

THE RHETORICAL PRESIDENT AND “ROSE GARDEN RUBBISH”:
LIGHTING THE NATIONAL CHRISTMAS TREE

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Abstract

This paper uses the speechwriting process for the presidential remarks at the lighting of the National Christmas Tree as a case study in the institutionalization of presidential speech. Using archival material and a variety of published sources, this study illustrates how presidents put this occasion to use. In the process, this paper illustrates the institutionalization of the speechwriting process in the White House.

THE RHETORICAL PRESIDENT AND “ROSE GARDEN RUBBISH”: LIGHTING THE NATIONAL CHRISTMAS TREE*

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.¹

Calvin Coolidge

At 5:57 Eastern Standard Time on December 5, 2002, President George W. Bush commenced one of the White House’s most recognized and least significant ceremonies as he began his remarks at the Pageant of Peace Tree Lighting. After declaring the event ‘one of the great traditions of our nation's capital,’ and offering the obligatory joke thanking Santa for his attendance, the President moved to the heart of his ceremony.

For nearly 80 years, in times of calm and in times of challenge, Americans have gathered for this ceremony. The simple story we remember during this season speaks to every generation. It is the story of a quiet birth in a little town, on the margins of an indifferent empire. Yet that single event set the direction of history and still changes millions of lives. For over two millennia, Christmas has carried the message that God is with us -- and, because He's with us, we can always live in hope.

In this season, we celebrate with our families -- and deeply miss family members no longer with us. Thousands of families in our nation are still grieving over the terrible losses that came to them last year on September the 11th. We pray for their comfort. We pray for the comfort for everyone who has lost a life this year.

Our entire nation is also thinking at this time of year of the men and women in the military, many of whom will spend this Christmas at posts far from home.

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The “national” Christmas tree should not be confused with its smaller cousin the “White House” Christmas tree that resides within the White House itself. The tradition of the White House Christmas tree goes back to 1889 and the presidency of Benjamin Harrison. The first electric lights on a White House tree were strung by First Lady Frances Cleveland in 1895. Jacqueline Kennedy began the tradition of “themed” Christmas tree when she decorated the White House’s tree in ornaments based on the theme of the Nutcracker Suite.

¹ Calvin Coolidge, The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge, New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1929, 219-220.

They stand between Americans and grave danger. They serve in the cause of peace and freedom. They wear the uniform proudly and we are proud of them.²

After wishing Americans a merry Christmas, the President was joined by two Washington area school children,³ and, following a brief countdown, together they flipped the switch and 200,000 red, green and gold bulbs lit the nation's Christmas tree.

While the President's remarks that evening were not the most important to come from the White House, they play an important part in molding the relationship with the people through the president's roles as "Chief of State" and "Voice of the People." Because of the annual repetition of this ceremony, the case of the lighting of the National Christmas Tree can be used to explore the uses of presidential addresses and to illustrate the institutionalization of presidential speech development.

This paper outlines the traditions that led up to the repetition of the National Tree lighting ceremony in 2002. It then utilizes archival materials from the presidencies of Dwight Eisenhower and George H.W. Bush to develop two in-depth cases for analysis. As these cases show, presidents use these remarks to do much more than light a Christmas tree and, given the potential impact of these remarks, the process of preparing these annual messages has grown to involve more White House staff.

Ghostwriters of Christmas's Past: Origins of the National Christmas Tree

The origins of the national tree date to President Woodrow Wilson. In the early 1900s, the advent of electric lights led many cities to host Christmas tree lighting ceremonies. Wilson encouraged city leaders to create a "civic Christmas" ceremony for Washington, D.C. and helped raise money to fund the undertaking. The community Christmas Tree was placed on the east side of the Capitol and, on Christmas Eve, 1913, a large crowd gathered to hear 1,000 singers and the Marine band take part in a lighting ceremony which featured a live nativity. Wilson was not in Washington for the ceremony in 1913 and the event would not be held in 1915 for lack of funds but the city's Christmas tree would return after the war ended in 1918.

The national Christmas tree moved to the White House grounds after the District of Columbia public schools proposed to create a winter event at the White House that would have the national character of the annual White House Easter Egg Roll. First Lady Grace Coolidge agreed to have a cut Christmas tree placed on the Ellipse

² Remarks by the President at the Pageant of Peace Tree Lighting, December 5, 2002, (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/12/20021205-10.html>) The complete text of the President's 2002 Tree Lighting remarks have been included in the Appendix.

³ The President's assistants in 2002 (Samara Banks and Benjamin Schneiller, both 7) were chosen after volunteering on behalf of the homeless.

south of the White House so that the city's tree lighting event could be combined with other events already planned. Washington public schools hosted the first lighting of the national tree on Christmas Eve in 1923. President Coolidge arrived at 5 P.M. and pushed a button on a switch box that is still used today to light a sixty-foot Vermont Balsam Fir. There was a choir and band concert at 7 P.M., a carol sing along at 9 PM and then more caroling at midnight which featured a recreation of the wise men's journey. While "Silent Cal" declined to speak that evening, he would begin the practice of delivering a Christmas message and in 1925 the speech was broadcast nationally on radio.

From 1924 to 1933 the tree was located at Sherman Plaza (Southeast of the White House, just south of the Treasury Department) so that permanent live trees donated by the American Forestry Association could be used without interfering with the variety of recreational uses of the Ellipse. In 1934 a redesign of Sherman Plaza led to Lafayette Park just across Pennsylvania Avenue. Two Fraser Fir trees planted on either side of the statue of Andrew Jackson in Lafayette Park alternated serving as the national tree from 1934 to 1938 when the ceremony returned to the Ellipse. In 1940 Franklin Roosevelt suggested that the ceremony and tree be moved to the White House lawn to make the even homier.

Various live trees on the White House grounds served as the national tree until the 1950s when the location was moved to the Ellipse. From then until 1973 cut trees were used. The first live national tree on the Ellipse was planted by the Parks Service in 1973. However, the Colorado blue spruce brought in from northern Pennsylvania was unable to handle the Washington heat and by 1976 the Parks Service had to attach branches of another spruce tree to make the tree appear healthy enough for use. In 1978, its replacement brought in a year earlier was knocked down by high winds.

In June of 1978, Bill Ruback, who ran the President's Park that includes the national tree's presence on the Ellipse, located today's national tree in a front yard in York, Pennsylvania. After compensating the owners \$1,500 the Parks Service began the process of extracting and shipping the new tree as neighbors watched the process from beach chairs while the rest of the nation followed the uprooting through frequent news stories.⁴

Today

The tradition of the national tree has endured wars, assassinations, and terrorism. While the event has been moved, it has never been canceled. In line with wartime precautions, lights were placed on the tree in 1942, but not

⁴ It's fair to assume that digging up the next National Tree will be carried live on Fox News, unless pre-empted by a car chase in Los Angeles.

lit. In 1963, the tree was not lit until December 22, when the 30-day official period of mourning the death of President Kennedy ended. In honor of hostages held in Iran, President Carter lit only the star atop the tree in 1979 and 1980.⁵ After the hostages' release in January 1981 newly-inaugurated President Reagan requested that the tree be lit in honor of their return.

