

**“A classic for anyone who cares about speech or covers it.”**

— Al Hunt, Former *Wall Street Journal* and *Bloomberg News* Washington Bureau Chief

# The Political Speechwriter's Companion

**A Guide for Writers and Speakers**

**SECOND EDITION**

**Robert A. Lehrman | Eric Schnure**



**FOREWORD BY Senator Lamar Alexander**



**Advance Praise for**  
***The Political Speechwriter's Companion,***  
***Second Edition***

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# **The Political Speechwriter's Companion**

Second Edition

To Susan, Eric, and Michael, with admiration, love, and gratitude.

Robert A. Lehrman

To Nancy for her love, support, and, yes, patience. Lots of it. And to Benjamin and Daniel, who constantly test my power of persuasion yet were convinced I could write a book about it. Love you all.

Eric Schnure

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A Guide for Writers  
and Speakers

Second Edition

**Robert A. Lehrman**

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# Preface

**U**pdate.

The term implies taking a project on its way to irrelevance and making it timely once more.

In this second edition of *The Political Speechwriter's Companion*, written a decade after the original version, there is much of that.

One obvious example: In the first edition, none of the almost 200 examples could come from later than 2009. Of the 244 examples in this edition, more than half are.

The reason we include so many recent ones: This book is a hybrid, written in part for both students and those in the business of politics. We don't discard every wonderful example from the long history of modern political speech. But each year our readers—especially students—get a bit younger. A speech from 1998 resonates less with students born that year than one they've heard.

Still, we've done more than update. This edition differs from the first in more ways than dates.

A lot of those differences stem from the fact that while Bob wrote the first edition, this one results from the partnership between him and his longtime colleague, coworker, and friend, speechwriter Eric Schnure.

In a preface written together, it is awkward for us to laud each other. Suffice to say we both feel working together has been a joy. Whether brainstorming, trading drafts back and forth, or wrestling with how to expand the section on ethics, we wound up gratified by the experience—and with a better book.

One improvement comes because we expanded its scope. The first edition was basically a “how-to.” What kinds of speeches do politicians need? How can you write and deliver them effectively? This edition still focuses on those two questions.

We do that because we both believe in the value of political speeches done right. Of course, many political speeches are awful. But at its best a political speech doesn't just convey information or argue a point. It can be a dramatic monologue built around ideas, able to move, excite, entertain, and inspire. Even in the bitter 2016 election Americans saw skillful, moving, and thoughtful speeches from people in both parties.

Those speeches weren't typical, though, and the reasons are no mystery. Political speeches are usually written at breakneck speed, sometimes by committee, by young writers with little training, or by people whose main interest is policy, not language. Few books exist to help.



So our aim remains what it was in 2009: filling that gap. And not just for American politicians. Speechwriters and politicians use this book in Canada, Europe, Asia, and South America. We know that because they write us and send samples. Google Translate—thanks!

But while much of the book is about technique, there are six areas that are new and very different.

**The Age of Trump:** The first edition treated speeches from both parties the same. We pride ourselves on keeping what its reviewers called its “evenhanded approach.” But especially since 2016, the amount of falsehoods and—frankly—lies in political life has made us expand the discussion of ethics, and not just in Chapter 16.

**Technology:** Much of the technology that influences speech today existed in 2009. But the ease of researching, the reach speeches now have, and the existence of not just new websites but new avenues to communicate—of which the tweet is just one—influence much of the way politicians use speeches. That changes what we suggest in many chapters.

**Political Life:** Writing speeches doesn’t appear in a vacuum. Influencing it are the ways politicians live their lives, and the dynamics of an office. Readers will see more attention to those influences. Readers will also see a more anecdotal approach this time, with chapters laced with stories from our own lives and others. We want readers to see not just the language of speeches but the life that influences them.

**Humor:** We take advantage of Eric’s experience. Called by one reporter one of the “go-to guys” for political humor in Washington, he has worked on dozens of the roasts that are part of Washington life. We expand the chapter on wit, but also expand how we treat it in various segments of the speeches we describe.

**Persuasion:** Bob was reluctant to offer much detail about the theories of and research into persuasion, in 2009. We have expanded our discussion of those elements here, in part influenced by the interest from readers, but also because in a field dominated by persuasive speech, understanding what theory and research make possible changes what writers create.

**Other Views:** The authors make our views clear. We believe in simple language, use of story, a variety of ways to persuade, and other ideas. Not everyone agrees, so we have expanded the book, for example, to include a long interview with the distinguished author of *The Anti-intellectual Presidency*, Elvin Lim, who agrees with us on very little except the

importance of political speech. We want readers to examine his ideas unfiltered by our biases. And we offer a more nuanced view about other issues in the rest of the book.

Can you really learn to write speeches?

In a field where writers have traditionally learned on the job, it's not surprising that there are those who question the value of our systematic approach. It is the same question writers have asked about books on writing plays or short stories.

Systematic teaching seems to help most people, whether they're learning tennis, piano, or screenwriting. After teaching hundreds of students and seeing the results, we have no doubt. It does. As two people who have played and coached sports most of our lives—soccer and hockey—we try to teach speechwriting the way coaches operate. We could give soccer players a lecture on how to kick or trap. But as coaches, we take players onto the field and let them do a million touches. You will see this approach throughout the book, whether we cover the LAWS of speechwriting (language, anecdote, wit, and support) or the ways to apply those elements in the speeches most common in political life.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EXAMPLES

In virtually no sport is it enough to just play—or even practice. You have to watch others. A coach can tell you what to incorporate into your game. Examples *show* you. And because political speech is in the public domain, meaning we neither have to seek permission nor pay royalties for using them, this book is laced with examples of what others have done. You can't steal their language. But you can imitate their approaches.

Which is what all writers do.

Whether you are in class or in the White House, we want you to see what's worked. In our speechwriting course at American University, we see, semester after semester, that this makes a difference. You should read through and think about each example in the chapters that follow.

In the first few chapters, you will see us often draw from the speeches of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. For while media attention focused on their differences, political speechwriters should also see the similarities in rhetoric. But this book is not about just presidential speech. We draw our almost 250 examples from well over 200 speakers.

Because we learn not just from success but failure, some chapters use examples of speeches that did not work. But since the odds are that someone who writes a good opening is more likely to have closed well, and because by following one speech through we can examine how things planted in an opening recur later, you will see some speeches come back again and again:

Michelle Obama’s 2016 Democratic National Convention speech, for example, or Mary Fisher’s “Shroud of Silence” speech from the Republican National Convention in 1992.

To help readers learn, we have included a number of features. We’re grateful first to CQ Press and now to SAGE for suggesting, encouraging, and in some cases insisting on them.

FEATURES

- *ANNOTATED SPEECHES*: In each chapter, we examine a variety of techniques in isolation. But in real life, speeches use them in combination. To show how that works, we have worked with skillful designers to annotate excerpts so you can see how each one works without destroying your ability to read on.
- *INTERVIEWS*: We don’t have a monopoly on wisdom. So, in this edition, we have interviewed experts, including Professor Lim. Other interviews let readers see how some of the best speechwriters in the country go about their work, as well as the views of one of the leading consultants on political management.
- *BEHIND THE SCENES*: We don’t have a monopoly on experiences either. So this edition includes historic insights.
- *EXERCISES*: Over the years, we have found a number of exercises that allow students not just to read what we suggest but also to experiment to see if our advice works for them.
- *THE SPEECHWRITER’S CHECKLIST*: Most chapters are full of suggestions, but you don’t have to take notes. At the end of those chapters, you will find a checklist of the things you need to remember most as you are thinking, creating, and drafting speeches.
- *AS DELIVERED*: If this book were being published ten years ago, we would have to include a long section of speeches to study. The internet and YouTube have made that unnecessary. You can read, listen to, and watch online most of the speeches mentioned or excerpted in the chapters that follow. Each “As Delivered” box includes either an audio file or a video of each speech.

So far, we’ve examined what kinds of things we offer in the book. Of course, we would be happy if you read the book straight through and committed large swatches of it to memory. Not every reader has the same needs, though. Some of you may want to turn right to the chapter on delivery; others may be more

interested in structure, or the research on what makes arguments persuasive. That's fine with us. We've tried to make the book easy to navigate so that you can dip in and out of the text to quickly find the advice you need.

