

Authoring Kennedy's Rhetoric: An Analysis of the origins of JFK's speeches

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Abstract

While the speeches of John F. Kennedy have included some of the most memorable lines of modern U.S. politics, little is known about the origins of Kennedy's speeches. Using internal administration memoranda and draft speeches this paper examines the collaboration between John F. Kennedy and his speechwriters. The traditional case study method is complimented with a computer-assisted content analysis to explore the degree to which Kennedy and his speechwriters produce similar rhetoric.

Authoring Kennedy's Rhetoric: An Analysis of the origins of JFK's speeches *

Few presidents are better known for their rhetoric but, ironically, little is known about how John F. Kennedy chose the words that would lie at the heart of his legacy. While Kennedy's speeches are some of the best known in American history, their own history is obscured in the mythology of the Kennedy years. Volumes have been written about what Kennedy said and did, but little has been written about Kennedy's speechwriters. Compounding this irony is the fact that while little has been written about Kennedy's speechwriters, they have written a great deal about him. Ted Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger served as speechwriters to Kennedy and their books, Kennedy and A Thousand Days, respectively, quickly became two of the best known sources on the Kennedy presidency. Patrick Anderson goes so far as to suggest "Schlesinger joined the small group of White House aides whose most important service to their President came not during but after his presidency."¹

Perhaps historians have little interest in prying too deeply into these historic phrases, lest their origins are revealed and impact be diminished. Just as some early Americans preferred not to probe the origins of George Washington's famous farewell address,² modern political observers may be reluctant to ask too many questions about the legacy of John F. Kennedy. After all, while few would dispute that Kennedy had a role in crafting his speeches, any discussion of the contributions of the people who contributed to Kennedy's speech only shifts the focus away from Kennedy who has become one of the most compelling characters in modern American history. Someone writing a biography of Ted Sorensen might find that making the speechwriter's contribution more prominent would make their subject more compelling. However, reader interest in speechwriters is low and presidents make more interesting subjects.

Shifting the focus away from Kennedy diminishes the value of quoting him. Historians who draw upon Kennedy's rhetoric as they describe the Administration's lofty goals will find little interest in tracing the rhetoric that inspired a generation back to the pen of the obscure speechwriter from Nebraska.

* The research was supported by a grant from the John F. Kennedy Foundation.

¹ Patrick Anderson, The President's Men, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969, 257.

² Roger Butterfield, "Ghost Writers: Behind the famous presidential phrase often lurks an unknown phrasemaker," Life, July 5, 1968, 62.

The case of Kennedy's White House speechwriting should be especially interesting to scholars because Kennedy came the presidency in a time of great change in political communication and few presidents have proven as adept at adapting. When Kennedy began his presidency, his words were recorded by stenographers and typists for publication in newspapers, but by the end of his presidency television was bringing presidential speeches directly into most American homes. In 1968, *Life* magazine noted that technology was behind some of the demand for speechwriters.

The boom in ghost writing is the inevitable result of three electronic inventions: the microphone for large public meetings, radio, and television. Each of these devices has progressively magnified the audiences of Presidents and presidential candidate, while radio and television require that speeches be precisely written and clocked in advance.³

The Kennedy White House is a particularly good case for studying presidential speech for other reasons. The first, Kennedy's reputation for great speeches, is well known and needs little explanation, especially as John Kerry represents yet another Democratic presidential candidate encouraged into public service by Kennedy's call to action. Secondly, the Kennedy speechwriting operation is worth exploration because it was one of the last of its kind. Ted Sorensen would be one of the last White House staffers to be involved in policy development while still remaining in control of the speechwriting process. Certainly, no speechwriter since has had more influence than Sorensen.

This paper will explore the development of Kennedy's rhetoric and demonstrate how a speechwriter with strong influence in the White House can help insure that the president's prose is clear and strong. This hypothesis is especially interesting today because Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson has been compared to Kennedy speechwriter Ted Sorensen.⁴

³ Roger Butterfield, "Ghost Writers: Behind the famous presidential phrases often lurks an unknown phrasemaker," *Life*, July 5, 1968, 63.

⁴ David Frum, *The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*, New York: Random House, 2003, 24.

The Kennedy style

Kennedy was not born a great orator and did not think of himself as a great speaker.⁵ However, he had the foresight to understand the importance of television and in 1960 he hired a speech coach, who taught him to practice “barking” like a seal and speak along with records of Winston Churchill’s greatest speeches.⁶

Sorensen describes the Kennedy style, one they found few potential speechwriters could faithfully replicate. As Sorensen said of many who they considered to draft speeches for Kennedy, “The style of whom we tried may have been good. It may have been superior. But it was not his [Kennedy’s].”⁷ Sorensen describes Kennedy as favoring short speeches, short clauses and short words as well as points in a numbered or logical sequence and “the construction of sentences, phrases and paragraphs in such a manner as to simplify, clarify and emphasize.” The President also favored alliterative sentences, not simply for rhetorical style, but because they aided the audiences recollection. He also wanted to avoid phrases like “suggest,” “perhaps,” and “possible alternatives for consideration” in favor of phrasing that was more specific and certain.⁸ Whenever possible, Kennedy preferred to speak without a formal text, relying instead on a brief outline and thorough briefing. This approach, according to Tom Wicker, “gives him more flexibility, allows greater reliance on the instinctive flow of emotion and response between audience and performer.”⁹

Sorensen had joined Kennedy’s Senate staff in 1953 and the years together created an understanding of substance as well as style. “As the years went on, and I came to know what he thought on each subject as well as how he wished to say it,” Sorensen reflected, “our style and standard became increasingly one.”¹⁰ Kennedy Press Secretary Pierre Salinger said, “Sorensen not only had strong social convictions echoing those of the young senator, but a genius for translating them into eloquent and persuasive language.”¹¹

⁵ Richard Reeves, President Kennedy: Profile of Power. Touchstone Book. New York. 1993, 41.

⁶ Richard Reeves, President Kennedy: Profile of Power. Touchstone Book. New York. 1993, 41.

⁷ Sorensen, Kennedy, 60.

⁸ Sorensen, Kennedy, 61.

⁹ Tom Wicker, Kennedy as a Public Speakah,” The New York Times Magazine, February 25, 1962, 14.

¹⁰ Sorensen, Kennedy, 60.

¹¹ Pierre Salinger, With Kennedy. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966, 66.

The Kennedy Speechwriting staff

Several things about the Kennedy presidency would strike any observer of the White House today. The most obvious difference is the small number of speechwriters Kennedy used. Ted Sorensen was chief speechwriter, although his title as “Special Counsel to the President” did not list speechwriter. However, Sorensen and his assistants were responsible for all presidential speeches and messages.

While insider accounts of a presidency generally tend to overstate the author’s role in the presidency, Kennedy’s speechwriters understate their contribution to the President’s speech. This is, in part, probably because they realized that taking responsibility for Kennedy’s words would only diminish his legacy. This is especially likely given that the Kennedy biographies written by Sorensen and Schlesinger were published in 1965, when few citizens wanted to hear about something as insincere as having your words prepared for you. As Patrick Anderson described the Sorensen account, “There is indeed a shadowy quality about Sorensen’s book, for when he praises Kennedy’s words and deeds, one senses a touch of self-congratulations, since many of the words and some of the deeds were Sorensen’s own.”¹²

The speechwriters may have played down their role in speechwriting due to lingering sensitivity over questions about the authorship of Profiles in Courage. In 1957 in a television interview, journalist Drew Pearson had asserted that Kennedy’s Pulitzer Prize winning book had been ghostwritten. In a counter-offensive, Clark Clifford was retained as legal counsel and Ted Sorensen went so far as to sign a sworn affidavit that he had not written this book for Kennedy and his assistance to Kennedy had included the “assembly and preparation of research and other materials.”¹³

While the debate over the writing of Profiles in Courage is not directly related to the construction of Kennedy’s speeches, the issue provides some insights into the relationship between Kennedy and Sorensen and an interesting example of the issue of authorship. In his book on presidential staff, Patrick Anderson suggests that both Sorensen and Kennedy wrote the book with Sorensen doing the historical work and the rough drafting and concludes

¹² Patrick Anderson, 358.

¹³ Sworn Affidavit, December 14, 1957, folder: “John Kennedy, ‘Profiles in Courage,’” Personal Papers of Clark Clifford, Speech File Series, Box 2, John F. Kennedy Library.

that “had they been professional writers, instead of Senator and aide, any publisher would have credited them as co-authors.”¹⁴ Historian Robert Dallek reached a similar conclusion suggesting that the book was the product of a committee and Kennedy “did more on the book than some later critics believed, but “less than the term *author* normally connotes.”¹⁵

Sorensen acknowledges his own role and the contribution of “historical memoranda” written by Professor Jules Davids. Kennedy thanks numerous individuals in the preface, including Sorensen to whom he owes the “greatest debt” for his work a “research associate.”¹⁶ Kennedy could certainly claim authorship of the Pulitzer Prize winning book, but his own listing of the assistance he received indicates that he was the beneficiary of more assistance than most authors.

The debate over authorship of Profiles in Courage probably has much more to do with the definition of “author” than with issue of who did what. It seems clear that Kennedy received a great deal of help with his book and that, while he may have been the driving force behind the book, the final manuscript was the product of many minds. As was typical of the relationship between Sorensen and Kennedy, the two men formed a partnership in which Sorensen remained a silent partner.

While Sorensen had, according to one journalist, “the glory of words,”¹⁷ he avoided taking credit for Kennedy’s speeches. In describing the ten-year relationship working relationship on speeches, Sorensen used the term “collaborator.”¹⁸ The term collaborator implies working with someone, rather than working for them. The Kennedy-Sorensen speechwriting effort was that of a team. However, Kennedy clearly held control over his speeches and was senior partner, but Sorensen held Kennedy’s respect and enjoyed a degree of latitude in drafting speeches.

