# *Touching the Granite:*
## *Presidential Speechwriting and the First Draft of History*

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### Abstract

*This study blends the traditional interviews and historical research with content analysis of speech drafts to examine the modern speechwriting process and its failures to produce more great presidential speeches despite the rise of professional presidential speechwriters.*

# Touching the Granite[*]

Presidential speech can play a unique role in America's past, present, and future. Citizens define presidential leadership in terms of the future and expect a president to articulate a "vision" that will carry the nation into the next generation. Presidents frequently use speech to shape citizens' perception of current crises and public policy. However, presidents have also found that they are able to shape the past, or at least our recollection of it. Clinton Rossiter claimed that the presidency is 'not just an office of incredible power but a breeding ground of indestructible myth."[1]

The president must be able to speak across both space and time, communicating both across the continents and across the generations of Americans. According to one of FDR's speechwriters, while Roosevelt may have adopted a casual, friendly tone as the talked to the nation, he fully realized the historical importance of his speeches: "Roosevelt seemed to take his speeches lightly, but no one knew better than he that, once he had the microphone before him, he was speaking for the eternal record—words were, as Sandburg said, 'throwing long shadows.'"[2] According to Sherwood, the President put a large amount of work into his speeches because "Roosevelt with his acute sense of history knew that all those words would constitute the bulk of the estate that he would leave to posterity and that his ultimate measurement would depend on the reconciliation of what he said with what he did."[3]

The role of the presidency in shaping our view of our past, present, and future is usually discussed in history as we look back fondly on the great speeches of the past. Scholars seldom speak of planning a reoccurrence of historic speech lest we jinx presidents. Like no hitters in baseball, speeches of historic proportion are a wish that seems best left unspoken. However, dreams of the great speech do live in the hearts of those that draft them. Presidential speechwriters occasionally talk about "touching the granite" or "touching the marble" as they describe their hopes of

[1] Clinton Rossiter, The American Presidency, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, 94.

[2] Robert E. Sherwood, Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History, revised edition, New York: Harper & Row, 1950, 219.

[3] Sherwood, 212.

writing words that will find themselves forever carved into a monument or, as William Muir, puts its become "woven into the ribbon of history."[4] This research looks inside the White House speechwriting operation and the dilemma that the professionalization of speechwriting doesn't seem to be producing better speechwriting. By looking at the structure and functioning of the White House we can see the forces that have made dramatic presidential rhetoric an endangered species. While not pretending that great presidential speeches in the past were the product of the president alone, this paper concludes that the institutionalization of the White House's speechwriting process has inhibited rhetoric by putting too many divergent interests in the speechwriting process.

## *Cases of Historic speech*

To get a better sense of the standards of historic speeches we need to consider the construction of some of the speeches that have become the standards against which presidents will be judged. The speeches of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt give us great presidents known giving the nation some of its most memorable words.

### George Washington's Farewell address

George Washington's Farewell address was written with the help of James Madison and Alexander Hamilton. Madison drafted a speech for the President when Washington considered retiring at the end of his first term. Four years later, Hamilton would expand upon the ideas of Madison's original draft and adding much of the specific language that Washington would use. This left Washington himself to fine-tune the speech to fit his personal style. The contribution of Madison and Hamilton would remain a secret for decades. According to one account, one day Hamilton was walking down Broadway in New York City when an old soldier tried to sell him a copy of Washington's Farewell Address. Hamilton walked away he remarked to his wife, "That man does not know he has asked me to purchase my own work." Later, some of Hamilton's friends withheld some of his papers including an original draft of the address in Hamilton's handwriting because they believed the public should not be disturbed by doubts about Washington's authorship of his speech.[5] While Washington's contribution to his Farewell address was important, any diminution of the great man's role in his own words would certainly undermine his legacy.

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[4] Quoted in William Ker Muir, Jr., <u>The Bully Pulpit: The Presidential Leadership of Ronald Reagan</u>, San Francisco: ICS Press, 1992, 43.

[5] Roger Butterfield, "Ghost Writers: Behind the famous presidential phrases often lurks an unknown phrasemaker," <u>Life</u>, July 5, 1968, 62.

Inclusion of Washington's Farewell address in a list of great speeches should be done cautiously for several reasons. First, it was not a speech. Instead, it was initially printed in Philadelphia's American Daily Advertiser on September 19, 1796. While the most basic function of the address would be the same as any presidential speech today, Washington's farewell did not have to be delivered as the spoken word. This is evident from sentences that frequently run 50 or more words and would taxed the breadth of the speaker.

In addition, Washington's address does not include the kind of eloquence we often quote. The speech does contain great insights including a caution against rhetorical labels like "Axis of Evil" when Washington declared: "Antipathy in one nation against another disposes each more readily to offer insult and injury, to lay hold of slight causes of umbrage, and to be haughty and intractable, when accidental or trifling occasions of dispute occur." The farewell address certainly inspired Americans to stop and think but did not remain in the American memory the other prominent speeches would.

### Lincoln's Gettysburg and Second Inaugural Addresses

The most obvious example of the potential durability of presidential rhetoric is Lincoln's address at Gettysburg where, according to Gary Wills, the President forever cast the events of the civil war in his own terms. "Abraham Lincoln transformed the ugly reality into something rich and strange—and he did it with 272 words. The power of words has rarely been given more compelling demonstration."[6] Lincoln's words redefined America in terms that remain with us today.

In his study of Lincoln's writing, Douglas Wilson notes that one of the most remarkable things about Lincoln's most influential addresses was that his ideas were often unpopular in their time.[7] Wilson suggests that Lincoln's success should be given more weight because they contributed to the transformation of American thought at the time.

What can we learn from the construction of Lincoln's speeches? We do not know the details of how Lincoln's speeches were written. However, the notion that addresses like the Gettysburg address were spontaneously written out on the back of an envelope should be dismissed. Lincoln prepared his speeches well in advance and he used the

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[6] Garry Wills, Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America, New York: Touchtone Books, 20.

[7] Douglas L. Wilson, Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006, 7.

time to edit and revise his speeches carefully.[8] It also appears that Lincoln had little help with this speeches and that the words he chose were largely his own. Lincoln did get some assistance from William Seward with his first inaugural address,[9] but Ronald C. White, Jr. concluded, "Lincoln's speeches were Lincoln's speeches. He worked without speechwriters or ghostwriters. Often he worked without benefit of any advice or counsel from colleagues and friends."[10]

The occasional assistance with wording that Lincoln utilized is almost the opposite of the process today. Lincoln drafted his own speeches and Seward or others might occasionally offer wording changes, but the basic structure and arguments were those of one author.

### Franklin Roosevelt

A more recent example of great speeches comes from Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt's speeches played a central role in the success of his presidency but were constructed more like those of his successors than predecessors like Lincoln.

While the modern White House was starting to take form, FDR's speechwriting operation was much looser than today's process[11] Roosevelt would begin by discussing major points, audience, and the general length of the speech with his writers. Sometimes Roosevelt would dictate his own first draft, often working from a file of news clippings, letters from citizens, and his own notes about speech topics. These dictations were often rambling and the speechwriters learned that Roosevelt used this dictation to try new ideas and occasionally vent some hostility. The speechwriters would cut and paste Roosevelt's initial thoughts together with their own material to assemble a coherent draft. As Rosenman said, "Shears and paste were used plentifully."[12]

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[8] Wilson, 198-237.

[9] Ronald C. White, Jr., The Eloquent President: Portraits of Lincoln Through His Words, New York: Random House, 2005, 65-66.

[10] Ronald C. White Jr., Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002, 68.

[11] Roosevelt's general speechwriting process is detailed in several sources. Excellent first-hand accounts exist: Samuel I. Rosenman, Working with Roosevelt, New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1952 and Robert E. Sherwood, Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History, revised edition, New York: Harper & Row, 1950. Raymond Moley, with the assistance of Elliot A. Rosen, The First New Deal, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966.

[12] Samuel I. Rosenman, Working with Roosevelt, New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1952, 248.

Roosevelt would often make deletions and add materials while reading the draft aloud to assure that the tone was appropriate for the spoken word. A major speech might go through as many as 12 drafts and that sometimes not even a single sentence from the first draft made it to the final draft.[13]

While the speechwriting process was not fully institutionalized, Roosevelt's speechwriters were not spared the influences of the rest of the executive branch. Speeches had to be reviewed by the various departments. While the institutionalization of the process had not developed, the pressures that would create the need for review was already looming. The speechwriting staff constantly felt the "harrowing responsibility": "The New York Times can make mistake—the World Almanac can make mistakes—but the President of the United States must not make mistakes."[14]

After Winston Churchill that proclaimed that "We shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight upon the beaches, we shall fight on landing grounds, we should fight in the field and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender" Roosevelt attempted to follow up by casting the conflict between England and its enemies with strong language. However, as Sherwood recounts, "Timid souls in the State department blanched with horror when, on his own initiative and without consultation with anyone, he inserted the words, 'the hand that held the dagger has plunged it into the back of its neighbor.' They felt that he was going much too far."[15] Roosevelt's famous "arsenal of democracy" speech was also sent to the State Department for comment and, in the words of his speechwriters, "of which plenty was forthcoming."[16] As Robert Sherwood recounted, Roosevelt took special note of some of the State Department's reservations.

> At one point in the speech, Roosevelt spoke of the agents of the fifth column operating throughout the United States and Latin America. Then followed the sentence, "There are also American citizens, *many of them in high places*, who, unwittingly in most cases, are aiding and abetting the work of these agents."
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> The words I have italicized came back from the State Department circles in read to indicate they should be cut out. When Roosevelt read this draft and saw that mark, he asked, "Who put this read line in here?" We explained that that the State Department suggested it would be well to delete these dangerous words.

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[13] Sherwood, 212.

[14] Sherwood, 216.

[15] Sherwood, 143.

[16] Sherwood, 227.

