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ON THE COVER

This fictional physician shares the creed of Francis Moore, M.D., "that assisting people to leave the dwelling place of their body when it is no longer habitable is becoming an obligation of the medical profession" (see page 46). Drawing by Susan Avishai.

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HOW HARVARD DESTROYED RHETORIC

*If using language persuasively is a vanishing art,
Harvard must bear much of the blame. Over the years,
the star faculty members appointed to teach rhetoric
seemed determined to hasten its end.*

by JAY HEINRICHS

On June 12, 1806, a balding 38-year-old United States senator, John Quincy Adams, took the lectern in University Hall to begin his part-time job as Harvard's first Boylston professor of rhetoric and oratory. He spoke as a man of the world preparing others to be men of the world. He promised to teach "reason, clothed with speech."

His own style was not exactly naked. "Is there among you a youth, whose bosom burns with the fires of honorable ambition?" he asked, rhetorically. "Let him catch from the relics of ancient oratory those unresisted powers, which mould the mind of man to the will of the speaker, and yield the guidance of a nation to the dominion of the voice."

Adams could get away with speech like that because it was the fashion in those days, and because it was sincere. Like many people in that young democracy, he believed that a talented individual could drive a nation's history. He had seen his own father, John Adams, do it. As an 11-year-old, Adams *filis* had spent a year in Paris with one of the most persuasive diplomats of the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin. He had heard the speeches of the greatest modern orator to date, Edmund Burke.

And now it was Adams's turn to teach persuasion as the paramount democratic skill. Commuting between Cambridge and the new capital city, he linked the republic and the academy in theory and practice. He taught for two years, published his lectures, and went on

to become the sixth president of the United States. But after him the Boylston chair went to a minister and gradually drifted away from oral address, political meaning, and anything remotely practical.

This is the story of how rhetoric was swallowed up by Harvard, and how Harvard might atone for its sin by giving back a skill that is sorely needed by Americans today.

In his first lecture, Adams conceded that he was not much of a scholar. It was not a shameful admission; he recognized that rhetoric's emphasis on skill, its usefulness to a nation, do not fit comfortably within the academy. The very eloquence of Adams's lectures argued against the stripped-down rhetoric that ruled the American academy at the time. When he accepted the Boylston chair, Harvard was still in thrall to the sixteenth-century French scholar Petrus Ramus, who had strictly departmentalized the three liberal arts—rhetoric, grammar, and logic—and thus helped create the modern connotation of the word *trivial*: useless, impractical, and only hermetically meaningful. Harvard's statutes, written by loyal Puritan Ramists, restricted rhetoric to the lesser skills of elocution and pronunciation. Adams took an approach that was literally radical. He returned rhetoric to its classical roots of oral persuasion, and he defied the statutes and Puritan tradition by preaching the possibility that reasonable people can coax each other into public decisions.

Nonetheless, Adams was not exactly an outsider when he arrived. He happened to be a distant relative of the chair's benefactor, the wealthy Boston merchant Nicholas Boylston. In the hope of fostering a well-trained political elite, Boylston had bequeathed £1,500

Opposite: Rhetoric in the grand style still flourished in America when artist Felix O.C. Darley sketched *Independence Day, 1848*. Courtesy Richardson-Clarke Gallery, Boston.

to Harvard in 1771, but the economic chaos of the Revolution kept the endowment from producing sufficient income for a professor. Harvard finally filled the chair in 1805 after a Boylston descendant threatened to sue to get the family's money back. The following spring Adams inaugurated a course of Friday morning lectures supplemented with student declamations in the afternoon. And so began both the revival of classical rhetoric and its eventual decay at Harvard.

As I write this I hold in my lap a two-volume first edition of Adams's bound lectures, published in 1810. The paper is yellowing, but the pages look largely unread except for one dog-eared lecture on "Eloquence of the Pulpit." "Lecture too long," someone has penciled into the margin. The volumes were rebound in 1929 and were last checked out from the Dartmouth College library in 1976.