While the National Christmas Tree may appear to be the most traditional of Washington scenes, it is in reality a modern marvel. In 2002, the tree was decorated through the donated efforts of a team of experts from General Electric. Ornaments using high-tech thermoplastics to withstand the cold and garland intertwined with special red light-emitting diodes designed to be energy-efficient and give off low heat (which was not an issue in 2002's snow covered lighting ceremony) give the Washington tradition a high tech feel. The tree has two distinct looks created by a cross-fading lighting scheme.⁶

The one-hour extravaganza leading up the actual lighting reflects an interesting variety of cultural influences. In 2002, the event was hosted by Barbara Eden (best known as star of television's "I Dream of Jeannie"),⁷ with entertainment from the Worlds Children's Choir, soprano Hei-Kyung Hong, Mannheim Steamroller, Three Mo' Tenors, Lee Ann Womack, Steve Wariner, the United State Air Force Concert Band, and Roy Clark as Santa. The show was produced by the Johnson Group of McClean Virginia.

Rose Garden Rubbish

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."⁸ In one of the longest sentences in political science, Clinton Rossiter described the burdens of the president's role as chief of state (and makes one of the rare references in the political science literature to the national tree lighting).

⁵ In 1980 the tree was fully lit for 417 seconds in honor of the 417 Americans held hostage.

⁶ Manny Fernandez, "A National Symbol's Pennsylvania Roots," Washington Post, December 5, 2002, Page B01.

⁷ According to information on the Christmas Pageant of Peace Inc's website (<http://www.pageantofpeace.org/>), "Barbara's effervescent personality, positive spirit and unique ability to reach and hold audiences of all ages has made the beautiful blue-eyed blonde from San Francisco one of Hollywood's most recognized, beloved and popular star."

⁸ James C. Humes, Confessions of a White House Ghostwriter: Five Presidents and Other Political Adventures, Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc. 1997, 3.

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 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 student, and heroic school children.⁹

The demand for these ceremonies continue to grow with each new American tradition. Just as the attack on Pearl Harbor and the invasion of D-Day created a new need to recognize America's sacrifices and successes, so too will September 11.

Why Study Rose Garden Rubbish?

In his 1984 study of presidential rhetoric, Roderick Hart suggested that all presidential rhetoric merits study. The rhetorical model of the presidency as a strategic model suggests that "anything that a modern president says in public becomes important—both wheat and chaff, both foolish and serious—and that foolish and serious remarks alike affect policy."¹⁰ In an article outlining a research agenda for future presidency research almost 20 years later, Hart repeated his desire for a broad approach to the study of presidential speech saying, "Sometimes, the most perfunctory, even the most banal, remarks can be especially revealing."¹¹ However, there are specific uses of these speeches that merit consideration.

As an example of a minor presidential rhetoric, the lighting of the National Christmas tree is ideal. It is hard to imagine a presidential speech that would less likely to contain important policy statements. As Truman speechwriter George Esley commented, "It would be regarded as poor taste to use a Christmas tree lighting... for a formal policy speech."¹² The celebration of Christmas and the use of Christmas trees in that season are both widely accepted and present little controversy. The event is no doubt even less controversial now that a tree is not cut down and the National Christmas tree need not give up its life to serve its country. Roderick Hart has suggested that one of the reasons that presidents may choose to speak at ceremonial events because the audience make few demands and

⁹ Clinton Rossiter, The American Presidency, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, 3.

¹⁰ Roderick P. Hart, Verbal Style and the Presidency: A Computer-Based Analysis, Orlando: Academic Press, Inc., 1984, 6.

¹¹ Roderick P. Hart, "Why Do They Talk That Way? A Research Agenda for the Presidency," Presidential Studies Quarterly, 32: 4 (December) 2002, 696.

¹² Oral History Interview with George M. Elsey, July 10. 1969, Truman Library. [on-line version, no page number]

give presidents little reason to say much that would get them into trouble.¹³ At the same time, such occasions grant the wide latitude to the White House as it crafts the speech. As we see from the tree lighting remarks, presidents introduce subtle political themes into their holiday message.

Beyond the argument that we need the broadest possible understanding of speech, minor presidential remarks also merit study because they reflect upon broader hypotheses about how the presidency finds influence. The crafting of these speeches can help us gain insights into the processes that produce major speeches. Minor presidential addresses can contribute to the symbolic presidency, help the president define America's "civil religion," and keep the media occupied. In addition, "minor" presidential addresses merit study because they often rise above the level of "rose garden rubbish" and have larger impacts.

Institutionalization

We expect the State of the Union address to be reviewed by White House staff and Cabinet officials. Likewise, we would expect that the president's foreign policy addresses would be scrutinized closely by the State Department to insure that no nuance of phrasing creates the wrong impression throughout the world. The need to subject major addresses to the scrutiny of large parts of the executive branch is evident and we know to expect this level of effort for key presidential speeches. The question is whether or not the White House exhibits similar tendencies on minor addresses. In this research there is evidence that the White House can find political reward in Rose Garden rubbish.

While there is little to be gained politically by the lighting of this tree, there are possible risks should the speech cause the president to misstate historical or religious facts, display some form of insensitivity or lead the president to commit a verbal blunder. There is a risk of selecting the wrong person to dress up as Santa since some private-sector Santas have been known to choose the wrong and/or quantity of beverage to stay warm and lapsed into decidedly un-Santa like behavior.

Calvin Coolidge was not the first president to dislike the many requests for presidential speeches, but he may have been the most emphatic. Presidents have discovered that, as Coolidge worried, every speech would be "dissected at home and abroad to discover its outward meaning and any possible hidden implications."¹⁴ To Coolidge, the president must guard against "an unfortunate phrase in an address" because the president is "constantly watched by a multitude of eyes to determine if there is anything unusual, extraordinary, or irregular, which can be set down in praise or in blame."¹⁵

¹³ Roderick P. Hart, "Why Do They Talk That Way? A Research Agenda for the Presidency," Presidential Studies Quarterly, 32: 4 (December) 2002, 699.

¹⁴ Calvin Coolidge, The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge, New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1929, 220.

¹⁵ Calvin Coolidge, The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge, New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1929, 216-217.

