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The 2,988 Words That Changed a Presidency: An Etymology

By D.T. MAX

The president could not find the right words. Soon after the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked on Sept. 11, he tried to articulate his response. In one week he gave more than a dozen speeches and remarks to comfort, rally and then -- when he'd rallied too much -- calm the country. To some, his language seemed undisciplined. He called the terrorists "folks" and referred to the coming battle as a "crusade." He called for "revenge," called Osama bin Laden the "prime suspect" and asked for him "dead or alive." He said "make no mistake" at least eight times in public remarks. When Bush didn't seem lost, he often seemed scared. When he didn't seem scared, he often seemed angry. None of this soothed the public. "It was beginning to look like 'Bring Me the Head of Osama bin Laden,' starring Ronald Colman," one White House official remembered.

In a time of national crisis, words are key to the presidency. Too many and people tune out; too few and they think he is hiding. The president knew he had not yet said the right things. He returned from Camp David the weekend after the attacks with an intense desire to make a major speech. His aides agreed. The president needed to reassure Americans while conveying a message of resolve to the world.

Shaping a successful speech wouldn't be easy. Karen P. Hughes, the counselor to the president, helped write the straightforward statement the president gave on the night of the attack. The speech, delivered from the Oval Office, was poorly received; it felt too slight, too brief for the great events. Three days later, the president's speechwriting team, led by Michael Gerson, came up with an eloquent meditation on grief and resolution, which the president read at the National Cathedral. "We are in the middle hour of our grief," it began. But the beautiful speech sounded borrowed coming from Bush's mouth. The tone was too literary. The president's next speech had to be grand -- but it also had to sound more like him.

The White House also had to decide where to give it. Among the choices the president and his advisers had was an address to Congress, which had invited him to speak before a joint session. There is no greater backdrop for a president. But some advisers were reluctant. The president couldn't march up Pennsylvania Avenue without something new to say. And according to his advisers, Bush wasn't sure yet what the administration's response to the attack would be. Some advisers suggested a second Oval Office speech, which would be more intimate and controlled than an address to Congress. Others suggested speaking at a war college. He would look strong there.

Karl Rove, the president's chief political adviser, felt strongly that the president did better with a big audience. Applause revved him up. Congress, he thought, was ideal: it would build a sense of national unity. That was important. The speech was a huge political opportunity for Bush. War had given the president a second chance to define himself, an accidental shot at rebirth. Bush's first eight months had been middling. To many, he seemed a little slight for the job. His tax cut had gone through, but the education initiative, the defense transformation and the faith-based initiative were not moving forward well. Americans had still not embraced him as a leader. A strong speech could revive Bush's presidency.

The president decided to speak to Congress. But he wasn't sure yet what to say. The main focus of the speech was tricky to define. "He had to speak to multiple audiences," his national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, later told me. "He was speaking to the American people, foreign leaders, to the Congress and to the Taliban."

Karen Hughes met Bush at the White House residence Sunday afternoon to discuss what ground the speech might cover. She jotted down notes: *Who are they? Why they hate us? What victory means? How will it be won?* On Monday morning, Bush talked to Hughes again. According to Hughes, he told her how to deal with the fact that military action might come anytime. "If we've done something, discuss what we have done," he told Hughes. "If not, tell people to get ready." He told her he wanted a draft quickly. Hughes called Michael Gerson and told him that he had until 7 p.m. to come up with something.

Gerson does not write alone. He has five other writers, two of whom he works closely with, Matt Scully and John McConnell. Scully is wiry and ironic, like a comedy writer. McConnell is more earnest. They help bring Gerson down to earth. Gerson, 37, is an owlsh man who fills yellow pads with doodles when you ask him a question. He says he believes that social justice must be central in Republican thought. "The great stories of our time," he told me, "are moral stories and moral commitments: the civil rights movement, the War on Poverty." He and the president get along well. The president calls Gerson "the scribe." They share an intensely felt Christianity.

