

The Discourse of Negation and the Ironies of Common Culture

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Alasdair MacIntyre has famously observed that in our historical moment all moral arguments are interminable. It is not just that the wide range of debates seems to have unlimited endurance and runs on without end but that there seems to be no rational way of actually achieving moral agreement. Each argument arrives at conclusions through logically valid reasoning, but at the source of these arguments are rival premises, conceptual starting points that imply competing normative claims or evaluations. As MacIntyre puts it, “From our rival conclusions we can argue back to our rival premises; but when we do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion.”¹ Premises can never be rationally established and, therefore, it is

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press) 6–9.

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impossible to evaluate rationally the claims of one position against another. The incommensurability of moral arguments necessarily means that they are interminable.

MacIntyre's observation applies not only to abstract philosophy but also to the institutional dynamics of contemporary political culture. This is reflected in sociological treatments of the "culture wars," the normative conflicts articulated by competing cultural elites through a discourse embedded within antagonistic advocacy institutions. Whether abortion, cloning, medically assisted suicide, sexuality, gender inequality, child-rearing, education, church/state issues, the avant-garde arts, or the moral standing of popular culture, the polarization of cultural elites and the institutions they represent is, in one sense, merely a social and historical reflection of the incommensurate positions in moral philosophy.

It is mistaken, however, to have the impression that there is little or no common culture at all amidst these seemingly pervasive divisions. My contention is that a common culture has both congealed underneath and permeated the range of cultural divisions in contemporary America in ways that are ironic and unexpected. It is not just in the attitudes of ordinary people but among the very institutions that drive cultural conflict in the first place.

Identity and Negation

Identity is crystallized most clearly in relation to its opposite. Durkheim famously elaborated this observation into a theory of social control. His argument, in brief, was that because collective identity is always formed (and maintained) in contrast, if not in opposition, to something or someone or some group, during times of social change and cultural uncertainty (when identities are themselves in flux), communities or groups will identify and may even exaggerate or fabricate a threat to their existence or well being. In the act of opposing an adversary—real, exaggerated, or manufactured—the community or group asserts its moral authority anew and reestablishes its collective identity. Social groups uncertain or forgetful about who they are, are "reminded" of their identity by their participation in acts of collective opposition to an external threat. In this way, not only is the community drawn together and united as a collectivity, it is reminded of its heritage and its place within the larger world. The "latent functionality," as sociologists say, of standing together against an adversary from the outside is the ritual reaffirmation of the community's identity in the face of what may be a far greater adversary, its own internal moral disintegration.

Thus, when threatened by change, religious communities will punish "agents of evil," as the Catholic hierarchy persecuted heretics and Jews during the Spanish Inquisition in the sixteenth century. The state will punish "subversives" as the Nazis did Jews in the 1930s and 1940s and as Mao and his "Gang of Four" did intellectuals and so-called "capitalist-roaders" during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.

This phenomenon is not strange to American experience either. As Kai Erikson has shown, the Puritan social order of seventeenth-century New England was under tremendous pressures to change. The Salem Puritans' exaggeration (if not fabrication) of the menace of witchcraft resulted in a collective opposition that shored up the community's identity and reestablished its moral authority (even if only temporarily). Likewise, after World War II, Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee exaggerated the menace of communist infiltration of American institutions, resulting in a purge of alleged communists and their fellow travelers from the entertainment and scientific industries as well as from government.

It is important to stress that willful intention is not really a factor in a community's treatment of its adversaries. There is usually no cabal consciously and cynically conspiring to induce fearful illusions. One rarely finds a calculated manipulation of public sentiment by an elite. Rather this development is "systemic," part of a community's natural collective response to a perceived threat to its security and stability. And so it is that negation is integral to clarity and significance; in this case, the formation and maintenance of strong identities.

Historical Observations

There are at least three historical developments that have made the present moment unusual.

