

**Dissent and the Rhetoric of Reflection:
Barbara Lee's September 14, 2001, Speech**

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H.H. Cooper has broadly defined terrorism as “the intentional generation of massive fear by human beings for the purpose of securing and maintaining control over other human beings” (881). This fear-for-control strategy was manifest in the acts of September 11, 2001, resonating powerfully among citizens and legislators throughout the world. Since September 11, terrorist acts throughout the world have doubled, occurring in such places as Madrid, Kirkuk, Tunisia, Bali, Mombasa, Riyadh, Istanbul, Casablanca, Jakarta, Sharm el Sheikh, and London. In the United States, the Bush administration's initial response was a controlled military strike on the Taliban-run government of Afghanistan. In addition, the administration launched a wholesale military action against Iraq, toppling Saddam Hussein's dictatorial reign.

However, the last three years have shown a slow devolution from what was considered a swift, surgically successful military action to a drawn-out, bloody quagmire in which the US and its few coalition supporters are finding it less possible to maintain basic societal stability, much less the installation and promotion of democracy. In an assessment of American anti-terrorism policy, Mark Danner argues that the rise in international acts of terrorism found its genesis in the tone and the attitude of the American response to September 11. Around the world and increasingly in the United States, a growing concern over the US invasion of Iraq has initiated a much-needed debate about American foreign policy and its bearing upon war and peace and terrorism. The Bush administration has continually countered this criticism with calls for national unity and requests for other countries to aid in the Iraq mission.

In the early stages of conflict, John Murphy recognized the Bush administration's ability

to control the war's representation for the American people (607-32). Framing a coming struggle in apocalyptic terms, the Bush administration grounded the country's problems on important cultural touchstones of manifest destiny and national redemption. Indeed, war declaration rhetoric is a distinct area of presidential action and legitimation, usually recognized as one of the most important roles a US president can have (Campbell and Jamison; Ivie). This great request for war powers usually generates some opposition and dissent, however tepid. It is a cliché to state that dissent is a cornerstone of democracy and, more specifically, an essential element in the discussion of public issues. However, in this over-communicated and hyper-nationalized age, the case for full and contentious public deliberation on matters of war and peace, fully accepting a rhetoric of dissent, is absolutely essential. It calls for the application of the age-old notion of prudence to increasingly compressed and rushed public deliberation. Such a rhetorical act emerged from the heated discourse of the fall of 2001. The act was a speech by Democratic Congresswoman Barbara Lee.

Barbara Lee's September 14, 2001, speech on the floor of the US House of Representatives is remarkable as an example of what I call a "rhetoric of reflection." The only member to vote against giving President George W. Bush open-ended war-making authority against the agents involved in the September 11 attacks, Lee gave a speech that was unique and brave and controversial. Her vote entered her into a small club of Congressional war dissenters such as Jeannette Rankin from Montana, Wayne Morse of Oregon, and Ernest Gruening of Alaska (Samuel 33). The speech garnered significant criticism in the press. For example, conservative *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Debra Saunders compared Lee's vote to European and American appeasement prior to World War II and labeled Lee's action a throwback to the "peacenik talk" of the Vietnam War era (qtd. in Nichols 29). However, even in

the face of stringent criticism and public shock, some recognized the significance of Lee's act. Peter Carlson argued that, historical import and slander aside, Barbara Lee's vote and speech were wholly pragmatic and recognized that "we're grieving. We need to step back and think about this [military action] so that it doesn't spiral out of control. We have to make sure we don't make any mistakes" (C01).

The purpose of this essay will be to analyze Lee's speech rhetorically, from a perspective that Carl Burghardt identified as ethical criticism. Specifically, this essay will identify the "rhetoric of reflection" as a subset of a much larger (and older) area of prudential rhetoric. Drawing on the ideas of Edwin Black's "second persona" and Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's "audience addressed/audience invoked," this study examines the rhetorical means by which US Congresswoman Barbara Lee constructed a brief, prudential argument against granting the US president unlimited war powers. I will argue that the idea of a reflective rhetoric is both a surface level appeal and a deeper explication of a pragmatic public policy position.

Three important concepts drive this essay. The first is the idea of the constructed audience. This idea evolves from the writings of Black, and Ede and Lunsford. Black's notion of the "second persona" as a means to read and understand a world view is primary in this analysis. Black believes that the "implied auditor" of a discourse can determine the moral substance of that discourse. From this perspective, both the audience and its morality lie in the language of the speaker. Likewise, Ede and Lunsford's notion of "audience invoked" is "a construction of the writer, a created fiction ... The writer uses the semantic and syntactic resources of language to provide cues for the reader which help to define the role or roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text" (160). While both concepts posit a constructed audience, Black's idea is focused on the moral dimension of language use. Ede and Lunsford provide more

resources for the social dimension of the persona of the created auditor.

