

## Whose Line is it? Evaluating the origins of Bush's Rhetoric\*

*I take personal responsibility for everything I say, of course.<sup>1</sup>*

*George W. Bush*

In a press conference on the morning of July 30, 2003 President George W. Bush stood before the nation and took personal responsibility for his own words. A president's need to claim responsibility for what he has said tells us a great deal about the modern presidency which has become a corporation of formal and informal advisors that reach beyond the person of the president themselves. Most people are assumed to hold responsibility for what they say. That the responsibility for the President's words was ever in doubt leads citizens to ask who is responsible for what a president says, if not the president himself.

President Bush's statement was an attempt to put to an end a building story in which blame for inaccuracies in the 2003 State of the Union Address moved rapidly through the Executive Branch. In his January 28 speech to the nation, Bush told citizens, "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."<sup>2</sup> Later, it became evident that not only had this claim been based on forged documents and unreliable intelligence, but that some people in the administration were aware of the untenable nature of this claim before the President made it to the nation.

Once the credibility of these sixteen words from the State of the Union was cast into doubt, finger pointing began to spread through the executive branch, landing the speech writing and

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- This research was supported by two mini-grants from the Stephen F. Austin State University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs as well as grants from the John F. Kenney Library and the Gerald Ford Foundation. The author is also grateful for the support of the College of Liberal Arts and the Department of Political Science, Geography, and Public Administration.
  - The author is indebted to his research assistants, Jessica Carwright and Don Gregory.

<sup>1</sup> Transcript of Presidential News Conference, July 30, 2003, 11:47 AM.

<sup>2</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, January 28, 2003, President Delivers "State of the Union"  
(<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030128-19.html>)

clearance process on the front pages of most of the nation's newspapers. The New York Times, Washington Post and Dallas Morning News ran the story on the front page above the fold.

The first victim of this high visibility blame game was C.I.A. Director George Tenet who issued a statement on July 11 taking blame for failing to remove the words that "should never have been included in the text written for the president."<sup>3</sup> President Bush and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice were happy to validate the CIA Director's blame with the President saying, "I gave a speech to the nation that was cleared by the intelligence services," while Rice assured the nation "The agency cleared the speech and cleared it in its entirety."<sup>4</sup>

By July 21, blame had spread further with Stephen Hadley, deputy national security adviser, apologizing because, "The high standards the president set were not met."<sup>5</sup> White House Communications Director Dan Bartlett conceded, "The process failed."<sup>6</sup> According to Hadley, he and presidential speechwriter Michael Gerson received a CIA memo on October 5, 2002 warning that the CIA had doubts about the evidence behind the claim that Iraq was trying to buy uranium in Niger. An October 6 memo had confirmed this doubt. With evidence that such doubts about the claims had found their way into the White House, blame eventually moved up to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice.

The flow of information and blame illustrates the diffuse nature of the presidential speechwriting process in the modern White House. This case not only illustrates how many people have become involved in drafting presidential speeches, it also demonstrates why the president's words must be carefully vetted. These 16 disputed words cast doubts on the validity of the other 5,000 in the speech and called into question the administration's justification for war with Iraq. With uncertainty underlying the most important decision of the Bush presidency, the President's credibility and leadership faced its most serious challenge as Democrat Howard Dean revived the ghost of Watergate by asking, "What did the President know and when did he know it?"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "C.I.A. Chief Take Blame in Assertion on Iraqi Uranium," New York Times, July 12, 2003, A1.

<sup>4</sup> Dana Milbank, "Bush Blames CIA for State of the Union Error," Washington Post, July 11, 2003, A1,

<sup>5</sup> Tom Raum, "Bush Aide Take Blame for Iraq Uranium Flap," Washington Post, July 22, 2003, A1.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Raum, "Bush Aide Take Blame for Iraq Uranium Flap," Washington Post, July 22, 2003, A1.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Cannon, "What Bush Said," National Journal, July 26, 2003.

The controversy over Bush's speech highlights the important but often overlooked question of who is responsible for what the president says. Asking "whose line is it?" goes beyond the simple question assessing authorship of presidential rhetoric. It also opens a window into influence within the White House. This paper examines the speechwriting process and assesses the degree to which that process transforms presidential speech.

### **Whose line is it?**

*Altogether, a superb performance. But was it wholly convincing? Everyone knew Bush hadn't written his words. Whose voice were we really hearing?  
David Frum, Bush speechwriter<sup>8</sup>*

The modern presidency has come to be defined by the relationship between president and public. While the use of symbols, spokespersons, and other tools are important tools of presidential communication, the presidential address remains the most important. The White House has become America's home with Christmas Tree lightings, televised White House tours, family updates, and even medical updates to connect average Americans to the First Family. The label "First Family" suggests that the president's family is closely tied to the other families of the nation.

We expect sincerity to lie at the heart of any relationship, personal or political. The president's bond with citizens is both. American citizens have become familiar with the president—or at least feel they have such a relationship. However, most of our friends don't communicate with us through formal messages written by others and read off of a Teleprompter while appearing in scripted events. Clearly, we hold the occupants of the White House to a different set of standards.

The words of the president remain the currency of American politics. As one reporter noted in 1943, "Perhaps oratory is a rather primitive way to test a man, yet it is the compulsion to meet this test which sends a candidate upon the standard campaign tour."<sup>9</sup> It is fair to ask how else citizens come to know their elected representatives. Walter Lippmann railed against presidential speechwriters fifty years ago. In the strongest terms, Lippmann argued that the authenticity of presidential speech was fundamental and that speechwriters could not serve presidential speech because "it is as impossible as writing his love letters for him or saying his prayers for him." Lippmann went on to

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<sup>8</sup> David Frum, *The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*, New York: Random House, 2003, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Harry Gilroy "Survey of the Ghost Writers," *New York Times Magazine* March 27, 1949, 20.

argue that, “When he speaks to the people, he and not someone else must speak. For it is much more important that he could be genuine, and it is infinitely more persuasive, than that he be bright, clever, ingenious, entertaining, eloquent, or even grammatical.”<sup>10</sup>

Lippmann, in many regards, has lost the arguments and presidential speechwriting has become common practice. Speechwriters now appear on the organizational charts of the White House and sometimes interviewed in newspaper and television stories about presidential speeches<sup>11</sup> so that little pretense remains that our presidents’ words are their own.