Rose Garden Rubbish and the Symbolic Presidency

Even if lighting the nation's Christmas tree conveys little that is clearly related to policy or politics, this event may play an important role in shaping the relationship between citizen and president. Leadership is facilitated by the perception of shared values between leader and follower. The president's policy proposal will face a more positive response from citizens if they feel that they share a set of common values with their president. Agreement on some areas may imply agreement on others. By engaging in a shared ritual presidents lay the foundation for a relationship of trust. In their study of presidential communication, Denton and Hahn argue that presidents can enhance their leadership by reinforcing their political messages with the trappings of the office.¹⁶ As presidents and their special guests light the National Christmas tree they are conducting a much more elaborate version of a tradition of carried out by millions of American families in their own homes. In his classic discussion of presidential roles, Clinton Rossiter suggested that the Founders "gave us a "father image" that should satisfy even the most demanding political Freudians."¹⁷

The holiday season is ripe with opportunities to share the holidays with the first family. Television has made sharing the spirit of the season easier. The nation can watch as the White House tree is brought to the front door via a horse-drawn wagon, the decorating theme for the mansion's Christmas décor is presented and discussed, and the White House becomes home to dozens of holiday gatherings, many of which provide the president with an opportunity to put aside differences with hostile members of Congress or the press corps. According to historian Williams Seale, "It's (the holiday) more a stage now than it's ever been."¹⁸

In The President as Interpreter-in-Chief Mary Stuckey argues that "the distance of formality" served to free presidents of the restraints of political accountability:

When presidents act to decrease the distance between themselves and the mass public, they also decrease the degree of insulation and protection available to them. This in turn increases the fragility of the presidency as an institution."¹⁹

In Stuckey's view, as presidents remove barriers between themselves and the public, the informality of the relationship leads to the blurring of lines between their public and private lives and the politicization of their private lives.²⁰

The White House doesn't seem to share Stuckey's reservation. Instead, presidents have chosen to selectively share more and more moments with the public. While subjecting non-public moments to public scrutiny might open

¹⁶ Robert E. Denton, Jr. and Dan F. Hahn, Presidential Communication: Description and Analysis, New York: Praeger, 1986, 60.

¹⁷ Rossiter, 5.

¹⁸ Alexis Simendinger, Perks, the Press and the Prez, National Journal, December 20, 1997.

¹⁹ Mary E. Stuckey, The President as Interpreter-in-Chief, Chatham, New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1991, 139.

²⁰ Mary E. Stuckey, The President as Interpreter-in-Chief, Chatham, New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1991, 139

the presidency up to politicization of private lives, doing so selectively may produce benefits for leadership. Thus, presidents can reap some of the benefits of formality while still sharing the occasional holiday moment.

Lighting the national Christmas Tree is well suited to presidential relationship building. The “Christmas spirit” goes well beyond the Christian community, especially when it is conveyed through more secular symbols like a Christmas tree and framed within the “pageant of peace.” While unlike the specific examples cited by Denton and Hahn, presidential remarks at the pageant of peace seem to be a good example of why those authors describe such symbols as an asset to the president.

Political symbols work because of their abstract semantic hollowness. Although political symbols function as objects of common identification, they simultaneously allow for idiosyncratic meanings to be attached. Political symbols are powerful not because of the broad commonalities of shared meaning but because of the intense sentiments created and attached to them resulting in the perception that the symbols are vital to the system.²¹

Clinton Rossiter points out that, “The role of Chief of State may often seem trivial, yet it cannot be neglected by a President who proposes to stay in favor and, more to the point, in touch with the people, the ultimate source of all his power.”²² As presidents reach out beyond their institutional sources of power with these speeches, they are grasping at non-governmental sources of legitimacy. Presidents may seek to claim and reinforce the representative bond that began with their election. A president like Gerald Ford might reach out to create legitimacy through shared values because the traditional election mandate did not exist. Or, when an election mandate is disputed, a president like George W. Bush might attempt to build a mandate on grounds other than an election.

The Presidency and Civil Religion

The president's role in lighting the National Christmas Tree reflects the balancing of the president's role as head of government and “chief of state.” According to Clinton Rossiter, in the role of “voice of the people” the president “acts as political leader of some, he serves as moral spokesman for all.”²³ In his classic book on leadership, James MacGregor Burns describes transforming leadership as a process through which leaders can “shape and alter and elevate the motives and values and goals of followers through the vital teaching role of leadership.”²⁴ He goes on to note “whatever separate interests persons might hold, they are presently or potentially united in the pursuit of “higher” goals, the realization of which is tested by the achievement of significant change that represents the collective or pooled interests of leaders and followers.”²⁵

²¹ Robert E. Denton, Jr. and Dan F. Hahn, Presidential Communication: Description and Analysis, New York: Praeger, 1986,

²² Rossiter, 4.

²³ Clinton Rossiter, 18.

²⁴ James MacGregor Burns, Leadership, New York: Harper Colophon Books, 425.

²⁵ James MacGregor Burns, Leadership, New York: Harper Colophon Books, 425-426

Going beyond the idea of the president as a moral spokesman or as the nation's guide in its pursuit of higher goals, Richard Pierard and Robert Linder assert that, "the president occupies a special place in American life—a place at once political and religious."²⁶ In Civil Religion and the Presidency, they describe the president's role as "pontifex maximus" of civil religion.²⁷ While the idea of the president serving as some form of high priest of civil religion may seem alien, similar labels have been used. Paul Erickson used similar language in describing one of Reagan's speeches as "a superb example of how the President aims for communion with his listeners in a preacherly as well as a political sense."²⁸ In a recent Newsweek cover story on President George W. Bush's faith, Howard Fineman commented that Bush seemed like a "preacher in chief."²⁹ There seems little doubt that presidents have engaged in a variety of activities that look something like the connection of politics and religion.

Pierard and Linder define civil religion as "the widespread acceptance by a people of perceived religio-political traits regarding their nation's history and destiny."³⁰ They describe civil religion as the "operative religion" of society and "the collection of beliefs, values, rites ceremonies, and symbols which together give sacred meaning to the ongoing political life of the community and provide it with an overarching sense of unity above and beyond all internal conflicts and differences."³¹ This view is in some ways similar to Campbell and Jamieson's claim that "Public communication is the medium through which the national fabric is woven"³² or Aristotle's "epideictic rhetoric" which can unite a diverse society by bringing citizens together behind a common sense of good vs. evil.³³

Civil religion fills a variety of citizen needs. It connects society and politics to broader meaning and gives the political community a special sense and a common ground. It also offers assurance that they are doing good work, or at least not engaged in collective sin.

The view of president as a sort of high priest and keeper of Americans' public faith seems to conflict with the idea of separating church from state. However, public faith is not a particular religion. In fact, the absence of an official state church creates a vacuum into which the presidency can insert its own brand of morality. The line between political and religious leadership seems especially blurry in times of crisis. Harry Truman often cast America's opponents in the cold war as "godless communists" while Reagan described the Soviets as the "evil empire."

²⁶ Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, Civil Religion and the Presidency, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academic Books, 1988, 19.

²⁷ Pierard and Linder, 25.

²⁸ Paul Erickson, Reagan Speaks: The Making of an American Myth, New York: New York University Press, 1985, 76.

²⁹ Howard Fineman, "Bush and God," Newsweek, March 10, 2003, 25.

³⁰ Pierard and Linder, 22.

³¹ Pierard and Linder, 22-23.

³² Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and Genres of Governance, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 6.

