



**FIRST YEAR: POTUS 2017**

**COPYEDITED TRANSCRIPT**

**SPEECHWRITERS ROUNDTABLE**

December 9, 2016  
Charlottesville, VA

**Participants**

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**Barbara Perry:** We want to begin with the concept of new media, and the fact that there is a new media environment that not only consumers of media, the American people and the international community, are experiencing, but presidents are using it. Presidents-elect are using it. We also want to know how that might impact what it is that speechwriters do. If you want to start either with that as a concept of where we are now, and from your experience, what insights you have on it, or if you want to talk about, in your own experience, how you use the media at the time, we are open to any or all of those approaches, or others that I didn't mention.

**Tony Lucadamo:** So I thought, Adam, since you would have the most recent experience working with "new media," we'd let you kick it off.

**Adam Frankel:** Sure. I guess I'd make a couple of observations. Clearly, there's the rise of digital technologies that radically transform the media landscape and the role of political communications. I think, in this campaign, we saw Trump make the most of that in ways that previous candidates had not been able to do for a variety of reasons.

I think that it was certainly something that we wrestled with, but I guess I would also make a broader point, which is there's a danger in rethinking the speechwriting process and the role of speeches to accommodate a world where information is communicated in 140 characters, or click-bait. My view is that speechwriters should continue to write coherent speeches that are arguments, and thoughtful, and fleshed-out arguments, and that it is the job of the communications team, press shops, to maybe figure out how to use the content of those speeches

to penetrate and break through in this kind of environment.

I know there are some whose view is we should write speeches in a way that can—short, digestible points that can break through today, in this media landscape, and don't put as much of a priority on the kind of longer, more fleshed-out arguments. That kind of tension goes back. It's not a product of the 21st century. That argument is sort of a push for sound bites and it has been around for a while. But I would argue that folks who are involved in the business of writing speeches should stick to making the arguments as best they can and taking the time they need to do that. The onus of navigating this media environment should fall not just on them, but the broader communications and press shops. I guess I'll leave it there.

**Lucadamo:** I know, Mary Kate, in your essay, you spoke a fair amount to this point. Do you want to jump in?

**Mary Kate Cary:** I agree with what Adam is saying, that there's a need for thoughtful—I guess thought leadership would be what you'd call it in the business world. When I write speeches for business leaders, often the speeches get reused in a variety of platforms, whether it turns into a magazine article and they put it on Medium, or they use it as part of their newsletter, they send it into *Huffington Post* or someplace like that. So there are ways for them to spread the arguments that they're making to audiences across various print and digital platforms.

You don't really see that at the White House. You don't see the president putting out a newsletter, or the president putting an essay on Medium. It's almost exclusively speeches. That is why I think Adam's right that we should continue to rely on the speechwriters for the marshaling of arguments and making the case to the American people, because there aren't other platforms like that that are available to the president, and so the speechwriting becomes sort of the tip of the spear. The press shop and the rest of the communications team has the job of figuring out

how to make arguments, as we were saying in our essay, findable, shareable, embeddable, and get them in front of audiences that may never click on [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov) to watch a presidential address. That's the challenge.

As far as the structure of the White House communications operations goes, back in the late '80s, early '90s, when I was in the White House, the press office dealt with the White House press corps exclusively, and then the Office of Media Relations actually was separate, and that was under Communications. The Office of Communications included the speechwriters, the researchers, the Office of Media Relations, and all of Public Liaison. So the Office of Media Relations dealt with *Parade* magazine and places like that, that were not in the White House press corps, all the radio stations, all the non-network news live-at-five types. I'm sure that's changed since then, but that was the way it was done back in the day, and I'm sure it's been revised many times since. It's not a terrible construct; it was pretty effective at the time.

**Frankel:** I would just add to that. To the point about conveying the content in different kinds of platforms, I totally agree, but also, it is sort of surprising that speeches are still generally—I mean, obviously all this stuff is changing, being constructed—but by and large, not altogether different from the way it was done decades ago, many decades ago.

We saw, in the Obama administration, for the State of the Union and other things—I think primarily the State of the Union, but it may have been for other speeches as well—you had a second-screen kind of experience, where you could go to [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov) and see digital graphics breaking out, like points the president was making, illustrating his words with broader context. I do think there's an opportunity to rethink the way information is communicated from the president, enriching his words with content like that that's distributed across multiple platforms, and using the kinds of tools that are available now to—not just—and this is slightly

different from the point about breaking through, but just the information we are breaking through with, conveying that information in new, more impactful, more informative ways.

**David Kusnet:** If I could add to that, and agree with what Adam and Mary Kate were saying. I think that Twitter almost returned speechwriting, in some ways, to its original form, talking to a large audience without intermediaries. When I was writing speeches in the '80 and '90s, the conventional wisdom that the speechwriters often pushed back against was that all that mattered was a few sound bites, and the rest of it was just connective tissue. But now you have people in the audience, and people watching it on TV, tweeting in real time. So a lot more of the speech gets pushed out to a large audience than was true when it went through the filter of media that would only report or broadcast a few lines.