Clearly, the study of rhetoric has been forgotten at elite schools like Dartmouth and Harvard. But that makes us no less a rhetorical species. Regardless of academic whim, humans continue to argue. The first rhetorical textbooks came out of this hard-wired characteristic more than two millennia ago. In 467 B.C. the people of Syracuse ejected the tyrant Thrasybulus and replaced him with a democracy. During his reign Thrasybulus had thrown many families out of their homes and replaced them with people loyal to the government. To clear up the clouded titles, the Syracusans began suing each other, arguing their own cases in front of juries that could number in the hundreds. The litigants turned to an older democracy, Athens, for coaching. Some of the Athenian teachers then wrote textbooks, which became instant bestsellers throughout Greece and eventually branched out to cover political as well as judicial persuasion. Schools for young gentlemen began teaching the art, which from the beginning acquired a slippery, manipulative reputation.

Our rhetoric would certainly be much purer if we could engage in logical discourse free from the stench of human emotion, if we made the right choice in every public question. But many Greeks eventually reached the conclusion that there *is* no universally correct choice in a public question. Human affairs, alas, are not sufficiently predictable. The teachers of rhetoric, called Sophists, came to distinguish between natural laws and human contingent reality. To achieve a consensus, the Sophists said, parties have to be willing to find some common ground of belief, a decision that suits the circumstances rather than fixed principles. What is true to the multitude then becomes a kind of temporary fact. The Sophists, in short, were good democrats.

This is why rhetoric's greatest enemy, Socrates, disliked them. Socrates was no great democrat. He taught that the wise speaker knows the truth before he opens his mouth, public opinion be damned. Socrates held himself aloof from greedy rhetoric professors who charged for their wisdom; his own lessons were free. Then one day his best scholarship student opened a rhetoric school and began charging tuition. The student was Aristotle.

Aristotle was no Sophist, though. He found a middle ground between the absolutism of Socrates and the Sophists' untrustworthy pragmatism. Aristotle had a scientist's skepticism of manipulative speech, and he believed that in any given situation there was a right and a wrong decision. "Truth and justice are more powerful than their opposites," he said. When society



John Quincy Adams, the first Boylston professor of rhetoric and oratory, taught classical skills of oral persuasion and consensus.

takes the wrong course, "the speakers with the right on their side have only themselves to thank for the outcome." Given a fair match between two good debaters, the truth will make itself understood.

In what is the most influential handbook of oratory ever written, Aristotle listed three tools of persuasion: the logic of the argument; the emotions and attitudes that can be employed among the audience; and, most important, the speaker's own character—or, rather, the audience's impression of it. In a perfect world, wrote Aristotle wistfully, cases should "be fought on the strength of the facts alone." But "the sorry nature of the audience," that unpredictable human nature,



The Reverend Mr. McKean succeeded Adams as Boylston professor. As a professional Christian he saw rhetoric as a fitting subject for scholarly study, but not as a practical skill to be taught to young men. The discipline never recovered from his ministrations.



Professor Channing viewed oral address as a thing of the past. Most public decision-making, he thought, was now shaped by the written word. He redefined rhetoric to include all verbal communication other than belles-lettres.



Professor Child, right, took an even broader view of rhetoric. He disliked college teaching and cared little for "what is called declamation." He was a fox in charge of henhouse studies.



Professor Hill wrote an influential textbook on rhetoric that did not mention oral address or classical forms of rhetoric.

makes it necessary to employ a few psychological techniques. Still, the point of the debate is not merely to win an argument but to decide the best course a society should take. The outcome, either in court or in the legislature, becomes a kind of public knowledge all its own—a truth that the majority of citizens accepts. In other words, a *consensus*.

Naturally, Aristotle did not have the final word. The two poles of argument—Socrates's and the Sophists'—lasted right on through Roman times and the birth of Christ. Their temporary juncture lay in one Roman, Cicero, whom his peers considered the greatest speaker ever. Cicero came up with five "arts" of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and

delivery. These arts came to form the core of Roman education. Modern liberal arts would not suffer if they were organized along similar lines.

