is in the democratic process, arguing constitutes the essential activity of public life. If the will of the people constitutes the truth of democracies, then argument and persuasion are the methodologies by which truth can be discovered.

Aristotle is a little more helpful here, or at least a little more sympathetic. Instead of condemning rhetoric, he analyzed it. Consistent with his approach to knowledge, he categorized the ways persuasion could be made effective. One way was to appeal to a sense of reason. “This soap is new and improved and has been shown to be effective in cleaning shirt collars.” Another is to play on the emotions. “If you don’t use this soap, the dirt on your husbands shirt collar will be noticed and then people won’t think you are very nice and look down on you.” Finally the status of the speaker lends credence to the statement. The man in the lab coat may not be a scientist, but he looks like one. When he pronounces the results of scientific studies that he assures us demonstrate conclusively that his soap will clean collars more effectively than the other soaps in the study, we tend to believe him. I’m pretty sure that Aristotle didn’t have mass marketing in mind when he divided persuasion into logos, pathos, and ethos, but his work seems to have been

thoroughly thumbed by the members of the advertising fraternity. There may be other categories of persuasion more accurate than these but these will do, and since Aristotle is the one who makes this claim I tend to believe it.

I have also used selling soap to introduce another thought. Those here who have worked in the field of advertising know, far better than I can explain, the powers of persuasion. That people can be persuaded to buy stuff they didn't know they wanted or needed demonstrates this power and is the basis of much of the American consumer economy. The power obviously belongs to the professions of law, the ministry, education, and politics, and less obviously to the scientist hunched over his microscope. There is no need for him to persuade the one-celled animals in his field of view to any particular point, yet he may need to persuade someone to fund his research and someone else why the results say what he says they do and why that matters. If he is involved in a large-scale study, he may need to motivate and direct the activities of others in order to conduct his research. In other words, any endeavor that includes human relationships comes under the power of persuasion and is somehow the object of and determined by "mere rhetoric."

If what I have said so far seems only a rehearsal of the obvious, I ask you to forgive me and please indulge me a bit longer. I will come, by and by, to my point. Among the categories posited by Aristotle, ethos, the appeal based on the character of the speaker, is least obvious. We can resist by poking holes in the logic of the would-be persuader, or by resisting the emotions he is obviously playing on. We can and do practice various forms of sales resistance in a variety of circumstances, from hanging up on the telemarketer to tuning out the political campaign speech. We are aware that we are being importuned, and that awareness helps us mount our defenses.

It is the unspoken nature of the appeal based on ethos that makes it most difficult to resist. Ethos is the body language of rhetoric, the hidden persuader. These appeals invade our psyches subliminally, as it were, while the sentries are asleep at their posts. The information penetrates our defense, we begin to process it unknowingly, and that processing shapes our responses in spite of ourselves. If this weren't true, it seems to me, there would be no reason for celebrities to sell things on television.

For the most part these selling celebrities have no more to recommend them than their fame. Anthony Munoz did wonderful things on the gridiron, to be sure. The connection between those deeds and why I should listen to his endorsements of furniture purchases escapes me, and, I am certain, anyone else who may question the ethos of his pitch. But there he is, on my TV, persuading me by his personal status to visit some furniture mart, a thoroughly modern hero. We seem to need heroes. We create them in our own image and adore them as the best that is in us. We want to believe in our own superiority, or at least in our own possibilities. So we bank where that celebrity banks, and shave with his brand of razor, and drink his brand of beer.

We not only create heroes to admire, we also build them up to tear them down. In the world of celebrity, that process is incessant. Anyone who spends a few moments

in the super-market checkout line has probably scanned the chronicles of that process in the headlines of the tabloids. I cite these publications, not in support of their veracity, nor to suggest they are worth your perusal, but to notice that the creation and destruction of heroes is compelling enough a subject to support even these exercise in journalism. What that says about us and the state of civilization is tempered somewhat by remembering these heroes are the creation of and the necessary raw material for the mega-billion-dollar entertainment industry. Come to think of it, perhaps it says very dire things about the state of civilization.

