Opening an Oral Argument before the Supreme Court: The Decline of Narrative's Role

Louis J. Sirico, Jr.
Opening an Oral Argument before the Supreme Court: The Decline of Narrative’s Role

Louis J. Sirico, Jr.
Professor of Law
Villanova University School of Law
299 North Spring Mill Road
Villanova, Pennsylvania 19085

610 519 7071
Sirico@law.villanova.edu

Professor of Law, Villanova University School of Law. Thanks go to Jon Williamson, VLS 2016.
Opening an Oral Argument before the Supreme Court: The Decline of Narrative’s Role

Abstract

In contrast to an earlier era, today’s oral advocate can expect Supreme Court justices to start asking questions earlier and often. Consequently, the advocate should expect to launch the argument with only a few sentences before the questions begin. These critical sentences offer the brief opportunity to introduce the theme of the subsequent argument. Advocates in other “hot bench” courts face the same challenge.

Our study of opening statements in Supreme Court oral arguments finds that the statements have one of three themes: a conventional legal argument, a policy argument, or a narrative argument. The conventional legal argument is the most common, followed by the policy argument, followed by the narrative argument.

The dearth of narrative arguments—even as supplementary arguments—can have adverse consequences for the advocate seeking to be persuasive and the Court seeking to decide the case properly.

I. Introduction

In 1940, John W. Davis, the most prominent oral advocate of his era, gave his contemporaries advice on conducting an appellate argument. At the opening of the argument, he counseled, the attorney should state the nature of the case and briefly its prior history, state the facts, state the applicable rules of law on which the attorney relies, and “go for the jugular vein.”1 In 1951, Justice Robert H. Jackson advised advocates to “begin with a concise history of the case, state the holding of the court below and wherein it is challenged[,] . . . follow with a careful statement of important facts, and conclude with discussion of the law.”2

In today’s United States Supreme Court, however, this advice is out of date. Now, questions from the bench come fast and furiously and do not allow for extended opening statements. For example, in the 2005 case of Kelo v. City of New London,3 the attorney launched his argument with three sentences (38 seconds) before the justices began asking questions.4 The justices posed questions and made comments 62 times during thirty minute argument of the petitioner’s attorney and 64 times during the argument of the respondent’s attorney.5 During the 1998-2007

---

2 Robert H. Jackson, Advocacy Before the United States Supreme Court, 37 CORNELL L. REV. 1, 6 (1951).
4 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from oral arguments and all statements relying on these arguments come from case reports on Oyez.org.
5 According to the oral transcriptions on Oyez.org, the attorneys each spoke just under the permitted 30 minutes. For a discussion of the problem of oral arguments crowded with questions, see Louis J. Sirico, Jr., A Proposal for Improving Oral Argument Before the United States Supreme Court, PEPPERDINE LAW REVIEW (in publication).
Court terms, comments and questions by the justices totaled 87,941, averaging 133 questions per case or more than twice per minute of oral argument.  

The attorney can expect the justices to start asking questions before the advocate speaks more than a few sentences and thus prevent the advocate from offering much context for the strictly legal argument. Veteran Supreme Court advocate Seth Waxman has observed, “In all but the rarest of modern appellate courtrooms, for example, we litigate in an environment of interruption, not oration.” Chief Justice John Roberts, Jr. has written, “Nowadays, the most uninterrupted time that an advocate is likely to get before the Supreme Court is a couple of minutes at the outset of argument.” Sometimes, an advocate may utter only a single sentence before the justices begin their questions.

Our informal survey indicates that other courts vary in how quickly they tend to begin questioning the advocate. Writing about courts in general, Chief Justice Roberts has advised:

Forget what you may have learned about how to structure an argument: a review of the facts, the holding below, and so on. There simply isn’t enough time. Try to have one opening sentence that tees up the issue in an advantageous way, and then proceed immediately to the meat of the argument Most judges today are well prepared, will be bored by a recitation of the facts or holding below, and will move you to the heart of the case with questions if you tarry on background.

