Ch 6Going Meta

Part 2 Contexts for Political Rhetoric

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In the course of the Thomas-Hill hearings on allegations of sexual harassment, Professor Anita Hill engaged consistently in communicational activities that we might characterize as direct exchange. She concentrated, that is, on doing what was expected of her at the hearings, according to all the explicit rules of communication and implicit "taken-for-granteds" (Hopper, 1981) for that situation. Asked a question, she answered it directly. Challenged by a follow-up to her response, she attempted to meet the challenge directly. What she did not do was go meta.(1)

Consider by contrast Judge Clarence Thomas' behavior at the hearings. In his opening statement Thomas sought to place the hearings themselves in question: "This is not American. This is Kafkaesque. It has got to stop." Then he let his questioners know which questions he would answer and which questions he considered out of bounds. "I am here specifically to respond to allegations of sex harassment in the workplace....I will not allow this committee or anyone else to probe into my private life." In his second statement, Thomas found new ways to castigate the hearings: a "circus," a "national disgrace," a "high-tech lynching." Thereupon he proceeded to inform the committee that he had chosen not to listen to Anita Hill's testimony: "No I didn't: I've heard enough lies." Admonished by Senator Heflin for not listening to the testimony and thus denying himself a chance to refute it, Thomas challenged Heflin's premise: "Senator, I am incapable of proving the negative." Only after Thomas had engineered a reframing of the committee hearings did he deign to respond directly to questions, and even then he maintained nonverbally the persona of the beleaguered victim.

This essay is in two parts: Definition and Political Applications. The first section offers a general introduction to the concept of "going meta," further explicating the term and, in the process, providing brief illustration of its far-reaching applications to the study of rhetoric and communication.

The second section focuses exclusively on televised political confrontations, such as the Thomas-Hill hearings. In these high stakes, high visibility encounters, going meta requires of political actors that they engage in a rhetorical balancing act, pivoting on the high wire of perceived legitimacy. While ordinary interactants frequently go meta for cooperative purposes -- for example, as a way of advancing consideration of a question, or as a form of intellectual play -- in political confrontations allusions to common interests and to the need for cooperation are generally a tissue-thin guise for the pursuit of competitive power advantages. Not always is going meta a matter of great significance, but, as one looks back on recent presidential debates or televised political hearings, for example, it is striking how often "meta-moves" from these events are what get sound-bited on the evening news, and even remembered many years later. The second section should provide a clearer sense of the rhetorical art of going meta.

*Definition: What is Going Meta?*

To go meta is to provide a strategic, reflexive, frame-altering response to another's prior message or messages, or to a shared message context. Here we attend to specific features of the definition.

*Going Meta as Responsive*

As here conceived, going meta is a response to what others have said or done (or to their shared message context), rather than being self-referential.(2) Of interest may be the meta-goer's overall pattern of response(3) or the communicator's individual meta-moves. Judge Thomas "went meta" at the Thomas-Hill hearings by way of a sustained pattern of verbal and nonverbal responses, each one of which was a meta-move. One such meta-move, as we have seen, was his frame-challenging response to Senator Heflin's question, but Thomas also sought to undermine the legitimacy of the message context as a whole, including the racial composition of the Judiciary Committee, its presumption of possible wrongdoing, and its rules of evidence.

*Going Meta as Strategic*

Although it is possible to imagine one communicator going meta to another inadvertently, this essay's interest is in strategic meta-moves: for example, in what a political candidate might deliberately do in a debate to claim the higher ground, or to displace attention from one issue to another, or to prevail in a battle over meanings of a key term. Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford inadvertently said a good deal about their fears and discomforts as they stood mutely facing the audience over the entire course of a prolonged power failure at their first nationally televised debate. However, neither of them went meta, during or immediately after the power failure. Either one of them could have earned kudos by simply commenting on the awkwardness of the situation and perhaps joking about it.