Gerson had written speeches with Scully and McConnell during the campaign. They worked well together. Since then, Gerson has moved up a notch: he now has an office in the basement of the West Wing. The office is prestigious but not great for writing. It is claustrophobic and illuminated by artificial light. McConnell and Scully were in the Old Executive Office Building. If the West Wing, with its plush carpeting and secretaries in heels, resembles a Sun Belt office suite, the O.E.O.B. is by comparison a funky hotel. Every office, no matter how small, had its own couch, yet no office had a matching set of chairs. It was a good place to brainstorm.

So Gerson crossed West Executive Avenue to see McConnell and Scully. The three writers sat around the computer in McConnell's office, Gerson in one of the gray suits he wears, bouncing nervously, Scully's feet up on the couch. They began to write, adopting the magisterial tone of presidential speechwriting. These were great events. They deserved great sentiments, a lofty style that Don Baer, a communications director in the Clinton administration, called "reaching for the marble." The three wrote as a team, trying out sentences on each other: "Tonight we are a country awakened to danger. . . . " They went quickly. They knew there would be time to change things and plenty of hands to do it. They assumed that one of the widows of the heroes of United Airlines Flight 93 would be there, so they put in Lyzbeth Glick, the widow of Jeremy Glick, one of the men who apparently fought with the hijackers. (In fact it would be Lisa Beamer, whose husband, Todd, had also been on the plane.) They knew little for certain, and knowing little increased their natural tendency to sound like Churchill, whose writing they all liked. Gerson tried out: "In the long term, terrorism is not answered by higher walls and deeper bunkers." The team kept going: "Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done." The computer screen filled with rolling triads. "This is the world's fight; this is civilization's fight; this is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom." Words tumbled out.

"They were just sitting there, jamming," said Juleanna Glover Weiss, the vice president's press secretary, whose office is next door. "There was a sort of one-upsmanship to it." Gerson wrote, "Freedom is at war with fear." Together, they tweaked it: "Freedom and fear are at war." They worked steadily, getting meals from the White House mess to keep them going.

The patriotic riffs were falling in place. But what, and how much, could they tell the country about the administration's plans for bin Laden and Afghanistan? They received some help from John Gibson, another speechwriter. Gibson writes foreign-policy speeches for the president and the National Security Council and regularly attends meetings with Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, and Stephen Hadley, her deputy. Gibson has the odd job of writing public words about the government's most private decisions. He has top-secret security clearance; his hard drive is stored in a safe.

Getting good information is always a problem for White House speechwriters. The most important officials keep it away from them for the obvious reason that they are writers: they have friends at newspapers; they eventually write memoirs. When sensitive policy is made, the principals close the door. Since the attack, information, as they say in the intelligence community, had become "stovepiped." Gibson's meeting with Rice and Hadley was canceled, and he couldn't get through to them.

Fortunately, Gibson had made contact with Richard A. Clarke, the counterterrorism director for the N.S.C. Clarke is a white-haired, stocky man who has been in the job for nearly a decade. He speaks very loudly. "Even his e-mails are blustery," one White House employee told me. Whatever the meetings were, he was still going to them. Gibson e-mailed Clarke questions that unintentionally echoed Hughes's original discussion with Bush: *Who is our enemy? What do they want?*

The e-mailed answer came in a bulleted memo. *Who is our enemy?* "Al Qaeda." *What do they want?* "That all Christians and Jews must be driven out of a vast area of the world," and "that existing governments in Islamic countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia should be toppled. They have issued phony religious rulings calling for the deaths of all Americans, including women and children." Gibson liked the tone and authority of the response. He handed over an edited version to Gerson.

Using Gibson's edit, Gerson, Scully and McConnell began on the Taliban. Scully started: "We're not deceived by their pretenses to piety." Gerson wrote: "They're the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions, by abandoning every value except the will to power, they follow in the path of Fascism and Nazism and imperial Communism." Scully added, "And they will follow that path all the way to where it ends." They paused. Where would it end? They didn't know. But there were plenty of ready-made phrases around. McConnell threw out five or six, like crumbs from his pocket. They liked the idea of predicting the end of the Taliban's reign of terror. "You know, history's unmarked grave," McConnell said. The group bounced the phrase around until McConnell came up with: "It will end in discarded lies." Gerson liked that, too. So the line read, "history's unmarked grave of discarded lies."

