Letters to a President in Rhetorical Perspective: Glimpses of Public Morality

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Abstract. This study is premised on the possibility that citizens’ letters to President Gerald Ford that reacted to his pardon of Richard Nixon in 1974 can inform an understanding of “public morality,” particularly as it may reflect John Rohr’s conception of regime values and/or rhetoricians’ notions of collective public voice. The first section elaborates upon regime values and a rhetorical public voice as alternative expressions of public morality in the U.S. The second classifies interpretations of (our sample of) 53 letters either supporting or opposing the pardon among four conceptions of public morality explicated by Derek Edyvane. A final section introduces three political forces that have emerged in U.S. politics since the Watergate era (political polarization, identity politics, and distrust of facts). That discussion then explores plausible linkages between conceptions of public morality, substantive interpretations of letters in our sample, and the recent emergence of the three political forces.

Calls for public ethics reform are often premised on the need to re-establish a clear sense of public morality in civic life. For Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, rescuing public morality involves “recovering the language of the virtues and the courage to speak of what a good life looks like – as well as the clarity to identify what has gone wrong in our society when we fail to set out a clear picture of the good life…” (Williams 2010, n.p.) A section of the 1990 Volcker Commission Report Leadership in America: Rebuilding the Public Service takes note that “what people really think in Peoria” projects a murky picture of public life; they are proud of the American form of government but are nonetheless disenchanted with (bureaucrats) who are “responsible for [the federal government’s] day-to-day activities.” (National Commission on the Public Service 1990, p. 62) Thus, public morality, as characterized by Williams as the “good public life,” appears to be as evident in its absence as its presence.

For the American public administrator, the issue of discerning the essence of public morality could lead to confusion. On one hand, her professional education directs her to regime values accessible by carefully reflecting on important constitutional and statutory language as well as pertinent judicial opinions (Rohr 1989, pp. 59-96) But can a collective public voice (or voices) emanating from “we the people” convey enduring norms that prescribe what a good
public life entails as well? Some scholars of communication and rhetoric assert that a public rhetoric—that “influences the general climate of public dialogue” (Benson quoted in Hauser 1999, back cover)—interacts with a formal, official discourse of a regime. Although it shapes public opinion, this informal public rhetoric reflects certain core narratives anchored more deeply in societal tradition than transient public opinion. As an example, communication scholar Gerard Hauser relates how Polish resistance leaders capitalized on the *Kotwica*, a historical image of the Catholic Church as a unifying force to realize a future independent of the Soviet Union:

> [D]uring World War II, a common symbol of resistance that appeared on graffiti on the walls of buildings in Warsaw combined a *P* for Poland with a *W* for Warsaw into a single sign 🟢. The *W* [on the bottom] also formed the hooks of an anchor, the traditional symbol for the church. (1999, p. 126)

Is there reason for public administrators to discern similar, although perhaps less dramatic, public rhetoric in American society that conveys a sense of public morality that in some way interacts (presumably to complement or challenge) with notions of morality derived from regime values?

This inquiry interprets 53 letters written to President Gerald Ford reacting to his September 1974 action granting Richard Nixon “a full, free, and absolute pardon” for offenses he may have committed during the Watergate experience to determine if some semblance(s) of public morality surface(s) from some or all of those letters. Provided by the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, this sample of letters is contained in the “Philip W. Buchen Files, 1974-77”; Buchen served as Counsel to the President. Presidential pardons typically evoke strong, often negative, reactions since they are perceived as circumventing due process (a regime value). In fact, 72% of the nearly one-quarter million letters received responding to the Nixon pardon expressed opposition to Ford’s action. More recently, an NBC-SurveyMonkey poll found that
nearly 60% of those surveyed disapproved of President Trump’s 2017 pardon of former Maricopa County, Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio, convicted for contempt of a federal judge’s order not to detain suspected illegal immigrants (Treene 2017). Thus, it is expected that citizens’ letters written to a president reacting to the full pardon of a former president for crimes possibly committed could convey some collective senses of an organic public morality that stand apart from the regime values that John Rohr recognizes (1989).

Research efforts herein employ a historical-hermeneutic strategy that interprets “individual consciousness and subjectivity” to discover “intersubjectively shared meanings” that possibly relate to public morality. (Burrell and Morgan 1980, pp. 28, 31: also see Murray and Overton 2014, p. 23) The section to follow compares John Rohr’s notion or public morality as conveyed through regime values with some rhetoricians’ theories of collective public voices in the context of Ford’s 1974 pardon of Richard Nixon. A subsequent section categorizes letters (as interpreted) among four alternative conceptions of public morality. Next, a discussion section ascertains (1) if and how ideas about public morality conveyed in the letters relate to regime values and (2) if those ideas about public morality of the 1970’s remain pertinent to the current political discourse in the U.S. This study arrives at a conclusion that a shared vision of public morality discerned in a significant number of letters corresponds with, but stands apart from the substance of Rohr’s regime values.

Public Morality, Regime Values, and Public Voice(s)

To what extent do citizen reactions to public events and initiatives reflect “public morality”—that is, a shared core value representing a coherent public viewpoint—that rises above raw emotion, ephemeral opinion, or partisan alignment? This study probes such reactions in its interpretations of 53 citizen letters written to President Gerald Ford in response to his 1974
pardon of Richard Nixon. Specifically, inquiry here determines if some or all of these letters advance perspectives of public morality. But what specifically does “public morality” entail? On one hand, it appears reasonable to understand a public morality in terms of its implied publicness; it needs gravity beyond personal preferences and beliefs about governmental actions and policies. On the other, it seems logical that the force of regime values—as embedded as they may be in constitutional procedures—coexists with a “public realm” as “the locus of word and deeds by which humans establish their truths.” (Arendt 1958 as quoted by Hauser 1999, p. 269) In the event that this “public realm” does coexist with regime values as expressions of public morality, what implications might it (or should it) pose for public ethics in general and appropriate professional education for public servants in particular?

