

WELCOME HOME WORDSMITH

In mid-July, 1908, the ever energetic progressive Republican President Theodore Roosevelt paused a bit to write a letter to his arch-conservative friend from Boston Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. (1)

Roosevelt had served as New York City police chief, Governor of the state of New York, and as US Vice-President. He had also been a popular army colonel and horseback warrior in Cuba, a rancher, an ardent traveler, a scholar of American naval history, a conservationist, and a museum- builder. But his days as president were waning, and he was searching for ways to support his lumbering ally William Howard Taft in the presidential elections later that year.

Roosevelt wrote of his caution about men of words, and about how action and words needed to be blended together in order to affect a successful political agenda. In so doing, he appears to have highlighted a question that has surrounded occupants of the White House to this day: How to best translate thoughts concerning increasingly complex national policies into words that will attract both individual voters across the political spectrum and diversifying constituencies. .

With time, the president's own administrative and political activities diversified as well. The 20th century White House staff increased and fragmented, and it then coalesced into groups with particular interests and occupational specialization. Ad lib talks declined along with a rise in a need to clarify issues in a diplomatic way at home and abroad. Woodrow Wilson, a former Princeton academic and university head, brought with him a talent for setting down thoughts quickly and accurately on a small typewriter. Later presidencies saw business, military, and political professionals occupy the White House, all with a need for a "literary clerk," someone who would craft their words for special policies and occasions. (2)

Notable White House speechwriters include Peggy Noonan, William Safire, and Ted Sorenson. The latter movingly described his days with John F. Kennedy, a compelling but all too brief era in which his role was an interstitial one: located somewhere between policy and expression and framed by friendship. Far more than a writer, composer of words, or mere scribe, the speechwriter-counselor usually exists apart from public view or mention-- "at the edge of history," according to Sorensen ,yet it is a real life nonetheless. (3)

Matt Latimer enhances the public's ability to penetrate the White House staff hierarchy with his personal memorandum of speech and speed-writing for the executive branch. (4)His tale is the stuff of survivalism, a saga that reads more like a non-fiction *bildungsroman* during which a young law school graduate is propelled along by unknown forces of circumstance only to realize that he has actually become part of an institutionalized culture rather than a loose, drifting network of benign and not so benign colleagues. (4)

He starts out in Michigan, more specifically in Flint, a gritty city of automobile production that was already beginning to feel its later decline. Though many were bound to the lifeways of the factories, his family of teachers stood somewhat apart from the rest. They enjoyed regular hours and weekends off, unlike those whose daily round seemed akin to those of an earlier age of late 19th century shift work cycles. He sought the usual teen and young adult independence through a shift of his own, a departure from liberal politics that grew in scale and opportunity as he advanced through high school, college, and the informal political associations of graduate law school.

A series of friendly connections and recommendations took him to Washington, and to his home state Senator's office where he worked on press releases. Thereafter, more of the same in the office of an additional Senator from a distant state and locale. He wrestled with the communications' challenges of one who sought out TV camera and media attention, and another who was private and appeared to crave an inappropriate solitude for the context. A daily place of refuge from the hectic pace was a neighborhood Subway sandwich shop. His admiration for the free meals he occasionally enjoyed in the Senate dining room only declined on 9/11/2001 as both the horror of the New York news arrived along with an impending threat to the Capital. The building was evacuated.

More connections, recommendations, and increasing experience, took him to the office of the Secretary of Defense where his speech writing capacity evolved under the tutelage of Donald Rumsfeld who liked to ask crisp series of questions whose answers eventually became part of public discussion and presentations. A signal surprise came when an off the cuff remark about the "old Europe" accidentally flowered into an integral portion of US policy towards the European Union. Its eastern European members were indeed pleased, France and Germany were miffed, and his grandmother, who kept in touch with his progress from her home in Chicago, wrote "what happened to you?"

Good fortune finally arrived. After several tense interviews, he gained a slot among the White House speechwriters and advisors. A major advantage was that the President, George W. Bush, known elsewhere for his often blurry sentence structure, turned out to be in full command of the English language, constantly desired the latest details and facts about almost every thing, and was in equally constant contact with his staff. A major disadvantage for the now certified GOP speechwriter was that he entered the halls of the White House in 2008, the year of the bursting of the housing bubble, the sub-prime mortgage and banking crises, the despair over mounting job loss and rising foreclosure rates.

The grandeur of the place swiftly departed along with a long-held confidence in the free market's ability to correct itself. The rooms with their potent and lingering history suddenly seemed smaller. The need to connect confidently and exactly with a confused, resentful public grew. How do you put an economic and financial meltdown into words? There was a scramble to do so, and everyone was graded according to how polls and pundits accepted or rejected the very last words they had written, either as individuals or organized into committees. There was also an uncomfortable feeling that a philosophical reluctance to have government intervene in problematic economic situations would have to be revised, and therefore rewritten. Words were worked and reworked, a stimulus check was signed and in the mail, the reassuring phrase, the "fundamentals are sound" was often repeated, and a robust economy had now moved towards a more resilient phase.

But the implosion and the election came. His year in the midst of a democracy trying to translate theory into a starkly changing reality for the benefit of as many people as possible had come to an end. He considered setting off for Flint. Hollywood seemed attractive. Perhaps he would spend a short time in Chicago. After all, you never know how democracy will turn out. As his grandmother had once written after a candidate's disappointing run for local office: "that Barack Obama will never get anywhere."

(1) Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, 1894-1918; New York and London, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925. Volume II. Pp.302-. 303. (2) Schlesinger, Robert. White House Ghosts: The Presidents and Their Speech Writers. New York, Simon and Schuster (2008). (3) Sorensen, Ted. Counselor: A Life At the Edge of History. New York, HarperCollins (2008). (4) Latimer, Matt: Speech*Less: Tales of a White House Survivor. New York, Crown Publishers (2009).