For Cicero, invention is the discovery of the correct arguments for the occasion, and arrangement is the organization of those arguments. Style is the composition of the language itself. Memory is the ability to work without a teleprompter (the ancients had a love-hate relationship with writing, fearing its erosion of people's ability to remember). And delivery, said Cicero, is the control of voice and body. Cicero placed greater emphasis on invention than on delivery (and thus would not have given the Great Communicator, Ronald Reagan, high marks). "Wisdom without eloquence has been of little help to states," Cicero wrote. "But eloquence without wisdom has often been a great obstacle and never an advantage." He, like Aristotle, wanted to find a common ground between philosophy and manipulation, and between nature and human nature. His writings acquired an educational momentum that kept rhetoricians employed even when democracy declined and despotism reigned. But then came Christianity and the rise of modern science, which yanked rhetoricians back toward Socrates's eternal-truths point of view.

The great fact of the Christian God and the revealed knowledge of the Scriptures precluded finding temporary truths among human beings. The Christian rhetorician did not persuade; he proclaimed. Cicero's invention—the art of discovering the logical means of persuasion—became a matter merely of understanding eternal biblical truths. And so under Christianity rhetoric lost its logical and philosophical underpinnings and became a matter of style, a corpse in brilliant clothing. Yet the Sophistic art did not die out entirely. Professors continued teaching the discipline throughout Europe, and public disputation arose with democracy in the city-states of Italy between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. Medieval cathedral schools in England and France taught rhetoric for preaching and letter-writing, and in the thirteenth century scholars translated Aristotle's *Rhetoric* into Latin and used it throughout Europe as a textbook. When the printing press arrived, classical works on rhetoric—Cicero's in particular—were among the first to be printed. As law courts developed through medieval times and the Renaissance, argument began to be seen as a practical art with a political purpose. But then came the second knockdown punch, after Christianity: modern science.

Political and natural scientists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries rejected the Sophists' distinction between natural and human science. René Descartes thought it perfectly likely that human behavior would someday become utterly predictable. They declared contingent truths to be anathema. Said Descartes, flatly: "We reject all such merely probable knowledge and make it a rule to trust only what is completely known and incapable of being doubted."

As it was stripped of its usefulness, the academic study of rhetoric turned increasingly to a bad habit common to fields that are uncertain of their own worth: the proliferation of jargon. Most notorious among rhetorical terms are the figures of speech—combinations of words for emotional effect. The Greeks came up with a few of them, the Romans many more. The terms are often useful in analyzing skillful language: metaphor and alliteration, for example, are figures. But by the seventeenth century, the field was collapsing under their

weight. There was the redundant epanalepsis ("Year chases year, decay pursues decay"), the run-on anadiplosis ("For want of a nail the shoe was lost, for want of a shoe the rider was lost . . ."), along with chiasmus, antisthecon, proparalepsis, epanaphora, perekklasis, paradiegesis, and a raft of other picked nits and obesities. Grammar-school children, including William Shakespeare, had to memorize as many as 200 figures. In *Hamlet*, Polonius abuses an antimetabole: "'Tis true 'tis pity, and pity 'tis 'tis true, a foolish figure but farewell it, for I will use no art." By Samuel Butler's time in the eighteenth century the technical study of rhetoric was on the wane, but he still could charge in a famous couplet: "All a rhetorician's rules / Teach but the naming of his tools." No longer was formal argument a means for uncovering the truth in a public situation; it became an art of showing off, even of obfuscation. The scientists wanted nothing to do with it, and who could blame them? The English Royal Society adopted a resolution requiring members to use "a close, naked, natural way of speaking." They meant this language to be in opposition to rhetoric.