Attention to “public morality” as pertinent to the pardon issue herein follows two particular streams, one that relates to regime values in the U.S. context and another that applies various rhetorical perspectives to collective voice in (what Arendt calls) the public realm. For scholars of public administration, John Rohr’s work (most notably, in Ethics for Bureaucrats) serves as an especially provocative articulation of regime values that sharply distinguishes a “public” from “private” morality, the former premised upon constitutional provisions for a limited governmental role in social life. In an insightful essay, Richard Green distills Rohr’s thinking about the “distinctive obligations and characteristics” of a public morality constrained by regime values. In this effort Green identifies seven important thrusts of Rohr’s work: (1) that constitutional provisions for limited government “presume a constrained sphere of public morality”; (2) governmental officials are obligated to “give reasons for their actions”; (3) that public morality requires government officials follow “substantive and procedural principles law”; (4) that public officials maintain “impartiality and emotional distance” in pursuit of fairness; (5) that public officials must “forgo their own causes” in public matters; (6) that public
expectations of accountability lead to double standards for public officials; and (7) public officials have the obligation to represent “their own people first”, sometimes at the exclusion of others. (Green 2012, pp. 630-632) For Green, the net effect of Rohr’s understanding of regime values is to lower expectations of governmental morality given the realization that “public life demands compromise, tolerance of opposing principles and views, double standards and even a measure of hypocrisy.” (p. 633) In other words, lofty standards of universal moral obligation are often eclipsed by regime values.

Some other notable statements about public morality in the public administration literature published prior to the dissemination of Rohr’s ideas generally corroborate the challenges of and constraints upon moral actions within bureaucracies with his regime values approach. For example, Stephen Bailey identifies mental attitudes that the “moral public servant” must acquire to cope with moral ambiguities related to “men and [policy] measures,” “winds above the timber line” or the political pressures related to high-level decision-making, and “paradoxes of procedure” presumably associated with Rohr’s double standards (1964, pp. 236-240). In another case, York Willbern presents six types of “public morality” in an ascending order of “publicness” or the morality in high(er) level decision making contexts—approaching Bailey’s “timber line”; Willbern’s higher levels include “service orientation and procedural fairness”, “the ethic of democratic responsibility”, “the ethic of public policy determination”, and “the ethic of compromise and social integration”. As does Rohr and Bailey, Willbern focuses on the institutional constraints that militate against high moral ideals. Willbern concludes his article: “The word is full of saints, each of whom knows the way to salvation, and the role of the politician is that of the sinner who stands at the crossroad to keep saint from cutting the throat of saint. This may possibly be the highest ethical level for the public servant.” (1984, p. 108)
As Green notes in his essay, Rohr essentially discounts the values of “political philosophy” and “humanistic psychology” as underpinnings for public morality in the US (2012, p. 629; Rohr 1989, pp. 65-68). Is there, then, no room at all for a collective public voice in the articulation of public morality? Some rhetoricians maintain that there is indeed a central role for such a collective voice, but they do so cognizant of arguments to the contrary (such as those Rohr advances). For example in making the case for “the rhetorical construction of public morality”, communication scholar Celeste Condit acknowledges that what erroneously passes as “public morality” is essentially the brokering of private viewpoints; further, she acknowledges that an essentially “thick” collective voice—grounded in the lived, day-to-day experiences of a people—is typically incompatible with “thin” (universal) philosophic principles (1987, pp. 79-81). Rather, it is anchored in the common, spoken vernacular of public interaction. Condit speaks to the rhetorical construction of public morality as “collective crafting”; this leads her to conclude:

Together, then, people have built the good, not with an architectural blueprint, but with a traditional knowledge of the way the tribe has built in the past and through daily assessment of the probabilities involved in a local outcome. Proceeding day by day, we do not live the moments of the present as though they sucked in the past and future at once in some dizzying, transcendent manner. Rather, the moral craft requires us to live the moment, through the legacies of the past, with just an eye to the fact that we are crafting the future as well. (p. 95)

In *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres*, Gerard Hauser speaks to a similar rhetorical construction (of interaction within “civil society”) as a collective national identity (re)formed outside the power of the state. Specifically, he argues:

> Our publicness is formed in the domain of self-structuring associations, which means that it is continually under negotiation. [This] self-structuring activity inevitably encounters competing interpretations that must be negotiated, so that inventing publicness invariably poses the problem if integrating conflicts. (1999, p. 113)
But how does a collective (national) identity emerge from individual identities? Twentieth century rhetorician Kenneth Burke attributes the (re)formation of a collective identity to changing ideas related to cooperation and conflict brought about by significant societal transformations—for instance, the emergence of the corporate structure in the U.S. in the early twentieth century. In particular, Burke focuses upon the notion of piety, not necessarily in a religious sense but as related to prevalent cultural ideology. Ross Wolin summarizes Burke’s thinking in this way: “Burke refers to piety as ‘loyalty to the source of our being’…‘a desire to round things out, to fit experiences together as a unified whole’…‘the sense of what properly goes with what’” (2001, p. 75). Rhetorical efforts that underwrite a collective sense of piety depend upon persuasive techniques that capitalize on fear, or alternatively hope, in motivating national audiences (Duncan 1962, p. 173)

So, to the question about what a public morality entails, Rohr’s appeal to seek out the regime values in constitutions (and other founding documents) as well as in high legal opinions appears compelling. Nonetheless, rhetorical studies that discern “publicness” from the everyday, vernacular voices of “lived experience” in contemporary societies give testament to an organic, collective authorship of public morality that could either complement or challenge regime values, depending upon the context. Further, some scholars of rhetoric document the tendency for individuals to unify around shared rhetorical visions or fantasies, some of which articulate particular conceptions of public morality. For instance, Ernest Bormann traces various “forces of fantasy” intended to “restore the American dream”, from the Puritan preaching rhetoric of the seventeenth century to Lincoln’s un-genteel sarcasm to undercut the divisive forces (such as shrill abolitionist voices) in order to preserve the Union (2001). In “The Eagleton Affair: A Fantasy Theme Analysis”, Bormann focuses on George McGovern’s “New Politics” theme as
the rhetoric supporting his 1972 presidential bid (1973). Here Bormann illustrates how languages of public virtue and morality can surface from political action in civil society.

