War and Peace among the Words: Rhetoric, Style, and Propaganda in Response to National Reports

Clifford Adelman

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On Easter Sunday, 1609, a sermon no less remarkable for our purposes than for his was preached before King James at Whitehall by the Bishop of Winchester, one Lancelot Andrewes. The good Bishop’s text (Jn. 20:19, known to clerics by its shorthand, “the Pax Vobis”) was as appropriate for its particular day as the tenor of his interpretation is for ours. The portion of Andrewes’ commentary which attracts the modern sensibility, and which, in our very catholic reading, has little to do with doctrine, is as follows:

... Pax Vobis. The words are but two, yet even between them there seemeth to be no peace, but one in a manner opposite the other. Looking to vobis, the persons, this should not be a salutation for them, pax. Looking to the salutation, “peace,” it should not be to those persons, vobis, “to you.” So that our first work will be, to make peace between the two words [2, p. 240].

This article is about making peace among words. It is about the drama of a discourse no less public in our time than a sermon before the court of King James nearly four hundred years ago. It is about cadences of symbolic performance as Senecan as the style of Andrewes’ prose. Although it may have been a standard conceit of seventeenth-century divines to make peace among words, and although the tradition of doing so may be inseparable from the ecclesiastical profession (regardless of persuasion), the essential wisdom of the exercise should not

The author presents this article in his individual capacity. None of the opinions or positions advanced in this article should be taken as representing the opinions or positions of the United States Department of Education or any of its officials (past or present) or the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education or any of its members.

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escape us: these are public words, and public words are both precious and powerful.

The public words before us are those that were written before the court of national opinion during 1984–85 in response to three major reports concerning the state of American higher education that were published by national bodies. These words form a body of "literature" that, in its cadences and rhetoric, both creates a drama and reflects a way of life. The language, the cadence, the rhetoric, and the drama, I hold, set the conditions under which action to improve higher education takes place and are thus worth very serious attention and analysis.

To consider the ways in which the response to national reports evolves, this article relies on a quantitative content analysis and a qualitative rhetorical criticism, both of which draw on fundamental ideas of semiotics [16, 17]. Harold Lasswell, whose pioneering work on propaganda a half century ago inspired the formal quantitative analysis, once noted that despite our recognition of the practical effects of language, whether "power, pain or composure of mind," we have a tendency to resist quantitative appraisals of its public uses [13, p. 4]. Yet language used with the intent of influencing decisions and choices is a language of power. "It is," as he wrote, "battle cry, verdict and sentence, statute, ordinance and rule, oath of office, controversial news, comment and debate" [13, p. 8].

Given the magical power of this use of language, given the broad effects it is intended to have, given the myriad of media that convey the myriad of utterances functioning to influence decisions, Lasswell and his associates refined and applied the methods of content analysis to determine what was "representative." What content analysis as a method accomplishes is not much different from what Kenneth Burke asserts an artist does informally to arrive at the "representative," the "characteristic," the "symbolic" [7]. But the quantitative method does something more in that it enables us to trace the diffusion of ideas, myths, doctrines, and attitudes through public language use, and hence, to describe the potential for change [5, 9, 20]. That is why I find the method particularly valuable and appropriate for this investigation.

**The Argument**

The argument leading to the content analysis is a bit knotty. I do not wish to belabor the obvious, but one must take care to map such routes:

- The public use of language refers not only to linguistic signs but also to nonverbal acts that are intended to be "read" the same way.
This is what Charles Morris calls the "pragmatic dimension of semiosis" [15].

- *Patterns* of language use and nonverbal behaviors are "performances," the meaning of which lies in convention, not in ostensible definitions [3]. When the complex of these uses is played out on a public stage, the potential for a drama of symbolic action is established [10].

- When this drama is played with a purpose, where persuasion is the goal, we judge its success by its effects. Broadly speaking, the drama becomes a *rhetoric* [17]. As Morris observed, "newspaper statements . . . are increasingly being looked at in terms of the interests which are expressed and served by the production and use of the signs in question" [15, p. 38].

- There is no *public* drama without the mass media. The media themselves interpret the issues raised in the drama: directly, through editorial opinion, and indirectly, by selection of topics, illustrations, experts to interview and quote, letters-to-the-editor, diction, and epithet.

- To the extent to which the selections of the mass media are repeated we perceive the elements of the drama as "representative" or "symbolic," or, in Kenneth Burke's phrase, "individuations of a common paradigm." *Nothing is representative or symbolic unless statistically so,* unless there are enough "individuations" for us to see "a common paradigm" [7, p. 16].

- The constant public repetition of assertions about key elements in a drama of persuasion that is also of sufficient duration constitutes propaganda.

- When this propaganda has been sufficiently diffused, provoking the participation of key target audiences, we can conclude that its principal messages have been accepted.

In 1984 the higher education community in the United States was forced to enter a national discussion that challenged some of its most basic beliefs and myths concerning the *quality* of its processes and outcomes. Emerging slowly and indirectly in the preceding years, that questioning formed a stage of what we are describing that, in democratic societies, the French social theorist, Jacques Ellul, has called "pre-propaganda":

... direct propaganda, aimed at modifying opinions and attitudes, must be preceded by propaganda that is sociological in character, slow, general, seeking to create a climate, an atmosphere of favorable preliminary attitudes. No
direct propaganda can be effective without pre-propaganda, which, without direct or noticeable aggression, is limited to creating ambiguities, reducing prejudices, and spreading images, apparently without purpose [11, p. 15].

When, at the beginning of the work of the study group that wrote *Involvement in Learning*, Harold Hodgkinson observed that no report intended to play a role on a national stage would be effective "unless a tide was already rising," he offered, in a simple figure, the complex notion that lies at the core of Ellul's theory. Indeed, I think one could demonstrate that sociological propaganda, conveying a profound dissatisfaction with American education, had been building for five or six years before *A Nation at Risk* was issued, and that, after that pivotal event, the national stage was open for statements which reinforced the rising myths and symbols of a new belief system in American education.

*A Necessary Word on Propaganda*

Because we associate propaganda with totalitarian regimes, we tend to think of it as intrinsically evil. As Lasswell and others have demonstrated, however, there are different kinds of "propaganda," some of which are used almost exclusively in democratic societies [9, 10, 11, 13]. These "democratic" uses of propaganda tend to be overt, involve direct incitement, openly admit their aims (for example, "Yes, I am trying to persuade you to..."), and often utilize education. Ellul contends that modern propaganda is no longer so much about changing people's ideas or beliefs "but to provoke action" [11, p. 25]. In a democratic society, he says, "propaganda... aims solely at participation. The participation may be active or passive: active, if propaganda has been able to mobilize the individual for action; passive, if the individual does not act directly but psychologically supports that action [11, p. 26]." Propaganda in democratic societies is a raggedy, decentralized but oddly systematic way of creating the conditions under which given groups will act for a specific set of ends/goals or passively support the action of others. Intellectuals (and academics in particular) who value the "objectivity" of considering all sides of an issue stripped of its rhetorical wrappings, think they are immune to this raggedy action. Paradoxically, as Ellul points out, intellectuals in democratic societies are the most vulnerable to propaganda: "The reader of a number of newspapers expressing diverse attitudes—just because he is better informed—is more subjected than anyone else to a propaganda that he cannot perceive, even though he claims to retain free choice in the mastery of all this information [11, p. 113]." Thus, when the reports on the quality of American higher education emerged, the academics who thought they were insu-
lated from anything that resembled propaganda were among the most active players in the drama that ensued.

Because of competing belief systems and competing myths in democratic societies, propaganda must be continuous in order to be effective. The drama of response to the three reports at issue well illustrates that competition. The reports themselves—Involvement in Learning (National Institute of Education), To Reclaim a Legacy (National Endowment for the Humanities), and Integrity in the College Curriculum (Association of American Colleges)—were recreating a social myth: the true, the good, and the beautiful of liberal education; the true, and the beautiful of higher standards of learning and assessment; and in some formulations, the true, the good, and the beautiful of the active and involved student.