But if the Taliban were going to wind up on the ash heap of history, then someone had to suggest how this would be accomplished. Would we attack tomorrow? Would we mount a land invasion of Afghanistan? Would we take on Iraq as well? No one knew. Policy and prose work their way on separate tracks at the White House, only meeting at higher levels. Speechwriters sometimes sit around with finished speeches, waiting for the policy person to call and let them know what the whole thing is for. Not knowing what the president was going to announce, Gerson and his team couldn't come up with the right tone for an ending. But they had done what they could, written a joint-session speech in a day. They sent it off to Hughes.

Late Monday night, Karen Hughes told Gerson that the president found the draft promising but thought it needed a lot of work. Hughes herself was already considering changes. Like Bush, she is a Texan who looks to the heartland. She is the person who reads with the president's eyes. "I can hear his voice," she said, "the way he likes to inflect and speak and the rhythm of his words."

Gerson and his team gave Hughes notes for a suggested ending. Hughes gave the draft a critical read. Speechwriters like beautiful phrases, the "marble." But this president stumbles over ornate writing. It makes him seem small. When he has time to edit, he cuts adjectives. "I've always described the president's style as eloquent simplicity," Hughes said. "There's a poetry, but it's a minimalist poetry." Some of this was image and some was reality and some was reality imitating image. The walls of the West Wing are lined with pictures of the president on the range in his jeans, pulling out trees by their roots. After two years of national exposure, the public had a certain expectation.

The way Hughes saw it, the speech needed to be vivid. "I felt strongly the need for new images to replace the horrible images we'd all seen," she said. It had to have sound bites. That was also her department: she had at one point been a TV reporter before going to work for Bush's first gubernatorial campaign. The White House press secretary, Ari Fleischer, would distribute a summary of the speech to the press beforehand so it could alert their listeners what to listen for. And the language couldn't be too flowery. Hughes felt the way to reach the vast middle ground was to explain things as if you were talking to a friend. The speechwriters were writing for history, but she just wanted it to be an informative conversation. She began making additions to the text: "Al Qaeda is to terror what the Mafia is to crime."

Meanwhile, the answer to what America was going to do next had been decided. Meeting at Camp David, the president's war cabinet among them Rice; Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld; Rumsfeld's deputy, Paul Wolfowitz; and Secretary of State Colin Powell -- spread out maps and charts of Central Asia before they began discussing strategy. Not everyone had a firm sense of the geography of places like Tajikistan. One question was how the United States would define victory. Obviously, capturing bin Laden wasn't enough. But should the United States go after every state that had ever harbored terrorism in the Middle East? Syria, Iraq and Iran were all on the State Department's state-sponsored terrorism list. Powell argued for a narrow targeting of the terrorists; Wolfowitz argued for a broader statement, one that would include Iraq. Powell prevailed. The president subsequently sided with him at a National Security Council meeting. "We decided we'd start with O.B.L., his lieutenants and Al Qaeda and then take it from there," a senior administration official recalled. For a president who had surprised many Americans in his first eight months with his hard-line conservatism, it was a turn toward the center.

At the same time, it was agreed that the speech would have flexible language that would give the military free license to win a war. There would be no pledge made not to bomb Kabul or Baghdad.

Under Powell's guidance, the State Department drafted the language of the goals. Condoleezza Rice walked them into the Oval Office. There, Bush was saying that he liked the speech but the ending wasn't right; the speechwriters and Hughes scribbled notes as he spoke. Bush was enormously excited, Hughes recalled. The speech shouldn't end reflectively, he said. It should end with him leading. Rice then read aloud the demands Powell sent over: deliver the leaders of Al Qaeda to the United States; release detained foreign nationals and protect those in Afghanistan; close the terrorist camps. Give the United States full inspection access. Bush liked the points. Calling on the Taliban to give up bin Laden in front of Congress would be a moment of some power. He told the speechwriters to translate them from bureaucratese. Rice left her notes with the speechwriters.