Rhetorical fantasies about good and virtuous societies offer opportunities to theorize about how people understand the nature of political action that both support (some conception of) “political morality” and follow from it. British political theorist Derek Edyvane proposes a particular “account of the structure of morality” as a four-cell matrix wherein either a positive (hopeful) or negative (fearful) political agenda is set against either aspirational political action (to promote an ideal) or preventative action (to prevent evil) (2012, p. 153) Edyvane explains:

The recent revival of popular interest in the idea of public morality has involved a striking divergence of opinion: there is widespread agreement that we must recover a language of civic virtue, but disagreement about the point of so doing. Some suppose that public morality should promote the good society, while others suppose that it should facilitate the prevention of catastrophe. While on the face of it this disagreement constitutes nothing more remarkable than a difference of temperament between optimists and pessimists, it reflects in fact a fundamental rift in the structure of political action, the denial of which has led to considerable confusion. (2012, p. 147)

Edyvane accounts for this “fundamental rift” as an argument between theorists who presuppose a monistic model of political action wherein the distinction between positive and negative political agendas is merely a matter of (optimistic versus pessimistic) temperaments and those (such as himself) who understand this model as dualistic; the latter view understands “the positive–negative distinction as being cut across by a more fundamental distinction between aspirational politics and preventive politics.” (p.147) As shown in figure below, Edyvane’s dualistic model breaks out four distinct conceptions of “public morality” (each of which is subsequently described) that together warrant some ambivalence as to the meaning of “public morality”—hence, his article’s title “What is the point of public morality?”

[Figure about here]
To what extent is Edyvane’s ambivalence about “the point” of public morality warranted or, for that matter, relevant to how the public reacts to controversial public issues such as the Nixon pardon? Specifically, do variations in political rationales supporting conceptions of public morality necessarily undercut rhetoricians’ cases that everyday vernacular(s) articulate a public [morality that undergird(s) legitimacy in a particular society? These (and other) questions are addressed below in the discussion section. Yet at this point, it appears useful to determine if our sample of letters reacting to Ford’s pardon of Nixon conveys any or all of the four conceptions of public morality that Edyvane breaks out.

**Letters Responding to the Nixon Pardon and Conceptions of Public Morality**

Through interpretation of the 71 letter documents provided by the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, it was determined that the writers of 53 of those letters subscribe to one of Edyvane’s four alternative conceptions of public morality. These letter-writers represented a diversity of backgrounds—some school children; others prominent Americans in the fields of entertainment, government/politics, political/consumer activism, and corporate/business leadership. Nonetheless, most fell under the general category of (adult) private citizens. With a few exceptions, the letters were either addressed or referred to Philip Buchen, President Ford’s Counsel; Buchen’s letters of acknowledgements of (and in some cases, specific comments in response to) letters were included among the documents provided by the Ford Presidential Library.

Among the letters that could not be interpreted as projecting a coherent sense of public morality, some were indecipherable hand-written documents. Others were too brief for interpretation, either as primary-school students’ one-to-three sentence letters (for example, “I think President Ford was half-right and half-wrong.”) or shrill expressions of a writers’ disgust
Three letters from members of the U.S. Congress asked Buchen for advice about how to respond to constituents’ concerns related to Ford’s pardon. Although perhaps expressing implied criticism, the letters were interpreted on “face value” as merely requesting advice.

The balance of this section addresses letters interpreted as corresponding to each of Edvane’s four conceptions of public morality and concludes with an overview that compares these four sub-samples of letters.

**Positive Politics/Hope**

Sixteen (30% of the 53) letters are interpreted as reflecting an idealistic public morality wherein “politics” can assume a positive role in reaching hopeful aspirations. Well over half (eleven of the 16) writers associated with this idealism expressed support of Ford’s initiative pardoning President Nixon. Many of these letters praised Ford for his courage of convictions in the face of opposition, as these passages convey:

“Always take strength in knowing that God is with you, and when He is with you, men will not stand against you long”;

“What courage you have shown. Such compassion. We are behind you all the way now and any time in the future”; and

“It’s a statement that in this case the long run interest of a country is best served by a pardon than by exercising the normal process of law. This was the spirit of Abraham Lincoln when he issued and wished to issue pardons to the rebels in the Civil War.”

Some of the other (five) letter writers who opposed the pardon condemned Ford for shattering their ideals:

“Who can I look up to? You now make me feel that if I do wrong I should be excused also even if I am guilty of a crime” [11 year-old student].
“Your pardon of Mr. Nixon has shattered the renewal of hope created by the beginning weeks of your administration. The action casts doubt on the credibility of the new openness and integrity which was beginning to be restored at the White House”; and

“It will prolong the division in the country” [respected pediatrician].

The other two letters levied ad hominin attacks on President Ford.