The contest between this myth and its competitors and the comparative strengths of those forces over time, are best observable in the press. In an age of electronic media, one may question my use of printed documents, particularly newspapers, to provide statistical verification of propaganda. Television, however, offers no harbors of reflection, and these harbors—particularly in the form of feature articles or op-ed pieces that break away from the surface events—are necessary for the group that must "participate" in order for the propaganda to succeed. Academic culture is a culture of print, and takes its vitality from the written word. The written word allows explanation and reflection—key academic values—and not merely fact or doctrine.

To construct the map of the progress of propaganda, we must thus look to the print media and analyze: (a) the language used to describe the three major reports, (b) the character of assertions made about the major sets of actors, issues and beliefs that comprise the competing myths, and (c) the rhetoric of response over time. In order to demonstrate what is more "representative" or "symbolic" in printed communications concerning the three reports, content analysis suggests itself as the most promising method.

Method: Categories and Rules

“Content analysis” is a technique for classifying signs that appear in communications of various kinds into a set of categories [5, 9, 12]. The classification is carried out by an observer or group of observers on the basis of explicit rules; and the categories established by these (or other) analysts must be appropriate to the subject. The results “state the frequency of occurrence of signs for each category in the classification scheme” [13, p. 55] and call for an inferential analysis of the intentions of those who produced the signs [20].
There are a number of kinds of content analysis [5, 9, 12], and I use three. In ascending order of frequency and importance they are:

1. "Attributions analysis," which, as Irving Janis defined it, "indicates the frequency with which certain characterizations are referred to" [13, p. 57]. For example, we might be interested in how often each of the three reports is characterized as "timely" versus how often it is judged "out-of-date." The weight of the evidence may indicate the receptiveness of the respondents to particular proposals for reform advanced by a report.

2. "Designations analysis," which simply records the frequency with which certain objects (persons, things, groups, concepts, events) are referred to. Lasswell uses the analogue of "subject-matter analysis" to describe what is at issue here. I claim that the identification of subject matter by respondents focuses the drama of competing myths so as to preclude some solutions and to advance others. The frequency of designations, in fact, provides the basic contours of the map of public interpretation: you can tell what the respondents think the reports are about by looking first to the distribution of designations and their frequencies.

3. "Assertions analysis," which indicates "the frequency with which certain objects are characterized in a particular way, that is, roughly speaking, thematic analysis" [13, p. 57]. This is the most important form of analysis for our purposes, and Lasswell himself notes it to be "the most productive type of content analysis, inasmuch as the 'thematic content' corresponds most nearly to the overall signification of a communication" [13, p. 67]. It is hardly sufficient to know the relative weights of subject matter. A map is comparatively meaningless until it is three-dimensional. The communications can refer to college administrators very frequently, but until we look more closely to determine how administrators are perceived by respondents and interpreters of the situation, we cannot advance any hypotheses concerning the future "participation" of administrators in specific courses of action.

Lasswell and his associates developed six categories of assertions for analyses of newspaper content and latent propaganda, and I have borrowed them wholesale [13]. With illustrations drawn from the 400 communications (or "artifacts," as I sometimes refer to them) used in this study, they are:

*Category 1:* "Unqualified positive," that is, a favorable presentation without any hedging, for example, "Colleges and universities are responding to this crisis [of demography] with courage and resourcefulness."
Category 2: "Qualified positive," that is, a favorable presentation that nonetheless includes unfavorable aspects, for example, "Since major research universities powerfully influence the rest of academe, we might turn first to the special problem of renewing baccalaureate programs in them."

Category 3: "Qualified negative," that is, an unfavorable presentation which nonetheless contains what Lasswell calls "ameliorating elements," for example, "While many students pile up courses and earn degrees, they don't learn much of value."

Category 4: "Unqualified negative." No hedging here, either, for example, "Some professors couldn't integrate those elements [of curriculum] if you put a gun to their heads."

Category 5: "Balanced," that is, an assertion about a subject with both favorable and unfavorable elements involved, for example, "While colleges are raising their standards for admission and thus encouraging improvement in high schools, they are neglecting their standards for graduation, thus running the risk that improvement will be undone."

Category 6: "Neutral" (what Lasswell terms, "No Direction"), that is, the presentation is devoid of any favorable or unfavorable linguistic or contextual clues, for example, "Over the past few years, many colleges have returned to core curricula."

The best examples in Categories 1 through 5 involve epithets. It takes a powerful qualification to overcome judgments of students as "hard-working" (Category 1), "raw materials waiting to be shaped" (Category 2), "high-tech peasants" (Category 3), or "barbarians" (Category 4). It is not surprising that we witness a surfeit of epithets in responses to the reports, particularly in assertions about the major groups of actors and issues in higher education. The more abstract the noun or the more it denotes a class of objects, ideas or events, the more likely does the epithet come into being. And the more a specific type of epithet is applied to a designation (whether as an adjective, noun, or noun phrase playing an adjectival role) the more a key equation in the drama of propaganda is established.

On the other hand, a significant percentage of our assertions do not provide the relatively clear road signs of epithets, and that is where judgment calls come into play. By strict canons of the methodology of content analysis, I am wanting on a key issue: the statistical reliability of my judgments. Ideally, at least two observers should have pored over the same 400 communications, performing the same acts of selection and classification by the same rules. We would then be required to demonstrate a convincingly high coefficient of correlation for separately rendered judgments in each category. In the absence of a team of
investigators and authors, though, I ask the reader to accept my judgments to the extent to which they have face validity.

The analysis of assertions (and, to a slightly lesser extent, the analysis of designations) is particularly important in light of a general hypothesis with which I embarked on this study: that the language of response to the reports changes in stages corresponding to the rhetoric of response to the reports, that there are discrete "acts" in the drama of our propaganda. Since the three reports were issued over a period of four months, and since each dominated the communications in the press until the next report was issued, I assumed it was possible to classify the responses within distinct periods of time:


Now, these divisions of time are not very neat (particularly those of Period 4), and I use the release dates of the reports as a convenience. But these classifications, as we will see, yield some intriguing hypotheses concerning the focus of debate, the rise and fall of symbols, and the accretion of meaning as actors and issues are sorted into bins of different values.

The basic rules I established for selection of communications and the assertions within them to be analyzed are presented in the Appendix. It is very important that the criteria be clear, prior, and applied consistently [5, 9, 13, 20]. These rules reduced the number of communications I examined from over 1200 available at the time the analysis was undertaken (July, 1985) to roughly 400. Although the three major time periods all "suffered" from this reduction, the effects were most pronounced for Period 1, during which the wire service stories played a greater role than they did in the other periods.

3There were four major collections of communications, totalling over 1200 artifacts. The first was maintained under a contract to the National Institute of Education for a period of 90 days commencing 19 October 1984. The second was a collection of clippings maintained by the Public Affairs Office of the National Endowment for the Humanities, covering a period beginning 25 November 1984 and concluding in March of 1985. The third was a collection of clippings collected under contract to the Association of American Colleges, commencing in January, 1985 and running through May. The last was an informal collection, maintained by the author, from October, 1984 through June, 1985. This latter collection also covered approximately 20 items concerning his study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source:</th>
<th>Number and Percentage of Total in Each Period</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Period 1</td>
<td>Period 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News articles</td>
<td>20 (23.3%)</td>
<td>19 (14.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wire service stories</td>
<td>5 (8.3%)</td>
<td>3 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other syndicated news/features</td>
<td>2 (3.3%)</td>
<td>3 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature articles/reviews</td>
<td>10 (16.6%)</td>
<td>12 (9.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College paper news/editorial</td>
<td>2 (3.3%)</td>
<td>17 (12.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorials</td>
<td>5 (8.3%)</td>
<td>38 (28.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syndicated editorials</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>5 (3.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columns</td>
<td>2 (2.3%)</td>
<td>13 (9.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest edits/Op-Ed</td>
<td>3 (5.0%)</td>
<td>6 (4.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters to editor</td>
<td>6 (10.0%)</td>
<td>14 (10.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assoc. &amp; trade publications</td>
<td>5 (8.3%)</td>
<td>3 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Sources:</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of days in period</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave. no. communications/day</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*NIE clipping service contract was limited to major media markets, no repetitions of wire service, syndicated column or other syndicated news, features, or editorials.