Sorensen’s closeness to the president and the policy process put him in a strong position to defend speeches drafts from dilution at the hands of others in the administration. No one other than the President was likely to

¹⁴ Patrick Anderson, The President’s Men, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969, 339.

¹⁵ Robert Dallek, An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2003, 199.

¹⁶ John F. Kennedy, Profiles in Courage, New York: Pocket Books, 1956, xx

¹⁷ Salinger, 66.

¹⁸ Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, 59.

override Sorensen and he was not obligated to clear speech drafts on most issues with more senior policy advisors because no one held a higher rank.¹⁹ As one observer noted, referring to Sorensen as “only a speechwriter” misses the point because Kennedy looked to Sorensen for ideas and the words to promote them.

Sorensen’s influence in the White House only expanded after the Bay of Pigs. After failing to consult with Bobby Kennedy and Sorensen on the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy decided that he needed to broaden his sources of advice on foreign policy. This eventually placed Sorensen in the middle of the Cuban Missile Crisis where Sorensen gained influence in the process when he was given responsibility for coming up with draft statements for both the blockade and the air strike options. In drafting rationales for each decision, Sorensen put together questions for the Executive Committee that forced them to consider the follow up to the blockade decision.²⁰

Kennedy’s empowerment of speechwriters went beyond Sorensen. In one case, Richard Goodwin worried aloud to the President that he might not be able to get a task force to agree to the specific proposals outlined in a draft speech. Kennedy’s response was simply, “I don’t care if everyone agrees. You know what our thinking is. That’s the only agreement you need—with me.”²¹

In his analysis of Kennedy’s speechwriting, Theodore Windt noted that Sorensen’s book on decision making in the Kennedy White House was remarkable for its clarity and its source, “Rarely has an official of a sitting administration spelled out the workings of the executive branch as Sorensen did. Rarer still is the power wielded by a speechwriter to speak about presidential decision making with such authority.”²²

While Sorensen’s broad role in the White House was an asset, it was also clear that the demands of speechwriting were quickly becoming too great to be handled by one person who also shared broad policy advising.

¹⁹ Theodore O. Windt, “John F. Kennedy: Presidential Speechwriting as Rhetorical Collaboration,” from Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond, Kurt Ritter and Martin J. Medhurst, eds., College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003, 103.

²⁰ Anderson, 354.

²¹ Theodore O. Windt, “John F. Kennedy: Presidential Speechwriting as Rhetorical Collaboration,” from Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond, Kurt Ritter and Martin J. Medhurst, eds., College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003, 101.

²² Theodore O. Windt, “John F. Kennedy: Presidential Speechwriting as Rhetorical Collaboration,” from Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond, Kurt Ritter and Martin J. Medhurst, eds., College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003, 92.

At times, Sorensen would need to set aside hours or days to focus on speechwriting, leaving his other tasks to Deputy Special Counsel Myer Feldman and Assistant Special Counsel Lee White.²³

Sorensen headed a speechwriting staff that would include Arthur Schlesinger, Lee White, Richard Goodwin, and Myer Feldman. Beyond contributing speech materials, Arthur Schlesinger also advised the President on Latin America and other issues. While his influence is in dispute, it is clear that he did not carry the same weight as Sorensen who was clearly one of those closest to Kennedy. Some sources argue that Schlesinger was often ignored and, as one Kennedy advisor put it, “You have to understand that *Arthur* was over in the *East Wing* drinking tea with *Jackie*.”²⁴ Schlesinger served as a sort of ambassador to the liberal wing of the party. As a founder of the Americans for Democratic Action and a close associate of Democratic rival Adlai Stevenson, Schlesinger was not regarded well by the Kennedy loyalists. However, while he may have initially been brought in to the White House to build liberal support, his contributions to Kennedy’s speeches were significant.

Reflecting Kennedy’s shunning of rigid lines of authority, the speechwriters advised Kennedy on a remarkable array of issues. Schlesinger, for example, wrote Kennedy a 5-page memo on the atmospheric test of nuclear weapons in late 1961. The memo goes well beyond the broad arguments of a generalist only casually involved in such issues and reflects a deep understanding of the facts of the case.²⁵

Dick Goodwin joined the speechwriting staff in January 1961. According to Patrick Anderson, Goodwin rivaled Sorensen’s speechwriting ability, creating some tension with Sorensen, the person who was nominally his boss. However, Goodwin was unhappy serving as a number-two speechwriter and wanted a position with impact on policy. Initially, Goodwin was well regarded in the Kennedy White House for his political and rhetorical sense but as he became restless in his pursuit of broader influence he began to annoy Kennedy and others in the administration. Goodwin would move to the State Department, wear out his welcome there, and then move on to become a speechwriter and trouble shooter for Sargent Shriver in the Peace Corps. Later, Goodwin would return to the White House to help Lyndon Johnson promote the Great Society.

²³ Anderson, 349.

²⁴ Patrick Anderson, *The President’s Men*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969, 259.

²⁵ Memorandum from the President, December 29, 1961, folder:” Memoranda for the President, 1961,” Personal Papers of Arthur Schlesinger, White House Files, Memoranda for the President, Box WH-66, John F. Kennedy Library.

The speechwriting process

Pierre Salinger says that one of Kennedy's "persistent regrets" was that he didn't have time to draft his own major addresses.²⁶ Kennedy recognized the importance of his speeches and considered them an important tool that could be used to convey the administration's decisions to the nation and the world and to set the agenda by framing the President's policies in certain terms.²⁷ His reliance on speechwriters did not result from either lack of interest in speeches (as may have been the case with George H.W. Bush) or an inability to write effectively. Instead, Kennedy likely realized that any attempt to engage himself more in the speechwriting process would have come at too high a cost in the neglect of other duties.

Major addresses generally started with a meeting of the President's closest advisors. With that group, Kennedy would come up with an outline of what he wanted to say. Sorensen would then go off to prepare a first draft. That draft would be reviewed, especially with an eye toward the broad goals of the speech. If Kennedy agreed that the emphasis of the speech was correct, Sorensen would assemble a subsequent draft. When the broad outline of the speech was set and the basic structure in place, Kennedy would review the speech and do some editing.

According to one study of the Kennedy speechwriting process, "practically anyone could be involved in some of the minor speeches." With Kennedy serving the role of editor.²⁸ While this observation is true, it should not be interpreted to suggest that the speechwriting function was scattered around the White House. Most speeches began (and ended) with Sorensen or Schlesinger. Others might offer suggestions, even drafts, but it is clear from the archival material that Sorensen and his assistants were the primary authors of speeches. Avoiding the downfalls of what Theodore Windt described as "committee writing"²⁹ may explain why Kennedy's speeches are so often quoted.

²⁶ Pierre Salinger, With Kennedy, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966, 109.

²⁷ Sorensen, 330.

²⁸ Theodore O. Windt, "John F. Kennedy: Presidential Speechwriting as Rhetorical Collaboration," from Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond, Kurt Ritter and Martin J. Medhurst, eds., College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003, 94, 98.

²⁹ Theodore O. Windt, "John F. Kennedy: Presidential Speechwriting as Rhetorical Collaboration," from Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond, Kurt Ritter and Martin J. Medhurst, eds., College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003, 103.

While authority in the speechwriting process remained in the hands of the president and his speechwriters, they were not reluctant about soliciting ideas and feedback—when it suited them. The degree to which speech drafts would be circulated varied from speech to speech. In some cases, the President wanted and sought little or no input from departments. This was the case with his speech at American University (the “Peace Speech”) because he expected resistance from the State and Defense departments. On issues of less interest to the President, Kennedy was often content with the drafts that resulted from Sorensen’s collaboration with the relevant department.

While Kennedy’s staff praises him as an excellent editor, his handwritten revisions to speech drafts are relatively sparse compared to the grammatical tinkering of an Eisenhower or the extensive revisions made by Jimmy Carter. Kennedy seemed to be as comfortable with the drafts he received as any president studied, reflecting the degree to which Sorensen understood the President’s wishes and the Kennedy style of speaking.

On major speeches, especially television addresses from the White House, Kennedy seems to have stuck closely to the prepared text. In minor speeches, Kennedy took more liberties, often frustrating the speechwriters who saw their labors evaporate from the page and journalists whose stories were often already written based on the pre-speech releases that the White House put out based on the prepared text.³⁰

While the institutionalization of the speechwriting process was not as elaborate as it would be by Nixon and Ford administrations, the need for clearance from departments was already being commented on by Kennedy. In a draft of his remarks for the annual Gridiron Club Dinner, Kennedy was to remark, “This speech has not been submitted to the State Department for clearance... so I have been asked to announce that these views are not necessarily theirs - - which is all right, since their views are not always mine.”³¹

The Kennedy White House recognized the limits of institutional speechwriting and the perils of speechwriting by committee. In the systems established by Sorensen and Kennedy, individuals could look over the speech and comment, but ultimately the overall structure of the speech and the theme had to come from one speechwriter lest the power of the words get lost in revision. “Groups of advisers could suggest outlines and

³⁰ Salinger, 67.

³¹ “TCS 1st Draft,” 3/15/62 folder: “Gridiron Club Dinner, 3/17/62, Speech Materials, 3/15/62 – 3/17/62 + undated,” Personal Papers of Theodore Sorensen, Speech File Series, Box 68, John F. Kennedy Library, 2.

alterations, and they could review drafts, but group authorship could not produce the continuity and precision of style he desired, or the unity of thought and argument he needed.”³²

Data and Methods

To better understand the construction of Kennedy’s speeches, five speeches were selected for closer study. The five speeches were not selected randomly. In fact, the needs of this study contributed to the selection of speeches of great significance. On one hand, the selection of speeches of significance insured that the results provided insights into the production of important speeches. Ideally, a model of speechwriting that would apply to major and minor speeches would be ideal. However, there were other limitations that make the use of a broader range of speeches difficult.