³³ James R. Andrews, "Presidential Leadership and National Identity," in The Presidency and Rhetorical Leadership, Leroy C. Dorsey, ed., College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002, 132.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, the bombing of federal offices in Oklahoma City, and the loss of both the Challenger and the Columbia space shuttles have thrust the presidency into the role of “mourner-in-chief.”³⁴ When George W. Bush addressed the nation after the attacks the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, he wanted to, in the words of speechwriter Michael Gerson, “speak at a moment of national horror and grief of a comfort that comes from faith, a comfort that God is on the side of justice, that death and tragedy are not final, that ultimately, we believe in a, in a story of hope.”³⁵

In some respects, a president has little choice in the moment of such crises. While the power of government may offer avenues for retribution or some form of justice, there is little the state can do to help citizens deal with the emotional impact of a tragedy. Professor John J. Pitney, Jr. describes this role as going back to Franklin Roosevelt leading the nation in prayer for the casualties of the imminent D-Day invasion. “This tradition goes with the territory, and it has deep roots; it’s part of the civil religion. It’s important to the people, all the more so in the television age.”³⁶

The role as “pontifex maximus” can serve the president in several ways. Any credible connection to a higher authority will undoubtedly aid a president’s cause. During his administration, Bill Clinton used his faith to promote his policies, give him credibility with many groups, and to ask for forgiveness. While not his most closely scrutinized speeches, the Clinton White House’s approach to lighting the national tree did draw some comment. Writing for National Journal, Burt Solomon described Clinton’s first such speech in almost surrealistic terms.

As darkness descended on the Ellipse on Dec. 9, awaiting their first chance to light the national Christmas tree, President Clinton and his family watched as a Snoopy, a Garfield, a Yogi Bear and a menagerie of other oversized creatures pranced across the stage to “Jingle Bells.” The gratingly cheerful Sandy Duncan warbled “Santa Baby” and danced gamely on a fractured toe. Willard Scott, the ubiquitous television weatherman, was Santa Claus, crossing through the crowd from the general direction of a huge menorah. Only in an occasional carol was there a mention of Christ.³⁷

Solomon’s article used the tree lighting to illustrate his arguments about Clinton’s faith. National Journal’s interest in detailing Clinton’s religious practices speaks to the significance of presidential faith. The debate over George W. Bush’s use of religious language suggests that this debate is as intense as ever.

The president’s dilemma is the same balancing act associated with religion throughout U.S. government. As Clinton noted, the authors of the first amendment recognized both “that religion helps to give our people the

³⁴ Carl M. Canon, “The Mourner-in-Chief,” National Journal, February 8, 2003.

³⁵ Michael Gerson, Interview with Chris Bury, Up Close: ABC News, December 20, 2002, Transcript, 3.

³⁶ Carl M. Canon, “The Mourner-in-Chief,” National Journal, February 8, 2003.

³⁷ Burt Solomon, The White House Notebook—Inside the Yuppie from Yale is a Southern Baptist’s Soul,” National Journal, December 18, 1993.

character without which a democracy cannot survive” and “that there needed to be a space of freedom between government and people of faith that otherwise government might usurp.”³⁸

President George W. Bush had, at times, justified his policies on the rhetoric established through his public faith. In confronting terrorism and Iraq, Bush cast the conflict in terms of good vs. evil, describing terrorists as “evildoers,” and alerting the world to an “axis of evil.” In his address at Commencement at West Point in June of 2002, Bush proclaimed, “We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name. By confronting evil and lawless regimes, we do not create a problem, we reveal a problem.”³⁹ After repeating this claim to his audience at an event launching the “freedom corps” the President rejected the existence of middle ground, and went on to assert, “The people we fight are evil people. They have no regard for human life. They believe in tyranny.”⁴⁰

The definition of the opponents as evil allows presidents to define American interests as good without touching on specific religious principles that might prove divisive.

Defining moments: Rising above “Rubbish”

Speeches at small events need not be small-minded. Jeff Shesol who wrote for President Clinton observed, “You spend a lot of time for any president making small moments sound historic, whether or not they deserve it,”⁴¹ The president’s inauguration is a ceremony and that speech carries much more symbolic value than policy import.⁴² Presidential inaugural addresses could easily degenerate into trivial expressions of the most general principals, becoming like the campaign speeches that preceded them. However, some presidents have used the ceremony and attendant audience as a launching place for broad and inspiring political rhetoric.

Nixon speechwriter Ray Price argued that speeches at ceremonial events need not be trivial, noting that, “The greatest American address in history was ceremonial—the Gettysburg Address.”⁴³ White House speechwriters often point out that Lincoln’s address at Gettysburg was a speech at a minor event. Not only was the dedication of the cemetery at Gettysburg a largely symbolic moment, Lincoln was actually invited to deliver only “a few

³⁸ President Bill Clinton, Remarks by the President at Signing Ceremony for the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, November 16, 1993, Press Release, www.whitehouse.gov

³⁹ Remarks by the President at 2002 Graduation Exercise of the United States Military Academy West Point, New York, June 1, 2002, www.whitehouse.gov.

⁴⁰ Remarks by the President on Citizen Preparedness, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, January 30, 2002. www.whitehouse.gov.

⁴¹ Elixabeth Blumiller, “The State of the Union and the Turn of a Phrase,” New York Times, January 27, 2003.

⁴² For a detailed discussion of the symbolic functions of inaugural addresses see Chapter 2 of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.

⁴³ James C. Humes, Confessions of a White House Ghostwriter: Five Presidents and Other Political Adventures, Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc. 1997, 3.

appropriate remarks” and was not the main speaker.⁴⁴ In that case, Lincoln’s words rose above the moment and created an address that reached beyond the small audience gathered that day to shape Americans’ images of their republic today. Faced with the lighting of a Christmas tree rather than the dedication of a cemetery, Lincoln might have used the holidays addressed the same sentiments.

According to Gary Wills, Lincoln had been looking for opportunities to lay out his view of the war in a venue other than the usual proclamations and messages to Congress.⁴⁵ Lincoln’s words at Gettysburg succeeded, not only in defining the Civil War to the audience gathered, but also shaped for generations the meaning of war and the definition of the nations.

While we would expect few presidents to succeed in redefining their times, they can look to Lincoln’s success and hope to accomplish in many speeches what Lincoln did in one. President Reagan’s address at Normandy became one of his best known and most loved speeches but had little to do with policy. Even if a president took dozens of speeches over their years in office to shape how Americans viewed themselves or their government, this accomplishment would merit our attention. Most cannot hope to accomplish what Lincoln did at Gettysburg, but they can hope to chip away and accomplish something.

Eisenhower and the Pageant of Peace

Nearing the end of his first year in office, Eisenhower offered the simplest of remarks as he lit his first National Christmas Tree. Eisenhower’s address, in its entirety, read:

“Ladies and gentlemen: It is now my very great privilege, in accordance with an American custom of long standing, to light the White House Christmas Tree, bringing- - as it does - - warm greeting from this House to your house.

Merry Christmas! - - and Happy New Year!”⁴⁶

The remarks, short and to the point, reflect what may have been Eisenhower’s basic approach to speeches. The brevity of the address was reflected in the preparation. No preliminary drafts of the address exist—not that there was much room for revision.