But plain speaking is not opposed to rhetoric. To the right audience, unadorned speech can be more persuasive—more effectively rhetorical—than ornate speech. The Royal Society's real linguistic complaint was not just about style: the scientists argued against Sophistic argument itself. It was déjà vu all over again, Socrates and his eternal truth versus the Sophists and their human reality. Speakers plain and fancy have fallen into both camps through the ages.

John Quincy Adams fell solidly for the fancy and the Sophistic. His teaching model was Quintilian, a Roman orator and teacher who taught students to arrange complex problems by set habits of logical organization. Adams also taught a set of *topoi*, or commonplaces, that translated the infinite field of persuasion into a limited set of arguments. They were the tricks of a sorely needed trade.

When he relinquished the Boylston chair in 1809, Adams was replaced by a practitioner of a very different trade, minister Joseph McKean of Milton, Massachusetts. A member of the class of 1794, McKean had already achieved a certain prominence by founding the Porcellian Club and serving as class marshal. The McKean Gate on Massachusetts Avenue is named after him. He must have been a light-footed sermonizer; he rarely rewrote his addresses and was famous for speaking without notes at all.

His theories were very different from Adams's. As a professional Christian, McKean aligned himself with the Socratic side of the rhetorical argument. McKean emphasized not the ancients but Ramus and the plain-spoken ecclesiastical rhetoric of the Puritans. In his nine years of teaching—before dying of tuberculosis at the age of 41—McKean swung rhetoric at Harvard away from the practical and back to the scholarly. The discipline never recovered.

When the literary scholar Edward Channing assumed the Boylston chair in 1819, oral address itself had begun to disappear. In his inaugural lecture, Channing asked (rhetorically), "How is it that eloquence has gone behind-hand?" He helped answer the question by observing that the nation had turned to the written word for most of its public decision-making. "We have now many other and more quiet ways of forming and expressing public sentiment, than public discussion in popular assemblies," said Channing. If classical rhetoric were needed

by society, then society would seize upon it no matter what a Harvard professor might do: "It would awake from the sleep of two thousand years without the aid of the rhetorician."

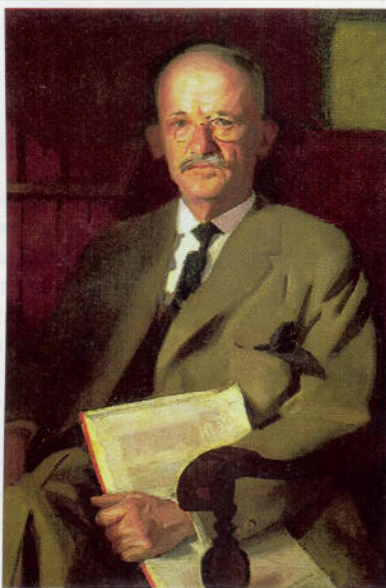
But Channing argued that current society did not need classical rhetoric. The leaders who had helped forge American democracy and free it of British despotism had been replaced by institutions that now worked perfectly well without men of genius. The machinery of government was in place, and required only moderately capable operators. "We never need great men now to take the place of laws and institutions, but merely to stand by them and see that they are unobstructed and unimpaired. A great man is perpetually taught that the world can do without him." In just 13 years Channing had reversed John Quincy Adams's stated purpose for the Boylston chair—to help future leaders shape history. Now history would shape them.

In the face of such irrelevance, rhetoric had no recourse but to jump off into other fields. Channing's choice was written communication. "I cannot see how a liberal and philosophical rhetoric can overlook any form of composition, any use of language that aims at power over the heart," he declared.

Truth be known, Channing never found classical rhetoric all that trustworthy. He disliked the Sophists' "false brilliancy." Channing himself was no spellbinder, at least in the classical sense. One of his students, Oliver Wendell Holmes, described "his bland, superior look, / Cold as a moonbeam on a frozen brook." By 1829 Channing had handed off exercises in oral address to an assistant, Jonathan Barber, who made himself notorious by teaching "exploding" vowels and devising a bamboo sphere for use in practicing gestures. The sphere tortured Barber's students until it was hung from a barber pole in Harvard Yard.