The relationship between president and speechwriter is not easily defined. On one hand, we should not assume that the president is only mouthing the words created by staff. Presidents consistently spend a great deal of time editing speech drafts prepared by their staff. On the other hand, we cannot give presidents full ownership of anything they may put a pen to. Any evidence that the president exercised some editorial control does not fully qualify him as “author.” It may be tempting to dismiss the impact of speechwriters when it provides a comforting alternative to the image of the leader of the free world having words put in his mouth. To say that the words are not purely those of the speechwriters is not to say that those words are the president’s.

In some ways, the degree to which Americans today accept this from their president is remarkable. The necessity of having others write the president’s words had become so accepted by the time of his presidency that George W. Bush was comfortable releasing photos of himself practicing his State of the Union Address in front of his communications staff the White House theater. While George W. Bush made no effort to conceal his use of speechwriters, this openness had not always been the case.

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Lippman, “Something Off My Chest,” *Today and tomorrow*, March 14, 1942. Reprinted in *The Essential Lippmann: A Political Philosophy for Liberal Democracy*, edited by Clinton Rossiter and James Lare, New York: Vintage Books, 1965, a320.

<sup>11</sup> For example, an interview Bush Speechwriter Michael Gerson was a segment of *Nightline* on December 20, 2002.

## From ghosts to stars

Speechwriters have long been one of Washington's worst kept secret. The roots of presidential speechwriting go back to George Washington who got help with his Farewell address from Alexander Hamilton and James Madison. For over a century, these helpers remained out of the public eye and off the organizational chart. While the practice of helping presidents with their speeches was kept from the public, the practice was well enough established in Washington to be labeled as "ghosting" and to have an oral tradition. Over lunch one day in the White House, Bryce Harlow, who had written speeches for Dwight Eisenhower, educated Ray Price on how to "ghost" for an ex-president.<sup>12</sup>

By 1949 *The New York Times Magazine* was ready to declare that, "political ghosting is a potential menace to society."<sup>13</sup> In a story assailing the use of ghost writers, Harry Gilroy suggested that the "ghost-ridden politics of today created a destructive cynicism. "The public is being swindled, and the worst thing about it is the cynicism this engenders. Cynicism is an acid capable of dissolving the whole idea that men can trust one another enough to combine in democratic government."<sup>14</sup> Scholars often agreed. Elmer Cornwell in 1963 suggested that the with the rise of radio and television people became more accustomed to the ideas of performers, commercial or political, who were reading the words of others. This, Cornwell suggests helped American people to accept the political ghostwriting that "was once viewed as faintly reprehensible.<sup>15</sup> In his 1965 study of the president and public opinion, Elmer Cornwell asserted, " The growth of the [speechwriting] office had eliminated by the 1920s any real possibility that the public utterances of the President could be prepared by his own hand, save rare instances."<sup>16</sup>

Today, when the President speaks, the presumption is that the words are not his own and it has become increasingly common for reporters to ask whose words the president is speaking. Most

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<sup>12</sup> Price, 52

<sup>13</sup> Harry Gilroy "Survey of the Ghost Writers," *New York Times Magazine* March 27, 1949, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Harry Gilroy "Survey of the Ghost Writers," *New York Times Magazine* March 27, 1949, 60.

<sup>15</sup> Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr. *Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1965, 289.

<sup>16</sup> Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr. *Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1965, 284.

citizens assume that the president doesn't write their own speeches. In her book on presidential speechwriting, All the Presidents' Words, Carol Geldeman makes the case that the lack of connection between speakers and the spoken word has become a part of political life in America. "Obviously presidents should take some part in writing their own words, but not all do. In fact, speaking the words that others have written is practically *de rigueur* in political circles, from the Oval Office to county headquarters."<sup>17</sup>

Questioning who is responsible for these words is more than a debate over simple authorship because the presidency has become a highly personal office. There is something paradoxical about the presence of presidential speechwriters. It is the presumption that the words come from the president that makes those words important and the possibility that those words originate from outside the Oval Office would seem to immediately devalue their importance.

Despite the visibility of speechwriters and the acknowledgement of rehearsals, the White House tries to maintain the image of the president as the primary author of his own words. Their insistence that George W. Bush writes his own words points to the delicate balance between sincerity and polish that drives the presidency into the hands of professional wordsmiths and image-makers.

To some, the difference between the speeches written by a president and those of a paid assistant may seem to be of less relevance. After all, from the outside the White House resembles a team of players, united behind their leader, and sharing a clear set of common goals. This overlooks many subtle yet important shadings of political views and motives. As Terry Moe points out "while they may 'exist to serve the president' and have no other constituency, formal organization inevitably creates interest and beliefs that set them apart from him."<sup>18</sup> The location of the speechwriting process in the policy process provides us with a unique view into the institutional and political battles within the White House and helps us see the careful balancing of political and institutional demands that the president must satisfy.

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<sup>17</sup> Carol Gelderman, All the Presidents' Words: The Bully Pulpit and the Creation of the Virtual Presidency, New York, Walker and Company, 1997, IX.

<sup>18</sup> Terry M. Moe, "The Politicized Presidency," in The New Directions in American Politics, John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson, editors, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1985, 240-241.

## Speechwriting in the Bush White House

By the time of the administration of George W. Bush the White House ghostwriters of the presidential past had become the speechwriting stars of the modern presidency. As Bush speechwriter David Frum noted, “The Bush speechwriting department was discreet, but hardly anonymous.”<sup>19</sup> In particular Bush’s chief speechwriter, Michael Gerson had a much wider reputation than those of his shadowing predecessors. In fact, Gerson has been described as “a gifted thinker and phrasemaker”<sup>20</sup> and “the pencil-chewing evangelical Christian who put the evil in the ‘axis of evil.’”<sup>21</sup> Bush’s nickname for Gerson, “the scribe,” appeared in media stories that even included Gerson’s perchance for drafting speeches in the local Starbucks.<sup>22</sup> Under the headline “He puts words in Bush’s mouth,” *USA Today* went so far as to promote his star power by proclaiming, “Gerson has done more for Bush’s ratings than an Oval Office full of Rob Lowes could do for The West Wing.”<sup>23</sup> On December 20, 2002 Gerson was a featured guest on ABC’s *Nightline* broadcast where he went before the cameras to discuss his role in writing Bush’s speeches after the September 11 attacks.<sup>24</sup>

This publicity is not a case of the media dragging a reluctant staffer into the glare of the limelight. The White House has been willing to promote its communications team, even featuring Director of Communications Dan Bartlett talking about the creation of the 2003 State of the Union Address in an on-line chat on its own web site.<sup>25</sup>

Sometimes Bush’s speechwriters got too much attention. On February 5 of 2002, the online magazine *Slate* published an e-mail message that speechwriter David Frum’s wife had sent to friends and family taking credit for one of Bush’s most famous phrases: “I realize this is very ‘Washington’

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<sup>19</sup> David Frum, *The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*, New York: Random House, 2003, 268.