In 1954 the lighting of the national tree was expanded and became the opening of the “Pageant of Peace,” a month-long event on the Ellipse that includes free concerts by church groups and choirs. Smaller trees representing each state, territory and Washington DC lined up to create the “Pathway of Peace.” These events and the tree lighting ceremony are put together by “Christmas Pageant of Peace Inc.” They oversee the complicated logistics of the media event.

⁴⁴ That honor fell to Edward Everett, a well-know orator who had specialized in battlefield orations after speeches at the battlefields of Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill.

Garry Wills, Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America, New York: Touchtone Books, 24.

⁴⁵ Garry Wills, Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America, New York: Touchtone Books, 25.

⁴⁶ Remarks of the President, December 24, 1953, “XMAS Tree Lighting 12/23/58, Box 28, Speech Series, Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Eisenhower Library.

By December 1954 Eisenhower's approach to the speech lighting the National Christmas Tree had changed dramatically. While the 1953 address had weighed in at only 47 words, the 1954 address included 794 words. The additional holiday rhetoric focused on foreign policy with much of it designed to stave off isolationism. "There are some who have believed it possible to hold themselves aloof from today's world-wide struggle between those who uphold government based on human freedom and dignity, and those who consider many merely a pawn of the state." Eisenhower contrasts the hope "for peace on earth, good will among men" with the threat to that peace of "Oppression, privation, cruel suffering of body and mind imposed on helpless victims." Eisenhower linked the sentiment of the season to a need to act. "We Americans know that a mighty part of promoting and serving peace is ours to do."

The 1954 address also represented a much larger preparation effort. The speech went through at least two major revisions, with minor changes. Eisenhower's role in fine-tuning the speech is evident as his hand-written revisions can be found throughout the drafts, with some last-minute changes being made on the reading copy.⁴⁷ Eisenhower often marked up the large type of the "reading copy" that went in the three-ring binder that he took to the podium for his speeches. He used a heavy black pen to underline phrases that needed emphasis. In this case, numerous revisions can be found throughout. These changes range from deleting the label of "inhumane masters" on those who oppress to labeling the nation's prayers for peace coming "directly from the heart of every one of its citizens."

The 1955 speech was delivered by television and radio from Eisenhower's retreat in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania where he was recovering from a September heart attack. Slightly shorter (471 words), the 1955 speech was a less direct call to internationalism and instead emphasized the common hopes and dreams of citizens of the world, rather than the evil that preyed upon them.

Now peace is the right of every human being. It is hungered for by all of the peoples of the earth. So we can be sure tonight in the fullness of our hearts and in the spirit of the season, that as we utter a simple prayer for peace we will be joined by the multitudes of the earth.

Peace, and the desire for it, was the predominant theme of this address. Eisenhower even stopped to remind his listeners that the previous Christmas had been the first one in many years not marred by war.

Eisenhower's approach to his tree lighting speeches is reflected in the opening of his 1958 address when he says, "Tonight I would like to speak not to you - - but for you - - to the peoples of the world."⁴⁸ Eisenhower used every tree lighting address to discuss global concerns for peace. In doing so, Eisenhower constantly reminded Americans of what they shared with the world and their obligation to the world. Early in his 1959 speech, Eisenhower would say that he wished every American could have seen and heard what he did on his trip because

⁴⁷ Although Bill Clinton became legendary for his last minute changes to his speeches, in reality many presidents continued editing up until the last minute. The advent of the teleprompter and its requirement that changes be entered by a technician rather than scrawled on the reading copy has made the presidents' final changes more evident.

⁴⁸ Reading copy, Tree Lighting Address, "After XMAS Tree Lighting—12/24/53, Box 5, Speech Series, Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Eisenhower Library.

“The mutual understanding thereby created could in itself do much to dissolve the issues that plague the world.”⁴⁹
Eisenhower painted a striking picture of the crowds he encountered on his recent overseas trip.

Many, indeed most, were poor, weary, worn by toil; but others were young, energetic, eager; the children, as always, bright and excited.

The clothes of the few were as modern as today’s Paris and New York; of others, as ancient as the garb of Abraham; often soiled and tattered; sometimes colorful and romantic to the American eye.

They were Buddhist and Moslem and Hindu and Christian.⁵⁰

After highlighting the difference between his American audience and the crowds he had encountered in the eleven nations he had visited, Eisenhower moved on to describe peace as the one hope for the world, but leaving the burden for realizing that hope largely on Americans.

I assure you that all the people I saw and visited with want peace - - nothing in human affairs can be more certain.”

I talked with Kings and Presidents, Prime Ministers and humble men and women in cottages and mud huts.

Their common denominator was their faith that America will help lead the way toward a just peace.⁵¹

The 1960 speech differs in several regards. A note typed by Eisenhower’s secretary Ann Whitman and attached to the President’s reading copy of the speech points out, “This was done from scratch by the President himself.”⁵² While heavy presidential involvement would not be unique to Eisenhower or any other president, most speeches start with drafts authored by others.

Presidential authorship of such a speech is not such a unique event on its own. As Truman and Roosevelt both had done before him, Eisenhower started work before the speechwriters and wrote out initial drafts of both major and minor speeches. Even when speeches started from his outlines or drafts completely constructed by members of his staff, Eisenhower did extensive editing.

The content of the 1960 speech differs in subtle ways from previous addresses. First, the speech opens with much more specific references to Christ and the Christian meaning of the holiday. The second sentence makes

⁴⁹ Reading copy, Tree Lighting Address, “Tree Lighting—Christmas 1959.” Box 32, Speech Series, Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Eisenhower Library, page 2A.

⁵⁰ Reading copy, Tree Lighting Address, “Tree Lighting—Christmas 1959.” Box 32, Speech Series, Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Eisenhower Library, 4.

⁵¹ Reading copy, Tree Lighting Address, “Tree Lighting—Christmas 1959.” Box 32, Speech Series, Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Eisenhower Library, 6-7.

⁵² Note from acw, 12/26/60, “Christmas Tree Lighting, 12/23/60, Box 30, Speech Series, Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Eisenhower Library.

specific reference to “the Christ Child” and “our gratitude for the great things that His coming has brought about in the world.”⁵³ The use of such specific language is not surprising except that makes evident the absence of references to Christ by name in the seven previous Christmas tree lighting ceremonies. The 1958 speech did say that “This is the time of year when Christians celebrate the birth of the Founder of their faith.”⁵⁴ However, Christ is not mentioned by name and Eisenhower’s wording seems to reflect the historical origins of the holiday rather than his specific faith or that of citizens. By contrast, Eisenhower’s 1960 speech proclaims that, “*We* commemorate the birth of the Christ Child.” [Emphasis added]

Eisenhower also uses the 1960 address to challenge Americans to address “blots and blemishes that mar the picture of a nation of people who devoutly believe that they were created in the image of their Maker.” While previous addresses had urged Americans to examine their roles in the world, the 1960 address directed Americans to look inward.

