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Euro-American Rhetorical Pragmatism: Democratic Deliberation, Humanist Controversies, and Purposeful Mediation

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For over a century Euro-American pragmatism has developed as a philosophical movement that takes seriously the human significance of language. Indeed, one might characterize much pragmatist thought as specifically being preoccupied with rhetoric, the use of language in a context to have effects. Inside the academy this rhetorical pragmatism often registers as a language-centered form of humanistic anti-foundationalism that refuses absolute distinctions between subject and object, meaning and significance, fact and value, knowledge and opinion, aesthetics and politics. In various non-academic public spheres, one version of this pragmatism supports a progressive pluralism and an inclusive deliberative democracy. In the following remarks, I would like to explore this tradition of Euro-American rhetorical pragmatism and one of its prominent features: a rhetoric of purposeful mediation.

Among recent rhetorical pragmatists we might include such academic and public intellectuals as Giles Gunn, Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, Cornel West, and Jeffrey Stout.[1] These are neo-pragmatists who give special attention to rhetoric or (more narrowly in Rorty's case) persuasion in the public sphere and connect this rhetorical attention explicitly to their articulation of pragmatism as a philosophical or critical theory. Such rhetorical pragmatism can be viewed as a version of postmodern sophistry: These neo-pragmatists are like some older Greek sophists partly because they share the pre-Platonic belief in a primordial unity of rhetoric and philosophy. Viewed from within the historical argument made by Edward Schiappa and others, sophists and pragmatists do not radically separate language use from the search for truth, rhetoric from philosophy.[2] It was Plato, the argument goes, who established this separation in the *Gorgias* when he coined the new term *rhêtorikê* and negatively distinguished it from *philosophia*. Rhetorical pragmatists reject this version of Platonism and embrace instead an anti-Platonist sophistic rhetoric.

But these contemporary neo-pragmatists do not emphasize their sophistic legacy as extensively as an earlier rhetorical pragmatist, the once-forgotten British philosopher, F. C. S. Schiller. I want to return here to an argument I made in my book *Reception Histories*, in which I claimed that Schiller's reading of Protagoras was essential to his early version of pragmatism that he called humanism.[3] During the turn to the twentieth century, the discourse of absolute idealism dominated the rhetorical context of philosophical debate in England. It was explicitly against this epistemological and metaphysical hegemony that F. C. S. Schiller directed much of his polemical energies, especially in his two

[1] See Steven Mailloux, *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 22-42; idem, *Disciplinary Identities: Rhetorical Paths of English, Speech, and Composition* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2006), pp. 42-44, 51-52, 118-21; Steven Mailloux and Keith Gilyard, "Conversation," in: *Conversations in Cultural Rhetoric and Composition Studies*, ed. Keith Gilyard and Victor E. Taylor (Aurora: Davies Group, 2009), pp. 30-51. Also see Stanley Fish, "Rhetoric," in: *The Stanley Fish Reader*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 116-44; Keith Gilyard, *Composition and Cornel West: Notes toward a Deep Democracy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008); Robert Danisch, *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007); and Nathan Crick, *Democracy and Rhetoric: John Dewey on the Arts of Becoming* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010).

[2] Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 40-49; Mailloux, *Reception Histories*, pp. xii-xiii.

[3] Mailloux, *Reception Histories*, pp. 27-32. Also see Mark J. Porrovecchio, *F. C. S. Schiller and the Dawn of Pragmatism: The Rhetoric of a Philosophical Rebel* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011); and, more generally, *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism*, ed. Steven Mailloux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

early books *Humanism* in 1903 and *Studies in Humanism* four years later. Both of these books were praised by the American pragmatists, William James and John Dewey, the former calling Schiller pragmatism's "most vivacious and pugnacious champion."[4]

One of the distinguishing features of Schiller's humanistic pragmatism was his use of Protagorean sophistry as an explanatory argument for his own theory. In fact, it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that Schiller's reception of Protagoras constituted his philosophical position. That reception was an exemplary instance of a theoretical argument reading the past to mark out a place in the intellectual present and to set an agenda for the immediate future. Schiller's pragmatism re-interpreted sophistry to establish his anti-idealist argument within the cultural conversation of the early twentieth century. Schiller read Plato against the grain of the ancient philosopher's attack on sophistic rhetoric, and in so doing, he demonstrated how the insights of pragmatism and sophistry coincided perfectly. Schiller's reception of the sophists locates at least one form of pragmatism firmly within a sophistic rhetorical tradition, and Schiller enthusiastically argued for branding this form with the name "humanism."