The first development is an outgrowth of 1989. For most of the last half-century, the Cold War oppositions of state socialism and democratic capitalism defined the dominant opposition of global affairs. Collective identity and purpose in both the Soviet Union and the United States were refined through this antagonism. Though there were exceptions, domestic politics in America by and large operated within that framework, not against it or outside of it. The Cold War always loomed in the background, always contextualized and minimized the significance of domestic differences, found, for example, in race, economics, and the like. With the end of the Cold War, external enemies to the United States vanished, and the defining dialectics of dualism turned inward, accentuating polarities that had been latent for at least two centuries but were manifested in major institutional structures only from the mid-1960s on. This culture war between traditionalists and progressives seemed to manifest itself in divisions on every domestic issue imaginable.

The divisions have been extensive and intensive and affect not only the society as a whole, but competing groups within society. They play out not only in the rarefied debates of elites over public policy, but in the identity and functioning of basic social institutions, and even in the common frameworks of knowledge and moral understanding. In part and in the whole, these divisions represent a social order in flux, one in which everything seems to be up for grabs.

It is only cumulatively that one sees American society as a whole groping for some kind of coherence. Endless numbers of groups within the U.S.—relatively distinct racial, ethnic, social, moral, and political communities—struggle to maintain *their own* cohesiveness and at the same time realize their own social and political agendas. Here one sees a second critical factor in this polarization—the extraordinary proliferation of special interest groups that represent these fragmented and fragmenting interests.

A third historical factor at play is the new technologies that give these dynamics energy and force. A professional class of media consultants has perfected the use of new communications technologies such as direct mail, the radio talk show, television advertising, and the internet as new delivery systems for public rhetoric. What is especially important about these technologies here is the absence of accountability between the speaker and the words he or she speaks. Indeed, the distance between the speaker and the words spoken is a defining feature of the new technologies of public communication. In talk radio, the host speaks into a microphone to an invisible audience; those listening are typically alone at home or in the car. Talk radio also provides a unique protection for the less educated American—they “need not fear the exposure that video creates. Anonymity reduces the reluctance of the uneducated.”² In direct mail, the person receiving the mail has no access to those who actually wrote the mail. Even those sending the mail distance themselves from their words. Political direct mail consultants advise their clients:

Keep your candidate out of the piece. No matter how well you organize your message with photos and type, there is always the chance that the voter will read the piece in a way that you didn't intend. By putting your candidate in the piece, you may risk associating him or her with the kind of message that you intend for your opponent. Moreover, it's always best to have someone else deliver the negative message, even if it's a third-person, unsigned piece. Keep your candidate at a dignified distance.³

Newspaper editorials and certain television programming can allow for some exchange, but the technical constraints of these media (space for newspapers and time for television programs) seriously limit the depth of debate. Thus, though television talk shows have a live audience, their success or failure has nothing to do with the reaction of the live audience, but everything to do with the response of an audience no one can see or interact with. The same can be said for televised political debates. Not only are they artificial, but the audience has little or no say in shaping their format. The internet as well allows the free exchange of opinion, but with its anonymity there is little or no accountability.

² Murray B. Levin, *Talk Radio and the American Dream* (Lexington: Lexington, 1987) xiii.

³ Richard Schlackman and Jamie “Buster” Douglas, “Attack Mail: The Silent Killer,” *Campaigns and Elections* 16.7 (July 1995): 67.

With few legal restrictions and almost no structures of social or moral accountability, almost anything may be said. The dominant voices and platforms through which public discourse presently takes place are notably conducive to reaching mass audiences but not at all conducive to substantive deliberation. Rather, discourse tends toward the sensational and the extreme.

To be sure, there is an intrinsic tendency in all social life toward dualism, and the polarities at play in our present historical moment have been present at least since the Enlightenment. Yet, the peculiar nature of contemporary public discourse reflects the distinctive social and historical circumstances of our time. Public discourse has become, in large part, a discourse of negation—in which every group or interest aims to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of opponents. By over-interpreting the nature, size, and political power of their opposition, each conflicting group attempts to reaffirm its own identity. These circumstances play into what has been called “the politics of identity,” in which identity becomes the sole ground of politics and politics becomes the primary validation of identity. The logic, as Jean Bethke Elshtain has noted, is simple: “all who disagree with my politics are the enemies of my identity.”⁴ Identity politics is sustained by this discourse of negation.

