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REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF RHETORIC IN PUBLIC POLICY

ROBERT ASEN

This article situates public policy as a mediation of rhetorical and material forces. From this perspective, public policy draws on the constitutive and consequential power of rhetoric as well as other factors like institutional authority and financial resources. As a constellation of multifarious forces, public policy refigures the text as process, which raises issues of authorship, temporality, and polysemy differently than singular speech texts and other relatively discreet texts.

On March 12, 1933, in the first of his Fireside Chats, the newly inaugurated President Franklin D. Roosevelt took to the relatively new medium of radio to address a nation experiencing economic crisis. Over the past few years, the United States economy had collapsed: the gross national product and business investment had plummeted, while unemployment had soared, rising in some cities like Toledo, Ohio, to seemingly unreal levels of 80 percent.¹ FDR devoted his first Fireside Chat to the troubles facing the United States banking system. Several unsound banks had closed during the previous weeks, increasing depositors' anxiety and threatening a run on the system generally. Following the lead of governors in many states, FDR declared a national banking holiday to create time to stabilize banks and

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regain depositors' confidence. FDR explained that the banking holiday "is affording us the opportunity to supply the currency necessary to meet the situation." He promised his listeners that "no sound bank is a dollar worse off than it was when it closed its doors last week."² However, he stressed that a full recovery would require participation from citizens, who needed, foremost, to exhibit confidence in the system. FDR insisted that "you people must have faith. You must not be stampeded by rumors or guesses. Let us unite in banishing fear. We have provided the machinery to restore our financial system, and it is up to you to support and make it work. It is your problem, my friends, your problem no less than it is mine. Together we cannot fail."³

Over 70 years later, as he met with citizens across the nation as part of a barnstorming tour to address a different economic challenge, President George W. Bush sounded the alarm about a crisis he foresaw in the future—a crisis over the financing of Social Security.⁴ According to the president, the Social Security system was losing money. As he toured the nation in the winter of 2005, Bush warned audiences that they paid "into a system that is going into the red every year. . . . That number gets worse and worse as time goes on." Eventually, the president insisted, the system would cease distributing benefits entirely: "In 2042, it goes broke, for good. It not only goes in the red, but whatever paper is available in the form of IOUs is gone."⁵ At best, this statement constituted an alarmist exaggeration of Social Security's financial shortfalls, as the 2004 Trustees' Report indicated that Social Security would continue to meet the large majority of its obligations even without legislative action and with the depletion of its trust fund.⁶ When one audience member expressed her "fright" upon hearing Bush's ominous forecast, the president made no effort to alleviate her fear, promising instead to circulate his message even more widely: "Not everybody knows it yet. They're going to know it."⁷

My two opening vignettes offer compelling evidence of the power of rhetoric to construct policy problems, craft solutions, and promote policies to citizens. Although the challenges faced by the two men differed—FDR confronted the ongoing, immediate suffering wrought by the Great Depression, whereas Bush addressed the potential long-term insolvency of a foundational public policy—similarities still circulated in their respective situations. Both FDR and Bush addressed systemic policy problems that many citizens would experience acutely as individuals—through the loss of either savings or retirement—with only a partial understanding of the larger forces affecting them personally. Both FDR and Bush characterized these challenges as *kairotic* moments, whereby swift and judicious action would redirect the nation on

a prosperous path whereas inaction or recklessness would exacerbate its woes.⁸ However, even though FDR and Bush both called on citizens to help them achieve their policy goals, their calls evidenced decidedly different rhetorical strategies. FDR sought to alleviate fear; Bush cultivated it. FDR offered assurances; Bush raised doubts.

In these ways, FDR and Bush offered dramatically different frames for thinking about their respective policy issues. FDR sought to contain and minimize the banking crisis, affirming decisions already made by the federal government and giving citizens a readily identifiable role in carrying out his policy. FDR represented the problem as known and manageable and the solution as already underway and likely efficacious. In contrast, Bush attempted to expand and amplify the financial deficits facing Social Security. He held that without a fundamental change in policy, Social Security's finances would only worsen, until the system ceased functioning.⁹ Tragically, he warned, policymakers facilitated Social Security's demise, since recalcitrant members of Congress refused to support his plan to restructure Social Security as a system of private investment accounts. In this milieu, citizens could play a role by pressuring their representatives, but the means appeared ill-defined and the outcome uncertain. Bush thus represented the problem as only partially known and the solution as blocked by entrenched political actors. In both cases, then, rhetoric functioned importantly in determining how policymakers and citizens construed the issue and their part in achieving a policy outcome.

Further evidence of the intertwinement of rhetoric and public policy appears in the illuminating work of many rhetorical scholars (in addition to those participating in this special issue) who study this topic. For instance, J. Michael Hogan's analysis of the nuclear freeze campaign offers an illustration of how rhetoric aimed at attracting media attention might hamper the policy goals of a social movement. Hogan argues that nuclear freeze activists crafted a media campaign that substituted "passion for argument and celebrity for expertise," leading to a campaign that attracted broad but not deep public support and could be co-opted easily by politicians (Reagan) who created complementary media events to achieve divergent policy goals.¹⁰ Examining the era of my opening vignette, Davis Houck analyzes the economic rhetoric of Presidents Hoover and Roosevelt. Against the popular impression of Hoover as an inactive pessimist, Houck recounts his efforts to rally the nation. Houck argues that Hoover and FDR shared an optimistic outlook, and both men believed that restored public confidence figured importantly in economic

recovery. Where they differed was in their rhetorical approaches, as FDR exemplified an ability to identify with citizens, whereas Hoover often seemed trapped in technical jargon. Underscoring the relationship between rhetoric and economics, Houck concludes that FDR and Hoover “understood that the concept of an ‘economic reality’ was a very malleable construct, shaped, in part, by the public’s confidence and belief rather than an externally real, objective reality.”¹¹