Humanism has always been about human being and becoming. In classical Greece, Protagoras said, "Humans are the measure of all things, of things that are that they are and of things that are not that they are not." Platonists rejected such sophistry and could quote in support of their case the Athenian in Plato's *Laws* who declares "it is God who is the measure of all things, not humanity as some say" (716c). Though often in other terms, some of the most important "humanist controversies" of the last century restaged this debate over Protagorean sophistry and Platonist philosophy.[5] During one such controversy, Schiller's 1903 book rejected the Platonist's charge that the human-measure dictum leads to skepticism and relativism. Instead, Schiller argues, Protagoras's claim that "man is the measure of all things," when "fairly interpreted, … is the truest and most important thing that any thinker ever has propounded. It is only in travesties such as it suited Plato's dialectic purpose to circulate that it can be said to tend to skepticism; in reality it urges Science to discover how Man may measure, and by what devices make concordant his measures with those of his fellow-men."[6] One goal of sophistic rhetoric is to investigate and theorize how this rhetorical process takes place, to establish what rhetorical "devices make concordant" one citizen's measures with those of his or her fellow-citizens.

In his next book, *Studies in Humanism*, Schiller more clearly and more extensively demonstrates how his humanism is both sophistic and pragmatist. He remarks on the political context of classical Greece, noting that "the great humanistic movement of the fifth century B.C., of which [the Sophists] were the leaders, is now [early twentieth century] beginning to be appreciated at its true value … The rise of democracies rendered a higher education and a power of public speaking a *sine qua non* of political influence – and, what acted probably as a still stronger incentive – of the safety of the life and property, particularly of the wealthier classes." The political, economic context of sophistic education resulted in "a great development of rhetoric and

[4] William James, "Humanism," *Nation* 78 (3 March 1904), pp. 175-76; rpt. James, *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 551.

[5] See, for example, late-twentieth-century debates in the U.S. Culture Wars and specialized academic controversies over postmodernism or poststructuralism. Various anti-humanisms, neo-humanisms, and post-humanisms marked out significant theoretical positions within these heated intellectual and political conflicts. On the rhetoric of these and other humanist controversies, see Mailloux, *Reception Histories*, pp. 20-21, 151-81; and "Humanist Controversies: The Rhetorical Humanism of Ernesto Grassi and Michael Leff," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* (forthcoming).

[6] F. C. S Schiller, *Humanism: Philosophical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1903), p. xvii.

dialectic," and the sophists definitely exploited this situation, growing wealthy in catering to their well-to-do clientele.[7] Schiller remarks in passing on the contradictory (democratic *and* undemocratic) origins of sophistic rhetoric and thus prefigures later debates over the problematic ideological affiliations of neo-sophistry and the dangerous political consequences of rhetoric more generally. Like many rhetorical pragmatists after him, Schiller identifies rhetoric with democracy – only in such a political structure, he argues, could sophistic rhetoric develop – but he also acknowledges that rhetoric could serve undemocratic interests when rhetorical education was restricted to the socio-economic elites.

There is a lot more to say about Schiller's reading of Protagoras, especially in his 1908 pamphlet, *Plato or Protagoras?*, but instead I want to move on to some implications of the sophistic legacy for rhetorical pragmatism in relation to contemporary debates over the future of democratic deliberation. To make this move I will fast forward exactly one hundred years.

"In case you haven't heard, Barack Obama is a pragmatist." So begins Christopher Hayes's December 2008 *Nation* article called, fittingly enough, "The Pragmatist."[8] After noting how the term has often been used to describe the newly elected President and how that President himself has used the word "pragmatism" in recent public statements, Hayes asks: what exactly does it mean to call President Obama a pragmatist? In answering this question, Hayes helpfully points to "Obama's famous rhetorical dexterity, which he's marshaled to tremendous effect – giving progressives as well as centrists reasons to believe he shares their values and outlook. In a postelection essay on Obama, George Packer noted these two strains of his campaign rhetoric and dubbed them the 'progressive Obama' and the 'post-partisan Obama.'" According to Hayes, "pragmatic" here means something like "post-ideological." Saying Obama is a pragmatist means simply that he is not a dogmatic ideologue; he is someone interested in practically getting things done and not someone blindly following an abstract ideological principle. But these are merely popular uses of the terms *pragmatic* and *pragmatist*. What, if anything, do they have to do with the more precise usage in relation to the specific tradition of American pragmatist philosophy?