I think there's more of a need for coherent argument now than there was in the sound bite era, because people are tweeting in real time, including people who are on your side. You want them to have an idea of where the speech has been and where it's going, so that they're tweeting and are on message. I think, in the age of Twitter, you really have a greater need for a coherent line of argument than you had in the age of sound bites.

**Cary:** The statistic I've seen the most this week is that Donald Trump's Twitter audience is larger—maybe it's Twitter and Facebook combined, I guess—larger than the audience for any of the nightly news network broadcasts, and that that tells everybody that he is not about to give up his Twitter feed when he becomes president. Obviously, President Obama has a Twitter feed, but doesn't use it the same way that Donald Trump has.

One of the things we put in the essay was that Donald Trump's "activity network" on social media was three times the size of Hillary Clinton's. The thing that people clicked on the most when he would attach links—Both sides would attach links to their tweets. Hillary Clinton

would as well. But Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders tended to take you to a page of DNC [Democratic National Committee] talking points, and Donald Trump tended to link to third-party news stories that, to the average voter, seemed more credible because they weren't coming from the RNC [Republican National Committee] or the DNC. That tells me that you still need a traditional White House press corps strategy, because you need those articles that are considered more objective by voters.

I would say that is where the future is going to be. There are going to be more tweets going out with links attached to longer-form thought and reporting, and maybe even things like Vox-style card stacks, where you can flip through and see the 10 reasons why the president signed the TPP [Trans-Pacific Partnership], for example. And so I think we're going to see an evolution of that as time goes on, because the 140 characters isn't enough. But you also need to link to things that people want to click on.

**Ken Khachigian:** In keeping with your concept of advising the transition, one thing that's not going to change in the new digital era is that, in the White House, speeches have to conform to policy. The danger of the Twitter feed, or whatever the president wants to do, is that the impulsive tweet is going to disrupt policy from time to time, and that can be very dangerous. The particular outburst from time to time, that can have a very damaging effect on policy that's been thought through and worked out, whether it's foreign policy or domestic policy. It has to be a very serious part of any consideration.

**Bill Antholis:** Ken, can I push you on that?

**Khachigian:** Yes, I was going to make—

**Antholis:** Yes, I can push Ken, and others who were going to chime in, on this a little bit to dial in, in particular, when he says it's disruptive to policy, with which audience is—One thing that

we discussed at the Reagan Library under the tail fin of the airplane was that, in a campaign, you're speaking to a broad national audience. When you move to governing, those audiences dial in more specifically. If you could talk more about that, that would be helpful. Who are typical policy audiences, even from anecdote?

**Khachigian:** I'm not so sure I fully understand the question. Some presidencies view the White House as a continuing campaign. I don't necessarily see it that way. Especially this incoming administration has some real serious challenges at the very outset, just as President Reagan had in the first 90 days. Just as he did, I think President-elect Trump, or the new President Trump, is going to have to have a plan for some speeches at the very outset, prescriptive speeches, setting out an agenda. Certainly some of the campaign themes are going to find their way into the dialogue, but basically I think the campaign is over with. He's having his tour now, but some serious work has to be done. It's not just the White House and politics that you have in mind; it's what OMB [Office of Management and Budget] has to say, thinking about what State has to contribute, thinking about what feedback is going to be from Congress. You have a whole new set of considerations.

**Antholis:** That's what I was getting at, Ken. So if I can extend what you're saying—In other words, if what State has to say, talking about now international audiences, with respect to Congress, how members of Congress might hear things as opposed to how voters might hear things?

**Khachigian:** Yes. Precisely.

**Frankel:** On that point, I think what we'll find is that tweets are useful for lighting people up on a particular issue, but in an administration, anybody who wants to know what the president thinks about something will go back and read his speech, so whether that's responsible members

of the media, whether that is advocacy groups, policymakers, and leaders in other countries— Anybody who's a responsible citizen, if you want to actually know what the president thinks, will go back and look at the text of the speech. The danger, as Ken and others were saying, is that a tweet or something will be at odds with policy that's laid out in a speech, which presumably has made it through some sort of clearance process, so there was consensus around what was said, and that will just sow confusion among anybody who cares about whatever the topic of the speech is, which will not be useful for the administration or anybody else.

**Cary:** One suggestion I heard this week was whether there should be some kind of staffing or clearance process also for some of the tweets, and just have a second set of eyes. Doesn't have to be half the cabinet or anything, but have somebody at the White House say, "Wait a minute, hang on, that's contradictory to what you said a month ago." Just for consistency and good policy, to have an Assistant to the President for Twitter Control or something similar. Just have a second set of eyes who can say, "Oh, wait a minute, hang on."

