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### A Rejoinder to Mark Smith on the Contribution of his Book

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## A Rejoinder to Mark Smith on the Contribution of his Book

In a previous discussion in the Burkean Parlor, I argued that Mark Smith’s book, *The Right Talk* (2007), was boring and largely unhelpful to rhetorical scholars because it explained the contemporary successes of neoconservatives in respect to a “rational choice” model of argumentation—a model of rhetoric that has long been abandoned by (most) rhetoricians. While it may be new to political scientists, in purposeful, colorful language I suggested that Smith’s account of conservative rhetoric was “impotent” because it deliberately ignored the role of affect and emotion in describing the appeal of rightist rhetoric. I also suggested that Smith overlooked the work done in rhetorical studies that examined the rise and contemporary dominance of neoliberalism, work that significantly undermined his claims about “a little noticed trend in our politics.” (It’s not my job, at this point, to cite the litany of rhetorical studies devoted to this rhetoric; as I hinted in my review, a simple EBSCO search for Ronald Walter Greene’s excellent scholarship would suffice.) I argued that Smith’s conclusion, that “political actors will frame many policy initiatives around the prospect of additional jobs, higher growth, and larger incomes” (*Rhetoric Review* 27.1: 218), was commonly known and understood by those who study political rhetoric. In short, I suggested Smith’s *The Right Talk* was obvious to rhetoricians—indeed, anyone steeped in contemporary political and social theory. Although Smith’s book may be helpful for documenting rhetorical history, I suggested that its deliberate avoidance of social/cultural issues and the affect associated with them fails to provide a compelling account of the rhetorical appeal of conservatism.

After reading Smith’s response to my review, I admit my first impulse was to offer an apology: The central evidentiary claim of my argument against his book was that he ignored affect and emotion, components of rhetoric that have been undertheorized and overlooked by rhetoricians in the last century. In other words, I implicate his book in the struggle over defining rhetoric in contemporary society. It was unfair of me to fault Smith for ignoring what many rhetoricians

have similarly ignored and, because Smith is a disciplinary outsider, it was especially impolitic of me to hold up his book as an emblem of that which contemporary rhetoricians have largely failed to investigate themselves.

Owing to my own self-absorbed arrogance, such an impulse, of course, was short-lived. Smith questions “how much [my] review reflects an attempt at scholarly assessment versus the ego-fueled desire to appear clever and contentious” (*Rhetoric Review* 27.3: 323). Because my negative review stands in opposition to that of three other rhetoricians, he argues that I am an “equal-opportunity misreader” of his book and restates his historical narrative about “a group of conservatives who in the 1950s set out to reverse their ideological fortunes” by recasting all issues as economic ones (324). I’ll be the first to admit that all scholarship is ego-driven, and I’m no less of a narcissist than the next scholar who enjoys seeing his or her name in print. After all, Smith himself has no difficulty pointing out that Wander and Busse have labeled his “analysis as ‘brilliant,’” with the amusing parenthetical that their assessment is “no doubt overly generous but appreciated nonetheless” (324). Smith stresses that Wander and Busse’s review of his book is absent of “any negative criticism,” which, apparently, is proof that rhetoricians everywhere will find his book novel or useful. Rhetoricians might term such an appeal to authority fallacious, but since Wander and Busse represent all of us, I suppose my negative judgments about the value of Smith’s book for rhetorical studies—as opposed to Mark Smith the person—stand corrected.

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## Success as Sell-Out: What to Make of Brian Jackson’s Review and What Students Have Made of Jay Heinrichs’s *Thank You for Arguing*

From his title to his final line, Brian Jackson equates the success of *Thank You for Arguing* with selling out. His title announces “When Rhetoric Sells Out” and he concludes, “[W]e should all try to be sell-outs.” This faint praise, however, obscures what I believe are the real reasons for Jay Heinrichs’s success. I believe that *TYFA* has become a bestseller because it is so rhetorically adept.