Hayes himself raises this question when he notes:

> Pragmatism in common usage may mean simply a practical approach to problems and affairs. But it's also the name of the uniquely American school of philosophy whose doctrine is that truth is pre-eminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief. What unites the two senses of the word is a shared skepticism toward certainties derived from abstractions – one that is welcome and bracing after eight years of [the] failed, faith-based presidency [of President George W. Bush].

Hayes then tries to connect Obama intellectually to American pragmatist philosophy by way of the President's political admiration for Abraham Lincoln. He implies that Obama's admiration for Lincoln connects him to American pragmatism partly because the war Lincoln oversaw was a significant influence on the earliest philosophical pragmatists:

> Having witnessed, and in some cases experienced firsthand, the horror of violence and irreconcilable ideological conflict during the Civil War, William James, Charles Peirce and Oliver Wendell Holmes were moved to reject the metaphysical certainty in eternal truths that had so motivated the [dogmatically ideological] abolitionists, emphasizing instead epistemic humility, contingency and the acquisition of knowledge through practice – trial and error.[9]

[7] F. C. S. Schiller, *Studies in Humanism* (London: Macmillan, 1907), pp. 31-32.

[8] Christopher Hayes, "The Pragmatist," *The Nation* (29 December 2008), pp. 13-16. http://www. thenation.com/article/pragmatist (accessed Dec 15, 2011).

[9] For a different, more detailed argument tying Obama to Pragmatism via Lincoln, see Susan Schulten, "Barack Obama, Abraham Lincoln, and John Dewey," *Denver University Law Review*, vol. 86 (2009), pp. 807-818.

I will return later to the placing of President Obama in the pragmatist tradition, but for now I want to re-deploy a text Hayes cites in explaining that tradition, Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*. We can use a passage from Menand's prize-winning book to transform Hayes's specific claim for a connection between pragmatism and Obama into a broader argument about American pragmatism and U.S. rhetoric in general. Menand writes that after the Civil War the pragmatists "changed the way Americans thought – and continue to think – about education, democracy, liberty, justice, and tolerance. And as a consequence, they changed the way Americans live – the way they learn, *the way they express their views, the way they understand themselves*, and the way they treat people who are different from themselves. We are still living, to a great extent, in a country these thinkers helped to make."[10] Among Menand's claims here most relevant to my topic are the ones asserting that pragmatism significantly affected the way Americans express themselves (their rhetoric) and the way they interpret themselves (their identities), what we might call an American rhetorical hermeneutics.[11] I would like to follow up on just one strand of this rhetorical hermeneutics and speculate about Euro-American pragmatism's effects on U.S. rhetoric in various academic and non-academic contexts. This speculation involves making a case for pragmatism as a possible source for or at least influence on an American rhetoric of purposeful mediation.

An obvious place to begin is William James's 1907 book *Pragmatism*, whose very subtitle "A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking" implies a mediating purpose for James's popular lectures, a mediation between the old and the new. James famously defined pragmatism as a method of thinking and a theory of truth. The method looked to results, consequences of beliefs, ideas, actions; and truth was defined controversially as what works. "The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons."[12] That last phrase provides an opening for teasing out the contours of a specifically *rhetorical* pragmatism: The true is the rhetorical compliment we give (the figurative label we posit) for whatever proves itself (argumentatively justifies itself through reasons) to be good in the way of belief. Put differently, to identify a specifically rhetorical pragmatism is to work out the way that pragmatism as a philosophical movement is a rhetorical way of thinking with a rhetorical theory of truth. As James explains his pragmatist approach more fully, he makes its strategy of purposeful mediation explicit. James calls pragmatism "a mediator and a reconciler," a "mediator between tough-mindedness and tender-mindedness," and a "mediator between empiricism and religion"[13] He describes pragmatism "as a mediating system" and offers "pragmatistic philosophy" as "just the mediating way of thinking" his audience requires.[14]

We find this same mediating way of thinking and its embodiment in a rhetoric of mediation throughout the American pragmatist tradition. Pragmatism is an intellectual solution to a cultural problem, which means it is a pragmatic response to a question in a specific time and place. A typical problem or question for pragmatism arises from the public recognition of a widespread cultural conflict; and the typical pragmatist response is not to choose sides but to mediate. This mediating rhetorical strategy can be seen in James's *Pragmatism* in 1907 and almost a hundred years later in Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*. Interestingly, the conflicts

[10] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. xi (emphasis added).