In sum, the fragmentation of the social world has multiplied competing interests. Those interests are pursued and reinforced by discursive practices oriented toward discrediting adversaries. The technological nature of these practices holds no inherent moderating capability. The net effect is a public discourse defined by the art and trade of negation. It is in this way that a culture of negation has become pervasive, and in many respects, even ubiquitous.

Negation as Discursive Practice

Clearly the use of rhetoric, even negative rhetoric, is as old as the ancients. The techniques of negation remain both various and commonplace: simple name-calling and insult, ridicule, assigning guilt by association, caricature, innuendo, accusation, and denunciation—even snobbish disdain. What has not been commonplace, however, is the increasing intentionality behind the trade.

Irrespective of party, position, conviction, or public ends are a body of explicit guidelines, techniques, and procedures shared by all of the technicians of the trade that direct these practices toward the greatest effect. In direct mail, for example, there are “key

⁴ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic, 1995) 53.

points to keep in mind when going negative through the mail,” such as: hire a “professional opposition research firm,” “keep it graphic,” “be visual,” “don’t be shrill,” “keep it smart and factual—without sacrificing the emotion,” “keep your candidate out of the piece,” “use the right colors,” “go the distance,” and “remember: you’re playing to win.”⁵

As one Democratic media consultant observes, “the most important changes in negative advertising have come in opposition research and polling... With more information available, earlier, it is commonplace these days to pre-test the potential arguments against an opponent to find out which work best with the voters.”⁶ Through both focus groups and polls, political consultants representing both conservative and progressive interests have made a multi-million dollar industry of testing words and phrases in public consciousness.

Consider, for example, the GOP Action Committee (or GOPAC) list of “politically effective terms” detailed in its pamphlet, “Language: A Key Mechanism of Control.”⁷ Sent to all Republican candidates, it states:

The list is prepared so that you might have a directory of words to use in writing literature and letters, in preparing speeches, and in producing material for the electronic media. The words and phrases are powerful. Read them. Memorize as many as possible. And remember that, like any tool, these words will not help if they are not used.

The pamphlet lists several “Optimistic Positive Governing Words,” which candidates are to use to “to help define your campaign and your vision of public service. These words can help give extra power to your message.” The list includes:

common sense	freedom	peace	reform
courage	hard work	pioneer	rights
crusade	help	precious	strength
dream	liberty	pride	truth
duty	light	principle(d)	vision
empower(ment)	moral	pristine	workfare
fair	movement	pro-environment	
family	passionate	prosperity	

⁵ Schlackman and Douglas 26, 62, 67.

⁶ David Doak, “Attack Ads: Rethinking the Rules,” *Campaigns and Elections* 16.7 (July 1995): 21.

⁷ “Accentuate the Negative,” *Harper’s* (November 1990): 17–8.

It also lists several “Contrasting Words” candidates are to use in describing their opponents:

anti-child	deeper	liberal	shallow
anti-flag	destroy	lie	shame
betray	devour	machine	sick
bizarre	disgrace	obsolete	status quo
cheat	excuses	pathetic	steal
collapse	failure	radical	taxes
corruption	greed	red tape	they/them
crisis	hypocrisy	self-serving	traitors
decay	incompetent	sensationalists	welfare

Importantly, all of these words stand without any concrete point of reference. Disembodied, they neither make a specific argument nor convey particular information. They are abstractions derived from highly refined market practices that can be applied to the particular in ways that play to and reproduce general moods and perceptions in the larger culture.

