
Warren G. Harding "writes the worst English I have ever encountered," H. L. Mencken opined, after the president's inaugural address. "It is so bad that a sort of grandeur creeps into it....It is rumble and bumble. It is flap and doodle. It is balder and dash." Little wonder, then, that Harding was the first president to hire a full-time speech writer, Justin Welliver, a reporter and editorial writer for *The Washington Times*.

Every president except Calvin Coolidge has followed Harding's lead. As radio and television created opportunities for more direct—and intimate—communication between the commander-in-chief and his constituents, speech writers became indispensable.

In *White House Ghosts*, Robert Schlesinger, a veteran reporter who teaches at Boston University's Washington Journalism Center, draws on ninety interviews and voluminous archival material to examine the relationship between presidents and their wordsmiths. Engaging and informative, the book illuminates the role of rhetoric in shaping public perceptions of policies and presidential "personas."

"Seeking the origin of specific phrases" in presidential addresses, Schlesinger writes, "is akin to straining to find the source of the first noise in an echo chamber. It is unknowable and...the answer is ultimately irrelevant." Fortunately, he doesn't take his own admonition all that seriously. *White House Ghosts* is packed with delicious details about the origins of iconic quotations—and elegant expressions that were left on the cutting room floor.

Speech writers, Schlesinger suggests, are creative kleptomaniacs. For Ronald Reagan's speech commemorating the fortieth anniversary of D-Day in Normandy, Peggy Noonan, who had just finished reading *The Boys of Summer*, Roger Kahn's elegy to the Brooklyn Dodgers, decided to pay tribute to "the boys of Pointe du Hoc," the Army Rangers who helped free a continent by seizing the cliff overlooking the French coastline. Two years later, thanks to
Noonan, the president quoted from John Gillespie Magee's poem "High Flight," saying that the crew of the space shuttle Challenger had "slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God." When an official at the National Security Council, inspired by the telephone jingle, edited the text to have the astronauts "reach out and touch someone—touch the face of God," Reagan had the good sense to just say no.

On occasion, according to Schlesinger, speech writers helped make policy. The State Department blanched when Anthony Dolan wrote that the Soviet Union was "the focus of evil in the modern world." But Reagan decided to smuggle the phrase into a speech on domestic affairs (he inserted and then crossed out a line about praying that one day the Communists would discover "the joy there is in knowing & serving God"). And speech writer Tom Malinowski helped shift American aims for the war in Kosovo by prodding Bill Clinton to assert that a resolution must include the return of all refugees.

The reputation of presidents, during and after their tenure in office, Schlesinger implies, depends in some measure on their use of the bully pulpit. Speech writers' slogans stick. We remember "military-industrial complex," "The Great Society," "the silent majority," and "the axis of evil." By contrast, Jimmy Carter's distrust of slogans, and his penchant for editing out soaring rhetoric contributed to public perceptions of a "passionless presidency." George H. W. Bush's refusal to express emotion, use "I," or refer to his service in World War II, and his uneasiness with "the vision thing," reinforced apprehensions that his administration lacked definition and direction.

In the end actions matter the most. Sooner or later, the American people judge how well deeds have fulfilled words. If a gulf remains between rhetoric and reality, they tend to something. Sooner or later.

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