Democratic Citizenship and the Ethics of Public Speaking

OVERVIEW AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Public Speaking and Civic Engagement

1.1 Discuss what it means to be a “good citizen.”

The Rhetorical Tradition and the Ethics of Speech

1.2 Explain how the rhetorical tradition relates to civic engagement.

Deliberation and Demagoguery in the Twenty-first Century

1.3 Distinguish between ethical persuasion and demagoguery.

The Responsible Citizen-Speaker

1.4 Discuss the legal and ethical obligations of the responsible citizen-speaker.
What does it mean to be a “good citizen”? For some, it means voting in elections, donating money to political candidates, or making “statements” about their political views by displaying bumper stickers or yard signs. For others, citizenship means getting involved in their local community, perhaps raising money for a worthy cause or joining with neighbors to clean up a local park. Whatever citizenship means to you, it involves sharing ideas with others and talking about important issues and controversies. In other words, being a citizen means communicating with others. Throughout history, the ability to communicate effectively has been not only the mark of great leaders but also an important skill for ordinary citizens.

This book is dedicated to helping you become a better speaker—and a better citizen. It offers practical advice about preparing and delivering speeches in a variety of public settings. Beyond that, it discusses the responsibilities of citizenship, including your ethical obligations to your fellow citizens and to your community. In the process, we will introduce you to a number of people—both famous and not so famous—who have made a difference by “speaking out.” We will also teach you how to recognize and resist the techniques of demagogues and propagandists—those who use the power of speech to manipulate and deceive others. When you complete your course in public speaking, you will have the confidence and skills necessary to participate fully in civic life. More than that, you will have a better understanding of what it means to be a “good citizen.”

**PUBLIC SPEAKING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

**Preview.** As you read this, you may be a full-time student, a business major, or a student who hasn’t yet decided on a major. You are many other things as well. You are a daughter or a son; you may be a single parent, a United Methodist, a part-time employee, a movie buff, a sports fan, or a camp counselor. We all play many different roles in life, but we all have one thing in common: we are citizens in a democracy. Our country’s future depends on how well we perform that role. As citizens, we have a responsibility to get involved in the civic life of our communities, and we need public speaking skills to do that effectively.

In Foxborough, Massachusetts, a local resident named Phillip Henderson organized a group of neighbors to fight plans by a fast-food chain to build a new franchise on an environmentally sensitive site. Henderson’s group, the Quality of Life Committee, fought for seven years to stop the development, and the disputed land is now part of a 19-acre protected wetland and wildlife preserve. In Washington State, Pete Knutson, the owner of a small family fishing operation, organized an unlikely alliance of working-class fishermen, middle-class environmentalists, and Native Americans to protect salmon fisheries in the Pacific Northwest. Standing up against powerful special interests, Knutson’s alliance pushed for cleaner streams, enforcement of the Endangered Species Act, and an increased flow of water over regional dams to help boost salmon runs.

“Getting involved” is not something just older Americans do. All across America, college and even high school students have been making a difference by participating in politics or other sorts of civic or service activities. In one survey, two-thirds of the respondents between ages 18 and 30 said that they had volunteered...
their time, joined a civic or service organization, or advocated some public cause in the past three years. In 2002, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) found that more than 40 percent of young people surveyed had participated in a charitable event, and more than half had boycotted some product “because of the conditions under which it was made.” In its 2006 survey, CIRCLE again found young people “involved in many forms of political and civic activity,” including voting, grassroots organizing, or volunteer work. More than 70 percent of the young people surveyed said they “followed what’s going on” in government and public affairs, and more than a third said they had volunteered or participated in “political discussions.”

The Challenges of Democratic Citizenship

Unfortunately, not all Americans feel the need to “get involved.” Over the past half century, barely half of all eligible Americans have bothered to vote in presidential elections, and the United States continues to trail most of the world’s democracies in voter turnout. Young people historically have been especially apathetic about voting. After the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 in 1971, turnout among Americans aged 18–24 steadily declined over the next two decades, from 52 percent in 1972 to only 36 percent in 2000. Other indicators of civic engagement have also declined over the past half century because fewer people have been paying attention to the news, attending public meetings, working for political causes, signing petitions, writing to their elected representatives or local newspapers, or speaking at political meetings and rallies. By the mid-1990s, 32 million fewer Americans were involved in these sorts of activities than was the case just two decades earlier.

Yet there are hopeful signs of civic renewal in America. As scholar Robert Putnam has observed, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, at least “interrupted” the downward trend in “political consciousness and engagement,” increasing the public’s interest in political affairs to levels “not seen in at least three decades.” This spike in political awareness was evident in the 2004 elections, when Americans voted at the highest rate since 1968. In 2008, voters again turned out in record numbers, with 131 million Americans going to the polls to elect the first African-American president in U.S. history. That represented 61.6 percent of the nation’s eligible voters, according to George Mason University political scientist Michael McDonald—a level of civic engagement not seen since the 1960s.

A crowd of young people participate in a get-out-the-vote rally. The rally reflected the increased participation of young voters in the 2004 and 2008 elections.
evidence of a revival in civic engagement is evident in recent surveys of incoming college freshmen that reveal the highest level of political interest since the 1960s.14 Today’s young people not only vote more than young people 20 or 30 years ago,15 but according to some political scientists, they also have embraced new norms of “engaged citizenship” that are more inclusive and more deeply rooted in democratic ideals than the duty-oriented norms of their parents or grandparents.16

Young people are making a difference all across America by working for political causes or by “getting involved in civic activities or volunteer work in their local communities. Some college students even give up their spring breaks to help others. According to Break Away, a nonprofit group that organizes “alternative” spring breaks, nearly 65,000 students from across the country spent their spring vacations in 2009 building homes, tutoring migrant farmworkers or inner-city kids, working with homeless people, or participating in other sorts of volunteer or community service.17

Some of the credit for these positive trends must go to the many schools, charitable foundations, and civic groups that have launched new initiatives to promote engaged citizenship, particularly among young people. For example, the Saguaro Seminar, which is an ongoing initiative of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, is working to develop “far-reaching, actionable ideas to significantly increase Americans’ connectedness to one another and to community institutions.”18 At the University of Texas, the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Participation has a similar mission: “(1) to conduct cutting-edge research on how civic participation, community understanding, and communication are undermined or sustained and (2) to develop new programs for increasing democratic understanding among citizens.”19 Another initiative, Project Pericles, provides funding to colleges across the nation to improve their community-service efforts and to “make civic engagement a part of the curriculum in every department.”20 And at the more than 1,100 colleges and universities affiliated with Campus Compact, millions of students have been involved over the past 20 years in a variety of civic and community-service projects.21

By volunteering to help others, you can have an immediate, tangible impact. Perhaps that explains why so many young people prefer community service over more “traditional” political activities, such as supporting political candidates or signing petitions. According to CIRCLE, many of today’s college students are “turned off” by the “spin” and “polarized debate” of electoral politics, and they seek more “open and authentic” ways to participate in civic affairs. In comparison to Generation X, today’s so-called Millennials are more politically active and aware. Yet many are tired of the “competitive and confrontational atmosphere” of electoral politics and are finding new ways to “get involved.”22 Still, if you really hope to make a difference, you can’t ignore traditional politics. Many of the problems we face today—including the problems that most concern young people, like the high cost of a college education—are, in the final analysis, political problems.

The Engaged Citizen
So we come back to our original question: what does it mean to be a “good citizen”? And what can you do to help make the world better? We’ve already suggested part of the answer: get involved, whether that means voting in the next
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presidential election, speaking out at a local town hall forum, or volunteering to help others in your community. In recent years, more and more young people are voting, and there are indications that at least some young people are turning to the Internet more frequently for political news and information.23 But there is more to being a “good citizen” than just voting or being well informed. If you really hope to “make a difference,” you need to communicate with others, and you need to understand what it means to communicate responsibly.