_negative politics/fear_

Fifteen (29%) of the writers in the sample are interpreted as subscribing to a public morality that embraces “a negative style of politics” that guards against the corruption of valued ideals. In other words, this negativity reflects a preventative mindset “to protect the pursuit and implementation of the ideal.” (Edyvane 2012, p. 157) Edyvane refers to this conception as a non-ideal liberalism, and quotes another theorist, “ideal theory dictates the objective, non-ideal theory dictates the route to the objective (from whatever imperfectly just condition a society happens to occupy).” (p. 157 quoting Simmons 2010, p. 12)

Only five of these (15) writers supported Ford’s pardon of Nixon. It appears difficult to find a coherent theme among these letters. Two offered varying measures of praise for Ford’s foresight in pre-empting calamities that could have plagued the nation, for example,

“[This] was a decision representing compassion, understanding and sympathy. It further demonstrated your courage in doing what you believed to be right and proper... “...was a decision representing compassion, understanding and sympathy. It further demonstrated your courage in doing what you believed to be right and proper” and

“He believed within his heart that he could defend his people and handle any contingency that may have arisen... If President Ford had not pardoned Richard Nixon, there was a possibility of [a sequence of chaotic events]”.

The other three writers in this classification supporting the pardon pursued diverse logics—one suggested a task force to investigate separation-of-powers problems, another proffered that inflation was a more serious issue than Nixon’s abuses, and a third argued that Nixon was a good leader who made mistakes.
By contrast, a clear and coherent pattern of discourse was evident among the responses of most individuals in this (negative, preventative) category who opposed the pardon. These letters were stridently indignant, reactionary, and zealous in condemning Ford (both as a person as well as for his action) for undermining protections of due process and equality under the law. Some examples:

“Since your Pardon of Nixon, I have felt such fury at being duped again I have made up my mind to use as much money, as much energy, as much influence as I can to defeat anybody that has any connection whatsoever with the Nixon-Ford Conspiracy”;

“While it is true, as people in politics say, that Americans are vitally interested in their economics and peace,...it would be a gross underestimation of the American people to say that they are not even more interested in equality of treatment under the law, fairness and honesty”; and

“It would seem that any president or public official could be free to break the law, resign and then expect to receive a full pardon. ... It would appear also that a deal must have been arranged before he resigned and you took office... The decision should have been made in the courts, as it is for everyone else, if only for the sake of history.”

Positive Politics/Prevention

Twelve (23%) of the letter-writers in this sample adhered to a “politics of hope,” but this optimistic conception of public morality focuses on preventative politics rather than aspirational endeavors in pursuit of an ideal. This pragmatic perspective appears to value the maintenance of moral governance, presumably to “keep on keeping on.” All except three individuals whose statements were interpreted as falling in this category supported Ford’s pardoning of Nixon. Although some statements here were generalized and vague, others volunteered specific justifications for Ford’s action (e.g., “In Burdick v. United States (1915) 236 U.S. 79, the court held unanimously that the acceptance of a pardon is a confession of guilt”) while others consoled the president in the face of his detractors (e.g., “You did the right thing. Let the hyenas howl. Hurray for you”). Regarding the latter, one Republican member of Congress suggested
Ford released some of Leon Jaworski’s analysis to counter critics. Passages from some other letters:

*I think you did the right thing [sic] because he was an ok President. Some times he makes mistakes but every one makes mistakes*” [primary school student];

“You granting of a pardon to Mr. Nixon was in the best interest of our nation, in which I concur”; and

*Because you have been unjustly criticized by reason of your pardon of former President Richard M. Nixon and because I believe your action was just and proper, I have taken the liberty of analyzing the United States Constitution and Amendments thereto and have come to the legal conclusion that a President of the United States, who was not removed from office by impeachment proceedings, may not be charged with a crime alleged to have occurred during his term of office*”.

Two of the letters criticized Ford’s action as inexcusably side-stepping the justice system, an act that could not be justified by other “good” motives, as expressed by this passage:

*“Mercy is a commendable virtue but never more so than when tempering justice. You, Mr. Ford, Mr. Haig and Mr. Becker have denied the American people this justice.”*

A third letter, interpreted as opposing the pardon, actually feigned support for it as a ploy to justify his own release from a state corrections facility. He premised his argument upon this statement:

*I am writing to tell you about my case because you said that the laws of God are higher than the laws of the Constitution and you said you got guidance [sic] from God with prayers about Nixon’s case...”*

**Negative Politics/Prevention**

Edyvane contends that those holding to a public morality of negative politics of prevention have abandoned their ideals, clinging instead to a faith that preventative politics can head-off adversities. Of the 10 (19% of) individuals interpreted as expressing this conception of public morality, only two supported the pardon. Both focused more on Nixon’s positive accomplishments (despite “mistakes”) as president more than the virtues of Ford’s pardon—although one acknowledged the thankless nature of the decision to pardon:
“Some of the hardest decisions a President must take are those which avert some unseen disaster; for if they succeed, [they deprive him] of his most self-evident justification.”

The nine letter-writers in this category who opposed the pardon expressed a general disillusion with the direction of America politics as evident in the pardon; nonetheless, these individuals arrived at their states of disillusionment from varied logics. For one letter-writer, the pardon power afforded in the Constitution subverted “the constitutional process”: this writer urged Ford to initiate change to rid the Constitution of that feature. Others regarded Ford’s pardon actions as short-circuiting the prevention of adversity by sparing Nixon the punishment he had coming:

“Has Mr. Nixon suffered enough for the 200 million of us? I think not’’;

“In one fell swoop, Mr. Ford has destroyed his credibility; thwarted legal process; become involved in Watergate cover-up; created doubts of an unsavory deal; and provides grounds for doubting his capacity to govern”;

“If Ford actually is that stupid, then he is far too dangerous to remain as President’’;

and

“Do not underestimate the disappointment, dismay, and worst of all, the sense of foreboding which spreads in the wake of this second TV press conference. Sir, we can ill afford this failure to live up to the almost explicit pact of faith the People made with the new President.”