Yet even as our scholarship has offered compelling analyses of policy debates on a wide range of topics across historical eras, our analyses largely have concentrated on the dynamics of particular cases. We have elucidated the rhetorical qualities of particular debates—charting their development, demonstrating their significance, and offering reasons for their successes and failures—but we effectively have neglected “meta” studies that explicitly consider the role of rhetoric in public policy and outline a rhetorical approach to policy analysis.¹² To be clear, I do not wish to discount the case-based quality of our literature. Quite the opposite, we have produced numerous excellent analyses that examine texts in context, producing sophisticated, layered, and historically informed readings of policy debates often lacking in the discursive turn to policy analysis undertaken by scholars in other fields, who often treat concepts like metaphor and narrative as a critical smorgasbord assembled in the interests of taxonomy.¹³ My point is that our scholarship offers important lessons that may be more apparent to researchers in other fields and aspiring rhetorical scholars if we explicitly consider the critical import of our case studies.

In this article, I investigate the role of rhetoric in public policy and the rhetorical character of the policy text.¹⁴ I do not offer definitive or exhaustive answers, but I hope to contribute to a larger (potentially cross-disciplinary) conversation about these questions. I begin by situating public policy as a mediation of rhetorical and material forces. Although this approach highlights the importance of rhetoric as a constitutive and consequential force, it also calls on rhetorical scholars to recognize the influence of factors, processes, and outcomes that cannot be subsumed entirely under an “imperialist” rhetoric. With respect to the policy text, I argue that rhetorical analyses of public policy raise issues of authorship, temporality, and polysemy differently than singular speech texts and other relatively discreet texts. In comparison to a single speech, for example, a policy debate involves not a single public author but hundreds, if not thousands. Temporally, policy debates proceed across time—sometimes weeks, months, years, or decades—rather than

appearing at a particular moment. This suggests that policy debates represent an ongoing engagement of text and context, as subsequent debate participants reinterpret the meanings of prior policy debates. In this way, rhetor, audience, text, and context operate in cross-historical perspective. These factors make policy debates polysemous rhetorical processes, as debate participants may understand the objects of their deliberations differently. I draw my examples from the issue of Social Security, which, for several decades, has stood as a keystone of American social policy and, with the emergence of privatization proposals, has been the subject of intense and fundamental debate over the past few decades.

RHETORIC, PUBLIC POLICY, AND MATERIALITY

For the past three decades, rhetorical scholars have sustained a lively debate regarding the relationship of rhetoric and its material conditions.¹⁵ One position in this debate, noting rhetoric's constitutive power and its pervasive influence in our nonlinguistic environment, construes rhetoric as a material practice. Articulating this view, Raymie McKerrow enumerates as a principle of critical rhetoric the claim that "the discourse of power is material." McKerrow explains that "the social relations in which people participate are perceived as 'real' to them, even though they exist only as fictions in a rhetorically constituted universe of discourse."¹⁶ An opposing position argues for a distinction between rhetoric and materiality, expressing a concern that equating the two terms would elide important political and economic forces informing rhetorical practice. In this spirit, Dana Cloud objects that the rhetoric-as-materiality perspective lapses into relativism, rendering society as "a set of competing reality definitions that are unfixed, free-floating, and malleable regardless of the material circumstances in which one finds oneself. In the competition among rhetorically produced realities, there are few resources for privileging one construct over another."¹⁷ Yet in establishing "rhetoric" and "reality" as its key terms, this debate proceeds at an unnecessarily abstract ontological level that obscures the relationship under scrutiny, at least for public policy. We need not consider "reality" in toto, but only specific material forces like institutional arrangements and money.

We also may discover unnecessary disjunctures when we look across disciplines at efforts to situate rhetoric in public policy. Within political science, for example, Mark Smith highlights rhetoric's role in "the formation

of policy,” but he outlines a segmented and unidirectional process.¹⁸ Smith’s model stands on a bifurcation of interests and ideas, which, by implying that the former are “idea-free,” effectively renders interests as objective indicators of socioeconomic standing. As a practice, rhetoric appears as a persuasive tool used by elites—only after they have formed policy preferences—to increase “the size of the supporting coalition.”¹⁹ In contrast, other scholars pursuing the discursive turn in policy studies ascribe a constitutive role to rhetoric. For instance, Frank Fischer sees policymaking as “a constant discursive struggle over the definitions of problems, the boundaries of categories used to describe them, the criteria for their classification and assessment, and the meanings of ideals that guide particular actions.”²⁰ Yet, even as they recognize rhetoric’s constitutive power and consequence in their critical perspectives, these scholars tend to invoke rhetoric episodically rather than developing a coherent rhetorical perspective, and to discuss its force abstractly rather than analyzing its functions amid particular material circumstances.

My perspective construes public policy as a mediation of rhetorical and material forces. In terms of materiality, public policies provide money, goods, and services to target populations to achieve particular outcomes, such as offering retirement incomes and disability benefits to millions of American workers and their families. A Social Security check engenders a qualitative improvement in the lives of its recipients, enabling elderly couples to pay utility bills and purchase groceries while offering younger recipients the chance to pursue long-term goals like obtaining a college education in the event of the tragic death or disability of a working parent. Without Social Security, people would suffer. A rhetorical analysis of public policy must appreciate this basic point, even as it must not reduce public policy to its material components nor establish a material “reality” as the arbiter of public policy.

Since material outcomes require human participation, rhetoric plays an equally important role in public policy through the ineluctable operation of meaning. At a fundamental level, policies create, sustain, negotiate, and redefine the meanings of the very money, goods, and services provided. Consider the phrase “providing retirement benefits,” which might appear at first glance as a rudimentary description of the nonrhetorical nature of Social Security. However, this phrase already implicates rhetoric, for it presumes a shared understanding of each of its three terms, which participants in the privatization debates have vigorously contested over the past few decades. In these debates, “provision” has meant a federally administered pension system and a system of private accounts; “retirement” has meant a carefree

and a worrisome period of life; and “benefits” have assumed a wide variety of shapes and forms. In this sense, a benefits check is never simply a benefits check. Offering the material advantages of the amount promised to its bearer, a check circulates in a system of meaning that invokes particular institutions (banks) as well as the meanings that we ascribe to the beneficiaries, their money, and other members of society.