Multiple drafts were needed to allow the comparison of drafts over the course of the writing process. Because multiple drafts are more common as the importance of the speech increases, major speeches were more likely to generate the variety of drafts needed to match the needs of the study. Further, in order to better gauge the degree to which Kennedy improvised, only speeches for which a “reading copy” could be located were used. The president’s reading copy was included in every case. That copy, usually in large type and placed in a binder that the president took to the podium with him, tells us what the final formal product of the speechwriting office was. This reading comment often is marked up in the president’s own handwriting, isolating the president’s last-minute changes. However, to see what extemporaneous comments the president added as they spoke, a “as delivered” version was utilized as the standard for the final version of the speech.

Five speeches were selected: the inaugural address, an address to the National Association of Manufacturers, an address at Rice, the 1962 State of the Union Address, and Kennedy’s commencement speech at Yale University. These speeches are each described briefly to provide some context of the unique circumstance of the speech and the process behind them.

Kennedy’s Inaugural Address

The election of 1960 gave John Kennedy the narrowest of victories and according to Arthur Schlesinger, “he could never escape the political arithmetic.”³³ Kennedy looked to his Inaugural Address to help create a

³² Sorensen, 330-331.

mandate for action through words to replace the mandate now won by ballots. Kennedy also saw the address as an opportunity to shed the image of inexperience and put aside the bitterness of the campaign. According to Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy knew that he would be viewed with skepticism “by those in Congress and the country who thought him too inexperienced for the post.”³⁴

Kennedy’s ability to build the excitement and vision during that speech is still remembered by many citizens today and the speech serves as one of benchmarks of presidential speeches since. While the inaugural address was heavily edited and resulted from the work of many minds, the rhetoric did not become bogged down by the process. The process, headed by Kennedy himself, was a process of refinement guided by rhetorical needs, not the narrow concerns of bureaucratic organizations or special interests.

While some of those invited to make suggestions for the speech were invited out of a sense of political obligation, the call for ideas from the President-elect reflected an invitation for real input on the broadest themes of the speech. On December 23, 1960, Sorensen sent telegrams asking for “specific themes and in language to articulate these themes whether it takes one page or ten pages” to Allan Nevins, Adlai E. Stevenson, Douglas Dillon, Joseph Kraft, Chester Bowles, Arthur Goldberg, Dean Rusk, Fred Dutton, David Lloyd, and John Kenneth Galbraith.³⁵

While the net originally cast by Kennedy and Sorensen was quite broad, the President-elect and his speechwriter would do much of their work isolated from the others, allowing them to avoid the tugging and prodding of the cacophony of interests that usually swirl around the White House.

According to Sorensen, Kennedy knew what he wanted to say in his address. “He wanted it short. He wanted it focused on foreign policy. He did not want it to sound partisan, pessimistic or critical of his predecessor... And he wanted it to set a tone for the era about to begin.”³⁶

³³ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965) 708

³⁴ Theodore Sorensen, “Let the Word go Forth.” Delacorte Press. New York. 1988, 11

³⁵ Block Wire Telegraph, December 23, 1960, folder: “Inaugural Address, 1/20/61, Memoranda, Speech Materials and Correspondence, 12/10/60 – 1/23/61,” Personal Papers of Theodore Sorensen, Speech File Series, Box 62, John F. Kennedy Library.

³⁶ Sorensen, Kennedy 240.

The interest in brevity is clear from the archival materials. Sorensen had a small sheet of paper that listed out the length of recent inaugural addresses. Sorensen scrawled some notes on this sheet comparing the length of his drafts to others and noting that the speech was far shorter than most.³⁷ According to Sorensen, as Kennedy sought to make his inaugural address the shortest of the twentieth century.³⁸ Kennedy was not satisfied with any draft that included domestic policy; he believed it sounded too partisan. Finally he told Sorensen, “Let’s drop out the domestic stuff altogether. It’s too long anyway.”³⁹

While describing Kennedy as the “principle architect” of the Inaugural Address, Sorensen acknowledges the input of more people with paragraphs, pages and even complete drafts coming from a variety of sources, solicited and unsolicited, with some of this material finding its way into the final version. Sorensen was asked to review past inaugural addresses and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address for guidance. According to Sorensen, “No Kennedy speech ever underwent so many drafts.”⁴⁰

Even though the president-elect had not officially taken office yet, he was already beginning to experience the tug of interest groups. Some “prominent citizens and church leaders” of Utah sent a wire to Kennedy only three days before the inauguration urging “prominent mention in [Kennedy’s] Inaugural message to the creation of an exclusive Peace Department in our government.”⁴¹ In a telegram dated January 11, Ernest Gruening, one of Alaska’s first senators, even managed to put in the plug for a little pork-barrel spending.

URGE YOU TO INCLUDE IN STATE OF UNION MESSAGE
STATEMENT ON NEED TO DEVELOP RESOURCES OF ALASKA.
RESPECTFULLY SUGGEST STATEMENT ALONG THE LINES OF THAT
MADE BY YOU ON FLOOR OF SENATE JUNE 24 1960: QUOTE WE
MUST MEET THE CHALLENGE OF ALASKA DASH THE CHALLENGE TO
REAP ITS ABUNDANCE BUILD ITS STRENGTH AND PROVIDE A
RESERVOIR OF ANTURAL WEALTH. HAVING GIVEN POLITICAL
EQUALITY TO ALASKA WE MUST NOT PROVIDE ECONOMIC

³⁷ Memorandum, undated, “Inaugural Address, 1/20/61, Memoranda, Speech Materials and Correspondence, 12/10/60 – 1/23/61,” Personal Papers of Theodore Sorensen, Speech File Series, Box 62, John F. Kennedy Library.

³⁸ Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, 240-241.

³⁹ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 242.

⁴⁰ Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, 240-241.

⁴¹ Telegram, January 14, 1961, “Inaugural Address, 1/20/61, Memoranda, Speech Materials and Correspondence, 12/10/60 – 1/23/61,” Personal Papers of Theodore Sorensen, Speech File Series, Box 62, John F. Kennedy Library.

EQUALITY AS WELL UNQUOTE DETAILS COULD BE GIVEN
CONGRESS LATER IN SPECIAL MESSAGE.⁴²

Denying these requests was made someone easier by Sorensen stated deadline for all “suggestions” for the speech to be delivered by December 31st. However, the final drafting of the Inaugural speech did not commence until the week before the actual speech.⁴³

Kennedy asked Sorensen to study the Gettysburg Address in hopes of having the same kind of impact. According to Sorensen, one of the secrets of Lincoln’s success was that “Lincoln never used a two- or three syllable word where a one-syllable word would do, and never used two or three words where one would do.”⁴⁴ While Kennedy’s speech may not quite have reached the level of Lincoln’s address, the new administration came remarkably close and demonstrated a tremendous capacity for speechwriting.

The NAM Speech

Another interesting case from the Kennedy administration is his address to the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). One reason the speech is significant is the importance Kennedy attached to it. Kennedy understood that that NAM held great power, both political and economic. The administration was interested in winning NAM’s support and spent a great deal of time developing this speech.

The speech is also interesting because apparently Kennedy improvised much of the speech even after all the careful preparation that went into the text. According to a story in *The New York Times Magazine*, Kennedy recognized that the prepared text was not succeeding and extemporized much of what turned into a somewhat rambling forty-seven minute address. Tom Wicker recounts:

As the President spoke, however, a sea of cold, upturned faces told him that he was not getting across, or at least not making the impact he had hoped for. More and more, he wandered away from the text to produce paragraph after paragraph of additional, deeply felt evidence from his well-briefed mind. His only crutch was a small card on which he had written down a bargain-basement

⁴² Telegram to President Elect John F. Kennedy from Ernest Gruening USS, folder: “Inaugural Address, 1/20/61, Memoranda, Speech Materials and Correspondence, 12/10/60 – 1/23/61,” Personal Papers of Theodore Sorensen, Speech File Series, Box 62, John F. Kennedy Library.

⁴³ Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, 240-241.

⁴⁴Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 240.

assortment of figures on trade, the balance of payments, defense costs, and other matters.⁴⁵

One interesting value of this improvisation is that it allows us a basis to compare Kennedy's natural speaking style to the texts which were prepared by the speechwriting operation—including Kennedy. While Kennedy's inclusion in the speechwriting staff may make his role harder to discern, it is possible that he had a different impact within the editing process than when left on his own.

As Kennedy stood before the NAM luncheon that day, he had with him his reading copy of the speech that covered 40 pages once put into large type. Like most speeches at this final stage, the President had made only a few minor changes hastily scrawled in Kennedy's almost unreadable handwriting. The President entered the meeting with NAM thoroughly on the issues and themes of the speech. Not only had he and Sorensen spent a lot of time working over the draft, the President also jotted a few additional facts and figures in the margin.

Kennedy would end up giving a speech of 6,646 words from a reading copy that contained only 4,023. While this initially appears to support the suggestion (probably planted by the White House) that Kennedy's speech was largely spontaneous, the picture painted of Kennedy's speech appears to be exaggerated. For example, it's clear that Kennedy spoke with more than "small card on which he had written down a bargain-basement assortment of figures." While about a third of the speech did not come from the pages of the reading copy, the other two thirds closely follow that text, usually word-for-word. Given Kennedy's precision in recounting the contents of the prepared text, it's unlikely that he gave those portions from memory. Even if the President could memorize large portions of his text, it was not his nature to stick closely to the text and this is even more unlikely given his performance on the other sections.