The other letters in this category conveyed a generalized but strong anguish about the state of politics in the nation, as evident in this passage: “As much as we would like to believe you people up there, too many of you have turned out to be liars and now you are all painted with the same brush.”

**Overview**

Table 1 below provides an overview of how the 53 letters written to President Ford in 1974 responding to his pardon of Richard Nixon are interpreted in this study. Specifically, this table breaks down data on interpretations into eight subsamples of letter-writers who respectively
supported and opposed the Nixon pardon while conveying a particular understanding of what “public morality” entails that coincides with one of the four conceptions that Edyvane characterizes. It is worth noting that nearly half of the letters in this sample supported the pardon, a significantly greater ratio than the 28% of all (nearly a quarter-million) letters that expressed support for this presidential action.

[Table 1 about here]

After showing the relative numbers (and percentages) of letters in each of the eight subsamples (row 1), table 1 compares degrees of “discourse coherence” (row 2) and untested estimates of writers’ level of moral cognitive development based on Kohlberg’s six-level model (row 3; Kohlberg 1971). Although impressionistic, the coherence assessments and Kohlberg estimates offer support for making some substantive comparisons among the eight subsamples of letters. Regarding the former, “discourse coherence” ratings (low, moderate, or high) are supported by discussions of letters in the previous section; subsections of only two and three letter-writers were not rated for coherence. Finally, this table arrays the letter-writers in each subsample according to personal background groupings (such as “celebrity”, “public official”, “corporate or business executive”, etc.) with “private citizen” as the default category.

Table 1 appears to support three general observations that are based upon researchers’ interpretations of the 53 letters in the sample. First, the discourses were somewhat more coherent among letters that opposed Ford’s pardon of Nixon than those that supported it. This coherence appears evident among writers in three of Edyvane’s public morality concepts but even somewhat valid as well in the positive politics/prevention category wherein only three letters opposed the pardon. The relatively low standard deviations of Kohlberg cognitive moral
development estimates suggest similar reasoning logics among pardon opponents within each public morality category.

Second (and related to the first observation), letters opposing the pardon in both positive politics/hope and negative politics/fear categories are estimated to convey high levels of moral cognitive development with minimal variation (low standard deviations). Placed in the context of Edyvane’s arguments, both of these public morality conceptions are aspirationally-directed. Writers interpreted to convey a positive politics of hope hold to the optimistic view that politics can bring about hopeful ideals; those whose public morality focuses on a negative politics of fear assume that politics plays preventative roles in counteracting forces that would impede the implementation of their ideals. Thus, pardon opponents in the first conception regarded Ford’s action as a direct repudiation of their public ideals, whereas those in the second category view his pardon as abandoning the responsibility to protect those ideals. By contrast, pardon opponents who hold to a public morality negative politics and prevention have essentially lost hope in their ideals. These letter-writers are interpreted as conveying a moderately coherent message in their letters but that reflect a lesser level of cognitive development than those in the two categories of political aspiration.

Third, table 1 arrays the personal backgrounds of letter-writers both in support of and opposition to the pardon within each of Edyvane’s four public morality categories. Only one meaningful pattern seems to emerge from these data—that, by a five-to-one margin, more corporate and business executives supported than opposed Ford’s pardon of Nixon. Whether (pro-Republican) partisanship accounts for strong support for Ford’s action among these business executives cannot be determined here.
Discussion

This study is premised on the possibility that citizens’ letters to President Gerald Ford that reacted to his pardon of Richard Nixon in 1974 can inform an understanding of “public morality,” particularly as it may reflect John Rohr’s thinking about “regime values” and/or some rhetoricians’ (such as Gerard Hauser’s) notion of a collective public voice (or vernacular). Such a determination can emerge through discussions around these questions:

1. What (if anything) do interpretations of some or all of the 53 letters reveal about the nature of “public morality,” or varying conceptions thereof, during the Watergate era of the 1970s?

2. To what extent did that (or these) conception(s) of public morality reflect regime values and/or a collective public voice?

3. How do conceptions of the public morality of the 1970s compare with those in the current political discourse?

Responses to the first two questions emerge from interpretations of the letters; the third invites speculation that reflects upon continuities and changes in political discourses since the Watergate era.

First, a case can be made that a significant number of letter-writers in our sample shared a deeply-seeded faith in public norms and actions that guard against the usurpation of democratic ideals—even if those limiting forces would take precedence over their own valued public aspirations. Edyvane associates this orientation toward public morality as a “negative political impulse” that, in a “Hobbesian spirit,” values justice for “what it prevents rather than what it engenders…[or that] calms the fear of catastrophe.” (2012, p. 151) In the context of the pardon issue, those with either negative conception of politics could be expected to fault Ford for failing to counteract Nixon’s erosion of the public trust (Kohut 2014). In fact, 18 letters that were opposed to Ford’s pardon of Nixon articulated rationales interpreted as valuing this negative political orientation either to guard against fear of catastrophe (see “Negative Politics/Fear” in
the table) or prevent the success of anti-democratic agendas (“Negative Politics/Prevention”). In other words, these 18 letters represent 69% of letters opposed to the pardon and 34% of all 53 letters in our sample.

Second, these interpretations suggest that the substantive correspondence between these 18 letters and John Rohr’s articulation of regime values is striking. Indeed, both of these approaches to public morality assign a higher priority to constitutional principles of rule of law, consistent judicial processes, and procedural fairness than to finer moral aspirations in public life. Nonetheless the depth of emotion within reactions expressed in these 18 letters—for example, “…I have felt such fury a being duped again…”, “…the decision should have been made in the courts…if only for the sake of history…” and “Do not underestimate the disappointment, dismay, and worst of all, the sense of foreboding…”—suggests that this shared reverence for constitutional values were/are embedded within a public vernacular, and that this public rhetoric complements but stands apart from any obedience these citizens pledge to regime values.

