It was the nation and the race dwelling all round the globe that had the lion's heart. I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar.
--Winston Churchill

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On speechwriting in the U.S.
by Charlene (Charlie) Fern
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My speechwriting career spans nearly two decades and more than half of my 25 years of professional work in communications and public relations. It began in July 1994 when I accepted a writing job in the Texas Governor's Office for then-Governor Ann Richards, who was campaigning for re-election against a political newcomer named George W. Bush.

The soaring summer heat proved no match for the firefight on the front lines of Texas politics that election season. Campaign rhetoric soared and ignited scorching political debate, but by November 1994 the election process had climaxed and ended in defeat for the state official who had only recently signed my first paycheck.

Texas, the 28th state in the union, boasts a storied history of feistiness and prickly decisions that led to controversial outcomes, broadly speaking, along the borders and boundaries of North America. The Lone Star State proved to be a thorn in the continent's side perhaps more times than modest history would care to count, or recount.

Nonetheless Texas would earn a place among modern history's higher ranks as the second most prosperous state in the U.S. and the 15th largest economy in the world (with a GSP of about $1.3 Trillion), comparable to that of India, Canada, South Korea or the Netherlands.

Such factors make Texas an ideal proving ground for emerging leaders whose aspirations include advancing to higher ranks and stations in Washington, D.C. and the White House, center stage, ever-shining in the geopolitical spotlight.

The southern plains of Texas proved to be fertile ground for the career of George W. Bush, whose family's roots run deep in politics and wide across the state, from Midland to Dallas and Houston, Texas, where 41st President George H. W. Bush and wife Barbara returned and retired after his term in office ended.

The younger Bush's political career began in earnest with his swearing in as the 46th governor of Texas in 1995. He became the first Texas governor to win consecutive four-year terms after capturing nearly 70 percent of the vote in the 1998 election. A groundswell of support carried Gov. Bush through a bitter U.S. presidential campaign to a hard-won victory, and in January 2001 he took the oath of office and became the 43rd President of the United States.

George W. Bush's five-year journey to the White House was mine as well as one of his speechwriters. January 1995 marked the beginning of a brighter future for my speechwriting career after the first brief chapter ended with Governor Richards' departure. I was offered a job with the incoming Bush administration, started working as a press aide in the Governor's press office and eventually settled in as chief speechwriter for First Lady Laura Bush until the presidential campaign was well underway in 1999.

I joined the White House speechwriting team a month after George W. Bush's inauguration in January 2001. I worked with some of the most superbly talented professionals I've ever met: Men and women who endeavored to translate ideas into words that could rise from a printed page and rally a nation to carry on with hope and purpose as the Bush Administration forged ahead with plans and public policy. We faced an unknown future together.

Nine months later - what seems like the blink of an eye in hindsight and history - the U.S. would grapple with the twin tragedies of terrorism and the prospect of a global war. And in Washington one week after 9-11, White House staff were faced with another threat: anthrax attacks on media and public officials, which killed five people and infected 17 others. White House staff were summoned to meet with the physician to the President, Brigadier General (Dr.) Richard Tubb, who gave us packages containing high doses of the antibiotic Cipro, which we were to keep with us at all times as a precaution.

I was part of a speechwriting staff that included Mike Gerson, Peter Wehner, David Frum, Matthew Scully, John McConnell, John Gibson, Gail Randall-Aspinwall and Ed Walsh. We were supported on all sides by a tremendous pool of talent with expertise in every field and subject matter. Most of us were housed in two office suites in the Old Executive Office Building (EOB), which is on the White House grounds adjacent to the West Wing offices. We worked in close quarters and developed tight-knit friendships that sustained us through the darkest days of 2001-2002 and eventually became permanently etched in our lives.

In one office you were likely to find Matthew Scully, John McConnell and David Frum collaborating on one of the President's major policy speeches. They were occasionally joined by chief speechwriter Mike Gerson -- but when Gerson was working on a speech, he was more likely to be found walking the long corridors of the EOB with a well-chewed pencil in hand or sitting in a quiet corner of a nearby coffee shop. Across the hall, I shared a suite of offices with deputy chief speechwriter Pete Wehner and the rest of the team: Ed Walsh, researcher Michelle

Brewer and Jen Reilly, who was the most meticulous fact checker I've ever known. The office of Mike Gerson and his assistants (Krista Ritacco and Anne Campbell) was the only one physically located in the West Wing - a fact necessitated the historic building's lack of space.

I was one of the team's least-experienced speechwriters, but I was uniquely qualified for the job as a veteran writer from Texas with firsthand knowledge of the public policy issues that President-elect Bush would use as a basis for his national agenda during the first term.

Gail Randall-Aspinwall was another veteran speechwriter from Texas who made the transition. During our work together in Texas, we collaborated on some of the best early speeches delivered by the Bushes, with memorable lines that delighted audiences and attracted national attention.