“Getting involved” in politics does not mean that you must be loud or combative, like some of the political activists and commentators we see on TV. As political scientist Morris P. Fiorina has suggested, those people seem “completely certain of their views; they are right and their opponents are wrong.” They view all who disagree not just as misguided or misinformed, but as “corrupt, stupid, evil, or all three.”24 Most of us are not so sure of ourselves, and we take more moderate, middle-of-the-road positions on complex issues. For most of us, politics is not about scoring points or defeating some enemy; it is about finding solutions to difficult problems. It is about working together to advance the “common good.” This is not to say that we should ignore or silence those who feel passionately about some issues—those whom sociologist Eric Hoffer once called “true believers.”25 But while “true believers” have played an important role in American history, giving voice to the powerless and calling attention to injustices that were being ignored, our system of government ultimately depends on accommodating a diversity of voices and finding compromises on tough political issues. As Fiorina concludes, the “less intense and less extreme” voices in politics should be given at least as much weight as those of the passionate activists. Not only would that “lower the decibel level of American politics,” but it also would focus attention on more “mainstream concerns.”26

Of course, some people might engage politics or other civic activities just to advance their own selfish interests. It looks good on a résumé or a college or job application to be “involved” in one’s community. But civic engagement is about more than career advancement. It is also a commitment to some cause greater than yourself. Wherever you get involved—in your school, at your place of work, in your town, or in a broader national or even international arena—you contribute to the common good. Everyone is better off when you get involved. Somebody has to take the lead in making our world better. Why not you?

Even busy college students can make a big difference. At Penn State University, for example, the largest student-run charitable organization in the world raises money to fight childhood cancer with an annual dance marathon. “THON,” as it is popularly called, involves thousands of students in a variety of activities, from planning the event to the care and feeding of the dancers themselves. THON even has a communications committee for “Penn State students with a passion for spreading the word.” To date, this group of involved students has raised more than $78 million to combat pediatric cancer. In 2012 alone, THON raised more than $10.6 million.27

The good citizen not only helps others but also strives to be well informed and thoughtful. In a democracy, you have a right to your opinion. At the same time, you have an ethical obligation to speak honestly, to know what you’re talking about, and to remain open to changing your own mind. Good citizens keep up with current events, and they recognize the difference between an informed opinion and one grounded in ignorance or prejudice. They take advantage of opportunities to
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learn more about the issues, and they carefully weigh all the arguments before forming their own opinions. They may feel strongly about their views, but they respect the opinions of others. Good citizens—people of good will—can and will disagree, sometimes passionately. But they remain committed to free and open debate and to resolving their differences through democratic processes.

Perhaps by speaking out you will someday influence the decision of your local school board or city council. Or by discussing political issues with your neighbors, maybe you will help change public opinion or influence the outcome of an election. You do not have to be a famous politician or a celebrity to make a difference. In the mid-1990s, Doris Haddock, an 85-year-old great-grandmother from New Hampshire, took it upon herself to improve the political process by campaigning for campaign finance reform. Testing both her public speaking skills and her physical endurance, “Granny D” (as her supporters and admirers called her) literally walked across America, speaking to thousands of her fellow citizens—a feat recalled in the following Focus on Civic Engagement. Whatever the results of your own ways of participating, it is important—both to you and our democracy—that you get involved. Before you do, however, you should first develop the knowledge and skills you need to “speak out” effectively and responsibly. The principles of effective and ethical speaking date back to ancient times, and they have been handed down to us in what scholars call the rhetorical tradition.

THE RHETORICAL TRADITION AND THE ETHICS OF SPEECH

Prefix. Rhetoric is an ancient discipline concerned with the techniques and ethics of speech. The three traditions of scholarship and teaching in rhetoric focus on the knowledge and skills necessary for democratic citizenship:

- The tradition of rhetorical theory that dates back to ancient Greece and Rome
- The tradition of rhetorical criticism, which emphasizes the critical analysis of public discourse in all its various forms
- The tradition of historical studies in public address, which focuses on the lessons we may learn from the speakers, speeches, social movements, and persuasive campaigns of the past

Participants in the 2012 Penn State Dance Marathon hold up signs bearing the grand total of money raised for fighting childhood cancer at that year’s “THON”: $10,686,924.83.
Each of these traditions helps to define the ethics of speech in a democratic society, and those ethical rules must be kept in mind at every stage of the speech-making process.

The scholarly traditions of rhetorical theory and criticism have something important to teach us. In recognizing rhetoric as one of the oldest scholarly traditions,

**FOCUS ON CIVIC ENGAGEMENT | “Granny D” Gets Involved**

In 1995, a newly proposed law regulating campaign financing, the McCain-Feingold bill, failed to win congressional approval. In New Hampshire, 85-year-old Doris Haddock decided to do something about it. Incensed that some congressional leaders had stated that the American public didn’t care about the issue, Haddock—or “Granny D,” as she became known—decided on a dramatic gesture to attract attention to the issue and gain support for reform.

After getting into shape by taking long walks around her hometown of Dublin, New Hampshire, Granny D set out to walk across the country to rally support for campaign finance reform. On January 1, 1999, she began her walk in Pasadena, California. By the time she arrived in Washington, DC, on February 29, 2000, she was 90 years old and had walked 3,200 miles. In Arizona, she was hospitalized for dehydration and pneumonia. Near the end of her journey, she faced heavy snows and had to cross-country ski for 100 miles between Cumberland, Maryland, and Washington.

All along the way, Granny D gave speeches and urged public support for campaign finance reform. When she reached the nation’s capital, she was met by more than 2,000 people, including representatives of various reform groups and several members of Congress. Many of these supporters walked the final miles with her.

Granny D is widely credited with helping to push the final bill into law. Al Gore, in adopting a finance reform plank in his campaign platform during the 2000 presidential election, credited Senator John McCain, former senator Bill Bradley, and Granny D.

Granny D passed away on March 9, 2010 at the age of 100. In her final years, she remained politically active. In 2003, she launched a drive to register more working women to vote, and in 2004, she ran for the U.S. Senate herself. She may not have defeated New Hampshire’s incumbent senator, but she did win a respectable 34 percent of the vote.

we realize that the ability to communicate in public has long been considered an important part of democratic citizenship. By learning to speak in public and by developing a clear understanding of the ethics of speech, we develop what the ancient rhetoricians called civic virtue.

**Speaking Responsibly**

The study of speech dates back to ancient times, with some of the great Greek and Roman thinkers, including Aristotle and Cicero, counted among the earliest rhetorical theorists. In the classical tradition, personal ethics and civic virtue, or devotion to one’s community and the common good, were the cornerstones of rhetorical education. For example, Isocrates, a Greek orator and teacher of rhetoric who lived from 436 to 338 BC, viewed the study of rhetoric not only as preparation for life and leadership in Athenian politics but also as a tool for creating unity out of diversity and defining the “public good.” For Isocrates, rhetoric was more than a collection of techniques for persuading an audience. It was a source of the communal values and the moral standards that made democracy itself possible. Similarly, the Roman rhetorician Quintilian described the ideal orator as “a good man skilled in speaking”—with the emphasis on the “good man.” Quintilian’s ideal orator was more than an effective speaker. He was, first and foremost, a good citizen—a civic leader, a lover of wisdom and truth, a sincere advocate of worthy causes, and a servant of the community. For both Isocrates and Quintilian, responsible orators promoted the best interests of the whole community, not just their own selfish interests.

We must acknowledge the greater challenges of public speaking in the modern world. Unlike the ancients, we live in a diverse, multicultural society, and we must take account of changing social values, new information technologies, and the realities of the consumer age. But that does not mean we cannot still strive to be good citizens and ethical speakers—that is, people who assume the responsibilities of leadership, tell the truth, believe sincerely in our causes, and engage in reasoned and ethical speech. In today’s world, it is more important than ever that we rise above our own selfish interests and think about the larger public good. If we hope to resolve the difficult problems we face, we must learn to deliberate together and find common ground.