Some of what Kennedy said, while not in the prepared text, was very similar to the material from the earliest drafts prepared by the speechwriters. The opening of the speech included the usual pleasantries and a display of Kennedy's dry wit. Presidents traditionally avoid reading these sections to maintain eye contact, project spontaneity and develop a rapport with the audience.

Kennedy opened his speech with a little humor about NAM's lack of support for his candidacy and policies. This included quotations from NAM's attacks on Coolidge and Hoover as a means of demonstrating that his audience had often taken exception to presidents, but found a way to work with them.

⁴⁵ Tom Wicker, Kennedy as a Public Speakah, The New York Times Magazine, February 25, 1962, 14.

I have not always considered the membership of the NAM as among my strongest supporters. I am not sure you have all approached the New Frontier with the greatest possible enthusiasm, and I was therefore somewhat nervous about accepting this invitation, until I did some studying of the history of this organization, I learned that this organization had once denounced on one occasion – I'll quote – “Swollen bureaucracy” as among the triumphs of Karl Marx, and decried on another occasion new governmental “paternalism and socialism.” I was comforted when reading this very familiar language to note that I was in very good company. For the first attack I quoted was on Calvin Coolidge and the second on Herbert Hoover.

I remind you of this only to indicate the happy failure of many of our most pessimistic predictions. And that is true of all of us.⁴⁶

While this text was not in the reading copy of the speech, it had been in the speech since the earliest drafts prepared by Sorensen. The original telling, while somewhat longer, relied on the same quotations and drew the same conclusions about working together.

It was apparently the response to this section that led Kennedy to depart from his prepared text. Kennedy used the next 510 words of his speech to offer up a defense of the administration by pointing out all that they held in common with the members of NAM. It seems unlikely that this material was entirely spontaneous as Kennedy prefaced his arguments for why they shared common ground by claiming three points. This outline may have been on the card Wicker describes.

Kennedy's speech before the National Association of Manufacturers suggests that all of a president's preparation may not end up on the printed page. Kennedy's heavy engagement in the speech preparation process left him familiar enough with the material to adapt the speech when he may have felt that the prepared text did not suit the moment.

The Rice Address

Kennedy's call of America to space is one of his most remembered goals. Kennedy's address at Rice is his best known message on space. The adventure and imagination behind the exploration of space provided a tremendous opportunity for elevated and inspiring prose. At the same time, Kennedy's very down to earth connection with his audience demonstrated how effectively research on the location of a speech could help win an audience.

⁴⁶ Press Release, Office of the White House Press Secretary, December 6, 1961, Folder: “National Association of Manufacturers, 12/6/1961, Drafts + Press Releases, 12/6/61-12/7/61 + undated,” Personal Papers of Theodore Sorensen, Speech File Series, Box 62, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

As Kennedy prepared for a speech, his speechwriting staff received briefing materials on local politics, sports and literary figures. During the Carter administration, head speechwriter James Fallows begged Carter for the ability to send someone from the speechwriting office to the site of the speech with the advance team. As Fallows explained to Carter, “in a day or so they could pick up a hundred crucial details that might make the difference between an acceptable speech and a truly successful one.”⁴⁷

Kennedy opened by connecting his inspiring themes with the location.

We meet at a college noted for knowledge, in a city noted for progress, in a State noted for strength, and we stand in need of all three, for we meet in an hour of change and challenge, in a decade of hope and fear, in an age of both knowledge and ignorance. The greater our knowledge increases, the greater our ignorance unfolds.

During the speech Kennedy chose to frame the struggle for space with a mixture of broad eloquence with localized humor.

But why, some say, the moon? Why choose this as our goal? And they may well ask why climb the highest mountain. Why, 35 years ago, fly the Atlantic? Why does Rice play Texas?⁴⁸

Kennedy’s humor in speeches was a bit sharper than other presidents who often included a relatively generic local joke. Kennedy’s example of Rice playing Texas at football is a good example of his pointed humor. Rice’s struggles against Texas were considerable, making its comparison to climbing the highest mountain a painful but funny reminder of the challenges that humans were willing to endure. The impact of Kennedy’s quip about Rice playing Texas was enhanced by its last minute addition. Scrawled into the reading copy of the speech, the line did not appear in the pre-speech version given to the press.⁴⁹ In fact, early versions of some drafts incorrectly labeled Rice University as “Rice Institute.”

⁴⁷ Memorandum to the President from Jim Fallows, May 8, 1978, folder: “Speeches, Preparation of [Guidance] 11/1/77 – 5/31/78,” Presidential Speechwriters, Staff Office Files, Subject File, Box 28, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, 2.

⁴⁸ Press Release, Office of the White House Press Secretary, September 12, 1962, folder: “Address at Rice University in Houston on the Nation’s Space Effort, 7/12/62,” President’s Office Files: Speech Files, Box 40, John F. Kennedy Library, 3.

⁴⁹ “Reading Copy,” folder: “Address at Rice University in Houston on the Nation’s Space Effort, 7/12/62,” President’s Office Files: Speech Files, Box 40, John F. Kennedy Library, 8.

Oddly enough, some of the ideas for Kennedy's famous address on space came from Secretary of Agriculture Freeman via his assistant Dorothy Jacobson. In a September 10 memo to Ted Sorensen Jacobsen described how Secretary Freeman had used time compression as a means of illustrating the rapid advances in technology in a speech two years earlier. She chose the 50,000 years that Kennedy would use because it "simplified the mathematical calculations, and it is a span of time that people can recognize from their own experience."⁵⁰ Jacobson drafted a paragraph that closely resembled the version Kennedy would deliver.

Original Jacobson draft

Another way to illustrate this fact is to condense the 50,000 years of man's recorded history into a time span of just fifty years. In these terms we witness something like the following.

We know very little about the first forty years, although perhaps during the last of that period the most advanced men had learned to use skins for clothing. About ten years ago, man emerged from his caves and constructed some other kind of shelter. Five years ago he learned to write. Christianity began less than two years ago.

Less than two months ago, during this whole fifty-year span of human history, the steam engine provided a great new source of power. Automobiles and electric power became significant only during the last month. Last week we developed nuclear power. And, if America's newest satellite succeeds in circling Venus, we will—before midnight tonight, in this compressed history of man—literally have reached the stars.

As delivered by Kennedy

No man can fully grasp how far and how fast we have come, but condense, if you will, the 50,000 years of man's recorded history in a time span of but a half-century. Stated in these terms, we know very little about the first 40 years, except at the end of them advanced man had learned to use the skins of animals to cover them. Then about ten years ago under this standard man emerged from his caves to construct other kind of shelter. Only five years ago man learned to write and use a cart with wheels. Christianity began less than two years ago. The printing press came this year, and then less than two months ago, during this whole 50-year span of human history, the steam engine provided a new source of power.

Newton explored the meaning of gravity. Last month electric lights and telephones and automobiles and airplanes became available. Only last week did we develop penicillin and television and nuclear power, and now if America's new spacecraft succeeds in reaching Venus, we will have literally reached the stars before midnight tonight.

While drawing ideas about technology and space from the Agriculture Department is somewhat unusual, Sorensen frequently received ideas for speeches from a variety of sources. Some of this reflects Kennedy's flexible approach to seeking advice. However, speechwriters seem especially receptive to a broad range of sources as they seek advice. Because speechwriters are inspiration and ideas rather than technical knowledge and answers, they can benefit from tremendous variety of sources.

As the data analysis will demonstrate, NASA's advice may have been rooted in a superior understanding of the topic, but proved to be of less value in putting together the President's speech. The difference between NASA's

⁵⁰ Memorandum from Dorothy H. Jacobson to Theodore C. Sorensen, folder: "Space—Rice Institute, Memoranda + Speech Materials, 9/10/62 – 9/12/62 + undated," Personal Papers of Theodore Sorensen, Speech File Series, Box 69, John F. Kennedy Library.

perspective and the needs of the White House speechwriters previews a growing struggle between the particularized interests represented in the Executive Branch and the broad vision required of the presidency.

The draft prepared by NASA focused more on the rockets than space. NASA's focus on facilities and equipment is a natural consequence of the agency's role and it serves to illustrate the choices that the White House must make as speechwriters try to balance the competing demands from within the administration.

Very little of the NASA draft survived. One example of the agency's suggestions about the capabilities of their hardware only is an explanation of the power of the Saturn rocket that would propel America to the moon.

NASA Draft

Only a few hours ago, I stood on a little hill in Huntsville, Alabama, to watch the ground-testing of a Saturn booster rocket, seven hundred yards away. The power developed by the cluster of eight rocket engines, fire simultaneously, cannot be fully appreciated unless one is close enough to hear the deafening roar and feel the earth quake underfoot.

This first-model Saturn, which generates 1,300,000 pounds of thrust - - a force equal to 28 million horsepower - - is the most powerful rocket yet revealed to the world. It generates power equivalent to 100,000 standard 1962 automobiles with their accelerators pressed to the floor.

The technical details of the systems are a good example of the kind of expertise that agencies can bring to the speechwriting process. The speechwriters blended the capabilities of NASA's equipment with the speechwriters' theme of the challenges of space to paint an eloquent picture of a nation rising to the challenge.

Another perspective on the speech was supplied by the State Department. While they did not prepare a draft of the speech, the State Department did put together three pages of suggested "Illustration and Arguments as to Why the Space Program is Important Based on Both History and Current Events." While many of the department's suggestions spoke to broad themes, the State Department saw foreign policy concerns to be addressed: "In the world of 1963 a principal symbol of strength of a nation is its ability to mount a vital space program."⁵¹

As delivered by Kennedy

In the last 24 hours we have seen facilities now being created for the greatest and most complex exploration in man's history. We have felt the ground shake and the air shattered by the testing of a SATURN C-1 booster rocket, many times as powerful as the ATLAS which launched John Glenn, generating power equivalent to 10,000 automobiles with their accelerators on the floor.