On the other hand, Ronald Reagan clearly went meta in his debate with Jimmy Carter when he repeatedly defended himself against charges of inaccuracy, inconsistency, and poor judgment by saying good-humoredly, "There you go again." So also did Walter Mondale go meta in the first of his electoral campaign debates in 1984 by first reminding Reagan of the line he'd repeatedly used against Carter, then saying to the President, "There you go again!" Most memorable in the 1988 campaign was George Bush's deliberate provocation to anger of Dan Rather in which each speaker's meta-moves elicited escalating talk-about-talk from the other.(4) In this case, Bush's managers recognized from the outset the potential of a televised confrontation with Rather becoming a "defining moment" in the Bush campaign (Hackett & Abbott, 1988).(5) Bill Clinton's State of the Union Address in 1993 was likewise notable for an upstaging meta-move ("You may laugh, my fellow Republicans..."), made all the more powerful because it was in a context in which speakers have traditionally stayed with their prepared texts.

*Going Meta as Reflexive*

A communication is reflexive when it makes prior communications the subject of communication, attending to them as communications, rather than to their manifest meaning or truth content. This is one of Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson's (1967) senses of the term, "meta-communication," viewed broadly as any communication about a communication.(6) An example they provide is of a secretary responding to her boss's paradoxical injunction by commenting on the form of his communication, rather than staying within the frame (p. 197). This example is clearly different from uses of "meta-communication" to refer to self-referential messages, as in "This is an order," appended to a verbal command, or a no-nonsense look accompanying the command. Watzlawick et al. characterized our preferred sense of "meta-communication" as "an ability or inability...to step outside the circle" of prior communications (p. 197). Bateson (1955/1972) had earlier characterized such reflexive address by means of a different metaphor, that of a shift in levels of communication.(7)

To further illustrate the sense of meta-communications as reflexive, suppose that Lou and Sue are having an argument, expressed by rounds of elemental disagreements about their respective truth claims:

It's true

No way. The truth is --

That can't be. As I was saying--

Wrong!

Here the conversants are communicating about each other's communications, but it would be odd to say that either party meta-communicated reflexively, because each responds to the other's manifest content.

But suppose that Lou or Sue were to break the cycle of assertion and counter-assertion by saying, "We're not getting anywhere. Let's look the word up in the dictionary." The observation on the dyad's lack of progress would be a reflexive meta-communication and would count as a meta-move.(8).

*Going Meta as Frame-Altering*

Finally, we turn to the all important notion of frame-altering as a constituent feature of going meta. This essay's senses of frame and of frame-altering are taken largely from Bateson (1958/1972) and from Goffman (1974; 1981). Said Goffman, in his classic essay on "Replies and Responses" (1981:43): "...although a reply is addressed to meaningful elements of whole statements, responses can break frame and reflexively address aspects of a statement which would normally be `out of frame,' ordinarily part of transmission, not content -- for example, the speaker's duration, tactfulness, style, origin, accent, vocabulary, and so forth."

Central to Goffman's general point in these examples are the notions of frame-altering (including frame-breaking) and reflexive address. If the expectation is that one should reply to questions directly in a given situation, then respondents will have gone meta (and broken the frame of direct address) if they elect to step back from the immediacy of a question to question the questioner's motives, or tone, or premises, or right to ask certain questions, or right to ask any questions at all. Going meta will also have occurred should the respondent comment favorably on the question, or on the questioner's mode of delivery. We can find instances of going meta even in so seemingly routine a situation as one person responding to another's request for the time:

Shh, those mikes pick up every sound we make.

Your English is improving.

You're pretty compulsive.

Is that really the right question? (Goffman, 1981:69-70)

But two qualifications are in order. First, if the topic under discussion had been the previous speaker's English, then the respondent's attention to what Goffman calls transmission, not content, would not have counted as a meta-move. Thus, what is here called a meta-move is context-dependent.

Second, a response may be frame-altering without being reflexive. Asked the time, our respondent could provide greater specificity than was expected: "Almost 4:22 pm." Or give added meaning to 4:22 pm: "Almost quitting time." "Time for a Budweiser." These would not be meta-moves in that (in Watzlawick et al's words) the respondent did not make prior communications with the subject of communication.(9)

This still leaves a veritable goldmine of possibilities for reflexively challenging taken-for-granted frames. Thus, as Goffman suggests, merely by calling attention to how something is said rather than to what is said, the respondent typically breaks frame. And attention to particular features of transmission -- to duration, tactfulness, and the like -- offers myriad opportunities for further reframing. Moreover, communicators may comment, not just on immediately preceding utterances, but also on segments of interaction ("This conversation is getting out of hand"), on the interaction as a whole ("I didn't know this was to be a cross-examination"), or, for that matter, on multiple interactions involving different groups of interactants ("Why do you European Americans always seem to privilege your own cultural premises?"). All of these would be instances of going meta.