> "Oh, do they!" he said. "Very well. We'll change it to read—'There are also American citizens, many of them in high places—*especially in the State Department*—and so forth."[17]

Before the development and spread of polling and focus groups, FDR needed some way of reading the public. To compliment his political instinct, the President turned to his wife. Because she traveled extensively she developed a strong sense of the thinking of the people, especially the young people and housewives. More than anyone else with access to the President, the First Lady remained in touch with the American people and proved to be an asset on speeches involving youth, education, and consumer interests.[18]

## *The need for studying speechwriting*

The dilemma here is that while presidents are getting more help they don't seem to be giving better speeches. This makes the lack of study of presidential speechwriting even more curious. The existence of presidential ghostwriters would be one of the White House's worst kept secret until the speechwriting office formally appeared on the organizational chart during the Nixon administration. However, while most Americans are generally aware of their existence, the outside world knows relatively little about the workings and habits of speechwriters.

The reasons that presidents prefer to avoid discussions of their speechwriters are obvious. The existence of speechwriter represents an acknowledgment of limits of a president and strips them of the claim of exclusive authorship of their own utterings. Thus, when the mission of the White House staff is to create the appearance exceptional abilities on the part of the president, these efforts by their nature must remain secret. As historian Douglas Brinkley noted, "Every time a speechwriter boast to the press that he or she composed an important phrase or was a primary author of an intriguing paragraph his or her stock goes slightly up while the president's is slightly diminished."[19] Speechwriters are also a threat to the credibility of a president. After all, how can one appear to be completely sincere when their most memorable quotations come from the keyboard of another person? Words spoken from the heart should not roll off the teleprompter.

While the analogy of making sausages is often overworked, Americans will likely find rhetoric much more inspiring when they don't witness its development. Despite our resistance to the divine authority of the old

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[17] Sherwood, 227. See also: Rosenman, 262.

[18] Rosenman, 346.

[19] Douglas Brinkley, The Boys of Pointe du Hoc: Ronald Reagan, D-Day, and the U.S. Army 2nd Ranger Battalion, New York: Harper Collins, 2005, 134.

monarchy, we would prefer that our elected executive not fall too far from the standards of the old lineage. The romantic notion that Lincoln scrawled the Gettysburg address on the back of an envelope suggests either personal brilliance or divine inspiration. Brining the details of process into focus only detracts from the image of the clear vision of the great leader. A discussion of writers' struggles over which word will make the president sound most confident would do little to inspire the faith of citizens in their leaders. Americans have shown little appetite for watching the give and take of the legislative process and the bargaining behind presidential speech may be even less appealing.

Journalists spend remarkably little time talking about speechwriters. Perhaps this is because they recognize that the role of the speechwriter clouds the focus of stories on the president's speeches. Entertainment writers generally spend much more time interviewing the actors we see on the screen with much less attention shown to the people who write, direct, and produce their movies. Actors are credited with "creating" characters although in most cases the characters' origins are found in the writer's script rather than the actor's imagination.

Presidential biographers show a similar reluctance to delve into the uncertain origins of their subject's public declarations. Some of this is the understandable reluctance to cloud the issue of the origins of some of the most visible and compelling statements of their subject. While few would dispute that Kennedy had a strong role in setting the course for this inaugural address, any discussion of the contribution of variety of people who offered input only dilutes the significance of the biographer's subject. Perhaps the author of a biography of Ted Sorensen, the speechwriter's contribution would make the subject more interesting. However, reader interest in speechwriters is low. The lack of reader interest may have been greater when the people who wrote the presidential speeches were high-level advisors like Roosevelt's "Brain Trust" who acted ghostwriters. Today, with speechwriters usually having no influence beyond providing the draft of speeches reviewed by top staff, there is less reason to believe that they'd merit much interest from the average reader.

However, the biographers' unease with the source of presidents' words need not be shared by political scientists. What president's words don't tell us about the presidents, they tell us about the presidency. My research demonstrates that the president's words are a collaborative product of many minds that can tell us a great deal about the process within the White House. In some sense, the presidency is a creation of words and symbols. The presidency has come to be defined by its relation with the people, a relationship that is based on (usually) mediated

interaction with the spoken word. It is in this collaborative process in the White House that each presidency defines itself and the broad outline of the institution is defined over time. As presidential messages are developed the White House engages in a struggle over the president's words. Different individuals and different offices may have different perspectives on what it means to "sound presidential."

The lack of study by political scientists is puzzling. While presidential scholars have reveled in the Teddy Roosevelt's bully pulpit, we've asked very few questions about who wrote the sermon. Clearly, presidential scholars have written a great deal about presidents' words, but asked few questions about who wrote the presidents' words.

*White House speechwriting today*

The speechwriting process in the White House today involves seven steps: (1) scheduling, (2) assignment, (3) drafting and editing, (4) circulation and comment, (5) staff revisions, (6) presidential revision, and (7) presidential ad-libbing.[20]

**Scheduling**

Presidential speeches may be scheduled for different reasons. Most speeches begin as events in search of a speech. These most often are minor speeches that are written to accommodate the president's need after they've agreed to attend a particular event. Other speeches are major addresses that are often speeches in search of the best setting. These speeches generally take shape in a meeting of the president's and their closest advisors. Based on that discussion, the president and senior staff come up with an outline of what the president wants to say.

Reflecting the natural rivalry between policy staff and speechwriters, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski proposed the speechwriters should work from a draft prepared by the policy staffs and send the draft to the president through the policy staff, rather than directly.[21] Brzeninski's proposal would insure that policy advisors controlled the process as much as possible.

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[20] These steps are adapted from the six steps described by former speechwriter William Muir. William K. Muir, Jr., "Ronald Reagan's Bully Pulpit: Creating a Rhetoric of Values," <u>Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond</u>, edited by Kurt Ritter and Martin J. Medhurst, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003, 198.

[21] Memorandum for Jim Fallows from Zbigniew Brzezinski, November 11, 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.

Scheduling is often the phase at which the communication strategy must enter. This often involves the need of the White House to repeat itself. One of Reagan's speechwriters acknowledge the toll on speechwriters re-using themes. "And, although it's monotonous for the speechwriters, they just have to realize that that public even though press corps and the God knows, White House staff may have heard it a hundred times, the message haven't even begun to resonate out there with the public."

### Assignment

Once the speech is set, the head speechwriter (or Director of Speechwriting) must decide who will write the speech. By the time Gerald Ford assumed the presidency in 1974 the speechwriting process in the White House had become institutionalized. Since that time, the speechwriting office has pretty consistently kept about six speechwriters on staff, although the number went as high as eight under Nixon. As Hult and Walcott note, the Nixon speechwriters were segregated in to the Office of Speechwriting and were writing specialists, playing no part in policy or political advising.[22] White House speechwriting operations generally discourage allowing speechwriters to specialize in certain policy areas. While depth of knowledge and understanding of an issue might seem important, the White House has already has people ready to provide background information to speechwriters on policy subjects. Further, rotating speeches on a policy between speechwriters helps keep the rhetoric fresh and prevents speechwriters from developing a sense of ownership over policy that might make them more ready to push policy in a particular direction.

The head speechwriter's job is often more about finding the speechwriter that best matches the audience or the moment. For example, some speechwriters specialized in audiences based on racial or religious considerations. Some speechwriters are much better at ceremonial events while some do better with more traditional policy speeches.

### Drafting and editing

After the head speechwriter has decided which of the speechwriters gets the assignment, one of the speechwriters sits down to the task of writing the speech. At this point the speech is in the hands of people who

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[22] Karen M. Hult and Charles Walcott, Empowering the White House: Governance under Nixon, Ford, and Carter, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004, 15-160

think more like artists than policy experts. Most presidential speechwriters seem to work alone. While they may bounce ideas off of each other, the basic task of writing is initially done individually.

Perhaps because of their artistic nature and because of their connection to the audience, speechwriters after often more ideological. As one veteran of several administrations noted: "In the White Houses I've been around the speechwriters tend to be—I don't want to say idealistic—but a bit more ideological and less just specialists on the economy, on medical care, on defense, or whatever." Some speechwriters tend to display the worst tendencies of artists, of which there are very few on the White House staff. While their complaint are often dramatically presented (based on their gift as writers) their suffering is not as great as they might suggest.

After several drafts the speechwriter generally gets a complete draft to the head speechwriter for review. The head speechwriter generally seems to accept the broad outlines although occasionally they might do a major re-write before sending the speech out for review.

### Circulation and comment

While some elements of presidential speechwriting have been relatively consistent over time, the circulation of speech drafts throughout the Executive Office of the President has become more expansive and standardized since the 1970s. For example, during the Kennedy Administration, the circulation of speech drafts would vary from speech to speech with Kennedy deliberately avoiding those departments where he expected to encounter resistance. In a draft of his remarks for the annual Gridiron Club Dinner, Kennedy pointedly joked, "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."[23]

The modern speech review process is not a routine clerical matter left to minor administration officials. While cabinet secretaries often leave the initial review of most speech drafts to assistants, the process often involves many of the top people in the administration. Major speeches often involved significant disagreements involving conflicts between senior White House staff and cabinet officials.

The review process is not reserved for a few major speeches. An excellent example is the seemingly innocuous process of finding the right words to light the National Christmas Tree. After drafting the remarks for George H.W.

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[23] "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.

Bush's 1989 tree lighting ceremony, the speechwriters circulated their draft to 17 key officials in and around the White House. The memorandum asked for "action" by eight individuals including Brent Scowcroft (National Security Council), Boyden Gray (White House Counsel), Fred McClure (head of Congressional Relations), and Roger Porter (Director of Policy Development). Nine others were given copies "FYI." Those who were informed without their advice being sought included Chief of Staff John Sununu, Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater, presidential image-maker Sig Rogich, Deputy Assistant to the President for Communications Chriss Winston, and Vice President Dan Quayle.[24] National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft suggested deleting the phrase "From the Atlantic to the Urals" from the speech's claim of a "far better Christmas than Europe has ever known." As Scrowcroft noted in the margins, the phrase "Echoes Soviet contention regarding a 'Common European house.'" Scrowcroft also circles a reference to "Unconquerable people" and notes, "In fact, the Czechs have a history of yielding without a fight."[25]

The president's annual "state of the union" speech is the premier battleground for presidential rhetoric as department's angle for a place in the speech to give them a foothold in the policy and budget battles to come. As Aram Bakshian, a veteran of three administrations, points out, everyone wants to get into this speech: "Every little crappy agency wants their stuff, their agenda, included."[26] Clark Clifford suggested that, "Every department, of course, would want the State of the Union message devoted practically exclusively to their problems."[27]

Some of the battles are more political than institutional. John Ehrlichman complained that in the writing of one of Nixon's speech on Vietnam as "all the ideological factions of the White House staff—came creeping out of the bushes."[28] The Reagan speechwriters generally considered themselves the ideological heart of the White House and often battled with the policy advisors they considered too moderate.