<sup>20</sup> Carl M. Cannon, “White House: Mission Accomplished,” *National Journal*, April 27, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, “The State of the Union and the Turn of a Phrase,” *New York Times*, January 27, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Francis Kiefer, “Where can a guy write a State of the Union Speech?” *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 28, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Gregg Zoroya, “He puts words in Bush’s mouth,” *USA Today*, April 10, 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Transcript, *Nightline: Up Close*, December 20, 2002, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Dan Bartlett, “Ask the White House,” [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), January 20, 2004,

of me to mention, but my husband is responsible for the 'axis of evil' segment of Tuesday's State of the Union address."<sup>26</sup>

Actually, Frum shared credit for the phrase. Frum originally cast Iraq, North Korea and Iran as an "axis of hatred." Gerson changed the phrase to the more biblical "axis of evil," picking up on the President's description of al-Qa'ida as "evildoers" thus linking these nations with 9/11.<sup>27</sup> The existence of a debate over credit for individual phrases from the speeches of a president still in office reflects a change in expectations.

Gerson heads a staff that has been called "as good as any in a generation"<sup>28</sup> and included 8 speechwriters and researchers. He is headquartered in the West Wing of the White House, returning the head speechwriter to the center of power. Gerson is part of the senior staff meeting every morning at 7:30 and the 8:30 communications meeting that the White House uses to shape the administration's message.

Gerson was hired on-the-spot after meeting with Bush for less than an hour at a Governor's conference in 1999. During the campaign he served as Chief Speechwriter and Senior Policy Advisor. While Gerson was also credited with authoring Bush's trademark "compassionate conservatism," he had begun developing that concept while working for Dan Coats of Indiana. According to *Newsweek*, Gerson had a gift for expressing Bush's brand of conservatism in "stately, lilting language that could appeal, simultaneously, to born-again and to secular boomers searching for a lost sense of uplift in public life."<sup>29</sup> Gerson had been recruited out of college by Charles W. Colson, himself a born again Christian, who had read an article Gerson had written about Mother Teresa for the Wheaton college newspaper. Gerson would later write speeches for Bob Dole and served as policy advisor to Jack Kemp and Dan Coats of Indiana. Later, he served as a Senior Editor at *U.S. News and World Report* writing about philanthropy.

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<sup>26</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, "A New Washington Whodunit: The Speechwriter Vanishes," *New York Times*, March 4, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Rupert Cornwell, "In God he trusts: How George Bush infused the White House with a Religious Spirit," *The Independent*, February 21, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Carl M. Cannon, "White House: Mission Accomplished," *National Journal*, April 27, 2002.

<sup>29</sup> Howard Fineman, Bush and God, *Newsweek*, March 10, 2003.



According to Stephen Smith, one of Gerson's colleagues from *U.S. News and World Report*, "Mike has the kind of ear that allows him to put words on paper that, when said aloud, are even more powerful than they are on the page, and more natural. It's a wonderful combination of conversational prose and eloquence."<sup>30</sup> Gerson's reputation was established by the first day of the administration because he had authored two of Bush's most successful speeches: Bush's acceptance speech at the 2000 convention and his inaugural address.

Bush's relationship with Gerson is probably the closest between president and speechwriter since President Kennedy and Ted Sorensen some 40 years earlier. Ed Gillespie, a member of the 2000 Bush campaign staff noted, "He and the president have a psychic connection. He understands the president's philosophy, his view of the world, his compassion, and his resolve."<sup>31</sup> This has put Gerson in the position being able to speak for the President in meetings. As one White House official said, "Mike has become the arbiter of what Bush would want. When he say, 'It's not going to happen,' there's nobody in the room who's going to say, 'Well, yeah, maybe it might.'"<sup>32</sup> Fellow Bush speechwriter David Frum wrote, "Not for a long time had a chief speechwriter wielded as much bureaucratic clout as Gerson did."<sup>33</sup>

Gerson's speeches were credited by some for turning a gaffe-prone candidate into an effective communicator. David Frum believed that whereas Bush's father denigrated the important of presidential rhetoric, his son valued a speechwriter like Gerson who held the skills he lacked.<sup>34</sup> After September 11, Gerson received a higher security clearance and has been invited into the Situation Room to better equip him to write about foreign policy.<sup>35</sup>

Gerson's clout may have been further enhanced by the departure of Communications Director Karen Hughes. After Hughes' departure Gerson was promoted from "deputy assistant to the

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<sup>30</sup> Jackie Koszczuk, "Speechwriter knew a time would come 'when you are writing for angels'" *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 21, 2001.

<sup>31</sup> Jackie Koszczuk, "Speechwriter knew a time would come 'when you are writing for angels'" *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 21, 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Mike Allen, "For Bush's Speechwriter, Job Grows Beyond Words; 'Scribe' Help Shape, Set Tone for Evolving Foreign Policy," *The Washington Post*, October 11, 2002, A35.

<sup>33</sup> David Frum, *The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*, New York: Random House, 2003, 24.

<sup>34</sup> David Frum, *The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*, New York: Random House, 2003, 24.

<sup>35</sup> Mike Allen, "For Bush's Speechwriter, Job Grows Beyond Words; 'Scribe' Help Shape, Set Tone for Evolving Foreign Policy," *The Washington Post*, October 11, 2002, A35.

president and director of speechwriting” to “assistant to the president for speechwriting and policy advisor.”<sup>36</sup>

While Gerson is clearly a close advisor to the President, this probably does not extend to the rest of the speechwriting staff, which, like those of other recent presidents, has enjoyed little direct access to the president. While out promoting his book, *The Right Man*, ex-speechwriter David Frum could not portray himself as close to the President: “Asked how many one-on-one meetings he had with the president, Frum said there were ‘six or eight.’ Pressed to exclude walk-by encounters in the hallways, the total falls to ‘two or three.’”<sup>37</sup>

While Gerson is solidly conservative, he has drawn inspiration from some sources not usually favored by the right. In discussing the proper use of religious language, Gerson drew upon sources in favor with both liberals and conservatives:

We have tried to employ religious language in a way that unites people. Martin Luther King did it all the time during the civil rights movement. He was in this long tradition, going back to Old Testament prophets, that say God is active in history and, eventually, he's on the side of justice.”<sup>38</sup>

Gerson’s description of himself as “an extraordinary fan” of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. may seem odd for a conservative, but for a speechwriter, particularly one who draws frequently from the Bible, drawing upon the language of one of our history’s most eloquent ministers is natural.

