DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 379 721 CS 508 842

AUTHOR Ratliff, Jeanne; Salvador, Michael
TITLE Building Nuclear Communities: The Hanford Education Action League.
PUB DATE Nov 94
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of The Speech Communication Association (80th, New Orleans, LA, November 19-22, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Involvement; Discourse Analysis; Higher Education; *Literary Genres; *Organizational Communication; *Political Issues; *Rhetorical Criticism; Social Action
IDENTIFIERS Discourse Communities; *Hanford Education Action League; *Jeremiads; Social Movements; Washington

ABSTRACT

Many scholars have examined the jeremiad in American rhetoric and political discourse. The Hanford Education Action League (HEAL), which influenced policy changes in the operations of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington, is a social movement organization whose founding members used the jeremiad to create a symbolic community which challenged established social order. The Hanford Reservation made the plutonium that produced the world's first atomic bomb and was operated without oversight under strict secrecy (as allowed by the Atomic Energy Act). HEAL's initial goal was to breach the walls that held Hanford's secrets to determine what effect its ionizing radiation had on health and the environment and to provide the public with the information. In May 1984, a local minister (and former research chemist), delivered a sermon drawing comparisons between the Holocaust and the nuclear establishment's "reckless use...of radioactive elements." A study group was formed, and by September, HEAL was organized. In 1986 information about the harmful effects of radiation was released to the local newspaper. The Department of Energy (DOE) released 19,000 pages of newly declassified data, and the HEAL newsletter began systematically analyzing the data, using the DOE's own methods of calculation. Of paramount interest was the "Green Run" of 1949, when Hanford, to test its monitoring equipment, secretly released radioactive material. Health problems (miscarriages, cancers, birth defects, etc.) suffered by people in the area were documented, and Hanford's reactors were eventually shut down, although nuclear waste and contamination are still a big issue. HEAL's jeremiad reconfigured history, offering a "counter-myth" which portrayed Americans as the victims, rather than the beneficiaries, of government secrecy, and DOE as villain rather than guardian. The jeremiad form, however, seems to have limited the scope of HEAL's social/political critique, since the jeremiad carries fundamental assumptions that limit serious considerations of structural change. (Contains 18 references.) (NKA)

Building Nuclear Communities: The Hanford Education Action League[1]

Jeanne Ratliff, Washington State University
Michael Salvador, Washington State University

This paper examines the rhetorical construction of a social movement organization: the Hanford Education Action League (HEAL). HEAL is widely credited with influencing significant policy changes in the operations of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in central Washington State. The study approaches HEAL as a symbolic community created and sustained through a rhetorical jeremiad articulated by the League's founding members, and recurrently reproduced in League publications and speeches.

First, the paper discusses the jeremiad as a rhetorical genre, particularly focusing on the jeremiad's relevance to social movement rhetoric. Next, we illustrate the rhetoric of HEAL through an exploration of the League's founding sermon and its symbolic use of the "Green Run" story. The study concludes by noting both the enabling and constraining features of jeremiad rhetoric for groups challenging the established social order.

The Jeremiad

Numerous scholars have examined the place of the

---

[1] Paper presented at the 1994 Speech Communication Association annual meeting. New Orleans.

jeremiad in American rhetoric (Carpenter, 1978; Johannesen, 1985, 1986; Ritter, 1980, Murphy, 1990), as well as a Biblical text (Zulick, 1992). The genre of the jeremiad is linked to early Puritan sermons, which "warned their people that they were straying from their special relationship with God and must face disaster if they did not turn back from corruption to live by the national covenant" (Ritter, 1980, p. 157). Carpenter (1978) discusses the historical jeremiad as "a secular treatise which accomplishes its goals rhetorically by a process leading readers to view themselves as a chosen people confronted by a timely, if not urgent, warning that, unless a certain course of atoning action is followed, dire consequences will ensure" (p. 104).