But these are only made-up heroes. An examination of post-modern academia will show historical figures subjected to the same treatment. Time and myth have built them up to impossible states of greatness, so those who have other requirements of the historical record counter the “great man narrative” with complicating interpretations. Christopher Columbus cannot remain the “Great Navigator,” he must become the defiler of an idyllic world, bringer of disease and colonial exploitation. Abraham Lincoln, upon re-examination, is no longer the “Great Emancipator.” He is, by the evidence of his own pen, a typical 19th-century American racist. No matter how venerated a figure may be to some, there will be others who will labor to mock that veneration, to question articles of faith, to tear down what others have been pleased to erect. The smashed noses of so many Mediterranean statues give mute testimony that this process did not begin with the deconstructionists of recent academic fashion. Let some find so much as a toe of clay and the idol must come down. Every icon, it seems, will have its iconoclast.

To illustrate I will turn to an American icon, some would say *the* American icon, George Washington, and an episode from late in his second term, the Whiskey Rebellion. The ethos of what will follow is weakened somewhat by my lack of status as a historian and the non-academic quality of the writing. Haven taken two rhetorical steps back let me advance again by assuring you that all the facts I will relate come from Joseph Ellis’ The Founding Brothers, and Thomas P. Slaughter’s The Whiskey Rebellion. They are both clearly admirers of George Washington, as am I. I tell you this to forestall your wondering about my motives in deconstructing our first president. I have no intention of unmaking his reputation, if that were even possible. Instead I want to use this story to ask other questions about the power of rhetoric, which I will get to anon.

George Washington’s apparently unassailable reputation offers an opportunity to explore this power. Washington the good, Washington the noble, Washington the brave, Washington the honest are all images that penetrate the dullest schoolboy’s sense of American history. Not as succinct as a sobriquet like Honest Abe perhaps, but the mythology generated by Parson Weems resists the debunking of recent historiography even for most educated and serious-minded Americans. Everyone knows the story of the cherry tree is only a story, but if you inventoried our collective memories the line, “Father, I cannot tell a lie,” would place in the ten-most-remembered “facts” regarding the Father of Our Country.

Washington, who could have been king or at least military dictator instead handed over his command and returned, if not to his plow a la Cincinnatus, to his civilian

pursuits. For the long years of the Revolution his private interests understandably languished, but with the peace Washington's thoughts turned again to the paths they had followed for nearly all of his adult life, the pursuit of wealth, the amassing of land, the accumulation of deeds. In ways that would seem unsavory, and possibly impeachable by today's standards, he used all his considerable talents, his well-deserved reputation, and the powers of his office to increase his holdings in western land and protect their value. And who more than Washington deserved his share of his country's blessings? Why shouldn't he do what all the others who had the means were doing? Those with the capital and connections were figuring out ways to get rich by speculating in western lands. Washington was no exception. Since his first surveying journey to the Ohio country, his economic ambition had led him westward. His military service in the French and Indian War and Lord Dunmore's War had earned him a reputation for bravery and coolness under fire and many thousands of acres of bounty lands in western Pennsylvania and Virginia.

In addition to the five thousand acres to which his service in Lord Dunmore's War had entitled him, he ended up with the bounties earned by many of his men. When the claims of veterans for land appeared to languish in a preoccupied Virginia legislature, Washington bought up their bounties for five pounds per thousand acres. Because his interest would have tipped the sellers to the probable value of their paper promises, Washington operated chiefly through third parties, including his brother Charles. He gave strict instructions that his connection to the business should be concealed, both to keep the prices low and to lull the Burgesses into believing that his eventual arguments in favor of the bounties were motivated by his just claims to his own bounties and not by the speculative interests in the bounties of others.

The plan worked without a hitch, or at least none that mattered. The veterans who had sold resented the apparent greed of their former commander and probably reflected ruefully on one more example of how the money always seemed to flow eastward, away from the backwoods and into the hands of the well-connected. Washington for his part set about making his bounties as valuable as he could, claiming the most fertile parcels available and having dummy houses erected to deflect the interests of squatters and deflect to some extent the resentment caused by the knowledge that his lands were among those held by the wealthy absentees who owned much, if not most, of the best lands available west of the Appalachians.