Karen Hughes, Bush’s first Director of Communications played an important role in speechwriting as well. David Frum gives her credit for important additions to Bush’s speeches, although the eloquence of some contributions might be disputed. Describing Bush’s 2001 State of the Union address as “one of the most audacious and effective presidential speeches in the past two decades”<sup>39</sup> Frum credits Hughes with “the night’s most quotable line,” giving her the credit for

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<sup>36</sup> Mike Allen, “For Bush’s Speechwriter, Job Grows Beyond Words; ‘Scribe’ Help Shape, Set Tone for Evolving Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Post*, October 11, 2002, A35.

<sup>37</sup> Mark Leilbovich, “David Frum’s axis of self-promotion,” *Austin-American Statesman*, January 31, 2003, E7.

<sup>38</sup> Mike Allen, “For Bush’s Speechwriter, Job Grows Beyond Words; ‘Scribe’ Help Shape, Set Tone for Evolving Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Post*, October 11, 2002, A35.

<sup>39</sup> David Frum, *The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*, New York: Random House, 2003, 49.

“Some say my tax plan is too big. Others say it’s too small. I respectfully disagree. This plan is just right.”<sup>40</sup>

Frum’s praise for Hughes and the three bears rhetoric of the President reveals something about the Bush style as well as the partisan nature of speechwriter books released before reelection. The high praise for lowbrow rhetoric is somewhat surprising coming from a professional wordsmith. Hyperbole aside, the selection of such a phrase for highlighting suggests that the Bush speechwriters shared the President’s love for simple phrases. The willingness to brush aside the legacy of the Great Communicator and Bush 41’s “thousand points of light” in favor of “This plan is just right” signals that the second Bush administration embraced a very different standard of eloquence.

Bush’s speechwriters must meet the challenge of sounding both inspiring and like George W. Bush. After a series of speeches given after September 11, the White House found itself struggling to find the right tone. According to one report, the speechwriting staff had done a little too good job. At times, Gerson’s prose has been portrayed as too good. “His speeches were so elegant that they did not sound like the words of Mr. Bush.”<sup>41</sup> The prescription, according to journalist Carl Cannon, was, “less of chief speechwriter Michael Gerson, an elegant stylist, and more of plain ol’ Dubya.”<sup>42</sup> Gerson spent time studying Bush’s natural speaking style.

According to one account, the Oval Office address following September 11, the speech sounded good. “But the beautiful speech sounded borrowed coming from Bush’s mouth. The tone was too literary. The president’s next speech had to be grand -- but it also had to sound more like him.”<sup>43</sup>

Bush played an important role in editing his speeches and generally was insistent about maintaining a simple style. According to speechwriter David Frum, Bush disliked extraneous wording.

One of my first efforts for him included the phrase *I’ve seen with my own eyes*. The words *with my own eyes* were circled and a sarcastic “DUH” scrawled beside them with one of his heavy marking pens.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> David Frum, *The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*, New York: Random House, 2003, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Damian Witworth, “Speechwriter finds his master’s voice,” *The Times*, September 22, 2001, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Carl M. Cannon, “The Lord of the Ring,” *National Journal*, February 2, 2002.

<sup>43</sup> D.T. Max, “The Making of the Speech,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2001, A32.

<sup>44</sup> David Frum, *The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*, New York: Random House, 2003, 48.

There must be a correspondence between president and speech lest the distance between thought and word become evident. Eli Attie, who wrote speeches for rival Al Gore, admired the simple direct language that Gerson wrote because having Bush speak in the same rhetoric as Kennedy “would look like a suit that doesn’t fit, because it’s not the way he speaks, and people don’t believe he thinks like that.”<sup>45</sup>

### **The Rhetoric of 9/11**

The Bush White House speechwriting staff may have faced the greatest challenge of any team of writers as they formulated the President’s response to the attacks of September 11. As the President sat reading to second-graders in Sarasota, Florida and his staff was finding its way through Washington traffic into work, terrorists struck an unprecedented blow against the United States. As the potential for additional attacks became clear, the speechwriters and the rest of the staff of the White House and surrounding buildings were evacuated, first in an orderly fashion, but within a minute turning to a sprint to safety—across Pennsylvania avenue, through Lafayette Square, and eventually into downtown Washington. There, White House staff were instructed to remove their White House identification badges lest they become targets for possible snipers. Stranded in the streets of downtown Washington, DC, cell phone circuits overloaded and ineffective, the staff began to regroup and try to work. Initially they headed for the American Enterprise Institute where they received word from Gerson, who had been at home, that DaimlerChrysler was offering its Washington headquarters as a temporary office for White House staff.

Sitting in borrowed offices, relying primarily on the same newscasts viewed by other Americans, the speechwriters struggled to find the words to meet a challenge that few Americans were ready for. Bush had offered a few brief, preliminary messages of assurance while his staff worked away in various locations in Washington assembling a more substantial response to be delivered from the Oval Office.

Working from the DaimlerChrysler offices, the speechwriters had assembled a draft. However, Karen Hughes rejected their drafts and put together her own speech for the President. The resulting

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<sup>45</sup> Frank Bruni, “A Wordsmith Who Shapes Bush’s Prose,” The New York Times, April 3, 2001.

speech, in the eyes of speechwriter David Frum, was far from successful. The President's speech opened, inappropriately with "Good evening" accompanied by a half-smile from the President. Frum also believed that the particularizing" of the victims ("The victims were in airplanes, or in their offices; secretaries, businessmen and –women, military and federal workers; moms and dads, friends and neighbors.") sounded condescending "as if we did not trust our listeners to feel sufficient grief for the murdered unless we summoned up the images of their orphaned children."<sup>46</sup> The speech also lacked the specifics needed to give it force. As Frum complained, "At the center of the speech, where Bush ought to have explained who the enemy was – and then pledged to destroy him utterly – the public was offered instead a doughy pudding of stale metaphors."<sup>47</sup> Frum went on to describe the speech as "a hastily revised compassionate conservatism speech"<sup>48</sup> that would leave Americans uncertain about the President's ability to lead them through this crisis.

