

PUBLIC ADDRESS: A STUDY IN SOCIAL AND
INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

ERNEST J. WRAGE*

IN the title of a book, *Ideas Are Weapons*, Max Lerner gives to ideas a twentieth century connotation, for in this century all of the resources of man have twice comprised actual or potential materiel of warfare. The merit of the title lies in the emphasis it places upon function, although one must read beyond it to grasp the diversity of function which ideas perform. Man's capacities for thought somewhat resemble modern industrial plants which are capable of converting raw materials into either soap or bullets, of refining sugar into nutritive food or into alcohol for the manufacture of explosives. Similarly, from the biochemical processes of individual minds responding to environment may emerge ideas which serve to promote social conflict, while there are yet others fortunately, which contribute to resolution of differences. Man's intellectual activities may result in ideas which clarify his relationships with his fellow men and to the cosmos, or in ideas which close minds against further exploration in favor of blind conformity to tradition and authority. It is axiomatic that the extant records of man's responses to the social and physical world as expressed in formulations of thought provide one approach to a study of the history of his culture. Whether we seek explanations for an overt act of human behavior in the genesis and moral compulsion of an idea, or whether we accept the view that men seek out ideas which promote their interests and justify their activities, the illuminating fact is that in

either case the study of ideas provides an index to the history of man's values and goals, his hopes and fears, his aspirations and negations, to what he considers expedient or inapplicable.

The word *ideas*, therefore, is not restricted here to a description of the great and noble thoughts uttered by accredited spokesmen for the edification of old and young. It is employed in a more inclusive sense and refers widely to formulations of thought as the product and expression of social incentives, which give rise and importance now to one idea, then to another. They are viewed as the product of social environment, as arising from many levels of life, and as possessing social utility. Ideas are not here treated as entities which enjoy an independent existence and which serve as objects of contemplation by the self-avowed or occasional ascetic. While the history of ideas is undeniably concerned with major works in systematized thought, and with the influence of thinker upon thinker, exclusive devotion to monumental works is hopelessly inadequate as a way of discovering and assessing those ideas which find expression in the market place. Subtle intellectual fare may be very well for stomachs accustomed to large helpings of ideational substances rich in concentration; but there also is nutritional value in the aphoristic crumbs which fall into stomachs unaccustomed and unconditioned to large helpings of such fare, and the life sustained by the crumbs is not without historical interest. The force of Emerson's ideas upon the popular mind of his time, and even

*Assistant Professor of Speech, Northwestern University

later, derives less from his intricate elaborations upon man and the cosmos than from his dicta on self-reliance. Moreover, ideas arise at many levels of human life and find expression in and attain force through casual opinion as well as learned discourse; and while the life span of many popularly-held ideas is admittedly short, often these "out-of-the-way" ideas thrive and emerge at higher levels of development. This extension in the conception of the history of ideas which includes more than monumental distillations of thought in philosophy, religion, literature, and science may be offensive to those of fastidious intellectual tastes, but there is increasing awareness that adequate social and intellectual history cannot be written without accounting for popular opinions, beliefs, constellations of attitudes, and the like.

I

Ideas attain history in process, which includes transmission. The reach of an idea, its viability within a setting of time and place, and its modifications are expressed in a vast quantity of documentary sources. Man's conscious declarations of thought are embodied in a mosaic of documents, in constitutions and laws, literature and song, scientific treatises and folklore, in lectures, sermons, and speeches. Of these, not the least either in quantity or value, as Curti points out, are the lectures, sermons, and speeches:

Historians of ideas in America have too largely based their conclusions on the study of formal treatises. But formal treatises do not tell the whole story. In fact, they sometimes give a quite false impression, for such writings are only a fraction of the records of intellectual history. For every person who laboriously wrote a systematic treatise, dozens touched the subject in a more or less casual fashion. Sometimes the fugitive essays of relatively obscure writers influenced the systematizers and formal writers quite

as much as the works of better-known men. The influence of a thinker does not pass from one major writer to another without frequently being transformed or dissipated, or compressed in the hands of a whole series of people who responded to the thinker and his ideas. It is reasonably certain, moreover, that in the America of the early nineteenth century ephemeral writings, widely scattered as they were in pamphlets, tracts, and essays, reached a much wider audience and are often more reliable evidence of the climate of opinion than the more familiar works to which historians of ideas have naturally turned. The student of the vitality and modification of ideas may well direct his attention, then, toward out-of-the-way sermons, academic addresses, Fourth of July orations, and casual guides and essays.¹

As a parenthetical comment, one recent study which makes extensive use of fugitive literature, particularly speeches, is Merle Curti's *The Roots Of American Loyalty*, published in 1946. But in the main, the rich vein of literature in speaking has hardly been tapped for this purpose except by the occasional prospector.

