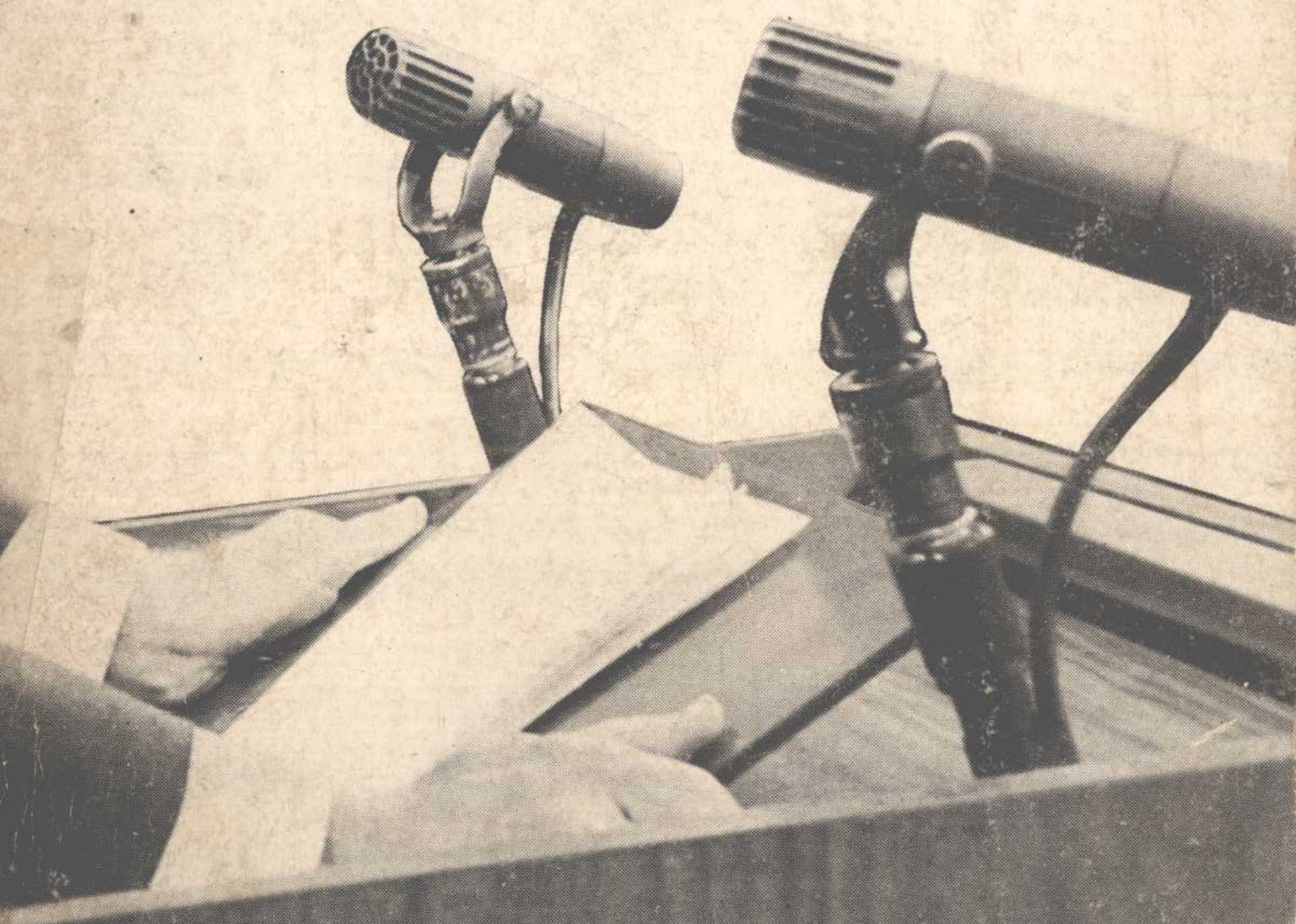


**CRITICAL DIMENSIONS:  
THE ART OF  
PUBLIC ADDRESS  
CRITICISM**  
**ANTHONY HILLBRUNER**



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# Critical Dimensions

*The Art of Public Address Criticism*

STUDIES IN *Speech*