I could imagine Americans switching off their television sets and looking at one another with the same dismay I felt. I could imagine them thinking: Bush was a nice fellow, a perfectly adequate president for a time of peace and quiet; but this was war, real war, and he had given no one any indication all day long of readiness for his terrible new responsibilities.<sup>49</sup>

It's little surprise that the address, nicknamed the "Awful Office Address" by some in the administration,<sup>50</sup> fell short of the mark. The President had been flying around the country as intelligence sources assessed the risks of attack to Air Force I. The White House staff was scattered and disorganized. There was little opportunity to formulate and refine a speech. Hughes' move to take the speech from the speechwriters cut the speech loose from those most practiced with the art of speechwriting. While Karen Hughes may have been highly skilled at constructing a broad plan, her writing skills were not enough to craft the subtle message needed to meet the challenge of crafting this speech alone.

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<sup>46</sup> David Frum, The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush, New York: Random House, 2003, 136-137.

<sup>47</sup> David Frum, The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush, New York: Random House, 2003, 127.

<sup>48</sup> David Frum, The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush, New York: Random House, 2003, 128.

<sup>49</sup> David Frum, The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush, New York: Random House, 2003, 128

<sup>50</sup> David Frum, The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush, New York: Random House, 2003, 133.

In their rush to respond to the crisis, the White House may have deepened the crisis. Speaking alone from the White House the President seemed to be asserting his authority more than bringing the government and the nation together. Karl Rove quickly scheduled two new speeches that would allow the President to speak to an audience: the memorial service for victims on September 14 and a speech to a joint session of Congress on September 20. The advantage of the live audience was two-fold. First, the White House generally believed that the President performed better in front of an audience, rather than alone in the room with the television cameras. Secondly, a live audience could demonstrate support for the president.

The White House's plan succeeded. Before citizens were ready to develop and share their doubts about the President's leadership ability, Bush had dismissed them with several fine speeches. After the speech to Congress and other appearances about that time, the doubts about the President gave way to wide spread praise.

### **Bush and God**

Bush's rhetoric has been consistently examined for its religious content. The presence of some of this language no doubt originates with the President himself, who attaches great significance to being born again in 1986. Such rhetoric may rise inevitably from a crisis like September 11 that defies traditional political arguments and whose massive losses requires calling upon a higher source. Additionally, given the religious rhetoric of the terrorists, calling upon God allowed Bush to answer in kind. However, Bush is not the first president to profess such a faith and his religious rhetoric is certainly facilitated by writers well prepared to deliver a religious message. While the President is known for his Bible reading, he, like most politicians, does not have the depth of training that is given to those who speak from the pulpit for a living. His speechwriter, however, does.

Head speechwriter Michael Gerson, an evangelical Episcopalian, studied theology at Wheaton College, "the Evangelical Harvard" which also produced Billy Graham. Gerson has been given some of the credit for Bush's effective use of religious themes. As one minister commented, "President Bush sounded more like a preacher than a politician—and a good one."<sup>51</sup> Beyond his formal training, Gerson's fondness for the rhetoric of Martin Luther King and Abraham Lincoln gives him a

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<sup>51</sup> Cathy Lynn Grossman, "President draws on the Bible to comfort a grieving nation," USA Today, February 2, 2003, A5.

model of religious rhetoric that has broader appeal than the traditional evangelical base of the Republican Party. This attention given to the speechwriting staff has not always been positive. While he has been widely praised for his contributions to Bush's best speeches, Michael Gerson, an evangelical Christian, has also been blamed for some of the religious rhetoric in Bush speeches that have generated some controversy.<sup>52</sup>

After Bush's declaration of a "crusade" against terrorism led some Muslims to feel that they were the target, the White House began to carefully avoid such terms. The declaration by Reverend Franklin Graham, who spoke at Bush's inaugural, that Islam was "a very evil and wicked religion" has required that Bush continue to be extremely cautious in using rhetoric that might be interpreted as favoring Christianity and being hostile to Islam.<sup>53</sup>

If Bush were being judged by off the cuff remarks, we could focus on the President alone. However, presidential speech today is the product of an elaborate process. In order to understand this process better, we should examine the rise of the process and the forces behind its rise.

### **Institutionalization**

*Big presidential speeches are constructed in the way the Romans built their temples: The major components are carved in workshops all over the site and then hoisted into place according to the architect's plans.<sup>54</sup>*

*Bush speechwriter, David Frum*

*What most people fail to realize is that making a major Presidential address is something akin to enacting a public law.<sup>55</sup>*

*Ford speechwriter Robert Hartmann*

In examining how presidents go about putting together their speeches, we begin by considering some of the specific pressures that led to the creation of a highly institutionalized

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<sup>52</sup> John Donnelly, "Some Voice Concern Over President's Religious Rhetoric," The Boston Globe, February 16, 2003, A20.

<sup>53</sup> David L. Greene, "Bush's faith rhetoric grows more explicit," Dallas Morning News, February 15, 2003, 5G.

<sup>54</sup> David Frum, The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush, New York: Random House, 2003, 147.

<sup>55</sup> Robert T. Hartmann, Palace Politics: An Inside Account of the Ford Years, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1980, 384.

speechwriting process. Given the transformation of the speechwriting process from the labors of a few writers to an elaborate drafting and clearance process, it's fair to ask: How did this happen?

While the motivation for a single presidential address may seem to be of little consequence to political science, the reasons behind the transformation of the speechwriting process may be a complex matter with many motives. Pressure on presidential speeches is nothing new. While presidents have not always relied on speechwriters for as many speeches as they do today, it appears that every president needed some help from time to time. According to historians, the only president not to use help on his inaugural address was Ulysses S. Grant who wrote his second inaugural address on his own. The result was, according to historian Allan Nevins, Grant's "most complacent and fatuous of all his public papers."<sup>56</sup>

The forces behind the development of the speechwriting process are as complex as the process they created. The pressures of creating more speeches, more widely heard and read, facing more scrutiny, combined with the growing importance of public persuasion to the modern presidency force the White House into a process that is cautious, perhaps to a fault.