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[24] White House Staffing Memorandum, 12/12/89, "National Christmas Tree Lighting 12/14/89 [OA 8309], Office of Speechwriting, Speech Files, Backup, Chron Files 1989-93: Box 45, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library.

[25] White House Staffing Memorandum 10002, 12/12/89, "National Christmas Tree Lighting 12/14/89 [OA 8309], Office of Speechwriting, Speech Files, Backup, Chron Files 1989-93: Box 45, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library.

[26] Aram Bakshian Interview, Miller Center, University of Virginia, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, January 14, 2002, 45.

[27] Clark Clifford, Oral History, Truman Library.

[28] John Ehrlichman, Witness to Power: The Nixon Years, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982, 21.

While there was a legitimate need for a systematic process, staffing would grow, according to Hult and Walcott, "out of control."[29] When a reporter asked how many speechwriters worked in the Ford White House, Robert Orben turned to another speechwriter and said, "I don't know Milt [Freeman], how many are there now? Is it five or six hundred?"[30]

### Staff revisions

By the end of the review process, speeches have been reviewed by many officials, all with their own motives. The task of reassembling the drafts then returns to the speechwriters whose desks are covered by marked-up speech drafts from all over the executive branch. Incorporating the feedback that comes from around the White House is a unique combination of literary art and diplomacy as speechwriters try to incorporate conflicting advice from a large number of administration officials—most of whom outrank them. Michael Gerson, who was head speechwriter during George W. Bush's first term, commented, "I tell new writers that I hire that the job is half-writing and half-diplomacy."[31]

The position of the speechwriters in the process and the conflicting advice of others in the Administration allow speechwriters to maintain some control over the prose. As one Carter speechwriter noted, if they used all the input the speech would become "hodgepodge."[32] Reagan speechwriter Peter Robinson recounted, "Officials marking up a foreign policy speech at the State Department and Pentagon, for instance, might insert contradictory comments forcing the speechwriter to spend a lot of time on the telephone persuading the officials to sort out their differences."[33]

Speechwriters in some administrations sometimes find themselves unable to reject enough suggestions to put together a cohesive speech. In these cases the fate of the speech ultimately goes to the president, allowing them the opportunity to regain control over the content and put the speech back together. However, this might be difficult if the speechwriters have not laid a solid foundation. In his attempt to placate both sides of the battle over the 1976

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[29] Karen M. Hult and Charles E. Walcott, <u>Empowering the White House: Governance under Nixon, Ford, and Carter</u>, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004, 160.

[30] Robert Orben, "Speeches, Humor and the Public," <u>The Ford Presidency: Twenty Two Intimate Perspectives of Gerald Ford</u>, Kenneth W. Thompson, editor, New York: University Press of America, 1988, 242.

[31] Transcript, Nightline: Up Close,

[32] Gerald Rafshoon, Exit Interview, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, 13.

[33] Peter Robinson, <u>How Ronald Reagan Changed My Life</u>, New York: Harper Collins, 2003, 44.

State of the Union, Ford took bits and pieces of the competing drafts and, according to head speechwriter Robert Hartmann, "strung them together like a string of beads. He thought that was pretty dandy. Nobody was willing to tell him how terrible it was."[34]

### Presidential revisions

After the speech had been sent to various offices around to various aides in the EOP and Cabinet, the president has a chance to edit the speech. For example, Ford would sit down with his  chief speech editor), and the speechwriter and the speech who drafted the speech in order to go over the text. The President often reviewed the draft line by line and the speechwriter was given a chance to defend his initial choice of words if changes had been made. In other administrations, the speechwriter must content themselves with seeing the president's handwritten edits to the speech drafts.

Kennedy's staff praised 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 Nixon and Carter. Kennedy seemed to be as comfortable with the drafts he received as any president studied, reflecting the degree to which Ted Sorensen understood and anticipated the President's wishes and the Kennedy style of speaking.

If speaking your mind and being independent of speechwriters is what Americans wanted, they should have found it in Jimmy Carter. Carter was an aggressive editor and his comments on speech drafts are generally clear and direct.  In response to one draft of the Energy speech that Gerald Rafshoon had been working on with several others, Carter returned the draft with the comment, "Jerry, this is the one of the worst speeches I have ever seen. After the first half-hour, nobody—no, after the first five pages nobody but the Mobil Oil public relations man would be awake." When Rafshoon read the President's comments back to speechwriter Rick Hertzberg, Hertzberg comment was, "He seems pretty sure of himself."[35]

Sometimes, the speechwriters travel with the president. Having a speechwriters travel with the President also provided feedback to the President and the rest of White House about the appropriateness of the event, the President's delivery style, and the audience's response.  For example, Robert Orben followed President Ford on a trip that included the commencement speech at the University of Pennsylvania.  Orben credited the President with "a

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[34] Chase Haddix interview with Robert Hartmann, April 5, 1991, Gerald R. Ford Library, 6.

[35] Gerald Rafshoon, Exit Interview, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, 11-12

good range of emphasis and tonal changes" that gave "a fine dramatic reading to the speech." However, Orben noted that while the style of delivery would have been good as part of a shorter program or as the first or second speech of the event, "Appearing at the end of almost one an a half hours of ceremony, a faster tempo might have been indicated."[36].

### Presidential ad-libbing

In some ways, the final form of revision is improvisation at the president speak. On major speeches, presidents generally stick closely to the prepared text. However, in minor speeches, presidents frequently take more liberties, in part, perhaps, because they had spent less time on earlier versions of these drafts. For example, Kennedy often departed the text on minor speeches, frustrating the speechwriters who saw their labors evaporate from the page and journalists who had often already written their stories based on the pre-speech press releases put out by the White House.[37]

Speechwriter James Fallows pressed Carter to put more preparation into each speech to insure that the speech went better and that the press covered the themes that the White House wanted.  Fallows became concerned that press coverage of Carter's speeches focused more on the logistics and atmospherics of speeches than in what was said. Fallows outlined his reasons for doing more planning in an October 1977 memo to the President.

> If we don't do the planning, chances are slim that the reporters will emphasize what we want to get across. But if we do plan – by releasing a text, explaining the parts we think are important, giving the reporters a few hours to prepare – we improve the odds for favorable substantive coverage. We do so for several reasons:
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> * it makes it easier on the reporters (they can follow the text as you speak, rather than desperately taking shorthand);
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> *it gives them more time to plan, think over, and write their stories;
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> *it enables us to highlight the points we are most eager to push;
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> * it allows us to phrase things in exactly the form we want to see quoted.[38]

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[36] Memorandum from Robert Orben to Robert Hartmann via Paul Theis, May 19, 1975, folder; "Orben, Bob," Robert Hartmann Papers, Box 145, Gerald R. Ford Library.

[37] Salinger, 67.

[38] 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.

Carter's staff worried that his impromptu remarks tended to get the most attention and drew reporters' coverage away from the planned purpose of a trip. Another speechwriter urged the President to avoid the overuse of extemporizing speeches, even though they were his strength. "You are extraordinarily good at impromptu speaking, and plainly more comfortable with it than with a prepared text. But it's the wrong piece of equipment for formal occasions. While Arthur Ashe would no doubt feel more comfortable on the golf course with a racket in his hand, he would do better with a nine-iron."[39] Carter proved resistant to many of the speechwriters' plans. In a memo urging the President to reevaluate his style, Jerry Rafshoon warned Carter, "I know you think it's phony and that you're fine the way you are but that pride is, by far, your greatest political danger."[40]

## *The Paradox of Professional Speechwriters*

The rise of a specialized staff in the White House devoted exclusively to wordsmithing suggests a paradox worth examining:  If the president is getting so much more professional help with speeches, why haven't we entered a golden age of presidential rhetoric?  Presidential speechwriter Peggy Noonan suggests a similar "irony of modern speeches" as the quality of speeches declining as the ability to disseminate them rises.[41] However, there is a certain sense to this. As we will see, as the farther the president's voice reaches, the more cautious the White House becomes about words.

The forces that created the demand for a professional speechwriting staff also created a White House bureaucracy whose cautious management of all aspects of the presidency—including its prose—help make sure that the eloquence of the speechwriters does not take the presidency into unauthorized areas. As one speechwriter mused, "The halls may be filled with ambitious young men waiting to improve on your product, in the process somehow transforming it into *their* product."[42]  David Frum, who wrote speeches for George W. Bush complained, "Too many and too powerful people wish to insert a pet sentence and paragraph, and a writer who tries to push them all away

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[39] Memorandum to the President from Jerry Doolittle, 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.

[40] Memorandum for the President from Jerry Rafshoon re: Style [nd], file: "Memoranda for Jerry Rafshoon, June, July & August, 1979," Box 28, Rafshoon Files, Domestic Policy Staff, Staff Office Files, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, 2.

[41] Peggy Noonan, What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era, New York: Random House, 1990, 70.

[42] Will Sparks, Who Talked to the President Last? New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971, 54-55.

has soon propelled himself out of a job." [43] Ted Sorensen argues 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."[44]

Ironically, as the president gears up with battle with external opponents, the drafting of presidential remarks often generates a fierce struggle inside the gates of the White House. As one Nixon speechwriter noted, "Successful Washington speech writing is one percent literary talent and ninety-nine percent political in-fighting."[45]

## *The Forces at play*

This battle in the White House is as complicated as it is fierce. While much of this struggle is driven by the egos and personal ambitions of individual staffers, their fight reflects a much broader battle of representation in the executive branch and the conflicting roles of the presidency. Battle lines are drawn between the different constituencies that individual presidents serve the different roles every president must play.

