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Speechwriting and its Influence on Presidential Policy in the United States of America

According to Medhurst and Kurt the U.S. Presidents have requested and received assistance with their speeches, messages, letters, bills, memoirs and the like since the beginning of the Republic¹. Meantime, Campbell and Jamieson underline that certain questions are asked by critics of presidential discourse. How can one speak of presidential discourse when, particularly in recent times, such discourse is crafted by speechwriters? How can one know what Presidents were trying to accomplish as they chose from among the available means of persuasion? Finally, how can presidential rhetoric be evaluated?

Making an attempt to answer these questions scholars underline the fact that since the earliest recorded history, the need to act rhetorically has generated ghostwriters². In the ancient Greek city – states, logographers, such as Antiphon and Isocrates, penned speeches for others to deliver, particularly for citizens who had to act as their own lawyers in the courts.

For a variety of reasons, the U.S. presidency has not been an exception to these long-standing precedents. From the outset, speechwriters played a significant role in generating and revising presidential discourse. George Washington had a variety of collaborators, including Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay, and his secretary, David Humphreys. Hamilton, for example, wrote a draft of his famous farewell, then edited Washington's revised version. Ghostwriters enabled Andrew Jackson to convert "*his vigorous but illiterate thoughts into respectable prose*". Jackson's important Nullification

1 Ritter Kurt, Martin J. Medhurst, *Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 4.

2 Term used by Campbell and Jamieson to describe speechwriters.

Proclamation of December 10, 1832, was written by Secretary of State Edward Livingston and bears both their signatures. Martin Van Buren assisted Jackson in preparing the Maysville Road veto message; Amos Kendall, Andrew Jackson Donelson, and Roger B. Taney helped prepare the 1832 Bank Bill veto message³.

Even the most eloquent Presidents have been assisted by others. As Campbell and Jamieson note, William Seward advised President Lincoln on his first inaugural speech and made a key contribution to its conclusion. Raymond Moley drafted Franklin Roosevelt's first inauguration address, and Louis Howe added its most memorable line, "*The only thing we have to fear is fear itself*"⁴. Likewise, given the consistent style of Roosevelt's rhetoric, Stephen Hess, the author of *Organizing the Presidency* found it to be startling that so many hands were involved in crafting the speeches.

Hess provides his reader with a detailed presentation of people from Roosevelt administration who were involved in the speechwriting process. Such comprehensive explanation provides a reader with the possibility of analysing the connection of Roosevelt's speechwriters to the American politics, and of following their impact on presidential policy. As Hess notes, drafts were prepared by teams or by one writer gathering submissions from a number of sources⁵.

Roosevelt's distinct style of speaking seemed to be made to order for speechwriters, but that phrases from so many sources could have taken on a unitary character can be explained only by his involvement in the process. In the

³ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words. Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990, p. 24. Read also Allan D. Loudon, *Speechwriting* in "Encyclopedia of Political Communication". London: SAGE Publications, 2008, p. 636.

⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

⁵ Stephen Hess, *Organizing the Presidency*. The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., 1988, pp. 30-32.

end, as Sherwood wrote of FDR's martinis, the President "*mixed the ingredients with the deliberation of an alchemist*"⁶. Additionally, the speechwriting operation often served also as a mechanism forcing decision.

Rosenman explained, for example, that in preparing a 1942 congressional message on economic stabilization Roosevelt first arranged a conference of the vice President, secretary of the treasury, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, director of budget, and the price administrator, whose suggestions and disagreements were presented to the President in a memorandum, then fought out in various forums, and eventually resolved by Roosevelt under deadline pressure⁷.

As far as other eloquent Presidents of the United States of America are concerned, Campbell and Jamieson emphasise that Woodrow Wilson's "*neutrality of thought*" proclamation of August 10, 1914, was originally drafted by Robert Lansing, a counsellor to the state department. In this case, it is obvious that speechwriters were too luminaries in the field of politics and were able to suggest political steps for the President.

A range of scholars pays particular attention to the John F. Kennedy cooperation with his speechwriters and, what is more important, to the political outcomes of such cooperation. As Campbell and Jamieson underline Theodore Sorenson's key role in creating the rhetoric of John F. Kennedy is well known, but less well known is John Kenneth Galbraith's invention of one of the memorable antithesis of his inaugural address, "*Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate*"⁸.

6 Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*. Harper, 1948, p. 214.

7 Rosenman, *Working with Roosevelt*. New York: Free Press, 1948, pp. 333-340.

8 Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds* ... p. 27.

Furthermore, as it is mentioned in *The Modern Presidency*, edited by Nelson W. Polsby, during the presidency of Kennedy the production of speeches again became a major White House activity. Instead of isolating this function on the organizational chart, as Eisenhower had, Kennedy returned to Roosevelt's practice and to the title that had been invented for Rosenman and had been continued through the Truman administration: as chief draftsman, Sorensen was special council and primary White House adviser on domestic policy⁹. That again proves the assumption concerning the high professional political skills of the President's speechwriters.