So far there is nothing that even the most determined iconoclast could persuasively construe as impeachable, at least not in the constitutional sense. Had his Pennsylvania claims and the extent to which he had flouted the law in order to claim only prime acreages come to light, his national reputation would surely have suffered. Or if he had done these things while in office, a hostile Congress might have investigated him. As it was, only friends knew of his subterfuges, and they didn't tell. That Washington served the community in which he lived is undeniable and that service merits our respect and gratitude. The question of whether he served for the sake of his nation or for the sake of his own enrichment or for some combination of the two, or for other motivation or motivations unknown does not belie the great fortitude and leadership he displayed

throughout the Revolution. Subsequent events, however, do shed some light on this question.

The residents of the western territories of the new United States wanted very little of their government. They wanted relief from the menace of Indian depredation and they wanted access to the world's markets. Save these two things, they wanted mostly to be left alone. What they got was, to their eyes, just the reverse. The American government sent to poorly led, badly organized and inadequately supplied expeditions under Harmar and St. Clair against the Indians of the Ohio territory. To the dismay of the westerners, both ended in disaster, and rather than intimidating the Indians, served only to embolden them. Raids, with their widely publicized murders, rapes, and kidnappings, only increased. In the matter of access to markets, John Jay was sent to negotiate with the Spanish for free navigation of the Mississippi. He quickly abandoned the commercial interests of the interior for those of the coast, and news of what seemed like double-dealing slipped out and caused much ill feeling on the frontier.

“Well,” the westerners might have mused, “if they can't help us with the Indians and won't help us with the Spaniards, at least they aren't actually hurting us.” And there things might have rested a while if it hadn't been for Alexander Hamilton and his need to pay for the Revolution.

One of the burning political issues of Washington's administration was Federal assumption of state debts. In order to put his National Plan into operation, Hamilton wanted the federal government to assume the indebtedness that the states had incurred during the war. This would go a long way toward establishing international credit and promoting the commercial interests of the eastern merchants. Perhaps not coincidentally it would also enrich a few individuals who had bought up the average patriots' paper money when it seemed like it would never be redeemed and thus remain worthless. Perhaps also not coincidentally, those individuals were nearly all staunch supporters of the Federalist faction in Congress and hence political allies of Hamilton's. Most of you already know that the compromise that allowed Hamilton's plan to go forward included a provision that put the national capitol in a swamp on the Potomac's north bank.

In any event, in order to find the money to balance the budget, Hamilton proposed an excise on distilled spirits. To our eyes, this must seem unremarkable. We have been used to paying such a tax for as long as any can remember. To the farmers of the western frontier, however, the excise on whiskey seemed the final outrage from a federal government that couldn't or wouldn't meet their basic needs.

What separates this story from the usual requires a little more exposition. Several pieces, when added to the puzzle, will show a picture much less good, noble, brave, honest, or fatherly than the one we think we see when we look at the dollar bill. First, the western settlers were so discouraged by the behavior of the federal government that there were negotiations with both Spain and Britain exploring separation from the U.S. and alliance with either nation, so long as that nation would protect them from the Indians and let them float their produce to market down the Mississippi. Indeed it appears that it was only the ineptitude of the Spanish and the preoccupation of the British that kept things

from proceeding down this path. Despite this European mishandling, the prospect of cutting off the United States at the Appalachian Mountains loomed over America's west for much of the 1780s and '90s.

Second, the economy of the west depended almost entirely on barter. Most farmers did not own their own land because eastern speculators tied up most of the good stuff. And because there was no way to transport any surplus to market most farmers produced only as much as they needed themselves. What was left over was typically converted to whiskey in small household stills. The poorer families sent their grain to communal stills and paid with a percentage of the whiskey produced. The wording of the excise law favored large, efficient, full-capacity stills over the subsistence variety found on the frontier. So a typical subsistence share-cropping frontier family not only had to pay taxes on what they kept but also on the percentage paid for still rental and all this in hard cash which they did not possess.