The second guiding concept of this paper is the idea of the reflective “no.” Ray Fabrizio, Edith Karas, and Ruth Menmuir identify four “voices” in what they call the “rhetoric of no.” Of these four voices (an impassioned no; a discursive no; a reflective no; and an ironic no), it is the “reflective no” that is most significant in our present political climate. As Fabrizio, Karas and Menmuir note, whereas “[t]he impassioned writer reaches out to the reader principally with his feeling[,] the discursive writer reaches out to the reader with his subject, trusting him to perceive its validity. But unlike both of these, the reflective writer reaches out to his reader only incidentally. His primary interest is in what his subject means to him” (249). The reflective writer or speaker is conversing with him- or herself. However, the authors note that the reflective dissenter is not unaware of the audience; rather, he or she is working out or thinking through the subject before an audience. A rhetor is “impelled to express himself even when he feels that what he is saying will cause no change in the world ... his real purpose is to give outward expression to his inner thoughts and feelings” (Fabrizio, Karas, and Menmuir 249-50). This form of dissent rhetoric is highly personal and “intimate,” with the author “articulating his subject for its own sake” (250).

The third concept is Edwin Black’s “prism” metaphor. Using the prism to analyze Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Black noted that “its aspects reflect back and forth on one another in such radiant multiplicity that, diamond-like, its fires are somehow both protean and integral” (22). Following Black’s approach, the various reflections of style, argument, and ethical stance of the speech will be examined to determine how these many “facets” contribute to the reflective, prudential nature of Barbara Lee’s speech.

Context

Vietnam Syndrome

Caught up in the anger and emotion following September 11, few would have thought that the spectre of Vietnam, and what some had called the Vietnam Syndrome (Karnow; Simons), would reappear in public discourse and policy; yet given the many events of the last twenty-nine years, this spectre echoes in the words of US Representative Barbara Lee. Michael Klare defines the Vietnam Syndrome as “the American public’s disinclination to engage in further military interventions in internal Third World conflicts” (1). This disinclination is, as Klare states, “a prudent and beneficial alternative to the interventionist policies which led us into Vietnam in the first place” (1).

As Geoff Simons points out, various American administrations have pushed an interventionist agenda for some years. These impulses were given voice at the time of the Persian Gulf War, captured in President George H. W. Bush’s statement that “we’ve finally licked the Vietnam Syndrome” (Simons 21). Within this statement lies the belief that the unwillingness of the American people to be the world’s police had subsided, and that the United States was more believable in its claims to use all the means necessary to support its international policy initiatives. Lloyd Gardner goes further, observing in the Johnson administration’s contribution to the syndrome that

Reducing the history of the Vietnam War to the abstractions ‘credibility’ and ‘reliability’ made it possible to deal with that history on terms established by the outcome of the Gulf War. But the end of the cold war raised more profound questions about how to interpret the Vietnam experience and the meaning of the ‘syndrome,’ questions others besides historians must ponder. (543)

The central question raised by Lee’s speech is how history and collective memory shape war policy. The literature on public memory and US involvement in Vietnam is growing in rhetorical

studies. Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci's study of the Vietnam War Memorial, Hasian and Frank's analysis of the Goldhagen debates, and Dionisopoulos and Goldzwig's analysis of Vietnam revisionist rhetoric have all explored the link between the rhetorical function of remembering and history. The link between rhetoric, policy, and memory is profound in the connection a people find between an identity and shared history. The meaning-making function of the Vietnam experience is still valid and exists as a prudent reminder or warning not to make rash decisions about policy.

Dissent and Public Memory

John Murphy noted the difficulty that congressional dissenters had when attempting to argue against a presidential proposal for military action. Through an analysis of the anti-war discourse of Robert F. Kennedy and Sam Nunn, Murphy concludes that a congressional dissenter must use both deliberative and epideictic rhetorical strategies to combat a president's calls for war. The dissenter is hard pressed to challenge a president's authority to make epideictic appeals for the morality and appropriateness of war. Murphy finds that "the war rhetoric of the presidency has become an almost insurmountable obstacle to successful dissent" (76). Kendall Phillips argues that the role dissent plays in society is stunted by the dominance of consensus within public argument. This limits the individual rhetor's ability to use rhetoric to create resistance.