As Hauser maintains, such vernacular is typically grounded by mythical narratives of the past as much (or perhaps more) as than the factual, historical record (1999, pp. 116-119). Furthermore, the embeddedness of this thick vernacular rhetoric distinguishes it from the fleeting characterizations of public opinion proffered by pollsters who (according to Hauser) are “tone-deaf to the heteroglossic dialogue of vernacular narratives and arguments that give their lives meaning to issues…” (1999, p. 109) As related to the practice of public administration, acknowledgement of a deep vernacular that speaks (or at least, spoke) for the sanctity of constitutional processes could justifiably be taken as buttressing, more than diminishing, Rohr’s regime values arguments. At one point, Rohr remarks, “One might object that all this [about
regime values] is terribly subjective—that in the final analysis bureaucrats respond to those values to which they choose to respond.” (1989, p. 84) Presumably, public officials could follow Rohr’s prescriptions with a good measure of confidence if citizens in fact share a common vernacular that celebrates fairness and procedural continuity in public life; presumably, such a collective endorsement would speak to the legitimacy of regime values as the bedrock of public morality.

Third, there are reasons to expect that ideas about public morality have shifted in the four decades since the Nixon Pardon as recent forces have emerged within American political discourse. Table 2 considers the possible effects of three selected (and likely inter-related) forces presumably characterizing U.S. national politics that in turn could influence current conceptions of public morality: political polarization, identity politics, and a distrust of facts. Regarding the first, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein refer to this “ideological schism” in terms of “asymmetric polarization,” brought on by their contention that “[t]he center of gravity in the Republican Party has shifted sharply to the right.” (2012, pp. 44-52) They trace the origin of this schism back to 1978 when the National Conservative Political Action Committee was created. Mann and Ornstein’s reference to this date takes on meaning as one historical account attributes Ford’s 1974 pardon of Richard Nixon as an opportunistic opening for the Republican right. Specifically, Barry Werth observes, “The Nixon pardon handed a prime opportunity to the Republican right. After the fall election defeats, conservatives began to criticize Ford openly. By late 1974, Reagan stopped anguishing publicly about whether he should challenge a sitting president and began attacking Ford’s policies in a weekly newspaper column.” (2006, p. 339)

The term “identity politics,” having emerged in the 1960’s civil rights movement, originally related to group identities associated with particular personal attributes (e.g., race,
religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) as bases of political action (UK Essays 2015). More recently, however, this concept has expanded to embrace a reactionary, nativist identity articulated in the U.S. political discourse and those of other polities. In *The Shipwrecked Mind*, political theorist Mark Lilla places “the betrayal of elites [as] the lynchpin of every reactionary story.” (2016, p. xiii) For *New York Times* analyst Amanda Taub, nativist discourse speaks to a White identity crisis. Whiteness, she argues, relates to “being a person who, by unspoken rules, was long entitled as part of ‘us’ instead of ‘them’.” Taub quotes Professor Eric Kaufman at the University of London: "It's fundamentally about 'who are we?' and [appeals pleading] 'what does it mean to be part of this nation? Is it not our nation anymore, our meaning the ethnic majority?'” (Taub 2016, p. A6) Sociologist Arlie Hochschild refers to such political emotionalism as an outcome of “feeling rules” (“left ones and right ones”) that reflect how “people want to feel” in reacting to political issues (2016, pp. 15-16; italics in original).

The growing distrust of facts in U.S. political discourse prompted the Rand Corporation to release its 2018 report *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in Public Life*. The authors of this publication characterize “truth decay” in regard to “four related trends: (1) increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data; (2) a blurring of the line between opinion and fact; (3) the increasing relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact; and (4) declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information.” (Kavanagh and Rich 2018, pp. x-xi) These authors speak to the implications of these trends in terms of “erod[ing] civil discourse; weaken[ing] key institutions; and impos[ing] economic, diplomatic, and cultural costs.” (p. ix) Distrust of facts nonetheless has its origins in past eras; for example, a columnist comments on Nixon’s assertion that the alleged Watergate accounts were merely “fake news.” Charles Blow
recalls Nixon’s words spoken at a 1973 dinner for the Japanese premier: “Let others spend their time dealing with the murky, small, unimportant, vicious little things. We have spent our time and will spend our time building a better world.” (Blow 2018, p. A21)

Table 2 shows reflections on these three emerging political forces as they may affect the various conceptions of public morality characterized by Edyvane (discussed above). To simplify, table 2 combines discussions related to both styles of positive politics (that associated with aspiration and that with the positive face of prevention) and of negative politics (with the negative face of prevention and avoidance of catastrophe). These reflections speculate upon anticipated effects of the three political forces as guided by Edyvane’s (brief) discussions of public morality conceptions and the substance of respective pardon letters discussed above.

On the surface, it could be reasoned that widening political polarization would steer public morality toward a positive politics aspires to achieve ideological goals, but also endorses a negative political style that would prevent ideological adversaries from realizing their ideals. Nonetheless, Edyvane rejects such symmetric logic, arguing that one’s negative political agenda may require the betrayal of her own aspirations; thus, two different conceptions of public morality are in tension—the politics of faith and of skepticism (2012, pp. 154-155). Supportive letters to President Ford were more apt to convey a positive politics of aspiration than of prevention than of a pragmatic politics of prevention in order “to keep on keeping on.” In that regard, shrill advocates of a polarized discourse can be expected to reject maintaining the status quo. Thus, there is reason to expect that political polarization promotes a conception of public morality that elevates the hope of achieving ideological aspirations over the fear of adversarial actions.
As for negative political styles, Edyvane differentiates between one committed to “protect[ing] the pursuit and implementation of [an] ideal” and the other associated with “the prevention of catastrophe.” (2012, p. 157). In that regard, there may be reason to expect polarization to engage ideologically-fueled discourses about catastrophic consequences as threats to public morality. The majority of letters in our survey reflecting a negative political style opposed the Nixon pardon, and most of those letters reflected a sense of dire outcomes expressed in vehement language. In that the ideological dispositions of letter-writers were not known, there is no intent here to associate them with ideological beliefs. Nonetheless, the stridence of their reactions to the pardon and its presumed ill-effects suggests that increased polarization may support conceptions of public morality associated with the prevention of catastrophic outcomes.