Implicated in struggles over meaning, policies express a nation’s values, principles and priorities, hopes and ideals, and beliefs about citizens’ responsibilities and obligations to each other. As rhetorical artifacts, rather than seeking out existing and objectively apparent populations for receipt of benefits, policies enact powerful processes of representation. These enactments sustain a crucial, mutually implicative tension between presence and absence, between making something present and standing for something absent. Making something present expresses its absence, and standing for something absent invokes a presence. As Hanna Fenichel Pitkin explains, “representation, taken generally, means the making present *in some sense* of something which is nevertheless *not* present literally or in fact. Now, to say that something is simultaneously both present and not present is to utter a paradox, and thus a fundamental dualism is built into the meaning of representation.”²¹ With respect to public policy, a congressperson both advances a constituent agenda and portrays his or her constituents in ways that comport with this agenda. In the Social Security debates, politicians supportive of the existing Social Security program cast retirees as frugal grandparents enjoying fulfillment in retirement, whereas some advocates of privatization (albeit less often politicians) cast retirees as “greedy geezers” pursuing conspicuous consumption over the long-term well-being of their children and grandchildren. These images and others circulate inside and outside of the forums of policy debates, informing their trajectory, influencing participation, and illuminating their meaning and significance. Seniors appearing before congressional committees to talk about benefits collected from work-based pensions, for example, must negotiate representations of themselves circulating in the debates. Whether positively or negatively, policies may force these identities on individuals, or individuals may actively adopt these identities. Outside of the institutional forums of policy debate, representation may expand or restrict opportunities for agency in people’s everyday lives by conferring different levels of status on recipients, such as contrasting images of Social Security and welfare recipients.

As my reference to agency suggests, policies often enact and enforce

symbolic hierarchies that unite and divide people, and synthesize and oppose values. In these ways, policies can bring people together, creating a target population that overcomes individual differences, and policies can pull people apart, constituting some individuals and groups as “other” and inferior to conventional practices and beliefs. Symbolic hierarchies reveal what some scholars have referred to as a “politics of representation.” In this sense, participants in policy debates do not engage in neutral and transparent processes when they characterize themselves and others. Rather, debate participants make (often unacknowledged) choices regarding how people should be portrayed. As Linda Hutcheon explains, representational processes do not “*reflect* society as much as grant meaning and value within a particular society.”²² Representation does not occur outside of history and society, but works with the symbolic materials of specific cultures. During the 1990s and the first decade of this century, as the stock market rose and fell with the dot-com bubble and stories surfaced of corporate wrongdoing at Enron and elsewhere, images of corporate executives shifted dramatically. As the dot-com bubble expanded during the 1990s, executives appeared as risk-taking, jobs-making heroes whose high compensation was only a small reward for their contributions to the overall economy. However, as the bubble burst at the new millennium, an alternative image circulated of executives as ruthless self-promoters interested only in personal wealth and willing to harm ordinary folks to satisfy their desires. Even as negative images of executives circulated in the early years of the new millennium, these representations tended to highlight the bad behavior of individuals, drawing attention away from systemic problems and potential solutions for the thousands of workers and retirees who suffered widespread losses.

Benefiting from contrasting representations, Social Security has participated in a prominent symbolic hierarchy that has shaped the landscape of American social policy, namely, insurance versus assistance.²³ As the dominant partner in this hierarchy, Social Security has obtained an honorific position in national politics as much for what it does not promote as for what it does. From the beginning, supporters of Social Security championed its insurance basis as promoting independence, while chastising assistance for perpetuating dependence. Insurance benefits represented a return on workers’ contributions, and retirees claimed benefits as a right. Paling in comparison, assistance supposedly transferred money from workers to idlers, casting recipients as shameful beggars. To sustain this hierarchy, supporters of insurance have advanced arguments contrasting work and nonwork, independence and

dependence. However, we can imagine an alternative discourse that supports insurance-based retirement benefits not by demonizing assistance, but by celebrating the contributions (paid and unpaid) that seniors make to their communities.

As these examples suggest, rhetoric articulates policy purposes and populations, and negotiates fits between them. Sometimes, an advocate may begin with a policy purpose, such as a principled opposition to Social Security as contrary to the operation of the free market, then construct a population to advance their goals. Other times, an advocate may imagine a population, such as champions of an emergent “investor class,” then pursue a policy to meet its ostensible interests. Exhibiting a mutually informative relationship, purpose and population exert mutual constraint. An advocate who imagines technology-savvy younger workers prospering in a postindustrial economy likely would regard investment as a superior purpose for retirement policy. Along these lines, purposes and populations may exhibit better and worse fits, which can change over time as good fits may deteriorate and bad fits may improve. In this spirit, advocates of private investment accounts have sought to break the original association of Social Security with independence. For instance, Paul Hewitt, executive director of the National Taxpayers Union Foundation, insisted that “Social Security has indeed helped make many of today’s elderly very dependent on Government.” He exhorted Congress to break “the cycle of dependency in old age.”²⁴ Hewitt and others championed private accounts as an embrace of individualism that would return independence and control to all seniors.

