

# THE HISTORY OF *RHETORIC & PUBLIC AFFAIRS*: A SALUTE TO FRED BOHM

With the publication of volume 11:1, *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* begins its second decade of service. Much has happened in the last ten years, including the deaths of two of our founding board members—Wayne C. Booth and Edwin Black—and the retirement of the man whose vision and foresight made *R&PA* possible in the first place, Dr. Fredric C. Bohm. This seemed as good a time as any to reflect on the first decade of the journal and to celebrate the career of Fred Bohm, a man who did more perhaps than any other single person—in his role as director of Michigan State University Press from 1990 to 2007—to support the rhetorical renaissance of the last part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Fred retired as director of MSU Press in July 2007. During the preceding 18 years, he and I worked on a number of projects that have, I think it is fair to say, changed the face of rhetorical studies. This is my tribute to Fred.

The story of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* really begins in 1988, for it was in that year that I left the University of California, Davis, to take a position as a tenured associate professor at Texas A&M University. One condition of my hiring at TAMU was that I take over the direction of a national conference on communication and technology. A grant had already been secured, the conference planning had already begun, and several people had already been invited to participate before I arrived in College Station. This was not an auspicious beginning. Even so, with the help of my colleagues Alberto Gonzalez and Tarla Rai Peterson, we pulled a conference together for the spring of 1989. It featured such notables as James Carey, Bruce Gronbeck, Tom Benson, Tom Frenz and Janice Hocker Rushing, Stan Deetz, Robert Hopper, and several other top-flight scholars. Part of my marching orders (and at Texas A&M they *were* marching orders) was to secure publication of the conference results, preferably in the form of a university press book. Upon the advice of my colleague Bob Ivie, I called Dr. Fredric Bohm. Fred was, at that time, the director at Washington State University Press.

Fred and I hit it off immediately and the first result of that relationship was *Communication and the Culture of Technology* (Washington State University Press, 1990). In the same year that the book appeared, Fred left Washington State to become director of the press at Michigan State University. Fred and I continued to stay in contact and I soon began to discuss with him the possibilities for starting a new quarterly journal. My motives were simple: I was becoming ever more dissatisfied with the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* and what seemed to me to be the emerging marginalization of public address and rhetorical criticism in the field at large. In 1991, I drafted a full-blown proposal for a new journal and sent it to Fred. At the same time that I was floating the idea of a journal to Michigan State, Bob Ivie and I were trying to interest Texas A&M University Press in a book series on rhetoric and public affairs—to no avail. This was in 1991, less than a year before President George H. W. Bush decided to place his presidential library at Texas A&M. Timing, as they say, is everything.

Having been turned down by the folks then in charge at TAMU Press, I turned back to Fred Bohm and Michigan State. Instead of pushing for the journal, I rewrote the proposal to feature a book series in rhetoric and public affairs. The journal idea was just a little too raw, with too many questions not yet answered and too few people convinced that there was a need for another journal in rhetoric. A book series, on the other hand, was a more manageable enterprise. I sent the revised proposal to Fred in the fall of 1992. He approved the new series early in 1993. By this time, I already had a book under contract with Michigan State and I simply proposed to Fred that we make that book the first in the series. He readily agreed and in 1993 the MSU Press Rhetoric and Public Affairs Series came into being. Its first book, *Eisenhower's War of Words: Rhetoric and Leadership*, was published early in 1994. As of January 2008, the R&PA Book Series has published 26 titles and of those 26 titles 10 have won major national awards. The success of the book series was in large measure the result of Fred Bohm's having faith in the representations I made to him—so much faith, in fact, that he allowed me to form my own editorial board and empowered that board to make the final decision on all books appearing in the series. He put the power in the hands of the scholars. Not many press directors are willing to do that.

It was, in fact, the success of the book series that gave all of us the confidence that a journal could also be successful. I continued to consult widely about the possibility of a new journal. I called the two people that I knew who had started new journals—Carroll C. Arnold, one of the cofounders of *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, and James J. Murphy, the founding editor of *Rhetorica*. Both gave sage advice. I also consulted with my colleague in sociology, James Burk, who was then editing *Armed Forces & Society*, an interdisciplinary quarterly; my col-

league in modern and classical languages, Craig Kallendorf, who was then editing *Rhetorica*; and my colleague in political science, Ed Portis, who was then coediting the *Journal of Politics*. I was constantly in contact with scholars in rhetorical studies, particularly those with substantial editorial experience. Tom Benson, Bob Ivie, David Zarefsky, David Henry, Mike Hogan, Bob Hariman, and others were a constant source of support and insight. By 1995, some of those who hadn't seen the need for a new journal back in 1991 had changed their minds.

Also in 1995, MSU Press decided to support the publication of *A Rhetorical History of the United States: Significant Moments in American Public Discourse*. This was to be a ten-volume, high-cost project that most university presses would have rejected out of hand, but not Michigan State. It was Fred Bohm who made the final decision to support publication and who traveled to our organizational meeting at Northwestern University to underscore that commitment in front of the editorial board. As a sign of his commitment to the project, Fred agreed to produce the first two volumes of *A Rhetorical History* with no subvention whatsoever. There were now two series in rhetoric at Michigan State University Press. It was time to develop the journal.

