

CONFESSIONS OF A WOUNDED SPEECHWRITER

By Ken Askew '72

Our plan is simple. As speechwriters we will engage the imaginations of our clients, provoke from them substance, add texture and convey to the world an enriched wisdom.

Will our plan run into trouble?

Big trouble.

My big trouble with speeches began in 1985, when I was hired as then Sen. Sam Nunn's writer. First assignment: Address the Trilateral Commission about mutually assured destruction. Yow!

There was little I knew less about, so I visited the venue for inspiration — a stately Washington, D.C., mansion converted to museum. The senator was to speak in a splendid dining hall sagging with art treasures: Matisse, Gauguin, Picasso, de Kooning, Cezanne, Rubens.

To capture the sinister logic of nuclear strategy I built the speech around a line from poet Kenneth Rexroth, "Art is the reasoned derangement of the senses," and adorned it with properly-spirited quotes from artists represented in the room — such as Cezanne's "I close my eyes that I might see."

Each quote was associated with a painting, all of which except Rubens' "The Repentant

Peter," showing the contrite disciple grieving at Christ's crucifixion, were abstractions with little to suggest their titles. So I drew a podium guide: the Picasso is at your three o'clock, Senator; the de Kooning at your nine. All nested in nine pages of textured prose that in retrospect only Gauloises-sucking Soho denizens in black mock-turtlenecks would tolerate.

The big event arrived. It was a dark and stormy night. Pouring rain; the Senate locked in vote; an agitated Sam Nunn bursting from the Capitol an hour late. We piled into the car, I introduced myself as the new speechwriter and handed the senator his draft. Flip. Flip. Flip. Flipflip. Flipflipflip. "Did you write this?" he asked.

Tension was palpable. The senator urged speed and asked proper pronunciation of Matisse. Charlie

Harmon, senior aide at the wheel, reluctantly ran red lights, which is legal for senators in an official hurry in D.C. Stupidly searching for soothing music, I turned on the radio and a "Hooked on Classics" disco version of *The Barber of Seville* blared forth like a cartoon soundtrack.

When we arrived, dessert was history and the senator raced to the podium. I took my seat between a Rockefeller and a former national security advisor, who by now were restlessly inspecting their forks and spoons.



And the bolt then hit me. The senator's podium had been moved! My art map for the senator was wrong! Ye gads, Senator, Matisse occupies Picasso territory!

I grabbed a linen and ruined it with large letters: Senator! The Art Has Moved! and desperately waved for his attention, attracting instead disdain from the Rockefeller flank. The senator for his part glanced around the room, waved at several pals who help lead the free world, nailed a joke about Noah vis-à-vis the torrent outside and launched into 30 unrehearsed minutes of for the life of me I know not what. Heads bobbed in excitement, muted voices murmured, mutual destruction was less assured than mine because I did not recognize the language my new client was using as English. It was instead a lofty technical patois of facts and figures and codespeak grokked apparently only by those like the Beastmarked Trilateral Commission and folks who hang out at the Pentagon.

Suddenly the senator stopped. Dramatic pause. For the first time he consulted his prepared remarks, and gesturing toward the Rubens said with measured deliberation, "Looking at that Repentant Peter, I'm reminded of the quote, 'Art is the reasoned derangement of the senses.'"

It's a tough quote to say and hear, but he delivered it perfectly, enunciating both "Ds." He looked around the room. "And you know, our topic tonight is kind of like that." He had the instinct to let it bloom.

The thought moved through the room like big weather. The audience nodded and murmured agreement. The good senator tied up his remarks with a bow and got a standing ovation.

And the speechwriter? Saved by a pro.

On the ride home, the senator was in a fine mood. He said to me, "Good quote," and meant it.