When, through bitter prejudice and because of differences in skin pigmentation, individuals cannot enjoy equality of political and economic opportunity, we see another of these imperfections, one that is equally plain to those living beyond our borders.⁵⁵

Much of Eisenhower’s call for self-improvement takes the form of very general language about blemishes, respect and justice. Again, the language here is striking, not so much for what it says, but for what had not been said before. In 1956 Eisenhower does mention “all forty-eight states” and “our neighbors next door; and our neighbors in other nations,” but there is little reference to the nation’s specific internal problems or differences. The brief discussion of domestic matters only stands out in the context of the overwhelming concern with international affairs that characterized other events.

In their book on civil religion, Richard Pierard and Robert Linder assert that, “Piety returned to the Potomac under the immensely popular general from Kansas.⁵⁶” Presidential visits with such noted evangelical leaders as Billy Graham became commonplace in the Eisenhower year. While these evangelists may have visited the White House, the heavy international flavor of Eisenhower’s remarks generally avoids specific religious references at a moment when they seem natural. Instead, the President’s focus on international relations reveals a great deal about the interests of a president who would title the second volume of memoirs *Waging Peace*.⁵⁷

⁵³ Christmas Tree Lighting, December 23, 1960 (Reading copy), “Christmas Tree Lighting, 12/23/60, Box 30, Speech Series, Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Eisenhower Library, page 1.

⁵⁴ Remarks of the President, December 24, 1953, “XMAS Tree Lighting 12/23/58, Box 28, Speech Series, Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Eisenhower Library, 1.

⁵⁵ Christmas Tree Lighting, December 23, 1960 (Reading copy), “Christmas Tree Lighting, 12/23/60, Box 30, Speech Series, Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Eisenhower Library, page 3.

⁵⁶ Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academic Books, 1988, 18.

⁵⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*. Garden City: Double Day and Company, 1965.

George H.W. Bush and Institutionalized Speech

George H. W. Bush entered the White House as experienced and comfortable with the mechanics of the modern presidency as any occupant of the office. Despite his familiarity with the mechanics of the presidency, Bush's enthusiasm for the public side of the modern presidency was similar to Coolidge's disdain for rhetoric. However, entering the White House in 1989, Bush did not have the luxury of shunning presidential speech as Coolidge could. Bush labored in the shadow of the "Great Communicator" who had expanded the quantity and quality of presidential speech. Reagan's communication was especially effective in ceremonial roles.

While the core message of the speech itself had remained the same, some aspects of the ceremony had changed. The pageant of peace had gradually become an extravaganza, littered with a variety of minor celebrities. Special guests at Bush's ceremony included corporate icons the California Raisins (1990), Cosby kid Keshia Knight Pulliam (1992), and Lucie Arnaz (1992). Weatherman Willard Scott served as Santa all 4 years.

In Bush's lighting of the Christmas tree, we can see both significant changes in the speech and its preparation as well as theme common to those of Eisenhower. The theme of global peace endured while the visibility of the event led the Bush White House to try to score a few points by bringing celebrity and diversity onto the stage.

Still Waging Peace

The theme and tone of 1989 Bush's remarks before lighting the National Tree mirror those of Eisenhower's almost four decades earlier. Bush used the opportunity of the lighting of the first tree during his term to reflect upon the process of peace that Eisenhower had hoped for. Bush reminded the gathered crowd that, "This is the Christmas that we've awaited for 50 years." Just as Eisenhower had, Bush linked the holiday season to the hope for peace. And, as Eisenhower had often sought to do, Bush extended the triumph of the Christmas hope beyond the Christian community.

And in this new season of hope, the triumph looms. It's just like the joy of Christmas; not a triumph of one particular country or one particular religion, but a triumph for all humankind.

As Eisenhower and other presidents had, President Bush addressed an American audience, but always reminded them of their obligations overseas. After dedicating the 1992 tree to the children of America, Bush directed his audience's attention overseas.

May I simply say, let us think of the children of Somalia, too, the children everywhere who live in fear and want. Our prayers are with them, and may their families be safe and the -- sporadic fighting over there -- end soon.

Policy Symbolism

It's of no surprise that symbolism would find its way into the lighting of a Christmas tree. Other symbolism found its way into the Pageant of Peace. In 1990 the 57 trees (each representing a U.S. state or territory) were donated by the National Coal Association. Bush, who aspired during the 1988 campaign to be the "environmental

president” proudly pointed out that “It’s a wonderful 1990’s tale of careful stewardship and rebirth, for these trees were grown on mined land that had been reclaimed.”

Although Bush would often feature foreign policy concerns, he occasionally turned to domestic matters. Domestic policy with its roots in the 1988 campaign was the exception to the general international flavor. After Bush’s 1988 campaign had spoken about “a thousand points of light” his administration felt obliged to produce them. Edward McNally noted the return of the phrase in his memo to Bush the day before the speech: “The remarks also renew your call for ‘A Thousand Points of Light’ here at home, calling on Americans to ‘reach out to someone right where you live’ this holiday season.”⁵⁸ Early drafts of the speech made use of the phrase. After recounting the story of Martin Luther walking through the snow and being struck by the bright stars of a winter night shining through the branches of a live evergreen, the draft proclaimed, “And so it is especially appropriate that we gather this year to light a living tree, a tree whose branches are hung with a thousand stars, a thousand points of light.” [Emphasis in the original]⁵⁹

Speechwriter Edward McNally had suggested that the thousand points of light make an earlier appearance. Scrawled at the top of the page of the fourth draft of the speech McNally suggested the speech open the remarks with a joke using the phrase. “For the better part of two years, mothers and fathers across American have struggled to tell their kids what the heck the President means when he says “a thousand points of light.” [[Gestures to tree]] Well - - there it is!”⁶⁰

Only a passing reference to “a thousand points of light” survived, by the time the speech was delivered the phrase made only a cameo appearance as the president prepared to switch the tree on, the President said, “let’s show our ‘thousand point of light.’ Let’s turn on the National Christmas Tree.”

The points of light made a more substantial appearance in 1990. To push his program of volunteering the White House invited local “Points of Lights” to “echo the theme of illuminating people’s [sic] lives through family unity, community service and national pride.”⁶¹ In one of the few occasions on which the President allowed the rhetoric to soar, Bush brought the symbol of the North Star in with his thousand points of light.

⁵⁸ Memo to the President from Edward McNally through Chriss Winston, December 13, 1989. “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.

⁵⁹ McNally/Simon draft, December, 12, 1989, 6:40 PM, “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, 2.

The reference to Martin Luther in the address may have been dropped after Brent Scowcroft’s scrawled “Not pagan?” in the margin.

⁶⁰ McNally/Simon draft, December, 12, 1989, Draft Four (B:X-MAS), “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, 4.

⁶¹ Memo from Beth Hinchliffe to the President though Chris Winson, December 12, 1990, “Tree Lighting Ceremony, 12/13/90 [OA 8320].” Office of Speechwriting, Speech Files, Backup, Chron Files 1989-93: Box 89, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, 4.