*Consulting Editor* DON GEIGER

*University of California, Berkeley*

RANDOM HOUSE / *New York*

*To Laura*

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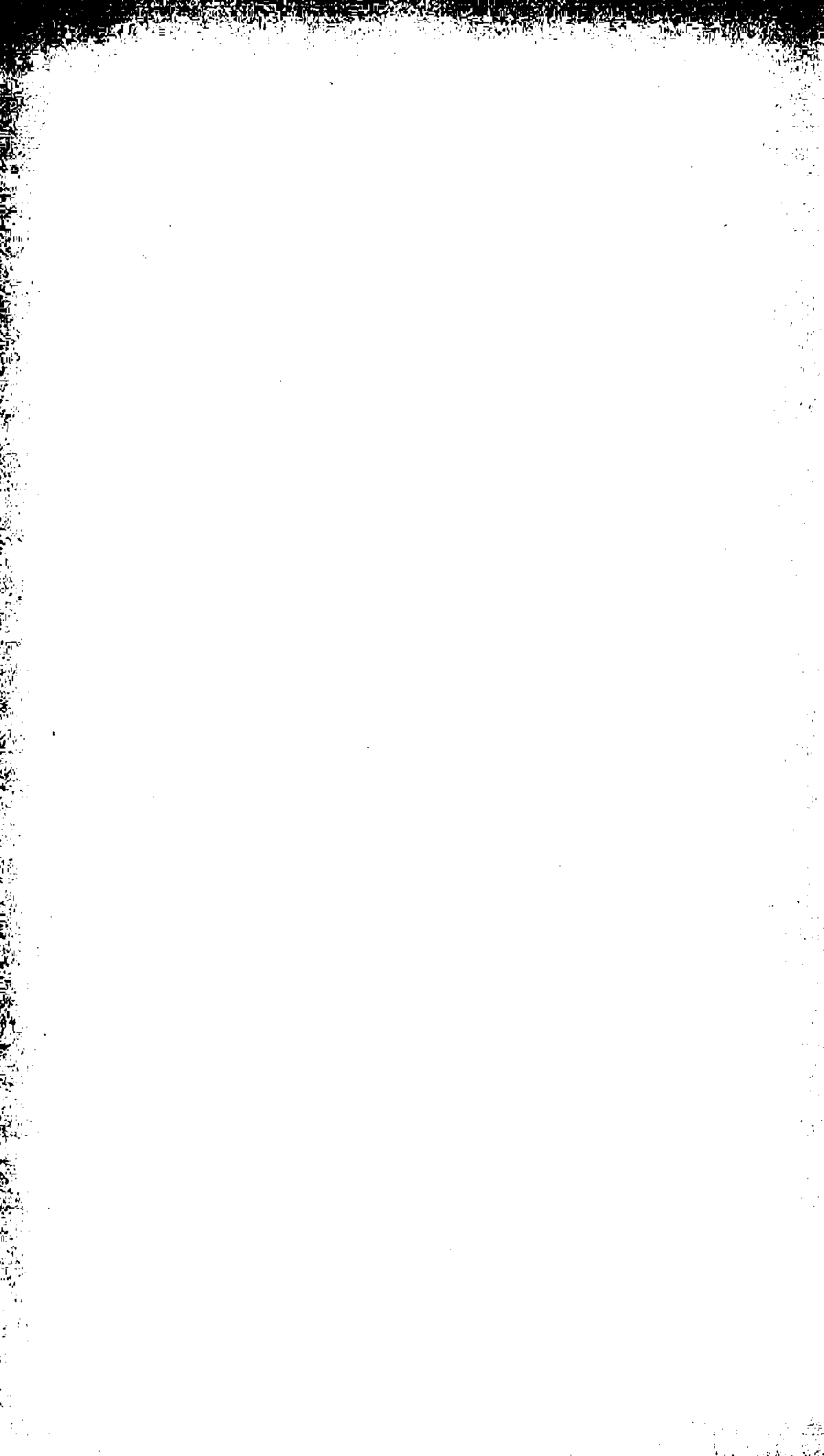
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# Critical Dimensions