### Political constituencies

Many of the offices with the Executive Office of the President were created to represent particular interests, either directly or indirectly. Some offices, like the Council on Environmental Quality, clearly serve to keep specific constituencies as happy as possible. Others, like the Office of National Drug Control Policy work with both key constituencies, but also serve to calm the fears of citizens in general.

Individual staff members of the White House Office are sometimes selected to satisfy the concerns of constituency. For example, Robert Mattox was brought into the Carter White House as a speechwriter and liaison with religious groups. He was supposed to keep these groups happy through meetings and by incorporating the language of religious groups, especially evangelical Christians, into the messages of the White House. Key White House appointments are watched closely by the different wings of the party, even if the appointee is not directly involved in policy. Ideologies often battle within the White House. John Ehrlichman describes the writing of one of

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[43] David Frum, <u>The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush</u>, New York: Random House, 2003, 137.

[44] Theodore C. Sorensen, <u>Decision-Making in the White House: The Olive Branch or the Arrows</u>, New York: Columbia University Press, 1963, 61.

[45] Sparks, 54.

Nixon's speech on Vietnam as "all the ideological factions of the White House staff—came creeping out of the bushes."[46]

Interest groups also come into play during the review process. During the Reagan administration, Elizabeth Dole, who as head of the Office of Public Liaison, asked to see a draft of the 1982 State of the Union address so that she could see how well the draft reached key constituencies. Dole wrote to head speechwriter Aram Bakshian: "Since you are well aware of our mandate, I am sure you can appreciate my interest in having the opportunity to see one of our SOTUA drafts. From a constituency standpoint, it is critical that we have a solid acknowledgement of the importance of women, Hispanics, Blacks, and ethnics."[47]

**Geographic concerns**

The tug of war between priorities can be geographic. For example, during the Ford administration when National Security Council staffer Hal Horan asserted that "the fact remains that if we do not break the continue absence of any reference to Africa in the President's speeches, the adverse impact this creates in Africa will only increase." Horan, although a representative of the NSC, was not narrowly representing the interests of the agency. He was instead trying to find presidential language that would dissuade "Africa's perception that it is unimportant to the United States."[48]

Horan's argument in favor of the inclusion of Africa in the President's address may have been reasonable. However, the speechwriting staff likely took exception to his argument that "What seems to me important to keep in mind is that it costs us nothing to include a few brief comments on Africa, whereas the absence of them creates a problem for us."[49] The dilemma for the White House is that presidential words are free. However, there is a cost in that if every interest found its way into presidential speeches, no one would listen to the speeches.

The language of George W. Bush's speech to a joint session of Congress after the September 11 attacks was edited for similar reasons. In the original draft Islamic extremists were compared to the Nazis and Communists who

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[46] John Ehrlichman, Witness to Power: The Nixon Years, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982, 21.

[47] Memorandum from Elizabeth Dole to Aram Bakshian, January 15, 1982, folder: "State of the Union Address (21), January 28, 1982, Anthony Dolan Files, Drafts, Box 7.

[48] Memo from Hal Horan to Jeanne Davis, April 2, 1975, Folder: "SP 2-3-6, Address by the President to the Joint Session of Congress, 4/10/75," White House Central Files, Box 11, Gerald R. Fold Library, 1.

[49] Memo from Hal Horan to Jeanne Davis, April 2, 1975, Folder: "SP 2-3-6, Address by the President to the Joint Session of Congress, 4/10/75," White House Central Files, Box 11, Gerald R. Fold Library, 1.

had disappeared "History's graveyard of discarded lies." However, the word "communist" was changed to "totalitarianism" to avoid offending China whose vote would be needed in the U. N. Security Council.[50]

International geographic constituencies even found their way into Reagan's famous address at Pointe du Hoc. As Peggy Noonan wrote speech that honored the Rangers from U.S. forces that took Pointe du Hoc, she added references to British and Canadian troops. Eventually, under pressure from the National Security Council, he added a reference to the Soviet Union's role in defeating the Germans. As she complained at the time, the added reference interfered with the flow of the speech: "It sounds like we stopped the speech dead to throw a fish to the bear."[51]

A fundamental dilemma for White House speechwriting emerges. The speechwriters can not create effective speeches if the language is subject to rewrites at the hands of the various policy and political offices around the EOP. At the same time, the departments and policy offices in the Executive branch cannot create coherent policy if it can be effectively rewritten by speechwriters. In some ways, this dilemma occurs throughout the White House as implementation offices try to put together a strategy while policy offices try to assemble a coherent policy.

### Personality Conflicts

Rounding out the conflict in the White House is personal ambition. As one veteran of the White House observed, personal conflicts overlay the complex politics of the executive branch: "Amidst the vortex of controversy, personal ambitions would swirl."[52] Putting it more colorfully, Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan complained about "cheap jockeying" and "sleazy backstabbing in the White House."[53]

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[50] Frum, 147.

[51] Douglas Brinkley, The Boys of Pointe du Hoc: Ronald Reagan, D-Day, and the U.S. Army 2nd Ranger Battalion, New York: Harper Collins, 2005, 156.

[52] William K. Muir, Jr., The Bully Pulpit: The Presidential Leadership of Ronald Reagan, San Francisco; ICS Press, 1992, 35.

[53] Quoted in William Ker Muir, Jr., The Bully Pulpit: The Presidential Leadership of Ronald Reagan, San Francisco: ICS Press, 1992, 33.

**Institutional speech**

*These people have tin ears.*[54]

Presidential speeches today are the product of an institution not a single man. While the speechwriting process lacks the clear rules and structures of some institutions it has become increasing complex. As Reagan speechwriter William Muir noted, "Where you stand depends on where you sit, the saying goes, and specialized responsibilities caused individuals to see things differently, assessing events in shorter or longer time perspectives and in terms of diverse objectives."[55]

Speechwriters occupy a somewhat unique position in the White House because their "turf" transcends traditional institutional or policy boundaries. In his book on the White House staff, Bradley Patterson describes the dilemma of the speechwriting office:

> Like other principal White House actors described in this book, the speechwriting director insists on his own rule of exclusivity. Other staff units may compose drafts, but it is the Speechwriting Office that demands a monopoly over the gateway into the president's office for all his addresses and statements. For his words on paper, they are the guardians of his style, his syntax, and his accuracy.[56]

After serving on the speechwriting staffs of Nixon and Reagan, Aram Bakshian using the yardstick of writing for the presidency to the product of the corporate world. "It was actually more like a large multinational corporation, if you were writing policy speeches for the CEO, where there was an enormous bureaucracy that it had to filter through, which is why there are very few good speeches given by CEOs of large multinational corporations. Similarly you could say that very often with a President who doesn't have a rhetorical flair, he's in danger of being swallowed by the bureaucrats as far as the quality of his own utterances is concerned."[57]

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[54] Aram Bakshian Interview, Miller Center, University of Virginia, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, January 14, 2002,53.

[55] William K. Muir, Jr., "Ronald Reagan's Bully Pulpit: Creating a Rhetoric of Values," <u>Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond</u>, edited by Kurt Ritter and Martin J. Medhurst, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003, 199.

[56] Bradley H. Patterson, Jr., <u>The Ring of Power: The White House Staff and Its Expanding Role in Government</u>, New York: Basic Books Inc., Publishers, 1988, 192.

[57] Aram Bakshian Interview, Miller Center, University of Virginia, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, January 14, 2002, 10.

As Terry Moe points out, "all institutionalized behaviors, whether or not they have an organizational chart or formal name, generate expectations conducive to their continuation."[58]

While the White House collectively may produce a speech, the president remains the primary author. Robert Sherwood, who wrote speeches for FDR attributed the lack of uniformity in Roosevelt's speeches to the role of the President himself because "the speeches as finally delivered were always the expression of Roosevelt himself; if he were in a confident, exuberant, affirmative state of mind, the speech was good and sometimes great; if he were tired, and defensive, and petulant, all the ghostwriters on earth couldn't equip him with impressive words."[59]

In describing why we went from an outside consultant to working in the White House Gerald Rafshoon recounts the story of how Carter posed the offer to him.

> In May of '78 the President said that about 90 percent of my advice was good. But the other 10 percent was not so good because I didn't know what was going on in the White House. And I laughed, and he said that the only way that you could do that would be to come to work here. I found that 10 percent was pretty significant because I had always been saying that, "You got to do this," and "You got to do that," and "Why aren't y'all doing this?" and "Why wasn't y'all doing that?" When I got here I found out that it wasn't y'all who had to do it, it was all of us that had to do it. And that it wasn't that simple.[60]

The Director of Communications does have responsibility for taking a longer-range view of communications than speechwriters and press secretaries who are caught up in a blizzard of day-to-day activities. However, it is hard for the director of communications to manage the president's message because the president's message is the product of numerous policy and political considerations.

*Surviving the modern speechwriting process*

While the institution created to assist presidential speechwriting seems to be stifling quality speeches, occasionally a good speech slips through the process. Certainly, debate exists over which speeches might be rated as great. However, a few cases can be identified as having been well received. How did these speeches slip through? There are a few cases. However, as we see these cases are truly exceptions with little in common with the normal process.

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[58] 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, 241

[59] Robert E. Sherwood, Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History, revised edition, New York: Harper & Row, 1950, 196.

[60] Gerald Rafshoon, Exit Interview, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, 2.

**John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address**

One standard of great presidential speech is Kennedy's inaugural address. Many Americans still mention Kennedy's speech as inspiring them to join the Peace Corps or otherwise join in public service. According to biographer Robert Dallek, Kennedy believed that his inaugural address would be crucial to the launching of his administration.[61]

Speechwriter Arthur Schlesinger's account of the origins of the inaugural address highlighted Kennedy's contribution with the image of the president working over a hand-written draft in Palm Springs. "Morning after morning, puffing a small cigar, a yellow, legal-sized pad of paper on his knees, he worked away, scribbling a few lines, crossing our others and then putting the sheets of paper on his already overflowing desk." As recent research has indicated, Kennedy relied heavily on speechwriter Ted Sorensen and the handwritten draft often cited as the first draft of the speech was actually Kennedy's writing of a speech already drafted by Sorensen.

Schlesinger does mention that Sorensen "gave his usual brilliant and loyal cooperation,"[62] but it's evident that the Kennedy White House labored to protect the image that the speech was purely Kennedy's.