**Communications received for this period were unsolicited.

Trends in Sources and Assertions

Table 1 presents a classification of the types of communications examined, by period. The following trends can be observed as the drama of propaganda ages (we leave Period 4 aside because the clipping service contracts had expired, and hence the evidence is slight):

1. The percentage of news articles falls at the same time that the percentage of editorials rises, reaching a peak in Period 3 (dominated by Integrity in the College Curriculum);
2. Even as the percentage of editorials rises, the percentage of letters-to-the-editor and guest editorials (Op-Ed pieces) falls;
3. Likewise, the percentage of association and trade publication articles withers away by Period 3 (but makes a strong comeback in Period 4, for reasons discussed below).

None of these trends is surprising. As the drama opens, official opinion has yet to be formulated. But unofficial opinion (letters-to-the-editor, for

"The Standardized Test Scores of College Graduates, 1964-1982," which was released in January, 1985. None of these items was included in the content analysis unless it specifically mentioned one or more of the three major reports.
example) and the opinions of those with the most visible stakes in the competition of myths (the association and trade publications) substitute while official opinion is "warming up." Editors are slow to decide just how important a cultural issue may be to their readership, and slower still to decide what tone the components of that issue warrant. Once they enter the drama, their stance tends to coalesce and clarify what was previously reported as news or offered as analysis or opinion.

One cannot reach this conclusion only on the basis of the classification of communications. One must also look to the overall trends evident in the classification of assertions presented in Table 3, where we note:

Period 1: diffusion and ambiguity (the percentage of "balanced" or "neutral" assertions is comparatively high);
Period 2: a bi-modal pattern (negative/neutral), indicating a gradual shaping of tone;
Period 3: certainty and negativity (the percentage of negative assertions is at its zenith, whereas the percentage of balanced or neutral statements is at its nadir);
Period 4: analytic (the percentage of balanced or neutral assertions is at its height at the same time that the previous imbalance between negative and positive statements modulates).

Given the distribution and weights of the types of communications, these characteristics also should surprise no one. Taken in their mass, news stories diffuse, features and reviews analyze, and editorials crystallize tone and provide the certainty of stance. The point is twofold: (1) the stages of the drama have distinct characteristics, partly determined by the types of communications that dominate, and (2) each type of communication has an inherent bias toward certain categories of assertion.

Trends in Designations

The second significant feature of the data concerns the distribution of designations contained in the 403 communications (see table 2). It is important to note that I arrived at the 15 major designation categories inductively, and that while other designation categories were recorded (for example, business, the federal government), the contexts in which those symbols were raised often did not relate directly to the presentation or discussion of the reports, hence they were excluded from the analysis.
The 15 major designations, extended by their allied terms (for example, the designation, "administrators," also covers assertions about "college officials," "deans," "presidents," "academic managers," and "academic leaders"), are the major terms of both the reports and the responses. Confining our attention to Periods 1, 2, and 3, and remembering that each of them is dominated (but not exclusively ruled) by a different national report, the data offer some fairly plausible hypotheses about how each report differs from the others. In other words, I contend that the sheer number of designations (category x period) provides a phenomenological indication of what the reports are about. The question is whether the representation of reality (dominance of a designation) in the communication matches the presentation in the reports. To a significant degree, the answer is "yes":

*Integrity in the College Curriculum* (Period 3) does, in fact, place a greater emphasis on the faculty role than the other two reports, and the percentage of designations in the "faculty" bin is highest in Period 3.

*To Reclaim a Legacy* (Period 2) does, in fact, place college administrators (or "academic leaders," and others) at the center of responsibility for what has gone awry, and, in part because it is focused on a specific

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Period 1</th>
<th>Period 2</th>
<th>Period 3</th>
<th>Period 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrators</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustees</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislators</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation agencies</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departments</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate education/schools</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisement, counseling</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admissions/access</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduation standards</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education in general</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local institution/system</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals:</strong></td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>99.9%</td>
<td>100.5%</td>
<td>99.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total assertions, 15 designations</td>
<td>168%</td>
<td>283%</td>
<td>337%</td>
<td>86%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total communications/artifacts</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>133%</td>
<td>183%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave. no. assertions/artifact</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
set of disciplines, pays more attention to academic departments than do the other two reports. These emphases are well reflected in the distribution of designations in Period 2 in comparison with the other two major periods.

Involvement in Learning (Period 1) in fact, covers a broader scope of actors in the system of higher education than do the other two reports, particularly through its inclusion of issues concerning governance (hence, more frequent mention of trustees, legislators, and accreditation agencies); and, through its elevation of assessment, is far more explicit about issues of standards than the other two reports.

In all these cases, the distribution of designations is verified by the content of the reports themselves. But far more interesting from the point of view of the drama of propaganda are the cases in which the distribution of designations does not find agreement in the emphases of the reports or vice-versa (that is, when the emphases of the reports are not confirmed by the topics selected by reporters, editors, and other respondents). For example, Involvement in Learning was probably the most student-centered of any of the reports on education issued in recent years, yet only 10 percent of the designations in Period 1 (versus 14–15 percent in the other three periods) were about students.

One phenomenon that explains this "anomaly" is the steady and dramatic decline in the proportion of designations of "higher education in general" across the time span of our sample of communications. There is common sense to this. When the subject of the quality of higher education first breaks on the national stage, no matter how specific its first incarnation (and Involvement in Learning was rather specific in both its diagnosis and many of its recommendations), the tendency of the response is to protect the local province by talking about the world. But once the target audience becomes accustomed to the terms, tenor, and tone of the drama, it is more willing to talk about the province. So to the extent to which we reduce the weight of assertions about "higher education in general," the weight of assertions about administrators or students or curriculum will rise—unless, of course, a specific report calls forth comments on a very particular issue.

Corresponding to the decrease in the proportion of assertions concerning "higher education in general" is an increase in the proportion of statements concerning particular "local institutions or systems." This phenomenon, however, cannot be considered apart from the assertions analysis data presented in table 3. As the tone of public presentation of the reports shifts toward the negative, a defensive reaction sets in. Commentators quoted in the press tend to say, in so many words, "Yes, but
that's not true here at Old Siwash." Against a dim national backdrop reflected in the reports and crystallized by a reporter's question, college presidents (in particular) or deans understandably seek to set their institutions apart from the calamity, and certainly say nothing that would cast aspersions on their reigns or that would thwart their career advancement.

TABLE 3
Gross Assertions Analysis: 14 Designations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assertion Categories</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Unqualified positive</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Qualified positive</td>
<td></td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Qualified negative</td>
<td></td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Unqualified negative</td>
<td></td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Balanced</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. No direction/neutral</td>
<td></td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td></td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total assertions, 14 designations</td>
<td></td>
<td>154</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total communications/artifacts</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave. no. assertions/artifact</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For this table, the 15th designation, "Local institution/system" was dropped from the data analysis because the responses in that category were heavily biased, so will.

Assertion Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
<td>57.7%</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Insufficient number of designations.