Third, the frontiersmen could find examples in recent history of powerful arguments against the excise tax. Indeed, it was the excise aspect of the Stamp Act that aroused the colonists to such bitter resistance in the 1760s. The protests subsided when Parliament rescinded the Stamp Act and replaced it with a more draconian impost, which the colonists dubbed the Intolerable Act and yet mostly tolerated. The whole process showed that the heart of the matter was not Parliament's right to tax, but rather the form of the tax. The colonists resisted excise just as their ancestors had done in the decades leading up to the English Civil War when Charles I had attempted to extract ship money from the interior of England. The objection then was, and continued to be, that excise gave the government the right to enter any man's premises to examine his business, and trammel his privacy and outrage his women and take his property without normal due process.

The excise was also linked to that whiggish bugbear, the standing army. It was said that a standing army was so expensive that it required an excise to pay for it, and the excise so unpopular it required a standing army to collect. The frontier response to the first excise men appointed by Hamilton's Treasury Department seemed to support that sentiment. Where men were so bold as to set up to collect the whiskey tax they were met with threats and in some cases violence. More than one was stripped naked and covered with tar and feathers. The resentment for the tax and the resistance to the collector was so spirited that no money was sent from the western counties of Pennsylvania, Virginia, or all of Kentucky for several years.

The community leaders who pleaded the case to the national legislature invoked the language of the Stamp Act resistance and the Declaration of Independence to make their case. They objected to a legislature hundreds of miles away levying a tax on domestic produce when the very remoteness of the legislature meant that no understanding of local circumstances would be used to see to the law's fairness and mercy. They pleaded that excise laws enacted by a legislature for whose members they had not been able to vote (most were disenfranchised by property laws), enforced by outsiders (few local men had the nerve to accept the office), adjudicated in courts

hundreds of miles distant (Hamilton knew that local courts with local juries would never convict) were (according to the Declaration of Independence) grounds for revolt.

These same western leaders allowed that a tax on land would go down amongst their brethren more easily and be supported without much fuss. Most of them would only pay it indirectly and it could be bartered with the landlords or, if no accommodation was reached, they could move on to other lands and landlords, acreage being more plentiful than those to work it. But Hamilton knew that a tax on land would punish the speculator class whose support the Federalists depended upon and knew also that one man would oppose such a tax vehemently, and that man was his mentor, his general, his president, and one of the major speculators in western land, George Washington.

And in order to protect his private financial interests, Washington was willing to risk revolution and disunion. To be fair, Washington and Hamilton had other reasons besides personal gain to want to put as much of a burden as possible on the poorest class of citizens. As early as his first visit to the western frontier as a surveyor, Washington had formed a low estimation of the inhabitants. They were, he wrote on more than one occasion, dirty, lazy, dishonest, and usually intoxicated. When led in the field they performed poorly and deserted at alarming rates. Unless handled firmly, read harshly, discipline hardly existed.

In these opinions Washington was not alone. Most comments recorded by eastern visitors disparaged the western settlers in even harsher terms. The foreign birth and poverty of many of them, when added to their reputation for slovenly behavior made them at the least of unsympathetic in the eyes of the men in the Treasury department whose job it was to create the tax system. At the most it encouraged them to ignore the repeated pleadings and petitions of these lazy, ignorant, dirty, disloyal, and drunken citizens. That the object of this excise was spirituous liquor kept the public from taking very seriously the complaints of the westerners and any comparison to their own complaints about the Stamp Act excise now 25 years in the past.

And so the federal government waited on the military success of Anthony Wayne and tax-resistor provocation and, in the fall of 1795, raised a conscript militia of some 13,000 men to march to the forks of the Ohio and impose the federal will on the westerners who had so vehemently resisted the tax. The army met no resistance but did succeed in humiliating a few dozen of the most vociferous opponents of the tax and made themselves thoroughly despised by their overbearing behavior. They destroyed a lot of property that went mostly unpaid for, and marched back east leaving the speculators in firm control for their acreages and largely untaxed.

Shortly afterward Washington declined a third term and in his farewell address decried the squabbles of faction. What he called a “. . . small but artful and enterprising minority of the community;” might have described the very party formed by his successors. “Usurpers of the properly constituted authority who cleverly put their will ahead of the people’s,” is a reasonable description of the Federalists without Washington to lead them. From this distance it seems that what he meant when he urged Americans

to avoid the squabbles of faction was, “Don’t disagree with your natural leaders in the Federalist Party.”

