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COUNSELOR

"MASTERFUL."—ROBERT CARO

A LIFE AT THE EDGE OF HISTORY

TED SORENSEN

too many television appearances would bore the public, though I acknowledged the common sense of his concern that the public temperature could not long be kept at a high crisis level. (He was relieved to learn from Arthur Schlesinger that FDR had actually conducted relatively few fireside chats.)

OVER THE PAST FIFTY years, I developed a style of speechwriting that can be boiled down to six basic rules.

LESS IS ALMOST ALWAYS BETTER THAN MORE.

Make it as simple and direct as the Ten Commandments; as simple as J. P. Morgan's alleged response to the youngster who asked him the secret to the stock market: "It fluctuates." Some politicians mistakenly believe that the art of political speaking is to stretch as few thoughts as possible into as many words as possible—JFK and I believed exactly the opposite. I've always treasured the wisdom of William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White's classic book, *Elements of Style*. Among its watchwords: "Omit unnecessary words." My favorite rule, because it illustrates itself.

I like two examples: Winston Churchill's opening line in his radio address after the fall of France in June 1940: "The news from France is very bad." Not one unclear or unnecessary word. And the second, a sign for a fish store window: "Fresh Fish for Sale Here Today." The only necessary word on that sign is "fish."

CHOOSE EACH WORD AS A PRECISION TOOL.

Care and prudence in selecting the right word and sequence of words, important in every speech, were even more important in helping draft the president's letters to Soviet Chairman Khrushchev during the Cuban missile crisis. In his foreign policy speeches, JFK stayed out of the terminology trap, the common tendency to label groups with names that put them beyond the pale of negotiation, such as "Communist," or "enemy," or "evil." He often used metaphors, especially nautical metaphors, which he knew better than I. But he did not resort to casual reliance on the war metaphor—never declaring

a war on cancer, a war on crime. I do not recall whether he, RFK, or LBJ first described the new antipoverty program for 1964 as a "war on poverty."

ORGANIZE THE TEXT TO SIMPLIFY, CLARIFY, EMPHASIZE.

A speech should flow from an outline in logical order. Number points, when appropriate; each numbered paragraph can start with the same few words. There should be a tightly organized, coherent, and consistent theme—a rule reinforced by Churchill's criticism of an opponent's speech, "That pudding has no theme." Coherence and consistency suffer when there are too many writers working on one speech. Many people can contribute suggestions and corrections, but only one can truly write it.

USE VARIETY AND LITERARY DEVICES TO REINFORCE MEMORABILITY, NOT CONFUSE OR DISTRACT.

Alliteration and repetition can help make a speech memorable—as can the "reversible raincoat," another technique occasionally used by JFK and me, but often parodied. Academic analysts called this chiasmus, a new word to me, but an ancient literary device. "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate." "Bring the absolute power to destroy other nations under the absolute control of all nations" (from JFK's inaugural).

Another device I employed—and since childhood enjoyed—was rhyming. Partly as a result of seeing Burma Shave signs along the Nebraskan roadside on our early family travels, I always liked to hear and read poetry, all kinds, from childhood verse by Mother Goose to limericks and doggerel. As a speechwriter, I felt that words that roughly rhymed were more easily remembered and more clearly communicated: "Let every nation know . . . that we shall oppose any foe."

In each case, the test is not to ask how it reads but to ask how it sounds.

A personal experience is more credible evidence and more likely to be remembered by the hearer. The right quotation from the right

person can help. Do not covet thy neighbor's entire speech; but do not feel ashamed to improve upon some ancient statesman's good line, or apply it in a different context, alluding to the source or citing him by name. Just as there are no new jokes in the world, there are very few epigrams, phrases, or even speech ideas that are entirely new. Almost every line of almost every great speech can be said to bear some resemblance or relationship, however tenuous, to something someone else, somewhere else, said at some earlier time.

In early 1960 my campaign colleague, friend, and early mentor, Bob Wallace, told me that a speech draft of mine was "little more than a collection of some *Bartlett's Famous Quotations*." I resented it—mostly because he was right. But JFK gave the speech with little change, and his college audience loved it.

Kennedy liked to embellish his speeches with quotations from the widest possible variety of sources: Hemingway, Shaw, Aristotle, Socrates, Pericles, Demosthenes, Solon, and Pindar. One American politician asked me whether Kennedy's frequent invocation of ancient Greek philosophers and culture represented an effort on his part to woo the Greek-American vote in Massachusetts or nationally. Apparently that politician did not share JFK's passion for history. I was told that, when LBJ received a speech draft containing a quotation from Socrates, he scratched out the philosopher's name and replaced it with "my granddaddy."