The classical rhetorical tradition still has something important to teach us: that public speaking in a democratic society must be grounded in a strong code of ethics and a commitment to the public good. The classical tradition suggests an approach to public speaking that emphasizes not the techniques of manipulation, but rather the character of the speaker and the shared interests of speakers and listeners. Now more than ever, we need citizens with civic virtue, citizens who know how to deliberate with their fellow citizens. That requires that
we embrace the ideals of Isocrates and the virtues of Quintilian’s ideal orator and demand that all who speak in public do so responsibly. And that is where the second tradition of scholarship and teaching in rhetoric comes in—the tradition of rhetorical criticism.

**Thinking Critically**

Today, citizens must be more than skilled speakers. They must also have the skills necessary to critically evaluate the messages of others. In the economic marketplace, we have consumer watchdogs who warn us against false advertising and defective products. But in the “marketplace of ideas,” we must learn to protect ourselves against those who may seek to manipulate or deceive us. We must learn how to recognize and resist illogical arguments, misleading or irrelevant evidence, and appeals to our emotions that short-circuit our thinking.

When should we believe that presidential candidate who promises change or that lawyer who publicly declares his client innocent? How do we decide who is speaking ethically—or who has some conflict of interest that might lead to deceptive or manipulative speech? By doing some research, we can often distinguish between advocates who are speaking sincerely and truthfully and those who are not. But often we must render judgments on the spot, without the benefit of research or time for reflection. In the day-to-day world of democratic life, we all must be citizen-critics, ready and able to make our own judgments about who deserves to be believed—and why.

By studying public speaking, you are not only developing your ability to communicate effectively but also learning how to recognize misleading arguments, faulty reasoning, or inadequate evidence in other people’s speeches. Demagogues, or speakers who employ “highly suspect means in pursuit of equally suspect ends,” abound in our media-saturated world. So it is important that we, as citizens, recognize and resist their attempts to mislead us. Should we believe that speaker who insists that the U.S. government is actually behind some recent terrorist attack? What about that politician who claims he knew nothing about those illegal campaign contributions? And should we listen to that preacher who insists that all “good Christians” must vote for a particular candidate? Studying the principles and methods of public speaking can help you decide how to respond to such appeals. It can also help you distinguish between a reasonable argument and an attempt to manipulate or deceive.

Obviously, not everything you read or hear is true, so you need to learn how to evaluate competing claims and arguments. Consider, for example, the debate over a national sales tax. Proponents argue that this tax would simplify the tax structure and impose exactly the same burden on all citizens. Those opposed to such a tax insist that it is grossly unfair, placing the greatest burden on those who can least afford to pay. How would you go about sorting out the competing claims of advocates on both sides of this debate? How would you evaluate all the contradictory testimony, statistics, and other forms of evidence? In short, whom should you believe? Students of public speaking learn to take nothing at face value. Becoming a citizen-critic means learning how to evaluate claims, weigh all the evidence, and come to reasoned conclusions based on a careful examination of the arguments on all sides of an issue.
In a democracy, it is not enough that we ourselves speak responsibly; we must also demand that all who speak in public live up to high ethical standards. Critical listening and thinking are no less central to the rhetorical tradition than the skills of preparing and delivering a speech. If democratic deliberation is to lead to sound collective judgments, we all must learn to be more critical consumers in the “marketplace of ideas.”

Lessons of the Past

Finally, a healthy democracy requires a common store of historical and political knowledge. It requires appreciation for the well-crafted argument and the eloquent speech, as well as an understanding of the American rhetorical tradition and our unique history as a deliberative democracy. In short, it requires some measure of historical and civic literacy. Unfortunately, as Bruce Cole, former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, has noted, Americans have forgotten much of their own country’s history, and that historical “amnesia” clouds our vision of the future. “We cannot see clearly ahead if we are blind to history,” Cole argues, because “a nation that does not know why it exists, or what it stands for, cannot be expected to long endure.” Urging more study of our history and political traditions, Cole concludes: “We must recover from the amnesia that shrouds our history in darkness, our principles in confusion, and our future in uncertainty.”

One of the best ways to learn about our past is by studying the great speakers and speeches of American history. The most basic principles of our government were forged by speakers who assumed the responsibilities of leadership and put the public good ahead of their own personal opinions and interests. During the Constitutional Convention, for example, Benjamin Franklin admitted that he had reservations about the proposed U.S. Constitution. Nevertheless, he consented to ratification “because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best. The opinions I have had of its errors I sacrifice to the common good.”

Similarly, Abraham Lincoln is remembered as a great president in part because of his lofty, high-minded speeches in the closing days of the Civil War. Putting that terrible tragedy in perspective and beginning a process of national healing, Lincoln used his second inaugural address to urge “malice toward none” and “charity for all.” Pledging to “bind up the nation’s wounds,” Lincoln pointed the way to “a just and lasting peace among ourselves and among all nations.”

Many of the issues and controversies debated in the early years of our republic are still with us today. Past debates shape the way we think about our own times. The great controversy over slavery and the rights of freed slaves after the Civil War echo in today’s debates over racial discrimination and affirmative action. In the nineteenth century, Susan B. Anthony’s demand for women’s suffrage laid the groundwork for today’s debates over women’s rights and gender equality. Debates over the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 foreshadowed today’s arguments over genetically engineered foods, food additives, and labeling requirements. We may think we live in an unprecedented age of scientific and technological progress, yet many of the challenges we face today have roots deep in our past.

By studying the great speakers and speeches of the past, we learn not only about the origins of contemporary controversies but also about the principles of
public advocacy and democratic deliberation. By examining the speeches of the great African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass, for example, we can learn how appeals to “higher law” can motivate us to live up to our national ideals. By studying the inaugural addresses and fireside chats of Franklin Roosevelt, we can witness the power of speech to boost morale and promote sacrifice for the common good. By reflecting on how our ancestors debated controversies over America’s role in the world or our economic and social policies, we can learn how to disagree while still working together toward common goals. American history is, in large measure, a history of people who made a difference by “speaking out.” By studying those voices, we can both learn about our past and find inspiration and guidance for meeting today’s challenges.

**The Ethics of Speech**

Throughout its history, America has seen its share of demagogues and propagandists. For every Lincoln or Roosevelt, we can point to a Joseph McCarthy—the 1950s anticommunist crusader known for his false accusations and character attacks. We can also think of hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan, and we can recall religious cults that have brainwashed people into blind obedience. We sense that all of these speakers, by deceiving and manipulating people, violated some ethical rules. But what are our ethical obligations as speakers? When do we have a responsibility to “speak out” in the first place? And what are our ethical responsibilities when we do choose to speak in public?

Your most basic ethical obligation as a speaker is to tell the truth and take responsibility for what you say. You also have an ethical obligation to give credit where credit is due for ideas or language that you borrow from others. No doubt you recognize that principle from your other classes; you probably have been warned about plagiarism and told to cite your sources. Yet honesty and accountability are more than just academic requirements. They suggest a broader commitment to intellectual honesty and social responsibility—a commitment that we should demand of all who speak in public.
In a survey of 4,500 high school students in 2002, some 75 percent admitted to cheating in school, with more than half admitting to plagiarizing work they found on the Internet. Even more troubling, some did not see anything wrong with cheating. “What’s important is getting ahead,” said one student at George Mason High School in Falls Church, Virginia. “In the real world, that’s what’s going to be going on.” Unfortunately, cheating already has become a way of life for this student, and she will probably continue to cheat—at least until she gets caught. Other students do not cheat intentionally but instead commit plagiarism “accidentally.” Cheating results not only from the attitude that “getting ahead” is more important than honesty but also from simple carelessness or confusion over what constitutes academic dishonesty.

