

Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk: Politics in America 2017

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In the Forward to his 1976 *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk: How We Defeat Ourselves by the Way We Talk – and What to Do About It*, Neil Postman wrote, “This is a book about talk...the kind which I think it useful and virtuous to expose as crazy or stupid.”¹ This is how he defined these two kinds of talk: “Stupid talk...is talk that has...a confused direction or an inappropriate tone or a vocabulary not well-suited to its context. It is talk...that does not and cannot achieve its purposes.”² “[C]razy talk is talk that may be entirely effective but which has unreasonable or evil or, sometimes, overwhelmingly trivial purposes. It is talk that creates an irrational context for itself or sustains an irrational conception of human interaction.”³

Postman situated his analysis of crazy and stupid talk within a universe of discourse peopled by the likes of “Karl Popper, George Herbert Mead, Alfred Korzybski, I.A. Richards, George Orwell, Lewis Mumford, Gregory Bateson, Wendell Johnson, Kenneth Burke, and Saul Alinsky.”⁴ Given that we are here tonight for the Alfred Korzybski Memorial Dinner, it seems fitting and proper that I read some of Neil’s

assessments of Korzbyski's contributions to thinking critically about language and effective communication: "If you think of a book as a container of answers, you will hate *Science and Sanity*. But if you think of a book as an instrument for the stimulation of thought, you should find Korzbyski unforgettable. He addresses himself to questions of profound interest.... For example, what are the characteristics of language which lead people into making fake evaluations of the world around them? He also tries to say how we may avoid talking excessively crazy."⁵

Tonight, I am here to talk about some of the language of politics in 2017, formed, in part, by Neil's interpretation of Korzbyski's work. In so doing, I am keenly aware that I cannot, and therefore do not, speak for either man. Rather, I am offering my own understanding of how I think their work is applicable to today's political semantic environment. I first encountered Professor Neil Postman as an undergraduate student in his Introduction to Semantics course at New York University in the 1962-63 academic year. One of the first axioms he presented to the class was that words themselves have no meanings, that only people have meanings which they try to express through words. And so tonight I wish to try to share with you through words some meanings of mine concerning political language and sanity. To do so I will draw upon what I have learned in the 55 years since my first meeting with Neil and my introduction to General Semantics.

My approach is a media ecological model that tries to examine how people use language and other media within a culture to share information needed for mutual survival. When Neil and I, aided by Christine Nystrom and Charles Weingartner, created the Media Ecology M.A. and Ph.D. Programs at New York University in 1970,

our conceptual foundations included a mixture of General Semantics, media theory, propaganda analysis, and technology studies. As Neil liked to put it: “Media Ecology is General Semantics writ large.” By “large,” he meant that we were expanding our analyses of language to include all symbol systems and the media used to communicate meanings among people.

Before I began my analysis of today’s political languaging, I need to confess two early influences on my life and ways of thinking. As a product of a Brooklyn Irish Catholic upbringing, including eight years in parochial schools and four years of active service in the United States Marine Corps, I underwent two extreme forms of behavior modification. Within the communication environment of the “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church,” the Ten Commandments provide excellent examples of Aristotle’s either-or approach to logic with their absolute categories of good versus evil – Thou Shalts and Thou Shalt Nots. The very first commandment says, “I am the Lord Thy God. Thou Shalt have no other gods before me.” The second commandment takes aim at visual symbols: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” It should be noted here that the Catholic Church has always made extreme use of visual imagery – from the crucifix to the multitude of paintings and statues depicting God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and all of the Saints. The third commandment concerns the power of words themselves: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” The power of words was present at the creation when, according to *Genesis*, “And God said, let there be light, and there was light.” In the New Testament’s Gospel According to St. John, the role of language in the Creation is explained thusly: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us....” Following my indoctrination into becoming a

true believer in Roman Catholicism, I was exposed to a new set of Aristotelian either – or beliefs in the Marine Corps. In addition to venerating the Marine emblem consisting of an eagle, globe, and anchor, recruits were taught the official motto of the Corps – the Latin “*Semper Fidelis – Always Faithful*” and *The Marine Hymn* – “From the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli.” The Fourth and final stanza of the hymn even promises a life hereafter with this closing quatrain:

If the Army and the Navy
Ever look on Heaven’s scenes,
They will find the streets are guarded
By United States Marines.