Several writers have noted the significance of the jeremiad in American political discourse. Murphy (1990) argues that political leaders have recurrently expressed "American Jeremiads [which] assume that Americans are a chosen people with the special mission of establishing that 'shining city on a hill'" (p. 404). In place of religious doctrine, the secular American Jeremiad takes as its founding vision the "American Dream" of America as a promised land with a special destiny (Johannesen, 1985). The rhetorical potency of the jeremiad lies in its mythic (re)constitution of the past and future: Defining the errors of the past which have led to a contemporary crisis, and providing a prophetic vision of future redemption. Thus, jeremiads "provide a source of renewal of cultural

identity in a time of political conflict" (Ritter, 1980, p. 171), and "define the problems a community faces and enable the community to understand itself and its values"" (Murphy, 1990, p. 402).

Given that a fundamental feature of the genre is a call for essential social change in order to avert calamity, it would seem that the jeremiad is ideally suited to social movement objectives. Yet, little mention has been given to the jeremiad as a significant element in movement rhetoric. Perhaps this is because, as Murphy (1990) argues, "the jeremiad cannot serve as a vehicle for social criticism" (p. 404), because it inevitably reinforces the dominant cultural system. Yet, Murphy and the other writers mentioned above examine establishment leaders such as presidents and presidential candidates. Given this focus, it is not surprising that a consistent feature of such rhetoric is its reinforcement of the dominant political system. Is it possible for groups outside the establishment to adopt the rhetorical form of a jeremiad which challenges the prevalent symbolic order of the time?

The Hanford Education Action League provides a viable case study to explore this question. This paper argues that HEAL embodies the rhetorical form of a jeremiad which did challenge particular elements of the American establishment, while subtly reinforcing other aspects of American ideology. To explain this argument fully, we next illustrate the jeremiad rhetoric of the League, and conclude

with a discussion of both its politically combative and ideologically reinforcing trajectories.

HEAL's Rhetorical Jeremiad

The Hanford Nuclear Reservation in southeastern Washington State made the plutonium that produced the world's first atomic bomb, detonated at Alamogordo, New Mexico. As such, it held a mythic place in American history. Not only did it make "the weapons that ended World War II [it was also] the largest workhorse weapons production site in U.S. history" (Gerber 1992). Hanford, like other nuclear weapons producing plants, was administered by the Department of Energy (DOE) under the Atomic Energy Act. The Act allowed all nuclear weapons plants to be operated, as a matter of national security, in secret and without oversight. HEAL's initial goal was to breach the containment walls that held Hanford's secrets in order to determine what effect, if any, Hanford's ionizing radiation had on health and the environment.

When William Harper Houff delivered his May 20, 1984, sermon, he was speaking as a minister of the Unitarian Church of Spokane. In addition to being a minister, he holds a Ph.D. in organic chemistry, and is a former research chemist. Titled "Silent Holocaust," the sermon drew comparisons between the Holocaust of World War II and the American military and commercial nuclear establishment's "reckless use and misuse of radioactive elements...which may

well turn out to be an order of magnitude worse [than the World War II Holocaust] in terms of the human suffering it ultimately causes and the destructiveness that is incurred to future civilizations" (Houff 1984, pp. 1-2). He called it a "silent holocaust," first because radiation cannot be seen or heard or smelled, and, second, because "despite massive evidence to the contrary, American officialdom...has uttered almost no words of alarm,...but have...frequently taken extravagant measures to silence those who do sound a warning" (p. 1). The sermon detailed human use of nuclear knowledge. From snake oil salesmen who sold patented medicines containing radium, to the U.S. War Department who sent military personnel into Hiroshima and Nagasaki and then denied them military benefits for radiation-caused illnesses, the effects of radiation had been denied by those who controlled it.

