

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

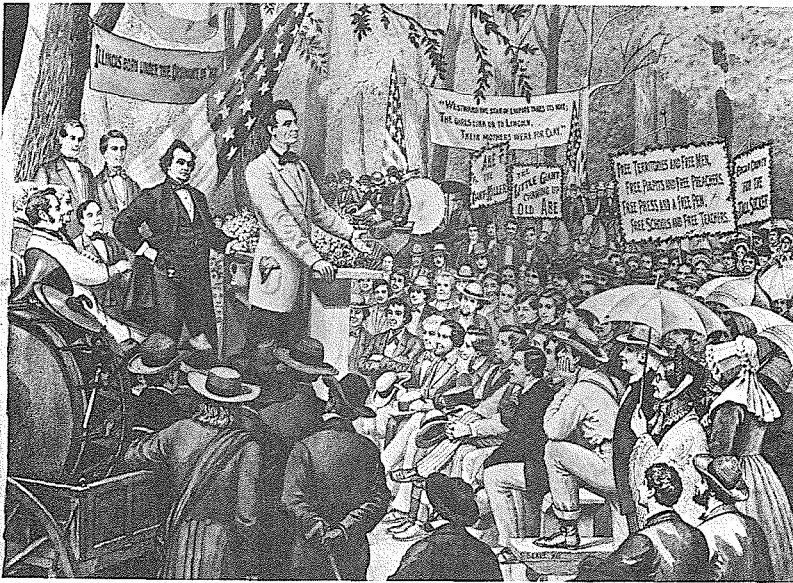
Rhetoric's Fall

"The Decline of Oratory" by Henry Fairlie, in *The New Republic* (May 28, 1984), 1220 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Once "it was impossible to think of the practice of politics without the eloquence with which kings and politicians tried to move individuals and multitudes." Today, laments the *New Republic's* Fairlie, oratory has no place in American politics.

Of course, television is responsible for much of the change. Before the advent of broadcasting, public gatherings and newspapers were the sole outlets for political expression; a public speech was "almost a sporting event." Only by speaking eloquently or passionately could a politician hold the crowd's attention. "If a speech fell flat for the immediate audience," writes Fairlie, "it would not travel the nation."

TV guarantees contemporary politicians an audience, no matter how banal their utterances, but it strips political speeches of the crucial element of human exchange. Surrounded by microphones, loud-speakers, and TV cameras, shielded by security personnel, today's speakers are deprived of give-and-take with listeners. More often than not, observes Fairlie, they address only "the red eye of the camera." They see little more than the text of a speech reflected in the mirrors of Teleprompters; they feel little of the ur-



A landmark in American political oratory, the six Lincoln-Douglas debates during the 1858 Illinois Senate contest drew up to 15,000 people, as the candidates argued over the future of slavery in the United States.

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gency or inspiration that crowds can impart.

Today's orators also lack a rich lode of common literary allusions and images. Even references to the Bible—to Job or to Balaam's ass, for example—are no longer universally understood. "What do our politicians now quote?" asks Fairlie, "A television commercial: 'Where's the beef?'"

But neither TV nor politicians are solely to blame for the decline of oratory. After all, Fairlie observes, the purpose of public speaking is to persuade the public to support a certain course of action. "But a nation with its ears in a Sony Walkman does not wish to act." It is not that our public officials cannot lead, but that we do not want them to. Oratory will return, he predicts, when Americans once again look to their politicians for leadership.

Social Security's Cloudy Future

"Budget Cutters Think the Unthinkable—Social Security Cuts Would Stem Red Ink" by Linda E. Demkovich, in *National Journal* (June 23, 1984), 1730 M St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Nobody in Washington wants to admit it before the November elections, but public officials of both political parties who are looking for ways to reduce federal budget deficits are contemplating cuts next year in that most sacred of federal programs, Social Security.

The retirement program itself seems assured of solvency for the foreseeable future, thanks to the \$165-billion rescue package signed into law last year. And while the system is self-contained (it is financed by a designated payroll tax), reports *National Journal* correspondent Demkovich, its outlays and revenues are counted in federal budget totals. (In 1992, Social Security will be separated out of the budget.) Trimming its expenditures—\$180 billion, or 20 percent of Washington's spending in 1984—would thus reduce federal red ink during the present crisis.

A look at the options illustrates why the system is such a juicy target. A one-year freeze on its annual cost-of-living adjustment (COLA), for example, would save \$15 billion in 1985 alone. By reducing the base from which future COLAs are calculated, it would also save some \$20 billion annually thereafter.

Tinkering with the COLA, however, would hurt the poorest recipients most: Elderly individuals who live alone and are in the bottom fifth of the U.S. income scale will have an average income of only \$3,600 this year, \$2,600 of it from Social Security. That makes another plan attractive: If half of every recipient's benefits were subject to the federal income tax, the poor would pay virtually nothing. Such a tax would reap \$6.5 billion in general revenues in 1985. (Well-to-do retirees will pay such a tax this year as a result of the 1983 rescue package.)

Taxation and COLAs offer the quickest savings, Demkovich says, and are thus most apt to get serious attention after the November elections. But more far-reaching "reforms" are also possible. Treasury Secretary