⁵¹ Memorandum for Theodore Sorensen Through McGeorge Bundy, September 10, 1962, folder: "Space—Rice Institute, Memoranda + Speech Materials, 9/10/62 – 9/12/62 + undated," Personal Papers of Theodore Sorensen, Speech File Series, Box 69, John F. Kennedy Library, 2.

The speech at Rice reflects an interesting mix of research and writing as the speechwriter combined a variety of sources to produce a speech that tackled American reservations by calling upon American pride and determination.

The 1962 State of the Union Address

The State of the Union Address holds a special place in the administration. Anthony R. Dolan, who wrote speeches for Reagan called the annual message “the mother of all speeches.”⁵² The state of the Union speech plays an important role in a presidency because, in the words of one speechwriter, “it freezes, chisels in stone for the remainder of the year, some of the things that become the policy of the President.”⁵³ This not only makes the historical significance of the annual speech greater, it also insures that the infighting within the administration will be especially energetic.

Kennedy’s Commencement Address at Yale

Kennedy’s address at Yale on June 11, 1962 is an interesting speech for several reasons.⁵⁴ One of the best known lines from the address is the President’s joke playing upon the rivalry between Yale and his alma matter, Harvard: “It might be said now that I have the best of both worlds, a Harvard education and a Yale degree.” While the humor itself is not of great value to social science, the White House seems to have been particularly anxious to make a good impression with this speech. The large number of drafts produced indicates how carefully the speech was constructed. In what seems to be an exceptional case for Kennedy, competing drafts of the speech were prepared by Sorensen and Schlesinger. Not only were separate speech drafts started, each went through several revisions, suggesting that the speechwriters competed in a way in which they usually did not. It appears that Sorensen and Schlesinger each went through at least three drafts of their version of the speech.

One possible explanation is that Kennedy, who usually relied on Sorensen as his primary speechwriter, wanted to give Schlesinger more time to develop the intellectual arguments that he specialized in. Given the

⁵² Elisabeth Bumiller, “The State of the Union and the Turn of a Phrase,” New York Times, January 27, 2003.

⁵³ Interview with Robert T. Hartmann, James F. C. Hyde, Jr. and Stephen J. Wayne, Oral History Collection, Gerald R. Ford Library, 4.

⁵⁴ Putting aside the interesting typos on the White House’s press release of the speech which proclaimed: “Your role as university men, whatever your calling, will be to increase each new generation’s grasp of its new cuties.” In his address, Kennedy had correctly called upon graduates to pursue its duties.

audience, Kennedy may have become less insistent on the simplified style he preferred in most speeches and thus less reliant on Sorensen.

The speechwriting staff also received extensive input from Walt Rostow, McGeorge Bundy and others, suggesting that the administration was putting a special effort into the President's words for the occasion. The evidence from the memoranda circulated indicates that the speech was being discussed in some detail almost a month before it was to be delivered.⁵⁵

The speech at Yale is also important because, as presidents often do with commencement addresses, Kennedy was attempting to speak beyond the assembled graduates. The administration sought to recast itself with this speech and endear a president seen as a liberal who supported big government to a business world whose confidence he needed to keep the economy moving. The speech sought to explode myths and break down barriers as Kennedy told his audience:

Mythology distracts us everywhere - - in government as in business, in politics as in economics, in foreign affairs as in domestic policy. But today I want to particularly consider the myth and reality in our national economy. In recent months many have come to feel, as I do, that the dialog between the parties - -between business and government - - is clogged by illusion and platitude and fails to reflect the realities of contemporary American society.

The speech at Yale is both another attempt to build bridges to the business community and to build an image of the administration that would help win Democratic seats in 1962 and reelections of the President in 1964. The administration worked especially hard on this speech because without the support of business leaders, the economy and the administration might falter.

DICTION Scores

Drafts of these speeches were photocopied from the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston and they were put into machine-readable form and then analyzed using DICTION software. The DICTION software was initially

⁵⁵ Memorandum to McGeorge Bundy, from W.W. Rostow, folder: "Yale University Commencement 6/11/62, Drafts, 5/16/62-6/6/62 + undated," Personal Papers of Theodore Sorensen, Speech File Series, Box 71, John F. Kennedy Library.

developed by Roderick Hart for his 1984 book, Verbal Style and the Presidency⁵⁶ and has been refined in the 20 years since.

DICTION evaluates rhetoric by using thirty-one dictionaries to analyze a text. These dictionaries are detailed in Appendix B. Each dictionary yields a semantic score based on the frequency of words from those dictionaries. While some of these narrow scores may be of interest to the researcher, a broader measure of rhetoric is needed to make sure that changes in narrow components of the rhetoric do not receive too much attention.

The DICTION software uses scores based on these narrow characteristics to constructs five “master variables” that summarize the tone of speeches:

CERTAINTY: Language indicating resoluteness, inflexibility, completeness, and a tendency to speak from a position of authority or rank.

Formula: [Tenacity + Leveling + Collectives + Insistence.] - [Numerical Terms + Ambivalence + Self Reference + Variety]

OPTIMISM: Language that supports some person, group, concept or event or highlights their positive qualities.

Formula: [*Praise + Satisfaction + Inspiration*] - [*Blame + Hardship + Denial*]

ACTIVITY: Language featuring movement, change, the implementation of ideas and the avoidance of inertia.

Formula: [Aggression + Accomplishment + Communication + Motion] - [Cognitive Terms + Passivity + Embellishment]

REALISM: Language describing tangible, immediate, recognizable matters that affect people’s everyday lives.

Formula: [Familiarity + Spatial Awareness + Temporal Awareness + Present Concern + Human Interest + Concreteness] - [Past Concern + Complexity]

COMMONALITY SCORE: Language highlighting the agreed-upon values of a group and rejecting idiosyncratic modes of engagement.

Formula: [*Centrality + Cooperation + Rapport*] - [*Diversity + Exclusion + Liberation*]

The scores for all of the speech drafts examined in this study can be found in Appendix A.

The DICTION software allows the user to compare speeches to a variety of speech types from a “normative profile” based on semantic scores from similar speeches. The “normative profile” utilized for this study is a “public policy speeches,” a group composed of 615 speeches delivered by presidents from Harry Truman to Bill Clinton. These speeches match closely the kind of presidential addresses studied here. Based on these 615 speeches, the

⁵⁶ Roderick P. Hart, Verbal Style and the Presidency: A Computer-Based Analysis, Orlando: Academic Press, Inc., 1984. (A detailed description of the function of the DICTION software can be found pages 14-24 and Appendices A-D.)

software generates a “normal range” that reflects the variation of semantic scores for the type of speech.⁵⁷ This normal range for each variable is listed at the bottom of Appendix A.

These scores were originally designed to compare rhetoric across administrations, speeches and policies. However, this study is more concerned with how speeches change over the drafting process. For this, the high and low end of the range can be used to generate a standard of variation across speeches that can be used as a standard for comparing changes across drafts. For example, based upon the 615 presidential speeches in Hart’s database, the normal range for the “optimism” variable ranges from 49.97 to 53.03. The difference between these two (3.06) can be interpreted as the “normal variation” across speeches.

To facilitate comparison across the different speech characteristics these scores are reported as a percentage of the normal variation. While Hart’s measures places these speech scores on similar scales, variation in some types of wording may be more common than in other. For example, the normal range for the “commonality” score for public policy oriented speeches ranges from 49.91 to 52.37. The difference between the high and low end of the normal range (2.46) is less than half the normal variation of the “activity” score (5.28) that ranges from 47.25 to 52.53.

This standard labeled normal variation allows us to focus on the *change* in rhetoric and to more easily summarize the data so that change across speeches and rhetorical characteristics can be more easily compared. If the various drafts of one of Kennedy’s speeches differ more than different speeches by different presidents, the impact of the process is significant. This is similar to ANOVA analysis that compares variation across groups to variation within groups.

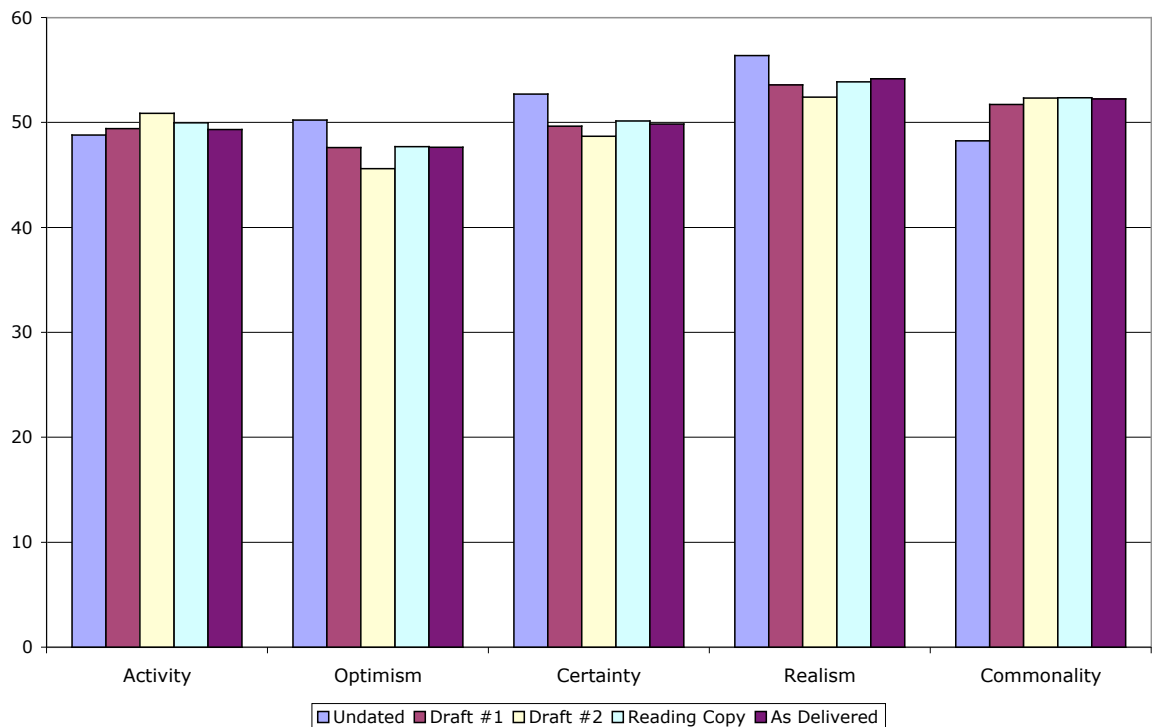
Results

In general, the process behind Kennedy’s speeches seems to result in a relatively orderly process in which speeches are drafted by the speechwriters before being refined with the input of the President and others in and around the White House. Dramatic shifts in tone are generally rare.

