



# BLAH, BLAH, BLAH

*Catherine Smith decodes the rhetoric of Congressional hearings.*

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



The Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings enraged women so much that they ran for public office, says Catherine Smith, an associate professor in the Writing Program who has researched the Congressional hearings process.

**I**s it worth fixing the B-1 bomber?" Congresswoman Barbara Boxer asks a General Accounting Office witness. "Wow," the witness responds, using a word not often uttered at Congressional hearings. She quickly composes herself and answers formally in cautious, analytical language: "That needs to be judged against whether or not there is a viable and valid assessment that we have a certain threat against which we need to have a penetrating bomber. . . ."

Congressional hearings contain moments of drama but also long stretches of anesthetizing technical

exchanges that may be meaningless to the average person. Journalist Cokie Roberts says they're like watching grass grow.

Despite the increased access to hearings, through C-SPAN and the evening news, the sessions remain difficult to understand. Catherine Smith, an associate professor in the Writing Program who spent a year researching the hearings process in Washington, D.C., hopes to aid viewers' and scholars' understanding of Congressional hearings. Smith believes what's really going on in hearings isn't readily apparent.

Hearings both reflect and shape

American life. Their topics, Smith says, are "an index of what's current, important, and needs to be thought about" at a given time in history.

Holding a hearing can create a major issue, as the Zoe Baird-illegal aliens controversy demonstrated. But news highlights may not truly capture what happened in a day's worth of hearings, says Smith. The single sound bite is taken out of context and given an interpretation by the news anchor. Watching C-SPAN, viewers must reach their own conclusions, but that's difficult because of the monotony of the presentation. "Both sources, whether the contour-less broadcast or the context-less word bites, require analysis if we want to understand how hearings process information, how they make meaning," says Smith.

**U**nderstanding more about the hearings process can clarify simple questions for the average viewer. For instance, why is the content so repetitious? Smith says it's because Congress has more than 300 committees, most with subcommittees. Twenty to forty hearings are held in a typical day, so members may need to make brief appearances at several. As a result, witnesses can be asked the same question over and over by different members.

Another factor is the operation of partisan politics. Members act as Democrats, Republicans, or Independents, not as individuals. Smith found it "stunning to see people vote against their expressed position in order to form coalitions." In hearings on banking reform, Smith saw a resolution to force banks to cash United States Treasury checks voted down by members she knew supported the measure. Party loyalty, and pressure from the banks, led to nothing getting done.

Hearings are not just a show, however. Due to imposed time restrictions



on House and Senate speeches, hearings have become Congress' major work session. "Hearings provide rare opportunities for legislators, other governmental agents, and segments of the public to directly negotiate ideas on which to base policy and action," says Smith. Even if no decisions are made, hearings are valuable because they provide public debate.

Smith began studying hearings when she was on sabbatical leave from Syracuse University in 1991. For six months she attended daily hearings, sometimes lining up before dawn in the hallway outside a hearing room in hopes of getting one of the 30 public seats inside. In addition to firsthand observation, Smith studied C-SPAN videotapes and interviewed selected politicians, witnesses, journalists, and staff.

Smith has been teaching people how to write testimony and deliver it at hearings for more than six years. She advises witnesses to make their main point in the first sentence—perhaps no one will ever read or listen further than that. Before appearing, witnesses must also anticipate the situation: Who will be there? What will they want to talk about? From focusing on the witness's perspective, Smith became interested in looking at hearings from other points of view as well.

She is now writing a book she hopes will serve as "the thinking person's guide to Congressional hearings."

Smith came to SU in 1987 to work in the new Writing Program, attracted partly by plans for a graduate program in rhetoric and composition. Smith is now one of the architects of that program. She finds her Congressional hearings research influencing her design of the program's Writing in Professional Cultures concentration. She has already taught a graduate course on discourse analysis, using her research as a case study of how speech and written documents can be used together to produce meaning.

Smith's work models the way discourse analysis can shed light on an everyday situation like the "strange and rich chaotic mess" of Congressional hearings. "These events are so readily observed," she says, "but they're not transparent."  
—LESLIE LOEFFEL

## RESEARCH NOTEBOOK

- *Scientists honored.* Alok Choudhary, associate professor of electrical and computer engineering, and James Coleman, assistant professor of biology, were honored as recipients of 1993 Young Investigator awards from the National Science Foundation.

Choudhary will use his five-year funding package to further study the development of software for high-performance parallel computers. Coleman will continue his research of plant responses to multiple forms of stress, and to damage from natural and man-made causes.

- *Studying Hypersonics.* The Center for Hypersonic Training and Research opened this fall, backed by a three-year \$600,000 grant from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The Center, which is part of the College of Engineering and Computer Science, will focus on producing the next generation of leaders in hypersonics, the study of flight speeds approaching 4,000 mph.

- *For Hire.* Editorial entry-level hiring at magazines has increased over the last year, according to the second annual survey of members of the American Society of Magazine Editors. The survey was conducted by Alfred Balk, an associate professor in the magazine department of the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications.



- *Slavery and the Holocaust.* Philosophy professor Laurence Thomas recently published *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust*, a book by Temple University Press. Thomas, who is both African American and Jewish, takes a philosophical approach in analyzing the evils of American slavery and the Holocaust. He concludes that although both situations were horrendous, neither was worse than the other.
- *Holocaust Remembered.* Special education professor Arnold Goldstein recently published *The Shoes of Maidanek*, a story about the Holocaust. The book is written from the perspective of a Jewish teenager who is rounded up with his family and imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp.

The fictional account is based on historical records and is illustrated with 12 black-and-white drawings by former SU psychology professor Mark Sherman.