Bush still wasn't sure whether to give the speech or not. Andrew Card, his chief of staff, told Bush that Congress was eager for a decision. Bush said he still needed time.

The speechwriters went back to work. They laid more marble: "This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight."

Meanwhile, Rice and Hughes wondered if the speech conveyed the Taliban's evil well enough. Rice sent Dick Clarke and Zalmay Khalilzad, another N.S.C. member, who is Afghan born, to Hughes to help punch up the section. Clarke and Khalilzad told her how men could be punished if their beards were too short, how women weren't allowed to go to school, how movies were illegal. Hughes took notes and put them into her copy of the speech. She was thinking domestically: these were wrongs Americans could understand. Hughes also amplified language that Gerson's team had written expressing compassion for the Afghan people. What had helped Bush become president were the overtures of compassion in his conservatism. In the days after the attack, he'd been so bellicose that his father called to tell him to tone it down. It was time to bring back the candidate.

Gerson, Scully, McConnell and Hughes sat down in Hughes's office on Wednesday at 11 a.m. They grouped around Hughes's computer. In front of her was a little plaque quoting Churchill: "I was not the lion, but it fell to me to give the lion's roar." New material kept coming in. Vice President Dick Cheney sent up a short text with McConnell defining the new cabinet position, director of homeland security. Hughes felt that the speech didn't make the point clearly enough about America's respect for Muslim Americans. The president's rush visit to a mosque had gotten a good response on Monday; it was important to highlight that theme. Hughes changed the phrase "Tonight I also have a message for Muslims in America" to "I also want to speak tonight directly to Muslims throughout the world. We respect your faith." She helped write the sentence "The United States respects the people of Afghanistan." Hughes was taking the speech out of marble and making it concrete. She added "I ask you to live your lives and hug your children." Rove stopped by; as a result of his input, the speechwriters added the line "I know many citizens have fears tonight, and I ask you to be calm and resolute." Rice's deputy, Stephen Hadley, who had to worry about more terrorism, suggested reminding people that there might be more terrorism to come. "Even in the face of a continuing threat" was added to the sentence.

All week, the president worked on the speech at night in the residence. He likes his speeches to make a point and for the point to be clear. He hates redundancies. He took a course in American oratory at Yale and remembers how a speech divides into an introduction, main body, peroration. (He once annotated a speech with phrases like "tugs at heartstrings" and "emotional call to arms.") Bush writes his notes with a black Sharpie pen. His edits tend to simplify. He is a parer. "Bush favors active verbs and short sentences," Rove said.

The president had strong feelings about the speech's ending. Although they had not yet found a place for it, the writers had suggested including a quote from Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the speech's conclusion: "We defend and we build a way of life, not for America alone, but for all mankind." The president didn't want to quote anyone else. He'd said this to them in emphatic terms at a meeting the day before, explaining that he saw this as a chance to lead. "I was scribbling notes as fast as I could," Gerson said.

The team worked on an ending that would be all Bush. They revisited the phrase "freedom and fear are at war" and gave it a providential spin: "We know that God is not neutral between them." Without hitting it too hard, a religious note would be sounded.

At 1 p.m., Gerson's team met with Bush and Hughes. They pulled up their chairs around the desk in the Oval Office. "You all have smiles on your faces; that's good," Bush said. Then, wearing his glasses, he began reading the speech aloud, stopping only for a few edits. He read the new ending aloud. "It is my hope that in the months and years ahead, life will return almost to normal," it said. "Even grief recedes with time and grace." But these comforting words were not all. "I will not forget the wound to our country and those who inflicted it," the speech went on. "I will not yield. I will not rest. I will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security for the American people." It echoed William Lloyd Garrison ("And I will be heard!"), but it was his own. Here was his peroration, and it tugged on your heartstrings and called you to arms. The final "freedom and fear" image worked, too. The president said: "Great speech, team. Let's call the Congress." He would give the speech the next night, on Thursday the 20th.

