

# GOVERNOR CLINTON AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM: A NOTE ON THE USE OF NON-LANGUAGE BASED SYMBOLISM

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By the close of the extra-ordinary session of the Arkansas General Assembly on November 10, 1983, a significant program of public education reform had been endorsed and a one cent increase in the sales tax had been passed to fund it.

Aside from the question of the value of this public policy for the future of education in Arkansas, scholars in a number of disciplines may well examine this situation to validate theory and to discover useful insights. Converging in this effort, are, at least, political scientists and communication scholars who view these concerns as a common domain. As noted political scientist Murray Edelman has observed, gestures and speeches make up the drama of the state (Edelman, 1964: 172).

Conventional public perception and wisdom argues that public policy is determined by the masses expressing their views to the legitimate decision makers who formalize them into public policy. Edelman contends that this is myth and ritual. Public policy, he argues, is determined by the ability of the politically elite to characterize and appeal to public assumptions and values by using conspicuous symbols (p. 172). In this context, a symbol may be defined as "an act, sound, or object having cultural significance and a capacity to excite or objectify a response (Webster, ). Edelman's observation and this definition would lead us to ask: Who were the "elite" and what conspicuous symbols were used to characterize and appeal to public assumptions and values which were critically related to public policy on education?

Because language itself is a symbol system and because communication (gestures and speeches) make up the drama of the state, we may be led to look for the use of conspicuous symbols in the speech making process. While many will be found in the language of the leader, others that may not be as conspicuous, or as obvious, also need to be understood.

This analysis will examine the 1983 educational reform campaign to discover and assess the use of non-language based symbolism emanating from leadership and setting. It will examine certain leadership decisions which seem to have symbolic influence and the symbolic influence of critical public speaking situations which occurred during the period under consideration.

For purposes of this analysis, Governor Bill Clinton will be considered as the "politically elite." The Arkansas educational reform program was his initiative, therefore, his ability to use conspicuous symbols is central. Furthermore, he, as governor, is a symbol. As Edelman states, "When an individual is recognized as a legitimate leading official of the state, he becomes a symbol of some of all aspects of the state (Edelman, 73).

## *Governor Clinton and Educational Reform*

The educational reform campaign of 1983, serves as an excellent vehicle to study the influence of the non-language based leadership and setting symbols. It is a reasonably bounded universe of discourse and action. It is limited to a period of approximately two months during which time Governor Clinton delivered three critical public addresses.

The matters to be considered in this analysis can be better understood against the background of the critical circumstances and events which converged in the fall of 1983 that created, or, from which was created the particular setting or situation for the exercise of political leadership.

In May 1977, a number of Arkansas school districts filed a law suit challenging the constitutionality of the method of distributing state funds to school districts. Filed in Pulaski County Chancery Court, the suit was periodically amended and substituted over the next few years, primarily to include other plaintiff school districts. Finally, on October 26, 1981, the Chancery Court found in favor of the plaintiffs. The state appealed the case to the state Supreme Court. On May 31, 1983, the high court sustained the lower court's decision. Even though the court did not establish a compliance date, an early resolution was expected.

In the early months of 1983, prior to the Supreme Court's decision, the Arkansas General Assembly met for its regular biennial session. Among the items on each biennial legislative agenda is the funding of public education and the method for the distribution of those funds. It could safely be assumed that members of the legislature were aware of the pending law suit and the issues. Furthermore, there had long been a concern about the large number of school districts in the state, many of which were small and thought to be inefficient and expensive. Consolidation would reduce administrative costs and permit more academic offerings. Even though evidence and reason may justify the conclusion, the advocacy of such a proposal would not be supported by those affected, hence politically, such a solution could not be adopted.

Instead of considering consolidation proposals, the 1983 General Assembly passed the Quality Education Act (Act 445) which created an Educational Standards Committee. The committee was charged with the task of developing standards with which all schools would comply to be state accredited. Failure to comply with the standards would result in consolidation. The Committee began its meetings in May, 1983 and on September 6, issued a preliminary report. As a part of its deliberations, the committee, chaired by the Governor's wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, conducted hearings in all seventy-five counties. Also during this time, national, regional, and various state studies were attesting to the inadequacies of public education which were putting the nation at risk.