**Lucadamo:** I don't envy that person.

**Perry:** Well, we can't predict what kinds of speeches, or when, or what the topics will be on the suggestion that there will need to be some specifics on agenda items, but we do know that the next president will begin on January 20th with an inaugural address, and bookend that, at the end of the first year, with the first State of the Union address, and then somewhere early on, too, an address to Congress, usually about the budget. I wonder if you all can take us through your experiences on the process of putting together the first inaugural address in the cases of those of you who perhaps worked on two, and then the first State of the Union speech.

**Khachigian:** Well, of course I sat down with Mr. Reagan, and he unloaded his storehouse of speeches in the past. Dozens and dozens of notecards, which were extremely valuable. The next



step I did was read through every inaugural address from every previous president, and I will warn anybody who's writing an inaugural address, don't read President Lincoln's second, because then you'll never want to write another word, because of the poetry, which can't be matched by anyone. But mainly, you want to try to extract from your principal as much as you can about what they want to convey in that speech.

Frankly, then-Governor Reagan was so distracted by so many things, and I think Trump will be distracted. You really have to try to get them to focus, to give their attention to you so that you can empty out of them as much as they will give you. Because sometimes, I felt like I didn't have as much guidance as I could have had, and yet once we got down right to the end, then he really focused, and then started doing his own writing, and then he took over and crafted it the way he wanted. Boy, I wished I could have had that focus earlier in the process.

**Perry:** These cards, Ken, that you're mentioning, these are the ones that—am I correct?—that Doug Brinkley then pulled together in his book? These are notes that Reagan had made over the years?

**Khachigian:** I'll tell you something that will make you all sick. He was in the process of moving from his home, and when I walked in to see him, to work, that first day, we were looking for a place to move, and then we got into a study, and he showed me a trashcan that was packed to the top, and it was full of old index cards in his handwriting with his speeches on them. He said, "Ken, one of the nice things about moving is getting rid of all these old cards." I was horrified. I said, "Governor, you can't get rid of anything anymore." So I don't know whatever happened to them. I tried to convince him he couldn't throw them away, but he may have thrown away thousands and thousands of index cards full of his old speeches.

**Perry:** Well, at least Doug Brinkley found a store of them. I think what these were, were quotes

he had collected over the years that he would incorporate into speeches, I'm told.

**Khachigian:** He had a wonderful storehouse of them, yes.

**Perry:** Others on the inaugural?

**Frankel:** Yes, I guess I should say a couple of things on the inaugural. The first conversation I think we had with the president about the first inaugural was just a few days after he won the election, in the transition offices where we talked to him, where he wanted us to think about the moment that we were in in this country, and where in broader history. That was kind of his initial thinking, wanting to situate this particular moment in this sort of sweep of American history.

One of the dangers with an inaugural is, especially for speechwriters who have not written an inaugural before, is there is a lot of pressure on the speeches, and I think there's an inclination to sometimes make your principal sound a little bit more like what you think a president ought to sound like than what the person does sound like. Now, speaking very bluntly, I think that actually might be useful for the Trump transition to bear that in mind, but I do think that, in the past, one of the things that has happened is that presidents sound a little more stilted than they might ordinarily sound, because they and their speechwriters were trying to write some speech for the Great Speeches books or something. That would be my only note there.

Then as far as the State of the Union, my recollection was that that first State of the Union is not technically a State of the Union, but more a Joint Session address, that it occurs so soon after they take office that it's less about reporting on what's happened than aspirational, and sort of an opportunity to lay out more thoroughly a policy mission for the country.

**Kusnet:** With President Clinton and his first inaugural and his Joint Session speech in February of '93, I think in his own mind, at least, he was beginning to see the two of them as part of a larger narrative with, to paraphrase Mario Cuomo, the inaugural being the poetry, and the Joint

Session speech being the prose. We met with him toward the end of November in Little Rock about the inaugural, and he had already thought out a lot about it in terms of him being the first baby-boomer president, the first post–Cold War president, the first president to try to forge what was called a “third way” between traditional liberalism and the Reagan era. The imperative on us was not so much to be down to earth but, in view of his reputation, to be brief. So the one requirement we had was that it had to come in under 15 minutes.

The process on that was largely consulting with deep thinkers and what could be called “poets of history,” with historians, some of whom were friends of his, such as Taylor Branch, and coming up with some kind of summons to reflection and action about where the country stood at that moment in history. But he did foreshadow the Joint Session speech about the economic plan with language in the inaugural that said—and I’m pulling this from memory—that we have to do what no generation has had to do before, to pay down our debts, but also to invest in our future.

That was really the fundamental contradiction, not just of his economic program, but of his first years in office. He came in with this ambitious “Putting People First” program of public investment, but he also discovered that the budget deficit was much worse than he had been told before being elected. For the first time, thanks largely to the Perot campaign, which was in some ways a forerunner of the Trump campaign, the deficit was no longer an elite issue. It had become a symbol for many Americans of government being unaccountable and irresponsible and out of control. So even though his own instincts, I believe, were toward the public investment side, he had to, both for practical and political reasons, cope with the deficit as well. He did foreshadow that in the inaugural, and he spelled it out in detail in his speech to the Joint Session about the economic plan.