Among these indoctrinations into rather closed systems of thinking and talking and acting, two ideas, one from within each realm of discourse, did encourage me toward some explorations into individual critical thinking. Within the Catholic cosmology, it was the concept of individual Free Will – the idea that each of us was responsible for the choices we make in life and the consequences of those choices. To me, this seemed to offer a small opening in an otherwise closed system. In the Marine Corps, I received words that continue to guide my thinking and acting from my Senior Drill Instructor, Staff Sergeant Voelker, at Boot Camp on Parris Island, South Carolina in October 1955: “Rules and regulations are made for the guidance of wise men and the obedience of fools.”

In analyzing the language of American political discourse in 2017, I am keenly aware of my own limitations and of the limitations of the concepts and models I am using to shape this analysis. A core principle of what we called “media ecology” was that

any analysis of media and communication had to be grounded in the context in which people communicate. Neil liked to say that “media ecology is context analysis.” Therefore, in trying to understand the language of politics in 2017, I need to examine not only the speakers and the words spoken but the context within which the communication occurred. At a minimum, this includes trying to identify and understand the time, place, and circumstances involved; the sources of the messages, the contents of the messages; the encodings and transmissions of the messages; the channels that carry the messages; the receptions and decodings of the messages; the receptions and decodings of the messages; and the responses of the audiences to the messages. Students of communication will recognize that my model here is based upon a number of sources, mainly: Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*; Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver’s *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*; and Norbert Wiener’s *Cybernetics*.

In thinking about language as a medium of communication, I am guided by these words from the German philologist, statesman, and educator Wilhelm von Humboldt: “Language is a ‘Third Universe’ midway between the phenomenal reality of the ‘empirical world’ and the internalized structures of consciousness.”⁶ In the Media Ecology Program, we changed “language” to “media” to expand our explorations. We also adapted Ludwig Wittgenstein’s aphorism that “The limits of my language are the limits of my world” into “The limits of my media are the limits of my world.”

In considering political discourse, I recognize that today’s American politics exist in a very Aristotelian binary system of right and wrong, of *us* against *them*. Today’s political universe of discourse is shaped not only by politicians’ and their supporters’ use of language and other symbolic systems but also by the proliferation of media

that carry their symbols. From orality to literacy and typography, from graphics to hypergraphics, from electric and electronic to cybernetic, these media not only carry messages but shape our lives and our cultures within the environments they create.

In 1966, Ronald Reagan, who would be elected President of the United States in 1980, said: "Politics is just like show business."⁷ In 1984, Neil and I both agreed with Reagan's comparison. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Neil devoted Chapter 9 to Reach Out and Elect Someone, quoted Reagan and wrote these words: "In America, the fundamental metaphor for political discussion is the television commercial."⁸ He offered these warnings about the lessons taught by TV commercials: "... that short and simple messages are preferable to long and complex ones; that drama is to be preferred over exposition; that being sold solutions is better than being confronted with questions about problems."⁹ In his critique of television's impact on Politics 1984, Neil provided what I think applies even powerfully to today's cybernetic media that present "... information in a form that renders it simplistic, nonsubstantive, nonhistorical and noncontextual; that is to say, information is packaged as entertainment."¹⁰ In "Politics 1984: That's Entertainment," published in the Summer 1984 edition of *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, I proposed a triad for analyzing the American political scene: First, the Politics of Issues – which revolve around a core of key issues that attract or repel voters. In debating these issues, politicians and partisans used Rhetoric – both positive and negative – and visual symbols, music and song, and actions to reinforce their commitment to the cause and to attract new supporters. As I saw it, the campaigns of issues contained the communication of information and the pseudo-communication of propaganda disguised as information. Second, the Politics of Party – which demanded loyalty to the party over loyalty to any issue or candidate.