In addition to these developments, the national and particularly the state economies were flagging. Many industries were moving production operations overseas to take advantage of cheaper labor costs. This development seriously affected many Arkansans in such industries as shoes, garments and other low

wage manufacturing operations. This situation was also aggravated by foreign imports. In addition, the petroleum industry was depressed as a result of the breakdown in OPEC oil prices. Industrial leaders were suggesting that America must move from a production-based economy to one based on technology and information. Consequently, if Arkansans were to survive and thrive in the modern economy, they must prepare themselves for a new industrial age, one which required more (perhaps different) education and training.

By the fall of 1983, the circumstances, events and conditions had coalesced to create a matrix for the political leadership to exercise its influence to alter public policy in order to remediate these matters. None of the matters just discussed yielded to a simple solution; collectively, the complexities of the situation were compounded. Such conditions result in public anxieties and frustrations hence creating conditions for the politically "elite", the leadership, to provide a solution and to provide assurance through the employment of symbolism.

To better understand the symbolic significance of leadership it is necessary to define leadership and to discuss the sources of leadership symbolism in order to determine the use of it by Governor Clinton in the campaign for educational reform.

Leadership is often described and defined in terms of personality traits or characteristics, which if possessed, can be employed transituationally. Edelman contends, and this analysis would seem to confirm, that:

Leadership . . . is not to be understood as something an individual does or does not have at all times and places. It is always defined by a specific situation and is recognized in the response of followers to individual acts and speeches. If they respond favorably and follow, there is leadership; if they do not, there is not (Edelman, 175).

The sources of leadership symbolism emanate from two sources: the constitutional and statutory role of the position as noted earlier, and from the incumbent's personality and style. In 1984, the Associated Press conducted a survey to identify the "most powerful men and women in Arkansas" (Franklin, 1984: 1). The governor headed the list. One respondent remarked "The Governor's office has influence of itself. His influence with various state agencies enable him to touch the life of each Arkansan almost daily" (Parsons, 1984: 1). Governor Clinton, in response to this observation, remarked "the office carries its own power to hire and fire state officials, to call the legislature into session..." (Parsons).

However, the exercise of these constitutional and statutory powers is symbolically limited. Murray Edelman observes that the exercise of authority or force along signals weakness in politics. Therefore, it is necessary to turn to style

in order to understand the influence of the symbolism of leadership. Significantly, Governor Clinton recognizes this fact. He observed". . . I think the real power of the office is very much either limited or expanded by the extent to which the people support what the governor's doing and the extent to which the governor can work with other people" (Parsons).

Even though leadership symbolism emanates from status and from style, Murray Edelman's observation needs to be underscored: it [leadership] is defined by a specific situation. A sage once remarked that "influence is something you have until you try to use it." Governor Clinton remarked about his own influence: "sometimes I feel I have it, sometimes I don't" (Parsons).

Edelman describes two basic leadership styles: passive and active ( p. 80). A passive style consists basically of the avoidance of firm positions on controversial subjects while at the same time posturing as a protagonist. Active leadership style is characterized by responding to controversial subjects by taking a firm position and advocating a solution. While the election of style may be a manifestation of personality type, Edelman theorizes that the active style is easier to carry off when emergency conditions are objectively present. The active leadership style has more symbolic force when there is a general perception that circumstances pose an imminent threat of significance.

It may be arguable whether the circumstances facing education in Arkansas in the fall of 1983 were of sufficient magnitude and severity to be described as emergency conditions. Nonetheless, Governor Clinton employed the active style in response to those conditions. In an interview with the writer on July 10, 1984, Governor Clinton explained that he had three options from which to choose (Clinton, 1984). Two of the options would characterize a passive style; the third an active style.