For those who do want to read it all, we have organized it so each section prepares you for the next. But there's a reason the word *companion* is in the title. Like we do with lifetime friends, you may want to spend time with this book, drop it for a while, then pick it up again. Readers have told us that is true for the first edition. We hope that will be the case in the decade ahead.

Whether you read from beginning to end or skip around, please don't forget the way this preface opened: Technique is important but not everything. As you read about antithesis, or analogy, or Monroe's Motivated Sequence, remember: A gift for language and passion for issues will contribute more to a speech than technique alone ever can.

And this book results from contributions made by many people other than the authors.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Faithful readers, in both the first and second editions of this book, you see us urge the absolute minimum number of acknowledgments you can get away with. But that's in speeches. This book is different. We owe too many people too much.

It is the custom with second editions to eliminate much of the editorial work valuable the first time around. That would have been a disaster with this one because there was so much new. We are grateful to Executive Editor Monica Eckman for seeing why for this book we needed an exception and grateful to the one she found, Lily Norton, for navigating us through the process; and to Sarah Wilson for making sure we met our deadlines, which we mostly did. We are grateful, too, for the work by former journalism professor and now editor Jane Harrigan. As she did with the first edition, she threw herself into not just what we wrote but what we thought in every chapter. We both relished and dreaded her long emails, along with comments and suggestions we ignored at our peril. Thank you also to Production Editor Bennie Clark Allen, Copy Editor Melinda Masson, Marketing Manager Staci Wittek, and Cover Designer Glenn Vogel.

We are grateful to five people known for the expertise who let us interview them so we could broaden the perspectives offered in this book: Sarah Hurwitz, Clark Judge, Elvin Lim, Jeff Nussbaum, and Rick Shapiro.

We are also grateful to the many speechwriters, friends, and academics who got right to work producing the stingingly honest critiques we wanted when we finished the first draft. Thanks to Brian Agler, Russ Block, Elizabeth

Gibson, Dan Gottlieb, David Lehrman, Ryan Myers, Mintaro Oba, Mary Robbins, Genevieve Rozansky, and Desson Thomson.

We are also thankful for the perspective of two top-notch journalists, Clark Hoyt and Doyle McManus. They offered a different perspective from other reviewers, and the book is better for it. We are grateful as well to David Murray, not just editor of *Vital Speeches*, the only magazine that reprints speeches that would otherwise escape notice, but also the founder of a vital resource and network for speechwriters: the Professional Speechwriters Association.

Naturally, we didn't just learn from those critiquing this book. We learned a lot from the brilliant strategist and media person, and now friend, the communications director for Vice President Gore, Marla Romash, and her successor, the equally talented Lorraine Voles. We learned from colleagues like Dan Pink, who writes so accessibly, and Ginny Terzano, who reminds us to get to the point. We've learned from the writings of others, especially the textbook of Stephen Lucas. In fact, readers should frequently visit [www.americanrhetoric.com](http://www.americanrhetoric.com), the website created by the indefatigable Lucas, author of *The Art of Public Speaking*. And of course, Alan Monroe. When Bob was hired to teach speech as a grad student, he used *Principles of Speech* (fifth edition) by Monroe and Ehninger. The ideas it contained shape Chapter 5 and our teaching. We have been involved with politics for much of our lives. This book is informed by every campaign and every political office we ever joined.

Do students understand that teachers learn from them? There hasn't been a class where we haven't learned from students not just how to be better teachers, but how to be better writers. When we look back, we take pride in knowing that alums of the class have been speechwriters for at least eight senators, Democrats and Republicans; governors; dozens of members of the House of Representatives; corporate CEOs; and university presidents, as well as officials in other countries. You will study some of their work in this new edition—and profit from their critiques as we wrote.

Finally, we are grateful to our families, Nancy (Epstein) Schnure, and Benjamin and Daniel Schnure; and Michael and Eric Lehrman and Susan Thaul. Every trip to California, hockey practice, or quiet dinner at home missed so we could spend time on this book came with a profound measure of guilt—and gratitude. And to Nancy and Susan: Your views have influenced everything we write. We two book partners are lucky to have found partners willing to share their lives with us—and tolerant of the times this book has kept us away.

We can't emphasize how grateful we are to Senator Lamar Alexander, who not only agreed to write the Foreword, but who turned in a witty piece of writing that enriches the book.

Thank you all.

# Foreword

## Senator Lamar Alexander

I once spoke to an audience that included “Roots” author Alex Haley, who was a marvelous storyteller. Afterward he politely suggested, “If when you begin talking, you would say, ‘Instead of making a speech, let me tell you a story,’ someone might actually listen to what you have to say.” Ever since, I have tried to begin any speech with a story, often *that* story. As Robert Lehrman and Eric Schnure recommend: “Begin with some wit—and leave them eager to hear what comes next.”

It helps if the opening story defines your purpose. When introducing myself to Republican audiences in Iowa during the 1996 presidential campaign, I began with: “*The New York Times* once wrote that ‘Mr. Alexander grew up in a lower middle class family in the mountains of Tennessee.’ When I called home that weekend, my mother was reading Thessalonians to deal with what she considered to be a slur on the family. ‘Son, we never thought about ourselves that way,’ she said. ‘You had a library card from the day you were three and music lessons from the day you were four. You had everything you needed that was important.’”

If my purpose was to define a problem at a United States Senate hearing: “Last month, Becky Savage broke our hearts when she testified about the opioid crisis. One night her two high-school age sons returned home after graduation for a party in their basement. The next morning, she found both sons dead. Someone had brought opioid pills to the party and mixed them with alcohol. “My boys were not alcoholics,” Becky said, “They were not drug addicts. They were the victims of this terrible public health epidemic that is affecting nearly every community.”

Or, if I was arguing that bipartisan cooperation in Washington, D.C., still was possible: “In the Fall of 2016, I telephoned Vice President Joe Biden. “Joe,” I said, “Our ‘21st-Century Cures’ bill is stuck. I’ve got President Obama’s precision medicine provision in it. Your cancer moonshot is in it. Mitch McConnell’s regenerative medicine is in it. Paul Ryan has found a way to pay for it. But I can’t get the White House’s attention. I feel like the butler standing outside the Oval Office with a silver platter, and no one will open the door and take the order.” Biden replied, “If you want to feel like the butler, try being vice president.” Then we went to work together and, a few months later, President Obama signed what Senator McConnell called “the most important piece of legislation of this Congress.”

After defining the problem comes the solution. When I was elected governor, John Seigenthaler, editor of *The Tennessean*, gave me "The Twilight of the Presidency," a book by President Johnson's press secretary, George Reedy. In it Reedy says the president's job is to (1) See an urgent need, (2) Develop a strategy to meet that need, and (3) Persuade at least half the people you are right.

At least since Aristotle, the speaker's job has been to persuade. This is easier if the listener understands who you are and what you are talking about. I have been surprised at how many visitors to my Senate office never properly introduce themselves or tell me exactly what they want and why. I am also surprised by the number of staff members who are unable to write jargon-free sentences describing who my visitors are, what their problem is and what I should do about it. Staffers able to write clearly move up quickly. Lehrman and Schnure call such writing "human English."

Fewer words encourage clarity. In 1967, after he spoke for 45 minutes in his maiden speech to the U.S. Senate, Senator Howard Baker Jr. asked his father-in-law, Senator Everett Dirksen, "How did I do?" Dirksen replied, "Howard, occasionally you might enjoy the luxury of an unexpressed thought." I once overheard President George H. W. Bush ask his wife, "Bar, what should I talk about?" "About five minutes, George," she replied. David's encounter with Goliath is told in 327 words. It only took President Lincoln three minutes to define the Civil War in the Gettysburg Address. Lehrman and Schnure: "Length guarantees neither clarity nor nuance."

The authors stress the importance of delivery. Unfortunately, in my experience, practice does not always make delivery perfect. In my second try for the presidency, I would say, "We need less from Washington, and more of ourselves." My phrase resonated so poorly that I was out of the race almost before it started. A few months later, I heard Margaret Thatcher use the same phrase. The audience was thrilled. Delivery matters. As Marshall McLuhan said about television, the medium is the message.

There are ways to work around the challenges of delivery. In 1992, I was invited to address the Gridiron Dinner, a Washington, D.C., gathering of national media and other big shots. Texas Governor Ann Richards was to be the Democrat speaker. I knew immediately that I was in trouble. Governor Richards could light up the house with her speeches. So instead of speaking, I wrote funny lyrics to country music tunes and sang them while I played the piano. The audience applauded both her speech and my music.