The idea of a new journal devoted to rhetoric and public affairs continued to percolate throughout 1995 and into 1996. By the fall of 1996, we were ready to move. It was decided that *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* would be an interdisciplinary quarterly, with that interdisciplinarity to be manifested both in the composition of the editorial board and in the kinds of articles accepted for publication. There were 37 members on the original board, with 16 of those members coming from disciplines other than rhetoric and communication. Political science was represented by Francis A. Beer, Larry Berman, George C. Edwards III, Fred I. Greenstein, Bruce Miroff, William Ker Muir, and Jeffrey Tulis. Historians on the board were H. W. Brands, Robert Dallek, Robert James Maddox, and Nancy S. Struever. From the field of English came Wayne C. Booth and Wayne Fields. From American studies, Jay Mechling. From religious and theological studies, Jean Bethke Elshtain. From journalism, Marvin Olasky.

It was also decided that the first two issues would be commissioned, with the composition and content of those issues carefully selected and designed to send several messages simultaneously: that this was a serious journal; that the term "rhetoric and public affairs" was to be construed in the broadest possible manner; that all kinds of rhetorical research, without regard to approach or perspective, were welcome; that there was no ideological or political bias in play; that the journal would be interdisciplinary in fact, not just in theory; and, perhaps most important of all, that some of the leading scholars from communication, history, English, and political science were endorsing the enterprise by placing their work in the first two issues.

To say that I enjoyed the support of a wide cross-section of rhetoricians would be an understatement. On the original board sat James R. Andrews, James Arnt Aune, Moya Ann Ball, Thomas W. Benson, Edwin Black, Stephen Howard Browne, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Celeste Michelle Condit, Robert E. Denton Jr., Kathleen Farrell, Robert Hariman, Roderick P. Hart, J. Michael Hogan, Robert L. Ivie, Kathleen E. Kendall, Michael C. Leff, Stephen E. Lucas, Robert P. Newman, Kathleen J. Turner, David Zarefsky, and Barbie Zelizer. David Henry served as book review editor. No journal founder has ever had a more dedicated and hard-working group of associates. And it showed in the product.

It was one thing to seed the first two issues with top-flight scholars, but what would happen when we went cold turkey with volume 1:3? No one really knew. Then the submissions started to trickle in. Best of all, they came from a wide variety of sources: established figures such as Robert Hariman and Robert P. Newman; beginning assistant professors such as Trevor Parry-Giles, Kirt H. Wilson, and Garth E. Pauley; graduate students such as Angela G. Ray, Bradford Vivian, and Michael William Pfau. They came from historians such as Robert J. McMahon and Athan G. Theoharis, from religious studies scholars such as Ira Chernus, from political scientists such as Timothy M. Cole and Frank Meyers. Our first special issue in volume 1:4 was expertly edited by John Angus Campbell and featured such stalwarts of the Intelligent Design movement as William A. Dembski, Jonathan Wells, and Michael J. Behe, with rebuttals by David Depew, John Lyne, Steve Fuller, and others. We were off and running.

Fred Bohm observed all of this with both wonder and delight. As a PhD in history, Fred understood the place of the scholarly journal in the life of the mind. By this time, having met repeatedly with the editorial boards of the Rhetoric and Public Affairs Series and the board of the ten-volume rhetorical history project, Fred even understood rhetoricians. Moreover, he thought that what we were doing was important, not just to us or to the field of rhetorical studies, but to intellectual and political life in general. When *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* was recognized by The Council of Editors of Learned Journals with the “Best New Journal of 1998” award, there was no one more proud than Fred Bohm, and for good reason. It was Fred who put the resources of Michigan State University Press behind the journal. It was Fred who continued to have faith, even as the journal lost money year after year. Like his publishing partner, he believed that quality would win out in the end—and he was right. And what quality we have had! From the award-winning articles by Lucas, Aoki and Ott, Murphy, Doxtader, and Finnegan to the special issues on the Iraq War and the AIDS Quilt, *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* has been at the forefront of the rhetorical renaissance.

Along the way, Fred managed to secure an endowed prize for the book series and to pull the journal out of the red. Because of the commitment of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and her late husband Paul Newell Campbell, the Kohrs-Campbell Prize in Rhetorical Criticism is now given every other year to the outstanding book in the Rhetoric and Public Affairs Series. Because of the commitment of Fred Bohm, laboring behind the scenes to support excellence, the work of more than 300 scholars has appeared during the first ten years of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*.

It has been one of the great privileges of my life to have worked closely with Fred Bohm for almost 20 years. On behalf of all the scholars who have benefited from the book series, the rhetorical history project, and the journal, I salute you, Fred.

Martin J. Medhurst, Editor