Nonetheless, "Potty" Channing went on to become one of the most famously popular professors in Harvard history. During the 32 years that he held the Boylston chair, he taught writing to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Henry Dana, Henry David Thoreau—and Edward Everett Hale, who wrote, "There are those who claim to be able to recognize from a nineteenth-century Harvard man's writing whether he graduated before or after Channing retired . . ." Although Channing expanded the bounds of rhetoric to include "all communication by language," he stopped at the border of English literature. His successor, Francis James Child, was to have no such compunction.

Plump, short, bespectacled, "Stubby" Child was the model of a modern university researcher. He clearly disliked teaching—especially of classical rhetoric. "I feel exceedingly little interest in what is called declamation, & would much rather be a teacher of dancing," he wrote to acting president Andrew Preston Peabody. As a senior at Harvard, Child had written a thesis on Plato's *Gorgias*. Solidly anti-Aristotelian, he was also completely anti-rhetorical, even before he was given Harvard's chair of rhetoric and oratory. He was a fox in charge of hen-house studies. Child transported the Boylston chair into literature; he also used his post to deliver rhetoric's *coup de grâce*, by founding Harvard's department of English and seeking to banish the classics from it. The moment he became Boylston professor, he changed the title of the lectures to seniors from "Rhetoric and Criticism" to "English Language and Literature." In 1876 the Harvard administration happily accepted reality and granted Child his own chair of English literature. By then the portly researcher had successfully smothered his sick-

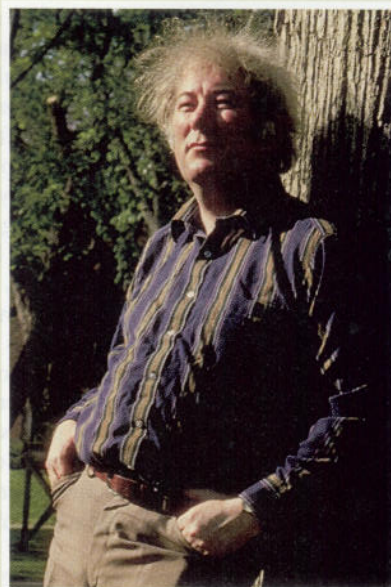


CHARLES HOPKINSON / HARVARD CLUB OF NEW YORK

BOYLSTON PROFESSORS OF RHETORIC AND ORATORY

John Quincy Adams, 1806-09
Joseph McKean, 1809-18
Edward Tyrrel Channing, 1819-51
Francis James Child, 1851-76
Adams Sherman Hill, 1876-1904
Le Baron Russell Briggs, 1904-25
Charles Townsend Copeland, 1925-28
Robert S. Hillyer, 1937-44
Theodore Spencer, 1946-49
Archibald MacLeish, 1949-62
Robert Stuart Fitzgerald, 1965-81
Seamus Heaney, 1984-

Professor Copeland, left, put the Boylston chair at the service of poetry. It is now held by the poet Seamus Heaney, right.



JOE WENIN

ly charge. When Child retired in 1896 the English department was offering 26 literature courses, none of them classical.

Child had killed off rhetoric at Harvard; his successor, Adams Sherman Hill, completed the job by destroying it at most other American colleges. The weapon was Hill's influential *Principles of Rhetoric*, which did not mention oral address at all and completely avoided the classics. Good rhetoric and good grammar were the same thing, he would tell his students in his high, thin voice. The Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison called him the "high priest of correctness." Hill's text was widely used in the English departments that were beginning to spring up around the country. Harvard being Harvard, it served as a model for other schools. Since classical rhetoric was dead in Cambridge, no self-respecting English department would think of keeping it alive elsewhere.

The sixth Boylston professor, Le Baron Russell Briggs, went on to become Harvard's dean of arts and sciences and president of Radcliffe. In the meantime he taught Conrad Aiken, Wilson Follett, Thomas Ybarra, Robert Benchley, Frederick L. Allen, E. E. Cummings, Edward A. Weeks, Nicholas Roosevelt, Bernard DeVoto, and John Dos Passos. Briggs was a literature professor who did not pretend to teach rhetoric.