Here, pragmatics ruled and parties would change sides on issues and candidates in terms of electability. One need only to consider the swapping of positions on the status of African Americans by the Democratic and Republican parties from the 1950s to the 1990s, during which the “Solid South” moved from the Democrats to the Republicans. Third, the Politics of Images – in which the images of candidates are crafted by advertising and campaign specialists and transmitted to the public by means of all available media, especially those carrying two entwined forces of American media – advertising and entertainment.⁸ In our present media environment, media do not merely reflect reality but create something new, what Umberto Eco called “Hyper-reality,” what Jean Baudrillard called the “simulacrum,” and what many call “Post Modern Reality.” I prefer to use the term “pseudo-reality,” while being well-aware that the name is not the actuality. At this point in time, the mix of broadcast and cable television with their so-called “Reality TV Shows” and 24-hour news programs that are more commentary than information, virtual reality games and platforms, Twitter, Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media sites and applications, all wrought by what James Joyce in *Ulysses* called “the ineluctable modalities of the visible and the audible,” to shape the contexts for our political communication environments in 2017.

It is worth noting here that Twitter, our cybernetic version of Morse’s electro-magnetic telegraph, with its restricted 140 character messages, encourages simple either-or answers to complex questions. Short slogans overwhelm reasoned discourse not only on Twitter but are the style favored on bumper stickers and in television debates, interviews, and talk shows. In this Brave New World of instant communication and gratification, there is scant room for non-Aristotelian political talk. When President Trump gives prepared speeches, his words tend to be more

balanced and less hostile than when he Tweets or speaks without notes. It seems to me that this is no example of how media tend to shape the messages they carry. Still, I think it could be possible to use language that is neither crazy nor stupid in messages under 140 characters. Consider this from Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural Address: "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies." To me, it is clearly a sane statement but, of course, it requires, as Lincoln well-knew, further exposition, and explanation to communicate his meaning to his audience.

Consider my 1984 Triad in today's political environment. During the 2016 campaigns, a Pew Research Center Report poll from July 7, 2016 listed the percentage of registered voters who ranked fourteen issues that were important for how they intended to vote. From the top, they were the economy, terrorism, immigration, foreign policy, health care, Supreme Court appointments, gun policy, social security, trade policy, education, treatment of minorities, abortion, the environment, and the treatment of gay, lesbian, and transgender people.¹² Some indexing is needed to identify the issues that were important to the Democratic and Republican candidates and voters who differed significantly on which issues were more important than others. According to a poll reported by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at Cornell University, 2016 exit polls suggested these differences on the most important issues: For Clinton voters, the main issues were Foreign Policy which led with 60%, followed by the Economy at 52%, Terrorism at 52% and Immigration at 33%. For Trump voters, the main issues were Immigration at 64%, followed by Terrorism at 57%, the Economy at 41%, and Foreign Policy at 33%.¹³

A 2017 Gallup Poll tracking issues of importance to Americans in 2017 reports that concerns about economic problems fell from 26% in March to 17% in September. Dissatisfaction with the government/poor leadership reached a high of 25% in June but returned to its March percentage of 18 in September. Terrorism, which ranked second in 2016 sank to a low of 1% in September and third-placed immigration now has only a 11% concern.¹⁴ It would seem that Korzbyski's principle of dating needs to be considered in comparing what issues people deem to be important.