As policies mediate rhetorical and material elements, the process of policy-making foregrounds the role of rhetoric as a constitutive force. Congressional hearings, floor debates, presidential speeches, media campaigns—these all represent irreducibly rhetorical acts. Policymaking occurs as debate participants attempt to persuade others to support particular programs and outcomes. Like ongoing policies themselves, policymaking ineluctably involves meaning and engages symbol systems. Policymaking also mediates the material, often in the form of institutional power, officially sanctioned authority and privilege, and money. However, policies and policymaking differ in their explicit use and mode of rhetoric. In terms of mode, I distinguish policymaking from policies as a difference between *making* meaning (policymaking) and *maintaining and enforcing* meaning (policies). Of course, practice complicates my analytic distinction, as administrators and field agencies, for instance, can make their own meaning by following the letter of a law while undermining its spirit.

Welfare policy betrays a sad history of administrators turning away legally eligible applicants for assistance. The so-called welfare crisis of the 1960s arose as a consequence of poor people successfully claiming their legal entitlements. On this score, James Patterson reports that, whereas only 33 percent of eligible families in the early 1960s participated in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, by 1971 over 90 percent of eligible families participated.²⁵ As this statistic illustrates, varying levels of maintenance and enforcement can expand, restrict, and shift policy meanings.

Policymaking nevertheless represents atypical moments in the lives of policies where meaning making appears as the central task occupying participants. Over its 70-plus-year history, Social Security has only periodically undergone explicit legislative revision, with important amendments and changes occurring in 1939, 1950, 1972, and 1983. In these moments—and as advocates of privatization hope, in the contemporary period—questions of aims and methods become primary concerns. Participants in policy debates ask “What do we want to do?” and “How do we want to do it?” Policymaking thus constitutes paramount rhetorical moments in the lives of policies. However, since no policy arises *ex nihilo*, policymaking does not inaugurate unprecedented meanings as much as it intervenes in an ongoing symbolic field. Negative attitudes toward assistance already circulated publicly in the 1930s when supporters of insurance invoked this distinction to champion their preferred vision of retirement pensions. In a similar spirit, contemporary advocates of privatization draw on public hostility toward government in their case for individual investment accounts. In these ways, policymaking provides participants opportunities to constellate meaning, creating and recreating multiple associations and dissociations, in making policy. Drawing on different constellations, debate participants may articulate social problems requiring a government response, imagine target populations, evaluate histories, and envision futures for public policies.

Rhetoric thus acts as a powerful but not an unconstrained force in policymaking. Individual participants in policy debates make choices in framing policies, affirming and denying values, representing target populations, inviting or discouraging wider agency, and other areas, but the participation of other advocates, the judgment of audiences, the social force of discourse, and multiple material considerations constrain these choices. None of these forces acts as an ultimate adjudicator in policy debate. We cannot, for instance, appeal to a transparent and universally understood reality to answer disagreements about the severity of Social Security’s financial shortfalls. Anticipating charges

that his ominous assessment of Social Security's future finances sounded unnecessary alarms, Rep. Clay Shaw (R-FL) insisted that his framing met the legal definition of bankruptcy: "I would like to submit for the record the definition of bankruptcy as it appears in Black's Law Dictionary: The state or condition of one who is unable to pay his debts as they become due." Unlike other policymakers who saw safety in the Social Security trust funds, Shaw dismissed them as "nothing more than an IOU from the government to the government."²⁶ And yet different perspectives do not engender a stymieing circulation of meaning, since policies elicit action: when members of Congress identify a problem, they often seek to pass bills, and presidents may sign or veto legislation. Rather than expressing entirely fixed or formless meanings, policy debates constellate meanings that emerge through the convergence and contestation of rhetorical and material forces. This point also broaches the processual character of the policy text.

AUTHORSHIP, TEMPORALITY, AND POLYSEMY IN THE POLICY TEXT

As rhetorical scholars know well, texts do not function as static, stable entities. Instead, texts—even seemingly discrete ones—often express multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings that manifest as qualities of dynamism and movement. In this way, we may view such texts less as objects and more as processes. Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, James Jasinski holds that all texts "contain essential dialogic moments" that reveal "interaction between different languages and voices at the level of word, sentence, utterance, and/or text." Foregrounding these moments as critically revelatory, Jasinski urges scholars to "reconstruct the dialogue embedded in the dialogic word and polyphonic utterance."²⁷ In a similar spirit, G. Thomas Goodnight underscores the processual character of public argument in his definition of controversy as "ubiquitous, temporally pluralistic, extended argumentative engagements constituted in the full range of communicative actions and enveloping communication systems and practices."²⁸ The ubiquity of controversy refers to its appearance across the diverse forums and interactions of our everyday lives, as well as its emergence across a range of topics. As temporally pluralistic, controversies endure over varying periods of time, exhibiting more and less active periods of engagement. Employing a full range of communicative actions, controversies proceed through debate,

narrative, visual display, and other modes of expression. As these qualities suggest, the rhetorical texts of a public controversy incorporate discourses circulating in different places and at different times. Situating the policy text as a process, then, draws on the insights of rhetorical scholarship in public address, argument, and elsewhere. However, even as process resonates across these areas, we need to consider the particularities of the policy text in terms of authorship, temporality, and polysemy.

Public policy texts often are composed by hundreds, if not thousands, of authors. For example, in my analysis of federal welfare policy debates in the 1980s and 1990s, I considered the testimony of over a thousand witnesses who appeared before congressional committees.²⁹ The number of committee witnesses, policymakers, and other participants in the Social Security debates over their 70-plus-year history far exceeds this figure. These numbers matter not for their sheer quantity but for the implications they hold for analysis. Because of their multiple authorship, policy texts do not readily cohere thematically. Broaching this point in his well-known debate with Michael Leff over the status of rhetorical criticism, Michael McGee famously (or, perhaps, infamously) discerned the “fragmentary” quality of the text. In the postmodern age, McGee asserted, audiences no longer shared a common culture, a development that broke up previously unitary rhetorical practices. In this situation, McGee maintained that “our first job as professional consumers of discourse is *inventing a text suitable for criticism*.”³⁰