The first option, he explained, would be to delay the implementation of the Court's decision until January, 1985 (when the legislature would meet in regular session). This option was rejected by the Governor for two reasons. First, it was inconsistent with the governor's oath of office. Secondly, the appellees in the court case were prepared to go back to court to get immediate relief. The Governor's legal advisers were of the opinion that they would win such a case.

The second option, also rejected by the Governor, was one of complying with the Court's mandate to equalize state funding to schools by redistributing current year funds. While this option would allow more time to address other concerns in education, it would damage the efforts of the better funded school districts and would not provide adequate or appropriate relief to the other districts. Consequently, the Governor believed education generally would not be advanced.

Perhaps the implicit threat of imminent legal action and the inevitable controversy that would occur with funding redistribution represented circumstances warranting the description of "emergency conditions" thus justifying the adoption of an active leadership style. If so, Governor Clinton's choice of a third

option was appropriate: to advocate the new educational standards recommended by the Quality Education Committee and to seek a one-cent sales tax increase. To help him accomplish these goals, the Governor created an organization called Arkansas Partners in Education which raised \$100,000 in private funds. He engaged the services of Watkins and Associates, a public relations firm, to prepare television "spots", brochures, and other promotional material. Precision Research, Inc. was employed to sample public opinion. The campaign would begin in early September and end on November 10, when the extraordinary session of the legislature adjourned *sine die*. During this period Arkansas public education was lifted from its customary low profile among public issues and political concerns. It enjoyed a new importance and immediacy derived from the symbolism of the Governor's active leadership style. Such style would also enable him to take advantage of symbolism associated with the setting. For purposes of this analysis discussion will focus on three major speaking situations, each representing a kind of sub-setting. However, each enabled the Governor to symbolically appeal to the public.

Political settings, as well as speech settings, are unique situations in which the action takes place. They represent potential sources of symbolism which the political communicator may employ in influencing responses.

"The common element in political settings," observes Edelman, "is their contrived character. They are unabashedly built up to emphasize a departure from men's daily routine, a special or heroic quality in the proceedings they are to frame" (Edelman, 96). The reader may observe that limiting the campaign in time, the use of media specialists and the calling of an extra-ordinary session of the legislature all served this purpose. However, during this period, the Governor delivered three major addresses which clearly illustrate the contrived character and symbolism associated with the setting.

Governor Clinton's first major address on educational reform was delivered on September 9, 1983 to a conference called the Science Information Liaison Office [SILO]. According to the transcript of this speech, "[T]he conference participants included legislators, school board presidents, educators from both public and higher education, and state agency representatives" (Clinton, 1983). The purpose of SILO is to examine scientific information which may be relevant to state government. Created by the legislature, it has a quasi-governmental status. Consequently, this conference, a particular setting was easily accessible to the Governor. Furthermore, its name (in contrast to its acronym) suggests a commitment to objectivity, to science, and to information all of which evoke a positive symbolic response. When asked in an interview why he chose the SILO conference as a setting for his first major address, the Governor explained its symbolic significance:

SILO has done a lot of creative policy work for state government. It was a select audience and it would be covered by the

press. It was a way to reach the people with some of my ideas before I went on TV myself (Clinton, 1984).

It can be concluded that the Governor was aware of the positive symbolic benefits of this setting.

Ten days following his SILO address, Governor Clinton took his proposals to the public via television. His address was carried by the commercial stations as well as the state's educational television network. This setting also was symbolically important. The public would not have the opportunity to actively participate in the decision making. It would be the legislature who would endorse the reform proposals and vote on the sales tax increase. However, symbolically it gave the public a sense of participation in the public policy decision making process. Furthermore, this setting clearly set education apart from its customary position of public benign neglect and brought it to a public focus. In addition, it allowed the Governor to manifest the symbolism associated with style. Governor Clinton saw this as an opportunity to "build public support," (communicate positive symbols). When asked his reasons for taking his case to the public, he provided a more expansive response:

Well, I knew once I had decided that I would do the program that before I did it I would go before the people and give a public address with enough time in between the address and the legislature's convening for the people to make their feelings known to the legislature. Obviously, I hoped that I would be building public support, but I also wanted to be fair if the people didn't agree with me, they would have a chance to tell their legislators because I didn't want anybody to feel I had pulled some sort of sneak attack. I wanted this to be an open, heavily debated, thoroughly thought through, collective decision by the people of our state manifested in the legislative session. (Clinton, 1984).