It is useful to conceive of any given message or message context, not as consisting of a single frame (e.g., content versus transmission; play versus fighting), but as offering up multiple frames for possible frame-altering. As illustrated in the foregoing example of varied responses to a request for the time, the frames of a question could be construed as including its immediate context, its place in a larger history or stretch of talk, its intent, its implicit premises, its manner of delivery, its type of speech act, its level of reflexivity (e.g., as talk about talk, or talk about talk about talk). Thus, for the message analyst to speak of the frame of the message or message context, is to engage in what is at best a useful oversimplification. More accurately, there are multiple frames, and frames of frames, to which the meta-goer might call attention.

Consistent with the foregoing, communicators may alter a frame rather than breaking it. Metaphorically speaking, they may bend it, shape it, enlarge it, constrict it. This happens, for example, when a speaker answers to a topic or theme rather than to an immediately preceding statement; the speaker in effect places the statement in a larger context (Goffman, 1974). Politicians frequently enlarge frames when they deflect questions, responding on their own terms while at the same time giving the impression that they are at least somewhat responsive to the question. This happened repeatedly when Bill Clinton was asked by television interviewers during the 1992 primaries about his alleged infidelities. On Donahue, for example, Clinton acknowledged that there had been "problems" in his marriage, he said the issue of adultery would not have been raised by the media had he and Hillary been unable to work out their marital difficulties, and he broadly hinted that there may have been an affair or two. When Donahue labeled Clinton's response a "deflection" (here going meta to Clinton), Clinton implicitly agreed with a head nod (here not altering frame), but then added: "Where would we politicians be with you interviewers if we didn't deflect some of the time?" This part of Clinton's response reflexively breaks frame (and thus goes meta) in so far as it substitutes a premise of justifiable self-interest for Donahue's premise of obligatory directness.

Rarely, even in radical rhetoric, is there a complete break with conservative values, as Scott (1973) pointed out. Instead, protestors have historically mocked or chastised leaders for dishonoring their self-proclaimed values (Tilly, 1979). A highly popular technique, says Tilly, has been to turn ceremonial events, such as a parade, into an opportunity for protest. A contemporary instance of this occurred at Columbia University in 1968. As Columbia Vice-President David B. Truman prepared to deliver a strong eulogy to Martin Luther King, Jr., slain five days before, protest leader Mark Rudd stepped between Truman and the microphone at St. Paul's Chapel and declared to those assembled that the event was a moral outrage. How, he asked, can the leaders of the university eulogize a man who died while trying to unionize sanitation workers when they have, for years, fought unionization of the University's own black and Puerto Rican workers? How can these administrators praise a man who fought for human dignity when they have stolen land from the people of Harlem? And how, Rudd asked, can Columbia laud a man who preached non-violent resistance when it is disciplining its own students for peaceful protest? (Avorn, 1969:28)

Here, quite clearly, Rudd was altering the frame set by the planners of the King memorial, but at the same time he was honoring King and his values, just as they had been. Perhaps this is another way of saying that a message or message context offers multiple frames for possible reframing, some of which the meta-goer will leave intact.

*Political Applications: The "Art" of Going Meta*

When Judge Clarence Thomas cast himself as the victim of a "high-tech lynching," he reflexively reframed the hearings in two important respects. First, by the very act of "stepping outside the circle" of question and reply, he broke from the frame of business as usual. Second, by his "lynching" metaphor, he placed a particular stamp on that business, a particular way of seeing it. The effect of Thomas' meta-moves was to displace attention from his own guilt or innocence to that of the Judiciary Committee's. Now it was the Democratic majority's turn to shift in their seats as Senator Heflin sought in vain to recapture control of the situation. Arguably, the Democrats could have so bolstered Anita Hill's case against Clarence Thomas in the course of the hearings that Thomas's later repudiation of the process would have seemed shrill, unfair, self-serving, and hypocritical. Perhaps someone among the members of the Democratic majority could have gone meta to Thomas' meta-moves, effectively calling them into question. Surely Thomas and his Republican handlers had to know that going meta in so confrontational a way was a risky undertaking.