One exception to this tendency occurs in Period 1. The local president or dean is not yet sure of the terms of debate, and, not wishing to expose him- or herself to subsequent ridicule, offers a neutral assessment (categories 5 or 6) of the current status of quality at Old Siwash (for example, by saying, "we're studying various propositions for reform"). This type of statement only reinforces the general trend of diffusion and ambiguity we have noted in Period 1.

Perhaps the most revealing assertions analysis we can undertake with these data involves two variables: designation x period. It is an analysis that can be reinforced by considering the epithets applied to the major designations. By way of illustration, let us consider two designations: faculty (a core group of actors) and curriculum (a core topic).

Faculty. The role and emotive position of faculty in the drama of propaganda changes considerably over time. The range of judgments in Period 1 is very diffuse, and only 25 percent of them fall in the two
“unqualified” categories (positive or negative). *Involvement in Learning* did not pin a specific responsibility on faculty for the “warning signals” that otherwise received much attention in the press. To the extent to which commentators understood the role of faculty in *Involvement*, they used epithets such as “immobilized” and “baffled” (attributions that cast faculty in a passive role, hence not the direct instruments of decline) more than epithets such as “self-righteous” (an attribution that implies an active disposition with negative consequences). In addition, administrators, who were widely quoted in the news and feature article formats that dominated Period 1, tended to offer balanced, neutral, or qualified positive statements about faculty. A dean or vice president, after all, would face uncomfortable pressures by making negative statements about faculty to the press.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assertion Category</th>
<th>Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Unqualified positive</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Qualified positive</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Qualified negative</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Unqualified negative</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Balanced</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. No direction/neutral</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum (other terms: studies, subjects, content, substance, course of study)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Unqualified positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Qualified positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Qualified negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Unqualified negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Balanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. No direction/neutral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Period 2, the distribution of assertions shifts, with over half of the judgments of faculty falling into the two unqualified categories (and of these judgments, 6 out of 7 were negative). This movement from ambiguity to certainty is a key development in the drama of propaganda. Whereas administrators responding to *To Reclaim a Legacy* still tended to make balanced or neutral statements about faculty, others applied epithets such as “shallow” and “lackluster,” attributes that indirectly explain to the public why college education in the humanities (and, by implication, in other fields) has lost its vitality. The writers of editorials, columns, and Op-Ed pieces who played a far greater role in the total package of communications in Period 2 than in Period 1 (43 percent
versus 17 percent of all communications) naturally seek to sort symbols into the bins of certainty. The symbol of “faculty” thus becomes more negative, ready to be reinforced by the next stage of the drama.

Indeed, no one was disappointed. *Integrity in the College Curriculum* was regarded by some as a full-scale assault on faculty and hence stimulated a very defensive response. Thus, fully two-thirds of the attributions concerning faculty in Period 3 are hedged (categories 2 and 3), balanced, or neutral. At the same time, over half the attributions are negative (categories 3 and 4); and negative epithets such as “resistant,” “uncaring,” and “jealous” imply that faculty are actively responsible for the dismal state of student learning.

Even though the evidence is thin, it appears that, by Period 4, a more balanced era of assessment has commenced. The epithets used to describe faculty are more sympathetic to their position (for example, “besieged” or “frustrated”). What has happened by this time is that all the potential respondents have had the chance to consider the three reports together, have witnessed a crescendo of emotive statements, have realized that there is a great deal of public pressure, have turned their attention from defensiveness to reconstruction, and have recognized that action will not occur without faculty participation. Perhaps due to an understandable lag in the diffusion of the symbols of the drama, let alone the period of digestion of the three reports, Period 4 evidences a high percentage of communications from college newspapers and a resurgence of communications from associations. It is reassuring that these sources tend to be more analytic at this stage. With this shift, we appear to be on the eve of participation—the goal of propaganda in democratic societies.

*Curriculum.* “One of the rudimentary protections of the human being against insecurity is repetition,” Lasswell wrote [13, p. 35]. The more abstract, generalized or distant the subject, the more readers need repetition to help them interpret the issues. Such is the case with the key topic of “curriculum,” a vast area addressed in different ways and with different degrees of concretion, in all three reports.

Given the generalized nature of the topic, it is not surprising that the epithets applied to the designation are highly metaphorical. For example, our data evidence a rising incidence of metaphors concerning food applied to “curriculum.” By Period, these include: soupy (1), pottage (2), stew (2), Swiss cheese (3), cheese doodles (3), clam dip (3), junk food (3), and bubble gum (3). This remarkable consensus may be due to some of the metaphors used in the reports themselves (supermarket, cafeteria, and so forth) and the tendency of commentators to seek novelty of expression within a language framework provided by the objects of com-
mentary. But there is a tenor of this metaphorical configuration that tells us much about the potential role of curriculum in higher education reform. Curriculum, this configuration says, is formless and not very nutritious; but more importantly, it is passive, acted upon, served. If so, it may be one of the more easily altered of the major variables in higher education. To counter one of our proverbial similes, changing curriculum is not more difficult than moving a cemetery; whereas changing faculty may be, as the effort requires a more complex understanding. Perhaps for that reason, and among our designations, "curriculum" does not receive as much attention as "faculty" in Period 4, the period of analytical reconstruction of the reports.

From Content Analysis to Rhetoric: The Issue of Excuses

As a last look at what content analysis can do for us, consider the distribution of judgments concerning the designation, "colleges/higher education in general." Recall that the percentage of assertions under this designation declines rather dramatically from Period 1 to Period 4 but what remains is still substantial and significant. To be sure, as the overall percentage of designations declines, the percentage of negative assertions rises (from 36 percent in Period 1 to 61 percent in Period 2 to 67 percent in Period 3), but the percentage of what I call "hedged" assertions (categories 2, 3 and 5), adjusted for the natural diffusion previously noted for Period 1, remains stable at about half of all assertions.

What is being hedged? When one looks closely at the assertions made about higher education in general in response to these reports, three manifestations of a single line of argument emerge. The argument is that, although there are "warning signals" or deficiencies, the current system of higher education in America is not at fault. Rather, there are forces external to the current state of affairs that "excuse" some of the trends we see. Three major external forces are repeatedly cited.

The first (principally in Period 1) lies in a combination of demographics and the preparation of entering freshmen. This is precisely the kind of argument that Involvement in Learning went out of its way to preclude, but evidently was not successful. The commentators thus claimed that while our colleges may evidence loose standards for degrees, the demographics argue that they have no choice in the matter. The second external force is American business enterprise, or, more accurately, our perceptions of the attitudes and practices of the business world. These are most prominent in Period 2. A statement such as "corporations cannot make money from Nibelungenlied," although not typical in level of diction or allusion, is typical in spirit: it "excuses" students from their
patterns of curricular choice. The third is the broader cultural battlefield, and in many ways, the "excuses" here are the most interesting.

Editorial writers have a penchant for blaming American cultural values for the ills of education. The target is mushy and invites the limits of news metaphor, invective, and epithet, for example, "calculated ignorance," "idiot savants," "bars of blindness," "intellectual sloth," "mindless cogs," "grasping boors,"—and these are all in one editorial (San Bernadino Sun, November 27, 1984)! What can American higher education possibly accomplish, one columnist asks, in the face of airline gift catalogues offering a set of richly bound great books (with simulated leather covers and gold foil filigree) that actually turn out to be hollow hiding places for videotapes (no doubt, of "Conan the Barbarian")? However we may agree with the sentiment, this type of commentary diffuses the issue because it offers excuses.