Houff went on to detail specific examples of government and industry disregard for human life and safety. Some watch and clockmakers, for example, used radium was used to make the dials of watches and clocks luminous from about 1915 to around 1935, . Workers "regularly pointed their brushes by moistening them between their lips" (3). Business owners, with the support of the U.S. Health Service, denied any connection between that work and the deaths of dozens of these workers from cancers and other radiation-induced illnesses, yet the radium "which had gotten into the victims' bones made the skeletons so

radioactive that years later they could still be detected with a Geiger counter" (3). The government was no better, denying harmful effects of radiation on Japanese civilians, and, by extension, the American military, although "a once-secret government document revealing that radiation levels two months after the Nagasaki bombing were ten times the level considered safe for civilians" (5) (emphasis theirs) indicated otherwise.

Dr. Houff called on his audience to recover control of the Department of Energy from the nuclear establishment to save the lives of those people who, because of official secrecy, did not know they were suffering from radiation-induced, and, ipso facto, government-induced, illness and, who, therefore, delay treatment until they can no longer be saved. He also called his audience to return control of the government to the people, in order that the people might protect themselves. Among other things, Houff said

> we must become a great deal better-informed personally and an enormous amount more hard-nosed in confronting our politicians, bureaucrats and technicians, who offer us platitudes and lies while inexorably killing us and our children" (13).

While apologizing for telling such a "dismal story," Dr. Houff said he felt he had to speak or he would be "as morally culpable as those bureaucrats and technicians who have repeatedly suppressed discussion of radiation hazards

in the name of not upsetting people" (p. 13). This demonstrates the prophetic role of the jeremiad: the speaker expresses his own sense of responsibility to call for change, a leader's -- or prophet's -- role, while, at the same time, acknowledging he is one of the people and, therefore, responsible for being part of the movement to make change. With his call to action, Dr. Houff speaks of his concern with his own responsibility, with the responsibility of the people, and with the health of those who has been, and continue to be, effected.

The sermon, then, was a jeremiad: a call to action, a timely and urgent warning of the need for drastic change. American nuclear policy had lead to injustice. Unless change occurred, there would be dire consequences: a silent, American, holocaust perhaps worse than the first.

At the conclusion of the service, a number of people came forward to talk. Apparently, the sermon lead at least some listeners to view themselves as a people with a mission, a people chosen to perform the task of returning society to rightness of purpose. This group met as a study group about every two weeks through the summer and "quickly expanded beyond the Unitarian congregation" ("Hanford Education Action League: Overview," 1985, p. 4). On September 6, 1984, the study group ceased and a new organization was formalized: the Hanford Education Action League (HEAL) was born.

HEAL's original intent was to inform its members and the public about the effects of ionizing radiation on public health and the environment. Dr. Houff's initial recommendations - being personally well-informed, the need for independent studies, government, and, especially, Department of Energy accountability, and a willingness to confront the establishment - served as the basis of HEAL's mission. Evidence gathered during the first few years of its existence suggested that radiation was harmful. It also suggested that the government, especially the Department of Energy (DOE), had not been helpful in providing substantive information on which to make informed decisions about Hanford's effect on the region. DOE claimed the need for national security demanded it operate in secret: Hanford portrayed its mission as protecting the people of America by providing an impenetrable national defense. HEAL, however, claimed that what was impenetrable was the truth about Hanford's effect on the health of the environment and citizens in the area. One method HEAL used to break through was by joining other groups in filing, in January of 1986, a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for Hanford documents.

The "Hanford Historical Documents" were released on February 27, 1986. The Tri-City Herald, reporting the release in a page one story, quoted several DOE executives who stated the papers suggested the impact of Hanford on offsite was "minimal [and] show no significant offsite

environmental contamination or health hazards" from Hanford (O'Toole 1986, February 28, A1). With these statements, 19,000 pages of newly declassified, raw data containing DOE material on Hanford operations were released to the public. The stack of papers reached a height of five feet.