But the Thomas forces also knew that the Democratic majority's legitimacy had been significantly eroded in the course of the regular hearings on Judge Thomas' nomination, during the period of the negotiations leading up to the Hill-Thomas hearings, and at the Hill-Thomas hearings themselves.(10) Having observed, for example, the failure of the Democrats to come to Anita Hill's aid in the face of withering questioning by Republican Arlen Spector, they concluded that they could attack with impunity. Said reporter Jack Nelson (1991, p. 5-A), "On the Democratic side, the reluctance to make an all-out defense of Hill or to attack Thomas, especially after he presented himself as the victim of a `high-tech lynching,' gave committee Republicans almost a free hand in carrying out the White House strategy."

This is not to say that Thomas' success was foreordained. On the face of it, after all, the metaphor of a high-tech lynching hardly suited a Congressional hearing peopled by supporters and not just opponents, at which the principal accuser of a conservative appellate judge was another African-American. But Thomas managed rhetorically to deflect attention from the questionable logic of the metaphor, providing what television critic Walter Goodman (1991:30) saw as having all the earmarks of a theatrical performance. Said Goodman, "He was innocent and hurt, indignant and outraged. His frequent references to family and his language -- `a living hell' -- seemed to have been influenced by television melodrama."

*Going Meta as a Rhetorical Balancing Act*

Judge Thomas' undoing of the Democratic majority at the hearing by way of biting commentaries on his situation provides vivid illustration of the power of going meta. In keeping with Bateson's "levels" metaphor, these are a way of going "one up" in the situation by arrogating to oneself the role of interpreter.(11) But, as suggested earlier, going meta requires a rhetorical balancing act, pivoting on the high wire of perceived legitimacy. There were reasons, after all, that Anita Hill did not go meta. Her almost exclusive reliance on direct exchange promoted an image of demure self-confidence; of politeness and a sense of propriety; of consideration for her interlocutors' interests and not just her own; of someone who had nothing to hide. Thus, meta-goers must skillfully balance the potential gains of enhancing their reputations, shaping agendas, influencing judgments against the dangers of appearing unjustifiably intrusive, disruptive, contentious, or evasive. Meta-goers in confrontative situations must also weigh into the balance their relative legitimacy as against that of their opponents.

"Having" legitimacy is rhetorically akin to holding the chips necessary to call or raise in a poker game. In each case, it is a matter of rights or entitlements. But calculations of legitimacy are by no means as easy as chip-counting. Ultimately, legitimacy is performative, a matter not simply of what one has, but of what one can do to shape audience perceptions of what one has. Legitimacy, then, is also subject to frame-altering.

Legitimacy is also contextual. Were Judge Thomas sitting on his own bench, there would be little question of his right to deflect questions by commenting upon them. Were he a teacher responding to a student or a therapist responding to a patient, he might be granted the right to provide, not just any interpretation, but the "authoritative" interpretation in that situation. But what are the rights of a Supreme Court nominee at a Judiciary Committee hearing on charges of sexual harassment? The waters were uncharted. Surely, a complex mix of countervailing factors entered into the public's determination of Thomas' rights, as they typically do in political confrontations, rendering generalizations problematic. Consider once again the Bush-Rather interview in 1988. Blum-Kulka (1983) and Heritage (1985) have suggested that interviewees on television news programs had best think twice before challenging the interviewer's questions or interpretations because the role of the newscaster as guardian of the public's interest, licensed to probe and to challenge the interviewee, has been normatively enshrined. But norms such as these are often "violated" successfully, and when they are, as during the Bush-Rather interview, they help to weaken the norm itself. Bush went meta to Rather repeatedly in the interview, seemingly with great success.(12)

Ironically, the very chanciness of going meta aggressively in high stakes political confrontations may lead viewers to construe the act as courageous. One thinks of Gary Cooper in Meet John Doe, daring to toss aside the pseudo-populist radio oration that had been prepared for him by his handler (played by Barbara Stanwyck), and, having served notice that he was to be his own man, delivering impromptu a "truly" populist speech (of Frank Capra's imagining) that fired the public's imagination. Why, we ask ourselves, could not our favorite political candidates have evidenced half as much bravery?(13) The bold meta-move stands out all the more in an age of micromanaged politics. (Never mind that it may have been the most carefully scripted.)

