



How To Write An Effective Political Speech

Remarks of Bryce N. Harlow
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THE
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I bring you today an eternal truth: ghosts should be read, never heard.

There is no need to belabor the point. It will prove itself as I move along.

A nagging conscience implanted by a Methodist forebear compels me to add one item to the introduction.

You should know that your speaker is immortalized in the Congressional Record. There he stands as "a classic example of the crass stupidity of the War Department General Staff."

So I am here for one reason only: I was inadequately investigated. Now, that's hardly novel in the Washington area. The town's alive with such folk. In my defense I can say that at least I left the government.

When I was assailed on the Senate floor 23 years ago, it was not a total loss.

A document I had furnished the Senate Military Affairs Committee brought on the tribute. It was signed "Bryce N. Harlow, Major, General Staff Corps." A leather-lunged legislator, with typical disdain for punctuation, roared this out to America as, "Bryce N. Harlow, Major General, Staff Corps."

I understand that, excluding the Mexican Army and, of course, our World War II Air Force, it was the fastest promotion of all time.

I call it instant brass.

Unhappily the Army stubbornly held to promotion by merit, so the military promotion passed me by. But the exhilarating fact does remain:; the records of Congress will forever testify that, at least from the standpoint of the Senate, I am a two-star general.

Now, before someone else says it, I acknowledge that all of this insinuates that your speaker is not simply stupid, but also rank.

Well, as a professional wordsmith I have to own up to part of it. For, after all, in an ambulatory ballpoint there's not much room for a brain.

But take it from me -- in this odd speech-writing profession the one thing there just isn't is rank.

Indeed -- and now we are meandering into our topic -- the prime prerequisite for an effective political speech is a zeal on the part of the writer to live and die unsung and unknown.

There can hardly be a more selfless business, possibly excepting self-imposed poverty in the public's service. The spartan career of President Johnson is an example of sorts.

But I must and do stress this self-denial. For if the speech writer is consciously or even instinctively striving for the lime-light, his output will miscast the candidate and in time the press will depict him as a dolt.

Over the years I have known a bevy of word merchants who were wizards in composition but who served poorly because their egos selected their adjectives. This is to say that, for a political speech to be effective, it must, first of all, stand revealed to everyone, not as the offspring of others, but as the speaker's very own.

Here I tip my hat to President Johnson as contrasted to President Kennedy. Unquestionably Ted Sorenson is a gifted writer. Effective writing was also done for JFK by Arthur Schlesinger and Richard Goodwin. But continuously the press attributed this President's most memorable phrases -- and often, even his best thoughts -- to the scribes, so time and time again the President was postured more as a parrot than a pundit. President Johnson, ~~humble and self-effacing man that he is,~~ scratched this arrangement as soon as he gracefully could. One by one the ^{JFK press favorites} ~~headline hunters~~ glumly departed his staff, their bright blossoms shriveled by his shadow, and now it is rare for a Presidential speech to be traced by the press to a doubledomer in The White House basement.

Selflessness in the writer, then, I mark down as a first essential for an effective political speech. Next I stress a more conventional point -- a sensitive appreciation of the person for whom you're writing. This is not as easy as it may seem. In the first place, most political

leaders are complex and often contradictory in various ways. Also it is par for this course that a candid appraisal of your star performer's strengths and weaknesses is likely to miss his own estimates a country mile. And, as some of you may have learned, most political prime movers are prone to get a bit testy when their personalities and traits are microscoped by a subordinate.

Let's move this point forward a step or two. Even my cocker spaniel can grasp the idea that if a candidate is a mule skinner, his favorite expressions will have a different hue than those of a Boston Brahman. But our problem is rarely that simple. Usually it also includes traits of personality, energy, dynamism and speaking techniques.

How forcefully, for instance, does your man give a speech? Does he slam home his points both verbally and physically? Or does he instinctively lean toward the understatement and the reserved stance?

Does he have a guttural voice that converts even a bridging sentence into a sledge hammer? Or, do you have to dredge up cheer lines to punctuate a monotonous and spiritless delivery?

Does he go for earthy humor, and must it be heavy-handed so he can recognize a joke when he finds it in the script? Or, is he the kind who takes to the sly shaft and subtlety and the political stiletto?

Does he like phrases that soar, words that sing, and concepts that inspire? Or, is your man a pragmatic, horny-handed son of the

soil who feels crawly with high-falutin' talk that would sound put on around a cracker barrel?

Such are the considerations that control effective speech production by a conscientious and selfless writer. You simply must capture the way your man most comfortably speaks, else sooner or later he will goof it up, look foolish, and try to expiate his sin by firing the writer.

And please mark this down as a hard requirement: your speech writer can never hope to do this job right unless he is kept continuously at the side of the candidate in his meetings and as he speaks. You just can't write effectively for a man unless you know precisely how strongly he feels about issues, how he expresses himself in ordinary conversation, and what phrases come most naturally to him.