The March/April, 1986, HEAL Newsletter carried the first analysis of information from these documents, and the first reference to what would become known as the Green Run. HEAL researcher Tim Connor identified December 2, 1949, as the date DOE performed what Connor called an "experiment" at Hanford reprocessing plant resulting in the release of over 5,000 curies of iodine-131" (p. 6). The article compared the 5,000+ release from Hanford with the 15 curies released from the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, considered, at that time, to be the nation's worst nuclear accident. Using the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's own methods of calculation, Allen Benson, a Ph.D. in chemistry and HEAL steering committee member, determined the amount of radiation inhaled by infants up to 14 miles away was enough to put "infants and fetuses...clearly in jeopardy." A manager of Battelle's Environmental Monitoring Program, when asked to comment on those calculations, thought they were "unreasonably high," but admitted he had not measured the effects of the fallout in the surrounding area and he didn't know anyone who had. This made DOE appear uncaring about the health of the most precious and vulnerable, infants and fetuses, while HEAL appeared to be trying to protect those

innocents. The implication was that, if DOE would not protect the most vulnerable, could anyone else reasonably expect to be protected? The Green Run thus reinforced HEAL's rhetorical jeremiad.

The newsletter article also contained numerous denials by officials of the DOE and DOE Hanford in relation to any health risks to people in the surrounding area (Connor 1986, p. 6). Hanford was pictured as refusing to face the truth of what it had done, and, as such, being not just an unknowing participant in the Silent Holocaust, but being an active part of it. This put them in the category of the impenitent in denial about their own wrongdoing. It served as a demonstration of why change was so desperately needed. If those who had done wrong in the past wouldn't acknowledge their wrongdoing, they couldn't be expected to get right with the American Way.

Again, this meshed with HEAL's Jeremiad myth. Where first the people were warned of impending doom unless drastic change occurred, the Green Run demonstrated the need for a moral call on those causing the harm to cease and for immediate change. In this sense, it was HEAL's responsibility as a chosen people to seek secular justice, to warn of the need for drastic change and reveal the dire consequences if the warning went unheeded.

Another function of the jeremiad is that it "helps to define (and redefine) the meaning of the American past" (Carpenter 1980, p. 164). Whereas DOE had previously

claimed the right to absolute secrecy, for national security purposes, now HEAL was claiming the right to information for a different type of national security--the ability of individuals to be safe from their own government. HEAL, by relating a more current concern -- illnesses caused by plutonium -- was able to redefine Hanford's mission as, first, protecting area residents from the facility, and second, national defense.

The Green Run, which had occurred soon after the Soviets had exploded their first atomic bomb, was designed to allow the Air Force to test its accuracy in measuring airborne radioactivity. In order to determine the accuracy of its measurements, the Air Force needed to conduct a test where it knew the amount of radioactive material released. Fuel containing radio-iodine 131 was released from Hanford to allow the Air Force to test its monitoring equipment. "The standard at that time was to let fuel cool for ninety to one hundred days to allow the iodine 131, as well as other radio-isotopes, to decay, so that, when they processed the fuel, they wouldn't be releasing huge amounts of radiation" (Thomas 1992, p.14). On December 2, 1949, the fuel was still young, only 16 days, and, therefore, "green." HEAL declared that this experiment was carried out without the knowledge or consent of the people on whom it was conducted.

The declassification of the Green Run report provided evidence that people had been hurt by the release and proof that the government had known, at the time of the experiment, that such would be the case. The Spokane newspaper, the Spokesman-Review, re-presented HEAL's Green Run story, stating, on May 4, 1989, that "In a test that apparently went awry, Hanford's Cold War-era scientists and the military turned Eastern Washington into a radiation laboratory on the night of December 2, 1949 contaminating most of the eastern parts of Washington and Oregon" (Steele, p. 1). The Green Run, identified as "the only deliberate release of radiation in Hanford's postwar history" (A1), was, unlike nuclear accidents which are usually referred to as "events," called an "experiment by DOE personnel. Mike Lawrence, DOE's Richland operations manager, stated, "We're already told Congress that the purpose of this experiment wasn't human experimentation or radiation warfare. Although there are some deletions, it clearly shows this was a monitoring effort" (A1). J. W. Healy, who was present the night of the Green Run, stated that, when the radiation release started to go wrong, "We weren't worried because the experiment had been thoroughly reviewed" (A4).