**Khachigian:** One difference between the inaugural and the Joint Session is in the inaugural,

there's not a lot of competition. With the inaugural, it was just working, pretty much, one-on-one with the president-elect. But with Reagan, he did a Joint Session speech in February, February 18th, to lay out his proposals for the economy. At that point, the speechwriter—In my case, I became the referee, dealing with Don Regan at Treasury, and Dave Stockman at OMB. Back then, Larry Kudlow was also at OMB, as I recall. People within the administration were all jockeying for their language and their views.

That's one thing that whoever's going to be taking on those first assignments in the Trump administration as a speechwriter, they're going to find themselves having that referee role of juggling between all these competing forces, trying to get either their language into that speech, or getting their policy into that speech. There are often competing policies. At the end of the day, you work it out. It's fun for a while, but at the end, you've got to shut everybody out and say, "Look, we've got to get this thing into print." I don't know if the rest of you had to deal with that.

**Kusnet:** If I could return to the Clinton economic plan for a minute—With us what happened was the plan itself was being hashed out up until a few days before the speech, and then we had a very compressed period of about two days and several all-nighters to draft the speech off of an economic plan that was still being formulated. So we weren't so much the referees as the recording secretaries in a deliberative process that was going on at the same time as the process for drafting the speech.

**Cary:** I was going to jump in. I was not senior enough to be writing the inaugural or the State of the Union, so I instead did a little reading on this, and I thought this might be useful to the Trump team: The precedent was set by George Washington in his first inaugural that there would be formal and elevated language.

Then there are two things that make the inaugural speech different from others. The first is that it's almost always a discussion of national unity and common values and a shared dedication to the Constitution, and all of his successors since Washington's time have kept those as broad themes. Second, they all have, in some way, acknowledged God as the protector of the United States. My boss, Bush 41, went so far as to—I think he was one of the only ones to do this—to start his inaugural address with a prayer, and then launch into the speech from there. I think something like that would be tremendously effective this year. Any sort of unifying language, I think, would be very appreciated by a lot of people on both sides. Then Washington also set the precedent of not having specific legislative proposals in his inauguration, and instead saving those for the State of the Union, a tradition that has continued. I think that's a good policy to continue as well.

**Lucadamo:** I want to go off something Ken mentioned, which is the give and take between different offices, both as you put the State of the Union together, and then in general, as you get further and further into the administration. I'm wondering, as these new offices come together here under Trump, what the appropriate give and take is, where the speechwriting office sits in that hierarchy, and how you do go about making the decision to overrule senior officials at a point when you have to move on with the speech.

**Frankel:** In our first term, at least, I think it's probably still similar, we had a pretty tight-knit speechwriting group, and we had a relationship with the president, and Axelrod was kind of overseeing all the speechwriting. We were sort of protected in that respect, and there wasn't the—I'm sure there were efforts to try and get policies in the speeches, and in the State of the Union, there's always a bit of that. More broadly, we were sort of protected from that respect, and when we pushed back, it was sort of understood that we acted with the blessing of the

president, because we had a strong relationship as a team with him. We didn't face the kind of litigating that I think—I've talked to some of my colleagues from past administrations about—in that respect, which I think was beneficial, quite frankly, and also was a result of working with a president and a senior advisor, Axelrod, who was himself a very talented writer, who understood narrative and the importance of a single voice, and all the elements that contribute to a good speechwriting process.

**Khachigian:** The lead speechwriter, the chief speechwriter, however you want to—director of speechwriting—has to demand, absolutely, to be in the senior staff meeting in the morning. That's critical. Also, the other critical thing is to be able to sit in on all these economic policy meetings when they're formulating policy. That was one of the advantages I think I had when we were setting out the policy in that first Joint Session speech. When I said I refereed it, I wasn't trying to make policy or overrule anybody, but I sat in on the meetings with Stockman and the Treasury folks, and I sat in on the senior staff meetings, so I knew the directions they were going. The speechwriters are never supposed to impose themselves on the president for policy or think they're the president themselves, but it just was a huge advantage. If you're not in those meetings, that would be very, very bad. That's one piece of advice I would pass on—speechwriters aren't just the potted plants in the room. They've got to be involved in these. They've really got to be involved in the meetings.

**Cary:** Along those lines, the Bush 41 speechwriting operation was, I would say, significantly downgraded, and I think we paid a real price for it. My advice to the incoming White House would be to avoid doing that. None of the Bush 41 speechwriters were even as high as special assistant to the president. We were just speechwriters. The chief speechwriter at the beginning, I believe, was a special assistant to the president. Later, when Tony Snow came onboard, he

negotiated deputy assistant to the president. I think that helps in the refereeing, if somebody has to get on the phone with someone at the cabinet level, to have them at least have some sort of rank. We didn't even have mess privileges at the White House mess, which would have been very helpful for—

**Khachigian:** Wow.

**Cary:** It was bad.

**Khachigian:** You've got to be in the senior staff meeting and have mess privileges. I didn't even think I had to add that.