*The Art of Public Address Criticism*





## *Introduction*

While criticism of public address has been going on since the first orator stood up to persuade his peers to take a certain course of action, it has only been in the last several decades that it has attained academic stature and prestige. Herbert A. Wichelns' precedent establishing "The Literary Criticism of Oratory" was an extremely persuasive document when it was published in 1925. It not only established the benchmarks which academic rhetorical critics tried to use in their own criticism, but it also set out the methodological process by which effective criticism was to be attained. In this work, Wichelns analyzed a number of analytical and critical approaches used by important literary critics. He found most of them wanting in what he, as a critic, would term "true" rhetorical criticism. He proposed a "full blown" critical approach. This was of great value to future generations of critics. It provided a rationale that rhetorical critics had been seeking; it provided a differentiation, a significant one, between literary and rhetorical evaluation. For all this, rhetorical scholars should be extremely grateful.

In a way, however, Wichelns has done the critic of public address a disservice with his emphasis upon a "full blown" criticism. The public address critic, after Wichelns, attempted to use *all* the rhetorical factors—or as many as were feasible within the manageable limits of the essay—to evaluate the speaker. Moreover, he tried to use these all the time. This is not to say that the critiques that have followed him are of no value; quite the contrary. At a time when much criticism was impressionistic, fragmentary, even capricious, Wichelns

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called for a disciplined scholarly approach. Unfortunately for public address criticism, he was too persuasive. In establishing criteria for speech scholars (most of the essays in the first two volumes of the *History and Criticism of American Public Address* were modeled after his formulations), he accomplished his purpose of rejuvenating public address criticism too well. In the process, therefore, his call for a definitive criticism also had its pernicious effects.

One effect was to force a pattern of criticism—largely the Aristotelian one—on speech scholars, thereby hampering the latent creativity of a diversity of approaches to criticism. Another was the emphasis upon the “full blown” approach. A third fostered an almost unnatural objectivity on critics, restricting their intuitive discernments and their use of critical assessments.

It is only now that public address critics are breaking out of the rhetorical cocoon that was so strongly wound about them by Wichelns. Some of the creativity and diversity in criticism which had been present before Wichelns, even though it was undisciplined then, are returning to effective rhetorical assessment. In other words, criticism after Wichelns had attained unity but began to lack variety. The unified approach needed to be recommended, since speech research and criticism in the academic community was in its infancy, had little standing and therefore needed to be prodded. This Wichelns accomplished most admirably.

Yet, despite Wichelns, when one examines the criticism of public address one can find some diversity, much of which has appeared within the last decade or so. Contemporary critics are beginning to follow the conception that useful evaluation can have as its aim the criticism of almost any significant aspect of public address. It can concern itself with a speech: its ideas or its artistry or lack of either; its impact; its relation to current intellectual, scientific, religious, political, philosophical, educational or artistic problems; its relation to the speaker's deeds; its value; its results. Criticism can concern itself with a speaker in a “full blown” way, and this can be done on different levels. It can describe the cir-

cumstances of a speaker's life; it can analyze and interpret these circumstances; and finally, it can evaluate them in some meaningful way.

That there is no one critical approach to speaker, speech, and audience has now been accepted. Art is long. It has manifold ramifications. And certainly no small volume can deal fully with all of them.

This book's purpose is to select a number of rhetorical critical approaches, examine their underlying bases and objectives, illustrate the approaches with excerpts from essays and monographs, ask questions about them, analyze and assess their value, and suggest problems for further work and study. In short, this is an analysis of criticism. It is all related to two fundamental questions. *How* good is contemporary criticism of public address? *What* good is contemporary criticism of public address? Hopefully, the student of public address, who may eventually burgeon as a rhetorical critic, will gain from this examination a discernment into the criticism of public address.

This work is organized in two parts: the first part will be concerned with the extrinsic factors in criticism; the second will focus on the intrinsic ones.

The extrinsic factors are those exterior to the speech itself, although of salient significance to it. They are such factors as the historical description and analysis of the times, of the audience and of the occasion. They deal with biographical description and analysis. And finally, they are concerned with a historical description and analysis of the effects of the speech.

The intrinsic factors are those dealing more comprehensively with the speech itself. They focus on a description and an analysis of the speaker's ideas, content, or invention, as well as with an interpretation and evaluation of them. Then, too, intrinsic factors are concerned with the more formal aspects of the speechmaking: structure, style, presentation. Here, of course, is rhetorical description and analysis as well as interpretation and evaluation of these important aspects of form. The latter two facets are especially significant primarily because of the comparative dearth of these in contemporary criticism.