This state of affairs leads to the importance of beginning oral argument with a brief persuasive statement before the questioning begins. Chief Justice Roberts has recalled:

When I was preparing for Supreme Court arguments, I always worked very hard on the first sentence, trying to put in it my main point and any key facts, because I appreciated that the first sentence might well be the only complete one I got out in the course of the argument.”

---

11 John G. Roberts, Jr., Thoughts on Presenting an Effective Oral Argument, School Law in Review 1997, 7-1, 7-4 (1997). Roberts has suggested that the justices “overdo it a bit” with their questions during oral argument. See Roberts, Bench a little too hot during oral arguments, D.C. DICTA (July 1, 2013), http://lawyersusonline.com/ddicta/2013/07/01/roberts-bench-a-little-too-hot-during-oral-arguments/
13 Roberts, supra note 8, at 71. According to the leading treatise on Supreme Court practice:
The shift to the short opening statement calls for an analysis of its consequences for the advocate and the Court. Our study finds that oral advocates are focusing on traditional logical legal arguments and giving little attention to a case’s narrative. This article examines the opening statements that the lawyers for petitioners make in arguing before the Supreme Court. The study offers insight into what typical openings lawyers use, what the contents of openings suggest about what lawyers believe to be persuasive, what the openings tell us about the importance of context for traditional legal arguments—or lack of importance. It further notes the adverse consequences for advocacy when narrative plays a diminished role.

II. The Study

For this study, we downloaded the openings of the petitioners’ oral arguments on Oyez.org, which provides the arguments in both transcript and audio formats. We selected the oral arguments of the 2012 and 2013 Supreme Court terms in order to have the most recent complete terms as of this writing. Our goal was to categorize these openings into whatever typology emerged. What emerged was not a complex typology, but a simple one.

We eventually grouped the openings into three categories:

1. conventional legal arguments, for example, arguments based on the text of a document, statute or regulation, arguments applying the law to the facts of the case, arguments based on legislative or statutory history, and arguments based on other historical information;

2. policy arguments, that is, arguments urging resolution of an issue in a way that advances or protects a particular social value implicated in the issue; and

3. narratives, that is, facts giving persuasive context to a party, the relevant events, and the law.

In this dynamic environment, the key is flexibility, and flexibility is a product of sound preparation. Counsel must expect to be interrupted within minutes of even seconds, and should not be thrown off by questioning that is both early and frequent. However, counsel must also be prepared to speak for a few minutes at the outset, arriving at the podium with a well-considered opening statement in mind.


See id. at 97 (explaining how to apply facts to arguments).

See id. at 125 (explaining arguments based on legislative history).

See id. at 147 (explaining historical arguments).

Here, we modify the definition proposed by Michael Smith: “A policy argument is an argument made by a legal advocate to a court that urges the court to resolve the issue before it by establishing a new rule that advances or protects a particular social value implicated by the issue.” The Sociological and Cognitive Dimensions of Policy-Based Persuasion, 22 J.L. & POL’Y 35, 39 (2013).

A narrative provides “just the new essential information and assumes the reader or other audience] has adequate banks of relevant prior topical knowledge to create context and meaning.” KENDALL HAVEN, STORY PROOF: THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE STARTLING POWER OF STORY 79 (2007). Technically, “narrative” and “story” have different definitions. A “story” gives more than information; it gives “a detailed, character-based narration of a character’s struggles to overcome obstacles and reach an important goal.” Id. Because the opening statements in the oral
Our experience in categorizing these openings showed that any effort at creating subcategories would be overly refined and artificial. We found that in opening statements, conventional legal arguments predominated over policy arguments and particularly over narrative arguments.

For the 2012 term, our study found that of the 71 cases in which the Court hear oral argument, 47 of the opening statements relied on conventional legal arguments, 12 relied on policy arguments, and 12 relied on narratives.

For the 2013 term, our study found that of the 69 cases in which the Court heard oral arguments, 33 of the opening statements relied on conventional legal arguments, 21 relied on policy arguments, and 15 relied on narratives.