**Cary:** We didn't have either, and so—

**Khachigian:** Oh, my God.

**Cary:** —that would be my advice. It sounds silly. It's kind of a nit-picky thing to ask for, but I would definitely say that the speechwriters have to be special assistants to the president. The chief speechwriter should be either a deputy or an assistant to the president, and I think they need to have some of those negotiating tools that other people have that we didn't, whether it's access to meetings or the mess or whatever, to be able to do the job right.

**Khachigian:** I think we're probably all in agreement on that. Ted Sorensen, who passed away a few years ago, used to say that maybe the main reason he was able to write so effectively for Kennedy was because he had been so close to him for so long and traveled around the country with him and just knew his thoughts. Proximity to the person they're writing for is absolutely essential, so I strongly urge that whoever is primarily responsible for overseeing the speechwriting process has that kind of access.

**Perry:** Could we ask sort of a macro question? These are very helpful details, to be sure, for us, and we hope for the transition team and for the incoming administration. But we wondered about

the concept of the bully pulpit, which starts in the 20th century as a reference to the bullyish-ness of Teddy Roosevelt, and I think the growth of mass media as well. Were you all particularly aware of that phenomenon or that model? Did that help you and guide you in writing speeches, particularly when the president—as we as political scientists, as historians, view it—seizes the bully pulpit to get traction on, get purchase on, and he hopes success on, policy?

**Frankel:** I don't think the bully pulpit exists today. The notion of a bully pulpit—frankly, Trump has done a very successful job, obviously, of breaking through in certain ways, than others have recently. But the notion of a bully pulpit, I think, is very different than it used to be. Getting back to one of the comments I made earlier, I think that speechwriting used to be the primary way a president would communicate with the American people. You look back in the '60s, and you'd have speeches by John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson that were printed, verbatim, the entire text, in the *New York Times*, and now it's just one tool in an arsenal that the communications office has. That's how they should be thought of, I think, as one tool among many.

I think that doing what is unconventional, and the Trump team knows this as well as anybody, is the way of kind of breaking through. We would find that in the Obama administration, that our speeches that we worked on hard, and that we'd given a lot of thought to, and set policy and stuff, didn't get any traction whatsoever. It was the more kind of unconventional—it was an ad-lib comment he'd make at a press conference, or a *Between Two Ferns* kind of thing, that would actually get some traction. I think that the challenge will be figuring out how to use speeches as part of this broader communications strategy, writ large.

**Kusnet:** With President Clinton, in 1993 and 1994, we found that he was at his best, very often, literally in a pulpit, and he was very much at his best talking about values, relating the fabric of people's lives to the values in American society. But we were promoting so many substantive



programs during the first two years—the economic plan, the health care plan, AmeriCorps, NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement], which many of us opposed, and so many other substantive programs, and we were involved in so many policy and economic arguments—that it was very difficult to work statements of values into the speech text, even though those were the best ways of framing the substantive proposals that we were offering.

In the first two years, and also afterward, the speeches where he was explicitly talking about values—the inaugural address, the speech that he delivered on the 25th anniversary of the death of Robert Kennedy, the speech at the Church of God in Christ in Memphis in the fall of 1993—and that church was where Dr. [Martin Luther] King had given his last public address—those were some of the most effective speeches, and they tended to frame the arguments that we were engaged in over policy issues, to which many more speeches were devoted.

**Frankel:** Yes, I would add that I think it is worth noting that the best speeches, at least from my perspective, that presidents have given haven't just been about policy. They have spoken to these sorts of common values, and that's a critical role for the president. The president is a moral leader, not just a political leader. I think that's an important thing to bear in mind. I'd also say, speaking on the point about a multitude of issues, one of the challenges we faced in the early days was there were so many big issues that we were dealing with so quickly. The Recovery Act, for example, included the largest investments in education, in infrastructure, in clean energy, each, going back decades. Trying to figure out how do we talk about this, how do we prioritize in a way that's going to give attention to where it ought to go, was a challenge. Being relentlessly disciplined in terms of message and the priority of the messages you're trying to communicate is absolutely essential.

**Cary:** I'm of two minds here. On one hand, I agree with you, Adam, that some of the most

memorable moments are the ones that are unscripted. Of course, the one that pops into my head is President Bush at a press conference saying how much he hated broccoli and he wasn't going to eat it anymore. That was good for a lot of speech jokes for many years afterward, but it didn't start in a speech.