Curti's observations have germinal significance for the student of public address. They suggest an approach which is interesting for its freshness and fruitful in intellectual promise. If American life, to adopt his point of reference, is viewed through ideas historically viable, then ideas are to be studied as a body of intricate tissues, of differentiated yet related thought. While the establishment of macroscopic relationships provides the ultimate reasons for tracing out an American intellectual pattern, explorations of the parts is a necessary preliminary to this achievement. As an enterprise in scholarship, then, the first operation is one of collecting and classifying data within limited areas amenable to description and analysis. This accomplished, generalizations from the data

¹ Merle Curti, "The Great Mr. Locke: America's Philosopher, 1783-1861," *The Huntington Library Bulletin*, April, 1937, pp. 108-109.

become at once permissible and desirable, and provide a basis from which further exploration may be conducted.

It is at once apparent that the delineation of an American intellectual tradition calls for division of labor. It is not only the magnitude in task but diversity in data and in media of expression which invites specialization and varied technical skills in scholarship. There are, after all, appreciable and striking differences between the materials of hymnology and constitutional law. While students of philosophy, history, and literature are traditionally accredited as the official custodians and interpreters of intellectual history, it is the thesis of this paper that students of public address may contribute in substantial ways to the history of ideas. They possess credentials worthy of acknowledgment and interest in a type of materials germane to the object.

It has been amply treated and clearly said by others that the rhetoric of public address does not exist for its own sake, that its value is instrumental, and that its meaning apart from an application to something is sterile. An endorsement of this doctrine leads us to an immediate recognition that the basic ingredient of a speech is its content. The transmission of this content is its legitimate function. It is a vehicle for the conveyance of ideas. It is a mode of communication by means of which something of the thought of the speaker is incorporated and expressed in language in ways which make for ready comprehension and acceptance by one or more audiences. It is for the very reason that public speeches and lectures are prepared with a listening audience in mind that they serve so admirably in a study of social thought. The full import of this point is disclosed by some comparisons.

When reporting the results of work to members of his guild, the physical scientist may confine himself to an exclusive concern with data, intricate operations, and complex thought. In preparation and presentation neither detail nor comprehensiveness needs to be sacrificed, for his discourse is not prepared with an eye to the limiting factors present in the differentiated audience. As distinguished from this highly specialized form of reporting, a public speech is a more distinctly popular medium which is useful for explaining the essence of an idea, for explaining the applicability of a particular, for establishing impressions and evoking attitudes, for direction in the more or less common affairs of men. Because speeches are instruments of utility designed in the main for the popular mind, conversely and in significant ways they bear the impress of the popular mind. It is because they are pitched to levels of information, to take account of prevalent beliefs, and to mirror tone and temper of audiences that they serve as useful indices to the popular mind.

This interaction between the individual mind of the speaker and the collective mind of the audience has long been appreciated, but for the most part this interaction has been considered in terms of its relationship to the speaker's techniques. What has happened to the ideas themselves under the impact of this interaction remains a field which is relatively unexplored in any systematic sense by students of public address. The techniques of the speakers are often highly individualized and perish with their bones; their ideas live after them. From the study of speeches may be gained additional knowledge about the growth of ideas, their currency and vitality, their modifications under the impress of social

requirements, and their eclipse by other ideas with different values. Such a study of speeches belongs to what Max Lerner calls the "naturalistic approach" to the history of ideas, one which includes "not only the conditions of the creation of ideas but also the conditions of their reception, not only the impulsions behind the ideas, but also the uses to which they are put, not only the thinkers but also the popularizers, the propagandists, the opinion skill-groups, the final audience that believes or disbelieves and acts accordingly."²

Is not such scholarship properly confined to the professional historian? The question is dated and should be so treated. Squabbles over contested rights are hang-overs from an age of academic primogeniture. A study is to be judged by its merits, not by the writer's union card. But a more convincing argument for participation in scholarship of the history of ideas by students of public address is made apparent when we take another step in our thinking. The very nature and character of ideas in transmission is dependent upon configurations of language. The interpretation of a speech calls for complete understanding of what goes into a speech, the purpose of the speech and the interplay of factors which comprise the public speaking situation, of nuances of meaning which emerge only from the reading of a speech in the light of its setting. At this juncture a special kind of skill becomes useful, for the problem now relates directly to the craftsmanship of the rhetorician. The student who is sensitized to rhetoric, who is schooled in its principles and techniques, brings an interest, insight, discernment, and essential skill which are assets for scholar-

ship in the history of ideas, as that history is portrayed in public speeches.