Integral to these discursive practices are images and messages that are emotionally evocative. “Remember,” one Washington television consultant states, “most good negative information has an emotional component.”⁸ “To make your negative mail three-dimensional,” advises a direct mail consultant, “keep it on message; keep it clear, simple, and concise; and keep it inherently emotional.”⁹ “Excite the emotions. It’s much easier and more effective to persuade with the heart than with the head alone. Fear, anger, envy, indignation, and shame are powerful emotions in the political arena.”¹⁰ Toward this end, speech acts of every sort become visual. “Use the ‘visual rhetoric’ of pictures and graphics and soft sell the copy,” declares one consultant.

Showing people is often more effective than simply *telling* them.... People are inundated with information.... You have to break through with powerful, emotional images. Associate your opponent with these images [of failure, incompetence, and weakness of character], and you’ll begin to make [them] an unfavorable symbol as well.¹¹

Usually these images and utterances are not technically untrue or even unjustifiable, but they stretch, bloat, or conflate realities to evoke a visceral response from the listener or viewer. To describe this, as most ordinary citizens do, as “mudslinging” suggests an

⁸ Doak 21.

⁹ Schlackman and Douglas 26.

¹⁰ Schlackman and Douglas 26.

¹¹ Schlackman and Douglas 26, 62.

unplanned and improvised quality to these discursive practices. Habermas is closer to the truth in his concept of “systematically distorted communication,”¹² for the interests and technologies are, indeed, systemic and totalizing. It is impossible to imagine a political campaign or a public referendum moving forward outside of this structure.

The professional class of experts is quick to justify the methods and practices of their trade. Using a lesson they offer their clients, they call the term “negative political advertisement” a “misnomer,” and describe the ads as a true contribution to the political process.¹³ Such ads, they claim, are more accurately described as “competitive, comparative and compelling ads.” Their “winning legacy” is due to the fact that they “open up the process: they draw contrasts between competing candidates—or dueling interests on ballot issues; and they provide voters with the mother’s milk of political decision-making: information...information that [is] relevant, timely, and well-researched.”¹⁴ As another consultant put it, “most negative spots actually advance the knowledge level of the voter and therefore can be a positive force.”¹⁵ “Take away negative campaigning and you take away half the information voters need to make an informed choice.”¹⁶ Polarization becomes a (very well-paid) public service.

While negative advertising can sometimes backfire, the techniques of negation in public discourse are enormously effective. One consultant suggests: “The reason for so many negative commercials is easy to think of. Conflict—people buy into it. There never is a race in beating people with kindness. You never see the week’s kindness award.... If you throw enough mud on your candidate you look cleaner.”¹⁷ Another publicity coordinator said that negativism is essential to the modern campaign. “Clean campaigns,” he said, “are nice, but they lose. If you don’t play by the *rules of the game*, you lose.”¹⁸ Some point to the high voter turnout in the 1994 mid-term election, in comparison to previous years, to suggest that voters were not turned off by the negative campaigning and that negative advertising can be useful to “propel an angry electorate into the voting booth to vote no.”¹⁹

¹² See Jürgen Habermas, “On Systematically Distorted Communication,” *Inquiry* 13.3 (Autumn 1970): 205–18; “Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence,” *Inquiry* 13.4 (Winter 1970): 360–75; and “The Public Sphere,” *New German Critique* 1.3 (Fall 1974): 49–55.

¹³ Adam Goodman, “Producing TV: A Survival Game,” *Campaigns and Elections* 16.7 (July 1995): 22–4.

¹⁴ Goodman 22–4.

¹⁵ Doak 21.

¹⁶ Schlackman and Douglas 25.

¹⁷ Timothy Lee, telephone interview by Danielle McCoy, November 16, 1995.

¹⁸ Chris Ashby, media consultant to Ed Robb’s Virginia state senate reelection bid, personal interview by Azish Filabi, November 3, 1995.

¹⁹ Don Sipple, a Republican consultant who has handled many races, including Governor Pete Wilson’s California election, quoted in Robin Toner, “Bitter Tone of the ‘94 Campaigns Elicits Worry on Public Debate,” *The New York Times* (6 November 1994): A1⁺.