We worked together well for a year or so. Then came The College Graduation Speech. To Georgia Tech, no less, and the senator is a Bee. I took the opportunity to write the speech I wished to hear, which was a high-profile suggestion to young graduates that this might be the perfect time to take off a year and skylark for pocket change: wait tables in Paris, ride a motorcycle across Africa, play blues in a Honolulu honky-tonk. Not understanding the speech was a personal vindication for my own post-collegiate



misbehavior, Nunn called me into his office after reading the first draft.

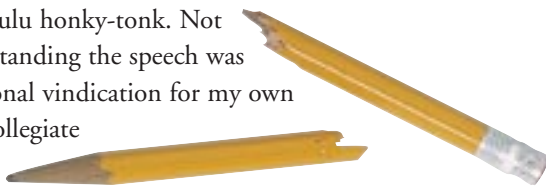
The Senator was not whistling "The Happy Wanderer." He said, "Ken, if I delivered this speech, all the parents in the stands who have paid good money to send their kids to Tech would rise up and lynch me!"

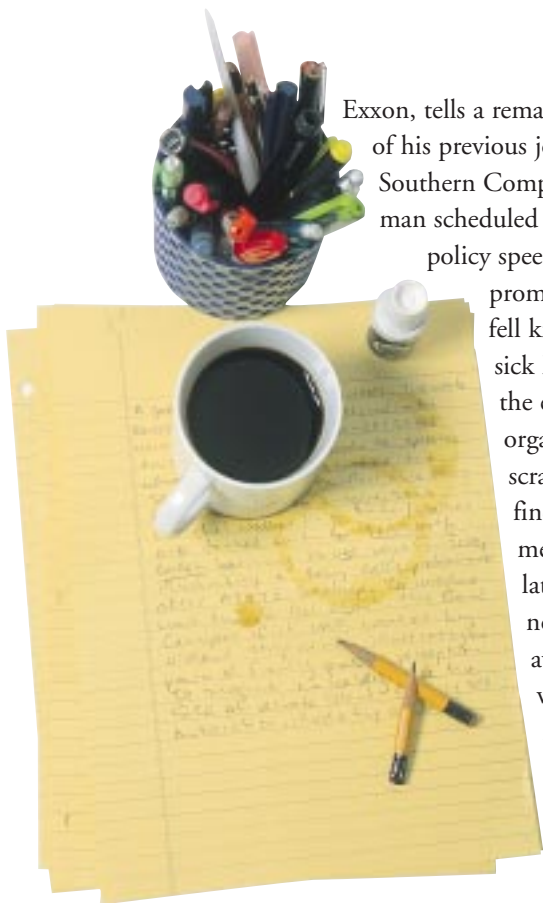
I rewrote, suggesting an immediate search for responsible jobs. And soon thereafter left political speechwriting for a great long while, taking with me the humbling lessons: Write their heart, not yours; and style is fine but you gotta have substance.

I entered the gates of corporate rhetoric, whose banner-bearers rely on shareholder votes for re-election. And big though government appeared to me, in comparison to corporate bureaucracy it seemed in fact a confederation of small fiefdoms. The senator's staff of roughly 30, for example, operated collegially through informal lines, under orchestration of the administrative assistant. I saw the senator almost daily.

The corporate world was different. A mere speck on the organizational chart of my new employer, multi-billion-dollar post-divestiture newborn giant BellSouth, I reported through at least four layers before hitting the level of Chairman John Clendenin. But the curious truth in such an enterprise — corroborated by peers at other corporations — is the existence of an undrawn dotted line connecting the little speck speechwriter directly to the big kahuna at the top of the chart. Coworkers observing the speck (me), on appointed occasions ascending the golden staircase to the top floor and closing the double-paneled doors for an hour alone with the great man, seemed to assume great bonding takes place — back-slapping bonhomie fueled by single malts, gilded truffles and Cuban freehands — when in fact a great deal of yessir and nosir takes place as the scribe scribbles and the leader instructs. (And to answer the unasked question: Yes, there is steerage on the corporate jet. It is wherever the speechwriter happens to sit.) But the organization reads it differently when the vault reopens and the speck, puffed by association, descends the golden staircase to his cubby. Power without authority. Which is why speechwriters' phone calls get returned.