In broad terms, speechwriting is a trade that demands long hours of sober contemplation and tedious attention to detail, which is unfortunate because few of history's great writers would tolerate working conditions that mandated either daily tedium or sobriety.

There are writers -- and then there are wordsmiths. Speechwriters fall into the second category. The word itself, *wordsmith*, connotes discipline and brute strength: One who forges words from the elements of thought in the fire of inspiration and imagination. But as the use here of the word "imagination" might suggest, the practice isn't entirely mundane. There's a bit of alchemy in speechwriting.

History's most powerful speeches are held together by the obvious nuts and bolts of grammar and structure, but they also have some indescribable, almost magic, qualities that seem give them a life of their own, separate from either the writer or the speaker. Here, imagination appears to be the ingredient that elevates a professional trade to a practice of fine art. Few speechwriters can create works of art from purely monotonous ingredients. They need variety; a change of pace and scenery; balance. And levity.

Some of my favorite recollections include events at which our boss and his wife shared the stage. These settings provided ample opportunity for humor.

My colleague Gail would emerge from her office with a joke she'd written:

"When I first met Laura, she was a shy librarian whose idea of oratory was 'Shhh!'"

I'd write a response for the First Lady:

"When I first met George, he was a gregarious businessman whose idea of literature was the sports pages…"

When our proposed jokes met with approval from our bosses - and they often did - the resulting speeches were well and widely received. Some of the most memorable lines were reprinted in newspapers or magazines and earned some measure of immortality on the pages of history.

The Relationship between Speaker and Speechwriter

When you write speeches for someone for many years, it's inevitable that you'll develop a personal relationship, and George and Laura Bush were very special to me -- and always will be. I remember riding in the back of the security team's black Suburban with Laura Bush, headed to one of her first public speaking events as First Lady of Texas (a role she had been somewhat hesitant to embrace at the outset).

I sat quietly in the back seat that faced hers while she read through her notes and made last-minute edits to the final draft. When she was finished, she looked up from her pages and asked me with a wry smile, "Are you nervous for me?"

If I was nervous for her it was only because she trusted me with the words on the pages in front of her. I wanted every speech to be a success, because I wanted Laura Bush to be a success. She was my boss, but she also was a woman whom I'd come to respect and admire as a mentor. During our first four years of work together, I spent more time with the First Lady and her family than I did with my own family and friends.

My confidence as a White House speechwriter was a direct result of that experience. I'd also spent years researching and writing about issues that were important to Laura Bush and would become part of the national conversation -- issues such as early childhood cognitive development, child advocacy, education, literacy, public libraries, the arts, women's rights and women's health. I would continue to research and write about these topics in the White House.

The Role of First Lady

> "If the writer doesn't sweat, the reader will."
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> — *Mark Twain, American novelist, essayist and humorist*

The role of First Lady is unique in that she has no say in U.S. public policy, and the U.S. public has no say in the first lady's policies. While she is not an elected official, her role as the wife of one presents rare the opportunity to not only promote the president, but also to advance her own causes and interests before both domestic and international audiences.

The governing documents of the United States make no provision for the duties and responsibilities of First Lady. With no basis in Constitution, and lacking expressed power or ratified privilege, the role of the citizen-wife of the President has been thus defined by omission and limited - at least officially - to a life in private at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, with occasion to serve as the official hostess of the White House during formal gatherings and events.

Most First Ladies were comfortable living within those quiet confines. It wasn't until the early 20th Century that First Ladies stepped out of the shadows of tradition. It was the so-called dawn of the modern woman, and the wives of Presidents Truman and Roosevelt - and many of their predecessors - saw their roles in a different light.

The lack of any expressly stated duties was seen not as a limitation but instead as an opportunity to fulfill self-ascribed duties and responsibilities, which have taken on increasingly greater meaning and importance -- and public notice - with each new administration.

By the 1970s, the First Ladies had become the President's partner in marriage and politics, and, thanks to legislation signed by Jimmy Carter in 1978, they were finally given a staff and a budget to work with.

The paradoxical role of First Lady has stood the test of time, and her office in the White House's East Wing is a place where policies are developed and issues of domestic importance and global relevance are addressed -- under the leadership of a woman who is now considered by many to be the nation's foremost ambassador of goodwill with a powerful sphere of influence. Today the White House receives thousands of requests from around the world for the First Lady's public presence or opinion on matters ranging from the presidency to broader geopolitical issues.

The speeches I wrote for Laura Bush marked many auspicious occasions, including the first entire Presidential radio address delivered by a U.S. First Lady; and a Radio Free Afghanistan address after 9-11. Mrs. Bush gave powerful speeches at the UN and the OECD, to the Congress of the United States, the National Press Club, and embassies around the world; she educated audiences and introduced new policies and initiatives at White House conferences; and she performed just about every ceremonial duty one could imagine: U.S. Navy ship dedications, toasts and roasts, retirements, memorial services, and countless formal occasions for heads of state and other international guests.