What he was able to do in terms of foreign policy, a lot of it had to do with the relationships he had with other foreign leaders. But when you think about either galvanizing world opinion against Saddam Hussein and trying to get him out of Kuwait, and convincing the world that that was a just war, and when you also think about the fall of the Soviet Union and him being able to respond to very quickly moving events in a very calibrated way—his speeches overseas in a lot of what are now the former republics of the Soviet Union—that was how he was able to convey a sense of very carefully chosen words, and not overreacting and not provoking a crackdown from the Soviet hardliners. I think the speeches had a lot to do with it. Like I said, some of it was President Bush's previous relationships with people, as a former diplomat, but I also think his speeches were able to convey a lot of thoughtfulness as the foreign policy was changing quickly. I think, in that sense, there is a bully pulpit, and there's a value to that. Hopefully that will continue. So it's a mixed bag.

**Frankel:** I think it is worth noting the distinction between domestic and foreign policy speeches in particular, because in domestic affairs, obviously, there's a whole process to developing policy, and a speech alone can't execute it. In foreign policy—Sorensen actually made this point—the president's words are often policy, and so it does—I agree. I think they should be considered as different in that respect.

**Khachigian:** I'm still a great believer in the bully pulpit. I think it could be a great tool, frankly, for President Trump. One of Nixon's best, most famous speeches was the Silent Majority speech,

back in 1969, which turned around huge support for his position on the Vietnam War. With Reagan, I was involved directly in one. In 1981, when his economic program was languishing and he needed a vote, they decided that basically he had to go over the heads of Congress, to the people, and he did what he did best and went on television. At that time, I was on a family vacation, and I got called. I remember writing the closing of that speech from the 13th fairway out in Sun Valley, Idaho. The nature of his speech was basically, to the American people, to let the Congress know that this is the plan that was important to them, and that they needed to let Congress know to move it forward. It was only after that that Congress finally passed it. I think Trump has a constituency out there that would react to being prodded and pushed and asked to push Congress to do something.

**Perry:** Ken, could I ask you, was that the speech in which President Reagan asked the American people to write to their members of Congress about the plan?

**Khachigian:** It was July 27th of '81. It's the one where he talked about two roads. There were two roads we could take—where America was at the fork of two roads. I don't know if that's the same one you're thinking of. You can look it up if you want.

**Lucadamo:** I was going to follow up with a quick question based on something Adam said, which is that speechwriting is one tool in the arsenal of an overall communications operation. I'm just curious, with a president who certainly has his own different, if not very effective, communications strategy, you're dealing with the press office, the communications office, you're in the speechwriting office—what is the appropriate give and take there? What's the most functional way that that relationship happens?

**Frankel:** I'm sorry, the give and take between—

**Lucadamo:** Between communications, your press office, your speechwriting office, the entire

basically communications group? The whole arsenal, as it were.

**Frankel:** There just has to be coherence. I think that there will be—I do think that one of the real risks here is they're going to have a message strategy that could easily be derailed by tweets from Trump. We were kind of joking about it earlier, but it's a nontrivial issue how you handle these tweets, because an entire messaging strategy will be completely derailed for a day or longer by the off-handed comments. For a political professional, you kind of cringe when your boss goes off message, because you have the message you're trying to drive at any given day, or week, or month. Having a coherent strategy and sticking to it, I think, will be critical for them.

**Khachigian:** Barbara, you asked—and I can confirm that is the speech that Reagan asked people to write their congressmen and senators

**Perry:** Oh, thank you, Ken, for looking that up. I thought I remembered that that was the case, because I had had a call from the media back during the campaign. I've forgotten the context of it, but it was this concept of asking—it might have been Bernie Sanders rallying young people about college tuition, and saying, "We really need to march on Washington and march on Capitol Hill and get their attention." So I went back and looked at some of the Reagan speeches and remembered that he had done that, and done it very effectively, and you can actually find the number of letters that came into Capitol Hill once he did that. In some ways bypassing the media and going directly to the people, which is what I think, now, traditional media are calling us to ask about the tweeting of this president-elect. It's not that it's unprecedented that a president has called upon the people directly, and we know Franklin Roosevelt did that, too. That's very helpful, Ken. Thank you.

**Frankel:** Is that legal? I ask because I vaguely recall wanting—I was discussing doing that for some of Obama's speeches, but being told that there were restrictions on what the president

could say as far as mobilizing people to influence, to try and reach out to their members of Congress.

**Perry:** Did that come from the White House Counsel's Office?

**Frankel:** Yes. I'm not—It would be worth looking into.

**Perry:** That would be.

**Cary:** Adam, to your earlier point, I don't think the tweeting is necessarily a bad thing if it's part of a consistent messaging strategy, because I do think President-elect Trump reaches a lot of people who may or may not be reachable through traditional media. So if he could just impose some discipline on the content of the tweets, he should continue tweeting. But the question is, how do you do that in a way that is still satisfying to him and useful from the communications point of view?