II

The prevailing approach to the history and criticism of public address appears to consist of a study of individual speakers for their influence upon history. If one may judge from studies available through publication, they fall short of that ambitious goal for reasons which are painfully apparent to anyone who has attempted to assess influence in history. Nevertheless, they do provide a defensible pattern in research which has yielded highly interesting data about prominent speakers, their speechmaking and speaking careers. Reference is made to this standard approach to public address simply as a means of establishing and clarifying some distinctions between it and the proposed method of study which concentrates upon the ideas in speeches. The differences are those of focus, of knowledge to be gained, and of procedure to be followed in investigation. While one approach is "speaker centered," the other is "idea centered." One focuses mainly upon the speaker and the speaking activity, the other upon the speech and its content. One seeks to explain factors which contributed to personal persuasion; the other yields knowledge of more general interest in terms of man's cultural strivings and heritage.

In point of procedure it should be at once apparent that there are differences involved in a study which centers, let us say, upon Henry Clay as an orator and in a study which centers upon the ideas embodied in his speeches on the American System. To pursue the example, a study of the ideas in Clay's speeches is not committed to searching out the sources of his personal power

² Max Lerner, *Ideas Are Weapons* (1940), p. 6.

with an audience, but is concerned with the doctrine of a self-contained economy as portrayed in his speeches in the perspective of that doctrine's history, from Hamilton to Matthew Carey's *Olive Branch*, to the congenial, nascent nationalism of Clay and contemporary speakers. Inasmuch as the American System is compounded of political and economic ideas, competence in handling the data of history is necessary; but it is also to be remembered that inasmuch as the ideas are projected through speeches, they are also the province of the rhetorician; that inasmuch as they are employed in speeches with the object of reaching and affecting a wide audience, the ideas are framed in a context of rhetorical necessities and possibilities. To adopt the rhetorical perspective is actually to approximate more closely a genuinely historical point of view when analyzing and interpreting speeches as documents of ideas in social history.

The possibilities for analysis in the rhetoric of ideas is illustrated in Roy P. Basler's essay on "Lincoln's Development As A Writer." The title of the essay should properly have included "And Speaker," for much of the brilliance of Basler's commentary arises from the treatment he gives the speeches.³ Basler sets forth the basic ideas which are the essence of Lincoln's philosophy and links them to the dominant intellectual currents of Lincoln's age. He analyzes the rhetoric of Lincoln, not because he is interested in rhetoric *per se*, but because Lincoln's ideas were framed by his rhetoric, which, in turn, was profoundly affected by the exigencies present in the totality of social factors bearing upon the speaking

situation. From an analysis of his rhetoric in this relationship, it is possible to come into a closer understanding of Lincoln's thought patterns and of the ideas he sought to lodge in the minds of his audiences. For instance, Basler recounts how the theme in the 'House Divided' speech was carried through many stages of inference, that it underwent many modifications in order to achieve the nuances and implications which Lincoln desired. Basler concludes that "It would be difficult to find in all history a precise instance in which rhetoric played a more important role in human destiny than it did in Lincoln's speeches of 1858."⁴ He speaks, of course, of the instrumental role of rhetoric as it served to crystallize the meanings which Lincoln sought to convey. Through a masterful analysis of the rhetoric in the Gettysburg Address, Basler presents the underlying pattern of Lincoln's thought, as is suggested by a short excerpt from his treatment:

Lincoln's problem at Gettysburg was to do two things: to commemorate the past and to prophesy for the future. To do these things he took the theme dearest to his audience, honor for the heroic dead sons and fathers, and combined it with the theme nearest to his own heart, the preservation of democracy. Out of this double theme grew his poetic metaphor of birth, death, and spiritual rebirth, of the life of man and the life of the nation. To it he brought the fervor of devoutly religious belief. Democracy was to Lincoln a religion, and he wanted it to be in a real sense the religion of his audience. Thus he combined an elegiac theme with a patriotic theme, skillfully blending the hope of eternal life with the hope of eternal democracy.⁵

A speech is an agency of its time, one whose surviving record provides a repository of themes and their elaborations from which we may gain insight into the life of an era as well as into the