The effective ghost must be flexible, therefore, as well as facile and selfless. He must be able to write the florid MacArthur style and also the ascetic George C. Marshall style which abjured all adjectives, all adverbs, and even one excess sentence. He must be able to write one day as a plowhand and as Churchill the next. Sometimes you find these sharply differing tastes in one and the same person. Then effective speech writing becomes a nerve-racking test of measuring the daily appetite as well as the cadence and content and quality of the statement being prepared.

President Eisenhower is an interesting case in point. For his addresses he prefers caviar on one occasion, and meat and potatoes the next. Sometimes he likes them mixed -- and woe betide you should you serve up chili con carne when his taste buds are snapping for Oysters Rockefeller.

By contrast, imagine writing for Ev Dirksen or, if any of you recall him, his lovable companion in House of Representative days -- Congressman Dewey Short of Missouri. These oratorical giants have styles all their own. Their words and figures of speech shift from one day to the next, but their styles never. Adlai Stevenson was one of these. His style was unchanging, but his expressions were as variegated as the rainbow. Presidents Eisenhower and Johnson are uneven in this respect, for two simply reasons. Both are concerned more with content than with rhetoric, and both tend to get forensically ~~a little club-footed, to mix a metaphor,~~ ^{out of focus} when their western ~~twangs try~~ ^{isms struggle} ~~to masticate~~ ^{with} lofty New Englandisms.

Such imponderables simply have to be mastered by a speech writer if he is to serve his candidate well. Said differently, the most superbly written document will come out first as affectation, next as drivel, and then will badly embarrass a person whom it doesn't fit. Just picture, for example, one of Daniel Webster's great orations being delivered by Harry Truman. It might do down in history -- but believe me, way down.

A good speech has to be tailored to the audience too or, I should better say, to the speaking situation.

If your candidate is addressing the National Council of Churches or the Harvard faculty -- not to suggest that they are comparable -- a prosy speech, with long, convoluted sentences that give a thoughtful mood, deliberately avoiding the hortatory and dramatic, should be the product sought by the writer.

But if it is a political rally or a plowing contest -- a speaking situation in which your man faces a raucous throng of happy-to-lucky citizens, crying children, bleating sheep, roaring tractors and barking dogs, and has to shout his message against a 30-knot wind -- then the short crackling sentence, the uncomplicated thought, and the verbal whammies need to be assembled, else things like eggs or tomatoes or boos or, worst of all, a cold, stony silence and a dwindling crowd will be the lot of our hero.

Here let me cite one inviolable rule: the writer must discipline himself and his candidate never to evolve a script that runs too long. Most speeches bore an audience within 20 minutes -- I call it the buzz signal, when the audience starts visiting instead of listening. A 15-minute spiel is the best of all. But in any case never -- and I repeat never, should you let yourself fall so in love with your grand and glorious words and paragraphs that you just can't shrink the talk to the allotted time. The finest televised speech is destroyed utterly

and made ridiculous if the speaker's mouth is still agape and his arms still waving just as the boob tube switches over to Mr. Clean. Obvious this is, but it is one of the hardest tasks in writing, for most ghosts regard their own words as precious as gold and go into convulsions over reducing a speech to size. The first thing a good writer has got to lose, aside from addiction to principle, is editorial pride.

Over the years I have discovered that a political speech before a riproaring partisan audience by a prestigious party leader should be calculated at 90 words a minute, or at the most 100 words. Certainly in such a situation you must hold yourself to not more than 2,700 words for a 30-minute TV appearance. That comes to about 11 triple-spaced, legal size sheets typed in executive type. For a more sedate speaking situation most public figures I have written for can be paced at about 120 words a minute. That works out to some 14 pages of script to give a man a relaxed 30-minutes before the cameras.

But the point is, one of the gravest responsibilities of a writer is to protect his principal against having to jetpropel his speech, jettisoning his best lines in a desperate rush to finish on time; and, above all else, he must be protected against running overtime. To support that point I could show you some gawdawful scars, like the one President Johnson showed us in living color when he was degalled.

And let me stress that your writer must not allow himself to be a patsy on this score. When a speech comes down to the wire, many a candidate gets heated up over some glittering thought, some sure-fire punch line, some imperative need for making six dramatic points instead of five; and at the very last minute he is likely to take off like a banshee after a grand new peroration that has just got to be shoehorned into the script. If a writer abides this, his speaker will foul the whole thing by stretching out a carefully streamlined text a catastrophic half-minute or minute or more. I offer the warning that the writer's own physical, financial and professional future may well depend upon his having the guts at this critical moment to stand his ground and fend off the last-minute brainstorms and Scotch and soda ideas that will make his man talk too long. At the least he has got to insist that for every 100 new words added, an equal number must be exorcised elsewhere. I would estimate that one in ten of our present unemployed are writers who failed this test.