The seventh holder of the Boylston chair converted it into a chair for poetry. It made some small sense to appoint Charles Townsend Copeland to the Boylston professorship; his field was the oral interpretation of literature. Unlike some of his predecessors, he actually spoke well, and he appears to have liked teaching. As author of *The Copeland Reader*, an English anthology, he gave some attention to prose. But his successors increasingly engaged themselves with poetics.

The eighth chairholder was Robert Silliman Hillyer, English teacher and poet. Hillyer offered a faint memory of the Boylston chair as a domain of practice. But that practice had become artistic, not political—poetical, not rhetorical. Hillyer did not stay long, leaving after seven years to teach English literature at the University of Delaware.

The ninth chairholder, Theodore Spencer, had an even

shorter tenure. A poet and expert on Shakespeare, he died of a heart attack in a taxi.

Archibald MacLeish was the tenth Boylston professor—perhaps the first true man of the world to hold the post since John Quincy Adams. Interestingly, MacLeish saw poetry as an alternative to "scientific abstraction." A Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, former law instructor, and diplomat, MacLeish viewed poetry as a form of action—endowing our purposes, like Prospero, with words that make them known. In recent times there have been men and women bereft of rhetorical background who have devised rhetorical principles on their own, who have intuited the need for a language of persuasion. MacLeish appears to have been one of them, but he did not know quite what to do about it. He attempted to teach classics in one of his classes but later declared the effort "untimely."

The late Robert Stuart Fitzgerald, another poet, came next, in 1965. He is best known for his translations of Homer.

The twelfth and current holder of the chair, and the first Boylston professor who is not a Harvard alumnus, is Seamus Heaney, also a renowned poet.

What does it matter that a chair endowed by a hopeful merchant to teach rhetoric and oratory is now dedicated to poetry? Isn't the country overfull of rhetoric as it is? True, but the study of rhetoric may be important for the very reason that there *is* too much of it—too much undisciplined argument, and too few citizens who know how to listen critically. We complain about being manipulated by advertising and political campaigns and then allow ourselves to be seduced. We decry the raucous nonsense of talk shows and then put up with it daily. We yearn for real leaders, men and women who can seize the spirit of the nation and lead it to some place greater, and then we distrust the very possibility of consensus. Partisan gridlock may not have been the only thing that killed health care reform. Its death may also come from Americans' inability even to understand what a consensus is.

We are unable to envision a public good; instead we fear that "special interests" may benefit, and we ourselves may lose.

Health care reform may be a dead issue, at least for now, but rhetoric still lives. If we scorn rational persuasion in our government and our talk shows, it will seek an outlet of its own. Argument will find its place. And, in fact, it *has* found a niche: in courtrooms, where decisions become (after the appeals are exhausted) a Sophistic public truth. Even when this process fails—when important elements of society refuse to accept a courtroom verdict, as in the Rodney King case—the anguish and outcry show that Americans *want* the law court to be the bastion of fairness and rational deliberation.

Beyond the courtroom, this notion of consensus can be difficult to sell in a society that holds as its dearest belief the sovereignty of the individual. The eighteenth-century philosophers who helped shape the modern American state—including John Locke, who was a rhetoric professor for much of his career—believed that self-interest would naturally lead to proper social decisions. Locke's public interest is an amalgamation of individual preferences. Our government operates under

READINGS IN RHETORIC

Walter Nash, *Rhetoric: The Wit of Persuasion* (Blackwell, 1989). Nash, who is well endowed with wit himself, gives a playful if uneven introduction to classical rhetoric and its modern forms. If you read only one book on rhetoric, this is the most entertaining.

Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (Oxford, 1971, second edition). This brilliantly annotated anthology of speeches and rhetorical writings launched a revival of classroom rhetoric in the sixties and remains the best single textbook extant.