The Spokesman-Review story echoed HEAL's prophetic redefinition of the past, declaring that the military and scientific community had conducted secret experiments on

Americans. While living out their daily lives in the beautiful and fertile Palouse farming region and urban areas like the city of Spokane, the public, without being informed, had been imprisoned in some mad scientific experiment. Although "cattle and other animals were tested afterward...there was no public health warning and Hanford managers never conducted follow-up studies on area residents" (Steele p. 1). The radiation release was linked to thyroid cancer and other ailments. Hanford, no longer defined as the producer of the weapons that ended the last great war, now stood defined as an entity which was part of a holocaust that hadn't yet ended. Just as with the European holocaust, these scientists had experimented on a civilian population, causing cancers and heart disease. The Green Run story thus validated the goal of HEAL jeremiad. It defined the problems a community faces, it warned the people to turn back from nuclear corruption and live by the national covenant. The need to return to rightness -- putting the health and safety of American citizens first -- was clear. Only in this way could American values be redeemed.

On July 12, 1990, over four years after HEAL's first announcement of the Green Run, DOE, for the first time, acknowledged the significance of the health risks borne by people living in the wide arc covering Eastern Washington, Eastern Oregon and Idaho who were in the path of the releases. The errors of the past had lead to contemporary

health crises for those living downwind of Hanford. The following day brought public revelations that "Some babies near Hanford got twice Chernobyl dose" (Steele 1990). Additional radioactive releases had occurred during the 40s and 50s and even later. This article, and a companion article, "Downwinders finally hear truth" (Steele, p. A4), identified people in the surrounding area who suffered from thyroid problems, cancers, miscarriages, stillbirths, and birth defects. Things atomic were presented not as progress or as the weapons that won World War II, but as instruments of terror used against the American civilian population -- silent killers. Even the most vulnerable, fetuses and babies, weren't safe from the scientists. Some women in the area surrounding Hanford had suffered as many as six miscarriages. These articles also spoke of a government acknowledging its guilt and willing to stop the corruption and return to the fold of the faithful -- at least at the Hanford location.

Hanford's reactors were eventually shut down. N Reactor had been deactivated in the latter half of the 1980s. From all appearances, it would not be reactivated. In 1990, the last of the military reactors at Hanford, the Plutonium Uranium Extraction plant (PUREX), ceased operations. Facility cleanup is expected to take at least thirty years. Nuclear waste and contamination are still a big issue.

Conclusion

The rhetoric which constituted HEAL as a social movement personifies a jeremiad in which a chosen people were called upon to correct a transgression of the American Way in order to avoid a continued holocaust. The rhetorical form of this jeremiad provided a redefinition of the past, a prophetic vision of the future, and a course of action for the present. As a foundational rhetoric for a social movement organization, HEAL's jeremiad both challenged the established order, and maintained elements of dominant American Militaristic ideology.

In part, HEAL's rhetoric articulated a direct affront to the institutionalized, historical cold-war mythology which held that government was primarily concerned with the protection of American citizens, and national security was the preeminent premise for public decision making and secrecy. HEAL's Jeremiad reconstituted that history as one of deception and self interest on the part of the military and DOE. This "counter-myth" portrayed American citizens as the victim, rather than beneficiary, of government secrecy, and the DOE as villain rather than guardian. This reconfiguration of history provided -- indeed, demanded -- a more powerful role for citizen oversight of previously insulated agencies. It also delegitimized official claims to secrecy based on national security as a historical precedent, depicting such assertions as deceitful frauds and a cover-up for wrongdoing. These features of HEAL rhetoric

furnished a base of political authority and credibility, which the organization used in fostering press coverage and government hearings on Hanford activities.