### **More speeches**

*One of the most appalling trials which confront a President is the perpetual clamor for public utterances. Invitations are constant and pressing. They come by wire, by mail, and by delegations. No event of importance is celebrated anywhere in the United States without inviting him to come and deliver an oration.<sup>57</sup>*

*Calvin Coolidge*

When Clinton Rossiter began his well-known description of the roles of the president, he began with the "Chief of State" role. In his classic study of the role of presidents, Clinton Rossiter illustrated the burdens of the president's role as chief of state.

As figurehead rather than working head of our government, he greets distinguished visitors from all parts of the world, lays wreaths on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier and before the statue of Lincoln, makes proclamations of thanksgiving and commemoration, bestows medals on flustered pilots, holds state dinners for the diplomatic corps and the Supreme Court, lights the nation's Christmas tree, buys the first poppy from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, gives the first crisp banknote to the Red Cross, throws out the first ball for the Senators (the harmless ones at Griffith Stadium), rolls the first egg for the

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<sup>56</sup> James A. Barnes, "Striking the Right Notes," National Journal, January 13, 2001.

<sup>57</sup> Calvin Coolidge, The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge, New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1929, 219-220.



Easter Bunny, and in the course of many months greets a fantastic procession of firemen, athletes, veterans, Boy Scouts, Campfire Girls, boosters, hog callers, exchange students, and heroic school children.<sup>58</sup>

During the presidency of Lyndon Johnson a young speech writer named Peter Benchley coined the phrase “Rose Garden Rubbish” to describe the flood of small speeches pressed upon the president. According to Nixon speechwriter James C. Humes, Rose Garden Rubbish is composed of “the concoctions of commendations, felicitations, and salutations that come forth from the president when he exits the Oval Office into the Rose Garden to deliver greetings to the Easter Seal Poster Girl or the ‘seasonal wishes’ when he lights the National Christmas Tree.”<sup>59</sup>

There is a certain inertia in presidential speech. The demand for ceremonial speeches continues to grow with each new American tradition. While the traditions behind these events may not be political, failure to recognize them could have grave political consequences. Few people would put any great value in the president’s speech at the lighting of the national Christmas tree, but the first president to shun this tradition would likely be seen as turning their back on the Christian community (and retailers).

While America’s diverse society and rich heritage may have made America great, the ceremonial obligations that they creates for its Chief of State are steadily becoming overwhelming. The march of history continues to add to the list of events to be remembered. Just as the attack on Pearl Harbor and the D-Day invasion created a new days to recognize America’s sacrifices and successes, so too did the attacks of September 11. While history may eventually relegate these dates to a lesser status, the first president to do so by failing to formally recognize these dates does so at his or her own political peril. In some ways, the presidency is becoming a captive to history.

While many of the ceremonial messages issued from the White House likely matter little to the nation at large, each likely reflects the concern of at least one narrower interest. Failure to properly acknowledge Martin Luther King’s birthday may be seen by African-Americans as a sign of lack of respect. Missing the celebration of Labor Day may trigger concerns of working Americans. Lighting

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<sup>58</sup> Clinton Rossiter, The American Presidency, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, 3.

<sup>59</sup> James C. Humes, Confessions of a White House Ghostwriter: Five Presidents and Other Political Adventures, Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc. 1997, 3.

the national Christmas Tree without also pausing to light the National Menorah might leave Jewish Americans feeling left out.

From the inside looking out, the demands are even more compelling. President Ford's chief speechwriter, Robert Hartman suggested that it was time that the presidency reverses the seemingly inevitable obsession with placing the president in the middle of more events.

If a good genie gave me the magic power to make just one change in the way the Presidency operates, and we could start with the Ford Administration all over again on August 9, 1974, I would rule that the President never (Barring an imminent invasion) open his mouth in front of a microphone more than once a month...

Nine-tenths of a President's problems can be traced to one fact: They talk too much. Unless a President has something important to say, he should keep still. People expect something significant to come out of his mouth and when it doesn't, after a while they tune him out. His critics are only listening for his mistakes, and when he makes on that's all you ever hear about.<sup>60</sup>

The increasing demands for presidential speech puts pressure on a speechwriting staff that is struggling to keep up with the demands on the presidency. As Hartmann noted, "my deadlines are inexorable... If he [Ford] has to give a speech, he has to give a speech. He has to have something in front of him. Our deadlines could never be slipped."<sup>61</sup>

Elmer Cornwell concluded in his study of president of the early Twentieth Century by connecting the growing need for ghostwriters to the fact that presidential speeches became more numerous and more important.

Given the imperative necessity for the White House to put its best foot forward in the material fed to the mass media, unless a President is a literary craftsman of outstanding ability, he should swallow his pride and accept expert collaboration. He need not give the whole job to others, but he should insure, one way or another, that his ideas are packaged as attractively as possible for general dissemination. Lamentable as this necessity may appear to be, prevailing conditions admit of no less.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Robert T. Hartmann, Palace Politics: An Inside Account of the Ford Years, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1980, 403.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Robert T. Hartmann, James F. C. Hyde, Jr. and Stephen J. Wayne, Oral History Collection, Gerald R. Ford Library, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr. Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1965, 110.

With so much to be said, it is little wonder that speechwriters have become a common fixture in the White House as well as those of other elected officials. The speaking demands of the modern presidency, on top of the many other demands of the office require professional help.

### **More extensive press coverage**

Clinton Rossiter noted that “the President has been the chief gainer from the miracles of electronics.”<sup>63</sup> John F. Kennedy understood the role of presidential speech. As he moved from the Congress to the presidency, he recognized that the audience of his speeches had changed. “The big difference,” he told Sorensen, “is all the different audiences that hear every word. In the Senate we didn’t have to worry so much about how Krushchev and Adenauer and Nehru and Dirksen would react.”<sup>64</sup>

Like most of the obligations of the presidency, the media fixation on the presidency is actually the product of years of work by the White House to generate as much coverage as possible to allow the president to dominate the media message. Every journalist covering a breaking story from the lawn of the White House is a journalist not covering the story from the Capitol grounds where congressional voices might begin to distract from the president’s ability to shape the debate. When he was an advisor to Ford during his career in Congress Robert Hartmann noted that from the point of view of Congress, the president monopolizes media coverage: “No matter what we did or said the President was 10 times more important than the Congress in the eyes of the media.”<sup>65</sup>

One presidential speechwriter recoiled at the objections to the scripting of presidents. “Why can’t he just wing it?” The answer is that everything the president says is engraved eternally in stone.”<sup>66</sup> Any presidential communication can become fodder for media coverage. During the Ford Administration, the messages office that included the speechwriter staff was responsible for overseeing the autopen that signed the president’s name to thousands of items daily. As Robert Hartmann noted, “Whoever controls this facsimile signing machine is in a position to protect the President from such acute embarrassments as calling a lifelong friend “Mister,” sending an obvious

<sup>63</sup> Clinton Rossiter, The American Presidency, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, 100.