³ Roy P. Basler, *Abraham Lincoln; His Speeches and Writings* (Cleveland and New York, 1946), pp. 1-49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

mind of a man. From the study of speeches given by many men, then, it is possible to observe the reflections of prevailing social ideas and attitudes. Just as the speeches of Schwab and Barton, of Coolidge and Dawes (accompanied by the latter's broom-sweeping histrionics) portray the ethos of business and a negative view toward government intervention in social affairs, so do the speeches of Roosevelt and other New Dealers mark the break from the attitudes and conceptions which dominated the twenties. Both schools of thought express the social and economic values of the times. Both mirror the dominant moods of their respective audiences. The very structure, idiom, and tone of the speeches, moreover, play their parts in the delineation of those ideas. For example, the full import of Roosevelt's First Inaugural Address is not perceived without reference to the many nuances and imperatives of his rhetoric. It is in the metaphor of war and the image of the religious crusade, as well as in argument and statements of intention, that the speech articulates the inchoate feelings of the people on government's social responsibility. Similarly, from a wide investigation of sermons, lectures, and speeches related to issues, movements, and periods, might we not extend and refine our knowledge of social ideas portrayed in history? Such an attempt would constitute a kind of anthropological approach to a segment of cultural history.

III

Let the final argument be a practical one. Specifically, what applications may be made of this approach to public address in a university classroom? Experience has made it apparent to the writer that a course consisting only of successive case histories of individual speakers

and speech-making leaves much to be desired. It certainly is open to question if an accidental chronology or arbitrary selection of orators provides a satisfactory focus and basic framework to warrant the label, "history of public address," or if it provides adequate intellectual and educational outcomes for the time expended. Interesting in its way as may be the study for its own sake of the personality, platform virtuosity, and career of an individual speaker, a mere progression of such more or less independent treatments is likely to be without secure linkage to historical processes. It is likely to result in an assortment of isolated, episodic, or even esoteric information which can make little claim to the advancement of the student's general culture.

There is more than a suggestion of antiquarianism in the whole business. We need, therefore, to provide a more solid intellectual residual. This may be realized when the focus of a course consists in the ideas communicated, in the ascertainable sources of those ideas, the historical vitality and force of the ideas, and of demonstrable refractions, modifications, or substitutions. As an adjunct to the materials of such a course, the study of the speaking careers and skills of individual speakers makes a valuable contribution. Such studies have supplementary value; but even more important is the study of the speeches themselves against a backdrop of history. Naturally, the exclusive study of speeches would result in historical distortion unless related to a larger framework of life and thought, to allied and competing ideas in the intellectual market place.

Seen against a broad and organized body of materials in intellectual and social history, the study of speeches both gives and takes on meaning in ways

which contribute substantially to educational experience. Especially helpful as leads in providing background are such familiar works as Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*; Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*; and Ralph H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought*, to mention but a few. Such literature supplies references and guidance to the main lines of thought which underlie movements and problems in American life; it brings into view not only tributaries which fed the main streams, but also rivulets of ideas which had a kind of independent existence. Speeches may be studied in relation to these movements. For example, intellectual turmoil and diluvial expression were provoked by the slavery controversy. Antislavery appeals, historians tell us, were couched in the language of personal liberty and Christian humanitarianism. Proslavery speakers, forced to compete upon an equally elevated plane, advanced arguments which derived from similar or equivalent ethical bases but which were interpreted in ways congenial to Southern institutional life and practice. True, the rhetoric of ideas fails to account for all the forces at work; yet a wide reading in sermons, lectures, and speeches does bring one into a deeper understanding of the basic

ideational themes, variations upon the themes, and the dissonance which were a part of the controversy and contributed to ultimate settlement. When seen against a contextual backdrop, speeches become at once a means of illustrating and testing, of verifying or revising generalizations offered by other workers in social and intellectual history.

There is an implied recognition in what has been said, of a deficiency in the scholarship of public address. There is need for an organized body of literature which places speeches and speaking in proper relationship to the history of ideas. Quite apart from reasons of classroom utility, research in the ideas communicated through speeches needs doing as a means of contributing to knowledge and understanding generally. Adequate social and intellectual history cannot be written without reference to public speaking as it contributed to the ideas injected into public consciousness. But if research is to move forward, perhaps the time has arrived to explore in our individual and joint capacities the rationale, procedures, and materials by which it may be carried on. To this end, a symposium of papers which deals with these problems would help to clarify and stimulate research in public address in its relation to social and intellectual history.