As the guidelines, techniques, and procedures are the same, so too is the effect: the portrayal of opponents as outside the bounds of conventional public opinion and social practice, with the corresponding implication that the speaker is “mainstream,” “centrist,” or “moderate,” and therefore trustworthy, balanced, reliable, patriotic.²⁰ What is at stake, of course, is legitimacy. The objective is to create a sphere of “common-sense” discourse that rules out one’s opponents’ claims from the start. To define opponents as extreme obviates the need to take them and their claims seriously. The effect is to make actual public engagement among opponents unnecessary, if not immoral. By contrast, to engage one’s opponents is to legitimate their claims by treating them as intelligible and even reasonable. The discourse of negation circumvents that democratic nicety.

The Case of Gay Rights in Colorado

The predilection toward mutual negation in public discourse is illustrated well in the controversy surrounding gay rights. Next to the controversy over abortion, there are few disputes that are more caustic and embittered. At stake, of course, are the rules for sexual intimacy—the codes which define the persons with whom, the time when, and the conditions under which sexual intimacy is acceptable. How a society enacts these rules implies a judgment upon what “nature” will allow or should allow, and therefore what is to be considered “normal.” The contest to define these rules, then, takes us to the heart of what a social order defines as good, right, and just.

The tactical ingenuity involved in the discourse surrounding this larger controversy was in full display in practical advice manuals that opposing sides designed for their constituencies in 1992 in the battle over Colorado’s Amendment Two. One manual was entitled, *Fight the Right*, and was published by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force; the other was entitled, *The Colorado Model: A Practical Workbook*, and was published by Colorado for Family Values, the organization that spearheaded the anti-gay rights measure in Colorado. Recognizing the long-term and intransigent character of the conflict they were in, both groups created manuals and distributed them nationally as resource guides to equip local citizen groups to successfully engage their opponents wherever grassroots conflict might take place.

It goes without saying that their ends were opposed. The contrast here is visible in the distinct meanings each side gave to the term, “gay rights.” For those in favor, gay rights were merely the extension of the fundamental rights guaranteed by law to all citizens to lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. Among other things, these rights protected those who, by virtue of their sexual orientation, might otherwise be discriminated against in

²⁰ See William Safire, “What’s an Extremist?” *The New York Times Magazine* (14 January 1996): 14.

employment, housing, public accommodation, public speech, and political assembly. The pamphlet stated that “Right wing zealots who speak of special rights want the very special right to discriminate against those they hate. They want ‘special righteousness.’”²¹ For those opposed, gay rights represented special rights; rights conferred upon those who required “special class protection” by virtue of their minority sexual orientation. Recourse, they argued, already existed in the legal code to fight discrimination: laws that protected their property, reputation, and person. To offer protected status for “sexual orientation” was to offer the same protections to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals as were offered to disadvantaged minorities. This pamphlet stated that “Homosexuals, an affluent, well-educated, politically-powerful group bear no resemblance to disadvantaged ethnic minorities. And giving them protected class status takes away the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens, simply because they disagree.”²²

Whatever else gay rights are, they are, at the very least, a measure of formal recognition within the prevailing social order. In this way, gay rights confer an official and lawful acceptance upon those who define themselves socially and politically through their sexual orientation and behavior. Even more, of course, gay rights represent the power and patronage of the state. The subtext of this controversy, then, was the bitter battle over political and moral legitimacy. One side wanted it desperately; the other side was loath to give it.

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As different as their ends were and the moral rationale supporting them, their methods for communicating in public were, for all practical purposes, identical; the form of public discourse one displayed was virtually indistinguishable from what the other displayed.