We counted only the initial petitioners’ arguments. Thus, when two advocates argued for the petitioner, we omitted the second opening argument. In the rare cases in which the Court heard a reargument, we omitted the opening in the reargument.

To be clear, many openings included elements from more than one category. Almost all included at least some reference to a conventional legal argument. We categorized the openings according to the theme that predominated.

Here is an example of an opening employing a conventional legal argument. In *Walden v. Fiore*, the petitioner’s counsel successfully argued that Nevada lacked personal jurisdiction over the defendant-petitioner. The attorney argued that Ninth Circuit’s holdings were inconsistent with Court precedent and with a statute, respectively.

> In holding that the -- in holding that respondents could bring this Bivens lawsuit against Officer Anthony Walden in Nevada, the Ninth Circuit made two errors that independently require a reversal.

> First, as to personal jurisdiction, the Ninth Circuit held that it was sufficient that respondents have connections to Nevada, and that Officer Walden allegedly targeted his conduct at them, knowing of their contacts with Nevada.

> That plaintiff-centered approach is inconsistent with this Court's precedence which emphasize that the defendant himself must have meaningful contacts with the forum State.

> Second, as to venue, the Ninth Circuit relied on the fact that the respondents felt in Nevada the effects of Officer Walden's alleged conduct in Georgia.

---

arguments that we studied are so short, they do not include enough information to constitute a story and perhaps have too much of a persuasive element to constitute a narrative. In any case, the terminological distinction has no bearing on this study, and we use the terms interchangeably.

That similarly Plaintiff-centered approach is in conflict with the text of the venue statute, 1391(b)(2) which focuses on where the events or omissions giving rise to the claim occurred, not where the impact of those events or omissions may be felt.

Here is an example of an opening statement employing a policy argument. In CTS Corp. v. Waldburger, the petitioner’s counsel successfully argued that the statute of limitations for CERCLA (Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act) does not preempt a state statute of repose. The attorney argued that the policy of federalism and other considerations required a narrow reading of the federal statute.

CTS should prevail here based on the text of Section 9658 as well as its structure, historical context, and other relevant considerations, all of which make clear that it is a federalism comprise having no effects on statutes of repose.

Section 9658 should be construed narrowly to do the one thing that Congress intended it to do, which is to postpone in some situations a single State law statute of limitations commencement date.

Here is an example of an opening statement employing a narrative. In Lozano v. Alvarez, the petitioner’s counsel unsuccessfully argued that the policy of equitable tolling applies to the Hague Convention’s provision on international child abduction. Equitable tolling pauses the running of a statute of limitations when a litigant has diligently pursued his or her rights. The narrative displays the emotive appeal of the petitioner’s plight.

I represent Manuel Jose Lozano, a father who loves his daughter.

Respondent kidnapped that daughter and concealed her from Mr. Lozano, first in the United Kingdom for nearly eight months; then in France, then in the United States.

In Abbott, this Court recognized child abduction to be one of the worst forms of child abuse, and that the Convention therefore aims to deter and prevent child abduction from occurring in the first instance.

Equitable tolling furthers that aim.

By contrast the rule adopted by the Second Circuit provides a playbook for thwarting the Convention.

As these examples suggest, with any effort at categorizing, not all items easily fall into the available categories. For example, in Burt v. Titlow, The Michigan Solicitor General successfully argued that under the highly deferential standard of review, the state prisoner here could not ask a federal court to set aside a sentence for ineffective assistance of counsel.

22 “Comprise” appears to be a misspelling of “compromise.”
24 134 S. Ct. 10 (2013).
No court has ever held that AEDPA [Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act] and Strickland can be satisfied by presumption based on a silent record.

Yet that is precisely the approach the Sixth Circuit adopted in granting habeas relief here.

The record doesn't say how attorney Toca [the criminal defendant’s trial lawyer] investigated or what advice attorney Toca gave, but based on that record silence, the Sixth Circuit assumed Toca was ineffective.