[11] A rhetorical hermeneutics focuses on the relation of rhetoric and interpretation and in one of its forms combines rhetorical pragmatism in philosophical theory with cultural rhetoric study in critical practice. See Steven Mailloux, *Rhetorical Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 3-18; and *Disciplinary Identities*, pp. 42-65.

[12] William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 42.

[13] Ibid., p. 43, 129, 7.

[14] Ibid., p. 7, 26.

addressed by both thinkers involve religion. In James's case it is a conflict between Darwinian Science and Christian Religion; for Stout it is a dispute over the role of religion in a democratic polis. James addresses his problem by mediating between what he calls tough-minded and tender-minded mental make-ups; Stout's rhetoric mediates between liberal democratic secularists and what he calls the new anti-liberal traditionalists.

In *Democracy and Tradition* Stout proposes to resolve the dispute over the contemporary role of religion in the public sphere by arguing that pragmatism as (what he provocatively calls) "democratic traditionalism" makes room for religious voices in political deliberation.[15] Like James though less explicitly than Schiller, he makes use of rhetorical concepts and traditions all along the way. For Stout "culture is an enduring collection of social practices, embedded in institutions of a characteristic kind, reflected in specific habits and intuitions, and capable of giving rise to recognizable forms of human character."[16] One particular aspect of culture is central to Stout's mediating rhetorical strategy. That aspect is tradition: "a matter of enduring attitudes, concerns, dispositions, and patterns of conduct"; for example a democratic tradition "inculcates certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes toward deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues."[17] Underlying these notions of *culture* and *tradition* is a theory of practices and a value given to particular rhetorical practices within certain traditions, such as democracy.

Stout's primary aim is to "make plain" how "a tradition of democratic reasoning, dispositions, and attitudes that the people have in common" serves as the "adhesive element in our sociality."[18] Stout thus claims that his "conception of the civic nation is pragmatic in the sense that it focuses on *activities* [practices] held in common as constitutive of the political community."[19] But the practical activities of a democracy are not just procedural forms: "They are activities in which normative commitments are embedded as well as discussed. The commitments are substantive. They guide the discussion, but they are also constantly in dispute, subject to revision, and not fully determinate."[20] Stout gives as examples of texts that embody such democratic normative values the Bill of Rights, the Emancipation Proclamation and the Nineteenth Amendment, Lincoln's Second Inaugural, and Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman." Stout advocates the rhetorical practices of public deliberation and notes the other social practices in which rhetorical activities are situated and which serve as topics of deliberation, such as voting and the electoral process.

Stout specifically takes up the question: What "is the role of free public reason in a political culture that includes conflicting religious conceptions of the good"?[21] To answer this question, he rhetorically focuses on "the discursive core of democratic culture,"[22] noting that "by highlighting the significance of public deliberation, democratic political arrangements bring to light their symbiotic relationship to a surrounding culture in which the shared discursive practices of the people are of primary importance."[23] Stout's rhetoric of purposeful mediation develops a pragmatist account of U.S. democratic culture, rhetorically analyzing both past mediated conflicts and present conflicts in need of mediation. In so doing, Stout notes the mediating strategies of others in the pragmatist tradition. For example, he notes how in an earlier time "Dewey sought a spiritual path between the extremes of militant atheism and arrogant traditionalism."[24]

[15] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 13.
[16] Ibid., p. 28
[17] Ibid., p. 3.
[18] Ibid., p. 4.
[19] Ibid., p. 4-5.
[20] Ibid., p. 5.
[21] Ibid., p. 2.
[22] Ibid., p. 195.
[23] Ibid., p. 4.
[24] Ibid., p. 32.

Armed with rhetorical pragmatist assumptions, Stout characterizes the current impasse within American democratic deliberation as a conflict between secular liberal political philosophers and religious-oriented, anti-liberal-democratic new traditionalists. Because of the discord resulting from religious diversity, "secular liberals," he writes, "have strongly urged people to restrain themselves from bringing their religious commitments with them into the political sphere." In contrast, "many religious people have grown frustrated at the unwillingness of the liberal elite to hear them out on their own terms, and have recently had much to say against the hypocrisies and biases of secularism."[25] Stout's mediating rhetoric, like James's before him, argues for (what I am calling) a rhetorical pragmatism, one that "can transcend the current standoff between secular liberals and the new traditionalists – and do so by borrowing crucial insights from both sides."[26] Thus, he argues against "the Manichean rhetoric of cultural warfare,"[27] and for the pragmatic rhetoric of conflict mediation, not complete resolution but rather respectful recognition of both basic disagreement and shared consensual values.