Although McGee rightly questioned ideas of coherence in rhetorical texts, his explanation and prescription for action do not serve policy texts. First, discerning a common culture is a dubious enterprise: what appears to some as “common” actually reflects relations of power that cast some cultural practices as universal and others as particular. Cultures always exhibit diversity, even if self-appointed arbiters may not recognize it. The absence of a unitary policy text, then, does not represent a recent cultural development. Second, McGee attributes too strong a sense of meaning making and agency to the critic. The multiple authors of policy texts do not appear as fragments waiting for the clever critic to give their statements meaning. Rather, participants in policy debates make meaning through their engagement with each other, and they hope to circulate their preferred meanings more widely. In the privatization debates, advocates of investment sought to persuade Americans that the present Social Security system confiscated their earnings with only a shaky promise of a minimal return. In contrast, supporters of the existing system reasserted its soundness and favorably contrasted the security of Social

Security with the uncertainty of the stock market. The thematic plurality of the policy text arises from the copresence of these competing positions, not the creative assembling of the sovereign rhetorical critic.³¹

Multiple authorship constrains the participation and significance of any single advocate in a policy debate, who must negotiate his or her participation in light of the others with whom he or she directly interacts as well as others who may participate at different times and settings. No single participant can direct the course of a policy debate; instead, trajectories emerge as collective achievements. Even though he possessed the power of the bully pulpit, over the course of his town hall meetings, President Bush confronted the opposing claims of other policymakers as well as prominent oppositional media campaigns by groups like the American Association of Retired Persons. These considerations challenge the frequent interest in public address scholarship and elsewhere with eloquence and exceptionalism. The project of close textual analysis, for example, appropriately investigates exemplary texts like King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and the Declaration of Independence.³² In policy debates, however, mundane statements often are more influential than exceptional rhetorical performances. For instance, in a discussion about investing a portion of the Social Security trust fund in the stock market, Rev. Jesse Jackson movingly called attention to the moral basis underlying all investment decisions, urging policymakers to consider whether potential investments in entities such as tobacco companies promoted positive or negative social aims. Jackson insisted that "we could never divorce our money interests from our moral interests and our commitment to human rights. Without that, we lose our moral authority in the world."³³ However, his poignant remarks were drowned out by the statements of numerous others—both liberals and conservatives—who insisted that investment decisions should be protected from "politics."

In policy debates, discourse acts as a force that operates relatively independently of individual participants. Insistence on the "value-free" nature of investment expressed a tenet of "market talk," that is, a utopian view of the market as an ameliorative set of practices, norms, and institutions. Such talk embraces markets as essential elements of human liberty, efficacious forces for financial gain, and superior governing structures.³⁴ Throughout the debates over privatization in the 1990s and early in this century, hundreds of advocates reiterated market tenets, such as the belief in the inherently superior efficiency of markets over governments. In effect, market talk provided "speaking positions" that various advocates could adopt.³⁵ The identity of

the advocate often mattered less than the tenet articulated. Moreover, even when discourses such as market talk do not appear explicitly, they may inform interactions in policy debates. Advocates backing government-managed investment of the Social Security trust funds had to address presumptions of partisan interference and higher operating costs. As these examples suggest, discourses implicate circulating bodies of rhetoric that serve as publicly articulated ways of collectively understanding and evaluating our world, and propagate and enforce social norms with material consequences.

In light of this interaction between particular advocates and larger discourses, rhetorical critics may pursue macro- and micro-analyses that reveal qualities of policy debates. At the macro level, the statements of individuals may be mixed and matched to reconstruct larger themes. Discourse appears as the rhetor, and situation refers to the larger political, economic, and social forces informing policy debate. At the micro level, particular exchanges obtain significance for both their representativeness and their exceptionalism. Although exceptionalism does not figure as prominently for public policy as for other modes of rhetoric, particular instances may challenge larger themes in important ways, such as Jackson's linking of economics and morality. In effect, macro- and micro-analyses treat policy debates as networks of inter-related rhetorical statements that can be examined broadly or at particular nodes and linkages.

Scholars have explored the relationship between rhetoric and time synchronically and diachronically. A preeminent illustration of the former appears in Lloyd Bitzer's enormously influential explication of the rhetorical situation. In important respects, time functions as a trigger for rhetoric in Bitzer's account, as he defines exigences as "imperfection[s] marked by urgency."³⁶ Moreover, Bitzer considers rhetoric's operation at particular moments in time—when a speaker addresses a specific audience about a particular problem, such as the assassination of a president. In contrast, Goodnight's conception of controversy calls attention to rhetorical practices that occur over time, as indicated by his reference to "temporally pluralistic, extended argumentative engagements."³⁷ Controversies, such as debates over the morality of wearing fur, connect rhetorical practices even when such practices, such as a protest at the entry to a fur retailer, seem discrete to the advocates and audiences directly involved.³⁸ Temporally, policy debates resonate more with controversies, even as they permit investigation of specific, temporally fixed practices.

Throughout policy debates, time may function both as context and as

appeal. For example, after the dot-com bubble burst, some advocates of privatization believed that its time had passed. Testifying before the Senate Aging Special Committee in 2000, Alan Greenspan observed that “about a year or two ago, maybe three years ago, there were considerable discussions about the issue of partial privatization of Social Security.” Greenspan judged that “discussion has essentially come to a halt as far as I am concerned, and frankly, I regret it.” However, some policymakers disagreed with this diagnosis. Immediately after Greenspan offered his remarks, Sen. Jim Bunning (R-KY) rejected this account. He asserted that the debate over private accounts had not ended: “It has come to the realization—and not to sound partisan—but this current administration is not going to allow that to happen on their watch, so we are delaying the further discussion until we have an administration that might be more friendly to some type of privatization.”³⁹ Although their judgments differed, Greenspan and Bunning both invoked time as an contextual element for public policy debates: a booming market, a friendly executive branch, and other factors worked together to facilitate political agreement. Further, Greenspan and Bunning both appealed to notions of time, implicitly urging restarting discussions of privatization or recalibrating them in accordance with the electoral calendar.