And under AEDPA and Strickland, the presumptions run the opposite way.

Now, if there's one thing that the Court takes away from the oral argument this morning, I hope that it's -- it's this: How upside down the Sixth Circuit's analysis is when it says on Page 19A of the petition appendix that Toca was deficient because the record contains no evidence that he advised Titlow about elements, evidence, or sentencing exposure.

The correct question is whether the record contains evidence that Toca did not do those things.

And that record silence is dispositive in favor of the State on habeas review.

Now, if we could pull the curtain back and see what really happened here, it may be the case that Toca gave the proper advice, that he advised Titlow about all the perils of going to trial, and that Titlow continued to maintain her innocence.

Under Strickland, we're supposed to presume that Toca did exactly that, especially when it's Titlow's burden to satisfy the burden of proof, and she failed to do that.

So I'd like to begin with our first issue, which is AEDPA deference and the performance prong of Strickland.

Although this comparatively lengthy opening statement (one minute, twenty-seven seconds), arguably could be classified as either a conventional legal argument or as a predominantly narrative argument, we classified it as a conventional legal argument, because the argument focused on the legal argument, though bolstered by the narrative. In any case, certainly other classifiers would differ in how they would categorize specific opening statements. We believe, however, that they would reach an aggregate result close to ours.

III. The Decline of Narrative Openings

Even in the openings that we classified as conventional legal arguments or as policy arguments, rarely is there any subsidiary narrative strand. In comparison, in the days of long openings, lawyers enjoyed the freedom of discussing the facts at length and building a persuasive narrative. Prominent lawyers of that time emphasized the importance of this practice. For example, in his famous 1940 speech on arguing appeals, John W. Davis advised:
A case well stated is a case far more than half argued. Yet how many advocates fail to realize that the ignorance of the court concerning the facts in the case is complete, even where their knowledge of the law may adequately satisfy the proverbial presumption. The court wants above all things to learn what are the facts which give rise to the call upon its energies; for in many, probably in most cases, when the facts are clear there is no great trouble about the law.25

As our study shows, the viewpoint of today’s advocate is markedly different. To explain the decline of narrative, we offer two explanations. First, the attorney may believe that the justices find narrative relatively insignificant in their deliberations. Second, the attorney may believe that justices may find that given the time constraints of oral argument, advocates should confine narrative argument to the brief.

A. A Perception that Today’s Justices Find Narrative Less Persuasive than Conventional Legal and Policy Arguments

The shift away from narrative suggests that attorneys assume the justices are more interested in conventional legal argument and policy arguments as frameworks for deciding cases.

For example, in *Kelo v. City of New London*,26 a regional agency condemned the property of several individuals, and the home of lead petitioner Susette Kelo in a working class area. The agency acted to make room for Pfizer, a pharmaceutical corporation that promised to open facilities in New London and revitalize the economically depressed city. Kelo unsuccessfully argued that the Constitution did not permit using eminent domain for general economic development, and therefore the agency had acted invalidly.27

The facts in the case made for a compelling story. Kelo, a single nurse had purchased her dream house where the Thames River meets Long Island Sound and had spent her resources restoring it. Now, a city and a corporation were planning to tear her house down. Proof of the story’s power came after the Court rendered its decision when many were outraged that government had such an extensive power. In response, over 43 states amended their statutes to limit the exercise of eminent domain.28 In their brief, Kelo’s lawyers acknowledged the personal narrative in the Statement of the Case:

Petitioner Susette Kelo, a registered nurse, lives down the block from the Derys at 8 East Street. She purchased the Victorian-era house in 1997 and since that time has made extensive improvements to it. She loves the water view from her home, the people in the area, and the fact that she can get in a boat and be out in the Long Island Sound in less than ten minutes.