So what exactly is plagiarism? According to Northwestern University’s “Principles Regarding Academic Integrity,” plagiarism may be defined as “submitting material that in part or whole is not entirely one’s own work without attributing those same portions to their correct source.” At first glance, this definition makes plagiarism a simple matter: you should never “borrow” all or even part of your speech from somebody else—at least not without acknowledging your sources. Yet the issue is complicated by gray areas in our definitions of plagiarism as well as by confusion over when and how to cite your sources in an oral presentation. Thus, it is important that you have a clear understanding not only of what constitutes plagiarism but also of how to avoid inadvertent plagiarism when preparing and delivering a speech.

Students sometimes take shortcuts in their speech class that constitute obvious and deliberate plagiarism. You are obviously guilty of plagiarism if you take your whole speech from a file at your fraternity house, for example, or if you buy your speech from an Internet site that sells ready-made papers and speeches. You are also guilty of plagiarism if you “cut and paste” all or part of your speech from Internet sources. But what if you “borrow” just a few quotations from that same source? Or what if you just paraphrase an article you read, borrowing some information and ideas but putting them into your own words? Does that constitute plagiarism? Here is where misunderstanding the rules may result in accidental plagiarism.

Paraphrasing refers to putting the ideas or insights of others into your own words. When paraphrasing, you should strive for language that differs significantly from the original. Yet that still doesn’t excuse you from giving credit for ideas or insights that are not your own. You need not document your own unique insights or conclusions, nor do you need to cite sources for what can be considered common knowledge or generally accepted facts. Yet how do you know when you have a genuinely original idea? And what constitutes common knowledge? Here is a useful rule of thumb: when in doubt, cite your sources.

If you find yourself tempted to take your speech off the Internet, remember that new technologies not only have made it easier to cheat; they also have made it easier to catch cheaters. Many teachers now use Internet search engines, or Web sites such as Turnitin.com, in their fight against plagiarism. At Turnitin.com, papers are checked against several massive databases, including more than 10 billion Web sites; more than 70 million student papers already submitted to the site; and more than 10,000 major newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals. Turnitin even checks papers against an electronic library of thousands of books, including many
literary classics. Within seconds, Turnitin.com returns an “Originality Report” highlighting possible instances of plagiarism and linking those passages to their sources. Although Turnitin.com is used mostly by teachers to detect and deter plagiarism, students can also use the site to learn more about how to paraphrase and how to cite their sources properly.\textsuperscript{37}

Plagiarism can cost you much more than a good grade on your speech. At most universities, penalties for plagiarism can range from warnings, grade penalties, or academic probation to expulsion from the university and even invalidation of a degree already granted. Beyond the classroom, plagiarism can have serious, real-world consequences. In 1988, for example, Vice President Joseph R. Biden, then a U.S. senator from Delaware, was forced to withdraw from the race for the Democratic presidential nomination when an opposing campaign released a videotape showing him repeating passages taken directly from a speech by British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock.\textsuperscript{38} More recently, Nevada’s Republican governor Jim Gibbons, when he was a congressman, delivered a hard-hitting attack on liberals at a Lincoln Day dinner in Elko, Nevada, including this stinging shot at the music and film industries: “I say we [tell] those liberal, tree-hugging, Birkenstock-wearing, hippie, tie-dyed liberals to go make their movies and music and whine somewhere else.” Unfortunately for Gibbons, it soon came out that he had stolen almost his entire speech from a copyrighted address delivered in 2003 by Alabama State Auditor Beth Chapman. “Not only is it a bad speech,” commented one Democratic Party leader, “it’s a bad, stolen speech.”\textsuperscript{39}

Among those whose reputations have been damaged by accusations of plagiarism are such well-known figures as the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and historians Stephen Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin. In these cases, the plagiarism may have been unintentional, but the accusations nevertheless proved embarrassing. At other times, the plagiarism is clearly deliberate, as in the case of a young New York Times reporter named Jayson Blair. Blair’s blatant use of stolen and fabricated stories led to his own resignation and to the resignations of two high-ranking editors at the Times.\textsuperscript{40} Plagiarism is not just something that you worry about in college. In the “real world,” the penalties for plagiarism are severe, and the consequences can be devastating.

**Ghostwriting**

Presenting somebody else’s words or ideas as your own is not always unethical. Since ancient times, ghostwriters, or professional speechwriters, have helped others write their speeches. Although you should never deliver a speech written by somebody else in your speech class, ghostwriting is now considered an inevitable part of our political and corporate culture. Many political and business leaders are simply too busy to write their own speeches. The president of the United States employs a whole team of researchers and speechwriters. Generally, we do not consider this unethical, so long as the speaker takes full responsibility for his or her words.

The earliest ghostwriters actually helped make democracy possible. Assisting citizens as they prepared speeches for the deliberative and legal assemblies of the Greek city-state, the first ghostwriters also taught the art of public speaking. Subsequently, ghostwriting “proliferated through the ages,” and today almost every speech by a major political, business, or academic leader is “written by someone else.”\textsuperscript{41} America’s first president, George Washington, had a speechwriter:
Alexander Hamilton. So, too, have many other presidents, including some whom we consider among our greatest orators: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for example, and John F. Kennedy. President Ronald Reagan employed not only a ghostwriter but also a whole team of researchers and writers to help prepare his speeches. One of those writers, Peggy Noonan, wrote many of Reagan’s most famous lines. Still, we remember those famous words as the words of Ronald Reagan.

When does ghostwriting become unethical? According to Craig R. Smith, a former presidential speechwriter, ghostwriting becomes unethical when the use of a speechwriter is “hidden from the audience.” According to Smith, if “someone who uses a ghostwriter denies it,” then he or she is “lying and acting unethically.” Beyond that, Smith holds ghostwriters to the same ethical standards to which he would hold any writer or speaker: if their speeches are “purposefully deceptive,” then they are unethical. For Smith, as for most professional ghostwriters, speech writing is a noble profession dedicated only to ensuring that their clients’ ideas get “fair play in the marketplace of ideas.”

Today, ghostwriters rarely hide their role in the speech-making process. To the contrary, some presidential speechwriters have become celebrities in their own right, writing best-selling memoirs or achieving fame in politics, journalism, or even popular entertainment. Nowadays, the real ethical questions surrounding ghostwriting involve the role of research and new technologies in the speechwriting process. With polling and focus groups, speechwriting teams can now create what one scholar has described as “quantitatively safe” speeches, or speeches scientifically designed to offend nobody. They can also test which arguments or evidence the public will find convincing or determine which emotional appeals will best move the public. Famous for such research, former Clinton adviser Dick Morris used polling data to position Clinton in the most politically advantageous positions, although he denies that he ever distorted the truth or manipulated public opinion. Thus, the ethics of using polling data to help craft political messages remains a debatable issue. Some defend the practice, although others criticize politicians for pandering to public opinion.

**DELIBERATION AND DEMAGOGUERY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

**Preview.** Those who speak in public need not be objective, or free of all personal opinions and biases, but they do have an obligation to be well informed and fully prepared. In most respects, the rules of ethical speech have not changed since ancient times, although unethical speech, or demagoguery, has assumed new forms in the modern world.

As the late U.S. senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan used to say, we are all entitled to our own opinions, but not to our own facts. What Moynihan meant, of course, is that we should never twist the truth or invent “facts” just to win an argument. As public speakers, we have an ethical obligation to speak honestly and to gather reliable information about our topic. We also have an obligation to remain open to other points of view and to respect those who disagree with our opinions. Democratic deliberation is not about winning and losing. It is about joining with other citizens in a search for solutions to our common problems.
Deliberating in Good Faith

Perhaps you’ve heard the expression *deliberating “in good faith.”* What does that mean? Does it mean that we must always strive to be objective? The answer is no. Nobody is completely objective. We all have personal experiences, religious beliefs, political biases, and social values that influence our opinions. As a speaker, nobody expects you to erase your past, nor do audiences demand that you deny your own beliefs and values, however controversial they may be. To the contrary, democratic deliberation is all about airing those differing opinions. It is about reconciling our disagreements through discussion and debate. Your fellow citizens do not expect you to be perfectly objective, but they do expect you to make good arguments in support of your opinions. That means providing sound reasoning and evidence to back up your views. It also means being open-minded enough to consider other people’s views and perhaps even to change your opinion when confronted with compelling evidence.