Having illustrated the examples of cooperation between the U.S. Presidents and their speechwriters, it came to light that speechwriting or ghostwriting has been part and parcel of the presidency throughout its history.

The scholar duet named above suggests a number of reasons, which explain why Presidents turn to ghostwriters. On the one hand, Presidents need to cast their ideas in careful phrases to avoid misinterpretation, a need that invites critical collaboration. On the other hand, on many occasions Presidents wish to incarnate their ideas in words that will move their audiences deeply and live through time, goal requiring extraordinary rhetorical acumen¹⁰. Rhetorical experts add that because the processes through which Presidents come to the White House do not ensure that occupants will have highly developed rhetorical skills, Presidents turn to ghostwriters for assistance.

Meantime, because of the demands of the office, which have increased greatly through the U.S. history, time to compose works to meet the rhetorical requirements may not be available. These tendencies, present from the outset, have been strengthened by the complexity of the issues faced by modern

9 Nelson W. Polsby (ed.), *The Modern Presidency*. New York: Random House, 1973, p. 84.

10 Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds ...* p. 24.

Presidents and by the increased rhetorical demands created by the development of the electronic news media.

This idea is broadened by Elvin T. Lim in his book *The Anti-intellectual Presidency: the Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush*. The author critically denounces the contemporary presidency in the United States of America and its attitude to the presidential rhetoric. What is more, Lim deems speechwriters to be helpers and assistants for the anti-intellectualism of the contemporary presidency in America. Having interviewed 42 presidential wordsmiths, going back to the administration of Harry S. Truman, Elvin T. Lim makes the important conclusion that prior to President Richard Nixon presidential speechwriters had policy responsibilities (Clark Clifford and Theodore Sorensen are prime examples).

However, with President Nixon came the institutionalization of speechwriting as a specialized role. The scholar underlines that now speechwriters were mostly recruited from field of journalism and often were far from the realm of policy. What they did was prioritize style over substance. Lim asserts that ironically, in the face of pressures for simplifying the readability of presidential texts, it would not even be the style that they preferred when they wrote in their own voices. Lim expresses his disagreement with such changes with the help of highly critical statements: *“the cult of simplicity endorsed by Presidents and speechwriters is anti-intellectualism, with a demagogic smile; it is a justification of anti-intellectualism that has blinded us to the gradual rot of our public deliberative sphere”*¹¹.

Having taken into account diverse scientific opinion as regards speechwriters and their role in modern presidency, one might agree with Campbell and Jamieson who raised an idea that ghostwriting is a given of

¹¹ Elvin T. Lim, *The Anti-intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 48. More on Nixon rhetorical skills read: Celeste M. Condit, Shannon Holland, *Richard Milhous Nixon*, “American Voices: an Encyclopedia of Contemporary Orators”. New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2005, p. 338-346.

presidential rhetoric and the presidency should be treated as an aggregate of people, as a corporate entity. From that perspective, “*an administration encompasses more than a single person, the President. In that sense, a syndicate generating the actions is associated with the head of state, including those deeds done in words*”¹².

Campbell and Jamieson assert that regardless of the fact whoever the author(s) may be, once the President takes authorial responsibility for them, the words become an integral part of that presidency. As evidence, they show some cases, when the use of various speechwriters has created presidencies that present different faces on different occasions. For example, the Richard Nixon who emerged from the pen of Patrick Buchanan was different from the Nixon who spoke in the words of Raymond Price or William Safire. Finally, their analysis shows how recurrent political exigencies, constitutional constraints, and rhetorical precedents affect each President’s rhetorical elbow room. Presidents Lincoln, Wilson and Roosevelt enlarged the scope of Presidential powers with convincing rhetorical justifications; on the other hand, the scope of Presidential powers was undermined by President Truman’s inadequate justification for the steel seizure, by President Nixon’s inadequate justification of executive privilege, and by President Ford’s inadequate justification of the Nixon pardon¹³.

Additionally, one might agree with Martin J. Medhurst who stresses the fact that Presidents represent the nation, not merely themselves. They speak on behalf of the people and represent the views of the nation as refracted through the lenses of party, ideology, political and economic constraints, and situational variables. They do not – and cannot – simply state their own personal views. They need good advisors and speechwriters precisely for this reason –so that their discourse represents the best articulation of policy or position possible. The

12 Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds ...*p. 32.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

nation expects – and deserves – no less. Finally, as scholar concludes, history has demonstrated the wisdom of having presidential speechwriters and advisors. All in all, presidential speechwriters have served the nation well. Presidents know that, which is why they continue to use them¹⁴.

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¹⁴ Ritter Kurt, Martin J. Medhurst, *Presidential Speechwriting...*, pp. 10-11.

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