The fact is, when one begins to study criticism of public address, one is amazed at the lack of emphasis on evaluation and comparative judgment. It could be that the focus on objective processes in criticism has brought this about. At any rate, most of the so-called criticism today really is historical scholarship. Some of it is descriptive and analytical, but little is actually critical in the more exact sense of the word as evaluative judgment. It is hoped that this book may suggest ways and means for effective valuation and thus give impetus to this phase of criticism.

In this work the study and evaluation of criticism, while it can be categorized in many different ways, will be concerned primarily with critical studies of speakers. Thus there will be no evaluation of such interesting approaches to public address and critical studies as the study of a significant period in speechmaking, such as the so-called "Golden Age of American Oratory." Nor will there be the study of an interesting area in which oratory bloomed, such as "Southern Oratory." Nor for that matter will it focus on a political or social movement related to oratory as "The Speaking of the Neo-Conservatives," or "The Populist Movement."

One must be aware that useful criticism—in the broad sense of the term—can even encompass the effective use of any one facet of the procedures suggested above. Description and analysis of the period, of the audience and occasion; description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation of specific canons and of the speaker himself—all constitute a legitimate kind of critical activity, always provided that it offers useful critical insights into some phase of public address. It is to that aim that this work is dedicated.

*Extrinsic Factors  
in the Criticism  
of Public Address*

*Part One.*



# *I Historical Description and Analysis of the Times*

Perhaps more than in the criticism of any art form, more than in literature, painting, or music, for instance, the times, or to put it more elaborately, the socio-cultural milieu, plays a significantly influential and molding role in public address and its criticism.

The importance of the social context for public address is omnipresent. In order to find the "essence" of a work of art such as a great speech, one must investigate the relation of the speaker's words to the civilization or culture that produced them.

That no speech is made in a vacuum is a truism in public address study. To be more explicit, every speech, especially a significant one, not only is the invention of the speaker, but a product of the time, the occasion, and the audience. Although a speech is given or produced by an individual, it really is a function of all these elements. Without them, and without a unique synthesis of them, no important speech could be given.

The critic's first job in his study of a specific speech, a group of speeches, or of a speaker, for that matter, is to discover what was happening at the juncture of history in which the speech event took place. The critic takes this segment of time, puts boundaries around it, isolates it, so to speak, by figuratively putting it under a microscope. After the examination, he notes the salient features of the period and describes its notable characteristics. For this, of course, he must rely upon his colleagues in such academic disciplines as history, economics, politi-



cal science, and sociology. Much of this material, therefore, comes from secondary sources. In certain instances, however, such as in local or regional situations, the critic may find it necessary to go to original sources. This may be more difficult, but it is necessary.

In order to uncover the contextual background of the speech or the speaker, the critic must develop a keen historical sense for the data. He will be aided in his task if he relies on the great historians whenever feasible. This is so because it is historical discernment which the critic needs, and it is this insight which characterizes the great historical scholar.

Perhaps the simplest approach to the description of the times is to delineate the political situation. This is needful since American society is noted for the flux in which it often operates. Within the span of a decade, or a generation, for instance, the political picture nationally, or regionally, can be altered radically. Moreover, the change in political administrations, such as that from Herbert Hoover's *laissez-faire* Republican one to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal Democratic one, often can be a significant index to the times. Such a substitution of administrations reflects the changing attitudes not only toward political questions and problems, but toward economic and social ones as well, since the latter two are inextricably tied to the former.

From this ever-changing political, economic and social construct comes the basic intellectual ingredients of the society. And from this comes something which is at once broader in one sense, and more specific in another. This is the value system.

Political theorists and sociologists tell us that the value system changes with the times. These changes, in the narrow sense, mean the interpretation of basic ideas (or values) of a specific society. The basic values themselves are not done away with very rapidly, however.

For example, an important basic idea in America is the democratic spirit, which is so often invoked by political, religious or social speakers. The three parts of this significant value are those virtues of a democratic society popularized in late 18th century France, *liberté, égalité,*