



# YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2010 Volume II: Persuasion in Democratic Politics

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## Introduction

by Bryan Garsten, Professor of Political Science

Learning how to argue with others without descending into a fight is one of the most fundamental skills of democratic citizenship, but it is one that schools too rarely teach today. Once upon a time, rhetoric was a central part of public education. Today, only politicians and advertisers take time to study the techniques of persuasion. Imagine a world in which ordinary citizens knew something about these techniques – a world in which they could recognize when they were being spun, and knew how to spin back – a world in which more of us could construct compelling arguments, rouse appropriate emotions, and make ourselves trustworthy and credible to different sorts of audiences. Our seminar sought to imagine just such a world by exploring links between rhetoric – the art of persuasion – and particular moments in the history of democratic politics.

We did not let ourselves ignore some of the difficult questions that arise when considering rhetoric: When is the use of rhetorical techniques justified and when is it intrusive or manipulative? How can the inspiring oratory of a leader be distinguished from the inflammatory rhetoric of a demagogue, the propaganda of a tyrant, or the desire-creation of advertisers? We approached these matters by discussing key political figures and speeches from throughout the history of democratic states. We spent time with Cicero, the ancient Roman orator warning his countrymen about a conspiracy against the Republic, and with Lincoln as he crafted a response to the wounds of Civil War. We listened as impressive orators debated the proper conduct of war in ancient Greece. And we noticed how the rhetoric of U.S. presidents has changed significantly over the course of our history, and how that change reflects developing views about what sort of speaking is appropriate for political leaders. We also read more theoretical writings about political rhetoric and its role in democratic politics, from an ancient Greek complaint that good speakers rarely do anything more than pander, to recent advice manuals written by political consultants about how to pander effectively.

As a group we became especially excited by several topics: the question of how the modern *media* – television and the Internet especially – influence both speakers and listeners; the question of how powerful *advertising* is and how students learn to judge their needs for themselves in the face of such strong grasping at their souls; and the question of how the ancient art of rhetoric might help teachers to educate modern students in the all-important skills of *writing and speaking*. I think we were all happily surprised to find how relevant the old craft of rhetoric could still be.

Teachers developed curriculum units that drew these themes in very different directions. Our two second-grade teachers offered units that focused on teaching students how to make themselves trustworthy and credible citizens of their classrooms (Torriann Dooley) and on teaching them to be aware of the way that advertisers try to create in them new wants and needs (Aisha Collins). Elementary- and middle-school teachers focused on linking great orators in history to basic rhetorical techniques (Adam Kubey, David Probst), with one using Barack Obama's election and his speech on race to raise questions about the vision of America

as a "post-racial" society (Samuel Reed) and another linking rhetoric to a strategy for teaching leadership strategies (Anjali Kamat). Our high school teachers could go into more historical depth about various topics: the history of presidential rhetoric (Sonia Henze), a case study in Latin American demagoguery (María Cardalliaguet Gómez-Málaga), and the link between persuasion and international institutions (Deborah Fetzer). Finally, our high school English teacher demonstrated how a unique program of journal-writing could be viewed as an elaborate process of rhetorical invention that helps students find their own voices, proving that rhetoric at its best is not merely the art of adorning our thoughts, but a way of learning how to think (Jeffrey Weathers). Together these units offer proof that rhetoric can easily find its way back into today's classrooms; all it needs is an invitation.

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