In many situations, you will be expected to take sides on a controversial issue. If, for example, you plan to speak on the health care crisis in America, your audience will expect you to criticize existing policies and advocate some alternative system for providing health care in America. Yet that does not mean that you will simply announce your proposal and wait for your audience to shout its approval. You must provide *reasons* for your opinion and *evidence* to back it up. Nor does taking a stand on a controversial issue mean that once you deliver your speech, you should close your mind to the possibility of changing your own opinion. Ethical speakers avoid allowing their existing opinions to blind them to new information, and they remain open to persuasion by advocates with different points of view. Once you have carefully researched your topic, you may be confident that your conclusions are thoughtful and fair. But down the road, you may need to reevaluate your opinion in light of new information or changing circumstances.

As a public speaker, you have an ethical obligation to be well informed and fully prepared. Speaking in public is not like casual conversation, in which you just “bounce a few ideas” off a friend. It is a *formal presentation,* often in a setting where people have gathered to discuss issues crucial to their own lives and communities. In such a setting, you owe it to your listeners to investigate your topic carefully and to provide information that is relevant, reliable, and up to date. More than that, you should organize and deliver that information in the most effective manner possible. Being fully prepared means more than developing an informed opinion—although that is a crucial first step. It also means carefully organizing your ideas, choosing the right language to express them, and supplying solid evidence to back up them up.

When you speak in public, you ask your fellow citizens not only for their time and attention but also for their trust. You therefore have an *ethical* obligation to contribute something useful to their deliberations—to deliver a speech “worth listening to,” as William Norwood Brigance put it.\(^50\) Perhaps you can contribute some fact that others have overlooked. Or maybe you have a unique way of looking at a problem or some new ideas for solving that problem. Whatever your contribution, you should investigate your topic thoroughly, consider all sides of the issue, and make sure that you have your facts straight. As we noted at the beginning of this section, you have a right to your own opinion but not to your own facts.
Chapter 1
Democratic Citizenship and the Ethics of Public Speaking

**Demagoguery and the Ethics of Emotional Appeal**

As Charles Lomas observed in *The Agitator in American Society*, demagoguery is a word that is loosely thrown around in American politics and is “difficult to define.” To the Greeks who invented the word, a “demagogue was simply a leader of the people.” Yet even in ancient Greece the term implied deceit and manipulation, with Euripides describing the demagogue as “a man of loose tongue, intemperate, trusting to tumult, leading the populace to mischief with empty words.”

Today, we use the term demagogue to describe speakers who deceive or manipulate their audiences, usually by provoking strong emotional responses. In a widely cited study, for example, historian Reinhard Luthin defined the demagogue as a “mob-master” who, with “considerable histrionic variety and always noisily,” seeks to “whip up and intensify the emotions, the prejudices and the passions, of the voting public.” According to Luthin, the demagogue stirs up emotions but rarely offers much in the way of “public service and constructive thinking.”

Demagogues typically appeal to the darker emotions, such as fear, anger, or hatred. During the Great Depression, for example, Huey P. Long, a U.S. senator from Louisiana, exploited the fears and hopelessness of many Americans by offering a quick fix to America’s economic woes: a vague, utopian plan to “share the wealth.” Similarly, Senator Joseph McCarthy became a household name in the 1950s by exploiting fears of communism and the uncertainties of the Cold War era. McCarthy accused high-ranking government officials and even U.S. military leaders of disloyalty, but these reckless accusations later proved unfounded. But for a time he whipped the entire country into an anticommunist frenzy.

Of course, not all appeals to emotions are, in and of themselves, unethical. Emotions play an important role in all aspects of our lives. As speakers, we must recognize that people get excited, upset, or angry about issues that concern them. Emotions are also a powerful motivator. If you want your audience to *do* something, you simply cannot ignore the role of emotions in human behavior. Many speakers use emotional appeals to move people to do good—donate time or money to a charitable cause, for example, or fight for better schools in their community. Various charitable organizations use emotional appeals to persuade us to save starving children in Africa or neglected and abused animals in the United States. The Red Cross uses emotional appeals to solicit aid for victims of hurricanes and other natural disasters. The Veterans of
Foreign Wars appeal to our emotions when they call on us to “support our troops.” Appeals to emotions take many forms, and they are not all bad. If your goals are ethical and you are honest in what you say, there is nothing inherently wrong with appealing to emotions.

Yet emotional appeals should never substitute for sound, well-supported arguments, and as speakers we need to give careful thought to when—and under what circumstances—emotional appeals may be appropriate. In addition, we need to recognize that some forms of emotional appeal are, almost by definition, unethical. Name-calling, for example, is a kind of emotional appeal that is always unacceptable. By calling people derogatory names rather than responding to their arguments, you demean, degrade, or even dehumanize others. In the hands of the demagogue, name-calling is designed to do just that—to short-circuit the reasoning process by demeaning those with different points of view. Thus, the demagogue may characterize all feminists as “man-haters” or all evangelical Christians as religious “fanatics.” This sort of name-calling (what the Greek rhetoricians called ad hominem) is not only intellectually dishonest but it also silences others and undermines democratic debate.

Finally, scholars have identified a number of specific rhetorical techniques typically employed by the demagogue. According to J. Justin Gustainis, demagogues not only employ excessive emotional appeals and name-calling. They also focus attention on their own personalities rather than the issues, oversimplify complex matters, and make logically unsound arguments. Like emotional appeals, none of these tactics is necessarily demagogic. Political candidates, for example, may emphasize their personal qualifications for office, and speakers sometimes oversimplify complex issues for uninformed or uneducated audiences. Demagogues, however, habitually use such tactics, and they do so to promote their own selfish interests, not the public good. In other words, demagogues deceive and manipulate others to promote themselves, and in the process they rarely show “concern for the truth.”

However offensive they may be, even demagogues enjoy the protections of the First Amendment. Direct incitements to violence go beyond the bounds of free speech, but even the most offensive forms of name-calling and stereotyping are generally considered protected speech under our Constitution. In recent years, a number of colleges and universities have tried to ban so-called hate speech on campus, but these speech codes rarely stand up in court. Nor do libel and slander laws offer much protection against even the most vicious personal attacks on public figures. Perhaps that helps explain why there is so much “mudslinging” during our political campaigns. Inevitably, some will exploit our right to free speech to say unfair or even offensive things about others.

In an era of rapid technological and social change, the ethical questions surrounding public speaking have become increasingly complicated. Hate speech has found a new home on the Internet, where its sources can remain anonymous and not be held accountable. Meanwhile, our society grows more diverse every day, complicating our efforts to identify shared ethical standards. Yet the basic principles of ethical speech—honesty, accountability, good faith, and commitment to the larger “public good”—remain as relevant today as they were more than 2,000 years ago. It is up to all of us—each and every one of us—to speak out against demagoguery and contribute something positive and constructive to the public dialogue.
THE RESPONSIBLE CITIZEN-SPEAKER

Preview. In a democracy, every speaker should be committed to communicating responsibly. Responsible speakers examine their own motives. They insist on accuracy and are concerned with the ways in which they acquire and present information. They see human communication as respectful dialogue and strive to live up to the legal and ethical standards of the larger community.

As a speaker, you hope to influence your audience. As a citizen, however, you have larger obligations to go beyond media sound bites and spin and present information that is truthful, reliable, and complete. You want your audience to respond positively to what you say, but that does not mean that you should be willing to say *anything* to “win the day.” Nor does it mean that you should shamelessly pander to your audience. You want to be an *effective* public speaker, but you also want to communicate responsibly. But what does that mean—to communicate “responsibly”? What are the responsibilities that go along with the right of free speech in America?