**Frankel:** Agreed.

**Perry:** Mary Kate, what will be fascinating is that we thought that the point, I think, that Adam was making, that we all understood, was common wisdom in communication strategy, whether it's a big corporate firm or a politician and his campaign. We thought that that unified message was what a successful candidate for the presidency would need, and it didn't seem to be the case this time around. So it will be interesting to see if the common wisdom holds for governing, as it did not for campaigning communications. Can we move to our penultimate topic today? That is, inevitably, presidents, sad to say, face crises, often in the first year, often in the very first few months of the presidency. Were you called upon to write about those? In the case of President Reagan, a crisis that happened directly to him, a very frightening one, but also attacks on our country, ongoing crises as the president comes in, in the realm of an economic collapse. Can you tell us about that, your experiences, and offer some suggestions?

**Khachigian:** In my case, there was a personal crisis that I dealt with. I don't know if that helps.

**Perry:** Yes, indeed.

**Khachigian:** Well, as you suggested, when President Reagan entered office, he was confronted with a true economic crisis. America had just gone through back-to-back years of double-digit inflation, and mortgage interest rates, believe it or not, were at 15 percent. Millions of Americans were unemployed, and the country's industrial capacity was nowhere near working at its capability. So, at the outset there was no greater priority for him than confronting this as a national crisis—in his inaugural address referring to it as an economic affliction of great proportions. The challenge here was not to sugarcoat it, but to strike at the heart of the crisis. As a result, early on the planning began for a one-two punch of speeches—first a televised address to the nation, using Reagan's enormous talents as a communicator and then going to the Congress for the Joint Session speech to lay out an economic agenda. All this took place in the first month of office.

The point here is that if the new president has some key economic goals—to create jobs, cut taxes, trim regulations, get the manufacturing might of America up and running—he has to do it fast. Reagan wasted no time and didn't waste words either. I recall him saying in that first television speech that the country was in the worst economic mess since the Great Depression. And he went on from there two weeks later to lay out his plans to Congress and used the theater of the House Chamber to apply pressure.

But, the main point is that this means setting priorities and getting your entire team behind your priorities and getting unanimity of support within the key agencies for your policies: Treasury, OMB, the Council of Economic Advisers, and others. In Trump's case, he probably ought to get buy-in from the outside financial and business sector to provide support. Bottom

line: strike while the iron is hot. Have a plan, be aggressive and sell it hard. You might get other bites of the apple, but the biggest one you will have is in the opening weeks of the administration.

**Lucadamo:** Adam, maybe you could talk to the speech you wrote in West Virginia, talking about the disaster in the coal mine.

**Frankel:** I think one of the fundamental issues is that the president needs to be a calming, reassuring force. Obviously, the nature of what he or she would say under various circumstances would vary widely depending on the nature of the crisis we're talking about here. In the case of unexpected deaths, or tragic deaths, like in West Virginia, the approach for those speeches is simply just to pay tribute to the people whose lives are lost, and reach out to the representatives of miners to understand what their lives are like every day. At least for me to understand, really understanding, and trying to pay tribute to the people whose lives were lost. It's actually, in that respect, very simple and important. That's the only thing that needs to happen.

But more broadly, I think, the president's role in times of crisis is, getting back to the points that were made earlier, to unite the country and bring people together. Be a force for healing, for calm, for reassurance, and inspiration, understanding that whatever is happening, the American people can pull together and find our way through it, and be stronger for it in the end. I think that's sort of overarching, the theme that you want to permeate the remarks during moments of crisis, whatever the crisis is.

**Perry:** Mary Kate, were you about to chime in?

**Cary:** Yes. I have a vague memory of one of my colleagues—this was before laptops were invented, and we had those big, plug-in government computers. I'm pretty sure it was when the U.N. [United Nations] deadline had expired [for Saddam Hussein to get out of Kuwait] and the

president was going to address the American people to say that the bombing had begun. I think Dan [McGroarty] had to sit outside the Oval Office, with basically a TV table with a computer plugged into the wall, and the president would come out and give him things, and he would work on the speech right there, which is a crazy way to operate.

Recently we were all in Jackson Hole and Fran Townsend gave a talk about scenario planning in an emergency at the White House. During the Bush 43 years, she would have the cabinet, once a month, come in on a Saturday, and she would throw out some hypothetical situation of a terrorist attack and see how would they all respond. They would have to come up with all sorts of solutions to what they would do, so that when it really happened there wouldn't be a blank look on people's faces.

It seems to me that the speechwriting office might consider doing something like that, because things now are so different from when we were sitting with a TV table with a computer plugged in the wall outside of the Oval Office, for an event that we knew was coming. Maybe there is some sort of process that they can talk about as they plan the office for when there is a national crisis, like on 9/11, where the president has to be up in a plane. There should be a plan for which speechwriter, where, is with him, thinking about who's going to address the American people, and what would be said, and how would it all work, what would the staffing process be. We didn't have anything like that, and I think the world has changed enough that it's probably pretty predictable that there will be some sort of crisis like that. Hopefully not. But they would be wise, I think, to have some contingency planning, just like the rest of the government does. We certainly didn't have that in my day.