And here tonight we also feel determination that the bright warmth of this holiday season will stay with us all year and that we will be guided by our inner North Star, making family unity and community service and national pride the center of our lives. We're determined that our nation will become a constellation of hope made up of thousands of separate Points of Light, people helping those in need across our land. People like the more than 100 representatives of daily Points of Light here tonight -- individuals like W.W. Johnson, and volunteers for groups like the Higher Achievement Program and the D.C. Central Kitchen and Mary's House. And following the lead of these Points of Light, let all of us echo that beautiful carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and like that long-ago Star, let us shine in all "dark streets" and to all people in the "deep and dreamless sleep" of loneliness and despair.

The symbolism of the event had expanded to include the entertainment offered so that the Christmas gala might resemble the "big tent" that the Republicans hoped to portray. The selection of each ceremony's performers displayed an appropriate array of diverse musical interests. For example, 1989 featured soul singing duo Marilyn McCoo and Billy Davis as well as country duo Loretta and Patty Lynn while 1990 brought together blues legend Ruth Brown and country star Ricky Van Shelton. The 1991 ceremony was especially diverse bringing together performances by the Metropolitan Opera's mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne, jazz singer Joe Williams, and country and western stars the Gatlin Brothers. Clearly, the administration wanted to use the ceremony to appear as inclusive as possible.

In the 1990 speech the President's rhetoric matched the diverse lineup on stage. In some of the most eloquent prose to survive the extensive vetting process for speeches, the language of speechwriters Hinchliffe and Grossman paint a vivid picture of American diversity.

People talk of the magic of the season. Well, what is more magical than the way light dispels the darkness? And I've read that white light is actually made up of all the colors of the rainbow. So, that's what we see in the glow of this tree -- red and blue and yellow bulbs mixing together to become something new -- one light that represents both unity and diversity. And that's how I like to look at America: All of us, all different, all working together, giving the best of ourselves to make this country the strong, beautiful land that it is.

Institutionalization The Clearance Process

To the casual observer, the lighting of a Christmas tree, even by the president, would seem the cause for little governmental action. However, the forces of institutionalization are strong in the White House and reach into every corner of the president's public activities. By the Bush administration, the process of assembling and refining presidential speeches had become institutionalized enough to subject the tree lighting remarks to considerable scrutiny. Martin Medhurst, in summing up a recent edited volume on presidential speechwriting views the vetting or clearance process for speeches an important issue in understanding the evolution of presidential speech.⁶²

⁶² Martin J. Medhurst, "Enduring Issues in Presidential Speechwriting," in Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond, Kurt Ritter and Martin J. Medhurst, editors, College Station: University of Texas Press, 2003, 219.

The President's remarks while lighting the tree near the end of his first year provide an excellent example of the clearance process that president speeches find themselves exposed to. Bush's 1989 remarks, while relatively brief (459 words) and apparently simple remarks, had to navigate a bureaucratic maze. After the speechwriters' first round of work was done, their fourth draft was attached to a "White House Staffing Memorandum" and given the document number 097228SS. With this routing slip attached, the draft was circulated to 17 key officials in and around the White House. The memorandum asked for "action" by eight individuals: [Brent] Scowcroft (National Security Council), Bates, Demarest, [Boyden] Gray, [Fred] McClure (Congressional Relation), [Roger] Porter, [James] Pinkerton (Deputy Assistant to the President for Policy Planning) and Petersmeyer (Office of National Service). Nine others were given copies "FYI." Those who were informed without their advice being sought included Vice President [Dan Quayle], [John] Sununu (Chief of Staff), [Andrew] Card, Cicconi, Marlin Fitzwater (Press Secretary), presidential image maker Sig Rogich, Rogers, [Chriss] [Chris] Winston (Deputy Assistant to the President for Communications), and Porter Rose.⁶³

While seeking counsel from these top advisors may seem a waste of time, some revisions to the 1989 remarks were offered. Given the international emphasis for the speech, it is not surprising that National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft might offer up some revisions. While the President's remarks were not a policy address, the National Security Council saw little need to risk the creation of any ill will with a minor address. Scowcroft suggests 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 Scowcroft notes in the margins, the phrase "Echoes Soviet contention regarding a 'Common European house.'" Scowcroft also circles a reference to "Unconquerable people" and notes, "In fact, the Czechs have a history of yielding without a fight."⁶⁴

The National Security Council's input reflected military concerns as well. In 1992, at NSC's suggestion the White House added a salute to U.S. forces in Somalia for "vindicating the values of America and the spirit of Christmas in this far-off land." Scowcroft's mention of Somolia also led the White House to mention the children of Somolia and other places where children lived "in fear and want."⁶⁵

While probably seldom the topic of major battles, the struggle to get policies mentioned by the president extends even to tree lighting ceremony. In a memorandum to Chirss Winston, James Pinkerton acknowledged the limits created by the ceremony while engaging in a failing effort to get his proposal for "empowerment" programs explicitly mentioned in the remarks.

Though we believe in using every pretext to sell the President's message, we would not suggest using such a ceremonial venue as this to point out detailed aspects of Administration policy. You don't talk about cutting the capital gains

⁶³ 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.

⁶⁴ 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.

⁶⁵ White House Staffing Memorandum, 12/2/92, "National Christmas Tree Lighting 12/10/92 [OA 7583], Office of Speechwriting, Speech Files, Backup, Chron Files 1989-93: Box 187, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library.

tax at a treelighting [sic] ceremony (though, come to think of it, there is a timber industry angle.) But as long as we are inserting some substance of policy in this speech (“family unity, community service”), and moreover, with regard to the disadvantaged, we suggest at least giving a nod to the world “empowerment.”⁶⁶

Generally, suggested revisions are stylistic or the response perfunctory. The response to the draft of the 1989 remarks from Jay Bybee read, “Counsel’s office has reviewed the above-referenced matter. We have no legal objections.”⁶⁷ While the legal implication of lighting the Christmas Tree may be limited, the White House has little need to take risks.

Sometimes the staffing process changes the speech dramatically. In the case of the 1991 lighting ceremony, the National Security Council suggested that hostages recently released from the Middle East be invited. This recommendation led to the rewriting of the draft that had mentioned the hostages to making the focus of the speech, in the words of the speechwriting staff, “these men, and the symbolism of their journey from darkness into light.”⁶⁸

Some changes in speech draft are made to make the draft fit the president’s speaking style. Writing in the president’s “voice” is a universal concern of speechwriters and presidents must often adapt the flowery writing of their professional wordsmiths to their own style. Winton Hall has labeled Bush “The Antirhetorical President” because of his distrust of eloquence. Andrew Card told Hall, “If he [President Bush] found the wordsmithing to be too rhetorical he would tone it down dramatically.”⁶⁹ The McNally/Simon Draft of the 1989 remarks does not seem to fit Bush’s style.