Contrarily, the rhetoric of HEAL also implicitly sustained key elements of the militaristic ideology which helped maintain the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. First, HEAL did not challenge the technocratic vision of progress underlying nuclear development. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that many of HEAL's leaders were themselves scientists and technical experts in the field. Nonetheless, HEAL's jeremiad called for better, or impartial, technical experts, not for a fundamental questioning of the technical sphere as the proper site for such decision making. In HEAL's rhetoric, Hanford's problem was with "bad technocrats," not with bad technology, or with a system which overpowered technical experts in the first place.

Second, HEAL's jeremiad isolated the DOE from pervasive American ideology in general. It portrayed Hanford as an aberration of the American Way. But what if Hanford was not an aberration, but rather a phenomenon consistent with American values? Here, HEAL seems to epitomize Murphy's (1990) contention that American Jeremiads may limit the potential depth of social criticism. Because HEAL portrayed Hanford as straying from the True Path -- a thorough questioning of the assumptions underlying American policy was hindered. As Murphy notes: "By looking at the past

through the jeremiad, Americans limit the kinds of choices they can make about the future. While reform within that tradition is possible, the jeremiad carries fundamental assumptions that make serious considerations of structural change difficult" (p. 412).

HEAL influenced significant changes in one of the most powerful agencies of the federal government. The organization's call for change was built upon a rhetorical jeremiad which challenged accepted mythologies about American history. The jeremiad form, however, seems to have limited the scope of HEAL's social/political critique. Further study of the role of jeremiads in social movement rhetoric should explore how the genre can offer an avenue to political power, and/or a blind alley of rhetorical sterility.

REFERENCES

Carpenter, R. H. (1978). The historical jeremiad as rhetorical genre. In K. K. Campbell & K. H. Jamieson, (Eds.) Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action, (pp. 103-117). Falls Church, Virginia: Speech Communication Association.

Connor, T. (1986, Mar/Apr). Hanford Documents. HEAL Newsletter.

Gerber, M. S. (1992). Legend and Legacy: Fifty Years of Defense Production at the Hanford Site. Richland, Washington: Westinghouse Hanford.

Hanford Education Action League. (1985, October). Hanford Education Action League: Overview of the Issues and History of HEAL. Spokane, WA.

Hanford Education Action League. (1986, May 1). Press Release/Hanford N Reactor. Spokane, WA.

Houff, W. H. (1984, May 20). Silent Holocaust. Sermon. Unitarian Church in Spokane, Washington (written copy provided by Dr. Houff).

Houff, W. H. (1986, July/Aug). "The Way We Have Traveled--A Personal Reminiscence." HEAL Newsletter.

Johannesen, R. L. (1985). The jeremiad and Jenkin Lloyd Jones. Communication Monographs, 52, 156-172.

Johannesen, R. L. (1986). Ronald Reagan's economic jeremiad. Central States Speech Journal, 37, 79-89.

Murphy, J. M. (1990). "A Time of Shame and Sorrow": Robert F. Kennedy and the American Jeremiad. Quarterly Journal of Speech, 76, 401-414.

O'Toole, K. (1986, February 28). Ill effects from Hanford limited, say DOE papers. Tri-City Herald. p. A1.

Ritter, K. W. (1980). American political rhetoric and the jeremiad tradition: Presidential nomination acceptance addresses, 1960-1976. Central States Speech Journal, 31, 153-171.

Sonner, S. (1990, July 12). Watkins admits seriousness of 1940s emissions. Spokesman-Review. pp. A1-2.

Steele, K. D. (1989, May 4). 1949 radiation release contaminated vast area. Spokesman-Review. pp. A1, A4.

Steele, K. D. (1990, July 13). Some babies near Hanford got twice Chernobyl dose. Spokesman-Review. pp. A1, A4.

Steele, K. D. (1990, July 13). Downwinders finally hear truth. Spokesman-Review. p. A4.

Thomas, J. (1992, December 15). Personal Interview.

Zulick, M. D. (1992). The agon of Jeremiah: On the dialogic invention of prophetic ethos. Quarterly Journal of Speech. 78, 125-148.