27 See id. at 472-77; JEFF BENEDICT, LITTLE PINK HOUSE 2009) (narrating the story of the case).
Wilhelmina Dew, Susette Kelo, and their neighbors, the other Petitioners in this case, stand to lose their homes through eminent domain to make way for private business development in the hope that the new development projects will create more tax revenue and jobs than the homes that currently occupy this peninsula of land along the Thames River. Petitioners have poured their labor and love into the fifteen homes they own in total. They are places where they have lived for years, have raised their families, and have grown old. Petitioners do not want money or damages. They only seek to stop the use of eminent domain so that they may hold on to their most sacred and important of possessions: their homes.\(^2\)

At oral argument, however, Kelo’s attorney apparently decided that the justices would find the narrative of little interest. Therefore, he chose to open with a policy argument and later, never highlighted the narrative:

This case is about whether there are any limits on government's eminent domain power under the public use requirement of the Fifth Amendment.

Every home, church or corner store would produce more tax revenue and jobs if it were a Costco, a shopping mall or a private office building.

But if that's the justification for the use of eminent domain, then any city can take property anywhere within its borders for any private use that might make more money than what is there now.\(^3\)

Ironically, Justice Ginsburg brought this opening statement to a close with a question offering a narrative favoring the respondents:

Mr. Bullock, you are leaving out that New London was in a depressed economic condition, so this is distinguished from the case where the state has no particular reason for wanting this, but the critical fact on the city side, at least, is that this was a depressed community and they wanted to build it up, get more jobs.\(^4\)

Thus, even in a case with a powerful narrative, the advocate cast it aside in favor of a conventional policy argument.

\(^2\)Brief of Petitioners, Kelo v. City of New London, 545 U.S. 469 (2005) (No. 04-108), at 2-3, available at https://a.next.westlaw.com/Document/13fb9ec1a495411d98915dbcd77ee80bc/View/FullText.html?navigationPath=Search%2Fv3%2Fsearch%2Fresults%2Fnavigation%2Fioad7051d00000014aa1e84741d85023d5%3Fnav%3DDBRIE F%26fragmentIdentifier%3D13fb9ec1a495411d98915dbcd77ee80bc%26start%26index%3D0%26context%3D%2528%2528sc.Search%2529%2529%26transitionType%3DSearchItem&listSource=Search&listPageSource=6b1dc8a6d39a14a86526f67c7e585d52&list=BRIEF&rank=357&grading=na&sessionScopeId=047faaba53c653380249db4a96b312d&originationContext=Search%20Result&transitionType=SearchItem&contextData=%28sc.Search%29


\(^4\)Id.
The belief that appellate judges are uninterested in narratives may be open to question. In one limited study, judges and other legal professionals read two sets of briefs. One set provided legally relevant facts and tightly focused on legal precedents and legal reasoning. The second set intertwined an appealing story into the argument.

Most readers found the second set of briefs more persuasive. These readers included most appellate judges, appellate staff attorneys, practitioners, and law professors. Appellate law clerks divided evenly. The latter group consisted of those individuals with the least experience and the individuals closest to their law school training, which probably emphasized narrow legal reasoning. In the aggregate, those individuals who had held their current positions for a long time generally found the story briefs more persuasive. Presumably, this study of written briefs has relevance to persuasiveness in oral argument and shows the power of narrative.

A number of scholars have emphasized the interplay between narrative and conventional legal reasoning. The focus on conventional legal reasoning, then, fails to employ all methods of reasoning and persuasion that might influence a court.

B. A Perception that Today’s Justices Find Narrative Dispensable in Oral Argument

Attorneys may believe that given the limited time for oral argument, going to the legal heart of the case leaves no time for the narrative. As a result, the legal argument may be deprived of the rich context that narrative offers. Thus, oral arguments focus on legal arguments, and to a lesser degree, policy arguments.

Consequently, the appellate brief, and not oral argument, has become the place to emphasize the narrative argument. This shift aligns with the long, gradual trend moving the central focus of the client’s entire argument from the oral argument to the appellate brief.

As for oral argument, initially, the Court followed the British practice of hearing lengthy oral arguments and not imposing time limitations. Not until 1849 did the Court restrict the length of oral argument, and then it limited them to two hours per lawyer unless the Court granted special leave for longer arguments. On occasion, it would permit longer arguments. For example, in the Dred Scott case, the Court allotted each counsel three hours, and on reargument, it heard twelve hours of oral argument.