Characteristics of the Responsible Citizen-Speaker

First, communicating responsibly means speaking honestly and truthfully, with a genuine concern for the well-being of your listeners. Responsible speakers also examine their own motives, and they do not slant the truth just to “win” an argument. Responsible speakers are committed to respectful dialogue; they honor the right of their listeners to raise questions, suggest alternatives, or even disagree. Responsible speakers carefully research their topics and present their findings accurately. Responsible speakers adapt to their audience’s interests and needs, but they do not pander. They may compromise on some issues, but they do not abandon their core beliefs to win their audience’s approval.

Responsible speakers also respect the diversity of their audiences. We live in a world where men and women of all ages, races, religions, and educational backgrounds must come together to resolve problems. During the 1980s, immigrants accounted for more than one-third of U.S. population growth, and our increasing cultural diversity can now be seen in all regions of the country. An overwhelming 92 percent of Americans recognize that the United States is now made up of many different cultures. No matter where you speak, you can no longer assume that all of your listeners will be like you, sharing the same values, beliefs, and experiences. Not all your listeners will view fraternities and sororities the same way. Not all will trust the police to protect them, and not everybody will define success in terms of how much money one makes. Some of your listeners may have a completely different understanding of “family values” than you do. Indeed, they may reject your most cherished principles and values. But that does not mean you should avoid talking about controversial public issues. In our diverse, multicultural society, it is more important than ever that we learn how to communicate both effectively and responsibly. We may be a more diverse nation today, but we still have common problems and shared aspirations, and we still need to work together for the common good.

Public deliberation is what democracy is all about; it is the mechanism through which we come together to talk about our common problems and to make...
collective decisions. We are not born with the habits and skills of democratic deliberation, however. For our democracy to work, we must learn how to deliberate, and we must agree upon some rules of deliberation. Some of those rules are actually written into law; others are more informal social norms.

**Legal and Ethical Issues in Public Speaking**

Imagine having to speak to an audience you know to be opposed to your ideas. How far will you go to win their agreement? Or imagine you are making a sales presentation to a group of potential customers. Are you willing to say *anything* in order to “close the deal”? Would you knowingly resort to misleading statements or attack the competition to make that sale?

Everyone who speaks in public must wrestle with these sorts of questions, and in recent years the lines between acceptable and unacceptable speech have become even more blurred. The news media nowadays seem most interested in voices from the extremes of the political spectrum: Ann Coulter on the right, for example, or Michael Moore on the left. Some public figures, such as Howard Stern, even push the boundaries of decency and good taste. Still others, such as white supremacist Matthew Hale, openly preach hate and advocate violence. So where do we draw the line? What are the limits of free speech in America? And who has the power to define the rules of acceptable speech? We have laws against slander and libel, of course, and the Supreme Court has ruled that speech that threatens public safety is outside the protections of the First Amendment. Yet controversies remain. To what extent, for example, should the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) be able to regulate what we see on television or hear on the radio? Should a city government be allowed to close an art exhibit that it deems obscene? Do “pro-life” activists have a First Amendment right to advocate violence against doctors who perform abortions? All of these questions point to difficult dilemmas for our free society.

Generally, we all recognize that there must be limits to free speech. By law, for example, we do not have a First Amendment right to slander or threaten others, nor do we have a right to incite mob violence. Beyond these legal limitations, however, there are few clear guidelines for acceptable speech. As a result, all public speakers must make choices. As a public advocate, will you resort to name-calling or exaggerated fear appeals to win an argument? Will you attempt to
prevail by labeling your opponents “ignorant” or “radical” or by trying to scare your audience into agreeing with your position? Or will you show respect for your listeners by grounding your speech in the best available information, supporting it with sound evidence and reasoning, and acknowledging the legitimacy of opposing points of view?

Issues that matter to people should be explored in depth, not clouded by language that dismisses rather than engages the arguments of the opposition. In the heat of political battle, some speakers may be tempted to exaggerate their case, to state mere opinions as fact, or to make promises they cannot keep. Those who resort to such methods sometimes carry the day, but in the long run they likely will be denounced by their fellow citizens and discredited in history. You may think that it doesn’t matter much what you talk about in your public speaking classroom, but the classroom is a public forum. What you say in the classroom does matter, and communicating responsibly is part of your assignment. As you prepare for your first public speaking assignment, don’t forget: the truly successful citizen-speaker is both an effective advocate for his or her ideas and a good citizen.

HIGHLIGHTING ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

In 1999, the leading professional organization for scholars and teachers of communication, the National Communication Association, adopted the following Credo for Ethical Communication:

1. We advocate truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication.
2. We endorse freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision making fundamental to a civil society.
3. We strive to understand and respect other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages.
4. We promote access to communication resources and opportunities as necessary to fulfill human potential and contribute to the well-being of families, communities, and society.
5. We promote communication climates of caring and mutual understanding that respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators.
6. We condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intimidation, coercion, and violence, and through the expression of intolerance and hatred.
7. We are committed to the courageous expression of personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice.
8. We advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant choices while also respecting privacy and confidentiality.
9. We accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences for our own communication and expect the same of others.

Questions for Review and Reflection

SUMMARY

Public Speaking and Civic Engagement

1.1 Discuss what it means to be a “good citizen.”

- Democratic citizenship entails responsibilities as well as rights, including the responsibility to “get involved.”
  - For some, getting involved may mean supporting political candidates, while for others it may mean volunteering to help others or simply “speaking out” on the issues.
  - The engaged citizen strives to be well informed and thoughtful when speaking out on matters of public concern.

The Rhetorical Tradition and the Ethics of Speech

1.2 Explain how the rhetorical tradition relates to civic engagement.

- The tradition of scholarship and teaching in rhetoric emphasizes the knowledge and skills necessary for democratic citizenship.
  - Theories of rhetoric dating back to ancient Greece and Rome have emphasized the ethics of speech and the concept of civic virtue.
  - Rhetorical criticism teaches us to be citizen-critics—that is, to carefully evaluate the arguments and evidence we hear in speeches or in the mass media.
  - By studying the great speakers and speeches of the past, we can learn about American history and about the principles and traditions of democratic deliberation.
    - The ethical speaker pursues worthy goals, is honest and accountable, avoids plagiarism, and takes full responsibility for words spoken in public.

Deliberation and Demagoguery in the Twenty-first Century

1.3 Distinguish between ethical persuasion and demagoguery.

- Although the basic rules of ethical speech have not changed since ancient times, demagoguery has assumed new forms, and the ethical issues relating to speech have been complicated by technological and social change.
  - The ethical speaker deliberates “in good faith” and is well informed and fully prepared.
  - The ethical speaker avoids the techniques of the demagogue and never substitutes appeals to the emotions for sound, well-supported arguments.

The Responsible Citizen-Speaker

1.4 Discuss the legal and ethical obligations of the responsible citizen-speaker.

- The responsible citizen-speaker is committed to honesty, respects the diversity of his or her audience, and understands the legal and ethical constraints on free speech in a democratic society.
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND REFLECTION

Public Speaking and Civic Engagement

1. Discuss what it means to be a “good citizen.”

1.1 How is public speaking related to “civic engagement”? What does it mean to “get involved” as a citizen, and what sorts of involvement are most satisfying or effective?

1.2 Do you believe that Americans are really less politically engaged or community spirited than they were in the past? Can you think of ways that citizens have become more engaged in recent years?

1.3 On your campus, what activities, clubs, or other special opportunities invite students to participate in civic affairs? Can you think of at least three examples?

The Rhetorical Tradition and the Ethics of Speech

1.4 Explain how the rhetorical tradition relates to civic engagement.

1.2 How is the rhetorical tradition related to civic engagement or good citizenship? What kinds of knowledge and skills do we learn by studying rhetoric?

1.3 What are the most important ethical concerns surrounding public speaking in a democracy? What does it mean to speak “ethically”? How, if at all, have the ethical considerations in public speaking changed over time?