If some editorial writers and columnists take the heat off the colleges by citing current manifestations of broader cultural values, there is another school that tends to blame the past. The argument here is very simple: "It's all the fault of the 1960s and 1970s." This argument is offered in fully 17 percent of all communications recorded for Period 2 and 10 percent of those in Period 3. What it obviously does is to "explain" current conditions by reference to a presumably inexorable logic of consequence. The explanation is very convenient in our drama of propaganda because it allows readers to develop their own vaguely negative image of what "the fault of the 60s and 70s" means. Whether or not the reader attributes whatever happened back then to the actions of colleges (students, faculty, administration), the effect is to excuse them from present responsibility. When that judgment dominates, the competing mythology advances, and the resolution of the drama is stalled. We are not liable to participate in reform if we accept a line of propaganda that undermines potential action with an appeal to the forces of history. That acceptance is part of a complex belief system. Charles Stevenson helps us understand this analysis with the following illustration:

Suppose that a man, believing that it is raining, should in fact put on his raincoat. Is he acting solely on the belief that it is raining? Clearly not. He would not have put it on unless he also believed that it would serve to keep him dry when he went out, and unless he wanted both to go out and keep dry. . . . Thus there are many dispositions involved, all of them relevant to any given action. Change any of these dispositions, and, with all else constant, the action will change as well [19, pp. 64–65].

In other words, however they may be disposed to participate in reform, once a group of actors repeats a belief excusing a condition that, in J. L.
Austin’s account, is “bad, wrong, inept, unwelcome, or in some other of the numerous possible ways untoward” [4, p. 42], that group will not participate the same way—if at all.

The excuse itself is a symbolic action, part of a larger flow of argument. The intentions of these actions are as important to our understanding as the isolated designations and assertions we have been examining through content analysis. With the entrance of “intention,” our focus shifts to the relationship between writer and audience, hence, to rhetoric. Rhetoric asks us to pay close attention to what Austin called the “performative utterance” [3]. In the context of propaganda, where mythologies may be competing, the interplays among these utterances constitute symbolic arguments. Their evolution in time is like a drama, complete with acts and scenes, context and costume, and to them we now turn.

The Rhetoric of Drama: The Drama of Rhetoric

For the purposes of the quantitative analysis of communications, we set some arbitrary time periods determined by the release dates of the three reports under consideration. When one examines the drama of rhetoric, however, it appears that the responses to each report go through the same set of acts and scenes until a period of reflection sets in, or at least until negative commentary has been exhausted. In the following account of this sequence, I use the case of Involvement in Learning, though I will also draw on the experience of the other two reports.

I propose that we witness a drama in five acts (this is a comedy, after all). Provided that the propaganda in the media is sustained, the sequence of these acts is inevitable: negation, misconception, ethical judgment, aesthetic judgment, action. This sequence does not necessarily correspond to the patterns of assertions we have previously analyzed, and that divergence is related to the difference between the surfaces of language and the intention of the utterance.

Act 1: Negation and Denial

Act 1, scene 1 is that of “absolute negation.” The dominant strain of responses at this stage was manifested in strange forms of the argumentum ad hominem offered up in terms of the symbols of the drama, not the substance of the reports. Act 1, scene 1 takes place in Washington (in the case of national reports issued by national bodies, it always does), where statements are issued in association and trade publications, or by representatives of those associations, whose job is to justify the conditions of their employment by raising flags. So, in the case of Involvement
in Learning, we heard everything from “this is another government report, therefore nobody should pay any attention to it” to those who thought a study group ought to be a commission and said, “there wasn’t an X (student, legislator, state college faculty, community college dean, librarian, research assistant, or football coach) on the study group, therefore the report is seriously stilted if not outrightly invalid.”

This foolishness calls for two retorts. First, while Involvement in Learning was published by the U.S. Department of Education, it was not written by the department. The “government” had no obligation to do anything more than place the report in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system, walk away, and let the academic community figure out that the report was in the public domain. Former Secretary Bell chose to publish it because he found it provocative, not because he agreed with it; and he made both positions clear in presenting the report at his news conference on 22 October 1984.

The second is more critical to our argument, as it relates to the “perceived voice” in any national report, the identity to the authors, and the way in which the composition of a report-writing group influences both the substance and style of the document produced. Noah’s Ark commissions do not produce conceptually challenging or stylistically memorable reports unless one member dominates the process of composition, for example, Gerald Holton for A Nation at Risk or Frederick Rudolph for Integrity in the College Curriculum.

Of the three recent national reports on higher education, only one indicated a single author. And, indeed, Secretary Bennett is the author of To Reclaim a Legacy. To be sure, he listened to thirty to forty members of a “study group” discuss the issues he wished to write about; and, to be sure, he distributed a draft of the report to those thirty to forty people for their comments and suggestions. But he is the sole author, and on record as such. It is precisely for that reason that in all the public commentary on these reports, To Reclaim a Legacy was not subject to act 1, scene 1. It is very difficult to issue an absolute negation and to offer silly ad hominem arguments when someone’s name is on the cover. But precisely because a name was on the cover, follow-up phone interview quotations from Bennett were very frequent in the press accounts. Those quotations allowed for emendations that shifted the emphases of the news.

Few reporters understood just how To Reclaim a Legacy was written. An attribution such as “prepared by a group of distinguished academics and written by William J. Bennett,” is typical. Others included, “The result of the work of 31 distinguished...” “Is the work of 31...” and “Drafted with the advice of prominent scholars and college leaders.” Of the articles I examined, only the campus newspaper at Texas A&M was accurate, and the chairman of the Aggie English Department, David Stewart, was a member of Bennett’s Study Group.
and feature stories from the report to Bennett's gloss, which was highly substantive. Respondents might have characterized the report with such epithets as "problematic," "grossly generalized," "doubtful," "defensive," "too rigid," and "unfair," but each of these epithets demands a substantive qualification. On the other hand, as soon as Bennett's name was floated as a potential replacement for Secretary Bell, epithets such as "sinister" and "contaminated" entered the public judgments of respondents, and the report was described, not in terms of substance, but as "an enormous power play."

On the other hand, it is much easier to deny an abstract "study group" or "commission," or (as the Association of American Colleges called it) "oversight committee." The flags you wish to raise, the symbolic issues upon which your position—moral, organizational, or otherwise—depend, are more effective against an indeterminate body and a diffuse voice.

The NIE Study Group, however, not only listed their names, but provided enough biographical information so that those who were predisposed to do so could shape their criticisms more on the biographies than the substance. The critics' task was made easier by the obvious discontinuities of style in *Involvement in Learning*. To read *Involvement* is to read a classic in the genre of reports from faculty committees. One person may have drafted the report, but as an amanuensis, and it is obvious that every line and every paragraph was subsequently negotiated. In fact, a serious stylistic analysis could deduce the composition of the group by citing everything from sociological and economic phraseology (sometimes called "jargon") to allusions and archaisms that could only be the product of graduate education in the humanities. Combine the diffuseness of style, choppiness of presentation, abstract nature of the study group yet concrete details of the biographies, and one has a very fit subject for act 1, scene 1.

Scene 2 of act 1 is that of "denial," a considerable advance over the absolute nonsense of absolute negation. But the setting is the same—Washington—and the purpose is the same: raise the symbolic flag. Defend the territory, whether provincial or global. At least "denial" acknowledges that a report has some substance. But it merely fires salvos into the sea, attacking a report for what it is *not*, and concluding, in a form of fallacious logic called the *petitio principii*, or "begging the question," that the report is suspect because it is *not* about X (adult basic education, technical education in community colleges, access and college admissions, research, for example). For *Involvement in Learning*, the practitioners of denial had only to read the bold type numbered recommendations—not the discussions that accompanied each nor the
analytic sections that set the stage for those recommendations—in order to load the cannons. For To Reclaim a Legacy, the petitio principii consisted in the accusation that Bennett did not go far enough and/or did not ask the "right" questions because he confined his attention to the Academy instead of a quasi-literate "Datsun 300ZX-oriented" culture that vaunts its disdain for serious thought at every opportunity.