One of the reasons for the success of Kennedy's inaugural address may be that it was not a White House speech since it was drafted before Kennedy entered office. The speech was written before the speech writing and vetting process could be created to protect Kennedy from rhetorical missteps. In fact, inaugural addresses are often mentioned as great speeches, with FDR's first inaugural serving as another example of presidential speechwriting being at its best when the influences of the institutionalize process are the least.

From this case we can draw our first rule for creating great presidential speeches: Avoid writing speeches in the White House. We can also see evidence in this hypothesis in Reagan's farewell address which was drafted by Peggy Noonan working as a freelance writer after her years in the White House.

**Ford proclaims "Our Long National Nightmare is Over"**

When Ford spoke to the nation for the first time as its president, he proclaimed: "My fellow American, our long national nightmare is over." This speech was very well received and cited as an important moment in the end of the

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[61] Robert Dallek, <u>An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963</u>, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2003, 321.

[62] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., <u>A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House</u>, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965, 162-163.

Watergate crisis. In an interview with James Cannon, historian Edmund Morris gushed, "After the self-consciously petty prose of JFK, the gross vulgarisms of LBJ, and those floods of inarticulate monologue tape-recorded by the Nixon White House, here was a man who restored common speech to Presidential rhetoric."[63]

However, the best known line almost perished at the hands of the President. As Robert Hartmann prepared the speech Ford would give as he began his presidency and ended the Nixon administration, he proposed the words that would be one of the most remembered of the Ford administration when the new president proclaimed, "our long national nightmare is over." Ford worried that the line was "a little hard" on Nixon. Hartmann battled fiercely to get Ford keep the phrase.

> Junk the rest of the speech if you want… but not that. That is going to be the headline in every paper, the lead in every story. This hasn't been a nightmare just for Nixon and his family… It's been a nightmare for everybody—for you, for me, for Nixon's enemies as well as his friends… This has been a national nightmare, and it's got to be stopped. You're the only one who can.[64]

Fortunately, Hartmann prevailed. However, once the Ford White House was formed caution took hold and Ford's speeches became less ambitious. Ford's reluctance to embrace strong language is the rare case of the President being the agent of dilution. Some of this reflects Ford's lack of experience with speeches.

### Reagan's Berlin Wall Speech

In contrast to Ford's lack of experience, Reagan was an experienced and gifted speaker. Examinations of speech drafts from his presidency demonstrate that he was an aggressive and detailed editor of speech drafts. Reagan certainly relied on the teleprompter during speeches, but he was also clearly the master of the text scrolling before him.

While others may dispute it, many of Reagan's admirers give him credit for bringing down the Berlin Wall with his speech in Berlin in June of 1987 when he proclaimed, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Oddly enough, while Reagan's admirers today credit this speech as the first step in the fall of the iron curtain, there was tremendous resistance within the White House to including that call to tear down the Berlin Wall in the speech. Speechwriter Peter Robinson initially drafted Reagan's famous line after visiting Berlin doing "advance" work to give him a feel

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[63] James Cannon, <u>Time and Chance: Gerald Ford's Appointment with History</u>, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994, 349

[64] Robert T. Hartmann, <u>Palace Politics: An Inside Account of the Ford Years</u>, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1980, 160

for the city and the audience. One evening he was discussing the subject of whether or not Berliners had grown to accept the Berlin Wall when one of his hosts broke in:

> A gracious woman, she had suddenly grown angry. Her face was red. She made a fist with one hand and pounded it into the palm of the other. "If this man Gorbachev is serious with his talk of *glasnost* and *perestroika*," she said, "he can prove it, He can get rid of this wall."[65]

In the weeks that led to the delivery of the speech the draft was reviewed by both the State Department and the National Security Council—both of which wanted the call to tear down the wall removed. Deputy National Security Advisor Colin Powell and Secretary of State George Shultz objected to the speech. Robinson and most of the speechwriters backed the stronger language.

In the end, Reagan approved the strong language telling his speechwriters with a smile, "The boys at State are Going to kill me but it's the right thing to do."[66] In contrast to Ford's legislative instinct to compromise, Reagan's more theatrical instincts lead him to side with the writers over the policy advisors.

### Reagan's Point du Hoc Speech

No speech better reflects Ronald Reagan's success—and the ironies behind his success—than his speech at Pointe du Hoc. The speech was by every account a resounding success. However, while this speech may be his most eloquent speech, it is also a speech that had little direct impact on any public policy. Oddly enough, as was often the case, some of Reagan's best rhetoric would end up having little to do with the "Reagan Revolution."

Historian Douglas Brinkley, who devoted a book to the speech and its antecedent events, described the "Boys of Pointe du Hoc" speech as "the opening salvo to a new American indebtedness to World War II veterans." [67] According to Brinkley, the speech played an important role in Reagan's effort to re-create a strong sense of American patriotism during the 1984 election. Reagan would reach back to the Normandy invasion because it better fit the hopes and dreams of Americans better than any military effort since.

While this speech played an important role in defining Reagan to the American public (and the world), it was written by a speechwriter who had no contact with the President until after the speech was delivered. On her first day at work Noonan learned that some of the speechwriters hadn't met with Reagan in over a year and she would

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[65] Peter Robinson, <u>How Ronald Reagan Changed My Life</u>, New York: Harper Collins, 2003, 98.

[66] Robinson, 103.

[67] Brinkley, 5

not meet with Reagan until she had been in the White House four months.[68] Peggy Noonan recalls the first time she got back a speech draft with evidence that Reagan had read it. She clipped the handwritten "RR, Very Good" scrawl from the first page, taped it to her blouse, and wore it around for much of the day.[69] Noonan's account and that of fellow speechwriter Peter Robinson almost breathlessly describe the most minor brushes with the President they served. In Robinson's book, How Ronald Reagan Changed My Life, he describes his first glimpse of Reagan in person as a transforming event. Although Reagan did not speak -- only sticking his head in the door with a wave and a wink—Robinson turned to another speechwriter and said, "How did such a nice guy ever get to be President?"[70]

As is often the case on a major address, the departments suggested their own version of the Pointe du Hoc speech. The State Department provided their own language, described by Douglas Brinkley as "bureaucratic, lifeless in a Harvard Law School type of way" and "the kind of terse Foggy Bottom prose Secretary of State George Schultz would often deliver in a bland monotone, guaranteed to put a listless glaze over even the most ardent listeners' faces." Brinkley goes on to contrast the State Department draft from the White House style by saying "Not a glimmer of the kind of high-note rhetorical bravado FDR would have demanded from his speechwriters."[71]

Weighing in on it's own themes, the National Security Council sought a theme of reconciliation with Germany because West German chancellor Helmut Kohl had been excluded from the Normandy event. Given Reagan's desire to keep western Europe unified against the Soviet Block, the need to soothe Kohl was not trivial.

The direction of the speech was clarified when Noonan learned that American veterans of the assault on the beaches would be present. When she realized that the veterans who had taken Pointe du Hoc fifty years earlier would be in attendance she scrapped her early drafts and started over.[72] Noonan worked alone on the speech and did not consult with the other writers and doing her own research.[73]

In an odd way, the event eclipsed the speech. The "Boys of Pointe du Hoc" speech turned into a movie of sorts, in part because Michael Deaver realized how effectively the visuals of the event would serve in the Reagan bio film

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[68] Noonan, What I Saw at the Revolution, 51.

[69] Noonan, What I Saw at the Revolution, 64.

[70] Robinson, 6.

[71] Brinkley, 129.

[72] Brinkley, 142.

[73] William K. Muir, Jr., The Bully Pulpit, 36.

being planned for the 1984 Republican convention. Deaver understood as they planned the even that the speech was only part of the story that day. The White House established the veterans being honored that day as characters by sending biographical materials on "the boys" in attendance in the week before the speech. The result would that the networks would find the choice of shots irresistible. "As Reagan was saying those words—if you look at the film— the camera was going to flash on one or two of the Rangers. When Reagan acknowledged them, the cameras would flash to a Ranger wiping away tears. It would be a very powerful image."[74]

Noonan would argue that the speech faced opposition within the Pentagon because it was drafted by a woman. "I have to tell you I have learned about the military and how they think over in Defense.. And the idea that a woman wrote the speech and that I had never seen combat upset them beyond belief. Cliques tried to tear it apart, and I saw that what they were doing was without the intention of being helpful."[75]

## *Data and Measures*

To refine our view of the workings and impact of the presidential speechwriting process and to compare its impact over time, speech drafts from administrations of Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan were examined. The cases do not reflect a random sample of speeches for several reasons. First, while having a random sample of all speeches from each administration might be desirable for the study of some hypotheses, such a sampling is not possible. Because the retention of drafts was often inconsistent, drafts of some speeches have disappeared. Some drafts were physically sacrificed to the process, their pages cut and pasted into a new version of the speech. Secondly, even if a random sample was possible, the time and expense required to gather, copy, and code multiple drafts of enough speeches to be a representative sample is not practical for a multi-administration study. Finally, a representative sample is not sought here because this study attempts to detect differences within the EOP by focusing on the cases most likely to elicit significant disagreement. The argument is not that differences manifest themselves on all speeches. Demonstrating an impact on speeches like the National Christmas Tree lighting statement is not the goal here, even though an earlier study found a lively exachange on that speech during the administration of George H.W. Bush.[76] Instead, this study identified and studied especially significant presidential

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[74] Brinkley, 138.

[75] Quoted in William K. Muir, Jr., The Bully Pulpit, 37.

[76] "Lighting the National Christmas Tree: The Case for Studying 'Rose Garden Rubbish'" presented at the *Southwest Political Science Association* (San Antonio, Texas, April 2003).

speeches because those cases were more likely to produce evidence of the internal tensions that may be restricting great presidential speech.

Multiple drafts of each of these speeches were either photocopied or digitally photographed from the respective presidential libraries. The drafts were then put into machine-readable form and analyzed using the DICTION software by Rod Hart for his 1984 book, Verbal Style and the Presidency,[77] and has been refined in the 20 years since. The prominence of Hart's study made DICTION a logical choice because its results will be familiar to some scholars in the field and comparable to other studies in political communication. The DICTION software evaluates the use of language by looking for the frequency of words from thirty-one different sets of words or "dictionaries." Unfortunately, DICTION's algorhthms for dealing with speeches longer than 500 words is flawed requiring that some analysis be done by hand until the new version is completed.