⁵⁷ Hart define the normal range as all those scores within ± 1 standard deviation from the mean of the normative group chosen.

Figure 1 reflects the scores of the five different drafts of Kennedy's inaugural address. As the figure indicates, the scores change little suggesting that the language of the speeches changed little over the writing process.

**Figure 1:
Shift in Rhetoric Inaugural Address**



While these figures alone can not tell us a great deal, they can provide a baseline for analysis. The results in Figure 1 do not provide definitive answers to our questions because, while the numbers are relatively stable, judging these numbers out of context is difficult.

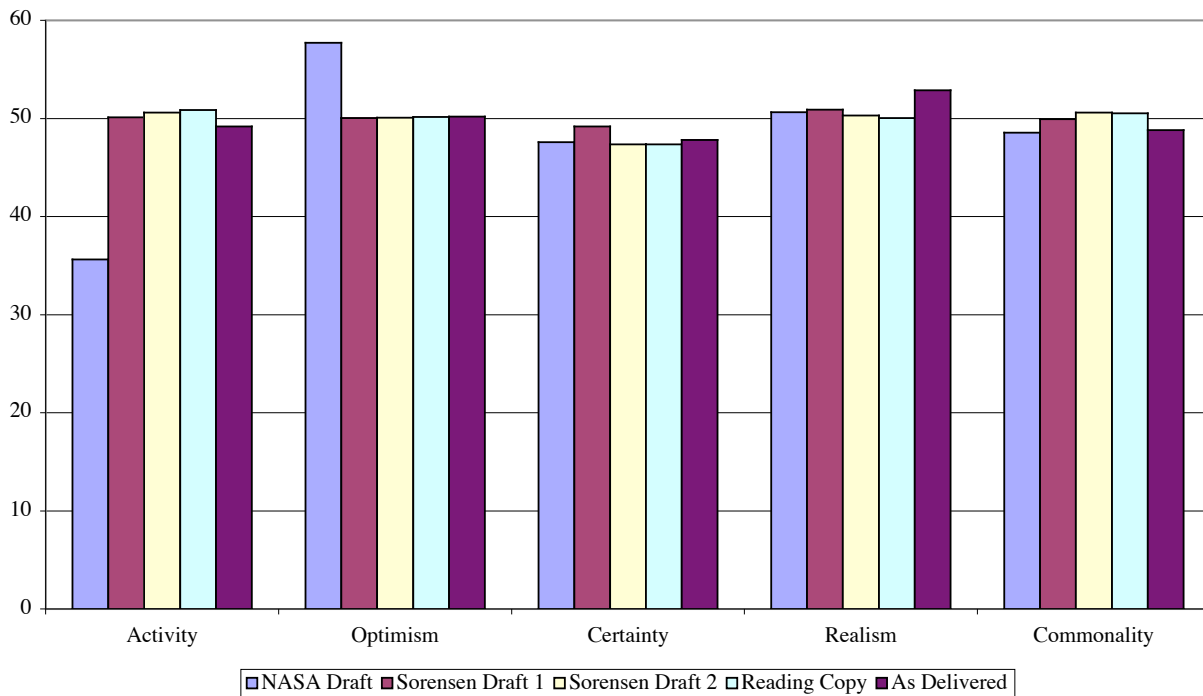
There are several ways of evaluating whether or not changes across speech drafts are sizable enough to merit discussion. One standard is to look outside the Kennedy White House for similar data. A second standard involves finding comparisons from other places in the Kennedy administration

Looking to other administrations for a standard is difficult since other studies of speech drafts are generally not available. However, an earlier study using the same methods can be used to compare the Kennedy speechwriting

process to that of the Ford administration.⁵⁸ The average shift ratio of the Ford administration is 84%, while the average for the Kennedy administration is 51%. Because neither of these studies relies on large or random samples of speeches, such results must be used with extreme caution. Further, because the Ford speechwriting process was often embroiled in especially intense battles between forces in the White House, the Ford case may not be the most appropriate baseline for judging speechwriting.

Looking within the executive branch may provide additional evidence about the stability of the process in the White House. Figure 2 charts the scores for 5 different drafts of the president’s speech at Rice University. The NASA draft differs dramatically in both “activity” and “optimism,” perhaps because its institutional origins outside the White House. This suggests that there are some measurable differences between the language of the White House and the language of the bureaucracy.

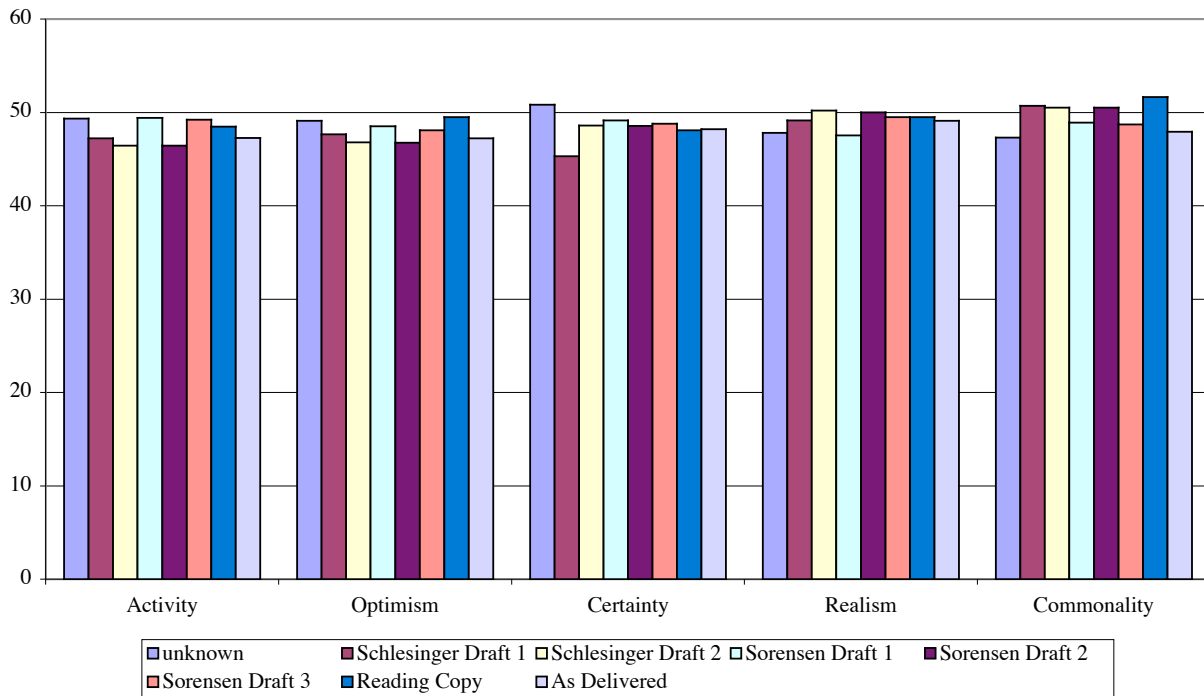
Figure 2:
Comparison of Speech Drafts
Rice University Speech



⁵⁸ Ken Collier, “Presidential Staff and Presidential Speech: The Impact of the Institutionalization of the Presidential Speechwriting Process,” presented at *Southern Political Science Association Meetings*, New Orleans, Louisiana, January 2004.

Figure 3 compares eight drafts of Kennedy’s commencement speech at Yale University. As noted earlier, one of the most interesting aspects of the process behind this speech is that Sorensen and Schlesinger were each working on separate drafts. However, while the two men were working separately, their results (at least measure by Diction) were remarkably similar.

Figure 3:
Comparison of Speech Drafts
Yale Commencement



Despite their differences in ideology and personal style, Schlesinger and Sorensen produce drafts that are very consistent. In contrast, the draft of the Rice speech draft from NASA shows more variation, providing some evidence to suggest that institutional differences matter more than personal differences. This evidence combined with the differences observed with the Ford administration data support the idea that the process within the Kennedy White House was remarkably consistent and that the consistency across drafts of speech results from the process, not a lack of sensitivity in the methods.

Conclusion

*We have people in the White House... who aren't there representing the President to the country. They are representing the country to the President. That's not what the White House staff should be.*⁵⁹

Theodore Sorensen

A peculiar variety of pluralism is at work in the presidential speechwriting process. All the forces that the president must serve find their way into the crafting of the president's words. In the end, the battle of political interests that make legislation such a mess takes their own toll on presidential speech. Kennedy did not become a slave to his clearance process.

Ted Sorensen argued that “group authorship is rarely, if ever, successful. A certain continuity and precision of style, and unity of argument, must be carefully drafted, particularly in a public communication that will be read or heard by many diverse audiences.”⁶⁰ His work for John F. Kennedy is a clear example of this principle. While subsequent administrations have employed more full-time speechwriters with more policy staff reviewing these speeches, the quality of speech has, if anything, declined.