*Some Tentative Guidelines for Going Meta in Political Confrontations*

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The first rule for going meta in political confrontations is to attempt to seize the high ground in any such conflict. In political situations, rhetors are surely likely to want to exploit potential power advantages in going meta, and to take smug satisfaction when they succeed, but they are institutionally constrained from appearing blatantly self-aggrandizing. George Bush did well in his confrontation with Dan Rather, but he was unwise to boast immediately afterwards (and while still on live mike) that "that bastard [Dan Rather] didn't lay a glove on me" (Hackett & Abbott, 1988). In so far as political confrontations are staged for display to audiences (Heritage, 1985), they must appeal to public conceptions of fairness and of the common interest. Moreover, political discourse is institutionally impelled and constrained (Heritage, 1985). In a campaign debate, maintain Edelsky and Adams (1990), the candidates are expected to adhere to the pre-specified rules for the debate, and, together, they are expected to educate the voters -- enhancing the citizenry's capacity to make informed electoral decisions. Ross Perot in 1992 was wise to cast the third debate as a problem-solving discussion and to include himself implicitly in asserting that "everybody's nibbling around the edges." It was time, said Perot, to go "for the center of the bull's eye." And, of course, Perot would show them how.

A second rule for going meta in political confrontations is that one should play the injured party and cast one's opponent as the victimizer. This rule is not always applicable, but we have seen it work often enough (Thomas v. Hill, Bush v. Rather, Clinton on Donahue) that we are willing to propose it as a general guideline. Colonel Oliver North, with the help of his attorney, Brendan Sullivan, did a masterful job of playing the aggrieved party in the very first moments of North's public appearance at the Iran/Contra Hearings. After a series of curt denials by Committee Co-Chairman Daniel Inouye of procedural motions by Sullivan, the stage was set for North to upstage the House/Senate Committee. In response to sharp questioning by Committee Counsel John Nields, Jr., North portrayed himself as a soldier/patriot, merely doing his duty to God and country. Then Nields referred to a document, presumably drafted by North, which was to provide evidence of North's culpability. Sullivan broke in at this point to insist that the document be identified and made available to Colonel North. After all, he suggested, this was the only fair thing to do. When Nields identified the document by volume and number, Sullivan made a great show of confusion as to where the document might possibly be in the piles of books of documents that, he said, had only been placed in the possession of Colonel North and his attorneys moments before North was to testify. Nields was forced to postpone his questioning until such time as a copy of the document could be located amid the myriad other documents on North's table. By that time the situation had been completely reframed.

A third rule for going meta in political confrontations is to capitalize on your opponent's resistance. In sharp contrast to Nields at the Iran-Contra hearings, Senate Chief Counsel Arthur Liman used his first minute with North to engage in some very gentle questioning. "Is it fair to say," he asked initially, "that November 25, 1986 [the day North was officially dismissed by President Reagan for his role in Iran/Contra] was one of the worst days in your life?" When North paused before answering the question to consult with his attorney, Liman broke the silence by joking: "I wasn't asking whether it was one of the worst days in Mr. Sullivan's life." Liman then proceeded to review with North the basic history of the case. By focusing on agreed-upon facts, and then asking per each item reviewed whether his version was "correct," North was given little choice but to grant assent to the substance of Liman's accountings. Yet he did so reluctantly and often obliquely, insisting at one point, for example, that he'd been officially "dismissed" and not "fired." When North paused and fiddled before answering whether Admiral Poindexter had personally authorized North's diversion of funds to the Contras (an admitted fact), Liman used the opportunity for another meta-move: "You seem to be hesitating. Is there any doubt in your mind?" At this point there was precious little that North or Sullivan could do. Sullivan interrupted to say that his client, having gone over this ground many times before in his testimony, was anticipating a trick. But in the absence of evidence that Liman was being the least bit tricky, Sullivan's rationale seemed rather hollow. Here, in sharp contrast to the North/Nields exchange, Liman was turning North's resistance to his own advantage.(14)