Because reporting scores for all 31 dictionary scores is cumbersome in this paper a few scores are reported individually because they represent the differences in language most likely to be associated with the ambitious language of great speeches.. For example, "ambivalence" which tracks language expressing hesitation or uncertainty, might help us detect the differences between the dramatic language often ascribed to speechwriters from the more cautious language associated with more bureaucratic concerns like those attributed to the State Department. Similarly, "aggression" identifies forceful language. "Familiarity" identifies the frequency of common language

he DICTION allows the user to compare their texts to a variety of speech types. The basis for comparison utilized here is "public policy speeches," a normative profile based on 615 policy speeches delivered by presidents from Truman to Clinton. The software reports a "normal range" that spans scores within ±1 standard deviation of the mean of the scores from these 615 presidential speeches. Hart originally used the normal range to make comparisons across speeches and presidents. In this study the normal range is used as a baseline for a standard of change across drafts of the same speech. For example, based upon the 615 presidential speeches in Hart's database, the normal range for the "inspiration" (which measures "abstract virtues deserving of universal respect") score ranges from 4.91

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[77] Roderick P. Hart, Verbal Style and the Presidency: A Computer-Based Analysis, Orlando: Academic Press, Inc., 1984. For a detailed description of the function of the DICTION software see pages 14-24 and Appendices A-D.

to 10.90.[78] The difference between these two (5.99) can be interpreted as the amount of variation normally found across different presidential speeches by different presidents. This variable, in this study labeled *"normal variation,"* is used to focus on the degree of *change* in rhetoric, so that shifts in rhetorical characteristics can be more easily compared. This use of the *normal variation* measure is similar to ANOVA analysis that compares variation across groups to variation within groups. Comparing differences in drafts of the same speech to differences between speeches by different presidents sets a very high standard. However, we need some means of assessing the differences between speech drafts.

The basic shape of the data and the need for revisions of the data is illustrated in Figure 1which reports the scores of the inspiration score for six different versions of Franklin Roosevelt's famous "four freedoms" speech. In general, the evolution of FDR's Four Freedom speech resembles a stable and relatively orderly process in which there is change, but in a consistent direction that reflects the evolution of the central argument of the speech.

Figure 1 compares the shift in the inspiration score for FDR's Four Freedoms address compared to the "normal" range for presidential policy speeches, putting the change in drafts of FDR's speech next to the range of scores for presidential speeches in general. The "normal variation" described earlier is illustrated by the distance between the two horizontal dotted lines in Figure 1 with the top line reflected the high end of the normal range (10.90) and the lower line reflected the low end of the normal range (4.91)

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[78] The normal variation for other kinds of communication is somewhat different. For example, "commonality" for all types of communication in the DICTION database ranges from 46.86 to 52.28.

Figure 1

Changes in "Inspiration" in Drafts
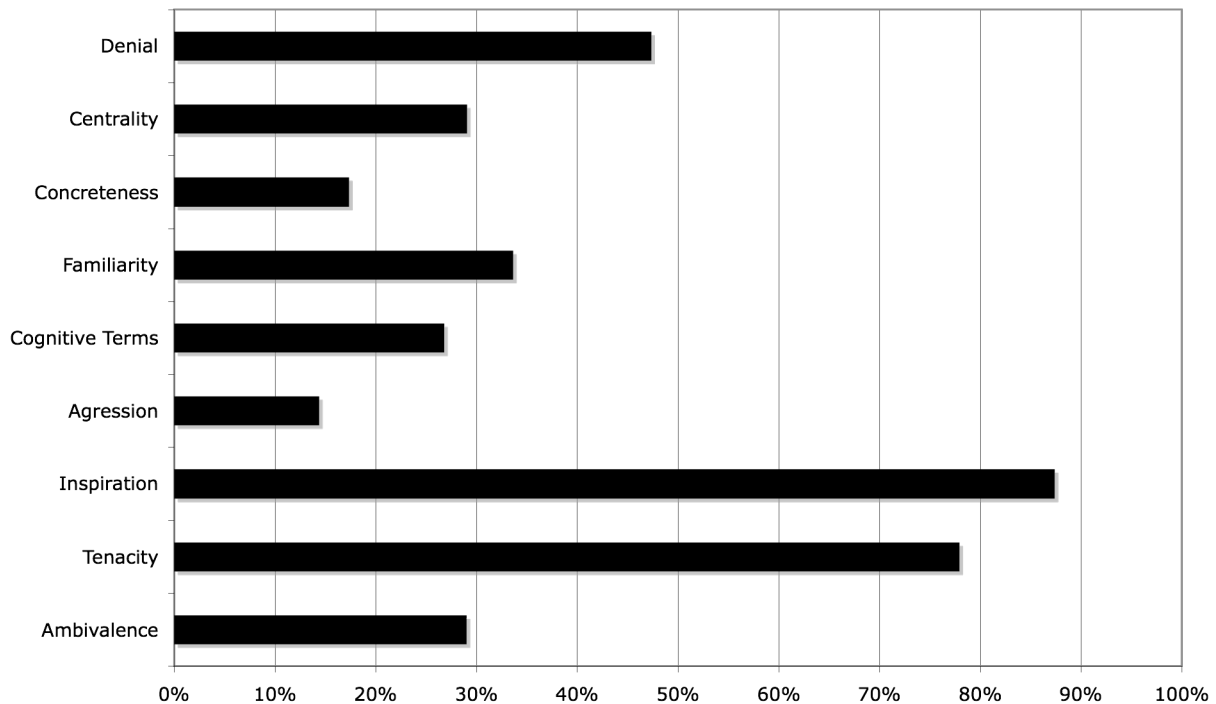of FDR's Four Freedoms Speech
Compared to Normal Range
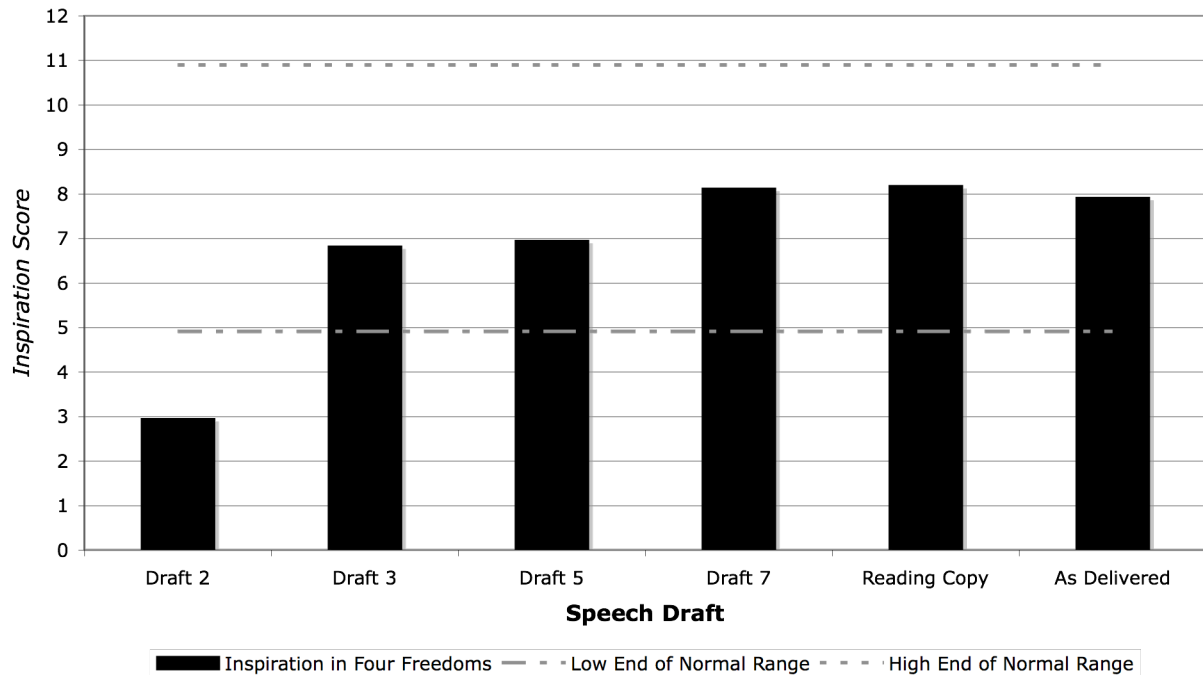


While the "normal variation" measure helps us create a standard across speeches, each of these scores have different means and standard deviations. For example, while the *inspiration* score for presidential speeches normally ranges about 6 points (from 4.91 to 10.90), the *ambivalence* score varies by 14.21 (from 3.84 to 18.05).

To standardize our measure of the changes for these variables we need to control for the differences between the variations of these scores. Thus, the variation found in different drafts of a speech is divided by the *normal variation* for that variable. This created a *percentage of normal variation* measure that compares the changes on this specific characteristic for a speech to the degree to which that rhetorical score varies across all presidential speeches. These measures for Roosevelt "Four Freedoms" speech are charted in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Shifts as % of Normal Variation in Select Rehtorical Variables in
Drafts of FDR's Four Freedoms Speech



As Figure 2 shows there is considerable difference between the behaviors of the variables. The inspirational variable varies by 87% revealing that the differences between the drafts of FDR's Four Freedoms speech were almost as great as the differences between different speeches by different presidents. At the same time, other variables are quite stable. These results demonstrate that even if we use the more stable individual measures rather than the more volatile "master variables" there are enough differences in the performance of the rhetorical variables to discriminate between stable variables and more volatile elements of rhetoric in a speech.