In his book on policy making in the White House Ted Sorensen described the “inherent limitations” on the value of advice from cabinet members because of their competence or the degree to which they share the philosophy of the president.

Moreover, each department has its own clientele and point of view, its own experts and bureaucratic interests, its own relations with Congress and certain subcommittees, its own statutory authority, objectives and standards of success. No Cabinet member is free to ignore all this without impairing the morale and efficiency of his department, his standing therein, and his relations with the powerful interest groups and congressmen who consider it partly their own.⁶¹

Sorensen makes the case for decision making that is both wary of the biases in cabinet input and sympathetic to its origins. The bias that comes from bureaucratic organizations is not simply bureaucratic; it may result from the legitimate needs of the department and its constituencies.

⁵⁹ Bradley H. Patterson Jr. *The White House Staff: Inside the West Wing and Beyond*, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2000, 173.

⁶⁰ Theodore C. Sorensen, *Decision-Making in the White House: The Olive Branch or the Arrows*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1963, 61.

For example, the rivalry between the service branches makes its way into the speechwriting process. In discussing the 1963 State of the Union message, Ted Sorensen was alerted to the a sentence in the draft that said, “We now know that a line of destroyers in quarantine or a division of mechanized infantry on a frontier may be more useful to our real security than a multiplication of inconceivable weapons beyond conceivable need.” While the sentence is clearly not intended to address the balance between the Army, Navy and Air Force, Sorensen was advised by an Army Colonel on the National Security Council staff that the sentence was of some concern.

It may seem a minor point, but I think it is a little unfortunate that the two illustrations used leave the Air Force out in the cold, so to speak. If you agree, I would suggest eliminating the reference to an infantry division, thus using only one illustration...⁶²

Sorensen’s analysis is interesting in that draws a sharp distinction between the “parochialism of experts and department heads” and the view of government as a whole that comes from White House staff.⁶³ Sorensen’s view, in 1963 at least, is that White House staff members are distinct from cabinet officers because the president is free to choose White House staff without regard to geographic, political or other representational concerns. This may no longer be true or Sorensen may not have been alert to this concern at the time. Some observers consider Arthur Schlesinger as an “ambassador” to liberals, suggesting that some representation went on within the Kennedy White House.

Sorensen himself notes that as White House offices continue to grow, they posses the potential to take a life of its own and “become only another department, another level of clearances and concurrences instead of a personal instrument of the President.”⁶⁴

Whether or not Sorensen’s fear of White House staff losing some of their linkage to the president to bureaucratic interests within the White House organization was realized at the time, there seems to be more room for concern given the rapid expansion of the EOP.

⁶¹ Theodore C. Sorensen, Decision-Making in the White House: The Olive Branch or the Arrows, New York: Columbia University Press, 1963, 68.

⁶² Memorandum for Ted Sorensen from Colonel L. J. Legere, folder: “State of the Union 1/14/63, Memoranda, 1/2/63- 1/10/63 + undated,” Personal Papers of Theodore Sorensen, Speech File Series, Box 76, John F. Kennedy Library.

⁶³ Sorensen, Decision Making in the White House, 70.

⁶⁴ Theodore C. Sorensen, Decision-Making in the White House: The Olive Branch or the Arrows, New York: Columbia University Press, 1963, 71.

If, as Ted Sorensen suggests, “authorship depends on one man along with his typewriter or pen”⁶⁵ no one can claim to have authored a presidential speech. The task of speechwriters can be as unrewarding as it is complicated. As one journalist noted, “Perhaps most painful of all, they are aware that writing speeches by committee is less of an art form than composing epigrams for Chinese fortune cookies.”⁶⁶

In some way, calling Ted Sorensen a speechwriter greatly underestimates his role in the Kennedy White House. Sorensen represents a case in which one of the president’s top policy advisors is also his top rhetorical advisor. The blending of policy and prose in the Kennedy White House stands in stark contrast to the situation today in which most speechwriters labor, as one Ford speechwriter described it, “the lower vineyards of the White House.”⁶⁷ One of George Bush’s speechwriters described “working within the NSC’s strict rules.”⁶⁸ Sorensen was in a position to defend the rhetorical choices that he made and avoid the pitfalls of speechwriting by committee.

⁶⁵ Theodore C. Sorensen, Decision-Making in the White House: The Olive Branch or the Arrows, New York: Columbia University Press, 1963, 61

⁶⁶ Dom Bonafede, “A View from the Trenches,” National Journal, February 18, 1978

⁶⁷ Memoranda from Pat Butler to Ron Nessen, folder: “Butler, Pat,” White House Memoranda,” Ron Nessen Papers, Box 126, Gerald R. Ford Library.

⁶⁸ David Frum, The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush, New York: Random House, 2003, 250.

Appendix A: Speech Values

	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Optimism</i>	<i>Certainty</i>	<i>Realism</i>	<i>Commonality</i>
Inaugural					
Undated draft	48.81	50.25	52.71	56.38	48.26
Draft 1	49.43	47.63	49.67	53.60	51.74
Draft 2	50.89	45.62	48.71	52.42	52.35
Reading Copy	49.97	47.72	50.16	53.87	52.36
As Delivered	49.33	47.64	49.86	54.17	52.25
Max shift	1.56	2.10	1.45	1.75	0.62
As % of range	30%	69%	30%	35%	25%
National Association of Manufacturers					
Draft 1	52.54	48.87	49.01	50.90	50.44
Reading Copy	52.01	49.74	49.01	50.65	50.80
As Delivered	51.96	49.31	48.96	50.40	50.56
Max shift	0.58	0.87	0.05	0.50	0.36
As % of range	11%	28%	1%	10%	15%
Rice University					
Sorensen Draft 1	50.14	50.06	49.20	50.90	49.96
Sorensen Draft 2	50.60	50.09	47.38	50.32	50.60
NASA Draft	35.66	57.72	47.59	50.67	48.57
Reading Copy	50.87	50.15	47.38	50.04	50.54
As Delivered	49.21	50.19	47.82	52.88	48.84
(Excluding NASA Draft) Max shift	1.66	0.13	1.82	2.84	1.76
As % of range	31%	4%	37%	56%	72%
(Including NSAS Draft) Max shift	15.21	7.66	1.82	2.84	2.03
As % of range	288%	250%	37%	56%	83%
1962 State of the Union					
D1	48.01	49.79	46.08	49.63	50.74
Reading Copy	51.52	49.16	48.24	49.79	51.91
As Delivered	50.19	48.61	49.34	51.60	48.04
Max shift	3.51	1.18	3.26	1.97	3.87
As % of range	66%	39%	66%	39%	157%
Yale Commencement					
Unknown	49.37	49.11	50.86	47.83	47.32
Schlesinger Draft 1	47.25	47.67	45.32	49.15	50.73
Schlesinger Draft 2	46.46	46.80	48.62	50.21	50.53
Sorensen Draft 1	49.44	48.53	49.17	47.55	48.91
Sorensen Draft 2	46.46	46.79	48.56	50.02	50.51
Sorensen Draft 3	49.23	48.09	48.80	49.51	48.74
Reading Copy	48.51	49.52	48.11	49.50	51.67
As Delivered	47.28	47.26	48.23	49.10	47.96
Max shift	2.98	2.73	3.85	2.66	4.35
As % of range	56%	89%	78%	53%	177%
Normal Range – High	47.25	49.97	47.68	48.42	49.91
Low	52.53	53.03	52.59	53.47	52.37
Range	5.28	3.06	4.91	5.05	2.46

Appendix B

DICTION Dictionary and Score descriptions⁶⁹

- ACCOMPLISHMENT:** Words that express task-completion (establish, finish, influence, proceed) and organized human behavior (motivated, influence, leader, manage). Includes capitalistic terms (buy, produce, sell), words related to expansion (grow, increase, generate, construction) and general functionality (handling, strengthen, succeed) and programmatic language (agenda, enacted, working, leadership).
- AGGRESSION:** Words that highlight competition and forceful action. This includes physical energy (blast, crash, collide), domination (conquest, attacking, dictatorships, violation), words associated with personal triumph (mastered, rambunctious, pushy), excess human energy (prod, poke, pound, shove), disassembly (dismantle, demolish, overturn, veto) and resistance (prevent, reduce, defend, curbed) are included.
- AMBIVALENCE:** Words expressing hesitation or uncertainty, implying a speaker's inability or unwillingness to commit to the verbalization being made. Included are hedges (allegedly, perhaps, might), statements of inexactness (almost, approximate, vague, somewhere) and confusion (baffled, puzzling, hesitate). Also included are words of restrained possibility (could, would) and mystery (dilemma, guess, suppose, seems).
- BLAME:** Terms designating social inappropriateness (mean, naive, sloppy, stupid) as well as downright evil (fascist, blood-thirsty, repugnant, malicious) compose this dictionary. In addition, adjectives describing unfortunate circumstances (bankrupt, rash, morbid, embarrassing) or unplanned vicissitudes (weary, nervous, painful, detrimental) are included. The dictionary also contains outright denigrations: cruel, illegitimate, offensive, and miserly.
- CENTRALITY:** Terms denoting institutional regularities and/or substantive agreement on core values. Included are indigenous terms (native, basic, innate) and designations of legitimacy (orthodox, decorum, constitutional, ratified), systematicity (paradigm, bureaucratic, ritualistic), and typicality (standardized, matter-of-fact, regularity). Also included are terms of congruence (conformity, mandate, unanimous), predictability (expected, continuity, reliable), and universality (womankind, perennial, landmarks).
- COGNITIVE TERMS:** Words referring to cerebral processes, both functional and imaginative. Included are modes of discovery (learn, deliberate, consider, compare) and domains of study (biology, psychology, logic, economics). The dictionary includes mental challenges (question, forget, re-examine, paradoxes), institutional learning practices (graduation, teaching, classrooms), as well as three forms of intellection: intuitional (invent, perceive, speculate, interpret), rationalistic (estimate, examine, reasonable, strategies), and calculative (diagnose, analyze, software, fact-finding).
- COLLECTIVES:** Singular nouns connoting plurality that function to decrease specificity. These words reflect a dependence on categorical modes of thought. Included are social groupings crowd, choir, team, humanity), task groups (army, congress, legislature, staff) and geographical entities (county, world, kingdom, republic).
- COMMUNICATION:** Terms referring to social interaction, both face-to-face (listen, interview, read, speak) and mediated (film, videotape, telephone, e-mail). The dictionary includes both modes of inter course (translate, quote, scripts, broadcast) and moods of intercourse (chat, declare, flatter, demand). Other terms refer to social actors (reporter, spokesperson, advocates, preacher) and a variety of social purposes (hint, rebuke, respond, persuade).
- COMPLEXITY:** A simple measure of the average number of characters-per-word in a given input file. Based on the idea that convoluted phrasings can make ideas abstract and implications unclear.
- CONCRETENESS:** A large dictionary possessing no thematic unity other than tangibility and materiality. Included are sociological units (peasants, African-Americans, Catholics), occupational groups (carpenter, manufacturer, policewoman), and political alignments (Communists, congressman, Europeans). Also incorporated are physical structures (courthouse, temple, store), forms of diversion (television, football, cd-rom), terms of accountancy (mortgage, wages, finances), and modes of transportation (airplane, ship, bicycle). In addition, the dictionary includes body parts (stomach, eyes, lips), articles of clothing (slacks, pants, shirt), household animals (cat, insects, horse) and foodstuffs (wine, grain, sugar), and general elements of nature (oil, silk, sand).