My friend Bill Crain, chairman's speechwriter at





Exxon, tells a remarkable story of his previous job at The Southern Company. The man scheduled to deliver a policy speech at a prominent college fell knee-walking sick hours before the event, and the organization scrambled to find a replacement. It was late Friday: no executives available. Who was pressed into service? Bill Crain. The man who wrote the words.

He was extravagantly introduced and squired about the grounds by the dean. He conducted TV interviews broadcast on a statewide cable network. Intelligent folk solicited his thoughts. He generally “had a blast,” in his words.

I continue to be amazed at that story and will forever bless the hearts of those who sent Bill to do The Man’s job. It was an instance of power without authority, voicebox without mouth, and it’s hard to wrap my speechwriter’s imagination around the, uh, paradigm. While in fact Bill knew as much about the topic as any one person, and with his Harvard English postgraduate pedigree was supremely articulate, and (if The Southern Company resembles corporations I’ve encountered) probably gently shepherded more policy over time than most might admit, he had no countenance to the public. No corporate conceits to underpin his voice, no umph title, no reserved parking spot. Understandable audience response: who is this guy? Nonetheless he spoke first-person, voiced the corporate we and represented very well. Stuff of dreams for speechwriters. It will never happen again.

We are not voices. We are tugboats, we are tofu, we are Ferrari mechanics.

Tugboats, because we nudge the ship of state into rhetorical berths. We do not stand beside the captain on

the ballast-blessed bridge, keen with a sense of charted journey. We are hullfodder in the turbulent wake.

Tofu, because we assume the flavor of our host. Presumably we bring nourishment and roughage to the message and stretch the recipe.

Ferrari mechanics, because although we hang out around Ferraris, we do not own them. We do not drive them. We work on them, get dirty improving their performance and are glad for it. We are glad because being Ferrari mechanics, we are at the top of our game, having worked through the Fiats and the Alfas. We thank God we are not working on Chitty Chitty Bang Bangs like the poor unfortunates — many of whom deserve better — stalled in typical speechwriting jobs across the land.

We are glad because we hold a sensual job in a culture rarely sensual. Federico Fellini, whose death on Halloween is as fine a proof of God as I know, documented in his movie *Roma* a subway crew tunneling a new line near that city’s Coliseum. Their massive drill unexpectedly pierced a subterranean chamber sealed for centuries, its walls festooned with frescos of Romans long dead. As the stunned crew stepped through the gape and stood transfixed in a scene lit only by their helmet lights, air rushed in to fill the silence and the ancient vacuum — and within a matter of moments the harsh modern atmosphere erased the fragile figures into nothing. Gone.

A good speech is like those images. The words vanish but the ideas remain etched in the mind. Clendenin understood this and happily took to speeches whose central ideas hooked the senses. He was comfortable asking the audience to imagine, say, Herschel Walker in a tutu (Walker once danced with the Fort Worth Ballet) learning to use new muscles, illustrating a Baby Bell’s predicament after AT&T’s breakup. To imagine how they’d feel about the Grand Canyon if it were created by violent strip-mining, illustrating the power of framing public perception. To imagine an iceberg twice the size of Rhode Island breaking off Antarctica, illustrating a seachange in education reform.

Note that each image carries an idea. I remembered from the Art Speech that style requires substance and saw that Clendenin embraced both. Once, invited to address the industry’s most prominent gathering, he responded to our speechwriting department’s timid suggestion to accept the post, quietly reject the pedes-

trian subject assigned and unilaterally elevate the speech to a level more appropriate to his — and his company's — new industry stature. Instead of complying with the invitation to contribute background noise, Clendenin stood and delivered by far the most imaginative and thoughtful address among hundreds at the event. It was called "Time Merchants" and through a muscular metaphor dared to ask the industry to define its social conscience.