With regard to the Politics of Party, in 2016-2017 parties continue to play significant, if altered and even challenged, roles in American politics. While no third party candidate has won the White House since Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 and the Republicans and Democratic parties still control both Houses of Congress and the governorships and legislatures of the 50 states, there have been some stress factors in both parties. Hilary Clinton secured the Democratic Party nomination only after a divisive primary battle with Bernie Sanders, an Independent Senator from Vermont, and Donald Trump secured the Republican Party nomination although he was opposed by almost all of that party's leadership. Still, the parties did play their parts in providing financial, personnel, and campaign support for their nominees. According to Roper, Trump won the vote of 90% of Republicans, 48% of Independents, and only 9% of Democrats. Conversely, Clinton won the votes of 89% of Democrats, 42% of Independents, and only 7% of Republicans.¹⁵

To the question, "Which political party do you think can do a better job of handling the problem you think is most important – the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?", Gallup reported these percentages for September 6-10, 2017: Republican Party – 34%; Democratic Party – 41%; and same/other/no opinion at 25%¹⁶ In

making sense of these poll numbers, I think that both indexing and dating would be useful constricts in trying to understand the changes in the Politics of Party in 2017.

The 2016 Presidential Campaigns confirmed my view from 1984 that Image Politics continues to play an ever-increasing role in the American political system. While Pew reported that more registered voters reported before the 2016 election that they considered Hillary Clinton to be able to do a better job than Donald Trump in dealing on seven issues and tying with him on two, she was perceived to be weaker on dealing with economic conditions, defending against future terrorist attacks, and reducing special interest influence. Here we must note that party loyalty or leaning tilts the scales for and against Clinton and Trump among Democrats and Republicans. The slogans used by each campaign tended to stress images (positive or negative) over issues or party.

From the Clinton Campaign, we received: “Hillary for America”; “Forward Together”; “Fighting for Us”; “I’m With Her”; “Stronger Together.” All of them seem to me to be images messages trying to reinforce Clinton’s image as a loyal member of the traditional Democratic tribe.

From the Trump Campaign, we received these messages: “Make America Great Again” “America First”; “Can’t Stop the Trump”; “Build the Wall”; “Lock Her Up”; “Drain the Swamp”; and my two favorites – “What do you have to Lose?” and “What the hell do you have to lose?” These seem to me to be slogans that stress Trump’s image as a maverick who would bring law and order to the chaos that is a Washington D.C. run by professional politicians, entrenched bureaucrats, special

interests, mainstream media, and the other co-conspirators who contest what Steve Bannon calls “The Deep State.”

This overview of my conceptual approach to understanding the 2016 election is intended to provide some context in which I hope to examine the American Political Language Environment in 2017. Obviously, given the actuality that Donald Trump is now the 45th President of the United States and that the Republican Party now controls both Houses of Congress, my focus will be upon the people in political power since they tend to have the most influence on the Great Debate that shapes our Republic. A front-page article in *The New York Times* of Thursday, October 26, 2017 carried this headline: “Critics Give Way As The G.O.P. Tilts to Trump’s Orbit.”¹⁷

One way to understand Trump’s success, in which he won 360 Electoral College Votes (57%) to Clinton’s 232 while his popular vote total of 62,984,825 (46.4%) to Clinton’s 65,853,516 (48.5%)¹⁸ was shy 2.9 million, is to examine what Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* called the pathos of the audience – the empathy they feel toward the context, the speaker, and the messages. This mind-set of the audience has been much-studied by psychologists, political scientists, sociologists, historians, propaganda analysts, and other academicians. One variable called “confirmation bias” involves our tendencies to trust sources and messages that support our pre-conceived opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors while distrusting other sources and messages that question or challenge our preconceptions.

As is often the case when academic theorists promote some concept that Postman thought his mother or aunt already knew, he had an example to explain the concept in layman’s terms. In *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk*, Neil offered this parable:

The archetypal fanatical response is given in the story about the man who believed he was dead. In an effort to release him from this idea, a psychiatrist asked him if dead men bleed.