Another generality possibly of interest is that, the more noteworthy the person you are writing for, the lower key his text should be; and, conversely, the less your speaker amounts to, the more you have to dress up his script. When his client is a recognized leader, a writer has to be extremely careful to avoid ruining a speech by verbal overkill. Any President of the United States, for example, can get a cheer by saying simply, after presenting some terrible

problem, "Of this I can assure you, my friends: I shall do my best."

On a simple line like that most audiences will come roaring to their feet in salute to their President. Indeed, they will cheer anything at all their President says. But for Candidate Fenstermacher, who runs the local sewage treatment plant, such an assurance won't send anyone. He needs to pledge not only to do his best -- which in any circumstance is fairly dubious -- but he must go on to explain when he says he will do his best that he means he will devote all his waking hours, his personal fortune and his sacred honor. Perhaps this redundancy and exhortation from the unknown aspirant will stir an audience to give forth with a couple of polite claps and a Confederate yell.

Likewise with voice quality. A growling, dominating, bull voice calls for light writing. A soft squeak of a voice needs expository muscle. Again, the point is that the writer has to be able to flex to the speaker and courts disaster if he tries to force a speaker into the writer's style.

There is little reward, I am sure, in pontificating about speech organization here; all of you know it full well. It is my judgment that, whatever you want to say and however you decide to say it, the one indispensable is accuracy, the more so the more prominent your man. The grandly turned phrases in a speech will devolve into sound and fury signifying nothing, if they are so eagerly pursued that meanings are lost, fuzzy conclusions are allowed to be drawn, and factual in-

accuracies come creeping in. Precision far outweighs rhetoric in a speech, and lucidity serves far better than clever twists that more often than not divert attention from thoughts to words.

One celebrated writer confessed to me a number of years ago that he becomes so bemused with the orchestration of language that he can't help composing paragraphs in speeches that are sheer music, devoid of meaning. But he said pretty words fascinate him so that he can't bring himself to delete the useless ones from the text. A man like that usually serves better as an editor than a speech writer. Even then he has to be watched, else he will end up chasing after notes instead of votes.

One of the most damning things to be said of a man is that he makes a wonderful speech but no-one remembers a thing he says. That technique might do just fine at the Hopeful Souls Society, but it will gut a politician over at Rotary.

It takes some skill to balance a speech. Indeed, it is a real trial when you have a national broadcast forcing an economy of words, a continual honing of sentences and a sharpening of ideas in order to get a critical message across to the entire nation. My experience has been that the writer is driven remorselessly to compress the fluffy introductory material into no more than a sentence or so to allow room for the all-important message. It is always a revelation to me how superfluous a long, chatty buildup becomes when the object

of the whole effort is to fashion a verbal weapon to hit an intellectual target bullseye.

You will note that I haven't said word one about content. There's not much to say that can be useful, because every candidate goes about this differently. Some have research staffs dredging up issue material which in time is dumped on a writer to ~~convert it in~~ ^{insert and reorganize as} a speech -- like the first State of the Union Message I had to do, reducing 90,000 words to 6,000. Some candidates decide speech content wholly by instinct. Some let their writers do it for them, which is a dangerous way to live. Some dictate partial ideas, including isolated paragraphs and have the writer fill in the holes. Some give the writer an outline, or the central idea, and let him take it from there.

But however you or your friends prefer to gather the content, I simply say that, quite obviously, you can't have much of a political speech unless you have something worthwhile to say. And surely I need not admonish any of you public relationists that a speech crammed chock-a-block with detail will never be retained by the audience; it all comes out as a formless blob in the listener's mind, hence ruins most speeches. Three or four basic points hammered home time and time again offer the best chance to influence an audience.

Finally, I urge that your speech writer be whiplashed if necessary into reading every speech aloud at least once before the

candidate puts it on the air. This is the only sure way to detect clumsy expressions, pick up the deadly double entendres, and slice up sentences into proper speaking length. Of course, if the candidate can be induced to do the same thing at least once before the final delivery, it is all to the good. Over the years I have picked up countless constructions that would have bolixed a speaker had they been left in the text -- constructions that do splendidly to the eye but break teeth and twist tongues when said aloud.

Now, my friends -- after you have carefully done everything I have suggested and your man steps confidently forward with his crucial speech for the campaign, I trust you won't be surprised when it develops that that particular talk sinks like a stone. Because in politics, I have learned, what happens two hours before can make the most carefully prepared speech as worthless as yesterday's news.

And pity your writer. For in such a circumstance what ordinarily happens is, the candidate throws the script away and delivers extemporaneously a far better speech than he had originally. This explains why few writers live beyond the mid-point of any campaign.

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