⁶⁹ Roderick T. Hart, *DICTION 5.0 Users Manual*, Austin: Digitex, Inc., 2000, 32-37.

- COOPERATION:** Terms designating behavioral interactions among people that often result in a group product. Included are designations of formal work relations (unions, schoolmates, caucus) and informal associations (chum, partner, cronies) to more intimate interactions (sisterhood, friendship, comrade). Also included are neutral interactions (consolidate, mediate, alignment), job-related tasks (network, detente, exchange), personal involvement (teamwork, sharing, contribute), and self-denial (public-spirited, care-taking, self-sacrifice).
- DENIAL:** A dictionary consisting of standard negative contractions (aren't, shouldn't, don't), negative functions words (nor, not, nay), and terms designating null sets (nothing, nobody, none).
- DIVERSITY:** Words describing individuals or groups of individuals differing from the norm. Such distinctiveness may be comparatively neutral (inconsistent, contrasting, non-conformist) but it can also be positive (exceptional, unique, individualistic) and negative (illegitimate, rabble-rouser, extremist). Functionally, heterogeneity may be an asset (far-flung, dispersed, diffuse) or a liability (factionalism, deviancy, quirky) as can its characterizations: rare vs. queer, variety vs. jumble, distinctive vs. disobedient.
- EMBELLISHMENT:** A selective ratio of adjectives to verbs. Embellishment is calculated according to the following formula: [Praise + Blame +1] ÷ [Present Concern + Past Concern +1]
- EXCLUSION:** A dictionary describing the sources and effects of social isolation. Such seclusion can be phrased passively (displaced, sequestered) as well as positively (self-contained, self-sufficient) and negatively (outlaws, repudiated). Moreover, it can result from voluntary forces (secede, privacy) and involuntary forces (ostracize, forsake, discriminate) and from both personality factors (small-mindedness, loneliness) and political factors (right-wingers, nihilism). Exclusion is often a dialectical concept: hermit vs. derelict, refugee vs. pariah, discard vs. spurn).
- FAMILIARITY:** Consists of a selected number words that are the most common words in the English language. Included are common prepositions (across, over, through), demonstrative pronouns (this, that) and interrogative pronouns (who, what), and a variety of particles, conjunctions and connectives (a, for, so).
- HARDSHIP:** This dictionary contains natural disasters (earthquake, starvation, tornado, pollution), hostile actions (killers, bankruptcy, enemies, vices) and censurable human behavior (infidelity, despots, betrayal). It also includes unsavory political outcomes (injustice, slavery, exploitation, rebellion) as well as normal human fears (grief, unemployment, died, apprehension) and incapacities (error, cop-outs, weakness).
- HUMAN INTEREST:** Includes standard personal pronouns (he, his, ourselves, them), family members and relations (cousin, wife, grandchild, uncle), and generic terms (friend, baby, human, persons) because concentrating on people and their activities gives rhetoric a life-like quality.
- INSISTENCE:** A measure of the repetition of key terms that may indicate a preference for presented a limited or ordered view. All words occurring three or more times that function as nouns or noun-derived adjectives are identified and the following calculation performed: [Number of Eligible Words x Sum of their Occurrences] ÷ 10.
- INSPIRATION:** Abstract virtues deserving of universal respect. Most of the terms in this dictionary are nouns isolating desirable moral qualities (faith, honesty, self-sacrifice, virtue) as well as attractive personal qualities (courage, dedication, wisdom, mercy). Social and political ideals are also included: patriotism, success, education, and justice.
- LEVELING:** A dictionary of words that build a sense of completeness and assurance used by ignoring individual differences. Included are totalizing terms (everybody, anyone, each, fully), adverbs of permanence (always, completely, inevitably, consistently), and resolute adjectives (unconditional, consummate, absolute, open-and-shut).
- LIBERATION:** Terms describing the maximizing of individual choice (autonomous, open-minded, options) and the rejection of social conventions (unencumbered, radical, released). Liberation is motivated by both personality factors (eccentric, impetuous, flighty) and political forces (suffrage, liberty, freedom, emancipation) and may produce dramatic outcomes (exodus, riotous, deliverance) or subdued effects (loosen, disentangle, outpouring). Liberatory terms also admit to rival characterizations: exemption vs. loophole, elope vs. abscond, uninhibited vs. outlandish.
- MOTION:** Terms connoting human movement (bustle, job, lurch, leap), physical processes (circulate, momentum, revolve, twist), journeys (barnstorm, jaunt, wandering, travels), speed (lickety-split, nimble, zip, whistle-stop), and modes of transit (ride, fly, glide, swim).

NUMERICAL TERMS: Any sum, date, or product specifying the facts in a given case. The presumption is that these term hyper-specify a claim and detracting from its universality.

PASSIVITY: Words ranging from neutrality to inactivity. Includes terms of compliance (allow, tame, appeasement), docility (submit, contented, sluggish), and cessation (arrested, capitulate, refrain, yielding). Also contains tokens of inertness (backward, immobile, silence, inhibit) and disinterest (unconcerned, nonchalant, stoic), as well as tranquility (quietly, sleepy, vacation).

PAST CONCERN: The past-tense forms of the verbs contained in the Present Concern dictionary.

PRAISE: Affirmations of some person, group, or abstract entity. Included are terms isolating important social qualities (dear, delightful, witty), physical qualities (mighty, handsome, beautiful), intellectual qualities (shrewd, bright, vigilant, reasonable), entrepreneurial qualities (successful, conscientious, renowned), and moral qualities (faithful, good, noble). All terms in this dictionary are adjectives.

PRESENT CONCERN: A selective list of present-tense verbs. The dictionary is not topic-specific but points instead to general physical activity (cough, taste, sing, take), social operations (canvass, touch, govern, meet), and task-performance (make, cook, print, paint).

RAPPORT: This dictionary describes attitudinal similarities among groups of people. Included are terms of affinity (congenial, camaraderie, companion), assent (approve, vouched, warrants), deference (tolerant, willing, permission), and identity (equivalent, resemble, consensus).

SATISFACTION: Terms associated with positive affective states (cheerful, passionate, happiness), with moments of undiminished joy (thanks, smile, welcome) and pleasurable diversion (excited, fun, lucky), or with moments of triumph (celebrating, pride, auspicious). Also included are words of nurturance: healing, encourage, secure, relieved.

SELF-REFERENCE: All first-person references. Self-references are treated as acts of indexing the locus of action appears to reside in the speaker and not in the world at large (thereby implicitly acknowledging the speaker's limited vision).

SPATIAL AWARENESS: Terms referring to geographical entities, physical distances, and modes of measurement. Included are general geographical terms (abroad, elbow-room, local, outdoors) as well as specific ones (Ceylon, Kuwait, Poland). Also included are politically defined locations (county, fatherland, municipality, ward), points on the compass (east, southwest) and the globe (latitude, coastal, border, snowbelt), as well as terms of scale (kilometer, map, spacious), quality (vacant, out-of-the-way, disoriented) and change (pilgrimage, migrated, frontier.)

TEMPORAL AWARENESS: Terms that fix a person, idea, or event within a specific time-interval, thereby signaling a concern for concrete and practical matters. The dictionary designates literal time (century, instant, mid-morning) as well as metaphorical designations (lingering, seniority, nowadays). Also included are calendrical terms (autumn, year-round, weekend), elliptical terms (spontaneously, postpone, transitional), and judgmental terms (premature, obsolete, punctual).

TENACITY: These verbs that connote confidence and totality. All uses of the verb "to be (is, am, will, shall), three definitive verb forms (has, must, do) and their variants, as well as all associated contraction.

VARIETY: This measure conforms to Wendell Johnson's (1946) Type-Token Ratio which divides the number of different words in a passage by the passage's total words. A high score indicates a speaker's avoidance of overstatement and a preference for precise, molecular statements