Although the main building blocks of the speech were in place and the speech would definitely be given, a lot had still to be nailed down. Other agencies had yet to be heard from. Speeches are sent out for comment to all the interested parties in the administration. Sometimes this encompasses much of the executive branch, speeches being like a ligament that binds together the administration. "The process of writing the speech forces the policy decisions to be finalized," Hughes said. In the case of a speech as big as a joint-session address, nearly everyone is involved, from the secretary of state to the chief of staff. People drop by and read a draft late in the process to make sure nothing has changed. They call with suggestions and send their emissaries.

Predictably, the State Department wanted emphasis on the coalition building that Powell was working on. Language went in. Defense was worried that the speech would focus on the wrong things. "Their point of view," one official remembered, "was that you could put a concrete dome over every stadium in the country and we still wouldn't be safe. The best defense is a good offense." These jostlings were the last echo of the arguments over the map at Camp David. They were an attempt to affect policy through minute changes in the text. Motivating it was the fact that a president's words receive enormous scrutiny overseas. Bin Laden had already thrown back some of Bush's most ill-chosen remarks, promising his jihad would beat Bush's "crusade." As Karl Rove told me: "In a crisis there's a gravity to each sentence. It's an awesome time and an awesome responsibility."

So the text got an extraordinary going-over. Language suggesting that Islamic organizations in the United States should be more aggressive in denouncing terrorism had earlier been tabled. Now "imperial Communism" was deleted from the list of ideologies that McConnell had put on the unmarked grave of discarded lies. According to one participant, the worry was about offending Russia, whom the alliance was courting. (The generic "totalitarianism" replaced it.) Some things that were in the text for no reason anyone could understand were cut. At one point, Hughes had put in that in Afghanistan you could be jailed for watching "movies like 'Gone with the Wind.'" It seemed odd to everyone, including Hughes, so it went out. Surprisingly to some, Hughes's Mafia line was not cut by Rove, who expended much effort courting American Catholics. Fact checking led to more changes. Someone realized that it was not true, as the speech asserted, that "Americans have known wars. But for the past 136 years they have been wars on foreign soil." What about Pearl Harbor? Pearl Harbor was added. History was history. But "sneak attack" became a "surprise attack." We were friends of the Japanese now and hoped to remain so. The staff collated the changes.

It was amazing how many countries you had to be nice to. The phrase "there are thousands of these terrorists concealed in more than 60 countries" lost the word "concealed." The terrorist organizations linked to Osama bin Laden were limited strategically to the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan -- two, as one White House official noted, "of the most obscure terrorist organizations in the world." The Hezbollah, the Fatah and the Muslim Brotherhood never got in. The Middle East was a fragile place. Still, that wasn't enough. An N.S.C. official flagged the phrasing of a sentence that read, "Any nation that harbors or supports terrorism will be regarded by the United States as 'hostile.'" What about Syria? The wording became "any nation that continues to harbor," giving the country, as one official said, "another chance to straighten up and fly right." Such softening was inevitable, but America still had to stand strong. Bush needed one hard phrase to lean on. It became this: "You're either with us, or with the terrorists."

Rice got one last look at the speech. If something misguided slipped in, it would be her problem first. She signed off. Policy and prose were now in place.

The president had to rehearse. It was the first thing he'd thought of after deciding to do the speech. The more time he practices, the better his speeches come off. The downward furl of his mouth relaxes. His tendency to end every phrase with an upward cadence diminishes. The first teleprompter rehearsal was at 6:30 Wednesday night. The president came out in his blue track suit with his baseball cap on. His dog, Spot, ran around the room, nuzzling the writers as they sat listening. The president weighed the sounds in his mouth. He came to lines about the administration's domestic legislative agenda, lines that had been slowly piling up -- the energy plan, the faith-based initiative, the patients' bill of rights. "This isn't the time," he said and cut them. Hughes agreed. This was the time for Bush to assert his credentials on foreign policy and not retreat into the domestic sphere.