Lehrman and Schnure discuss the "uneasy partnership between speakers and writers." For a while, I was Senator Baker's speechwriter. The senator never criticized my work, but he also never delivered what I had written. "Senator," I said, "We have a problem." "No we don't," he said. "You write what you want to write, and I'll say what I want to say." While Senator Baker and I

got along swimmingly after that discussion, my staff has learned to avoid that dilemma. They read what I have written, listen to what I have said and then regurgitate it in a better-organized form. From that I am usually able to compose a good speech.

When asked to write a column for *The Washington Post*, Ruth Marcus sought advice from David Broder, the Pulitzer Prize winning reporter. “One idea per column,” Broder said – which is also good advice for a speech.

Then there is the eulogy. After witnessing one senator memorialize another in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, I added this rule to “Lamar Alexander’s Little Plaid Book:” “When asked to speak at a funeral, remember to mention the deceased as often as yourself.” For a near perfect eulogy, devoid of the personal pronoun despite their intimate relationship, read Jon Meacham’s tribute to President George H. W. Bush.

Speeches are like music. The speaker experiments with words and phrases and delivery and then adjusts based upon what resonates with the audience. No one precisely understands this mystery. After World War II, Pee Wee King and Redd Stewart wrote lyrics to an everyday melody, “The No Name Waltz,” and delivered their song to the Nashville publisher, Wesley Rose. Rose changed one phrase: “Oh, the Tennessee Waltz, the Tennessee Waltz” became “I remember the night and the Tennessee Waltz.” Did that simple change of phrase help the song sell 5 million copies and become the anthem of country music?

In this handbook, Lehrman and Schnure offer a handy framework of suggestions for all those who are, in Bill Moyer’s phrase, “fooling with words” to create political speeches that capture the audience, present a problem and solution, and persuade at least half their audience that they are right. All of us who write and speak and try to help others do so should be grateful.

**Senator Lamar Alexander  
Maryville, Tennessee  
February 1, 2019**





# Introduction

## Why Speechwriting Matters

On July 21, 2016, during a presidential campaign reporters regularly called “poisonous,” Donald Trump took to the stage in Cleveland’s Quicken Loans Arena against a backdrop of American flags, smiling the close-lipped smile that has been his signature, and accepted the Republican Party’s nomination for president.

Exactly a week later, in Philadelphia’s Wells Fargo Center, Hillary Clinton walked onto the stage, kissed her daughter, and waved to the delegates before accepting the Democratic Party’s nomination for president.

If anyone expected the bitter atmosphere that dominated the 2016 primaries to evaporate after those conventions, they kept it to themselves. Even now, neither author of this book sees anything approaching unity in American politics.

But on those two nights, while Trump and Clinton spoke harshly about each other, they and their writers were united about one thing: the techniques that largely form the subject of this book.

Both used modified versions of Monroe’s Motivated Sequence, the five-step problem–solution structure, ending with a call to action often offering choice.

**TRUMP:** We must break free from the petty politics of the past. We must choose to believe in America.

**CLINTON:** America’s destiny is ours to choose. So let’s be stronger together.

Both used the approach to language favored by politicians in both parties: short words and sentences easy for average folks to understand. The readability gauges we explain later show Trump speaking at a ninth-grade reading level. While journalists have criticized him for “dumbing down” rhetoric, Clinton’s speech actually registered below sixth grade.

Both made liberal use of repetition, like alliteration—a succession of words beginning with the same sounds . . .

**TRUMP:** If you want to hear the corporate spin, the carefully crafted lies, and the media myths . . .

**CLINTON:** Enough with the bigotry and the bombast.

. . . and especially anaphora or epistrophe in what some politicians call “litany”—the series of sentences beginning or ending the same way, allowing speakers to build in power.

**TRUMP:** This administration has failed America’s inner cities. It’s failed them on education. It’s failed them on jobs. It’s failed them on crime. It’s failed them at every level.

**CLINTON:** If you believe that companies should share profits with their workers, not pad executive bonuses, join us.

If you believe the minimum wage should be a living wage . . . and no one working full time should have to raise their children in poverty . . . join us.

If you believe that every man, woman, and child in America has the right to affordable health care . . . join us.

If you believe that we should say “no” to unfair trade deals . . . that we should stand up to China . . . that we should support our steelworkers and autoworkers and homegrown manufacturers . . . join us.

If you believe we should expand Social Security and protect a woman’s right to make her own health care decisions . . . join us.

And yes, if you believe that your working mother, wife, sister, or daughter deserves equal pay . . . join us . . .

Let’s make sure this economy works for everyone, not just those at the top.

Both used their families to reassure listeners that they share their values.

**TRUMP:** My dad, Fred Trump, was the smartest and hardest-working man I have ever known . . . It’s because of him that I learned from my youngest age to respect the dignity of work . . .

**CLINTON:** I’ve had to pick myself up and get back in the game. Like so much else, I got this from my mother.

And that just scratches the surface.

This second edition, like its predecessor, aims at showing speakers and speechwriters on both sides of the aisle how to write convincing, substantive, exciting, inspiring, evocative, and effective speeches. Even in today’s polarized political climate, most techniques politicians use are largely the same as they were in 2009.

But this edition involves many changes from the first.

As it should. We would be pretty disappointed if we learned nothing from another decade spent working together.

One change stems from new experiences. Before 2009, we taught only Americans. Since then, we have led workshops in Asia, Europe, and Canada. With years spent testing how students and politicians around the world use *The Political Speechwriter's Companion*, we are both excited about putting what we've learned to use.

Meanwhile, readers who have used the first edition will see a second change.

While the first edition focused almost exclusively on technique, it would be naïve—myopic—to do that this time. Political speech involves ethics. In 2016, the changes in what characterizes responsible political speech went far beyond the idea that a president can communicate in a tweet. We saw a staggering amount of misleading or false passages and, in many cases, sheer lies.

Telling the truth also involves technique. What constitutes credible sources? How do writers avoid the ad hominem attacks, hasty generalizations, unsupported assertions, and other fallacies that dominated the campaigns in 2016? How should a campaign respond when what its candidate says turns out to be wrong?

We cover these often disheartening issues because students, journalists, and people in political life bombard us with questions about them. “Is this what you did?” they ask. We have expanded this edition to include more discussion about the way ethics and technique merge.

We do our best to do that without taking sides, though. Yes, we both started in Democratic politics. But we are resolutely nonpartisan when we teach, and the same goes for this book. Naturally, questions about ethics aren't the only ones we try to answer. And we start with one with an answer readers may think obvious.

## **DOES SPEECHWRITING MATTER?**

Former Bill Clinton speechwriter Jeff Shesol once wrote about the time after one of Clinton's speeches when Clinton threw an arm around him and said, “Here's the guy who typed my speech.” For those who believe speechwriters are glorified stenographers, the speechwriter's role might not matter. And for those who believe politicians are often empty vessels—actors—it might only matter as one more example of sleight of hand, written by those who couldn't care less about truth.

The authors have a different view. We see political speechwriters, including those whose views we detest, almost uniformly working for people they believe communicate truths that matter and making sacrifices to do it. They write about the biggest policy debates of the day. Out of their printers come

the arguments that support or oppose a war, universal health care, or a \$700 billion economic “stimulus.” They help articulate the passionate debate about everything from abortion to, well, the value of wooden baseball bats, as Senator Dick Durbin did for one speech. They give voice to our emotions at events important to us all. When the two of us worked in the White House for Vice President Gore, we wrote his speech commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the moon landing, and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela.

We wrote eulogies for firefighters who died in action. On Bob's fiftieth birthday, he spent the entire day at the White House writing a speech on the value of fatherhood. He missed the party his family was putting on for him, yet still found it worth doing. Once you accept the legitimacy of the idea that someone else should write what politicians say—more on that later—these are not trivial assignments.

And they require both skill and art—something speakers are not always willing to admit.

In 1988, when one of us (Bob) wrote Ed Muskie's tribute to Jimmy Carter for the 1988 Democratic National Convention, Muskie walked to the podium carrying Bob's speech.

Before starting, he turned to Texas governor Ann Richards, who had introduced him. “Madame Chairperson,” he said, “as you know, I like to do things my own way. So I will complete this assignment reading from my own handwritten notes.”