Digging through files recently I uncovered sedimentary evidence of "Time Merchants" evolution — a paper trail of memos and drafts confirming that from the get-go Clendenin embraced the idea of elevating the assignment from the mundane to the visionary. Perhaps more significantly, those files also showed intense organizational resistance to his instincts, including comments from a senior executive, whose sole edit was "P.U." scrawled on the front page.

I reckon this "P.U." speech was the most influential of Clendenin's career. It inspired a Japanese book about telecommunication's future, also called *Time Merchants*; won recognition as the best corporate speech of the year from the national speechwriters' association; and most importantly prompted the leading industry journal to christen Clendenin "the Iacocca of telecommunications" in two successive editorials. I felt the pulse of triumph at my temples when I read them. I like to think Clendenin did too.

Lesson: Ideas presented through sensual rhetoric can work for those with guts to use them. Such guts are rare. Possibly because most corporate managers are eviscerated long before ascending the golden staircase?

I was blessed early, learning from a gracious and patient senator, brought along by a thoughtful and gentlemanly CEO, before being subjected to a tough and weary town: Detroit.

I had been hired as senior speechwriter for Chrysler Corporation only a matter of days beforehand, under a burdensome title my cheerful then-wife found ridiculous, causing her to dub me "Speech Weasel" in honor of a gardening tool advertised on TV channels fond of The Clapper and products for folks who have fallen and can't get up.

This brand-new Chrysler Speech Weasel was going to meet the mighty Iacocca for the first time on a flight to Palm Springs. I was nervous. I had been in some nice corporate jets before and some scary military planes when I worked for Nunn.

But never one like this Gulfstream.

Gulfstream is the Bentley of corporate jets. At the time Chrysler owned Gulfstream Corporation, and let us just say they gilded the lily when it came to filling the order for the chairman's aeroplane.

I prepared my opening line. Keep it simple, I counseled myself. It's nice to meet you. It's nice to meet you. I practiced it on the way up the ramp and into the plane — for whose interior glory, I quickly saw, a tropical rainforest had been sacrificed.

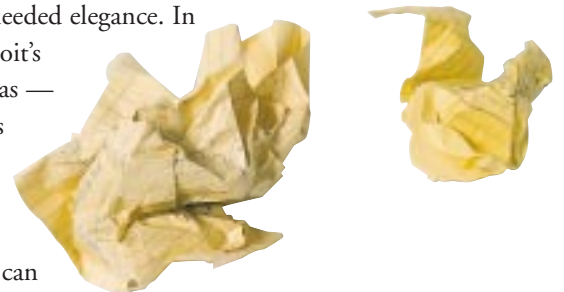
The chairman was aboard. It's nice to meet you, I practiced as I approached the throne. I had it down. He looked up.

Iacocca smiled and extended his hand. I shook it. "Hello," I pled earnestly, "It's nice to meet you."

I could see the thought framing in his mind: "Hmm, this Speech Weasel can twist even his own words. Say, he must be pretty good!" But to his credit the Captain of Industry was gentle and let it pass. My companion, however, master of the monosyllable, hissed in my ear, "Gee, swell start pal." I crawled to steage and kept my head under a cushion for two hours. I may have been a fancy Speech Weasel in the eyes of my wife, but when all was said and done, as a speechwriter that day I stared into the abyss of self and confirmed I will forever remain a Ferrari mechanic.

Lesson: Speech Weasels rise to the level of idiocy suggested by their titles.

It never got much fun for me at Chrysler, despite encountering two all-time favorite clients: The heart and soul of the company's product resurrection, President Bob Lutz, who despite countless endearing qualities, had the terrifying habit of stopping in the middle of delivering a speech — any speech, regardless of importance — to announce to the crowd he had discovered a spelling error in his podium copy, uncapping with great flourish his fountain pen and making the correction on the spot. And Vice-Chairman Jerry Greenwald, now chairman of United Airlines, whose calm grace balanced a zany management team with much-needed elegance. In the end Detroit's dearth of ideas — the industry's Achilles' heel — sent me home to Atlanta. You can



Successful delivery is more than meets the ear. To slightly paraphrase Somerset Maugham, there are three rules about writing a great speech. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are. But I reckon these three are as good as any.