All three reports tried to protect themselves against this fallacy in introductory statements, forewords, "letters of transmittal," and other portions of books that most people never read. In the case of Involvement, for example, there were three such statements, including a delineation of values that opened the text. But when a respondent is intent on using a national report for propagandistic purposes of his or her own, these statements can be ignored with impunity, because he or she knows that in the fast action of a broad, symbolic drama, the media will never have the chance to issue a contradiction—or even to quote someone of contradictory opinion. And when the opening act of the drama is conveyed principally by the wire services and news stories, with a comparatively low level of official editorial commentary, respondents intent on raising a counterpropaganda are more likely to succeed, particularly if they use the unofficial editorial capacities of association and trade publications.

Such was the case in the attack on Involvement in Learning in Period 1 by the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges on the grounds that the report was not about community colleges, and, to a lesser extent, that it was not about access. Just as the national press was eager to promote a report with metaphors of diseases, so it was eager to find a second opinion in the response (if the doctor is right, there is no good press). Paradoxically, the national leadership of this attack established an umbrella defense that, in effect, absolved community colleges from the criticisms of all reports, and allowed community college presidents to sally forth with non-sequiturs such as "because community college faculty have no other commitments, the quality of teaching at community colleges is better than elsewhere." The success of the initial effort to establish a countermythology here is ironic because it largely removed community colleges from the subsequent debate, from the drama that leads to participation and reform. In terms of our designations analysis above, community colleges are rarely mentioned in the press after Period 1.

The metaphor was first suggested by former Secretary Bell. In presenting Involvement in Learning at a press conference, he said our colleges "had a case of the sniffles." After this utterance, we were treated to everything from pneumonia to herpes.
Of course the situation might have been different. Had Involvement in Learning, in particular, given major attention to the status of the American community college, the recommendations would have been so bloody as to distract everyone’s attention from the broader issues concerning the improvement of student learning. Had any of these reports given major attention to access and college admissions, they would not have played on the national stage as reports about higher education, that is, on what happens to students between matriculation and graduation; rather, we would have witnessed a renewed (but short-lived), redundant, and unproductive attack on secondary schools.

The transition to act 2 is a variation on the theme of denial. When the critics began to read beyond the bold type of the twenty-seven recommendations in Involvement, they acknowledged that, in fact, the NIE Study Group did talk about access and did talk about community colleges and did address recommendations to adult, part-time and commuter students. At that point, it was rhetorically essential for the antagonists to escalate the argument, to repeat and sustain it at a different level. So the informal party line then advanced the notion that these issues were not in the report “enough” or that they weren’t in it “in the right way.” Likewise, the antagonists conceded that whereas the AAC report did not so much assault faculty as it critiqued the functions of faculty decision-making bodies such as the curriculum committee, its fatal flaw was a failure to take “the effects of collective bargaining” into account. This stance (so easily recognizable in the concession of the adverbial clause) introduces the potential for reconstruction which emerges later in the play. But by that time, as we will observe, the actors have changed and the scene is no longer Washington—which perhaps explains why the terms are more constructive.

Act 2: Purposive Misconstruction

The responses in this act of the drama are dominated by misconceptions, misreadings, deflections, and excuses—some naive, but most of them intentional.

The appearance of excuses demands attention to the language, as well as the rhetoric of response, because, as J. L. Austin has observed, there are clusters of words and word types associated with excuses. The former include such abstract nouns as “accident” and “purpose” and verbs such as “intend” and “attempt” [4, p. 50]. The latter feature adverbs because the excuse often claims that people did or said things in
certain ways, for example, in Austin's examples, "unwittingly," "spontaneously" or "impulsively" [4, p. 53].

Excuses arise when the prima facie evidence is difficult to deny, when the data are hard, in fact, when there is only one database. There is a significant difference between attacking the NIE Study Group's assertion (based on National Longitudinal Survey data) that roughly half the students who enter college with the intention of receiving the baccalaureate actually do so within 7½ years, and attacking its assertion that student performance on 11 of 15 GRE Subject Area Tests declined over the past two decades. One can argue with the first assertion if one uses a different database such as that of the Cooperative Institutional Research Project (where the sample is confined to those who entered college as full-time students); but one cannot argue with the second by saying, "Yes, but it's all those foreign students taking the tests"—which is the latest theme of the test-score excuses, and one that the data do not support[1].

Then there are the purposive misreadings, for example, that the NIE Study Group recommended two years of "humanities" for all college graduates. The Study Group made no such statement; it said two years of traditional arts and sciences. The misreading is a fascinating reflection of the habit of the academic mind to equate "liberal education" with the "humanities," and to attack the equation in terms of academic politics. Or that Involvement recommended that national standardized tests be administered to all students as a condition of graduation. The study group made no such statement. In fact, the group chose its words very carefully in recommendation concerning the "warranty" of degrees and in all its recommendations in which assessment of student learning and growth was the subject. But if one wants to use a form of the argumentum ad populum to generate fear of national standards, this particular misreading is very handy.

Some of these misreadings were used to support the contentions and recommendations of the reports. On this matter it is interesting to note that those commentators who used honorific terms in the general presentation of any of the reports (for example, "cogent," "trenchant," "commendable," "timely,"), also tended to misread some of the key recommendations. It is difficult to be charitable toward these commentators, particularly when they are college administrators or faculty. Integrity in the College Curriculum proved to be a very strong magnet for ignoratio elenchii (ignorance of the point at issue) utterances in this vein. In response to the central recommendation of the AAC report (the "min-
imum required curriculum” set forth in terms of nine “criteria or objectives”), I recorded, in 183 communications:

- Ten comments that equated the AAC recommendation with distribution requirements by major division of curriculum (humanities, sciences, etc.);
- Six comments that equated the fulfillment of the AAC recommendation with its existence as part of the mission statement of a college (there is more magic than logic to this);
- Eight recitations of course titles intended to indicate a positive response to the AAC recommendation.

Deflections differ radically from misreadings, and less radically from excuses. In the course of an argument, a deflection involves a turn of subject from the one at issue (which may cause the speaker some discomfort, logically and otherwise) to one on the same general field that nonetheless begs the question and diverts the attention of the audience. Respondents from the academy are very adept at this rhetorical twist, and offered four general lines of question-begging:

1. What I call the “federal configuration,” that is, student financial aid, Reagan administration policies, Secretary Bennett’s rhetoric;
2. Discussions of college and university finance, exclusive of student aid (this deflection usually begins with a potentially productive statement about the costs of implementing recommendations, but swiftly shifts to an exclusive focus on general money matters);
3. Comments on the quality of the reports—their language, their length (according to faculty and administrators, nothing less than 1000-page tomes, with discussions covering every situation and contingency, would do), their very physical presentation as published documents; and
4. “Bad eggs and research.” The commentary begins with an offhand concession that there may be a few bad eggs in the house, but then shifts to the achievements of university-based research, and dwells upon them at length.

The problem with the excuses, misreadings, and deflections is that they assumed greater importance in the minds of the commentators than anything the reports had to offer. More importantly, the persons and organizations carrying these “arguments” around like reliquaries, were engaging in avoidance behavior. They ran the risk of writing themselves right off the stage of the drama and later being caught in its consequences, because few of these rhetorical strategies even contribute to the competing myth. The “bad eggs and research” deflection, for the most
prominent example, can be offered with a modicum of justification by
only 30 of the 3300 institutions of higher education in the United States.
And more than half of those 30 are public institutions which may later be
trapped by legislative mandates for improved undergraduate teaching and
portrayed as defensive and reactionary.

*Act 3: Ethical Judgment*

Excuses, misreadings, and deflections are often stimulated by a highly
crude or striking statement or recommendation in one of the reports.
The very same statements, though, also call forth normative judgments
that advance counter-proposals. The normative judgment is recognizable
by an "ethical configuration of language," a noticeable incidence of
terms such as "should," "ought," "right," "obligation," for example.
Because utterances including these words are often loaded with emotive
meaning, and because those "performances" inherently involve assess-
ments of the acts of others, their use generates adversarial situations.