## *Results*

The Roosevelt administration makes an obvious benchmark. Figure 3 summarizes the average of the shift in the rhetorical scores for all 31 Diction variables. As the figure shows, the amount of change in rhetoric in the drafting of a speech differs noticeably from speech to speech. While some of the speeches may produce more change than expected, the shifts make more sense in light of some specific circumstances. For example, Franklin Roosevelt's 1937 Inaugural went through larger shifts in rhetoric than any other Roosevelt speech studied. While the 1933 Inaugural reveals the least change an analysis of these drafts may be misleading because, according to speechwriter

Raymond Moley, Roosevelt and his speechwriters went to great lengths to conceal the contribution of others to that speech, including having the President-elect hand-copy a speech draft written by Moley to make it appear that Roosevelt himself had written the first draft himself.[79]

In contrast to the first inaugural, the 1937 Inaugural Address was much more volatile. The variations in the 1937 Inaugural addresses may come from a variety of sources. First, there are important differences in book keeping. Whereas speech drafts for the first inaugural were not systematically retained and organized (making it easier to rid the files of drafts that might reveal Roosevelt's use of ghostwriters), the organization of the White House helped insure that more drafts survived.

Figure 3



Average Shift in Dictionary Scores
For FDR Speeches
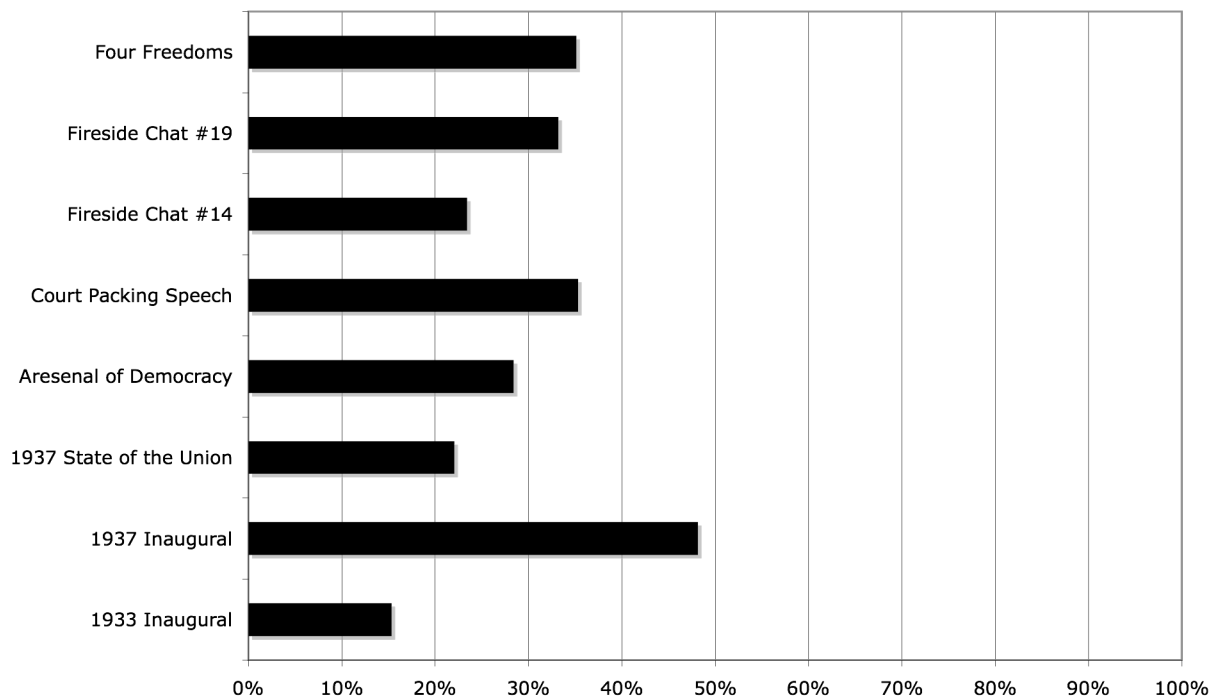
Inaugural addresses in particular invite suggested material, solicited and unsolicited, from a wide variety of sources. Also, the importance of inaugural addresses lead presidents to experiment more as they attempt to write something of historical significance and consider a broader range of materials for inclusion.

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[79] Raymond Moley, with the assistance of Elliot A. Rosen, The First New Deal (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966) 113.

Figure 3 also indicates that Roosevelt's speech defending his court packing plan went through extensive changes during drafting. This is not surprising since some of Roosevelt's assistants doubted the wisdom of the plan and resisted the President's attempt to defend it.

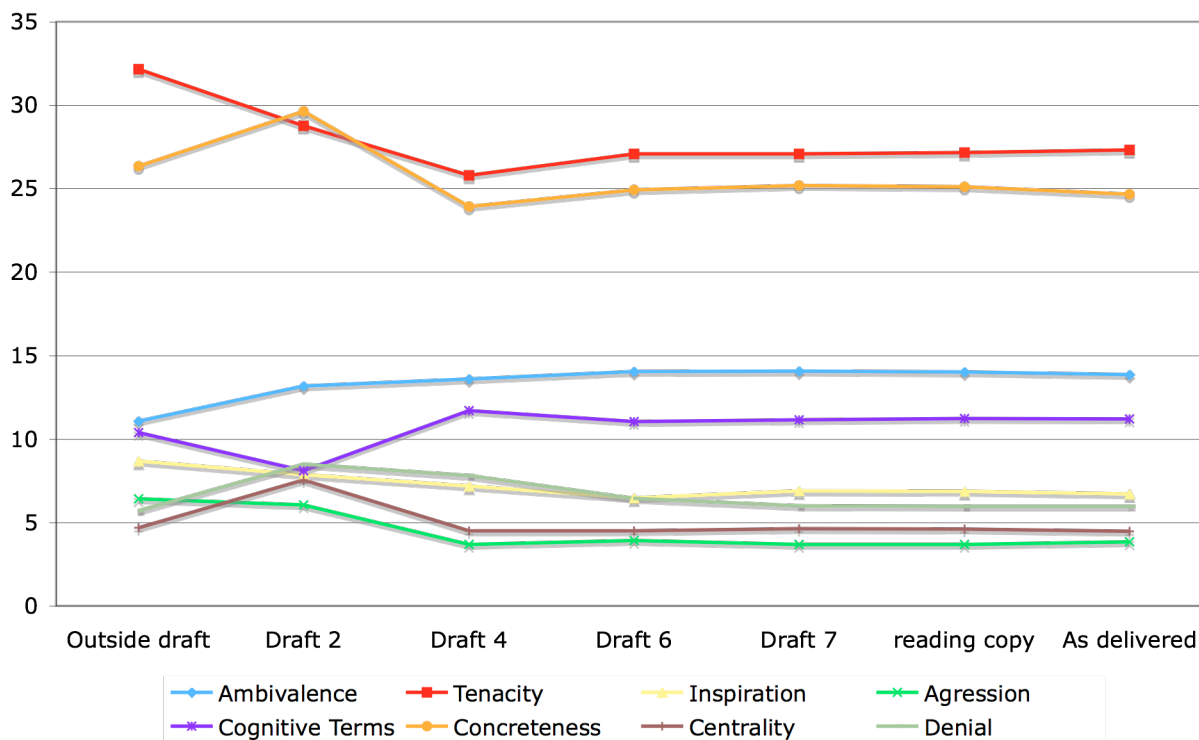Figure 4

The Development of FDR's Court Packing Speech



Figure 4 reflects the patterns seen in the other speeches studied in that most of the changes to Roosevelt's speech were made early with only minor changes in tone being made after the second draft.

We generally expect the close-knit Roosevelt Brain Trust to work together and resolve their internal conflicts quickly. However, as Figure 5 demonstrates, the rhetoric in Reagan speeches could also be relatively stable, revealing levels of variation almost identical to those found in Roosevelt speeches. In fact, the average percentage of normal variation across the 31 basic diction variables is 30.0% for Roosevelt and 30.7% for Reagan.

As with the Roosevelt data, the variation in the second inaugural is much larger than the first inaugural address. Reagan left the initial drafting of his first inaugural address to Ken Khachigian who had been in charge of speechwriting during the 1980 campaign but had no interest in serving on the White House staff, and left

Washington after helping with the speech that Reagan gave to a joint session of Congress after his recovery from the assassination attempt.[80]

Figure 5

Average Shift in Dictionary Scores
Reagan Administration
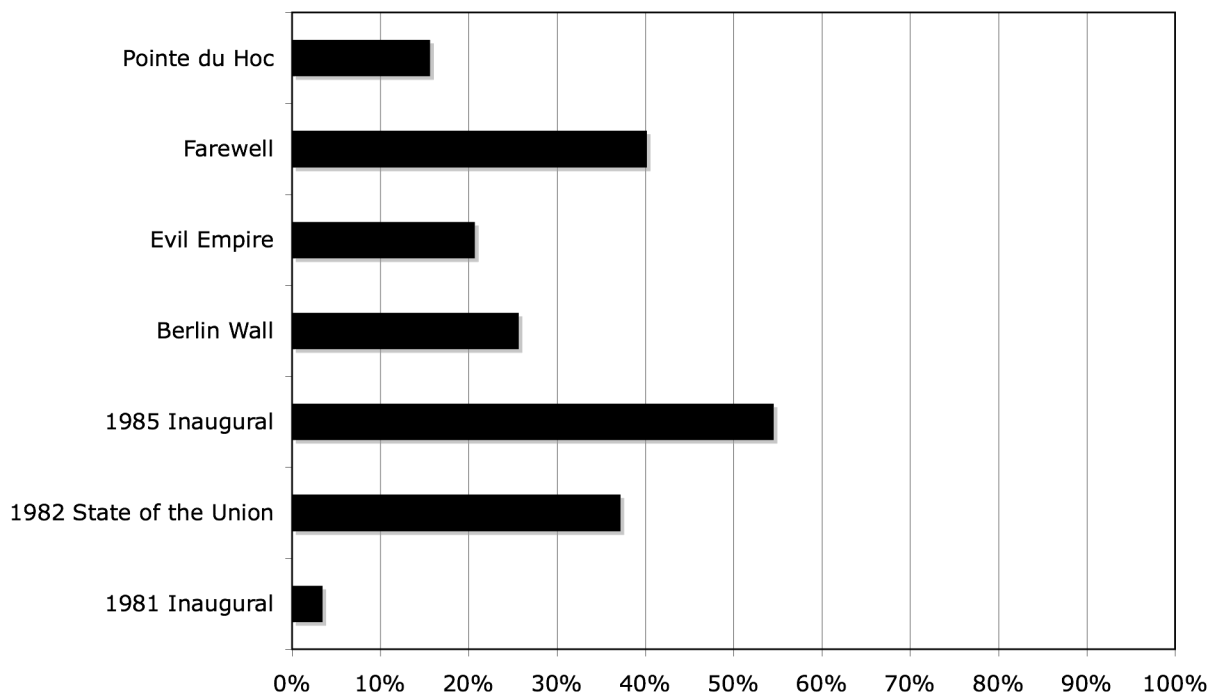


While the overall pattern of the rhetoric in Reagan's speech is steady, there is some variation. Of course, we should not expect that staff will battle over all aspects of presidential rhetoric. For example, accounts from within the Reagan administration suggest that the internal debates over Reagan's Berlin Wall speech were the most intense of the administration. As Figure 6 shows, the overall rhetoric of the speech shifted relatively little (26% of the normal range) during the development of that speech. However, the average of the shift in all the variables conceals large shifts in "rapport," (58%) "cooperation" (68%) and "liberation" (59%) where the battle over the speech was fought. Figure 6 tracks the shift in cooperative rhetoric was initially scarce in the speech, but appeared as the concerns of the National Security Council and the State Department prevailed as the speech moved through the

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[80] Larry Speakes with Robert Pack, <u>Speaking Out: The Reagan Presidency from Inside the White House</u>, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988, 88.

process. While the changes in the rhetoric after the first set of drafts are small, it is clear that noticeable changes in rhetoric were occurring throughout the process.