..... **R U L E 1**

Bend the rules. Surprise the form. Stretch predictable limits by avoiding prosaic ruts thousands of lazy writers (and speakers) before have carved into the well-worn paths of rhetoric. Robert Frost said writing blank verse is like playing tennis without a net; it follows that once we view a speech as a form to exploit and a system of limits to push — a tennis court with boundaries and a net — we can start plumbing its potential, surprising the audience and making the speech effective. Do you start with a joke? Perhaps — if you want to stay comfortably in form. Maybe you open instead with a dramatic statement, a challenge, an accusation, a question or even an obvious bald-faced lie. Struggling against the limits of a form is what makes *bonsai* and *haiku* interesting templates of a larger idea and pack a world of expression within their tiny selves. Conversely, staying safely in the middle of the form is a sure path to mediocrity. Clearly the major variable here is the stage skill of the speaker, which introduces a subset of rules beyond the scope of this article, although I will submit this handy hint: If the client ain't funny, the client ain't funny.

..... **R U L E 2**

Employ the senses. William Blake illuminated poetry with images. Going outside the medium to metaphorically evoke sight, smell, sound and abstract senses such as humor and irony hooks an audience and shrink-wraps their minds around the shape of your idea.

..... **R U L E 3**

Keep it simple. That knee-slapping Greek Archilochus wrote in his fable “The Hedgehog and the Fox” that the fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing. Strong writers can fall flat penning a speech if they write for the eye. The eye is a fox and can see many things. The ear is a hedgehog and hears one big thing. Write for the hedgehog.

write only so many speeches about Girding Our Competitive Loins for the Challenges of the Future, with a thank you for that kind introduction, a joke, an observation that our industry is aswim in uncertainty and therefore requires from us a noble response, three problems (from a rotating list) disguised as “challenges,” a complaint about the unlevel playing field driving us to hell in a handbasket and maybe a rhapsody on how technology demands a paradigm shift even as we speak. Either that or please notice our fine new models this year.

Lesson: Seek an industry you enjoy.

We learn slowly. An interior designer once asked if what I do for a living isn't somehow dishonest. I asked her, “What is it again you do for a living?” We stopped dating soon thereafter.

I remember a fateful day when a tattered, outrageously smelly quilt showed up at Senator Nunn's office with an earnest note explaining it was created by a sweet soul in the interest of world peace. The note said many prominent leaders had slept under this Peace Quilt for one night and deepened their concern for our species as a result. A quick inspection, however, revealed that clearly more than a few had done quite a bit *more* to this quilt. Would the senator please sleep under the quilt too? the note asked. The senator took one look at the skanky thing and said, “Askew, *you* sleep under it and tell me about it.”

We're paid for such hazard duty, and by golly if there were a junior speechwriter on staff I too would have delegated. But maybe the interior designer was right. Maybe that rhetorical sofa over there does express my thoughts more than it does the client's.

I was airlifted into Atlanta awhile back to craft an emergency draft for perhaps the most elegant executive of his generation, Roberto Goizueta. Because of circumstances beyond anyone's control at Coca-Cola I did not have the opportunity to hear his thoughts on the subject at hand, which coincided with the company's redoubled efforts to “brand” the color red.