“And in the still of the night, in the fading glow of the family Christmas tree and the rich, warm-wax smell of candles just gone out, parents stand alone beside their sleeping children. With hope in their hearts, a whispered prayer on their lips, they brush the hair from the eyes of the innocents. And, in that moment, perhaps, we see what is eternal in Christmas - - and in ourselves. [Emphasis in the original]⁷⁰

It is evident from the archival materials that by the time George H.W. Bush took office the speech development process had become so elaborate that no one actor could claim authorship of the President’s words. While

⁶⁶ Memorandum to Chriss Winston from Jim Pinkerton, Subject: Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony, December 11, 1990, “Tree Lighting Ceremony, 12/13/90 [OA 8320].” Office of Speechwriting, Speech Files, Backup, Chron Files 1989-93: Box 89, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library.

⁶⁷ Memorandum for Chriss Winston from Jay S. Bybee, 12/13/89, “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.

⁶⁸ Memorandum to the President from Beth Hinchliffe, through David Demarest and Tony Snow, “Christmas Tree Lighting, 12/12/91 [OA6040] .” Office of Speechwriting, Speech Files, Backup, Chron Files 1989-93: Box 132, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library.

⁶⁹ Wynton C. Hall, “Reflections of Yesterday”: George H.W. Bush’s Instrumental Use of Public Opinion Research in Presidential Discourse.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32:3 (September) 2002, 540.

⁷⁰ McNally/Simon draft, December, 12, 1989, Draft Four (B:X-MAS), “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, 4.

speechwriters are often portrayed as putting words in a president's mouth, the reality is that the president's words are the product of many voices in the White House.

Conclusion: The Challenge and Opportunity of Rose Garden Rubbish

"You try sometime writing the presidential Thanksgiving Day message and not sounding trite!"⁷¹

Paradoxically, minor speeches can create the most major challenges for speechwriters. Presidents speaking of great causes or in reaction to historic events run little risk of sounding trivial. As George W. Bush spoke to the American people about the attacks of September 11, he was virtually assured of having their attention. And, as he reminded Americans of the massive loss of life, there was little chance he would not evoke an emotional response. Responding to a unique event in U.S. history, President Bush ran little chance of sounding repetitive. By contrast, as he prepared to light the national Christmas Tree a few months later, he clearly ran the risk of sounding just like presidents at similar events in the past. In truth, there are not many ways to say, "Let's light this tree."

In the past, presidential speechwriters relished the kind of blank slate that ceremonial events offer. Below the radar of the senior white house staff and free of the protective interests of policy advisors, the speechwriters are, if only briefly, free to let the president's rhetoric soar. By the first Bush administration, the speech clearance process had become so extensive that the chances of unsupervised rhetoric were slim. In fact, it is evident from the archival materials that by the time of the first Bush administration, the label of "presidential speechwriter" is, at best, a gross over-simplification. While a few specialists in the White House might find themselves drafting presidential addresses, their work will be reviewed and modified by so many in the White House that it is hard to assign authorship to any one individual. This fits closely with what Roderick Hart describes a "corporate model" as a way of viewing the rhetorical presidency. In this view, presidential rhetoric is viewed as the product of a White House "persuasion factory."

With a gaggle of wordsmiths to help him stoke the fires of invention, and with political advisors to help him assess each drafted word for its presumed impact. A president hardly presents his lone essential self to us when he speaks. Rather, a president is an emanation of staff, party, and the electorate.⁷²

The holidays are a prime opportunity for the bonding of president and citizens as they partake in the shared traditions of Christmas. In his book on symbolic leadership Orrin Klapp defined symbolic leaders as those may enjoy influence "not because of achievement or vocation but because they stand for certain things: they play dramatic roles highly satisfying for their audiences; they are used psychologically and stir up followings."⁷³ While

⁷¹ James C. Humes, Confessions of a White House Ghostwriter: Five Presidents and Other Political Adventures, Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc. 1997, 6.

⁷² Roderick P. Hart, Verbal Style and the Presidency: A Computer-Based Analysis, Orlando: Academic Press, Inc., 1984, 6.

⁷³ Orrin E. Klapp, Symbolic Leaders: Public Dramas and Public Men, Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1964, 32.

there may be little related to policy in the president's holiday greeting, the president can use the symbols of the season to build a reservoir of support that can be drawn upon later.

In Union of Words, Wayne Fields argues that bringing together the nation is a primary role of the presidency. In that role Fields sees the office as requiring its occupant strike a balance between citizens' desire to join together in greater endeavors while still maintaining their independent identities.⁷⁴

The most interesting observation that can be made from these cases is that despite the religious origins of the holiday the White House often steers clear of specific Christian references in the address. It may be that presidents use the holiday to build a general "civil religion" rather than touch upon specific faiths.

Picturing George W. Bush at the 2002 lighting, it is hard to imagine the tree lighting remarks having much policy import as the President stands flanked by the star of *I Dream of Jeannie* and Roy Clark dressed as Santa Clause. However, it is clear from Eisenhower's focus on foreign policy and George H.W. Bush's attempts to re-illuminate his "thousand points of light" that presidential politics can creep into any White House occasion.

⁷⁴ Wayne Fields, Union of Words: A History of Presidential Eloquence, New York: The Free Press, 1996, 19.

Appendix

For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
December 5, 2002

Remarks by the President at the Pageant of Peace Tree Lighting
The Ellipse

5:57 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. With the lighting of the National Christmas Tree, we observe one of the great traditions of our nation's capital. And throughout the Christmas season, we recall that God's love is found in humble places, and God's peace is offered to all of us. Laura and I are pleased to be with you at this Christmas Pageant of Peace, and we thank you all for coming as well.

I want to thank Barbara for hosting this event. (Applause.) I want to thank all the entertainers for making the night such a special evening. Thank you all for coming. (Applause.) I want to thank Peter and the board of directors and the production team for organizing this fine event. I appreciate Santa coming. (Laughter.) Looks like he needs a belt for Christmas. (Laughter.) Finally, I want to thank all the good people of the National Park Service. (Applause.) The National Christmas Tree is a living tree and the Park Service looks after it every single day of the year.

For nearly 80 years, in times of calm and in times of challenge, Americans have gathered for this ceremony. The simple story we remember during this season speaks to every generation. It is the story of a quiet birth in a little town, on the margins of an indifferent empire. Yet that single event set the direction of history and still changes millions of lives. For over two millennia, Christmas has carried the message that God is with us -- and, because He's with us, we can always live in hope.

In this season, we celebrate with our families -- and deeply miss family members no longer with us. Thousands of families in our nation are still grieving over the terrible losses that came to them last year on September the 11th. We pray for their comfort. We pray for the comfort for everyone who has lost a life this year.

Our entire nation is also thinking at this time of year of the men and women in the military, many of whom will spend this Christmas at posts far from home. They stand between Americans and grave danger. They serve in the cause of peace and freedom. They wear the uniform proudly and we are proud of them. (Applause.)

Laura and I wish every American family the blessings of this season, happy holidays, and a merry Christmas. And now we have the honor of lighting the National Christmas Tree. And joining us we've got two new friends, Samara Banks and Ben Schneller, to help us light this tree.

Now, if everybody -- you all step up here -- (laughter) -- get ready -- please join us in the countdown: Five, four, three, two, one. (Applause.)

END 6:02 P.M. EST