32 A narrative opening need not consist of a statement of the facts of a case. Presumably the Court is well versed in them. The narrative highlights key facts in order to give context to the legal argument and introduce a persuasive theme to a case. See SHAPIRO, supra note 11 (noting the importance of facts and advising that “the presentation of facts must be woven into the fabric of the oral argument and its legal development).
33 See Kenneth D. Chestek, Judging by the Numbers: An Empirical Study of the Power of Story, 7 LEGAL COMM. & RHETORIC: JALWD 1, 10-18 (2010).
34 See id. at 20.
35 See id.
36 See id. at 29-30.
37 See id. at 21-22.
38 See, e.g., infra notes 40-45.
39 The following brief history summarizes the more detailed history in Sirico, supra note 5.
40 Dredd Scott v. Sandford, 60 U.S. 393 (187).
Over time, the Court limited the length of oral arguments. In 1858, it limited each side to two oralists and limited each side to two hours of argument unless it gave special permission for longer arguments. In 1911, the Court limited each side to one and one-half hours of oral argument unless it gave special permission for longer arguments. For arguments concerning the jurisdiction of the court below and in certain criminal appeals, it limited argument to forty-five minutes per side. In 1911, it limited oral argument to thirty minutes per side for the summary document, forty-five minutes per side in certified cases, and one hour each per side in other cases on the regular docket. In 1970, the Court revised its rules. It limited one half-hour per side for oral argument unless it gave special permission and limited each side to one oralist unless it gave special permission.

As for briefs, not until 1795 did the Court request attorneys to furnish it with a statement of the material points of the case. In 1849, it increased its emphasis on written argument by requiring the attorneys to file a detailed printed abstract of the case. In 1872, it required briefs to contain a concise statement of the case, an assignment of errors, a brief of the argument containing a clear statement of the points of law and the relevant facts, a setting out of the charge of a court, when relevant to the argument, and a quotation of the full substance of any evidence that was admitted or rejected. In 1911, the Court revised and detailed the required contents for a brief. In 1970, it again revised its rules on the content of briefs. 1980 marked the first time that the Court imposed page limitations on briefs. In 2010, the Court moved from prescribing page limitations to prescribing maximum word counts to limit the length of briefs.

As this history demonstrates, the Court has gradually chosen to limit oral argument and increase reliance on written argument. Because narrative arguments usually take more time to develop, the Court, directly or indirectly, has dissuaded oral advocates from employing their limited time at the podium to tell the story of the case. Consequently, advocates infrequently focus on narratives in their opening statements.

IV. The Implications of Diminishing the Narrative Argument

The diminution of the narrative in the oral argument has consequences for advocacy in the appellate brief, for the growing academic interest in persuasive narrative, and for the role of narrative in serving as a check on logical legal reasoning.

The telling of a persuasive narrative has shifted to the brief. However, the mindset that deemphasizes the narrative in the oral argument also will deemphasize it in the brief. Moreover, consigning the narrative to the brief prevents the oral advocate from emphasizing what may be a compellingly persuasive story in the eyeball-to-eyeball dialogue with the court. The advocate thus fails to fully maximize the power of the client’s story.

The diminution of narrative runs contrary to current explorations into persuasion. A growing literature emphasizes employing narrative in persuasive argument.41 With its roots in rhetoric,42

---

41 See, e.g., PHILIP N. MEYER, STORYTELLING FOR LAWYERS (2014) (focusing on storytelling in trials); RUTH ANNE ROBBINS, STEVE JOHANSEN & KEN CHESTEK, YOUR CLIENT’S STORY: PERSUASIVE LEGAL WRITING (2012) (emphasizing the teaching of storytelling in first year Legal Writing courses); Nancy Levit, Legal Storytelling: The Theory and the Practice--Reflective Writing Across the Curriculum, 15 LEG. WRITING 259 (2009) (advocating more
cognitive research, and fiction writing, the literature argues that humans innately find stories the best road to understanding. The most profound root reaches back to Aristotle’s categorization of the modes of persuasion—logos, ethos, and pathos. Narrative is rooted in pathos, the appeal to emotion. The narrative of a case, then, gives context to a conflict and may play a central role in determining the outcome of a case.