The anti-interventionist position dissenters usually take is located on the periphery of public memory. More than history, it represents the "intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions" (Bodnar 14). It speaks to the official interpretations and perspectives on war while simultaneously voicing the specialized interests that are part of the "official," national whole, but that represent more diverse values. As John Bodnar observes, public memory is a

broad continuum of beliefs about a society's past that help it understand its past, present, and future. More specifically, "It is fashioned ideally in a public sphere in which various parts of the social structure exchange views. The major focus of this communicative and cognitive process is not the past, however, but serious matters in the present such as the nature of power and the question of loyalty to both official and vernacular cultures" (14-15).

Public memory, particularly when it is used to shape public discussion, can also function as a constraint on dissenting views. Kathleen German finds that, to promote unity and public support for the Persian Gulf War in 1991, President Bush had to transcend the public memory of the Vietnam War. She argues that directive language served the purpose of framing and providing an overarching justification for going to war against Iraq in 1991. Carolyn Marvin claims that patriotism in the United States is a complete religion. In Marvin's conception, the nationalistic impulse in America has become sanctified and functions as a ritualistic set of memories to support. This impulse served as a strong justification for the Persian Gulf War and an equally strong one for current military efforts in Afghanistan and Iran. This syndrome is inherently connected to the first Persian Gulf conflict in 1990, under then-President George H.W. Bush. Jerry Lembecke asserts that a psychological, yet mythic, connection exists between the Vietnam War veteran's disgraced return to the US and attitudes toward veterans of more recent military conflicts. He believes this served as a rationale for quelling dissent during the Persian Gulf War. Indeed, Stanley Karnow cites George H.W. Bush's assertion that "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all" as an attempt to change the collective memory of the country. Karnow's analysis notes that "his [Bush's] deployment [of troops] had been preceded by sharp divisions in both Congress and in American public opinion," and that "the country was sober and uncertain as widespread doubt and anxiety tempered the manifestations of

patriotism” (15).

Analysis of the Text

Arguments in the speech

The introduction to Lee’s September 14 speech announces the sympathy she personally felt for those slain in the events of September 11, acknowledging that “only the most foolish or the most callous would not understand the grief that has gripped the American people and millions across the world” (par. 1). She mentions that the events of September 11 had left her to “rely on my moral compass, my conscience, and my God for direction,” and acknowledges that “our deepest fears haunt us now.” The significant thing about the introduction is that, while it acknowledges the fear, anger, and sadness of the events, it includes (as do other parts of the speech) a pivot phrase that asserts Lee’s main idea: “Yet I am convinced that military action will not prevent further acts of international terrorism against the United States” (par. 2). Based upon the three foundations of morality, individual conscience, and spirit, she asserts an anti-interventionist thesis.

Lee recognizes that the use of force resolution will pass, pointing out “we all know that the President can wage a war even without this resolution” (par. 4). She humbly urges the “use of restraint,” asking her fellow members of the House to think through their actions. With this statement, she constructs the first part of her argument—that an analysis of the long-term ends is essential to all the US does in the arena of foreign policy, particularly if that policy would engage war-making activity. This statement also serves as evidence of Lee’s reflective rhetoric. Much as Fabrizio, Karas, and Menmuir have argued, Lee “thinks through” her argument for her audience. However, this public demonstration serves as a counterpoint to those supporting the use of force resolution being debated. It is at this point of her speech that she approaches the heart of her

argument.

Lee makes four claims that serve as the main points of the message. First, she claims, “we are not dealing with a conventional war. We cannot respond in a conventional manner.” The many variables involved include “national security, foreign policy, public safety, intelligence gathering, economics, and murder” (par. 5). Second, she states, “we must not rush to judgment.” In the heat of emotion, she warns, the US may forget common decency and humanity in its acts and run the “risk that women, children, and other non-combatants will be caught in the crossfire” (par. 6). Third, she asserts that the US cannot “let [its] justified anger over these outrageous acts by vicious murderers inflame prejudice against all Arab-Americans, Muslims, Southeast Asians, or any other people because of their race, religion, or ethnicity” (par.7). Fourth, she warns that the US must “be careful not to embark on an open-ended war with neither an exit strategy nor a focused target. We cannot repeat past mistakes” (par. 8). Again, this last statement in this section of the speech serves as a pivot to move the listener/reader into a broader rationale, the heart of the anti-interventionist argument she is asserting. The heart of this argument is linked to public memory, the two tied together to prompt policy. This is clear when Lee remembers 1964, when “Congress gave President Lyndon Johnson the power to ‘take all necessary measures’ to repel attacks and prevent further aggression. In so doing, this House abandoned its own constitutional responsibilities and launched our country into years of undeclared war in Vietnam” (par. 9). Lee recognizes the problems of granting authority a blank cheque to take whatever action it deems necessary. She draws upon a touchstone of the Vietnam Syndrome reflected in both interventionist (“take all necessary measures”) and anti-interventionist (“urge the use of restraint”) perspectives. As Geoff Simons has suggested, the different world views “compete” for a dominant interpretation, where one view asserts the limitations and ethics of military power,