He then read from the 20-point text Bob had handed him.

At other times, it's the writer who feels uncomfortable revealing the truth. Eric remembers the first speech he wrote for Al Gore. He didn't know how to react when, at the event, he started getting compliments. He asked the communications director, Lorraine Voles. Her answer: “Take the credit. God knows you're going to get blamed a lot.”

We understand both sides. Staffers want to protect the boss. And for speakers, performing what others have written can make them uneasy. They think the crowd would be disappointed to know the truth, as if they were claiming credit for eloquence they don't have. Later in this book, we will pay more attention to the view that, as Professor Elvin Lim argues in his book *The Anti-intellectual Presidency*, speechwriters write memorably at the expense of substance. Presidents, he suggests, might “temper the scholarly animus towards the rhetorical presidency” if they spoke “more like Washington and Jefferson with greater frequency and less like Ford and Carter with equal frequency.”<sup>1</sup>

There are plenty of weaknesses in political speech. But—like Aristotle—we think it's possible to entertain, excite, move, and persuade listeners in a

responsible way about issues that matter. And because the issues matter, so does the work.

## WHY THIS BOOK?

Do a search. Go to the day's *Congressional Record* and scroll down through the House and Senate speeches. A distressing number begin with mind-numbing and fatuous acknowledgments, outline ideas in generalities, and finish with a flurry of clichés. To watch members debate in the House of Representatives too often means enduring an endless succession of platitudes uttered in a monotone by speakers of both parties—neither has an edge when it comes to terrible rhetoric.

And there exists very little about how to write them. On Amazon, you'll find anthologies, textbooks on public speaking, "how-to" books aimed at people in corporate life, books about how to be a great high school debater or how to give a TED Talk or sermon, and memoirs by political speechwriters. But when it comes to how one writes a political speech, the first edition of this book has stood almost alone.

And that is true of this edition. Much of the book covers subjects you will find in a public speaking text. But it is still alone in examining how they suit the unique demands of political life.

Those demands affect more people than you would think. When we include those running for, say, city or township office, it rises to well above five hundred thousand.

That doesn't include the hundreds of thousands who work for them. While we hope this book is useful for anyone interested in rhetoric, it is specifically for the students taking speech, communications, and political science courses and for those in public life: state representatives and state senators, governors, senators and members of Congress, cabinet officials, mayors, and city council members.

It is a book for an eighty-year-old senator who's decided to be more compelling—and for the twenty-year-old running for state assembly. While we often speak directly to speechwriters, the book is aimed equally at politicians who write speeches themselves, or just want to see what they can demand from their staff. Which leads to a third question.

## WHY FOCUS ONLY ON POLITICAL LIFE?

The simple answer: We want to write about something important—and important to do well.

Americans often look at politics with contempt. "That's just politics," they say. The word is an insult, sometimes understandably. Over the last ten years,

only 26 percent of Democrats and 11 percent of Republicans answered yes when asked if they “trust government.”

Politicians don't always deserve the insults. The two authors hang around lots of them. They are complex, nuanced people; often surprisingly introspective; and passionate about issues. They chafe at the limits politics imposes on their freedom to express what they think, to be both substantive and inspirational—and win reelection.

And while they've chosen a heady occupation, they pay a price: a bifurcated routine in which their families live hundreds of miles away while they rent tiny apartments in state capitals or Washington, staying for days they are in session; in which weekends mean rushing back to the district to race from pancake breakfasts to ribbon-cuttings to fundraisers as part of the perpetual campaign of political life; in which a small battalion of aides schedule their days, transport them to and fro, write their letters, and sign their names while leaving no time for them to go to their daughter's lacrosse game or read something besides a stack of memos.

In the White House, we used to be amazed by the briefing book aides handed Al Gore each night, dividing the next day into fifteen-minute segments from the moment he stepped into his limo (“7:30 a.m.: CIA briefing”) to the moment, often near midnight, when he returned to the residence. Once one of us asked him how he got the time to explore any of the issues he dealt with.

“You spend the intellectual capital you come here with,” Gore said, in his careful way.

How to change political life is beyond the scope of this book. How to make speeches better so they reflect that intellectual capital is not.

But we'll examine that question in practical ways—ways useful for people learning on the job. To be useful means sacrificing depth. It means seeming to suggest formulas rather than encouraging originality. And it may seem like we ignore the large issues that dominate a politician's day to focus on technique. We don't mean to. Even Mozart needed to practice scales.

What are the scales and arpeggios of political speech? Let's begin by looking at the kinds of speeches politicians give; how their needs differ from, say, those of the Exxon CEO or the Harvard University president; and what skills they and their writers must have before opening their laptops and writing the first word.

PART

# I

## LAYING THE FOUNDATION





## 1

## The Political Speech

Denver. November 1994.

The motorcade heads downtown past snowbanks while police cars with flashers on hold back traffic. Al Gore, then vice president of the United States, is on his way to speak to the Council of Jewish Federations. The speech is one of four on his schedule that day, all written by both Bob and Eric, calculated to get the Clinton administration out of trouble. Republicans won control of Congress in the disastrous elections two weeks earlier, prompting speculation that Bill Clinton would abandon principle and move to the right.

The other day in Jakarta, Indonesia, someone asked Clinton about a Republican proposal for a constitutional amendment allowing prayer in schools. The president said he would “not rule anything out.”<sup>1</sup> The *Washington Post* reported this response on its front page, outraging Jewish groups, and we’ve hastily scheduled this speech to reassure them. Much of the speech will do that, but right now Bob worries about the opening.

A heel injury has forced Gore to limp toward the podium before speeches, supporting himself with a flamboyantly orange cane. Since the accident, he likes to start speeches with a string of heel jokes. We wanted to find a Jewish one, but nothing seemed appropriate until our intern, Julie Fanburg, came down from the library with a brilliant discovery.

That week’s Torah portion was about Jacob, who was born grasping the heel of his twin brother, Esau. Jacob—*Ya’akov*, in Hebrew—actually means “heel”! Perfect! Eric writes an opening.

Now in Denver, Bob’s not sure. These are mostly secular Jews. Will they find it too arcane? Inside the auditorium, Gore asks if the crowd will get it. Bob decides to take a chance. They should, he says. Gore gives him the wordless stare that means he’d better be right.

At the podium, though, Gore starts out tentatively. “This may be a stretch,” he says. Uh-oh.

But now he’s locked into the joke. “I’m told there’s a special biblical significance to my appearance this morning, given my heel injury,” he says, overexplaining because he’s unsure. “The Torah—.”

The audience explodes with laughter. Bob is startled. So is Gore. But he isn’t too taken aback to improvise. “I hadn’t *realized*,” he says, pretending absolute incredulity, “so many of you *read* the— . . .”

More laughter. “Jacob was born grasping—I say this for those *few* who have not read— . . .”

Now everybody’s roaring. Staffers are high-fiving Bob. *You guys wrote that? Great!* Finally, he’s relaxed.

Can one, somewhat serendipitous remark really matter as much as Gore’s policy points? Of course not; but for politicians, speeches are about both policy *and* personality. Is the politician smart? Funny? Compassionate? Voters care about these questions, so politicians must. A joke can mean a lot.

Gore’s four speeches that day took him from Washington to Denver, where in addition to the Jewish Council he talked to a Native American convention. Then he flew down to Orlando for a meeting of Florida Democratic Party chairs, then to New York for another Democratic group meeting before heading back to Andrews Air Force Base. Not many people other than those in the White House—or running for it—go racing around the country to speak, living large chunks of their lives at thirty thousand feet.

Beyond the high-flying life and the national profile, though, Gore’s speaking needs mirrored the needs of every candidate and public servant from Congress to state legislatures to local school boards. In fact, those needs make political speech unique.

## POLITICIANS MUST SPEAK MORE

In national politics, four speeches in a day constitute a moderate load. Even first-term House members often speak more: at a prayer breakfast, at the caucus, on the floor, on the steps of the Capitol for off-the-cuff remarks to visiting school groups—and, after adjournment, maybe at a meeting of shop stewards or in a nearby restaurant for a fundraiser.

It is a routine both authors have lived, and it’s unique to politics. We know because while we specialize in political speech, we have also worked full time for and consulted with some of the biggest corporations in the world—among them, General Electric, Google, Pfizer, Texaco, American Express, Marriott, and Airbus. Many corporate CEOs believe speaking

once a week is a lot. While writing this chapter, we looked back at the White House index covering our years together. In two years, Al Gore spoke 556 times, largely from texts that we'd written. And those were just the prepared texts; politicians often speak using only a few talking points, or nothing at all.