<sup>64</sup> Sorensen, 331.

<sup>65</sup> William Syers interview with Robert T. Hartmann, May 3, 1985, Gerald R. Ford Library, 1.

<sup>66</sup> James C. Humes, Confessions of a White House Ghostwriter: Five Presidents and Other Political Adventures, Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc. 1997, 5.

for letter to a United State Senator or signing an inaccurate or improper statement.”<sup>67</sup> An autopen error during the Carter administration led to letters to winning and losing candidates in the 1978 election getting mixed up. Candidates who had just lost received a letter from the President congratulating them on their victory.

There can be as much risk in saying too little as in saying too much. In October 1974—a few weeks after Ford’s sudden pardon of Nixon the new White House Press Secretary Ron Nessen convinced the networks to yield some of their prime time for an address from Ford that was promised to generate plenty of news. The speech became, in the words of David Gergen, “a dud, a parody of a fireside chat” with “no apparent reason why the President should be addressing the nation in prime time.”<sup>68</sup> Some critics referred to it as the “clean-your-plate speech” because Ford urged Americans to not be wasteful by repeating his father’s admonition to “Clean you plate before you get up from the table.”<sup>69</sup>

The White House has every reason to maintain this level of coverage or even encourage its expansion to maximize the president’s ability to drown out opposing voices. George Bush scheduled his 2004 State of the Union Address at the time best suited to upstage the news coming out the Democratic caucuses. The president’s ability to be heard above political rivals is a tremendous asset, but one that requires considerable upkeep and come at some risk. Every moment the president is in the spotlight is a moment when those who would offer conflicting views, but it is also a moment of intense scrutiny than can reveal even the most minor flaw.

### **More intense scrutiny**

Today the world scrutinizes every word the president says publicly, and, in the case of leaks, even some things they may or may not have said privately. While writing speeches for President Ford, David Gergen found that even the drafts of speeches could cause problems. As while other speechwriters developed one draft of a speech, Gergen worked on a “hard-hitting” draft about New

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<sup>67</sup> Robert T. Hartmann, Palace Politics: An Inside Account of the Ford Years, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1980, 189.

<sup>68</sup> David Gergen, Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership, Nixon to Clinton,” New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, 126.

<sup>69</sup> David Gergen, Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership, Nixon to Clinton,” New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, 126.

York's financial situation. Gergen assumed that others on the staff would be "tempering the language and strengthening the analysis" before it was given serious consideration and saw the light of day. However, some of his unedited paragraphs ended up being published in the New York Daily News under the headline: "Ford to City: Drop Dead." This material was used by the Democrats in the 1976 campaign and may have contributed to Ford's loss in New York.<sup>70</sup>

Today the president is always on the record and cannot revise what has been said. Often, what the president did not mean to say gets more coverage than what he wanted to say. According to columnist Tish Durkin, "the media favor almost any gaffe over almost any issue."<sup>71</sup> Television's arrival in Washington has done a great to change the presidency. Ted Sorensen noted that television gave Kennedy a tremendous resource for reaching the people, but "even presidential corrections rarely catch up with those misstatements which now and again appear in the press."<sup>72</sup> Humorist PJ O'Rourke, more colorfully suggests that the press corps role attempts to be "on hand at all times, with video tape constantly running, waiting for the president to say 'fuck' or get shot."<sup>73</sup>

The intensity of the scrutiny of the press coverage means that speechwriters need to be aware of the audience and how they will receive the president's words. Carter speechwriter James Fallows makes the interesting argument that presidential speeches need to *read* well. According to Fallows, one of the lessons that Carter needed to learn early in his presidency was that the White House needed to create a text that journalists found eloquent when they read it from the page. "And they're not going to go to the speech, but they're going to read the text."<sup>74</sup>

Fallows made this argument in a two-page memo to Carter early in his administration. Urging the President to put more time into the preparation of his remarks rather than extemporizing, Fallows argued for the value of the thinking about the printed speech.

I can't overemphasize the importance of printed, pre-released material in the whole cycle of influencing public opinion. The first

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<sup>70</sup> David Gergen, Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership, Nixon to Clinton, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, 115.

<sup>71</sup> Tish Durkin, "Trent Lott and the Euphemistic Ways of Washington," National Journal, December 14, 2002, 3634.

<sup>72</sup> Sorensen, Decision Making in the White House, 55.

<sup>73</sup> P. J. O'Rourke, Parliament of Whores: A Lone Humorists Attempts to Explain the Entire U.S. Government, New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1991, 68.

<sup>74</sup> James Fallows, Exit Interview, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, 23.

thing a release text does is make it more likely that the newspaper stories will deal with the content of the speech – rather than its reception, the crowd, the trip, what you had for breakfast. Second, when the material gets in the newspapers, it gives the broadcast networks a signal that this is credible, weighty news, which they had better treat seriously too. Then, in the third state, the combination of the news stories and the text give columnists and editorialists something to chew on. For example, on phrase from your Notre Dame speech – about outgrowing our “inordinate fear of Communism” – has turned up all over the place in column and editorials about your foreign policy. If you had given that speech extemporaneously, you and your audience might have felt more elated about your delivery, but it is far less likely that journalists would have dug up the recorded transcript of the speech to find phrases to quote.

Any time you appear in public, reporters are going to write stories about it. The value of printed texts is that they focus the inevitable stories on the idea we are presenting, rather than the incidental stage-business.<sup>75</sup>

While changes in volume and the inflection of a voice can help give life to a president’s speech, presidents cannot rely on those signals since they will not appear in the written version of the speech. As one example of this, John F. Kennedy learned early on that humor can be misunderstood when, in a speech during his Senate career, he told a joke about a cab driver: “The cab driver did such a good job rushing me to this luncheon that I was going to give him a big tip and tell him to vote Democratic. Then I remembered the advice of Senator Green, so I gave him no tip and told him to vote Republican.”<sup>76</sup> After the press reported this as a statement without making clear that it was a joke Kennedy received letters from cab drivers and their wives.