Ironically, JFK is sometimes quoted by speakers attributing to him lines that he had quoted from others. When working in my first Kennedy year on New England economic problems, I noticed that the regional chamber of commerce, the New England Council, had a thoughtful slogan: "A rising tide lifts all the boats." JFK borrowed it often. Now the line is frequently quoted by others who attribute it to him. (During the George W. Bush pro-wealth era, one critic described the Bush motto as "a rising tide lifts all the yachts.")

Another example is "Some men see things as they are and say, 'Why?' I dream of things that never were and say, 'Why not?'" That maxim is now attributed to Robert Kennedy, who got it from JFK, who had also borrowed it.

Some political commentators said that Kennedy's 1960 campaign speeches may have "erred on the side of overestimating the literacy and intelligence of the American people." Possibly; but Kennedy won, proving that both he and the American people were a lot smarter than some political commentators.

EMPLOY ELEVATED BUT NOT GRANDIOSE LANGUAGE.

To paraphrase Browning, "A nation's reach should exceed its grasp, or what's a president for." A president who elevates the sights of his countrymen above and beyond the limits of their daily chores, a president who offers hope to the world's deprived and dispossessed, a president whose words enable the young dreamers of his country to feel that someone is listening who cares—such a president is bound to antagonize some and ultimately disillusion others, but he nevertheless fulfills as he speaks an essential role of national leadership consistent with the Founders' vision of this country as a beacon to the world.

JFK and I tried to elevate and yet simplify his speeches; not to patronize his audiences, but to keep his sentences short, his words understandable, and his organizational structure and ideas clear. He used straightforward declarations, not "maybe" or "perhaps," setting forth lucid, well-reasoned concepts of where we were headed as a nation and what we had to do as a people. His speeches were dignified but in the vernacular, never so esoteric that they could not be easily and quickly comprehended by the average listener.

A policy speech is not a statute, which needs to specify every detail in legally precise and comprehensive terms—nor should it be, if it is to be both enjoyed and understood by all its listeners. I was gratified to read a statement from one of my White House colleagues: "Ted Sorensen can use words that everybody can understand—intellectuals, milkmen, diplomats, politicians."

SUBSTANTIVE IDEAS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF ANY SPEECH.

A great speech is great because of the strong ideas conveyed, the principles, the values, the decisions. If the ideas are great, the speech will be great, even if the words are pedestrian; but if the words are

soaring, beautiful, eloquent, it is still not a great speech if the ideas are flat, empty, or mean-spirited.

Those politicians who have tried in the last forty years to emulate Kennedy's success on the speaker's platform forget that his best speeches moved people not because of the grandeur of his phrases, which can largely be imitated by any White House wordsmith, but because of the grandeur of his ideas. He who pens the final draft has an opportunity to shape the final version of those ideas. I once joked at a staff gathering that the old saying—"Give me the making of the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws"—could be amended by substituting "speeches" for "songs."

I approached each speech draft as if it might someday appear under Kennedy's name in a collection of the world's great speeches; that may have been immodest and presumptuous, but it motivated me to use elegant prose and the King's English. JFK and I shared an appreciation for great oratory. Early in his Senate career, I gave him for Christmas a *Treasury of the World's Great Speeches*. He devoured it, often citing passages to me for possible inclusion in his own speeches or *Profiles in Courage*. I borrowed the book back and used it as my own standard reference. Many years later, he would reciprocate by selecting as a Christmas present for me a beautiful leather-bound edition of all presidential inaugural addresses. He did not live to give it to me; but I was deeply moved by his widow's inscription in December 1963: "For Ted, Jack was going to give you this for Christmas—Please accept it now from me—with all my love and devotion always—for all the devotion you gave Jack."

Yet, after all is said and little is done, a speech—even an elevated, eloquent speech—is still just a speech. Saying so doesn't make it so. A speech can stir men's minds by describing what is; sometimes it can stir their hearts by describing what should be; but rarely can a speech by itself change their fate by determining or changing what will be. It does not have the power of law. It seeks to persuade people to change their views, but it may represent only the view of the speaker or his powerless speechwriter. Rare is the speaker who has the power to make others listen, and, if they listen, to act, and if they act, to do so in the manner he advocates.

Nevertheless, I do not dismiss the potential of the right speech on the right topic delivered by the right speaker in the right way at the right moment. It can ignite a fire, change men's minds, open their eyes, alter their votes, bring hope to their lives, and, in all these ways, change the world. I know. I saw it happen.