“Of course not,” he replied, whereupon the psychiatrist jabbed the man’s finger with a pin so that they both could see the rich, red blood flow. The man looked at the blood, at the psychiatrist, and then said, “Well, I’ll be damned, dead men *do* bleed.”¹⁹

In introducing this parable, Neil wrote that “Fanaticism begins with our falling in love, so to speak, with certain sentences.” In this, Neil found nothing particularly unusual or dangerous “... provided we are willing to permit the sentences to be scrutinized, subject to criticism, and revised as their deficiencies require.”²⁰

In this view, Neil was, as usual in his standard approach to critical thinking, inclined to trust in reason as the key to sane thinking, talking, and behaving. While I have tended to agree with Neil over many years about most aspects of media, culture, and communication, I do have some doubts about the appeal of reason to some people, especially those enveloped in conflict situations that call for partisan either-or solutions. As a small addendum to Neil’s recipe for sane thinking, I offer these words from the mouth of Finlay Peter Dunne’s fictional Chicago-Irish bar owner Mr. Martin J. Dooley on fanatics: “A fanatic is a man that does what he thinks th’ Lord would do iv He knew th’ facts of the case.”²¹

Clearly, some in-depth examinations into the mind-sets of Trump supporters are required before any reasonably valid and reliable assessments can be reached, but,

perhaps, some preliminary excursions may be in order as we try to understand the context within which Trump and his team use language and other symbol systems to convey messages and meanings to their loyal followers. Who are these followers? From a Roper Poll, we learn that Trump voters in 2016 tended to be more male than female (53 to 42 percent), white (58% to 29% Hispanic and 8% African-American), and older (52% over 45, 41% 30-45, and 36% 18-29). In terms of income, Trump voters tended to fall in the \$50,000-\$100,000 income range. Interestingly, he captured 43% of Union members. Not surprisingly, 81% of Trump voters labelled themselves as conservative, 41% as moderate, and only 10% as liberal.²²

An interesting comparison of reported values held by White Protestant Americans can be made from polls taken in 2011 and October 2016. To the question of whether “an elective official who commits an immoral act in his/her private life can still behave ethically and fulfill his/her duties in public and private life,” in 2011 only 30% of White Evangelical Protestants answered “Yes” as did 38% of White Mainline Protestants. In 2016, 72% of White Evangelical Protestants and 60% of White Mainline Protestants said “Yes.” To the prompt – “Thinking about your vote for president how important is it for a candidate to have strong religious beliefs?” the percentage of White Evangelical Protestants who answered, “Very Important” dropped from 64% in 2011 to 49% in 2016.²³ Clearly, something had changed. In general semantics terms, Candidate 2011, was not Candidate 2016. In Postman’s terms, dead men may not be bleeding but surely some voters were at least blushing when they cast their ballots for a candidate who bragged in 2005 into a live microphone for the TV show *Access Hollywood* about his wooing techniques with women: “You know, I’m automatically attracted to beautiful [women] – I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. Just Kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star,

they let you do it. You can do anything – [...] Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything.”²⁴ Trump and his supporters excused this language as “locker-room talk.” Whether it qualifies as “crazy talk” or “stupid talk” in Postman’s lexicon it is not clear until we know what Trump thought he was saying.

The same is the case with many examples of Trump-talk. Consider Trump on Abraham Lincoln: “Fine president. Most people don’t know even know he was a Republican, right? Does anybody know? Lots of people don’t know that.” According to a 2012 Pew Research Center Poll, 55% of Americans polled knew that Lincoln was a Republican.²⁵ And how do we classify terms like “Fake News”; “Alternative facts”; “Mexico will pay for the wall”; “Just heard Foreign Minister of North Korea speak at the U.N. If he echoes thoughts of Little Rocket Man, they won’t be around much longer!”? Concerning the clashes in Charlottesville, Virginia between the people who identified themselves as being members of the Ku Klux Klan and Alt Right Advocates and the groups opposed to them, President Trump said, “But we’re closely following the events unfolding in Charlottesville, Virginia. We condemn in the strongest possible terms the egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence – on both sides. On many sides. It’s been going on for a long time in our country.” It is worth noting that the chants shouted by the KKK and Alt Right marchers in their torch-lit nighttime parade included these two examples of what Neil would certainly have classified as crazy talk: “You won’t replace us. Jews won’t replace us.” In response to criticism for equating both sides, Trump on August 23, 2017 said this is a speech to supporters in Arizona,” But, the very dishonest media, those people right up there with all the cameras.... They don’t report the facts.”²⁶ It is worth noting here, that Politicoplayback reports poll results that reveal that “46 percent think media make up stories about Trump” and “Just 37 percent of voters think the media