Their lives weren't always like this. In his book *The Rhetorical Presidency*, Jeffrey K. Tulis calculates that from George Washington through William McKinley, American presidents spoke in public about ten times a year—and almost never about policy.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, especially during campaigns, even a state senator might talk ten times a day.

Speaking so often creates special needs. First, politicians need material they can recycle. Everybody knows that's true during a campaign, but these are the days of perpetual campaigns. Senators and their writers cannot possibly generate enough speech drafts to cover every appearance. They wouldn't want to even if they could. What politician with half a brain would have a formal text folded inside a jacket pocket for an intimate audience of a dozen well-heeled supporters at a fundraiser? The solution: a "stump," a set of remarks politicians deliver so often they can perform them without notes.

Sometimes politicians resent that option. In 2008, a reporter asked Michelle Obama if she got bored giving the same speech over and over again.<sup>3</sup> "Yeah, absolutely," she said.

But she did it. Most politicians eventually see that the sheer amount of day-in, day-out speaking makes recycling necessary.

This is true even at the highest levels, with politicians who have not just a speechwriter but a speechwriting team. So, for example, on July 14, 2017, Vice President Mike Pence opened a speech to the Retail Advocates Summit this way:

And I bring greetings this morning from a friend of mine, who's a businessman who knows just a little bit about retail, who's fighting every single day to unleash a new era of American opportunity and prosperity. I bring greetings from the forty-fifth president of the United States of America, President Donald Trump.

Later that day, he opened this way, talking to the National Governors Association:

And I bring greetings today from my friend, a champion of federalism who is fighting every single day to restore power to the states and to the people, the forty-fifth president of the United States of America, President Donald Trump. (Applause.)

In the same speech, Pence mentioned the major issue for that week: health care.

Every day Obamacare survives is another day the American economy and American families struggle. We all remember the broken promises that made it possible for Obamacare to get passed. You remember them? They said if you like your doctor you could keep them—not true. They said if you like your health insurance you could keep it—not true. We were told that health insurance costs would go down. That one wasn't true either.

Three days later, he talked at a Healthcare Roundtable. Here's what he said:

We all remember the broken promises of Obamacare. I have Dr. Price here. He and I were both members of Congress when the debate over Obamacare happened in the Congress seven years ago. I can still hear those promises ringing in my ears, can't you? If you like your doctor, you can keep them—not true. If you like your health insurance, you can keep it—not true. The cost of health insurance would go down if Obamacare passed—not true.

Does this kind of repetition seem unimaginative? Lazy? It's not. It allows speakers to use an effective bit more than once and, like actors in a play, to become fluent at it. Recycling material is smart.

That heavy, never-ending speech load leads to a second necessity: Politicians must rely on material prepared by others. Clearly, people delivering hundreds of speeches a year can't write them all. That's true even for skillful writers, like Gore. That day in Denver and Orlando, how could he have mastered the nuances of Middle East issues, biblical names, church and state questions, Native American concerns, and the volatile disputes of Democratic Party politics?

He couldn't. He had to rely on two speeches and on talking points from staffers like us who had the time to think about them.

"Politicians should write their own speeches," a reporter once told one of us. Often they wish they could. When Barack Obama made Jon Favreau his chief speechwriter, Favreau asked Obama's communications director, "Why? He's a great writer."

"He also has to be president," Robert Gibbs said.

Obama generally had a staff of senior writers. During his two terms, they churned out about four thousand speeches, all with the one overarching goal we discuss next.

## POLITICIANS MUST PERSUADE

During our years of corporate writing, neither of us produced a speech in which the speaker sounded angry, raised a voice, or pounded a lectern. In politics, all these things happen regularly. They help make political speech-writing fun. Luckily, emotions don't often reach the level they did in 1849, when a speech by Massachusetts abolitionist congressman Charles Sumner, so incensed a Southern colleague that he attacked Sumner at his desk, beating him unconscious with his gutta-percha cane. But when politicians sound furious, it's usually not an act.

That's not surprising. We argue at home about what's for dinner, or whether the kids can play video games before finishing their homework. Why shouldn't politicians get mad when they disagree about how to pay for cancer treatments, a company closing a factory or outsourcing jobs, or a president declaring war?

The contentiousness of political life means politicians need little of something that takes up a lot of space in public speaking textbooks: *informative speech*, the speech that should, as one text puts it, "convey knowledge or understanding."<sup>4</sup> There's room for informative speech in politics; just listen to a campaign organizer explaining a phone canvass to volunteers. But speeches by elected politicians almost always involve *persuasion*, the "process of creating, reinforcing, or changing people's actions."<sup>5</sup>

On the stump, politicians persuade people to vote for them. On the floor, they persuade people to support or oppose a bill. At a funeral, they persuade mourners that a dead friend lived a worthwhile life. Persuasive speeches, all. Moreover, they mostly use one kind. In Chapter 2, we examine three different types of questions central to persuasion: questions of fact (*Does North Korea have nuclear weapons?*), value (*Is that good or bad?*), and policy (*How should we handle it?*). In politics, politicians deal with the first two mostly to help answer the third.

Voters want politicians to solve problems. The solutions may be political (*Change the president!*) or based on issues (*Cut more taxes!*). Either way, speakers are urging—advocating—action, or *policy*.

Realizing that fact, values, and policy are *what* we argue about leaves open the question of *how* we argue. Aristotle identified the answer to how with his three modes of persuasion: *logos* (reasoning), *pathos* (emotion), and *ethos* (the speaker's character).

Persuasion is vital in political life; after all, politicians run for office because they have strong beliefs. To further those beliefs, it only makes sense to use every persuasive tool, even when you might think they have no reason to do so. Floor speeches rarely change a single vote, but reporters—and thus their readers

and listeners—would look askance at a party that abandoned the effort to make a case for its position. Politicians take floor speeches seriously.

They persuade even when speaking to the friendly audiences that make up the bulk of their speaking schedule. Even friends need to hear evidence reinforcing their own beliefs. That's what makes them walk a precinct, write a check, or turn out on Election Day.

But in no way does this mean that persuasion alone is enough. Politicians have other needs.

## POLITICIANS MUST BE LIKED

Late in September 2012, Mitt Romney felt hopeful about his chances in November. One thing worried longtime Republican strategist Stuart Spencer.

"It's the likability factor," Spencer said. "Many people think that Obama hasn't delivered, but they still like him. I'd rather have a beer with him than Romney. Wouldn't you?"<sup>6</sup>

At a time when politicians argue about health care, war in Syria, and investigations into whether Russia "hacked" American elections, do voters really care about who passes the beer test? Yes. Politicians measure likability by what pollsters call "favorability" ratings. Gallup's favorability ratings that month showed Obama ahead of Romney 53–45.

These days, when people see video of a damning mistake online even before the speaker has finished, speeches can instantly win or lose votes. And while political races principally turn on issues, *personality* influences voters, too. Voters usually want their politicians likable: humble, appreciative, energetic, moral, exciting, witty, and compassionate.

Being liked doesn't necessarily mean saying only what the audience wants to hear. It does, however, often mean downplaying the views a particular audience isn't likely to favor and highlighting those it likes. And there are other factors, as well.

Four years after Romney's loss, it was Hillary Clinton's turn to worry about likability.

"Presidential politics tends to be dominated by personality," wrote a *Washington Post* reporter, saying Clinton "may be hard pressed to win a traditional presidential election in which likability matters most."<sup>7</sup> Other reporters said something similar, sometimes quoting the beer test. And in her case, they mentioned the "mountain of evidence" making her unique. Much of that evidence was about one indisputable fact. Hillary Clinton is a woman.

Colleen Ammerman, director of Harvard Business School's Gender Initiative, saw here an old frustrating story. Women with strong ambitions and opinions "typically take a likability hit," she told *HuffPost*, which reported that

“most people” expect women to be “feminine—quiet, supportive, nurturing and definitely not ambitious.”<sup>8</sup>

Neither the beer test nor gender alone usually decides an election. But it can. It is still a fact that in the United States, about 8 percent of Republicans, 6 percent of Independents, and 3 percent of Democrats tell pollsters they would not vote for a qualified woman from their own party for president. In January 2019, no sooner had Elizabeth Warren declared her intention to run for president than reporters focused on this issue. “I’ll say it,” wrote defiant *Daily Beast* columnist Matt Lewis, “Elizabeth Warren isn’t likeable.”<sup>9</sup> Influencing likability—unfortunately—is one quality vital to effective political speech.