while the other considers the “suitability” of military power used prudently. Simons finds that “the Vietnam experience, like the Bible, could be read any way the readers chose” (25). He states that both visions have informed American foreign policy and that they both comprise the lessons America has learned from its experience in Vietnam.

Lee cites Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon, who was one of two US senators to vote against the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964. Quoting Morse, she asserts, “I believe that history will record that we have made a grave mistake in subverting and circumventing the Constitution of the United States.... I believe that within the next century, future generations will look with dismay and great disappointment upon a Congress which is now about to make such a historic mistake” (par. 10). Her use of Morse’s words serves as a touchstone to the anti-interventionist perspective on sanctioning open-ended conflict. She underlines the point by stating that “Senator Morse was correct, and I fear we make the same mistake today. And I fear the consequences” (par. 11), taking a reflective stance toward the issue of war and the use of force. Her final call for reflection is found in her concluding statement. Again, in pain, Lee comes “to grips” with her controversial vote through the “very painful yet beautiful memorial service today at the National Cathedral.” Through the service, she claims to have found the courage to stand on principle, to stand for a moment of silence, of reflection. The final line of the speech proclaims her moral purpose. Quoting the “member of the clergy” speaking at the memorial service, Lee hopes that, “as we act, let us not become the evil that we deplore” (par. 12). This statement would briefly become a slogan for those opposing any rash, war-like solutions to the multi-faceted problem that was September 11. It would also be a lonely, muted, disregarded statement.

Stylistic Characteristics

The style of Lee's speech is significant on two levels. On a macro-level (the speech as a whole), it exhibits characteristics of both a deliberative and a prophetic style. It is deliberative in the sense that its aim is "to win assent of a deliberative assembly (an election crowd, a legislature, a jury) to a position," which the speaker must articulate by "appealing mainly to the political, moral, or religious predispositions of his [or her] audience" (Brown 12). By contrast, prophecy is "an oracular piece of instruction or warning, bold and dogmatic, often highly diffuse, sometimes seemingly addressed to one or a very few persons whose near presence is acknowledged by more or less use of the second personal pronoun" (13). Lee's speech is a synthesis of these two styles: it is aimed at a congressional and national audience to persuade them on an important point of policy, while articulating acknowledged personal beliefs and values that invite a grave warning of tragedy. She concludes on both a prophetic and a deliberative note, juxtaposing the "fear" of making the same mistake the US made in Vietnam with the hope that the country does not become "evil" in order to vanquish evil.

On a sentence-level analysis of the speech, Lee expresses her four main ideas negatively, in a Burkean, hortatory fashion. These four tenets serve as her alternative approach to a war policy. In a tightly parallel structure, her counter-policy could be stated as follows

- 1) A complex exigency demands a complex response.
- 2) We must deliberate fully and carefully.
- 3) We must be fair and open to other races, religions, and ethnicities in what we do.
- 4) We must define an end point to hostility and have "a focused target."

A failure to recognize any of these points could result in the repetition of "past mistakes."

Lee phrases these statements in a style that James Jasinski (citing Lanham) identifies as a periodic style. To understand this style, one must understand the tension between running and

periodic styles and the centrality of structure and reflection in sentence composition. One style (running) values an open-ended, “stream of consciousness” quality to word placement, while the other (periodic) values organized, reflective use of language. According to Jasinski, periodic style “looks like the way in which a person’s mind is after the individual has sorted through the complexity of his or her experience” (540), exhibiting a mind that has reflected upon and structured its ideas accordingly. Lee’s speech exhibits these qualities of reflection and organization through a personal, ethical stance.