The temporal character of policy debates complicates relations of text and context: what may constitute text at one historical moment changes into context at another. For instance, both supporters of the existing Social Security system and advocates of privatization claimed that FDR would have supported their preferred policies. This example also indicates how aspects of policy debates may serve simultaneously as text and context. The founding debates over Social Security form part of the context for subsequent debates, and yet, insofar as contemporary participants explicitly invoke FDR and others, their historical statements function as texts in subsequent debates. In these ways, the statements of prior participants constrain the rhetoric of subsequent participants. Contemporary advocates may seek to invoke FDR’s authority for seemingly opposing policy positions, but they cannot pretend that he did not strongly prefer insurance to assistance as the basis of retirement benefits. A contemporary advocate seeking FDR’s imprimatur for means-testing Social Security benefits would face a greater rhetorical burden than someone opposing this change.

The persistence of policy debates over time facilitates a “meta” quality that enables participants to debate their debates. Throughout the debates over privatization, policymakers openly worried whether their colleagues

would address the issue genuinely and productively or resort to tricks and gamesmanship. Along these lines, Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA) urged other policymakers to educate their constituents about retirement policy, which entailed honest discussion of difficult decisions and an emphasis on connections across generations rather than divisiveness. Grassley held that policymakers “ought to be thinking in terms of not demagoguing this issue.” In invoking the specter of demagoguery, Grassley expressed the fear of many of his colleagues that they would be cast as endangering seniors’ well-being. This fear threatened to forestall any action by Congress, suggesting that only a bipartisan effort would embolden many policymakers to address Social Security in a forthright, and potentially unsettling, manner. Observing that “there is no issue easier to demagogue than Social Security,” Rep. Thomas Barrett (D-WI) maintained that addressing its problems would require “Democrats and Republicans . . . to hold hands together and jump off whatever cliff there is.”⁴⁰ Both past and future debates informed Barrett’s recommendation—memories of elderly constituents angered by past reforms stirred the sense of danger he discerned, and his call to address this danger together, by holding hands, envisioned a course for future debates.

As policy debates proceed over time, they exhibit multiple temporalities, with different aspects of debate often proceeding at different speeds. In the absence of a perceived immediate crisis, congressional debates may move methodically, as various congressional committees may hold hearings on a subject over several months or years. Throughout the 1990s, various committees in the House and Senate addressed the issue of Social Security, examining proposals for private accounts as well as for raising the retirement age, increasing the payroll tax, and other measures. However, when President Bush identified privatization as his top domestic priority after his 2004 reelection, the pace of the debates quickened. Advocacy groups joined the fray, launching media campaigns for and against private accounts.⁴¹ By January 2005, it appeared as though a ten-year debate over private accounts would be resolved in the next few months. This increased speed indicates that some debate participants, such as the president, may be better positioned than others to draw attention to an issue and affect the pace of the debates. Moreover, congressional hearings, town hall meetings, and media campaigns may occur simultaneously, as they did in winter 2005, exhibiting varying temporalities within a larger debate.

Composed by multiple authors and proceeding through time, policy debates constitute polysemous texts, as debate participants may understand

the objects of their deliberations differently. These differences do not merely signal support or opposition to a policy, what Celeste Condit characterizes as “polyvalence,”⁴² but differences in kind. At the heart of recent debates is an irreducible conflict over whether Social Security functions properly as an investment or as an insurance program, which diagnoses fundamentally different problems for the system and recommends dramatically divergent solutions. However, my reference to polysemy itself invokes a polysemous term. In an engaging essay, Leah Ceccarelli explains that rhetorical scholars have employed the term “polysemy” variously to refer to multiple meanings created by rhetors, audiences, and critics.⁴³ Rhetor-induced polysemy refers to strategic ambiguity introduced by the creator of a text to negotiate potentially competing situational demands, like multiple audiences with opposing interests. Audience-induced polysemy indicates a “resistive reading” that understands a text differently from the dominant message intended by its creator. Critic-induced polysemy alludes to the intellectual dexterity of the analyst, who discerns multiple meanings in a text to appreciate more fully its rhetorical dynamics.

Policy polysemy crosses and complicates categories of rhetor, audience, and critic, clouding Ceccarelli’s tripartite distinction. Because policies implicate multiple authors, we cannot achieve a clear-cut identification of policy polysemy as strategic ambiguity or resistive reading, for both senses presume a readily identifiable author and audience. And yet, we cannot simply turn to the critic, because policy polysemy does not fit easily with Ceccarelli’s characterization of critically induced polysemy as “not mak[ing] a claim about how audiences ‘actually’ read a text, but instead, offering a new expanded way that audiences *should* read a text.”⁴⁴ To be sure, critics may investigate policy texts to gain a fuller understanding of their tensions, but policy debates resist appreciative criticism as much as they enable it through their multiple authors and audiences. The critical work of analyzing policy debates focuses both on discovering *how* participants and audiences understand a policy as well as arguing that a critic’s readers *should* understand the debates in a particular way. Moreover, whereas Ceccarelli’s examples involve synchronic rhetorical acts, such as President Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address and Henry Grady’s 1886 speech “The New South,” the diachronic quality of policy debate engenders changing meanings for participants over time.

