After Dinner Speech
Katie Jefferson

Exordium
Good evening and thank you for letting me speak tonight. I would first like to say congratulations to all of the graduating seniors, and to all of us who will be returning next year for finishing the semester! Recently, I was thinking about college and what we get out of it. I came to the conclusion that education at its best teaches us new ways of thinking. Whether we think in terms of Palmeri’s speech communication models or Gemin’s bricolage, we come out of classes thinking about things differently. As we all prepare to leave this semester behind, we’ve got to look to where we can use our new found thinking ability, or else we might lose it. In the infinite wisdom of Winnie the Pooh, “Did you ever stop to think and forget to start again?” We certainly don’t want to loose what we’ve been working for four years.

Narration
The ability to think differently, or think at all, about problems is something that is absent in our national conversation today. I came across the following quote a few days ago: “What luck for rulers that men do not think”. It brought to mind many of the so-called solutions that have been called for in the last few months to fix the ailing economy.

Partition
The gas tax holiday, stimulus checks, deregulation, Reaganomics; we’re told that these things will fix our problems. But if we’re truly thinking about it, what are these things really doing?

Confirmation
In the past few days, both Clinton and McCain have introduced the possibility of a gas tax holiday. Oh, it sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? You’ve got a holiday on two things American’s are hating the most right now; taxes and gas prices. When George Stephanopoulos on "This Week Town Hall” confronted Clinton with the tiny problem of
over 200 economists, including the former President Bill Clinton’s Congressional Budget Office Director Alice Rivlin and 2007 Nobel winner Roger Myerson, saying that lifting the 18.4 cent federal tax on each gallon of gas is a very bad idea and that “the moratorium would mostly benefit oil companies while increasing the federal budget deficit and reducing funding for the government highway maintenance trust fund”, she had an excellent answer; “I’m not going to put my lot in with economists.” Exactly! What do we need experts on the economy for? Experts are so elitist. And that’s what she said as she went on to say “this mindset where elite opinion is always on the side of doing things that really disadvantage the vast majority of Americans.” That’s right and we know it; the elitist experts on the economy are out the get us.

Never mind that they’ve went to school for that, or teach economic principals for a living. Never mind that the economy affects them just as much as it affects us. Never mind that one of the expert elitists is the person President Bill Clinton entrusted with the Budget Office during his administration. Never mind that eliminating the gas tax will probably just encourage more people to drive more, therefore driving down the supply of oil and up the prices. Never mind that that it would only save the average driver less than $30 dollars a month. Never mind that the federal tax on gas is used for improving infrastructure. Bridges don’t just fall down… as long as we don’t count bridges in Minnesota.

No, the polls show that the public at large like this idea, even though 70% of us recognize it’s just the politicians pandering to the voters. And why shouldn’t they like it? It’s a right now, right here solution that helps every American. And we don’t really need to seriously talk about it, because neither Clinton nor McCain is going to be in a position to really push this gas tax holiday through this summer. So for a potential future president’s purposes, this plan fits their purpose of making people happy perfectly. What I don’t understand is why they’re proposing a gas tax holiday and not a gas holiday. Imagine that – free gas for everyone! Forget the expert elitists telling us that free gas is bad idea; you and I know that free gas is a great idea!
“What luck for rulers that men do not think.”

But on to something real – stimulus checks. Has anybody gotten their stimulus check yet? They’re on their merry way, could be delivered any day now. I’m planning on spending mine on a new iPod Touch. Anyone else have plans for theirs? I know Doug Roubiduox is getting a Playstation 3 with his! What a great plan for fixing the economy – money. You can tell we’ve got rich people in office when they think they can solve any problem just by throwing some cash at it! And better yet, with the stimulus plan, the experts have mixed opinions. So what’s to complain about?

Never mind that the national debt is growing by your $600 with just the blink of your eye. Never mind that the enormous national debt is probably at the bottom of the falling dollar and rising gas prices. Never mind that the combined value of all of our stimulus checks could have went to paying off part of the national debt, maybe removing part of the root cause of our economic problems. A $600 handout is sweet. I’ll take it, without the thinking please.

“What luck for rulers that men do not think.”

Finally, we get to the ideology of it all: Reaganomics and deregulation. Reaganomics just tells us what we already know: rules are bad, government makes the rules, and hence the government is bad. And, maybe the government is the problem. After all, the mom and pop store down the road, they deserve a break. The fresh college graduate who’s starting up his own company, he deserves a break. And the faceless, multinational, profit-hungry corporations, it deserve a break, too. They’re going to do the right thing. They don’t need any rules. It’s comfortable and intuitive to declare that the “government is always the problem” and that the evils of regulation only slow our economy down with it’s unwieldy and cumbersome hoops and rules to jump through.

Never mind that deregulation lets companies offer sub-prime mortgages to people, then turn around and sell the mortgages in little pieces so that no one’s sure who owns what.
Never mind that these sub-prime mortgages don’t have a set interest rate, and can and do jump through the roof when times get hard. Never mind those lenders are letting people borrow way too much money that they know they’ll never be able to pay back. Never mind that maybe if we would have had a little bit of regulations on mortgages and the credit industry, there would have never been sub-prime mortgages, or a mortgage bubble to pop. But don’t think about it too much, you might have to alter your view on regulations, and give up disparaging the government. And we must keep electing people who hate big government to run the government because they understand why we hate the government.

“What luck for rulers that men do not think.”

Refutation
I guess you could say, “Well, times are hard. Why shouldn’t we vote our pocketbook?” This seems reasonable for a lot of reasons.

You could also say that economic solutions that make sense in the long-term shouldn’t be my responsibly, or your responsibility, or any normal person’s responsibility to demand. This is what we elect our Congresspersons and Presidents to figure out. But, when you think about it, lawmakers are not going to respond to anyone but their voters, but voters aren’t demanding long-term solutions. We like getting a check to go out and buy a Playstation 3 or an iPod Touch, and 18.4 cents less on gas immediately sounds nice. So, as long as we are happy, our elected officials are happy too. So they sit back and let the next generation figure it out. You know, the future generations are very generous. But, you only come to that conclusion if you think about it - so don’t worry about it.

And for you staunch believers in Reaganomics, you could still insist that the government is always the problem. But if the government is always the problem, why are we looking to them now to hand out stimulus checks and bail out Bear Sterns?
I guess when you think about it; you come to the conclusion that you can either do what’s best for your country and you in the long-term, or what’s best for number 1 in the short term. But enough thinking.

Peroration

“What luck for rulers that men do not think.” It was Adolph Hitler that said this. This alone should be the warning to us now. As long as we continue along this path of accepting every short-term plan that is good for us now and damn the consequences for the future, we continue to follow Hitler’s description of society. We have to start thinking about solutions offered to us and whether or not they really solve the big problems. Because if we keep never minding the big picture, we’re going to continue to have bigger small picture problems. So as we leave for the summer or for our lives, remember to keep thinking. It may feel good to treat the symptoms and make ourselves feel better now. But if we always treat the symptoms and never the cause, we are always going to be sick.