Lee reflects upon the national experience and, through her conscience, asserts that there “must be some of us who say, let’s step back for a moment and think through the implications of our actions today—let us more fully understand its consequences” (par. 4). From this stance of ethical reflection, Lee arrives at a personal epistemology in which she knows that this is an unconventional conflict and that America “cannot respond in a conventional manner” (par. 5); she knows that the country “must not rush to judgment” as “too many innocent people have already died” (par. 6); she knows that Americans cannot allow “justified anger over these outrageous acts by vicious murderers inflame prejudice against all Arab-Americans, Muslims, Southeast Asians, or any other people because of their race, religion, or ethnicity” (par. 7); and she knows that Americans must not enter into “open-ended” conflict or risk making the mistake of another Vietnam. Each sentence here prefaces a clear assessment of the situation. When combined, they lead the listener/reader to the only supporting material she introduces into the speech: the historical situation of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and Senator Wayne Morse’s prophetic words. Here she leads with the historical situation and Morse’s prophetic declaration. She concludes her thought with her fearful reflection on the consequences of the actions the US Congress was about to embark upon.

Interpretation of the Text

While Fabrizio's concept of reflective dissent is a helpful way to characterize Lee's dissent, the preceding argument and style analysis suggest an underlying mode of thought in play with this form of reflective dissent. The ancient ideal of "prudence" is a concept that bears significantly upon contemporary deliberation. Robert Hariman, relying on an Aristotelian definition of the term, defines prudence thus: "Neither scientific nor artistic nor contemplative, it is the capacity for reasoning about particular cases of contingent affairs with regard to what is good or bad. This reasoning occurs through deliberation and is completed in action" (viii). Jasinski notes that prudence is something that, like rhetoric itself, is both practical and not systematic. It serves to "mandate careful reflection on the context of action and the relevant norms of propriety and appropriateness. But the concept of prudence is frustrating because it resists the systemization and precise explication that constitute our modern standards of intellectual rigor" (468). More often than not it contends with what Martha Nussbaum identifies as the Aristotelian "movement back and forth between particular and general" (316). Prudential discourse requires the measuring of the specific case in relation to the general principle.

Barbara Lee's speech functions as a prudential critique of imminent legislative action to be taken by the US House of Representatives. The specific situation of the use of force resolution was balanced against the general principle of anti-interventionism. As Kirt Wilson observes, though, prudence is a contested concept, functioning as "a contested space that political actors struggle to control through discourse ... a coveted space of legitimacy that [speakers] attempt to occupy by discursively controlling its meaning" (133). In Lee's speech, it is the principle of reflective restraint, evolving from the public memory of US involvement in Vietnam (general principle), that frames Lee's message of dissent. Lee's prudential stance recognizes the

fragmented nature of conflict and the fragmented nature of terrorism (specific case). In her speech, she creates an auditor who is, above all things, rational about not supporting a use of force resolution. The invoked audience, while prodded by its fears, is deliberate about its inability to control the situation. Lee readily admits to a situation that is so fluid that it could be beyond control in many instances.

On the level of ideology and foreign policy, Geoff Simons claims that “Vietnam forced the United States to refine its pursuit of global hegemony, with ethical factors continuing to weigh nothing in the scale of realpolitik calculation” (xv). Thus, the control sought by anti-intervention advocates can be seen as little more than constraints or parameters by which the US can further seek global hegemony. Barbara Lee’s prudential discourse functions within a political situation that is fragmented, with varying notions on what to do about terrorism. The contested meanings of the Vietnam War bear on the meanings of current military actions. The noteworthy element in Lee’s reflective address lies in how it attempts to infuse US policy (whether it is hegemonic or not) with some ethical constraints that are grounded in pragmatic, deliberative action. The speaker is “just facing the facts,” no matter how fragmented and diffuse they may appear.

Conclusion

Barbara Lee’s speech almost seems prophetic, given the current state of American foreign policy in the Middle East. It is most important as a touchstone for public memories of the Vietnam War and its relation to current American military activities. Lee creates a reflective, deliberative audience—an audience she suspected was not readily and actually there with her at the moment of her speech. The significance of Lee’s speech, as rhetoric of dissent, lies in its ability to fight

the public's ability to forget. As Brian Snee has illustrated, speakers, in addition to finding ways to enhance a particular kind of public memory, also have strategies to "discourage public debate and diminish public memory." This "amnesic" rhetoric is used to "forestall the communication and commemoration that foster collective contemplation" (189).

This study concludes that a notion of "reflection" serves as a specific form of rhetorical prudence. While not universal, rhetoric of reflection can create a space that enables an audience to contemplate and weigh the collective principles of a society against the immediacy and particulars of a given political situation. Within recurring situations of war and peace, such a stance is of grave importance and enables a political community to understand the fear-for-control appeal at the heart of terrorism. The preceding prismatic analysis and interpretation of Lee's text reveals a highly emotional, non-deliberative setting. Barbara Lee sought to fight the impulse to sanction the retaliation against the enemies of the United States and leave space for her colleagues and the American public to contemplate the new world they would encounter after September 11, 2001.

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