do not fabricate stories...while the remaining 17 percent are undecided. More than three-quarters of Republican Voters, 76 percent, think the news media invent stories about Trump and his administration, compared with only 11 percent who don't think so. Among Democrats, one-in-five think the media make up stories, but a 65 percent majority think they do not.... Among voters who strongly approve of Trump's job performance in the poll, 85 percent believe the media fabricate stories about the president and his administration."²⁷

This same poll also reported on what voters think should be done about "fake news." Trump tweeted on October 17, 2017, "So much Fake News being put in dying magazines and newspapers. Only place worse may be @NBCNews, @CBSNEWS, @ABC and @CNN. Fiction writers!" To Trump's suggestion that the government could revoke NBC's broadcast licenses, "Only 28 percent think the government should have the power to revoke broadcast licenses of major news organizations that it says are fabricating news stories about a president or the administration while 51 percent think the government should not.... Another 21 percent are undecided." These views diverge along party lines: "...68 percent of Democrats oppose government retaliation but Republicans support government control 46 percent to 33 percent."²⁸

At this point, it would seem that the First Amendment's protection of free speech and a free-press is supported by a bare majority of those polled. A plurality of Republicans seem to want to bring back the Alien and Sedition Acts of John Adams' presidency.

Whether we call it “confirmation bias” or “dead men bleed,” the tendency to believe our own bullshit and the bullshit of those who agree with us seems to have great power to persuade us that our beliefs are not only true but The Whole Truth and Nothing But The Truth. As my old friend Charlie Weingartner liked to say “The major purpose of language is to create the illusion of certainty in an uncertain cosmos.” Neil Postman had, I think, very few if any illusions of certainty, but he did profess a fond hope for the efficacy of reason in frequently unreasonable semantic environments. In this hope, Neil was not alone. In a speech given in London on December 15, 1970, Abba Eban the Israeli diplomat and writer said, “History teaches us that men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives.”²⁹ Later, in the 1989 edition of *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews*, Eban shortened this idea to: “When all else fails, men turn to reason.”³⁰

My half-century plus inquiries into the realms of media, culture, and communication, especially the environments shaped by mass persuasion and propaganda, have influenced me toward a very critical view of any expectations that people will turn toward reason even if all else has failed, especially in the area of political rhetoric. Mario Cuomo, when he was Governor of New York, famously said about politics that “You campaign in poetry. You govern in prose.” I’ve never quite understood what he meant by these words, especially the word “poetry.” My own take on his idea would substitute “bullshit” for “poetry” and “reality” for “prose.” And if “bullshit” is too strong a word allow me to use “myth” instead. It seems to me that almost all political rhetoric is mythic in its binary either-or structure and totalitarian in its absolutist answers to what some students of myth call the Four Great Mythic Questions of Life:

First, Identity: Who Am I?

Second, Creation: How did I come into being?

Third, Destiny: What is my purpose in life?

Fourth, Quest: How do I reach my destiny?

From before recorded history, families, clans, tribes, peoples, nations and empires have tried through media, culture, and communication to provide group answers to these questions. To me, these group answers are always to be questioned, even feared. I stand with Jacques Ellul that there can be no collective critical thinking, only what some call “group think.” To be critical, Ellul insists, thinking must be individual.