The Rhetoric of Aristotle, translated by Lane Cooper (Appleton, 1932). All serious rhetoric begins with Aristotle. His passion for subdividing thoughts and techniques often makes the book read like a maddeningly lengthy outline, and the *enthymeme*, his rhetorical remake of logic's syllogism, is a thorny concept to grasp (more than one serious student has been bloodied in the attempt). But the *Rhetoric* deserves to be read, and re-read, by every undergraduate who is interested in the way the world works.

Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (Simon & Schuster, 1992). The best rhetorical analysis ever written of the greatest American speech ever given.

Robert Reich, editor, *The Power of Public Ideas* (Harvard, 1988). Reich's introduction to this book is a manifesto for a new policy paradigm: decision-making by consensus instead of compromise.

John Quincy Adams, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* (Hilliard and Metcalf, 1810, two volumes). Adams's lectures are full of the wit and rococo embellishments that caused early nineteenth-century hearts to palpitate.

The Papers of Daniel Webster; Speeches and Formal Writings (Dartmouth-University Press of New England, 1989, two volumes). Abraham Lincoln thought Webster's "Second Reply to Hayne" the best American speech ever given. The literary quality of these works will surprise the sound-bite-jaded modern reader. —J.H.

that faith today, except that the sovereignty of the individual has largely been replaced by the sovereignty of the group. "The prevailing ideal casts government as problem solver," says Robert Reich, the former Harvard economist who now serves as Secretary of Labor. Reich explains that, under the current system, officials seek compromise between interest groups, or they try to maximize the benefits of one while minimizing harm to the other.

Reich heads a school of thought among policy analysts that proposes an alternative, which he calls the "power of public ideas." Instead of relying exclusively on polling and marketing surveys, instead of balancing the pleadings of special-interest groups, Reich and his colleagues make the case for public deliberation in national decisions. "Policy-making should be more than, and different from, the discovery of what people want," Reich says. "It should entail the creation of contexts in which people can critically evaluate and revise what they believe." But public deliberation works to foster changes in belief only when the persuaders on both sides subject themselves to opposing suasion, when the wooer is willing to be wooed. This active and passive art is not instinctive; it must be taught.

And that brings us back to Harvard. In the midst of an increasingly oracular society, the College requires that its students study expository writing (and has done so since 1872), but doesn't offer a single course in which oratorical theory and practice are taught together. As the ancients understood, the two are inseparable. And as Harvard goes, so goes the nation. Harvard's example helped destroy classical rhetoric. Harvard's example could still help revive it in elite colleges nationwide.

Obviously, not every student is suited to the study. But a great many are, and most of these barely know of the existence of rhetoric. Some young people love language and want to know how humans interact. These students are frustrated by the separation of ideas into territorial disciplines. They seek knowledge for its own sake, but they are also curious to know the ways in which knowledge applies in the marketplace. They want to learn how general concepts apply in specific situations, how theories become practice, whether ideals can become reality. Many of these future-oriented scholars end up in marketing, journalism, teaching, politics, the law, and other fields outside academia where language and thought are practiced professionally. They are looking for something more than what they get in their courses, some outward direction for their studies. Rhetoric, that most outward-facing of disciplines, may be just what these students need.

Without an education in argument, they are missing out on one of the greatest intellectual skills. Society suffers from the lack of educated citizens who accept the uses of debate, who want to be persuaded, and who have the sophistication to avoid being manipulated.

This last may be the academy's greatest lack. Skepticism is the vaccine that keeps our national rhetoric from turning malignant. Without it, we are a nation of dupes. ▢

Jay Heinrichs is editor of the Dartmouth Alumni Magazine. He spent nine years in Washington studying rhetoric first-hand as a conservation writer and editor. For much of the history of the Boylston professorship he is grateful for the scholarship of Syracuse professor Paul E. Ried, who wrote a series of entertaining papers on the endowment that are now in the Harvard University Archives.