But his political opponents did disagree with him. Although they were reluctant to attack him openly, they felt no compunctions about attacking his policies and his friends. And if they who knew him as a living breathing human being felt unable to openly criticize him, how much more are we, who know him chiefly as a mythic figure sanctified by 200 years of national success, intimidated into silent acquiescence with the manufactured reputation. With Washington’s death came also the demise of the Federalists and the rise of the Jeffersonian party. Hamilton met his fate soon thereafter on the plains of Weehawken, and the Federalists passed into history.

Why have I told you this tale, framed by a discussion of rhetoric? It might easily serve as a text on the unfulfilled promise of the American Revolution. Thomas Jefferson’s stirring words have been honored as much in the breach as in the reality. One has only to consider the histories of those Americans whose status as born equals was a long time denied to recognize the Declaration as more a wish than a practical program of governance. Yet the Declaration has inspired generations of Americans to try and live up to its promise, and few would deny that we are closer to realizing that promise than we were or than any other society ever has been – a testament to the power of mere rhetoric.

This story also could lead to an examination of how quickly the founders of our republic turned away from the principles they fought for once they themselves held political power. Much like the puritans who left England for the sake of religious freedom and, upon arriving in Massachusetts, demanded everyone else worship as they were told, the Federalists were deaf to their own arguments in the case of the Whiskey Rebellion. They did not believe that poor, unpropertied westerners had or should have an equal voice in the newly created democracy they were trying to run. They saw these frontiersmen not as the vanguard of a Jeffersonian society of small holders, but a raw material for the mercantilist system that would maintain the social, economic, and political status quo. And they saw themselves as the inheritors of the Roman patrician tradition, the sort of people who should be in charge. This division has persisted in American society ever since.

This persistent struggle between the patrician and the plebeian ideals has been at the very heart of the argument about what kind of nation we will be. Washington’s role in the Whiskey Rebellion places him firmly in the world of party politics. It isn’t that this is a bad thing, it is simply unacknowledged, overwhelmed by the hagiography of Washington the good, noble, brave, etc. Washington, in this construction, is not a person but an idol, and this uncritical idolatry does both him and us a disservice. Of course Washington led the ragtag colonials through to victory. How could so great a man have done any less? From our vantage the struggles, uncertainties, false steps, and lucky recoveries appear to be inevitable. This diminishes his accomplishments and his humanity. What every schoolboy knows is in some way true, but insufficient to understand just how towering a figure George Washington truly is.

It makes a certain pedagogical sense to teach young children simple stories about important figures in American history, and our school system seems to have done a fair job of inculcating simple stories. Most high school seniors don't know much more about Washington than the cherry-tree story. His presence for them is so obviously unrealistic that they come to think of him as in the same category as Paul Bunyan, wonderful but only mythic. Teenagers struggling to understand their own humanity get no help from old George, at least not the way he is taught. They may know he had false teeth and that they were wooden, but that is as far as he is ever humanized in our public schools. Teenagers quite naturally dismiss him as unimportant to modern life, and so know almost nothing about him, or any figures of American history for that matter.

Perhaps most significantly they never connect George Washington with the vital arguments about what kind of a society we ought to build, which parts we should hang on to and which should be razed and built anew, and on what principles, based on which blueprint. Washington had opinions and worked strenuously to see his visions for his country made manifest. Not everything he did was above reproach, and his political opponents strenuously if somewhat indirectly reproached him. Not everyone agreed with him, and they worked just as hard to put up another kind of national edifice, one that reflected their own visions. The argument between the Federalist and Jeffersonian visions continues and probably will for as long as the United States continues, and our young people have no inkling that our first president has any connection to such sordid things as political maneuverings, factional squabbles, personal ambition, or that he was a master of the art of rhetoric. If they did they might not be so indifferent to his story.

It has been said that Washington's most lasting contribution to American politics was relinquishing power. When he could have ruled by military command, he resigned. When he could have run and been elected to a third term, he declined. He was a man who knew how to quit well. Nothing contributed more to his status, to his rhetorical ethos, than knowing when to say, "Enough." And, to honor his example, so say I. Thank you.