While the realities of the printed news story shape speech in one way the nature of modern television news coverage creates a very different demand upon the president’s words. Today the president’s speech will likely be heard by the public, but only in selected portions. While the flow and pacing of the speech overall might be a crucial concern to the live audience, for the much larger television audience, the sound bite witnessed on the national news is more important.

The significance of presidential phrasing goes beyond the response of the public because presidential speech can play an important role in the policy process. In their study of speechwriting in the Johnson and Nixon administration conclude, “The writing of speeches for the President is

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<sup>75</sup> Memorandum for the President from Jim Fallows, October 25, 1977, 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.

<sup>76</sup> Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, 63.

inevitably connected to public policy.”<sup>77</sup> In some situations, a presidential statement may not begin a debate, it may end it. As Ford’s chief speechwriter said, “In choosing what words he will say, a President takes a public stand he cannot lightly alter.”<sup>78</sup> With the level of scrutiny applied to the president today, there is little chance for a president to bargain on an issue on which he or she has taken a clear stand. Backing down from a public statement is often portrayed as a sign of compromise and weakness, meaning that the presidents are largely obligated to stand by whatever their initial utterance on an issue might be.

### **Political persuasion**

Perhaps the most obvious motive for presidential speeches is persuasion. Richard Neustadt has placed persuasion at the heart of presidential existence.<sup>79</sup> Lacking formal power, the president must find ways to persuade others in power to do as he wishes. Speeches must be a primary part of persuasion because the president has little direct contact with those in need of persuasion. According to Richard Nixon, “In the final analysis, the President’s power depends on the power of his ideas.”<sup>80</sup>

Words are now a political asset that needs to motivate a large number of people and a wide variety of constituent groups. The president must persuade a variety of actors, some as a means of indirectly persuading others. Not only is each of these target audiences a different population, they may use different channels of communication and even different styles of language, logic and communication. Clearly, the president must adopt a different tone when trying to persuade a sophisticated audience like career bureaucrats or a technically-based interest group than when presenting arguments to the general public.

One method of political persuasion through speech is managing the agenda. By raising issues on their own terms, presidents can define the terms of debates. For example, President Ford had his White House Press Office leave any reference to the “earned amnesty” program he was about to

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<sup>77</sup> Karen M. Hult; Charles E. Walcott Policymakers and wordsmiths: writing for the president under Johnson and Nixon,” *Polity*, Spring 1998 v30 n3 465

<sup>78</sup> Robert T. Hartmann, *Palace Politics: An Inside Account of the Ford Years*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1980, 384.d

<sup>79</sup> Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern President: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: The Free Press, 1990),

<sup>80</sup> Richard Nixon, *In The Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat, and Renewal*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990, 208.

propose out of the prepared text of a speech he was to give to the Veterans of Foreign War to keep groups from organizing protests.<sup>81</sup> This helped him get his message out on his terms and without the distraction of protestors and others who would try to cast the debate in different terms.

The Ford administration also found that its failure to explain its policies undermined its goals. One Ford speechwriter complained, "I agree with those who say some of his actions appear to lack compassion. That is because his explanations of them do. They come off lacking understanding and feeling."<sup>82</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

*"President Bush's State of the Union address is a speech by committee—and sometimes the committee gets too large."<sup>83</sup>*

Bush's 2003 State of the Union Address was not the last time the authorship of the President's words would be publically discussed. As Bush prepared for his 2004 address journalists and citizens speculated casually over the authorship of the speech. In an on-line chat White House Communications director Dan Bartlett noted that the State of the Union Address drafting process took several months but that the President had only been involved for the last ten days.<sup>84</sup>

The assumption that great presidents are defined by great speeches seems to be deeply ingrained in the American political psyche. It is clear that even some of Bush's biggest fans refuse to judge the President by reasonable standards. Rather than accepting that there might be other ways of achieving presidential greatness, they struggle to see in George W. Bush the same characteristics of greatness that they learned in the elementary school textbooks. One Republican stretched credibility to the limits by comparing George W. Bush to Franklin Roosevelt: "FDR's 'infamy' line is remembered, but the speech itself is not that distinguished," Dolan said. "Bush's are, and it started before September 11th."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford*, New York, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979, 141-142.

<sup>82</sup> John J. Casserly, *The Ford White House: The Diary of a Speechwriter*, Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.com, Inc. 2000, 121.

<sup>83</sup> Reuters, "Everyone Wants a Piece of Bush's Big Speech," Reuters On-Line News Service, January 18, 2004.

<sup>84</sup> On-line forum with Dan Bartlett, "Ask the White House," White House Web Site, January 20, 2004.

<sup>85</sup> Mike Allen, "For Bush's Speechwriter, Job Grows Beyond Words; 'Scribe' Help Shape, Set Tone for Evolving Foreign Policy," *The Washington Post*, October 11, 2002, A35.



The discussion of the 2003 State of the Union Address is most valuable in directing our attention to a process that is a fundamental part of modern American democracy. Few would argue that the president's relationship with the public is not seen as an important part of representation. Given the importance of the president's words, it is remarkable that we know so little about their origins. The Bush administration's problems with sixteen words can lead us to asking the right questions, even if this case may initially nudge us toward the wrong answer. While the debate over a few words highlights those rare failures, what is more remarkable is that there are not more problems like this. Presidents give hundreds of speeches every year, each closely scrutinized from a variety of political, international, and technical perspectives.

If anything, the greatest casualty of the elaborate drafting and clearance problem is not the truth; it is the quality of the rhetoric. Few would argue that presidential rhetoric has gotten better over the last 50 years and the language of Lincoln and Roosevelt remains the standard by which their predecessors are judged.

# WHOSE LINE IS IT?

## Evaluating the origins of Bush's Rhetoric

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Prepared for presentation at the  
Southwest Political Science Association Meetings,  
March 2004, Corpus Christi, Texas

## Abstract

This paper uses the Bush administration as a launching point for a discussion of the speechwriting process in the White House. The causes for institutionalization of the speechwriting process is explored in order to explain the evolution of the speechwriting operation.