A fourth rule for the meta-goer in political contests is to maintain a consistent persona. Here, by way of illustration, we return to the Clinton-Donahue exchange. Once that conversation got beyond the first questions about Clinton's alleged adultery, it became strikingly similar in form to the Bush-Rather interview. That is, Clinton took sharp exception to Donahue harping on the "character" issue while Donahue, undaunted, continued to pursue it, insisting that Clinton had been warned in advance that he'd be asked these questions. Midway through the interview, Clinton threatened Donahue with a refusal to answer any additional questions about adultery, marijuana smoking, and the like, suggesting, to the audience's applause, that Donahue had overstepped his bounds. Donahue persisted, however, maintaining that he had an obligation to the American people to do so, and that Clinton had a parallel obligation to be forthcoming. Here, then, was another competition involving rival sources of legitimacy, but played out this time before a live studio audience. With the audience sympathetic to Clinton's cries of "foul," Donahue was clearly taking a risk in pushing forward. But Clinton was also placed in a king-sized dilemma, now that Donahue had refused to buckle under to his threat. Remaining silent, as he had promised he would do, would have escalated the contest further, and with a popular television interviewer. But failing to go through with his threat would compromise his initial stance. Clinton did eventually respond to Donahue's additional "character" questions, and Donahue eventually switched topics, but it was Donahue, in our judgment, who emerged as the more statesmanlike of the two -- less the crowd-pleasing politician and more the seeker of truth. Clinton's initial mistake was in threatening silence, for he could not maintain a consistent persona.

A fifth rule for going meta in political confrontations is to turn your opponents' criticisms of you against them. As part of "a 100 percent negative air-and-ground war aimed at reframing Clinton as a taxer, a spender, a liberal, a liar, a coward, and, at its shabbiest moments, a possible Soviet sympathizer" (Newsweek, 1992:83), George Bush created a storm of controversy a week before the first debate in 1992 when he linked Clinton's antiwar activities in England to a trip Clinton had taken to Moscow. Bush's intimations prompted countercharges of McCarthyism from Clinton's supporters, providing an immediate backdrop for the first debate. Significantly, Bush had been chipping away at Clinton's favorable ratings by references to the protests at Oxford "against his own country" and by contrasts between the President's military service and Clinton's waffling on why he never served. But, for three days, the issue of McCarthyism threatened to eclipse Bush's attacks. Realizing that, Bush's team of advisors urged him to back off from the Moscow connection and to focus instead on the immorality of Clinton's demonstrating abroad. This he did in the first debate, saying at one point, "And I'm sorry, but demonstrating -- it's not a question of character and judgment." Thus did Bush seek to alter a frame he himself had put forward a week earlier. But Clinton would not let him off the hook. "You have questioned my patriotism," he said. "You even brought some rightwing Congressman into the White House to plot how to attack me for going to Russia in 1969-70 when over 50,000 other Americans did." Now Clinton takes matters to a higher level, suggesting that Bush himself may have been doing a disservice to his country by even bringing up the issue, and, what's more, that he should have known better, given his own father's shining example:

But when Joe McCarthy was around attacking people's patriotism, he was wrong. He was wrong. And a Senator from Connecticut stood up to him named Prescott Bush. Your father was right to stand up to Joe McCarthy. You were wrong to attack my patriotism. I was opposed to the war but I love my country, and we need a President who will bring this country together, not divide it. We've got enough division. I want to lead a unified country.

To this response, Bush was effectively silenced, and it had the effect of blunting the President's attacks on other aspects of Clinton's character and judgment.

*Concluding Comments*

This essay has drawn upon numerous examples in explicating the concept of "going meta" (and the related concept of "meta-move"), and in providing a sense of the pushes and pulls on political actors in going meta in political confrontations. It should be evident why attacks such as these are so often the subject of repeated television replays and journalistic commentaries in campaign coverage (Jamieson, 1992:211).