Some might argue that logical reasoning acts as a restraint on narrative; however, narrative may act as a restraint on logical reasoning. Consider how essential to an argument are the qualities of narrative fidelity, external narrative coherence, and external narrative coherence.

According to this argument, a judicial decision must “ring true” with the stories that the audience knows to be true from its experience; that is, the argument must have “narrative fidelity.” Further, it must accept a narrative that is plausible; that is, the argument must have “narrative coherence.” Narrative coherence requires “external coherence;” that is, the narrative must correspond with the audience’s background social knowledge and cultural presuppositions.

In this normative world, law and narrative are inseparably related. Every prescription is insistent in its demand to be located in discourse—to be supplied with history and destiny, beginning and end, explanation and purpose. And every narrative is insistent in its demand for its prescriptive point, its moral. History and literature cannot escape their location in a normative universe, nor can prescription, even when embodied in a legal text, escape its origin and its end in experience, in the narratives that are the trajectories plotted upon material reality by our imaginations.


“Stories help us create knowledge, reinforce knowledge, and change existing knowledge and beliefs. They are a primary form of human communication.” Ruth Anne Robbins, An Introduction to This Volume and to Applied Storytelling, 14 LEGAL WRITING 1, 5 (2008).


Narrative coherence also requires “internal coherence;” that is, all the aspects of the narrative—the plot, the characters, the setting—must join together without contradictions. Thus, diminishing the role of narrative diminishes the validity and plausibility of the logical legal argument.

In *Kelo v. City of New London*, for example, the Court endorsed the story of a dying city whose only hope was accommodating a major corporation that wanted to move in and generate jobs and economic development. The accommodation required condemning residential property and compensating the property owners for their economic loss. This story would ring true with acceptance of the doctrine of eminent domain and its very long history (narrative fidelity). Further, the story corresponds with the legal audience’s background social knowledge and cultural presuppositions about the powers and responsibilities of government. In addition, the story is internally consistent.

On the other hand the Court could have endorsed a contrary story of a hard working woman who lost her cherished home because of an oppressive and insensitive government. This story would ring true with closely held notions of private property rights and individual freedom. Further, it corresponds with the audience’s presupposition that there must be some limitation on the government’s power to exercise eminent domain. In addition, the story is internally consistent.

With two such powerful narratives, it is no wonder that some justices (the majority) adopted the first one, and some adopted the second. In any case, the persuasiveness of the narratives would justify highlighting them at the start of the oral argument. However, neither advocate did so. Yet, based on the public outcry following the decision, the second narrative captured public opinion and led to legislative change narrowing the scope of eminent domain in many states. Thus the second narrative proved persuasive in other sectors of American government. That narrative, then, persuaded the public and the politicians to reject the conventional legal argument that probably always had the best chance of winning in the courts. So, perhaps Kelo’s attorney missed an opportunity to strengthen his argument.

V. Conclusion

With the shift to short openings for oral argument and aggressive questioning by the justices, the oral advocate has moved from an introduction highlighting a narrative theme to one that relies on conventional legal and policy arguments. The advocate apparently believes that the justices find narrative arguments not particularly persuasive or that the justices prefer to have this argument confined to the brief. With the decline in narrative arguments, however, advocates may be losing a persuasive tool, and justices may be depriving themselves of necessary context for their case deliberations.

50 *See id.* at 74-77.
52 Comprising the majority were Justices Stevens, Souter, Ginsburg, and Breyer, with Justice Kennedy concurring. Comprising the dissent were Chief Justice Rehnquist and Justices O’Connor, Scalia, and Thomas.
53 *See Cavazos supra* note 28, at 697.