Now we look at one more political need.

## POLITICIANS MUST STAY UPBEAT

In 1979, Jimmy Carter used an energy speech to deliver a sermon. His pollster, Pat Caddell, had persuaded Carter that Americans needed not optimism but candor.

Speaking from the Oval Office, Carter warned Americans that their “erosion of confidence in the future” was “threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.” He not only blamed voters for their problems but promised no solution.

The result: Historians call it Carter’s “malaise” speech, using a word that the president never spoke but did appear in Caddell’s original memo. Patrick Anderson, Carter’s campaign speechwriter, later wrote that the president had “embraced Pat Caddell’s mumbo jumbo about a national crisis of spirit.”<sup>10</sup>

“No one ever took his speeches seriously again,” Anderson wrote.<sup>11</sup>

Really, the speech wasn’t so bleak, and of course many voters continued to trust Carter. But the controversy that speech inspired shows how unusual *any* measure of pessimism is in politics. Voters find it hard to hear that they are at fault, or that there may be no solutions. Partisans want to know they *can* win the election, though the polls say no; that government *can* and *will* help; that a bill *will* pass.

In a sense, they want speeches to resemble a well-made Hollywood feature, raising serious issues, like corruption, but providing a happy ending by the closing credits. “We chose hope over fear,” Barack Obama said in his inaugural address, echoing his campaign theme. There are ways to be optimistic without sounding mindless. But the relentless need to promise success imposes sharp limits on the complexity of political debate.

Here again, we do not argue from anecdotal evidence alone. The classic research on this issue comes from two University of Pennsylvania professors, Harold Zullow and Martin Seligman. Beginning with the 1900 election



(McKinley v. Bryan), they analyzed the nomination acceptance speeches for every race through 1984.<sup>12</sup> Their question: Was there a correlation between optimism and outcome?

Candidates whose speeches were “sunnier” won eighteen of twenty-two elections. Three of the four exceptions involved Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which might mean that Americans will listen to pessimists if the situation is dire. But even FDR leavened his message with hope. “We have nothing to fear,” he argued, “but fear itself.” Similarly, Donald Trump appealed to the anger and frustration of the forgotten American. But he also told Americans they could be great again.

If the need for optimism can limit a speech’s complexity, so too can another reality of political life.

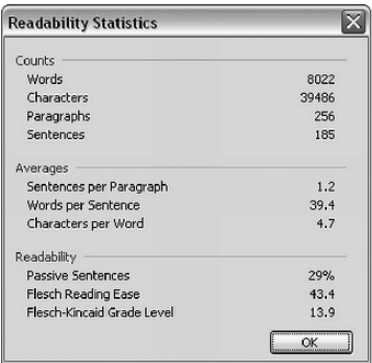
**POLITICIANS MUST SPEAK TO AVERAGE FOLKS**

In 2008, Professor Elvin Lim, mentioned in the Introduction and who expresses his views in more detail later, analyzed every single American presidential inaugural speech, using one gauge of complex language: the Flesch-Kincaid reading level assessment.<sup>13</sup> The results distressed him. He found that in the nineteenth century, inaugural speeches were written for college graduates and averaged sixty-word sentences—three times longer than the average today.

**BOX 1.1**  
**THE FLESCH-KINCAID READABILITY TEST**

He created it in 1948. Except for a little revision from John Kincaid, nobody has needed to change much about educator Rudolf Flesch’s invention. Now called the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Test, its simple yet effective formula can tell you how many Americans are likely to understand what you’ve written.

For those of you using Microsoft Word, it’s the little box that pops up after Spelling and Grammar Check. It looks like the image on the right. Note the elements besides grade level. Checking sentence length and percentage of passive verbs can really help speechwriters.



For most people in politics, the change makes perfect sense. Rhetoric has become simpler as the country has become more democratic. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, wrote his inaugural for a tiny educated elite—not backwoods farmers in Virginia, or most women, or slaves forbidden to learn reading. Modern presidents draw a television audience on Inauguration Day almost ten times the entire population in Jefferson’s America.

In 2017, Americans averaged a seventh-grade reading level. Forty percent of Americans struggled with language written for fourth graders. Op-eds can confuse even skillful readers. They can start over. Those listening to a speech don’t have that option.

Luckily, writers can express a lot with short sentences and simple words—like the one who thought up, “I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.” Because power in speech depends so much on concrete detail and repetition, simplicity precludes neither profundity nor power. We see this in one of 1988 presidential candidate Jesse Jackson’s most effective moments from that year’s “Keep Hope Alive” Democratic National Convention speech:

Most poor people are not on welfare. They work hard every day. . . . They catch the early bus. They work every day. They raise other people’s children. They work every day. They clean the streets. They work every day. They drive vans and cabs. They work every day. They change the beds you slept in at these hotels last night and can’t get a union contract. They work every day.

Why is this passage so effective after almost three decades? The reasons include Jackson’s use of repetition and his ability to pick examples that create a shock of recognition in the audience, both elements we will examine later in the book.

But look, too, at how easy his language is for average Americans to understand. Jackson uses fifty-six one-syllable words out of seventy-one, and of the fifteen words that have two syllables, the word *every* accounts for six. Naturally, simple doesn’t mean simple-minded. Though the Flesch-Kincaid test measures Jackson’s excerpt at a little below fourth-grade level, it made people with doctorates weep.

In order to write so that voters understand, speechwriters should be comfortable using sentence fragments and other modes of expression that wouldn’t work in a formal essay or grant application. In speaking, it’s fine to begin a sentence with “But” or “And.” To be more conversational, you will have to ignore the wavy lines underneath your words indicating you need a spelling check. But you can do it.

We also suggest keeping most speeches short. Politicians often get requests to speak for a half-hour. Surveys show, however, that after twenty minutes, the

attention of an audience is virtually zero. Even the authors have a hard time staying riveted during a State of the Union speech without a trip to raid the refrigerator.

Of course, the live audience is not the politician's only concern. Unlike most speakers, politicians have at least two sets of listeners: the people sitting in front of them and the secondary audiences reading news stories or watching snips on TV or YouTube. Speeches can influence listeners long after they end, which leads to a final point.

## POLITICIANS MUST GET QUOTED

*Sound bite.* The term appears as early as 1980 in a *Washington Post* piece quoting former White House aide Bill Rhatican. "Any editor watching needs a concise 30-second sound bite. Any more than that, you're losing them."<sup>14</sup>

Now in the Twitter age, we count the number of characters, not just seconds. But the concept of a *sound bite* remains the same—a brief phrase memorably summing up an important idea or the point in a speech.

To some, that represents everything wrong with politics. Only about eight seconds of the average speech now make news. That's not much time to capture the complexity of an issue. But those are eight important seconds. Politicians need memorable lines. Reporters may not quote more. TV producers may not run much more. Still, sound bites uttered by a politician that run on even one TV talk show can reach millions of people. Moreover, they are neither new nor meaningless. Take these:

Give me liberty or give me death.

It's morning in America.

Yes we can.

Make America great again.

All four implied significant messages, easily understood by those who heard them. Despite their denials, speechwriters do work to provide sound bites. We know because we have. While later we write more about how to use them, right now we want readers at least to imagine that there might be some justification for phrases that sum up an idea in a way hard to forget. For if you can't make your point succinct and interesting, how can you be sure you have one?

Let's sum up. Usually, politicians must speak a lot. Their speeches need to accomplish five things. They must help the speaker be

- persuasive—about problems and solutions,
- likable,
- upbeat,
- understood by average folks, and
- quotable.

## FINAL WORDS

This chapter has described what politicians need, not what we—or they—hope. Political speech has many flaws. We believe politicians should move and inspire listeners while they build a substantive case for ideas. They should be frank about the uncertainties surrounding proposals, seek out chances to debate in public with those on the other side, and seize every opportunity to promote candor.

These qualities are not absent from politics. The need for them has changed as America has changed. We hear them in committee meetings, in small groups, and in other ways when the cameras are not on.