As we consider policy polysemy, we must remain cognizant of the purposeful character of policy debate. Noting the purposeful character of various rhetorical practices, John Murphy trenchantly critiques the importation of

Mikhail Bakhtin's theories into rhetoric as a resource for explicating multiple meanings in texts. In trying to repair rhetoric's reputation in the eyes of its detractors, rhetorical scholars too often "defer the strategic aspect of rhetoric," which Murphy explains as "the potential of rhetoric to persuade people to make contingent choices in specific situations—its ability to shape the world's appearance such that we make this move rather than that choice."⁴⁵ As Murphy suggests, rhetoric serves both instrumental and constitutive functions, and we cannot sacrifice one as we explore the other. In policy debates, purpose intersects with polysemy because most, if not all, of the multiple authors of policy texts hope to persuade their coauthors to accept their positions. Even as supporters of insurance and advocates of investment understand Social Security differently, they seek to persuade their antagonists to accept their diagnoses of Social Security's problems and their preferred solutions. Moreover, polysemy returns us to the material consequences of policy debates. The different meanings circulating in policy debates portend different outcomes for target populations. If, for example, Social Security is restructured as a system of private accounts, and insurance-based benefits like inflation-indexed annuities are dropped, then retirees will see their incomes rise and fall with the ups and downs of the stock market.

CONCLUSION

Addressing citizens on the banking crisis, FDR both initiated policy debates and participated in an ongoing set of debates that fundamentally reconstructed the role of the federal government in bolstering the nation's economic well-being, producing important legislation that emerged in a flurry of activity known as the "first 100 days." As a particular moment in this larger process, FDR's first Fireside Chat exemplifies the roles of rhetoric I have outlined above. FDR ascribed a narrowly delineated purpose to the banking holiday approved by Congress—supplying currency to banks with sound assets. He explained that since banks invested depositors' savings, even sound banks could not remit all their assets on demand. Further, FDR clearly identified a target population for this policy—ordinary savers and investors. He vowed that the administration would not meet "the hysterical demands of hoarders," and banks made insolvent through speculation would not necessarily be restored.⁴⁶ Americans may not have grasped fully the operations of the banking system, but FDR insisted that understanding, which he hoped to

facilitate through his radio address, would alleviate citizens' anxiety and encourage public-spirited action. In this address and others, FDR affirmed values of security, stability, and interdependence amidst severe economic uncertainty. And he situated new policy proposals in the context of known and tested practices.

In focusing on FDR's first Fireside Chat as a revealing moment in New Deal policymaking, I have pursued a preliminary microlevel analysis of this topic. To appreciate fully this diachronic policy episode, I would have to place FDR's address in dialogue with congressional committee hearings, House and Senate floor debates, government agency reports, news media coverage, public advocacy campaigns, and more. Of course, as rhetorical scholars interested in public policy, we have to delimit our studies somehow, and I do not mean to suggest that macro-analyses must examine every potentially relevant utterance. Instead, a macrolevel analysis must cast a sufficiently wide net to elucidate the diverse perspectives forwarded by the multiple authors of policy debate and the developments in policy debates over time. Both of these qualities contribute to the polysemous and purposeful character of the policy text.

Recognizing the role of rhetoric in policymaking and the processual character of the policy text challenges linear models of policymaking that demarcate clear beginnings, middles, and ends. Deborah Stone identifies this approach as part of the "rationality project" of policy analysis, a decades-long effort to free policy from "politics." According to Stone, the rationality project advances a "production model" of policymaking, "where policy is created in a fairly orderly sequence of stages, almost as if on an assembly line."⁴⁷ On this line, policies supposedly move transparently from agenda setting and problem identification, through legislative analysis and selection, to agency implementation. However, as my references to FDR and Social Security suggest, rhetorical studies of policymaking reveal a multidirectional process, whereby policymakers may select problems from an already established agenda or introduce problems onto public agendas. In this way and others, rhetorical scholars may contribute importantly to studies of public policy by illuminating the constitutive and consequential qualities of this complex communicative practice.

NOTES

1. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 163; Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 207.
2. Franklin D. Roosevelt, “The Banking Crisis,” in *Words of a Century: The Top 100 American Speeches, 1900–1999*, ed. Stephen E. Lucas and Martin J. Medhurst (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 227.
3. Roosevelt, “The Banking Crisis,” 228.
4. Bush launched his barnstorming tour in the winter of 2005, holding town hall meetings in more than 20 states. At almost every stop, Bush moderated a panel discussion and a question-and-answer session involving attendees. The panel discussions typically included an expert on retirement policy and laypeople from various walks of life: children, parents, grandparents, young workers, older workers, retirees, farmers, firefighters, small-business owners, warehouse workers, students, single parents, new parents. The panelists uniformly voiced concern for the future of Social Security and support for the president’s proposed reforms. Retirees expressed confidence that their benefits would not be jeopardized by private accounts, and younger workers expressed relief that they and their children could anticipate a more secure retirement. President Bush began each meeting with a short speech, then he discussed issues of work and retirement with the panelists. Less often, Bush solicited questions from audience members. Like the panelists, questioners supported his policies.
5. George W. Bush, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 41 (2005): 362, 365.
6. The 2004 Trustees’ Report, the most current at the start of Bush’s barnstorming tour, offered a decidedly different picture of Social Security’s finances: “Despite these cash-flow deficits, beginning in 2018, redemption of trust fund assets will allow continuation of full benefit payments on a timely basis until 2042, when the trust funds will become exhausted. . . . Present tax rates would be sufficient to pay 73 percent of scheduled benefits after trust fund exhaustion in 2042 and 68 percent of scheduled benefits in 2078.” Board of Trustees, Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and Disability Insurance Trust Funds, *2004 Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and Disability Insurance Trust Funds* (Washington, DC, March 2004), 8, available at http://www.ssa.gov/OACT/TR/TR04/I_intro.html (accessed October 20, 2009).
7. Bush, *Weekly Compilation*, 365.
8. James Kinneavy succinctly defines *kairos* as discourse “at the right time in the right measure.” Roger Thompson, “*Kairos* Revisited: An Interview with James Kinneavy,” *Rhetoric Review* 19 (2000): 76.