The basic rule of engagement, for example, was clearly articulated by both sides. In short, it was useless to try to convince one’s opponents of the folly of their position. Therefore, any effort to engage one’s opponents in civil argument and debate was pointless. Simply put, the rule of engagement was not to engage at all. As the manual of the Colorado for Family Values group argued, “[t]he information you present to pro-gay mentalities will likely have no impact on them—their mind is made up independent of the facts.”²³ To be sure, it might be worth trying to engage “the enemy,” they went on to say; yet this was to be seen primarily as a mechanism for defusing the

²¹ *Fight the Right* 75, under the heading “Soundbites.”

²² *The Colorado Model* IV.6–7.

²³ *The Colorado Model* II.2.

accusation of bigotry. Predicting that gay leaders would not consent to public debate, they counseled followers to use the spurned invitation to advantage, by posturing themselves in public as the ones who are really tolerant.²⁴ *Fight the Right* offered much the same counsel: “Never talk to the other side. The other side believes that it is right. Period. The Bible tells them so. You cannot change people like this. Don’t even try.... In forums, where there is an audience open to argument, talk to the audience. Talk ABOUT the other side. But don’t talk TO them.”²⁵

The task, both sides contended, was neither to engage the opposition nor to demonstrate, in the give-and-take of public debate, the superiority of one’s argument over the opponent’s. Rather the task was to persuade the ambivalent and undecided. To this end, both sides encouraged their followers to use polling data to target different audiences of likely supporters as well as to craft audience-appropriate messages. Both manuals also encouraged strategic coalition building among mainstream organizations, such as churches, business groups, organized labor, professional associations, military personnel, and racial minorities, to ground and broaden their appeal to the uncertain middle. Both manuals provided experience-based recommendations for mobilizing coalitions of sympathetic-minded organizations and grassroots support (including voter canvassing, literature drops, direct mail, phone programs, and so on). They also provided sophisticated suggestions for mobilizing the media (including the creation of press kits, press conferences, speakers panels, pamphlets, etc.)

But what strategies did they make use of to entice the morally diffident and the politically timid? Here again the approaches were virtually interchangeable. In both cases the principal strategy was to portray the opposition as extreme to the point of monstrous.

For the conservative opponents of gay rights, the first step was to remind the public of the fact that gays and lesbians really only comprise 1–2 percent of the population, rather than the 10 percent popularized by the studies of Alfred Kinsey in the 1950s. The conclusion one was to draw, of course, was that homosexuals in America really are a small, fringe minority with no legitimate claim to representing any main currents of American life. On this foundation, conservatives portrayed homosexual extremism either through shocking images of the gay/lesbian subculture or through an explanation of the frightful

²⁴ In one section of their manual, Colorado for Family Values suggests going on the offensive on a point at which they were vulnerable: bigotry. To this they counseled “inviting your enemies to join you in the crusade [against bigotry]. This puts the opposition in a ‘lose-lose’ situation. Our strong feeling is that they won’t take you up on the offer. When they don’t respond, go ahead with the campaign, making sure everyone knows about your spurned invitation. Having made the invitation puts you in the enviable position, from then onward, of having honestly, truly tried your best to invite participation...” (*The Colorado Model* IV.4f).

²⁵ *Fight the Right* 74.

consequences should the gay agenda be accepted into law and public policy. Thus, as *The Colorado Model* summarized, it was necessary “to present some unsavory aspects of homosexual life in order to ‘inoculate’ voters against the deliberate distortions of the [opposition’s] campaign.”²⁶ To this end, Colorado for Family Values created television commercials containing colorful and controversial footage from a San Francisco gay rights parade. Following the experience in Colorado, the manual further recommended targeting specific groups, such as pastors, business leaders, educators, and military leaders, with literature detailing the social, political, and financial costs of giving special protected status to those whose legal identity is rooted in sexual orientation. Listing actual legal disputes, the guidebook stated the implications of the expansion of gay rights as special rights: “homosexuals, though only 2 percent of the population...commit between 1/4 and 1/3 of all [child] molestations”; “school promotion of homosexuality and condom use represent a clear threat to the health of students”; “sexual discrimination claims have been unfairly used by aggravated employees”; “granting sexual orientation special protected class status raises questions of affirmative action obligations”; “the right to refuse business services is unreasonably encumbered by sexual orientation laws; sexual tension in the workplace lowers morale, yet would be legally sheltered from remedy by ‘gay rights’ laws”: and so on.²⁷