In 1917, when President Woodrow Wilson came before Congress and asked it to declare war on Germany, not a single American heard him other than those in the hall. There was no YouTube, television, or radio. While newspapers widely reprinted Wilson's speech, relatively few Americans read it. The speech would have been way too hard for them anyway. It was written at a college junior's level when fewer than one out of ten Americans had gotten past eighth grade.

But one thing did make it through to most Americans: a quote. They knew Wilson wanted to “make the world safe for democracy.” That one sentence was enough to help galvanize much of the country.

In the hundred years since Wilson's speech, radio, television, cable, and the internet have combined with the rise in the ability of Americans to read. In fact, getting quoted these days is almost too easy.

Whether it be Hillary Clinton's “basket of deplorables” in 2016, or Donald Trump's “there is blame on both sides” after the Charlottesville rally a year later, each found a home online. The two-edged sword of such permanence is not lost on politicians. They need to speak vividly. But even the most outspoken politicians must think twice about candor.

Perhaps as a result, Americans see less of an institution they saw regularly during much of the last fifty years: presidential press conferences. John F. Kennedy held about two a month. Trump held only one in his entire first year in office. Instead, presidents send press secretaries out to brief reporters. While they travel around the country, they play favorites—either states where they are popular or the battleground states.

“In his first term,” reports Stanford University’s Shanto Iyengar in his book, *Media Politics: A Citizen’s Guide*, “more than half of [Barack Obama’s] domestic travel went to the thirteen battleground states.”<sup>15</sup> This practice is not likely to change.

Technology has dramatically increased Americans’ ability to get informed—or misinformed. Websites offer substantive discussions of virtually any issue with policy implications, and listeners need sophistication to recognize bias. Yet speeches remain vitally important.

They remain the staple not just for presidents but for any politician, because they satisfy the special needs politicians have. Through those speeches they discuss policy, pay tribute, comment on national events, or urge action. They communicate views, characterize themselves, and persuade listeners. And they do that in real time, in front of an audience, “eyeball to eyeball.” No other form of communication can do all of that.

Wouldn’t it be nice, then, if one format existed that could work to meet all those needs? Actually, it does. Surprisingly, you can learn a single structure that’s appropriate for almost every political occasion, especially when enlivened with what we have called the LAWS of persuasive speechwriting: language, anecdote, wit, and support.

Before you learn that structure, let’s set the stage. How will you go about persuading, whom will you persuade, and where will you find what you need to get the job done? We explore answers to those questions in the next three chapters.

## 2

## Persuasion

“Have you ever heard of Plato? Aristotle? Socrates?” asks the winningly evil Vizzini, played by Wallace Shawn in William Goldman’s classic movie, *The Princess Bride*. “Morons!”<sup>1</sup>

Vizzini wants to impress Westley, dressed as the Dread Pirate Roberts, with his intellect. It’s a sign of how much we still respect the Greeks that, 2,300 years after the morons died, Goldman still makes them Vizzini’s yardstick for brilliance.

A lot has changed about speeches since Aristotle sat in the garden of his villa, transcribing student notes from his lectures into what became *Ars Rhetorica*. How could he still have anything useful to say? The man lived before Snapchat! But the human psyche remains consistent. Few political speakers may ever read Aristotle, but his insights form the foundation of every effective speech they deliver. So we start with him.

“Rhetorical study in its strict sense,” he wrote, “is concerned with the modes of persuasion.”<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, politicians aim to persuade. Chapter 1 defined a persuasive speech as one that attempts to *change or reinforce values, beliefs, or action*. That contrasts with an informative speech: a speech that attempts to *convey knowledge and understanding*.

The distinction can seem artificial because both types often cover the same ground. We know that when a speaker says “We should deport undocumented immigrants,” we hear an attempt to persuade.

The key word is *should*. If the same speaker says “Here’s why *the administration believes* we should deport undocumented immigrants,” that becomes informative. The speaker has conveyed factual information about a view without endorsing it.

Political speech can be informative—but almost always to persuade listeners. In this chapter, we cover the questions, modes, and strategies politicians use to persuade.

## PERSUASION: THE QUESTIONS

Questions, that is, of fact, value, and policy.

Political rhetoric usually includes all three, especially since influential eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume saw people making decisions they believed resulted from answers to questions of fact. Really, Hume argued, those questions were about values.

Today, politicians establish the *facts*, remind listeners of the *values* they hold, then propose the *policies* they want listeners to embrace.

Let's look closely at each question, using two speeches with vastly different views—one by Barack Obama from 2014, and the other from Donald Trump in 2017. Both cover one of the bitterest issues, not just during the 2016 elections but in the years leading up to it: immigration.

### Questions of Fact

In their immigration speeches, both Obama and Trump assume that listeners need to know the truth. They devote a lot of space to answering questions that to them are as verifiable as who won the 2018 World Series.

Obama opens by arguing that immigrants keep America entrepreneurial and that our immigration system is broken, but that because of his efforts, the number of people trying to cross our border illegally is at its lowest level since the 1970s.

When I took office, I committed to fixing this broken immigration system. And I began by doing what I could to secure our borders. Today, we have more agents and technology deployed to secure our southern border than at any time in our history. And over the past six years, illegal border crossings have been cut by more than half. Although this summer, there was a brief spike in unaccompanied children being apprehended at our border, the number of such children is now actually lower than it's been in nearly two years. Overall, the number of people trying to cross our border illegally is at its lowest level since the 1970s. *Those are the facts.*

Trump says, the truth is, our immigration system is worse than anyone realizes. He too acknowledges the importance of facts but argues the facts aren't known because the media won't report on them:

In California, a sixty-four-year-old Air Force veteran, Marilyn Pharis, was sexually assaulted and beaten to death with a hammer. Her killer had been arrested on multiple occasions, but was never deported.

A 2011 report from the Government Accountability Office found that illegal immigrants and other noncitizens in our prisons and jails together had around twenty-five thousand homicide arrests to their names.

On top of that, illegal immigration costs our country more than \$113 billion a year. For the money we are going to spend on illegal immigration over the next ten years, we could provide one million at-risk students with a school voucher.

While there are many illegal immigrants in our country who are good people, this doesn't change *the fact* that most illegal immigrants are lower-skilled workers with less education who compete directly against vulnerable American workers, and that these illegal workers draw much more out from the system than they will ever pay in.

*But these facts are never reported.*

We have already said that a fact is something indisputably true, and independently verifiable. Let's assume that Trump and Obama both believe that the information they offer is factual. That doesn't mean listeners should accept it without question. Sometimes speakers are wrong. Sometimes what sounds like a fact is actually an unsupported assertion for which listeners should seek more evidence. "People are entitled to their own opinions," New York senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said. "But not their own facts." It is a maxim often observed in the breach.<sup>3</sup>

In Chapter 10, you'll learn more about how to use facts to persuade. Here, it is enough to see that in arguing about immigration, both Trump and Obama begin with them. That makes sense. If Trump wants listeners to believe "illegal workers" are a threat, doesn't it help to tell them that such workers "draw much more out from the system than they will ever pay in"? Despite their differences, in this instance, Obama and Trump both see facts as the foundation for argument.

But facts alone are not enough to persuade listeners.



## Questions of Value

Making value judgments means answering questions about what is good or bad, right or wrong, more important or less important. Which do you value most: Family? Career? Education? Religion? National security? Not everyone would answer in exactly the same way.

Values are harder to define than facts. To say “The sun rose this morning” is to utter a fact. We can check whether it’s true or false. What about saying we believe in “fairness”? When pollsters ask Americans that question in the abstract, 98 percent say yes. But in 2016 the Pew Research Center polled Americans on whether the American economic system was “fair.” Thirty-one percent said yes. Sixty-five percent said no.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, different segments of Americans gave vastly different answers about fairness. Eighty-eight percent of “solid liberals” said the economic system was unfair. Among “business conservatives,” only 31 percent did. Everyone *values* fairness, yes. But can we verify the truth when it comes to what fairness is? Clearly, that is not so easy.

Throughout his speech, Obama tackled the question of values in several ways, reminding listeners of their beliefs in various traditions, expectations, character traits, and what for many Americans is, literally, gospel. Some samples:

Even as we are a nation of immigrants, we are also a nation of laws. . . . We expect people to play by the rules. We expect that those who cut the line will not be *unfairly* rewarded. . . . Mass deportation would be both impossible and contrary to our character. . . . That’s not how our democracy works. Scripture tells us that we shall not oppress a stranger.