1.4 How would you define plagiarism, and how might we distinguish between deliberate and “accidental” plagiarism?

1.5 What ethical concerns, if any, are raised by the practice of ghostwriting? Is ghostwriting always unethical, or is it unethical only under certain circumstances? How might we distinguish ethical from unethical ghostwriting?

1.6 Deliberation and Demagoguery in the Twenty-first Century

1.3 Distinguish between ethical persuasion and demagoguery.

1.3 What does it mean to deliberate in “good faith”? Does deliberating in good faith mean being completely objective? Can you be passionate about your political views and still deliberate in good faith?

1.4 Define demagoguery. How does demagoguery relate to the use of emotional appeals? Is it always demagogic to appeal to your audience’s emotions? How, if at all, would you distinguish between ethical and unethical emotional appeals? Beyond emotional appeals, what other appeals or techniques in public speaking might be considered demagogic?

1.5 The Responsible Citizen-Speaker

1.4 Discuss the legal and ethical obligations of the responsible citizen-speaker.

1.4 What are the characteristics of the responsible citizen-speaker? What are some of the legal and ethical considerations relating to public speaking in a democracy?
The National Prayer Breakfast is an annual event in Washington, DC where prominent people—from Mother Teresa, to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, to the humanitarian rock star Bono—are invited to reflect on the role of religious faith in their life and work. Every president since Dwight Eisenhower has attended the event, and it now attracts some 3,500 participants from more than 100 countries. Hosted by The Fellowship Foundation, a group of conservative Christians within Congress, the event provoked controversy in 2010 after reports linked the sponsoring group to efforts to pass anti-gay legislation in Uganda. Ignoring calls to boycott the event, Clinton instead used the breakfast as an opportunity to denounce intolerance and violence in the name of religion and to go on record as strongly opposed to such discriminatory legislation.

Thank you. Thank you very much. I have to begin by saying I’m not Bono. (Laughter.) Those of you who were here when he was, I apologize beforehand. (Laughter.) But it is a great pleasure to be with you and to be here with President and Mrs. Obama, to be with Vice President Biden, with Chairman Mullen, with certainly our host today, my former colleagues and friends, Senators Isakson and Amy Klobuchar. And to be with so many distinguished guests and visitors who have come from all over our country and indeed from all over the world.

I have attended this prayer breakfast every year since 1993, and I have always found it to be a gathering that inspires and motivates me. Now today, our minds are still filled with the images of the tragedy of Haiti, where faith is being tested daily in food lines and makeshift hospitals, in tent cities where there are not only so many suffering people, but so many vanished dreams.

When I think about the horrible catastrophe that has struck Haiti, I am both saddened but also spurred. This is a moment that has already been embraced by people of faith from everywhere. I thank Prime Minister Zapatero for his country’s response and commitment. Because in the days since the earthquake, we have seen the world and the world’s faithful spring into action on behalf of those suffering. President Obama has put our country on the leading edge of making sure that we do all we can to help alleviate not only the immediate suffering, but to assist in the rebuilding and recovery. So many countries have answered the call, and so many churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples have brought their own people together. And even modern technology through Facebook and telethons and text messages and Twitter, there’s been an overwhelming global response. But, of course, there’s so much more to be done.

When I think about being here with all of you today, there are so many subjects to talk about. You’ve already heard, both in prayer and in scripture reading and in Prime Minister Zapatero’s remarks, a number of messages. But let me be both personal and speak from my unique perspective now as secretary of state. I’ve been here as a first lady. I’ve been here as a senator, and now I am here as a secretary of state. I have heard heartfelt descriptions of personal faith journeys. I’ve heard impassioned pleas for feeding the hungry and helping the poor, caring for the sick. I’ve heard speeches about promoting understanding among people of different faiths. I’ve met hundreds of visitors from countries across the globe. I’ve seen the
leaders of my own country come here amidst the crises of the time and, for at least a morning, put away political and ideological differences. And I’ve watched and I’ve listened to three presidents, each a man of faith, speak from their hearts, both sharing their own feelings about being in a position that has almost intolerably impossible burdens to bear, and appealing often, either explicitly or implicitly, for an end to the increasing smallness, irrelevancy, even meanness, of our own political culture. My own heart has been touched and occasionally pierced by the words I’ve heard, and often my spirit has been lifted by the musicians and the singers who have shared their gifts in praising the Lord with us. And during difficult and painful times, my faith has been strengthened by the personal connections that I have experienced with people who, by the calculus of politics, were on the opposite side of me on the basis of issues or partisanship.

After my very first prayer breakfast, a bipartisan group of women asked me to join them for lunch and told me that they were forming a prayer group. And these prayer partners prayed for me. They prayed for me during some very challenging times. They came to see me in the White House. They kept in touch with me and some still do today. And they gave me a handmade book with messages, quotes, and scripture, to sustain me. And of all the thousands of gifts that I received in the White House, I have a special affection for this one. Because in addition to the tangible gift of the book, it contained 12 intangible gifts, 12 gifts of discernment, peace, compassion, faith, fellowship, vision, forgiveness, grace, wisdom, love, joy, and courage. And I have had many occasions to pull out that book and to look at it and to try, Chairman Mullen, to figure out how to close the gap of what I am feeling and doing with what I know I should be feeling and doing. As a person of faith, it is a constant struggle, particularly in the political arena, to close that gap that each of us faces.

In February of 1994, the speaker here was Mother Teresa. She gave, as everyone who remembers that occasion will certainly recall, a strong address against abortion. And then she asked to see me. And I thought, “Oh, dear.” (Laughter.) And after the breakfast, we went behind that curtain and we sat on folding chairs, and I remember being struck by how small she was and how powerful her hands were, despite her size, and that she was wearing sandals in February in Washington. (Laughter.)

We began to talk, and she told me that she knew that we had a shared conviction about adoption being vastly better as a choice for unplanned or unwanted babies. And she asked me—or more properly, she directed me—to work with her to create a home for such babies here in Washington. I know that we often picture, as we’re growing up, God as a man with a white beard. But that day, I felt like I had been ordered, and that the message was coming not just through this diminutive woman but from someplace far beyond.

So I started to work. And it took a while because we had to cut through all the red tape. We had to get all the approvals. I thought it would be easier than it turned out to be. She proved herself to be the most relentless lobbyist I’ve ever encountered. (Laughter.) She could not get a job in your White House, Mr. President. (Laughter.) She never let up. She called me from India, she called me from Vietnam, she wrote me letters, and it was always: “When’s the house gonna open? How much more can be done quickly?”

Finally, the moment came: June, 1995, and the Mother Teresa Home for Infant Children opened. She flew in from Kolkata to attend the opening, and like a happy child, she gripped my
arm and led me around, looking at the bassinets and the pretty painted colors on the wall, and just beaming about what this meant for children and their futures.

A few years later, I attended her funeral in Kolkata, where I saw presidents and prime ministers, royalty and street beggars, pay her homage. And after the service, her successor, Sister Nirmala, the leader of the Missionaries of Charity, invited me to come to the Mother House. I was deeply touched. When I arrived, I realized I was one of only a very few outsiders. And I was directed into a whitewashed room where the casket had already arrived. And we stood around with the nuns, with the candles on the walls flickering, and prayed for this extraordinary woman. And then Sister Nirmala asked me to offer a prayer. I felt both inadequate and deeply honored, just as I do today. And in the tradition of prayer breakfast speakers, let me share a few matters that reflect how I came on my own faith journey, and how I think about the responsibilities that President Obama and his administration and our government face today.

As Amy said, I grew up in the Methodist Church. On both sides of my father’s family, the Rodhams and the Joneses, they came from mining towns. And they claimed, going back many years, to have actually been converted by John and Charles Wesley. And, of course, Methodists were methodical. It was a particularly good religion for me. (Laughter.) And part of it is a commitment to living out your faith. We believe that faith without works may not be dead, but it’s hard to discern from time to time.