For the progressivist advocates, the rhetorical emphasis was placed upon harsh accusations and denunciations of their opposition. As stated in *Fight the Right*, “isolate the opposition by painting them as extremists.”²⁸ One consultant put it this way: it was difficult “to persuade undecided people to vote *for* homosexuals.... Our best message, therefore, was to frame the initiative as an assault by extremists that posed a threat to everyone. Our campaign line was, ‘It’s a danger to us all.’”²⁹ To this end, activists were encouraged “whenever possible [to] flush out” the extremists because they “make a clear target.” Both sides acknowledged that their opponents often played to their own weaknesses in this regard. To the advantage of gay rights activists, they would find on television and in public meetings opposing “spokespeople [who] foamed at the mouth.” These, it was quickly acknowledged, “were [the] best illustration of the dangers of homophobia.”³⁰ In every situation possible, the manual advised, reinforce the idea and image that those actively opposed to gay rights are “irrational fanatics.”³¹ In short, accentuate the negative.

²⁶ *The Colorado Model* II.6.

²⁷ Quotations taken from *The Colorado Model* IV.48–68.

²⁸ *Fight the Right* 58, under the heading “Grassroots Coalition Building.”

²⁹ *Fight the Right* 74.

³⁰ *Fight the Right* 74.

³¹ *Fight the Right* 98.

Complementing this approach was the calculated strategy to portray themselves as “mainstream.” *Fight the Right* encouraged activists to think of themselves as “goodwill ambassadors,” and *The Colorado Model*, too, encouraged their readers to think of themselves as “winsome ambassadors.”³² To this end, *Fight the Right* advised supporters to “curb your dogma,” “and speak in language easily understood by most people.” “You must appear more reasonable than your opposition if you hope to convey what undecided and persuadable people will accept as truth.” “Don’t be scary!” “Pick articulate, ‘telegenic,’ media-savvy spokespersons.” “Be a voice of reason.”³³

Conservative opponents to gay rights anticipated this from “pro-homosexual extremists.”³⁴ In Colorado,

[t]hey wanted angry, red-faced, stereotypes of conservative “Religious Right” types.... Instead, they got Will Perkins.... Will personally is an amiable, jovial, self-deprecating person who is impossible not to like and impossible to perceive as “hateful”.... In your own efforts, search high-and-low for this sort of spokesman; one who radiates desired qualities effortlessly and genuinely.³⁵

Generalizing about their Amendment Two experience, *The Colorado Model* stated,

While we didn’t enslave our campaign to the winds of perception, we did pay attention to public relations. We tended to the perception of our organization in the general public, specifically those swing voters whose antennae are incredibly finely-tuned to the least appearance of CFV as typical “right-wing fanatics.”³⁶

As both sides understood in theory and practice, the power of their own position in the public imagination would be measured by the degree to which it seemed normal and unexceptional. Legitimacy is defined in such terms. While each side was sincere about the rightness of their own position, they knew too that normalcy had become largely a matter of image and appearance and, therefore, of pretense and affectation. As

³² *Fight the Right* 98; *The Colorado Model* II.7.

³³ *Fight the Right* 40, 70, 71, 98. In another advice manual, the same argument is made: “They must be vilified.... Our goal here is twofold. First, we seek to replace the mainstream’s self-righteous pride about its homophobia with shame and guilt. Second, we intend to make the anti-gays look so nasty that average Americans will want to dissociate themselves from such types. The public should be shown images of ranting homophobes whose secondary traits and beliefs disgust Middle America.” Marshall K. Kirk and Erastes Pill, “The Overhauling of Straight America,” *Christopher Street* 8, 11, reprinted in *Guide Magazine* (November 1987), reprinted again in *The Colorado Model* 5–11.

³⁴ *The Colorado Model* II.2.