Time was short. I holed up in a hotel and wrote the wrong speech, describing an arc of a career framed at one end with a boy's small world being painted violently red in Cuba, and framed at the other with a man's globe being painted an entirely different shade of redemptive red from atop a North Avenue tower. Only after submitting the draft did I learn that Goizueta apparently shied from publicly broaching

how Castro's communism disrupted his youth, and the speech was graciously rejected, perhaps for other good reasons as well. Although I was paid fairly for my work and later gratified to find shards of the "Red Speech" filtered into subsequent Coca-Cola corporate material, after such a failure I had to ask myself, have I really learned all that much since the The Art Speech?

Of course. In a similar crash-and-burn situation a few years earlier I was holed up in a Gatlinburg, Tennessee, motel pulling an all-nighter for another prominent CEO hours before my sister-in-law's funeral. That speech also took a bold tack, using as a metaphor for individual ethical responsibility the Dolphin, an 18th-century frigate whose crew members pulled precious nails from its decking for trade currency to South Pacific islanders — which caused the ship to sink. My particular circumstances that night infused the speech with a bit more raw heart than usual. It could have backfired. Instead the speech was a great success. Win some and lose some.

Occasionally an idea can get away from you like a big floor-buffing machine. Peggy Noonan put "A thousand points of light" in George Bush's mouth and the guy moves into the White House. I put "It ain't over 'til Cabrera swings" into Bush's mouth, the poor guy ends up with an Aggie library, Francisco Cabrera gets traded and the best team of the 1990s has one World Series Championship ring to show for it. Still, if I never write another successful speech, Bush provided me with the high point of my career.

It happened during the desperate last days of perhaps the worst-run presidential re-election campaign in recent history, when some genius in our camp decided Bush should embark on a whistle-stop tour through the heartland. The team rounded up a train, gussied it with bunting and POTUS (President of The United States) was off and running, sort of.

The trick to campaign speeches is to string a couple dozen policy ideas together, each pearl a standalone point so the press gets to choose its bits. It helps to punch each pearl with a one-line zinger.

One idea before us this particular day was the long-standing Democratic control of Congress — 38 years. In a moment of giddy fatigue, I threw out the line, "Thirty-eight years? That's 266 dog years!" It was so lame we put it in triple brackets to flag it for the president's review and moved on to the next idea. What I failed to understand was the president's fasci-

nation with dogs. Dogs are completely wonderful, according to Bush. He loved the line.

He used it at 8 a.m. to a crowd of half-asleep supporters at the first whistle-stop. It met with confused silence. What did the leader of the free world just say? Something about Congress and dog years?

On the way to the next scheduled stop, the president retired to the back of the train with his #2 pencil and wrote furiously.

Next stop, he tried the joke again. Again, confused silence. A sprinkling of polite titters.

Back in the train, he barked out requests for more facts and figures. Next stop, lo and behold, the same dog-year joke, the same response. But this time, a paragraph later, POTUS describes the Pentagon budget in dollars, multiplies it by seven and calls it dog-dollars. The crowd begins to catch on.

You get the picture. By day's end the speech was crammed with facts and figures, each multiplied by seven. Dog-years. Dog-dollars. Dog-this. Dog-that. And as the train pulled out of the last station at dusk, the crowd was actually chanting, "Twenty-eight more years! Twenty-eight more years!"

Parturientes montes murem ridiculosum pepererunt: The mountains went into labor and there emerged a ridiculous mouse. It was my finest seven hours.

Until the next morning, when *The New York Times*, front page below the fold, suggested perhaps the leader of the free world had lost his mind. Time to rewrite. ■



Former White House speechwriter Ken Askew has served as senior staff speechwriter for former U.S. President George Bush; former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn; Chrysler executives Lee Iacocca, Jerry Greenwald and Bob Lutz; and BellSouth Chairman John Clendenin. In subsequent private practice he has written for many Fortune 200 chairmen and CEOs including Roberto Goizueta of The Coca-Cola Company, Dave Pottruck of Schwab, Bill Esrey of U.S. Sprint, Paul O'Neill of Alcoa (now secretary of the treasury), George Shabehn of Andersen Consulting (now Accenture) and Jim Kelly of UPS.