The president made more cuts. When he saw how many billions of bailout dollars the speech promised for the airline industry, he insisted the line be deleted. "We're still negotiating that," he said. He put in little things for sound. After "The United States respects the people of Afghanistan," he inserted the phrase "After all" to begin the next sentence, "we are currently its largest source of humanitarian aid." It would give him a chance to breathe. Hughes coached him: "Give the ear time to catch up," she advised.

Thursday morning, the day of the speech, Bush rehearsed again. He didn't like the clunky paragraph that contained the list of our allies: the Organization of American States and the European Union, among others. It was too much of a mouthful. They would no longer hear their names spoken. State lost that round.

The president took a nap at 4:30, was awakened by an aide and rehearsed one more time. At 5:15 Hughes told Gerson the name of the new director of homeland security. It was Bush's old friend, the governor of Pennsylvania, Tom Ridge. The news had been held back so it wouldn't leak. Tony Blair, the British prime minister, was late arriving for dinner, and the president was offered a chance to rehearse again but said he was ready. The communications office prepared a list of sound bites and distributed them to the press: "The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends." "Be ready." "Freedom and fear are at war."

The president got into his motorcade and went to the Capitol. The vice president stayed behind so they would not be in the Capitol together. It was an unprecedented security move. It meant that every time the camera showed Bush, you would think about the meaning of Cheney's absence. You would remember the crisis. Bush walked into the Capitol, a president in wartime. He wore a pale blue tie. He began: "Mr. Speaker, Mr. President pro tempore, members of Congress and fellow Americans." He was interrupted for applause 31 times.

A week after the speech, the flag at the White House was back at full mast, waving in the wind. Karen Hughes wore a metal American flag on her lapel, upward streaming too. Was the speech a success? For the president, yes. "He told me he felt very comfortable," Hughes said. "I told him he was phenomenal." Bush had wanted to steady the boat, and he had done it. He had shown leadership. The Congress felt included. "The president's speech was exactly what the nation needed -- a

message of determination and hope, strength and compassion," Ted Kennedy said. For the writers, there was catharsis: Gerson felt that by working on the speech, he had become connected to "the men digging with shovels in New York." Pundits wrote that the president had said just the right thing in a time of crisis. The Uzbeks were pleased. The Syrians were not enraged. Only the Canadians, of all people, were piqued: their mention, as part of O.A.S., had been cut so the speech wouldn't sag. Even professional speechwriters, tough critics of one another, were impressed. "It was a good, strong speech," said Ted Sorensen, who wrote speeches for John F. Kennedy. "I'm not sure 'freedom versus fear' means much. But it had a nice ring to it, and you can be sure we're on the side of freedom."

Hughes quoted to me an e-mail message she had gotten from a journalist, saying that after the speech he'd been able to sleep again. It made sense. The speech reassured, even in the way it alternated its soaring Gersonian moments and its Hughesian explanations. America was mad but not too mad, mindful and not weak. Courage, compassion, civility and character were all there too -- the values that Bush ran on and that Gerson helped articulate in the campaign. After months of placating the right wing and days of disarray, the president had returned to the political and emotional center.

The very act of the speech suggested that civilized life would continue. The president had just sat around a big war map at Camp David -- but instead of first doing something violent, he turned to words. Some of those words were bland. Many were vague. Other than the demands to the Taliban, there was little policy in it. "This was a strategic speech, not tactical," admitted a senior White House official.

This wasn't a State of the Union address. It wasn't a moment to look ahead. Bad news could wait. New presidents are terrified of looking indecisive, but this one realized it would be worse to be rash. Who are they? Where are they? How can we strike back? The coming challenge is enormous. By delivering a speech that emphasized reason over wrath, Bush bought himself some time until someone could draw a real map for the first war of the 21st century.