The contrast between Edyvane’s “two styles of positive politics” comes into focus when comparing the presumed public morality of demographic groups that practice traditional identity politics with that of those who identify with a reactionary, nativist political agenda. In the first instance, traditional identity politics appears aligned with a positive aspiration of increased access to the body politic. However, in the second, a nativist morality may embrace some sort of hope, but one that is difficult to articulate other than to pine nostalgically for the “better” past. About this conception of public morality, Edyvane comments, “This sense of not having anything to pin our collective hopes to can all too easily lead to [a] sort of political cynicism and despair…” (2012, p. 158) Although none of the pardon letters interpreted as falling into this category clearly express such cynicism, Hochschild encounters it in her study of disenchanted Louisiana. Specifically, she describes a common narrative that characterizes the “politically privileged” as line cutters, presumably some of whom have pursued traditional identity politics with success:
In [this] story, strangers step ahead of you in line, making you anxious, making you feel distrustful, betrayed, and afraid. A president allies with the line cutters, making you feel distrusted, betrayed. A person ahead of you in line insults you as an ignorant redneck, making you feel humiliated and mad. Economically, culturally, demographically, politically, you are suddenly a stranger in your own land. (2016, p. 222)

Neither variation of identity politics appears aligned with Edyvane’s negative conceptions of public morality.

The Rand Corporation report *Truth Decay* maintains that the brunt of the prevalent distrust of facts in U.S. society falls upon institutions that serve as sources of factual information (2018, p. 37); this implies either that citizens are more inclined to trust in their own opinions than the authority of science or institutions that rely on science to fulfil their public missions (or both). Certainly, the Watergate revelations, and the investigative reporting of them, led to increased distrust of government and media institutions. Still, distrust in institutions was only half as prevalent in the Watergate era as today, and the report’s authors find no evidence of “increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretation of facts and data” then but reasonable evidence of such in recent years (p.71).

In reference to various conceptions of public morality, there is reason to associate distrust of fact, and institutions that disseminate it, with cynicism among those who understand public morality in terms of a positive style of politics but are conflicted about what to hope for (as the nativists). Yet on the other hand, these trends may well erode the confidence of those whose morality embraces a negative politics that depends upon science-based institutions to prevent catastrophes relating to the environment, public health, or food security. With this latter (negative politics/prevention) conception, letter writers opposing the Nixon pardon castigated Ford for abandoning this preventative role. By contrast, current attitudes of distrust weaken institutional capabilities to fulfil this preventative function.
An intuitive case can be made that, among these three forces having emerged since the Watergate era, political polarization stands out as the causal antecedent. To reiterate, Mann and Ornstein trace the origin of current political polarization to the 1994 election of “the young [Republican] guns” in the U.S. Congress, and that to “the new politics of hostage taking.” (2012, pp. 3-30). Presumably, a nativist identity politics and a distrust of facts follow either as outcomes or tactics of this new politics. Assuming this causal logic is reasonable, how do the “dots connect” in relation to Rohr’s pedagogical preference for regime values—as it may or may not relate to rhetoricians’ theories of collective public voice(s), letters in reaction to Ford’s pardon of Nixon, and the current “new politics” of polarization?

First, there appears to be a modest congruence between the substance of some (more than one-third) of the letters and at least one of the regime values that Rohr recognizes as foundational for understanding public morality. Specifically, those letters that justified opposition to the pardon with logic consistent with conceptions of public morality deriving from a negative politics of fear or prevention (see table 1) accuse Ford of having subverted established judicial processes and the rule of law. Presumably then, these expressions of public morality align with, but stand apart from, regime values within constitutional and other statutory documents. In rhetorical terms, these letter-writers could be understood as subscribing to a political myth (that is, associating public morality with just legal processes) both anchored in historical meaning and applied to contemporary situations (McGee 1975, pp. 247-249). Such a “vernacular voice” is not necessarily consensual, but it does reflect a stable sense of personal identity more so than fleeting public opinion (Hauser 1999, pp. 82-110).

However, rhetoricians also recognize alternative narratives wherein political leaders or philosophers refer to “the people,” not in reference to personal and collective identities, but as a
linguistic device to legitimize a political stance (for example, see McGee 1975, pp. 238-242).

Referring specifically to Hitler’s rhetoric, McGee explains:

An alternative to collecting the votes of “persons,” therefore, may be to conceive
“people” as an essential rhetorical fiction with both a “social” and “objective” reality.
This notion of dual realities is specifically “non-rational” in traditional terms. Contrary to
the law of identity, the assertion is explicit that “the people” are both real and a fiction
simultaneously. (1975, p. 240)

This rhetorical strategy can, according to McGee, be understood as a process. First, the leader
identifies “an old longing” in society upon which to construct a group identity, thus asserting
“what a ‘people,’ when created, want to hear.” (p. 241). Second, the leader exerts persuasion to
fulfil his own fantasy. In essence, the leader offers a conjuring of “the people” as a collective
identity that invites people to “assume an anonymous mask” in endorsing aggressive action or
speech (p. 242). Perhaps the forces of political polarization, nativist identity politics, and distrust
of facts have their origins in such rhetorical tactics of strident leaders. At any rate, in the
temporal context(s) of this study, it appears that these recent forces diverge from voices in the
letters to President Ford that identified with a public morality grounded on rule of law and
procedural justice congruent with, but apart from, Rohr’s regime values.