The legislature would not convene until October 4, but the Governor did not wait for the voice of the people to be manifested in the legislative session. On the night following the address and through Thursday, September 22, Precision Research, Inc. conducted a telephone survey to ascertain public response to the Governor's proposals. Those results were released on September 24 (Precision Research, Inc., 1983). Of the state's adults 42.5% saw at least a part of the state-wide TV speech. The results of the survey were positive of all issues. Reflecting editorially, the *Arkansas Gazette* observed "Public opinion appears to be about ready to accept or even demand...a major initiative in public education..." (*Arkansas Gazette*, September, 1983: 14A).

The Governor's final major address was delivered to the opening meeting

of the extra-ordinary session of the legislature at 6:30 p.m. on October 4, 1983. This address was also televised. To be sure, the special session emphasized the departure from the routine legislative consideration of education thus becoming important symbolically, both to the legislature and the public. Selecting the time of delivery of the address at 6:30 p.m. and televising the speech also reinforced the symbolism associated with public participation.

There appears to be no record of an opinion survey having been conducted following this presentation. The Arkansas Educational Television Network carried the address and devoted three additional hours of programming to the topic. AETN reported that 24.1% of its sample watched the speech on AETN stations and that 38.5% watched a part of the total three and one-half hour presentation (*Arkansas Gazette*, 6, Oct. 1983: 4A). Television has significant potential symbolic strength. Murray Edelman declares that the television screen creates a semblance of close contact and enables the communicator to concentrate impressions and evocations (Edelman, 101). On these occasions, the public came into the Governor's office and sat across the desk from him, and later observed him on the dias in the chamber of the lower house. On both occasions, the Governor had control of the viewer's attention and responses by his message and his behavior in those settings.

Although the Governor addressed other groups on educational reform and consulted with special interest representatives and members of the general assembly, these three public speaking situations afforded him with the opportunity to utilize the symbolic potential emanating from leadership style and setting or situation.

These situations were created by him. He determined the audience, the particular circumstance and the role of television. He determined the sequencing of the speeches at approximately two week intervals. All of these and more would suggest that the Governor was well aware of the symbolic value associated with contriving or managing the political speech making situation.

### Summary

Normally, political processes are so complex and public issues so multifaceted, that it is difficult for the analyst to draw causal relationships to account for success or failure. However, the Arkansas public education reform campaign of 1983 offered a unique opportunity to assess some political communication contentions offered by Murray Edelman regarding the role and use of symbolism.

Specifically, the campaign offered an opportunity to assess the role and use of non-language based symbolism emanating from leadership style and from the setting.

It was found that not only was public education elevated to a status of preeminence as a public issue, more importantly, Governor Clinton character-

ized it as an emergency. This symbolic characterization legitimated his choice of an active leadership style. This style had symbolic force. As Edelman observes, "A leader whose acts suggest that he has a strategy and is pursuing it finds it easy to attract a loyal and enthusiastic following" (Edelman, 82).

This leadership style decision, coupled with his political status allowed him to create subsequent situations, particularly three speaking situations in which he was able to capitalize on non-language symbolism. There is clear evidence that the Governor was aware of the symbolic potential in at least two of these. In addition, his use of television and presenting his addresses at an evening time to maximize public viewing further indicate his awareness of the symbolism associated with public involvement.

This analysis should not be interpreted to suggest that the case made for educational reform by Governor Clinton had no basis in fact or value and that the use of non-language based symbolism was deceptive or a fraudulent cover-up. Audiences and the public at large do value rationality. What this analysis clearly demonstrated is that the use of symbolism of leadership and setting plays a significant role in promoting public acceptance of a political policy.

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