Such pragmatist mediation is a practical accomplishment sometimes aided by theoretical articulation. As practical accomplishment, overcoming conflict takes place in a democracy through public deliberation and development of character, that is, collectively through democratic consensus and individually through democratic virtue. As a rhetorical accomplishment within public deliberation, pragmatic mediation of conflict requires the development of consensual overlap, not prior overarching agreement about the content of abstract concepts and principles. It requires verbally holding others responsible to give reasons for their opinions but not restricting beforehand the kind of reasons (secular or religious) that can be used in the public sphere. For all citizens participating in democratic deliberation, Stout recommends a specific kind of "conversation": "an exchange of views in which the respective parties express their premises in as much detail as they see fit and in whatever idiom they wish, try to make sense of each other's perspectives, and expose their own commitments to the possibility of criticism."[28]

This practical, rhetorical accomplishment can be assisted by theoretical articulation, self-reflective commentary on both the substance and process of the ongoing accomplishment. Stout sees such metacommentary to be the special task of public philosophers, to whom Stout recommends adopting a pragmatist point of view. This pragmatist viewpoint sees the "function of moral principles with respect to the ethical life of a people" to be "essentially expressive, a matter of making explicit in the form of a claim a kind of commitment that would otherwise remain implicit and obscure." The role of "public philosophy," then, should be a rhetorically-mediating "exercise in expressive rationality."[29] That is, public philosophers are intellectuals who express the reasons implicitly motivating citizens in their public deliberations. But we might just as easily characterize the public intellectual who performs this expressive theoretical function as a rhetorician. In fact, isn't this public theoretical articulation an area where again the philosophy/rhetoric distinction (certainly the opposition) tends to collapse, and thus couldn't we say that the pragmatist public intellectual is not just rhetorical in his or her mediating practice but also sophistic in theoretical orientation? Following Schiller's interpretation of Protagoras, doesn't a rhetorical pragmatist today assume the human-measure maxim (even when the appeal is to the divine) and try to discover and establish what rhetorical "devices make concordant" one citizen's measures with those of fellow-citizens? Stout as a rhetorical pragmatist attempts to fulfill his role as public philosopher through the theoretical articulations of his book *Democracy and Tradition*. In so doing, he presents a sophistic rhetorical pragmatist framework for public

[25] Ibid., p. 63.
[26] Ibid., p. 13.
[27] Ibid., p. 10.
[28] Ibid., p. 10-11.
[29] Ibid., p. 12.

deliberation in a democracy, advocating a rhetorical strategy of purposeful mediation.

Let me conclude by returning to the academic and popular claim that President Obama is a pragmatist, in my view a rhetorical pragmatist. To date the most comprehensive study published on Obama's pragmatist roots is James T. Kloppenberg's *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition*. A noted intellectual historian, Kloppenberg charts the marked influence of philosophical pragmatism on Obama's intellectual development from the readings and discussions in his Harvard Law School courses to his immersion in Deweyan progressive political thinking during his days as a Chicago community organizer and as a law professor at the University of Chicago.[30] Kloppenberg comments often on Obama's mediating style, his "commitments to philosophical pragmatism and deliberative democracy – to building support slowly, gradually, through compromise and painstaking consensus building."[31] Kloppenberg calls Obama "a principled partisan of democracy and pragmatism in the tradition of James and Dewey. He believes in the founders' ideals of equality and liberty. But he believes that achieving those goals requires working to forge agreement about forms of democratic experimentation, and he believes that those experiments must be followed by the critical assessment of results."[32]

Besides connecting Obama with the classical early pragmatists, Kloppenberg also mentions the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr, whom Cornel West and others call a Christian pragmatist.[33] In 2007 candidate Obama referred to Niebuhr as one of his "favorite philosophers."[34] Asked what he got out of Niebuhr, Obama responded that he took away "the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away ... the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism." Here we see the same mediating rhetoric, mediating between pessimism and optimism, between idealism and realism, that we find elsewhere throughout the American pragmatist tradition, including in Niebuhr's own book *The Irony of American History*, which, for example, praises the mediating strain of American thought "most perfectly expressed by James Madison" who "combined Christian realism in the interpretation of human motives and desires with Jefferson's passion for liberty."[35]