The first part of this essay was devoted to conceptual matters: differentiating going meta from self-referential meta-communications, from non-strategic responses, from non-reflexive direct exchange, and from frame-maintaining messages. Worth recalling from this discussion is that communicators may go meta to other communicators or to their shared message context, and that they may do so both by discrete meta-moves, and by repeated patterns of response. Also worth noting is that the same meta-move may alter more than one frame simultaneously, as Judge Thomas did in both stepping outside the frame of direct exchange and supplying, by way of his "lynching" metaphor, a new way of viewing the hearings.

The Hill-Thomas hearings illustrated the centrality in political confrontations of rival claims to legitimacy. Here we proposed a view of legitimacy, not as a countable property of political actors, but as contextual and ultimately performative. The decision to go meta in political confrontations also impacts on legitimacy. It is a way of going "one-up" on one's opponents and thereby reaping significant rewards, but it may also be seen as evasive, intrusive, disruptive, or contentious -- hence, in some contexts, illegitimate. Ironically, political actors may be regarded as more genuine, and even as more heroic, the more going meta seems a gamble in a rhetorically dicey situation. But much depends in any case on how one goes meta, and on how one prepares the ground for going meta. Colonel Oliver North and his attorney never said explicitly that North had been victimized by North's interlocutors, but they so effectively prepared the ground for the "documents" debacle (with help from Nields) that words became unnecessary. On the other hand, attorney Arthur Liman was able to capitalize on North's by then habitual stance of injured party that he was able to use North's resistance against him in a stellar performance of rhetorical jujitsu. Bill Clinton also played the aggrieved victim in his confrontation with Donahue, but this time to mixed effect. The trouble was that he probably over-reached in threatening silence should Donahue persist in asking embarrassing questions. Clinton was unequivocally successful in debating the "patriotism" issue with Bush, in part because he refused to let Bush off the hook for Bush's seemingly excessive criticisms of him. In all these instances, and in others discussed in the essay, we see underscored the importance of appearing to stand on higher ground than one's opponents. This is consonant with Bateson's notion of meta-communication as not just about or beyond or outside, but above -- at a higher level than -- the message or message context that it frames reflexively. This sense of going meta as moving upwards in conceptual space is reflected in the number of ordinary language expressions corresponding to our sense of higher as better, or more sweeping, or more abstract, or more spiritual, or as transcendent -- all of which are potential sources of legitimacy.

This essay has broached a concept and explored some of its applications to the political arena. It remains to further develop the concept and to apply it in a variety of contexts. How is going meta used as an instrument of power in the boardroom, the classroom, and the bedroom? How can going meta be used cooperatively, as a form of intellectual play, or as a way of advancing consideration of a question? This essay has also focused most of its attention on the smallest unit of going meta, that of the individual meta-move in response to a single message or message context. But, as was suggested earlier, one can go meta to entire streams or patterns of discourse. It would be interesting in this connection to bring the concept of "going meta" to bear on the many discourses comprising the "political correctness" debate, including the charge that the very critique of "political correctness" conceals its own political agenda.

It would also be interesting in this wise to think back on the 1992 campaign of Ross Perot. Perot was very much the meta- candidate, not just in respect to particular utterances or stretches of campaign talk; his style of campaigning challenged the very institutions of talk. And he made it clear, if elected, that he would repair the institutions of governmental talk as well. Perot, the expert at organizational communication, would end gridlock in Washington, just as Perot, the rhetorical critic of campaigning as usual, had shown that there was an alternative to jumping around the country, offering up silly one-liners and photo opportunities at airport stops for the local news. Virtually every major campaign move of Perot's, beginning with his initial refusal to hire handlers, pollsters, and "cosmetologists" (his word), and culminating in his thirty minute, chart-in-hand infomercials, was an implicit repudiation of the campaign practices of his opponents.

Yet there was also a point during Perot's first incarnation as Presidential candidate at which the repeated challenging of reporters' questions began to wear thin. As the questions got tougher and Perot's responses got testier, his strategy of going meta seemed to backfire. Likewise, in the Presidential debates, one wished eventually for more substantive talk and less talk about talk. Too often, his stock of solutions seemed limited to plans for cutting back the deficit. Not always is going meta an appropriate substitute for direct exchange. As this essay has argued throughout, going meta is an art of rhetorical balance.

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