To be sure, the prudent public administrator studies the Constitution, court opinions, and
statutory documents as foundations of public morality in our democratic system. Perhaps that
administrator can take heart in knowing that she inherits the support of a public voice that
reveres those same values. In recommending gardening as an apt metaphor for public
administration, Frederickson advises that “[g]ardening…makes demands upon our powers to
observe, upon a sensitive awareness of changes and maladjustments and upon our willingness to
face the political…basis of administration…[it] requires time, patience, and experience.” (2005,
pp. 40-41) This gardening metaphor suggests that adverse political forces (such as those
addressed above) are to be endured, just as unfavorable weather patterns or soil deficiencies. But in the end, Frederickson reminds us, “[t]o understand public administration is to know that it is all about the garden, not the gardener.” (p. 42) The same cannot be said of McGee’s self-serving leaders who construct a rhetorical “voice” to support their own agendas.

**Conclusion**

This study attempts to determine if some or all 53 letters reacting to President Gerald Ford’s 1974 pardon of Richard Nixon express a core conception of public morality that is more deeply rooted than passing public opinion and partisanship. After finding evidence of such core values, attention focused upon whether they are substantively congruent to John Rohr’s ideas about regime values, Hannah Arendt’s (and some contemporary rhetoricians’) theories of “public voice,” or both. Inquiry herein classifies interpretations of the pardon letters among four conceptions of public morality differentiated by Derek Edyvane; two of these conceptions associate with positive politics—summing that “political life is composed as an aspirational activity” toward the realization of ideals, and the other two as a preventative effort to counteract evils (Edyvane 2012, p. 153). The letters in our sample conveyed logics and rationales associated with public moralities grounded in both positive and negative political orientations in nearly equal proportions, and significant numbers of letter-writers supporting and opposing Ford’s action identified with both orientations.

Interpretations of several letters convey a negative political orientation, or a conception of public morality of prevention, and, in so doing, they emphasize the importance of the judicial process and rule of law as effective preventative principles. Thus, the substance of these letters appears congruent with Rohr’s regime values and their pedagogic utility for professional education. But the expression of these values by citizens—rather than academics or practitioners
in the field of public administration—suggests that, taken together, these letters articulate a coherent public voice parallel with, but apart from a regime values approach that requires a contextual familiarity with constitutional and judicial matters. Certainly, it is plausible that constitutional and judicial processes (as foundations of regime values) inform “public voices” through common socialization processes. Yet even in that case, a public rhetoric takes on resonance in upholding these values, just as it would in unravelling them.

Thus, a case can be made that some of these pardon letters reflect core public principles at the heart of American political discourse that take on a symbolic as well as a utilitarian function. Likely, the imagery of rule of law and fair judicial process may well have taken root as a potent symbol in our public discourse long before the Watergate experience; nonetheless, it appears to have taken particular resonance in the immediate aftermath of that ordeal.

Conceivably, symbols speak (or spoke) to emotions and the “feeling rules” that Arlie Hochschild uncovers in *Strangers in their Own Land*. However, in 1974, many of the letter-writers reacting to the Nixon pardon expressed “feelings” of identity with due process, procedural justice, and related (regime-like) core values—rather than nativist feelings of lost identity.

Rohr’s treatment of regime values in *Ethics for Bureaucrats* unabashedly pushes a pedagogical agenda in preparing prospective (and current) public administrators to assume their moral obligations. Yet might there be a complementary pedagogical proposal for incorporating skills to decipher public voices, and respond to them effectively, into the ethics curriculum? If extremism is normalized through rhetorical efforts—and vital public institutions are placed at risk, a familiarity with rhetorical techniques could better equip public administrators to conserve regime values. Such a program could develop insights relating to narratives that anchor individual and collective identities, signal orientations of “piety” that accept or reject the “other”
(either people or ideas), detecting hidden motives, as well as recognizing other discursive strategies. Such a skills repertoire could enable public administrators in uphold core public values amid political forces that threaten them.

**Bibliography**


Figure. Edyvane’s Model of Public Morality

Table 1. Sample of Citizen Letters (n=53) to President Ford re: Nixon Pardon by Edyvane’s Four Conceptions of Public Morality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptions of Public Morality</th>
<th>Positive Politics/ Hope</th>
<th>Negative Politics/Fear</th>
<th>Positive Politics/ Prevention</th>
<th>Negative Politics/ Prevention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For/against pardon</td>
<td>For</td>
<td>Against</td>
<td>For</td>
<td>Against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (% of category for/against)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse coherence</td>
<td>mod</td>
<td>Mod</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Est. Kohlberg level $\bar{x}$ (stand. dev.)</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Background</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Official</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corp/Business Executive</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Activist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Interest Activist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attorney</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Citizen (default)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inmate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary/Mid-Sch Pupil</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2. Selected Forces with Potential Effects on Public Morality in U.S. since 1974

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergence of:</th>
<th>Conceptions of Public Morality Associated with Styles of Positive Politics</th>
<th>Conceptions of Public Morality Associated with Styles of Negative Politics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Polarization</td>
<td>Promotes a public morality that elevates the hope of achieving ideological aspirations.</td>
<td>Supports a public morality focused on the prevention of catastrophic outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Politics</td>
<td>Traditional identity politics aligns with a morality of hope and aspiration, but a nativist identity may foster an inarticulate hope that leads to cynicism and despair.</td>
<td>[not applicable]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distrust of Facts</td>
<td>Increases cynicism among those with public morality based upon a positive politics but inarticulate hope.</td>
<td>Erodes confidence in science-based institutions among those depending upon them to prevent catastrophe.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>