But at the same time, the ethical judgment is hardly a negation, denial,
excuse, misreading, or deflection. In this case, the ethical judgment is
grounded in what a report actually says, in an expression that is the
"act" of its author(s). In their most typical incarnation in the communi-
cations I examined, these judgments "reconstruct" an analysis or recom-
mandation in the form, "they should have said that. . . ." A typical
subjunctive variation of this form is, "If they acknowledged x, they
ought to have acknowledged y." In the indicative mood, we also find, "In
recommending x, the authors have an obligation to consider y."

The very form of these statements advocates the "y." And the "y" is
an emendation or interpolation that considerably advances the drama—
both the rhetorical drama and the drama of propaganda. The latter con-
text is important here because these reconstructive statements are not
evident until Period 3, dominated by *Integrity in the College Curriculum*,
and the period in which the proportion of negative assertions in the
propaganda was at its height. I cannot attribute the rise of reconstructive
statements directly to *Integrity*, since most of them are about the other
two reports. But the months of negation, denial, and excuses may have
proved cathartic and necessary. The public repetition of assertions slowly
brings forth a "private" attitude of impatience among key target groups;
and there must be something unsettling in witnessing one's "leaders"
constantly making defensive and foolish statements in the press. This
private impatience finds its way into the public drama in feature articles/
reviews and in Op-Ed pieces, both of which dominate (43 percent) the
communication types in Period 4.
These reconstructions are hardly comprehensive. They tend to pick a single issue. Some, as noted, are emendations, such as the considerable number that sought to advance or qualify the implicit canon of the humanities in *To Reclaim a Legacy*. Nearly all these emendations accept the idea of a canon, the idea of an intellectual authority (an issue also raised in *Integrity*), and implied in the section, “To Students,” in *Involvement*). The normative utterances, though, the “shoulds” and “oughts,” have as much to do with the responsibility for stating a canon as they do with its contents. This tendency is most apparent in “ideological” statements in which critics of the Left accept the centrality of Western civilization and its artifacts in Bennett’s formulation, but then turn introspective with the judgment that “we should have said this long ago instead of conceding the issue to the Right.” Or, in responding to the recommendations on assessment in *Involvement in Learning*, we find frequent references to the “oughts” of the faculty role in the face of potential state intervention.

Reconstructions can also be stimulated by a phrase that the respondent judges to be insufficiently explained in a report. “College-level learning” in *Involvement* is a good example because it is part of the “standards issue” that is perceived as more of a central topic in *Involvement* than in the other two reports. The reconstruction accepts the ethical imperative that lies behind the idea of college-level learning as a guide to standards of content (that is, as *Involvement* tried to make clear, colleges have to keep their promises to students in terms of what degrees signify). But it finds inadequate the scattered hints of what “college-level learning” means (twelfth-grade norms required for release from remedial classes, the ability to explain an issue of *Scientific American*, the ability to discuss the articles of a foreign language newspaper, for example). Thus, one noted reconstruction reported in the trade press claimed that we would be better able to keep our promises to students if we disposed of textbooks and multiple-choice examinations at the college level, and if we distinguished “those subjects truly worthy of college study” from those “better learned in high school” because we owed our students the challenge of understanding “competing versions of reality.” By this reconstruction, for example, foreign languages should be taught in high schools, whereas area studies should be taught in colleges.

A final example of the reconstructions of act 3 lies in the court of costs. In act 1, costs were raised as part of the overall “performance” of denial, and were most often found linked to epithets describing a report as “unrealistic” or “naive.” Rhetorically, this is a very convenient and

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*See, for example, Kriegel, L., “Who Cares About the Humanities?” *The Nation*, 29 December 1984, pp. 713–715.*
effective method of counterpropaganda, as the American public has been conditioned to associate the word, "costs," with "deficits," "spending," "debt," and other words that carry negative implications concerning the national bank account. "Cost" is a stock word that is used to substitute for a whole set of related negative symbols. Thus, commentators could issue a blanket denunciation of Involvement in Learning on the grounds that its recommendations were, prima facie, expensive to implement.

In act 2, the cost issue becomes part of a deflection. Involvement, in particular, invited this response because it offered a number of recommendations in which costs were explicit, for example, "states should revise funding formulas," "academic and student service administrators should provide adequate fiscal support," "state officials should establish special and alternative funding," and, of course, "state legislatures and boards of trustees should reverse the decline in faculty purchasing power by increasing faculty salaries at a rate greater than inflation." When four out of twenty-seven recommendations carry explicit language on costs, and when three of the four recommendations are directed at "states," it is easy to see just how the issue can be deflected, and in a manner purposefully blind to the state focus. That is, the commentators, particularly college administrators, reacted as if the word, "state," had never been written, rolled up all these steps in one ball, and pronounced, in so many words, "they will cost millions, and Involvement doesn't say where the money will come from, therefore the recommendations cannot be taken seriously." Remember that one of the purposes of participation in act 2 is to absolve oneself from responsibility, and this deflection does just that.

In act 3, commentators start to take out their calculators. Though we are not privileged to inspect their calculation routines in the press, there are indirect manifestations of attempts to reconstruct one recommendation or another in terms of costs. The "ethical" dimension turns up in a budding consciousness of cost-benefit analysis and in consideration of potential trade-offs. The issue of costs raises that of obligations. Where are our obligations most significant, some commentators ask, hence where should our allocation priorities lie? What is improvement "worth"? Although some of these are practical questions, they presuppose normative answers. Something is happening.

Act 4: Aesthetic Judgment

How do we know when an institution or association or any group of key players in our drama is serious about adopting a recommendation from one of the reports, indeed, serious about the reports themselves?
When judgments become aesthetic, we know that the speaker or writer has reached a stage of "appreciation" that may lead to action. Wittgenstein uses a metaphor that may help us understand what kind of language and rhetoric to watch for. A man tries on a suit at a tailor shop. What does he say? "That's the right length," "That's too short," "That's too narrow." Words of approval play no role. . . . How do I show my approval of a suit? Chiefly by wearing it often, liking it when it is seen, etc. [21, p. 5]." The fact that the man is at the tailor's, trying on the suit, and issuing judgments concerning the relation and proportion of the garment to his own circumstances is what counts. These are three indispensable parts of a "performance." The words used in the judgments, then, are determined by the context and the role of the actor, and they accompany concrete actions taken in that context. The words do not explicitly "disapprove," rather they adjust. Of course, as Wittgenstein also points out, there is a large difference between what happens "when a person who knows a lot about suits goes to the tailor" and "when a person who knows nothing about suits goes" [21, p. 7]. By act 4, by the moment of aesthetic judgment, those who are going to the tailor's know a good deal about suits.

By its very nature, we do not see much of act 4 in the press. It is not that aesthetic judgments are private by definition. For the individual, in fact, they are public. Aesthetic judgment arises, as Kant said, when the individual consciousness "agrees with" the subject, and we do not know an aesthetic judgment unless words of approval or disapproval are spoken [18, p. 162]. For an institution such as a college, on the other hand, we know that aesthetic judgment has been made only by the act of trying on the suit; and this act is reported to us, if at all, in fugitive literature: reports of presidents to boards of trustees, student government resolutions, accounts of faculty development seminars, comments at public meetings.