And, of course, John Wesley had this simple rule which I carry around with me as I travel: Do all the good you can by all the means you can in all the ways you can in all the places you can at all the times you can to all the people you can, as long as ever you can. That’s a tall order. And, of course, one of the interpretive problems with it is, who defines good? What are we actually called to do, and how do we stay humble enough, obedient enough, to ask ourselves, am I really doing what I’m called to do?

It was a good rule to be raised by and it was certainly a good rule for my mother and father to discipline us by. And I think it’s a good rule to live by, with the appropriate dose of humility. Our world is an imperfect one filled with imperfect people, so we constantly struggle to meet our own spiritual goals. But John Wesley’s teachings, and the teachings of my church, particularly during my childhood and teenage years, gave me the impetus to believe that I did have a responsibility. It meant not sitting on the sidelines, but being in the arena. And it meant constantly working to try to fulfill the lessons that I absorbed as a child. It’s not easy. We’re here today because we’re all seekers, and we can all look around our own lives and the lives of those whom we know and see everyone falling so short.

And then, of course, as we look around the world, there are so many problems and challenges that people of faith are attempting to address or should be. We can recite those places where human beings are mired in the past—their hatreds, their differences—where governments refuse to speak to other governments, where the progress of entire nations is undermined because isolation and insularity seem less risky than cooperation and collaboration, where all too often it is religion that is the force that drives and sustains division rather than being the healing balm. These patterns persist despite the overwhelming evidence that more good will come from suspending old animosities and preconceptions from
engaging others in dialogue, from remembering the cardinal rules found in all of the world’s major religions.

Last October, I visited Belfast once again, 11 years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, a place where being a Protestant or a Catholic determined where you lived, often where you worked, whether you were a friend or an enemy, a threat or a target. Yet over time, as the body count grew, the bonds of common humanity became more powerful than the differences fueled by ancient wrongs. So bullets have been traded for ballots.

As we meet this morning, both communities are attempting to hammer out a final agreement on the yet unresolved issues between them. And they are discovering anew what the scripture urges us: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we don’t give up.” Even in places where God’s presence and promise seems fleeting and unfulfilled or completely absent, the power of one person’s faith and the determination to act can help lead a nation out of darkness.

Some of you may have seen the film Pray the Devil Back to Hell. It is the story of a Liberian woman who was tired of the conflict and the killing and the fear that had gripped her country for years. So she went to her church and she prayed for an end to the civil war. And she organized other women at her church, and then at other churches, then at the mosques. Soon thousands of women became a mass movement, rising up and praying for a peace, and working to bring it about that finally, finally ended the conflict.

And yet the devil must have left Liberia and taken up residence in Congo. When I was in the Democratic Republic of Congo this summer, the contrasts were so overwhelmingly tragic—a country the size of Western Europe, rich in minerals and natural resources, where 5.4 million people have been killed in the most deadly conflict since World War II, where 1,100 women and girls are raped every month, where the life expectancy is 46 and dropping, where poverty, starvation, and all of the ills that stalk the human race are in abundance.

When I traveled to Goma, I saw in a single day the best and the worst of humanity. I met with women who had been savaged and brutalized physically and emotionally, victims of gender and sexual-based violence in a place where law, custom, and even faith did little to protect them. But I also saw courageous women who, by faith, went back into the bush to find those who, like them, had been violently attacked. I saw the doctors and the nurses who were helping to heal the wounds, and I saw so many who were there because their faith led them to it.

As we look at the world today and we reflect on the overwhelming response of outpouring of generosity to what happened in Haiti, I’m reminded of the story of Elijah. After he goes to Mount Horeb, we read that he faced “a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence—a still small voice.” It was then that Elijah heard the voice of the Lord. It is often when we are only quiet enough to listen that we do as well. It’s something we can do at any time, without a disaster or a catastrophe provoking it. It shouldn’t take that.

Clinton demonstrates her command of biblical texts by relating the story of Elijah. She then expounds upon the ethical commands common to all religions: care for the poor and suffering, the Golden Rule, and love for one’s neighbors.
But the teachings of every religion call us to care for the poor, tell us to visit the orphans and widows, to be generous and charitable, to alleviate suffering. All religions have their version of the Golden Rule and direct us to love our neighbor and welcome the stranger and visit the prisoner. But how often in the midst of our own lives do we respond to that? All of these holy texts, all of this religious wisdom from these very different faiths act out of love.

In politics, we sometimes talk about message discipline—making sure everyone uses the same set of talking points. Well, whoever was in charge of message discipline on these issues for every religion certainly knew what they were doing. Regardless of our differences, we all got the same talking points and the same marching orders. So the charge is a personal one. Yet across the world, we see organized religion standing in the way of faith, perverting love, undermining that message.

Sometimes it’s easier to see that far away than here at home. But religion, cloaked in naked power lust, is used to justify horrific violence, attacks on homes, markets, schools, volleyball games, churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples. From Iraq to Pakistan and Afghanistan to Nigeria and the Middle East, religion is used a club to deny the human rights of girls and women, from the Gulf to Africa to Asia, and to discriminate, even advocating the execution of gays and lesbians. Religion is used to enshrine in law intolerance of free expression and peaceful protest. Iran is now detaining and executing people under a new crime—waging war against God. It seems to be a rather dramatic identity crisis.

So in the Obama administration, we are working to bridge religious divides. We’re taking on violations of human rights perpetrated “in the name of religion.” In the process, she indirectly criticizes the Fellowship Foundation for its alleged support of anti-gay legislation in Uganda.

Transitioning into her conclusion with another personal story, Clinton recalls her honeymoon and a subsequent trip to Haiti. This connects back to her introduction, where she first mentioned Haiti, and signals that she is about to conclude. It also reinforces her credibility as a Secretary of State who truly empathizes with the Haitians and is committed to helping them long after the news cameras leave. Invoking religious language and imagery, she concludes with a prayer, reinforcing her theme that we must bridge our religious and political differences if we hope to be a “greater force for good on behalf of all creation.”

Turning to the dark side of faith-based politics, Clinton laments how religion is sometimes used to justify oppression and violence. Speaking on behalf of the Obama administration, she pledges to fight against human rights abuses perpetrated “in the name of religion.” In the process, she indirectly criticizes the Fellowship Foundation for its alleged support of anti-gay legislation in Uganda.
that we should go somewhere and celebrate, take a honeymoon. And my late father said, “Well, that’s a great idea. We’ll come, too.” (Laughter.)

And indeed, Bill and I and my entire family—(laughter)—went to Acapulco. We had a great time, but it wasn’t exactly a honeymoon. So when we got back, Bill was talking to one of his friends who was then working in Haiti, and his friend said, “Well, why don’t you come see me? This is the most interesting country. Come and take some time.” So, indeed, we did. So we were there over the New Year’s holidays. And I remember visiting the cathedral in Port-au-Prince, in the midst, at that time, so much fear from the regime of the Duvaliers, and so much poverty, there was this cathedral that had stood there and served as a beacon of hope and faith.

After the earthquake, I was looking at some of our pictures from the disaster; and I saw the total destruction of the cathedral. It was just a heart-rending moment. And yet I also saw men and women helping one another, digging through the rubble, dancing and singing in the makeshift communities that they were building up. And I thought again that as the scripture reminds us, “Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed.”

As the memory of this crisis fades, as the news cameras move on to the next very dramatic incident, let us pray that we can sustain the force and the feeling that we find in our hearts and in our faith in the aftermath of such tragedies. Let us pray that we will all continue to be our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. Let us pray that amid our differences, we can continue to see the power of faith not only to make us whole as individuals, to provide personal salvation, but to make us a greater whole and a greater force for good on behalf of all creation.

So let us do all the good we can, by all the means we can, in all the ways we can, in all the places we can, to all the people we can, as long as ever we can.

God bless you. (Applause.)

Source: From Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Keynote Address at the 58th National Prayer Breakfast, February 4, 2010.” Published 2010 by U.S. Department of State.