I do not pretend to have answers to all questions about the language of politics in 2017 America. The media-ecological analysis I have sketched out tonight is not the only way one might examine the science and sanity of contemporary American political discourse. And I am keenly aware of my own and my model’s limitations. As Neil wrote in *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk*, “This idea - that human intelligence is engaged in its most functional activity when in the process of refutations – has been given sophisticated expression by the philosopher Karl Popper. He calls his point of view ‘fallibilism.’ It proceeds from the simple assumption that all people are fallible, and that it is not possible for anyone to know if he or she is in possession of the truth. Therefore, to devote oneself to justifying one’s beliefs is, essentially, an act of fanaticism and the source of much cruelty and injustice.”²⁸ Popper proposed that we aspire toward “critical rationalism,” what Neil and Charlie Weingartner called “crap detecting.” As Popper himself put his ideas in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, “...we can say that in our search for truth, we have replaced scientific certainty by

scientific progress.”³² I understand Popper to mean that fallible human beings can never know the whole truth but that we can discover what is not true by using the scientific method which Popper describes thusly: “In so far as scientific statements refer to the world of experience, they must be refutable; and, in so far as they are irrefutable, they do not refer to the world of experience.”³³

In closing, allow me to return to the interfacing of politics and poetry by quoting one politician and one poet. The politician was the Thirty-fifth President of the United States, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who said: “If more politicians knew poetry and more poets knew politics, I am convinced the world would be a better place.”³⁴ The poet was William Butler Yeats, perhaps Ireland’s greatest modern poet and winner of the 1923 Nobel Prize for Literature, who wrote these words in 1918: “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.”³⁵

To me, science and sanity might be found in Popper’s “critical rationalism” and in Yeats’s concept of poetry but clearly not in fanaticism and political rhetoric. As Neil put it in the last paragraph of *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk*, “And so it comes down to this: The arrangement of our minding is a Sisyphean task. We can never finish doing it. We can only keep pushing the rock, armed with what William James called the feeblest force in nature, our capacity to reason.”³⁶

Good luck and good thinking.

Notes

- 1 Neil Postman, *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk: How We Defeat Ourselves by the Way We Talk – and What to Do About It* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976), xi.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*, xi-xii.
- 4 *Ibid.*,xvi.
- 5 *Ibid.*,256
- 6 Quoted in George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 81.
- 7 Quoted in Elizabeth Drew, *Portrait of an Election: The 1980 Presidential Campaign* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 49.
- 8 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Elizabeth Sifton Books – Viking, 1985),126.
- 9 *Ibid*, 131.
- 10 *Ibid*, 141.
- 11 Terence P. Moran, “Politics 1984: That’s Entertainment,” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* (Volume Forty-One, Number Two, Summer, 1984), 121.
- 12 Pew Research Center, U.S. Politics & Policy, 4 Top Voting Issues in the 2016 Election.
- 13 Cornell University Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, How Groups Voted 2016.
- 14 Gallup, The Most Important Problem. [gallup.com/poll 1675](http://gallup.com/poll/1675).
- 15 Cornell University.
- 16 Gallup.

- 17 Jonathan Martin and Jeremy W. Peters, "Critics Give Way As GOP Tilts Toward Trump's Orbit," *The New York Times* (Thursday, October 26, 2017), A11.
- 18 CNN.com
- 19 Postman *Crazy Talk*, 105.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 21 Finley Peter Dunne, *Casual Observations*.
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- 27 Steven Shepard, "Poll: 46 percent think media make up stories about Trump." Political/mybook.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Abba Eban, *London Times*, December 17, 1970.
- 30 Eban, *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews* (Praeger Publishing, 1984).
- 31 Postman, *Crazy Talk*, 106.
- 32 Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2: *The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962, 1966), 12.

33 *Ibid.*, 13.

34 John Fitzgerald Kennedy

35 William Butler Yeats, *Per Anima Silentia Lunae 1918: Anima Hominus, Part V.*

36 Postman, *Crazy Talk*, 254.