9. Bush's appeal exemplified Douglas Walton's assessment of the dichotomous structure of many fear appeals: "Either take the recommended action or the fearful outcome will occur." Douglas Walton, *Scare Tactics: Arguments that Appeal to Fear and Threats* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic, 2000), 20.
10. J. Michael Hogan, *The Nuclear Freeze Campaign: Rhetoric and Foreign Policy in the Telepolitical Age* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 7.
11. Davis W. Houck, *Rhetoric as Currency: Hoover, Roosevelt, and the Great Depression* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 195.
12. I do not mean to suggest that rhetorical scholars studying public policy have proceeded in a nontheoretical or antitheoretical manner. For example, David Zarefsky's seminal study of LBJ's war on poverty offers important insights on the functioning of policy metaphors. Rather, my point is that we have not explicitly reflected on the character of the policy "text" or extensively addressed methodological considerations. See David Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986).
13. See, for example, Frank Fischer, *Reframing Public Policy: Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Deborah A. Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making* (New York: Norton, 2002). Fischer and Stone's books present important findings, but they lack the developed trajectory and conceptual coherence of many rhetorical studies.
14. Portions of this article are drawn from my new book *Invoking the Invisible Hand: Social Security and the Privatization Debates* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009).
15. For a sense of the development of this debate, see Michael Calvin McGee, "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric," in *Explorations in Rhetoric: Studies in Honor of Douglas Ehninger*, ed. Raymie E. McKerrow (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1982), 23–48; Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 91–111; Dana L. Cloud, "The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron: A Challenge to Critical Rhetoric," *Western Journal of Communication* 58 (1994): 141–63; Ronald Walter Greene, "Another Materialist Rhetoric," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15 (1998): 21–41; Carole Blair, "Reflections on Criticism and Bodies: Parables from Public Places," *Western Journal of Communication* 65 (2001): 271–94; Ronald Walter Greene, "Rhetoric and Capitalism: Rhetorical Agency as Communicative Labor," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 37 (2004): 188–206; Dana L. Cloud, "The Matrix and Critical Theory's Desertion of the Real," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3 (2006): 329–54.
16. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 102–03.
17. Cloud, "The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron," 154.

18. See his chapter "The Role of Rhetoric in the Formation of Policy," Mark A. Smith, *The Right Talk: How Conservatives Transformed the Great Society into the Economic Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).
19. Smith, *The Right Talk*, 29.
20. Fischer, *Reframing Public Policy*, 60.
21. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 8–9. In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams makes the same observation; he writes that representation involves "the sense (a) of making present to the mind and the sense (b) of standing for something that is not present." Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 267. See also Jacques Derrida, "Sending: On representation," *Social Research* 49 (1982): 294–326.
22. Linda Hutcheon, "The Politics of Representation," *Signature: A Journal of Theory and Canadian Literature* 1 (1989): 24–25.
23. See my previous book, *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002); Nancy Fraser, "Women, Welfare, and the Politics of Needs Interpretation," in *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 144–60.
24. Senate Aging Special Committee, *Social Security Reform Options: Preparing for the 21st Century*, 104th Congress, 2d sess., 1996, 44.
25. James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty 1900–1994* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 179.
26. House Ways and Means Committee and Senate Finance Committee, *Social Security and Medicare Trustees' 2001 Annual Reports*, 107th Congress, 1st sess., 2001, 21–22.
27. James Jasinski, "Heteroglossia, Polyphony, and *The Federalist Papers*," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 27 (1997): 28.
28. G. Thomas Goodnight, "Controversy," in *Argument in Controversy: Proceedings of the Seventh SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation*, ed. Donn W. Parson (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1991), 2. For an influential explication of argument as process, see Daniel J. O'Keefe, "Two Concepts of Argument," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 13 (1977): 121–28.
29. Asen, *Visions of Poverty*.
30. Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990): 288.
31. Of course, the rhetorical critic does not simply report on a policy debate; criticism necessarily involves judgment, and good criticism exhibits creativity. However, McGee's position seemingly gives the critic unconstrained agency in creating a text from cultural materials.

32. See, for example, Michael Leff and Ebony A. Utey, "Instrumental and Constitutive Rhetoric in Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail,'" *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7 (2004): 37–51; Stephen E. Lucas, "Justifying America: The Declaration of Independence as a Rhetorical Document," in *American Rhetoric: Context and Criticism*, ed. Thomas W. Benson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 67–130.
33. House Ways and Means Committee, *Preserving and Strengthening Social Security*, 106th Congress, 1st sess., 1999, 33.
34. See Robert Kuttner, *Everything for Sale: The Virtues and Limits of Markets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); James Arnt Aune, *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).
35. This dynamic resonates with Michel Foucault's discussion of "enunciative modalities" in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 50–55.
36. Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 6.
37. Goodnight, "Controversy," 2.
38. See Kathryn M. Olson and G. Thomas Goodnight, "Entanglements of Consumption, Cruelty, Privacy, and Fashion: The Social Controversy over Fur," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994): 249–76.
39. Senate Aging Special Committee, *Income Taxes: The Solution to the Social Security and Medicare Crisis?*, 106th Congress, 2d sess., 2000, 21.
40. Senate Finance Committee, *New Directions in Retirement Security Policy: Social Security, Pensions, Personal Savings and Work*, 105th Congress, 2d sess., 1998, 28; House Finance and Hazardous Materials Subcommittee, *The Market Impact of the President's Social Security Proposal*, 106th Congress, 1st sess., 1999, 73.
41. For an examination of an advertisement in support of privatization, see Glen Justice, "Social Security; Groups that Clashed in the Campaign Are Facing Off Again," *New York Times*, April 12, 2005, G.11. For an oppositional ad, see MoveOn.org, "WMD," *New York Times*, February 2, 2005, A7.
42. Celeste Michelle Condit, "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 106.
43. Leah Ceccarelli, "Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998): 395–415.
44. Ceccarelli, "Polysemy," 408.
45. John M. Murphy, "Mikhail Bakhtin and the Rhetorical Tradition," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87 (2001): 260.
46. Roosevelt, "The Banking Crisis," 228.
47. Stone, *Policy Paradox*, 7, 10.