Perhaps the most striking example of Obama's own pragmatist rhetoric of mediation involves his thoughtful response to the passionate rhetoric of Reverend Jeremiah Wright and his vociferous critics. In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama had described his admiration for Reverend Wright, who, he noted, was a reader of Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and black liberation theologians.[36] Then, famously and still controversially, Obama demonstrated his skill at mediating rhetoric in an 18 March 2008 speech, "A More Perfect Union," in which he (at least for the moment) refused to repudiate Wright despite his disagreement with his views. Throughout the speech, Obama tried to reconcile without dissolving many differences, many oppositions, not the least of which was that between Black anger and

[30] See James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 63-71. Also see Bart Schultz, "Obama's Political Philosophy: Pragmatism, Politics, and the University of Chicago," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 39 (2009), pp.127-73; and Robert Danisch, "Obama and the Pragmatist Tradition," unpublished manuscript.

[31] Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*, p. 83.

[32] Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*, p. 221-222.

[33] Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*, pp. 22, 120, 250; Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 150-164.

[34] David Brooks, "Obama, Gospel and Verse," *New York Times* (26 April 2007), p. A25.

[35] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner, 1952), p. 96.

[36] Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), p. 282.

White intolerance. Here is just one piece of Obama's mediating, unifying rhetoric about "America's improbable experiment in democracy": "I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction – towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren."[37]

Given the argument I am making that Obama can be viewed within a rhetorical pragmatist tradition, it is somewhat ironic that three years into his presidency the close fit between his rhetorical power and his mediating pragmatism is being questioned by some of his former supporters. In "The Pragmatic President" Fareed Zakaria writes that liberals are disappointed with President Obama "because of his persistent tendency to compromise."[38] Their criticism "stems from a liberal fantasy that if only the President would give a stirring speech, he would sweep the country along with the sheer power of his poetry." That is, prior to his election and soon after, his supporters marveled at the rhetorical power of his mediating progressive pragmatism. Now, some of those same people criticize Obama for giving up on the power of his rhetoric in the process of making pragmatic compromises. In contrast, Zakaria defends the President's record of accomplishments in today's highly polarized politics: "Obama is a centrist and a pragmatist who understands that in a country divided over core issues, you cannot make the best the enemy of the good." Thus, we might say, a pragmatist's mediating rhetoric is sometimes the only way to get something done in difficult situations of extreme ideological partisanship.

Still, it is also worth noting the limits of mediating rhetoric within deliberative democracy, limits fully acknowledged by Obama in this passage from *The Audacity of Hope*:

> Democratic deliberation might have been sufficient to expand the franchise to white men without property and eventually women; reason, argument, and American pragmatism might have eased the economic growing pains of a great nation and helped lessen religious and class tensions that would plague other nations. But deliberation alone could not provide the slave his freedom or cleanse America of its original sin. In the end, it was the sword that would sever his chains.[39]

In light of such historical examples, Obama the rhetorical pragmatist notes the limitations of rhetorical pragmatism and its rhetoric of purposeful mediation. He admits:

> The best I can do in the face of our history is remind myself that it has not always been the pragmatist, the voice of reason, or the force of compromise, that has created the conditions for liberty. … I'm reminded that deliberation and the constitutional order may sometimes be the luxury of the powerful, and that it has sometimes been the cranks, the zealots, the prophets, the agitators, and the unreasonable – in other words, the absolutists – that have fought for a new order. Knowing this, I can't summarily dismiss those possessed of similar certainty today – the antiabortion activist who pickets my town hall meeting, or the animal rights activist who raids a laboratory – no matter how deeply I disagree with their views. I am robbed even of the certainty of uncertainty – for sometimes absolute truths may well be absolute.[40]

Ultimately, Obama turns back to the political figure with whom he has so often identified. He writes, "I'm left then with Lincoln, who like no man before or since understood both the deliberative function of our

[37] Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union," in: *The Speech: Race and Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union"*, ed. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), pp. 237-238.
[38] Fareed Zakaria, "The Pragmatic President," *Time* (22 August 2011), p. 18.
[39] Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), p. 96.
[40] Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, p. 97.

democracy and the limits of such deliberation."[41] Not forgetting such sobering reminders, rhetorical pragmatists will surely continue their strategic advocacy of purposeful mediation, further developing the long pragmatist tradition of a "mediating way of thinking" within specialized intellectual debates as well as the popular politics of our deliberative democracies.

[41] Ibid.