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BOOKS

Presidential Words

In a Speechifying Season, a Look At How the Writer's Job Has Changed

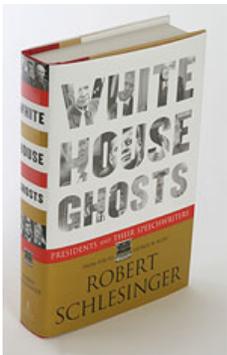
By Robert K. Landers

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White House Ghosts

By Robert Schlesinger

Simon & Schuster, 581 pages, \$30



The eight hours Richard Goodwin spent writing the speech one March day in 1965 were "the finest moments of my life in politics," and the address itself, delivered in the chamber of the House of Representatives that very night -- leading to the passage of the Voting Rights Act -- was perhaps the high point of Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency. "It is not just Negroes, but it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we . . . shall . . . overcome," Johnson said, making the black protest anthem his own rallying cry.

After the moving speech, reporters were told that Johnson himself had composed it and was responsible, in particular, for the inclusion of its most memorable phrase. But the speech and the phrase were, in reality, Mr. Goodwin's work. After a year of close collaboration with the president, he had drawn on his own knowledge of the man -- "not merely his views, but his manner of expression, patterns of reasoning, the natural cadences of his speech," Mr. Goodwin recalled in his 1988 memoir. The speechwriter had sought "to heighten and polish -- illuminate, as it were -- his inward beliefs and natural idiom, to attain . . . an authenticity of expression." Though Mr. Goodwin's hands were on the typewriter, "the document was pure Johnson."



White House/Lee Huebner

President Nixon meets with speechwriting staff, including (third from left) Patrick Buchanan and (by window) William Safire.

longstanding tradition back then was that the presidential speechwriter should remain largely out of public sight, his existence almost a secret shame, intimating, as a speechwriter for President Carter once put it, that the nation's chief executive was "too lazy or too stupid to decide for himself what he is going to say." President-elect John F. Kennedy, with his Inaugural Address in nearly final form, even pretended to be writing a first draft of it in longhand so as to give a leading reporter the impression that he, Kennedy, and not Theodore Sorensen or anyone else, was the author. But in recent decades, Washington journalist Robert Schlesinger observes in "White House Ghosts," the phantoms -- "for better or worse" -- have become far more visible.

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Mr. Schlesinger, who interviewed more than 90 speechwriters and other White House aides, has written an evenhanded account of the speechwriting for presidents, from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to George Walker Bush, with a chapter devoted to each presidency. His episodic history is fluent, well researched and richly detailed.

Raymond Moley, one of FDR's speechwriters during his first term, saw himself as more than a wordsmith, and rightly so. "My job from the beginning . . . was to sift proposals for him, discuss facts and ideas with him, and help him crystallize his own policy," Moley wrote in 1939. Implicit in this conception of the speechwriter's job, notes Mr. Schlesinger, was the idea "that policies and words are inextricably linked -- the former cannot be conjured in the absence of the latter." Moley, Sam Rosenman and other Roosevelt speechwriters were advisers as well as wordsmiths. But the job "has evolved," Mr. Schlesinger notes, "as television eclipsed radio as the nation's medium, as the White House staff grew from a handful to a sprawling group of specialized cadres, and, of course, as each president has dealt with it in his own way."

'WHITE HOUSE GHOSTS'

Read an excerpt from Robert Schlesinger's new book.

In Carol Gelderman's earlier study of presidential speechwriting -- the incisive and concise (221 pages) "All the Presidents' Words" (1997) -- she identified the Nixon administration as the one where the decisive break occurred. President Nixon "established the first formally structured

White House speechwriting office, called the Writing and Research Department," its ranks fluctuating from 12 to 50, part of what Nixon called the "PR group." But, said Ms. Gelderman, an English professor at the University of New Orleans, "the writers rarely assumed a consultative role in policy matters. Unlike their predecessors from Rosenman to [LBJ's Harry] McPherson, Nixon's writers had no regular access to the Oval Office." Indeed, the reclusive Nixon wrote some speeches virtually on his own. Mr. Schlesinger's account bears Ms. Gelderman out.

Speechwriters had little involvement in the making of policy and only limited access to the president in most of the administrations that followed Nixon's, even that of the "Great Communicator." "For eight years," writes Mr. Schlesinger, "Ronald Reagan's speechwriters had diminishing access to a president who was remote from even his closest aides. [But he] had presented a clear ideology and style so they had gotten his voice even though they might go months without seeing him." Between the ideological conservatives writing Reagan's speeches and the more pragmatic senior staffers in his inner circle, there was continuing tension -- tension that was constructive during the first term, in Mr. Schlesinger's view, but, with some different people involved, destructive during the second.



Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

Policy advisor and speechwriter Raymond Moley confers with President Roosevelt.

Reagan appreciated the importance of speeches to a successful presidency, but George Herbert Walker Bush, Jimmy Carter, and Gerald Ford were less concerned with the words they proclaimed, Mr. Schlesinger reports. Mr. Bush disdained "high-flying" rhetoric and never even practiced delivering his speeches beforehand. Mr. Carter "didn't much like the idea of using [speechwriters], ever," one of his wordsmiths recalled. President Ford "rarely

faced up to the fact that making a major address *is one of the most important things a President does*," said his chief speechwriter, Robert Hartmann. Journalist John Hersey, shadowing Ford for a week in 1975 much as he had shadowed Harry Truman in 1950, found himself "profoundly disturbed by what seemed to me the aimlessness of the speechwriting session" that Ford had with his writers in advance of an address at the University of Notre Dame. Hersey contrasted it with a speechwriting session of Truman's, "at which most of his principal advisers, including Dean Acheson, were present, and during which policy was really and carefully shaped through its articulation."

Presidential speeches are important not only as a means of educating and persuading the public but also, according to Mr. Schlesinger's father, the late historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "as a means of forcing decisions, crystallizing policies, and imposing discipline" within the executive branch.

During the presidency of Bill Clinton, there was something of a return to the older tradition of involving speechwriters in the making of policy, the author says. "There was more crossover between the speechwriters and policy aides than in any presidency since [LBJ's]. . . . Clinton preferred to work on speeches with aides who could answer substantive questions about policy." But Clinton also often preferred to ad lib his remarks rather than stick to his prepared speech, and he spoke so often that, in effect, he devalued his own words. In a typical year, by one count, he spoke in public 550 times, compared with Reagan's 320 times and Truman's 88.

Unlike his father and despite his own oft-derided propensity for verbal gaffes, George W. Bush has recognized the importance of speeches, notes Mr. Schlesinger. "He put a great deal of time and energy into speech preparation and faith in his speechwriters." As some of Bush's speeches illustrate, particularly in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terror attacks, a president's words do matter.

By departing from the older tradition, recent presidents seem to have inadvertently denied themselves the power of speechwriting to clarify their own thinking and aid in the making of policy. Arthur Schlesinger, to whom his son has dedicated "White House Ghosts," said he fully agreed with Carol Gelderman on "the necessity of 'uniting important policymaking and speechwriting functions in one trusted adviser.'" Robert Schlesinger refrains from endorsing that prescription, but his extensive study seems to provide further support for it.

Mr. Landers is a writer in Arlington, Va., and the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell" (Encounter).

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