Trump also answered the questions of value, using entirely different sentiments—praise for the values of “working people,” a reminder of our rights, and the assurance that we will abide by the American traditions of fair play.

We have to listen to the concerns that working people have over the record pace of immigration and its impact on jobs. These are valid concerns expressed by decent patriotic citizens from all backgrounds. . . . It is our right as a sovereign nation to choose immigrants that we think are the likeliest to thrive and flourish here. . . . We will treat everyone living or residing in our country with dignity. We will be *fair*, just, and compassionate to all. But our greatest compassion must be for American citizens . . .

Both speakers cite fairness as an American value. But that doesn't mean they feel the same about *what* is fair. So while it's fine for politicians to argue that they comport with American values, simply espousing those values and citing facts isn't enough. To be persuaded, audiences want to know how a politician will act.

## Questions of Policy

Addressing policy in a speech means answering your listeners' biggest question about the issue you've described: "*What are you going to do about it?*" In 2014, Obama answered by outlining three steps he would take:

Tonight, I am announcing those actions.

First, we'll build on our progress at the border with additional resources for our law enforcement personnel so that they can stem the flow of illegal crossings, and speed the return of those who do cross over.

Second, I'll make it easier and faster for high-skilled immigrants, graduates, and entrepreneurs to stay and contribute to our economy, as so many business leaders have proposed.

Third, we'll take steps to deal responsibly with the millions of undocumented immigrants who already live in our country.

Trump answered the policy question in the same way, using *we* and *will*.

Number one: We will build a wall along the southern border.

Number two: End catch-and-release. Under my administration, anyone who illegally crosses the border will be detained until they are removed out of our country.

Number three: Zero tolerance for criminal aliens. According to federal data, there are at least two million criminal aliens now inside the country. We will begin moving them out day one, in joint operations with local, state, and federal law enforcement . . .

One might think that since Obama and Trump differ so sharply on policy, they must also disagree on facts and values. In general, they don't. It is only when the two outline their proposed actions that the differences emerge. These two useful speeches differ in structure, language, and use of story. Here, we focus on what the speeches have in common: the need to persuade listeners about the *facts* and assure them that the speakers conform to American *values*. Only then, they believe, will listeners accept the different *policies* each candidate wants.

In most political speeches, you can find some variant of that three-pronged approach. But the polarizing differences now dominating the United States make clear that answering questions of fact or value doesn't necessarily win approval for policy, or in and of itself make a speech persuasive.

What other techniques might? For that question, we do find an answer in Aristotle.

## PERSUASION: THE MODES

Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker [ethos]; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind [pathos]; the third on the proof, or apparent proof provided by the words of the speech itself [logos].<sup>5</sup>

*Ars Rhetorica*

Speechwriters learn early that there is a "rule of three," and that one breaks it at one's peril. The rule applies even to jokes: A rabbi, priest, and minister walk into a bar. Four people walking through that door would make the joke drag; just two would rush it.

Aristotle's rule of three is at the heart of effective persuasion. If you want to persuade listeners about, say, immigration policy, you'll find the tools in the extract above: *logos* (reason), *pathos* (emotion), and *ethos* (character).

To see how politicians use all three, we'll examine speeches from Obama, Trump, and another politician, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

### Logos (Reason)

Logos "can produce persuasion," according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, just by using "the argument itself." In other words, by using logical evidence, or reason.<sup>6</sup>

Consider this passage from Schwarzenegger's speech at the 2004 Republican National Convention:

My fellow immigrants, my fellow Americans, how do you know if you are a Republican? Well, I[']ll tell you how. If you believe that government should be accountable to the people, not the people to the government, then you are a Republican.

Though Democrats might have a hard time accepting it, Schwarzenegger's speech provides a perfect example of how reasoning works in politics.

Bear with us as we condense a yearlong logic course into a page. Such courses divide logic into two kinds: deductive and inductive.

Deductive reasoning works from *general* to *specific*:

- General: All humans die.
- Specific: Socrates is human.
- Conclusion: Socrates will die.

Inductive reasoning works from *specific* to *general*:

- Specific: Socrates and everyone we know have died.
- General: All of them are human.
- Conclusion: All humans will die.

This is not the place to review the controversies over whether inductive reasoning exists, or the discussions of what makes a valid syllogism (an argument based on deductive reasoning). For here is the good news: In partisan politics, the embarrassingly simple truth is that almost *all reasoning is deductive*. In fact, it overwhelmingly uses variations of two forms:

- X policy is good.
- Our side has done (or believes in) X.
- We are good.

Or:

- X policy is bad.
- The other side has done X.
- The other side is bad.

Does that seem cynical? Take Schwarzenegger's example. Looked at logically, it would take this form:

- Government accountable to people (X) is good.
- Republicans believe in X (good).
- Believers in X are Republican.

Ah, says the resident Democrat, *but Democrats also believe in accountable government*. Good point. Apparently, Schwarzenegger has taken the first semester of logic, which involves creating a valid syllogism. But he hasn't taken the second semester, which deals with *evidence*: the facts, brief or extended examples, or expert testimony that might make listeners believe.

In Chapter 10, readers will find much more about evidence. Both Obama's and Trump's immigration speeches contain plenty. Here, we draw from Obama's.

He asserts what he believes is fact:

My fellow Americans, we are and always will be a nation of immigrants.

His evidence: the three bodies of water they crossed. Obama believes listeners should accept that as reasonable support.

We were strangers once, too. And whether our forebears were strangers who crossed the Atlantic, or the Pacific, or the Rio Grande, we are here only because this country welcomed them in, and taught them that to be an American is about something more than what we look like, or what our last names are, or how we worship.

Can a sentence with the words "always will be" be factual? Only if Obama means that because we all descended from somewhere else, our ancestors define us. But as a syllogism, Obama's ideas might look like this:

- Specific: Our families were strangers—just like the immigrants of today.
- General: Others helped our immigrant families.
- Conclusion: We must help the immigrants of today.

If you want to read more about formal logic, consult this book's bibliography. If you want to know enough to write persuasive political speeches responsibly, remember this: for reasons we detail later, paying attention to logic, evidence, reason—*logos*—is worth doing, even in the heat of campaigns.

## Pathos (Emotion)

English speakers use the word *pathos* to describe the quality that produces emotion—usually sympathy—in an incident or image they observe, for example, a tear-inducing scene in a movie. Aristotle used *pathos* to mean an appeal to emotion.

Here is Trump making that appeal in a 2016 speech on immigration:

Countless Americans who have died in recent years would be alive today if not for the open border policies of this administration. This includes incredible Americans like twenty-one-year-old Sarah Root. The man who killed her arrived at the border, entered federal custody, and then was released into a U.S. community under the policies of this White House. He was released again after the crime, and is now at large.

Sarah had graduated from college with a 4.0, top of her class, the day before.

Also among the victims of the Obama–Clinton open borders policies was Grant Ronnebeck, a twenty-one-year-old convenience store clerk in Mesa, Arizona. He was murdered by an illegal immigrant gang member previously convicted of burglary who had also been released from federal custody.

Root’s story offers a way for Trump to use *logos*—an extended example to support his main point. But why include those details about her killer—and the immigrant who killed Grant Ronnebeck? Clearly, Trump wants to elicit *pathos*, too. He has put a human face on tragedy to move listeners. To believe *pathos* and *logos* should be isolated from each other is a mistake.

Some listeners hear stories evoking *pathos* as mawkish and manipulative. Others are just as contemptuous about an overemphasis on *logos*, considering it dry as dust.

Right or wrong, emotional appeal seems more important in politics than it was in earlier generations. During the 2008 campaign, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio pointed out that the twenty-four-hour online news cycle has supplanted the time voters once had for reflecting on issues. “The amount and speed of information, combined with less time to analyze every new development, pushes us toward the emotion-based decision pathway,” he wrote.<sup>7</sup>

The authors aren’t sure whether the trend stems so exclusively from technology—nor are we certain how much reflection Americans ever did devote to political issues. But for reasons we discuss more fully in Chapter 8, we believe appeals to reason and emotion both deserve a place in political speech. As does the third—and most misunderstood—of Aristotle’s three elements: *ethos*.

## Ethos (Character)

In English, the word seems related to ethics. But ethics makes up only part of what Aristotle meant. While *logos* and *pathos* are qualities of the