Figure 6

## Cooperation Rhetoric in Ronald Reagan's Berlin Wall Speech
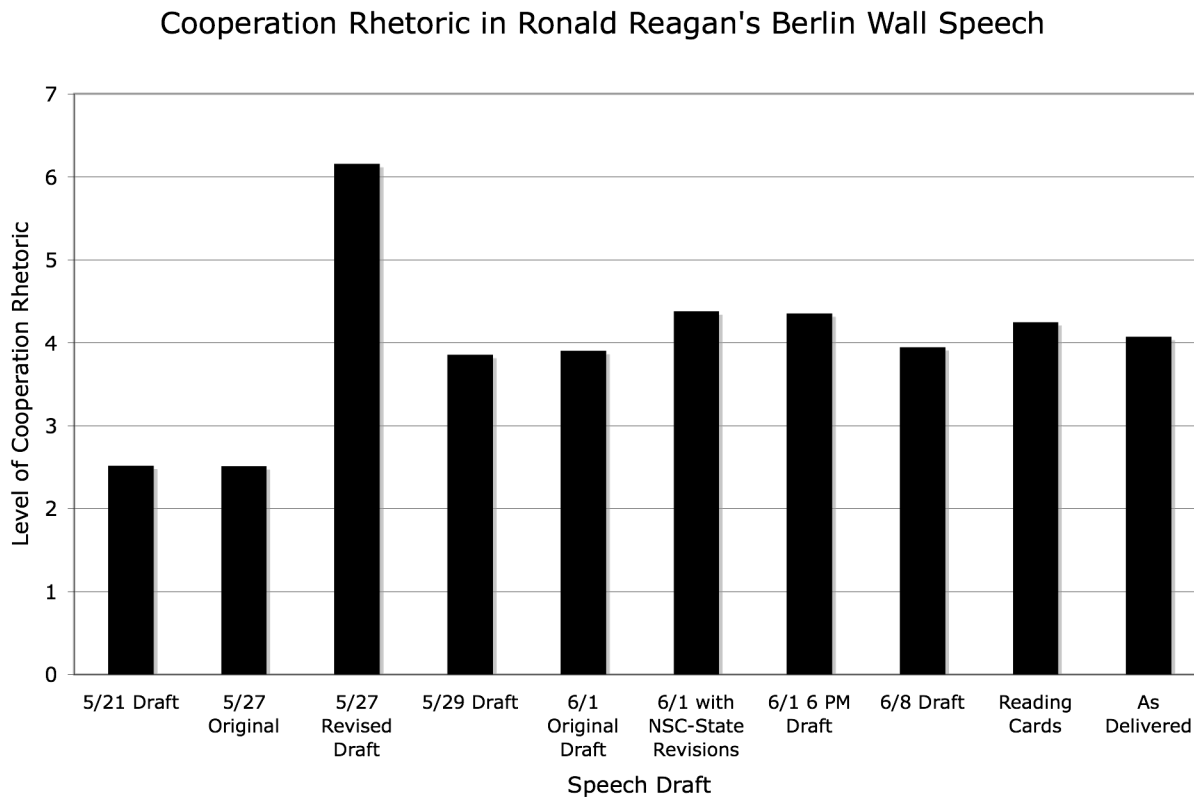


The Berlin Wall speech points to several challenges for the use of broad analysis used to introduce the methods here. First, the concerns of State and the NSC centered on the confrontational tone of the speech and not other elements of the rhetoric. Looking at the average of all the changes in rhetoric obscures our view of the issues actually under debate in the White House. Second, the single sentence urging Gorbachev to tear down the wall outweighed the rest of the speech, at least in the eyes of many. In the age of soundbites, it if difficult to tell how much to weigh the impact one line in a speech.

Closer examination of another speech reveals that differences between speechwriters can be significant. Most of the development of Reagan's "Farewell" address was given to Peggy Noonan, even though she was no longer on the White House staff. Noonan would bill the administration $6,479 for her efforts (27 days at $277 per day). Her drafts became the heart of Reagan's final address to the nation on January 9, 1989.  Other speechwriters wanted to write the speech and Tony Dolan, who served as head speechwriter for much of the administration submitted his own

draft. As Figure 7 shows, the Dolan draft differed significantly from the rest of the drafts on denial rhetoric (similar differences are evident on several other measures).

Figure 7

Shifts in "Denial" Rhetorics in
Reagan's Farewell Address
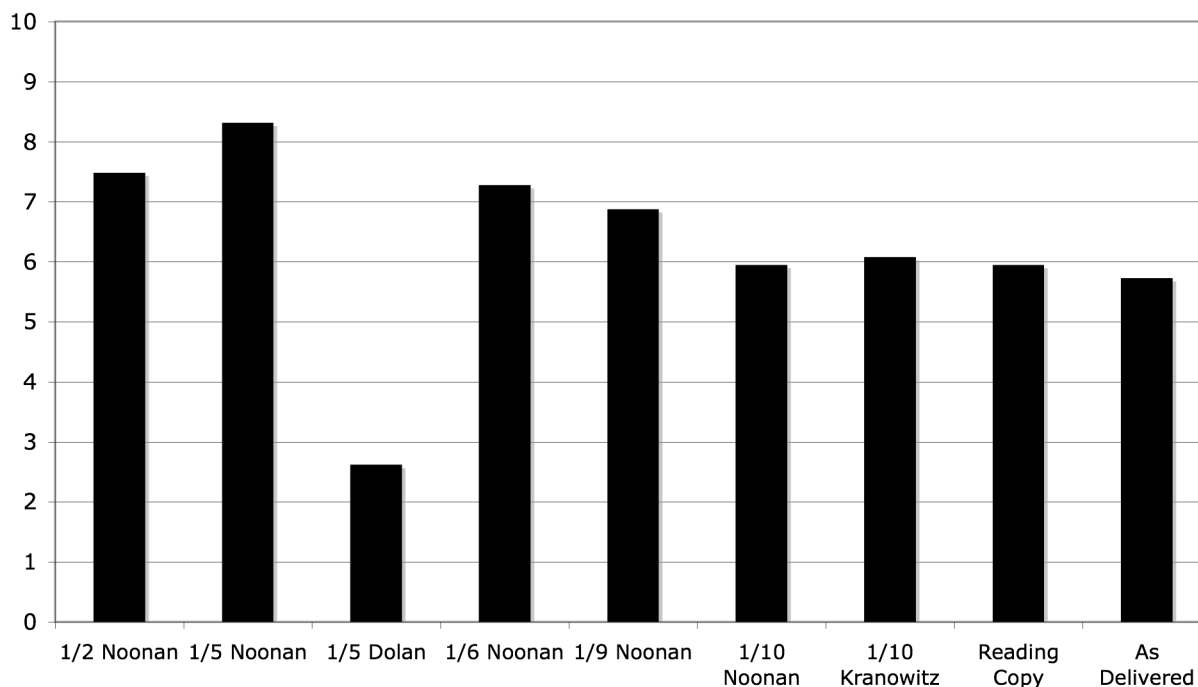


While this use of such rhetorical variables is difficult and needs further fine-tuning, the results indicate that shifts in rhetoric between drafts can be detected and analyzed.  At the same time, the analysis presented here points to the need for a flexible approach that acknowledges the differences in speeches since no one dimension of rhetoric can be used to track changes across all speeches.


*Conclusion*

Presidential speechwriters labor to create speeches that will outlive them. Policy analysts prefer speeches that follow rather than lead policy. However, the reality of the modern presidency is that presidential speech is policy and a dramatic phrase might excite a crowd but it might also imply something unintended. Presidential rhetoric is closely monitored by people as close as agencies within the executive branch and as far away as nations across the globe for signals about the direction of policy.

Lincoln may have had an advantage over modern presidents because he could proclaim that the country was inherently committed to the principle that all men are created equal because he knew that what he said would be principle rather than policy. The weight of the bully pulpit is that presidential speech has become equated with policy. This view is consistent with the fact that many of the most memorable speeches given in the last century carried little policy consequence. When Ronald Reagan honored the crew of the space shuttle Challenger or the soldiers who took the beaches of Normandy he was giving the same kind of speech as Lincoln at Gettysburg. Similarly, FDR's call for Americans to put aside fear and Kennedy's call to service asked citizens to do nothing that was controversial and committed the government to no particular course of action. Gerald Ford's proclamation that our long national nightmare was ending might have offended some members of the Nixon White House, but his speech captured the idea of a bad dream from which the country was ready to awake

While political scientists have observers have suggested that the presidency today is a "rhetorical presidency," few would insist that we have an eloquent presidency. In fact, the irony of the modern American presidency is that the rise in the importance of presidential words has undermined the quality.