Great American Speakers and Issues

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Are you interested in how presidents who break the law use speech to effectively shift the blame to others? Then you’ve got to read President Nixon’s “Watergate Investigation Speech” (and compare it to his later speech resigning from the presidency to avoid impeachment)! Does conspiracy rhetoric fascinate you? Senator Joe McCarthy’s rhetoric is a perfect example of the moves that make such rhetoric “self-sealing” so that the target seems guilty however they answer.

Have you ever thought about how the rhetoric of the reform and more radical branches of a social movement, like black rights or women’s rights, work both for and against each other in practice? Come and read Martin Luther King’s speeches relative to those of Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael and speeches like Representative Shirley Chisholm’s “For the Equal Rights Amendment” in comparison to women’s consciousness-raising rhetoric and the SCUM Manifesto. Have you ever heard of a president honoring his assassinated predecessor by implying that he was all talk and no action? Well, take a look at Lyndon Johnson’s “Inaugural” as he ascended to the presidency of the fallen John F. Kennedy. Can you imagine the audacity of a president blaming his decision to widen an unpopular war on the very citizens who are protesting for peace? Nixon’s “Vietnamization” speech is one example. In Communication 667, we’ll tackle all these puzzles and more, analyzing speeches from one of the most interesting periods in U.S. history (1945-1980s), one with some intriguing parallels to today’s public problems.

The Fall 2017 version of “Great American Speakers and Issues” focuses on the pivotal period in U.S. history of 1945 to the late 1980s, which profoundly shaped much of the political and cultural landscape that Americans now inhabit. The course features public rhetoric’s role in shaping key
aspects of post-World War II, 20th-century America (e.g., the Cold War, the McCarthy Era, Kennedy’s New Frontier and Johnson’s Great Society, Civil Rights, Black Power, Women’s Rights, the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Crisis of Confidence in government, the Rise of the New Right). Focusing on significant texts and rhetors, this class employs a rhetorical perspective on the historical influences of significant communicative events after 1945. It introduces analytical tools for understanding the persuasive dynamic between texts and historical contexts. Class sessions combine lectures, videos, group work, close textual analyses, and exams to complement students’ out-of-class preparation.

If you are an undergraduate, do not hesitate to take this class because there may be some M.A. students in it, too. The class assumes no prior knowledge of rhetoric (hence, no prereqs), so everyone is cooperating and learning together, and the graduate students have additional assignments and are graded on a different point structure. Additionally, there is no functional difference (other than the option for some MA students to enroll) between a 300-level class and a 400-, 500-, or 600-level class. In other words, for undergraduates, a 600-level class is no more difficult than a 300- or 400-level course; the numbering schemes are built on logics unrelated to course difficulty.

The three resources we will be using are:


- Additional readings on D2L. You MUST print off copies and bring them to class for analysis.

Hope to see you in Comm 667, Great American Speakers and Issues, this Fall! Due to the Communication Department’s many other curricular needs, this class does not get offered frequently, so this is a rare opportunity.