The Role of the Speechwriter

I'm often asked about the process of writing a White House speech. Seasoned speechwriters spend a great deal of time getting to know their subjects and speakers. They adopt the same work schedule and carry out similar daily routines, they are collectors of stories and anecdotes from the daily lives of their speakers. And when possible, they gather firsthand accounts and attend relevant and important events -- in both personal and public life. Over the years I became an expert on the mind of Laura Bush. I knew exactly what she would say about nearly any subject -- and precisely how she would say it. Likewise, the West Wing writers learned as much about the President.

A well-known example is about George W. Bush's tendency to pronounce the word nuclear as "nucular." With that in mind, his speechwriters would likely avoid that word in speeches whenever possible.

Like her husband, Laura Bush has a fantastic sense of humor, and capturing it in writing is no easy task. The delivery has to be as good as the content. I had to know precisely how Mrs.

Bush used humor so I could accurately work it into a speech that she would deliver with confidence.

She preferred jokes based on real-life experiences. She liked to poke fun at some of the characters in the Bush family. She also liked reading excerpts from letters that children had written to her, which were always precious and often precocious. She had the ability to read a funny line from a child's letter with perfect timing and impact, and her audiences howled with laughter every time.

Speechwriters must accurately assess their speaker's strengths and weaknesses, building on those traits which lend credibility to both message and delivery -- and working around those that might limit the effectiveness of a message or communication strategy.

One of the lesser-known skills of a speechwriter is that of diplomacy. Crudely defined, White House speeches are remnants of battle, but these remnants are masterpieces of thought and balance; of poetry and prose. A speech is the product of intricate analysis and tedious fact-checking; of tough negotiations and at times hard-earned compromise. And the process of speech making is led and driven by the speechwriter.

The President and First Lady regularly met with their speechwriters to review proposals and discuss themes and content. Chief speechwriter Mike Gerson would assign speeches based on a number of factors including levels of importance, schedules, and a writer's specific areas of expertise. Frum, for example, handled most of the economic themes; Gibson handled defense, Scully captured the kinder gentler side of the President, and Wehner captured the ideas of faith, religion and conservative values and visions. I wrote the First Lady's remarks, but I also wrote the ceremonial and "Rose Garden" speeches and some remarks for Texas events for the President.

The Nuts and Bolts of Speechwriting

The writing of a speech begins with an assembly of a broad range of ideas, facts, figures, interviews and message points. Cabinet members are consulted. Trusted advisors and subject-matter experts are called in to provide their expertise and guidance on the overarching themes, key messages or tone and tenor.

And then the writers write.

A primary objective of speechwriting is to capture the true essence of a speaker and accurately convey it meaningful, relevant words -- their own words -- in a set of remarks that is finely whittled from huge amounts of data and information.

Once a first draft is complete, it's sent through the chain of command for review. That's when the trouble begins.

Many voices weigh in on a speech, and it is the speechwriter's job to ensure that the President's voice (along with his ideas and manners of speaking) isn't lost in the process.

After tedious rounds of editing, a final draft emerges. Before a speech went to the President's desk for review, it had to pass one final inspection by the White House fact checker. Jen Reilly was one of the youngest, brightest and most stubbornly meticulous people in the speechwriting office. She was a hard-working and well-liked young staff member despite the fact that it was her job to question the facts and challenge the figures we presented in the speeches that ended up on her desk.

With the single stroke of a red pen, Reilly could dismantle a sentence, render complex numbers useless and undermine the value of entire passages. She was a fearless defender of the President's best interests, and she would not hesitate to incite an intellectual riot among staff members if it meant that a statistic would be clarified, a number would be corrected, or a contradictory line would be deleted. No easy job for a 26-year-old, but she managed each task with patience and grace.

Only once did Jen Reilly truly upset the entire staff. It was on December 7, 2003, the day she lost her battle with cancer at age 27. In truth, Jen Reilly was loved by her team, respected by her peers and and trusted by her bosses.

White House speechwriters choose their battles wisely (as true in life as it is in politics). Some words are worth fighting for; others are mere distractions that stand between a speech and its highest calling. Speeches that achieve their highest calling often do without reason or explanation; without planning, preparation or practice. Their words rise from the printed page with the power to change an ideal or a philosophy; to lift antiquated belief systems from the steel rails of injustice; or to turn a community or country around and change the course of history.

I left the White House after 18 months of service, which is a short term or service (or tour of duty), but not unusually so. The average life span of a White House staffer's job is about a year and a half.

For some years after my departure I chose not to linger on those past experiences, in large part due to the series of tragic events that unfolded during that time -- events that permanently altered the identity, perspectives and course of the United States with its partners and allies around the world.

Looking back, I can no longer remember who wrote some of the greatest words that were spoken or what part I had in writing them. But that's as it should be, because those words never belonged to me; they belonged to the people who delivered them. At the end of the day the speech belongs to the speaker, and when it's all said and done the speech belongs to the ages.

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