³⁵ *The Colorado Model* II.6, 7.

³⁶ *The Colorado Model* II.7.

Fight the Right put it, people “often vote on style rather than substance...presentation rather than content.”³⁷

There was a deliberate effort to elude serious engagement even with the general public. Instead, all of the questions were anticipated; all of the answers were pre-made, scripted into sound bites. Both *Fight the Right* and *The Colorado Model* served up pages of pre-processed presentations.³⁸ Whatever the intentions, their availability made individual thought unnecessary. It also insured uniformity at the rhetorical extremes.

Though *The Colorado Model* offered more of these sound bites, it was *Fight the Right* that was especially emphatic about not straying from the short, scripted statements. To spokespersons, it advised: “Keep statements very brief—five minutes maximum. Give lots of pithy, quotable ‘sound bites.’ Deliver your key messages over and over.” Block canvassers were told to “avoid lengthy discussion with voters”: “People you meet at the door may have many questions. Be prepared to answer them with short, simple answers. Don’t fall into a debate or over-personalize the issue.” Phone canvassers were advised to: “Write a script to be used by the volunteers. Make it brief and to the point... Avoid lengthy conversations.” During “bigot busting” events (crashing anti-gay rights petition signature drives), participants were told: “Don’t engage in lengthy discussions about the issues, and don’t argue with belligerent petitioners or signers. All Busters should be trained to give short, effective answers to the questions they are likely to be asked (see ‘sound bite’ list).”³⁹

In the end debate was not only avoided with opponents, it was effectively avoided with those they wanted to persuade in the general public. At best, each side went through the motions of discursive engagement but in a discussion that was carefully orchestrated not to go beyond the mechanical expressions of preformed hostilities.

Fear as Lingua Franca

As Freud observed, all fear is related in one way or another to the risk of death or its social equivalents—the loss of financial security, reputation, status, power, legitimacy, even recognition. Labeling an adversary extreme and dangerous asserts that life, reputation, or rights are endangered by the very existence of that threat. This was sadly demonstrated in the dispute over Amendment Two in Colorado. A discourse of negation proliferates a public culture of fear; fear is the subtext of negation.

³⁷ *Fight the Right* 98.

³⁸ *Fight the Right* 75–6; *The Colorado Model* III.5:3–7; IV.7, 8.

³⁹ *Fight the Right* 98.

In political life, fear reveals the limits of democratic toleration and, thus, the limits of pluralism—not just for conservatives who are already reputed to be narrow and intolerant but for liberals and other progressives who claim to champion diversity. To view adversaries as “extreme” and therefore a “risk” makes it impossible to regard them as the loyal opposition; rather, one can only view them as enemies. In history, one makes war on enemies in order to silence or eliminate them. In principle, of course, only the most contentious faction would ever articulate their position this way, yet that is precisely where the structure of today’s discourse necessarily leads them. In fact, each side wishes that the other would disappear. Elshtain is right when she says that there is a very real danger of forfeiting the most basic category of our democracy: that of “citizen.”⁴⁰ The quandary we face is not simply due to a general failure of civic good will, a rejection of civility, or even a loss of respect for democracy. Historical and sociological circumstances come together to create an environment in which these practices are difficult to resist. The irony is that we participate in creating the hostilities we claim to abhor so much. And with the help of public opinion polling and focus groups, we learn to do it with meticulous detail and extraordinary effectiveness.

Of course the use of fear of the other in this context is intended to motivate the disaffected and apathetic into action. Fear does motivate effectively but often enough it simply reproduces itself, creating more fear. It is fear that transcends the differences of every faction and interest whether right or left, conservative or liberal, traditionalist or progressive, Democrat or Republican, communitarian or libertarian, black or white. Fear also, unwittingly and ironically, binds us together through a shared language, becoming a *lingua franca* among various incommensurate and competing factions—factions that are already, by the very nature of their opposition, mutually dependent upon each other.

⁴⁰ Elshtain 68.