At the 1985 Annual Conference of the American Association for Higher Education, for example, a vice president for academic affairs engaged in the following reflection:

I've always had a problem with part-time faculty, and, while Involvement in Learning didn't explain all of my problem, it got a lot of it. I have 150 part-timers. Half of them are there for special courses. I couldn't get them any other way, and I don't want them for anything else. The other half teach an average of 4 courses a year for us. It would take us 28 full-timers to replace them. On the surface, the cost does not seem to be worth it; . . . the bottom line (including benefits and overhead) comes out to about $1 million, three times the salary we pay the 75 part-timers. But the part-timers cost us far more in terms of administrative time, student complaints, and worry. Can
you put a price tag on that? Can you put a price tag on what you may be sacrificing in quality by letting the status quo ride? ... I'd like to consolidate some of those lines, but in stages, and perhaps add $10 a year in tuition across 8000 FTEs for every 5 full-timers we got as a result of the consolidation. I know where those potential conversions lie, and what the political and organizational dangers are. ... 

What the speaker is doing is trying on clothes ("I've always had a problem with... it would take... on the surface. ... But they cost us far more. ... Can you even measure? ... I'd like to consolidate... potential conversions...") There are no slogans here, no denials, no excuses, no deflections, not even reconstructions. We have journeyed through those deserts. Even the calculations are on the table: the speaker is not throwing numbers at walls. The report has been accepted. There is peace among the words.

Could we have reached this stage in the rhetorical drama without the propaganda? Could we have passed through what Kenneth Burke describes as "the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurrys and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard, the Give and Take, the wavering line of pressure and counterpressure, the Logomachy, the onus of ownership, the War of Nerves, the War [6, p. 547]." to such "peaceful moments" in which the "endless competition" inherent in rhetoric transcends itself? I do not believe so. Without the sustained bombardment of assertions and epithets in the mass media, and without the self-defeating but necessary counterpropaganda on behalf of the "I'm-all-right, Jack" myth, the issues themselves would not have been diffused, and we would never have passed from ethical to aesthetic judgment among key target groups of actors. Unfortunately, we do not know the extent of the diffusion. We do not know how many key actors in how many different types of institutions are wearing the suit. But we do know that one report, standing alone, could not have brought us this far. The response to one report can evidence the paradigm of rhetorical drama, but without three reports, there would have been no propaganda—that special form of rhetoric whose aim is participation.

Time, Change and Action: Is There an Act 5?

I said there was an act 5. That is part of the mythology of higher education. Wearing the suit of the reports is insufficient. Aesthetic judgments are self-contained. Participation must lead to action, and action to change. The sequence lies at the core of our belief system, but it may involve superficial distinctions. Our mythology of change borrows heavily from the literature of organizational theory and innovation; and in
that literature, time is treated principally in economic terms: as a resource to be allocated and/or used. But there is a deeper, philosophical treatment of time that can help us understand the "way of life" and expectations that our language creates.

The responses we have been examining often employ the qualifying language of time: "always," "sometimes," "unalterable," "stage," "phase," "renewal." The language is one of sooner and later, before and after, a language implying that because what we do is serial, there is change—and change means that something is different now from the way it was before. The responses thus too often commit the classic fallacy of post hoc ergo propter hoc. The very structure I have used to analyze the responses to the reports also contains a bias for change. It assumes, through what are ultimately arbitrary divisions of time, that conditions are serial, and that the possibilities for action do not occur until there has been a modulation of language, and a rise of first, ethical, and then, aesthetic judgment. "Modulation" and "rise" themselves imply an earlier and a later.

But time does not necessarily mean change; and change may not be the most accurate or proper end in our belief system. We no longer live by a concept of mythical time that derives from the division inherent in space[8]. "The ultimate entity" in the "four-dimensional geometry" of the universe as we now understand it, George Herbert Mead wrote 50 years ago, "is . . . not a point but an event" [14, p. 321]. And because of the way we perceive them, events do not necessarily imply change.

Consider Mead's wise illustration. A train passes by a station platform. "To the man on the station platform and to the man in the train there is the same level of events at this ideal moment, but to each observer the events on this level are succeeded by different events, to the one by the flying windows of the cars and to the other by the flying telegraphs [sic] poles." And "Within the train there is a persistent here and there organization, while the events of the landscape have continuously different positions with reference to this sentient set of the interior of the train" [14, p. 322-23]. The different sets of participants in our drama act and observe in different time systems. To one set of participants, the reports pass; to another, they change; and to still another, they remain constant. As Mead points out, there is a difference between something passing and something changing. Neither the platform nor the train changes; rather, they pass. Change occurs only when the mind intervenes in the perception. "Change involves a departure from a condition," Mead wrote [14, p. 331], and that happens only on active intervention that identifies a reference point in another event.
By one argument, we have achieved change if the same parties who issued negations and denials on the appearance of the reports are now wearing the suits. In other words, there would be evidence that the mind has intervened in the perception in different ways at two different points in time. Though we do not have this evidence, our traditional faith wishes that it were so. Otherwise, the reports and the key actors have simply passed.

But another argument is more optimistic; and it turns our traditional faith around. If we accept the goals of diffusion inherent in the dissemination of these reports, and if we respect both the present circumstances and future freedom of the actors, we can argue that as long as the mind has moved from a state of passivity to at least one intervention in support of the "mythology" advanced by the reports, both the reports and the drama of propaganda have been successful. Change involves "a departure from a condition," and participation is just such a departure. It is a "witnessing" of the myth through ethical and aesthetic judgments, both of which, by their very utterance in our ordinary language use, reference other "events" or "states." When we "perform" in such a manner, we symbolically establish a favorable disposition to act on particulars or to support the actions of others, and thus expand the community of potential actors. By sustaining the drama of propaganda, we will widen the circle of witnesses, and that, I contend, is sufficient: act 5 will thus take its course. Our good Bishop Andrews well understood the potential power of this symbolic action when he observed of the circumstances of the _Pax Vobis:_

This to all; the more, the more witnesses, the better for faith. Those when they were scattered; this here when they were all together. The more together, the more meet for this salutation . . . [2, p. 240].

Our faith in the myth of change may be more secular, but our words of witnessing are just as public—and powerful.

References


APPENDIX

Content Analysis Guidelines

A. *Communications Excluded Altogether*

1. Any text that merely presents, summarizes or strings together quotations from any of the reports.
2. Short (one paragraph/50 words) letters-to-the-editor.
3. Articles from newspapers or magazines published outside the U.S.
4. Press releases.
5. Communications that are not in the public domain. Although we possess many of these, although some of them are remarkable documents, and
although many were shared with important groups, they were never reported or published in media that would reach a broad constituency in higher education. Examples include reports by state chancellors to their trustees, analyses of one or more of the reports written by groups of students as part of their coursework, and the texts of nearly 200 formal statements made at the three Regional Conferences on Quality in Higher Education sponsored by NIE and at the various sessions of the 1985 conventions of the AAHE and the AAC.

B. Communications Included Only Once Despite Multiple Appearances

1. Wire Service stories, even where wording or paragraph order has been altered (but see E below). The original wire is included.
2. Syndicated editorials. The first appearance only is analyzed (however, see E below).
3. Syndicated columns and features.

C. Range of Text and Specified Context

1. The basic “range of text” within which a designation will be tabulated once even if it occurs more than once is the paragraph. The “specified context” within which the judgment of the direction of assertions will be applied is the entire communication or artifact. This basic rule is modified by D and E.

D. Assertions Excluded

1. Statements about their own reports made by members of the study groups or panels responsible for writing them.
2. Statements by or about William J. Bennett in which Student Financial Aid or Department of Education policy issues are raised.
3. Assertions of the same category (e.g., qualified negative) made twice or more about the same designation in the same article. In these cases, the assertion is counted only once. If the assertions are in different categories, they are counted individually.

E. Special Inclusion of Communications and Assertions

Where individual newspapers add to basic wire service stories or syndicated editorials, e.g., with a quote from a local college official or with a comment on the situation on area campuses. In these cases, only that portion of the story or article in addendum is subject to assertions and designations analysis.