**Perry:** That's a fascinating thought—

**Frankel:** Also, just to talk about crises more generally—obviously when we came in, the



economic crisis was unfolding. I worked with the president on all of the auto restructuring speeches, and after that first one, we were walking back and I remember asking him how he thought it went. I remember him saying, “I just want to give people some good cheer. I’m tired of giving people all this bad news.”

Looking back, we can think about what the Obama administration might have done differently in terms of communicating all that was being done, but I do think there’s a—When people are not feeling the impact of policies that are in place, it’s tough to go and tell them, “Hey, look at all the great stuff we’re doing for you.” It’s also tough to say, “We’re going to make everything better. We’re going to do everything you’ve ever dreamed of” if they don’t feel that in their pockets in relatively short order. Being measured in terms of what the president’s communicating the American people—overpromising can be a dangerous business. I don’t know, we might have gone too far in the other direction. But I do think that it’s an important thing for this incoming president to bear in mind.

**Khachigian:** One of the big problems in any of these crisis situations is losing perspective, and that’s a big issue in Washington, where the confluence of the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*, and the television, and the pounding of the media, and everybody talking, and the echo chamber can really distort your sense of reality sometimes. Keeping perspective as best you can is really critical to bringing a real common sense to whatever you’re doing in resolving a crisis, and writing the precise kind of words that make sense and bring resolution to whatever you’re trying to do.

**Perry:** Well, we’re coming toward our last quarter hour, our last 15 minutes. I had a question, I think, that maybe takes us back to our informal talk at the beginning about teleprompters. I call this the Lenny Skutnik phenomenon. The reference to President Reagan’s citing a genuine hero,

an OMB apparatchik, Lenny Skutnik, who jumped into the frozen Potomac River to help save people from a plane that had crashed into the 14th Street Bridge. President Reagan brought Mr. Skutnik to Congress and put him up in the president's box and pointed him out during his State of the Union address.

We know now that that happens, and the media always get in touch with the Miller Center and say, "Now, for this year, what kinds of people do you think the president will bring?" I find it an interesting phenomenon that also I think has a pairing with it in speechwriting, when you're not bringing the actual person there, but I find presidential candidates and presidents constantly telling stories about regular people. Mrs. So-and-So I talked to in such-and-such city, who had lost a child to cancer, and she told me about how difficult it was with her insurance.

I don't mean to be flip with this, but I think back to the Gettysburg Address, or one of you mentioned Lincoln's second inaugural. I do think of the poetry of those speeches, and I think how they would have, to be honest, been ruined if, in the midst of the Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln had looked out into the audience and said, "I want to introduce Joe Smith from Pennsylvania, who fought here at Gettysburg. He lost an arm, but I would like Joe to stand up and wave to the crowd." Do you all have any thoughts about that?

**Frankel:** I would challenge that a little. I would say, with all due respect to Abraham Lincoln, the Gettysburg Address might have actually been more moving. I think that people in a box at the State of the Union is sort of an artifact now, and a little bit of a—there are lots of other ways that administrations can integrate people into messaging throughout the course of the day and months. They don't have to wait until the State of the Union box or something now. I do think that that is sort of what all of this is about, is about people's lives. If the president were on a battlefield, being able to speak directly about the stories of people who lost their lives or been

wounded would have been a very powerful addition to the Gettysburg Address. I think it's very important. It grounds speeches in what the stakes are and what it's all about.

More broadly, just getting back to the conversation about prompters earlier, it was interesting to hear the different perspectives, because I have always found that prompters are very helpful—maybe not surprisingly, considering the president I worked for—so that a president—or any principal, quite frankly—isn't looking down, because I've always found that when somebody has to continue looking down, it actually interrupts their ability to connect with an audience. When they're actually looking straight ahead, it's much easier for them to make eye contact and connect. I certainly think that was true in President Obama's case.

That's an argument wholly apart from being able to just make sure we're staying on message. President Obama veered from the prompter many times and is perfectly comfortable doing it. It was just much more his priority and preference, consistent with the disciplined nature that he brought to the process, to know what he was going to say and stick to it and not have to go off script, unless it was necessary.

**Kusnet:** To try to speak to two of those points. I think an interesting filter with the anecdotes is whether the anecdote is something that the staff found for the president, or if it's something that the president mentions to the staff. I think if you have an interaction between a president, or more—it's easier during a campaign, with a presidential candidate—with a voter that the president remembers and draws a lesson from, that can be very moving and very illuminating.

I remember in the '92 campaign, candidate Bill Clinton was speaking in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and there was somebody who had been a refugee from Eastern Europe who said he came from a Communist country where he still wasn't free, but here in America he wasn't free because of crime in his neighborhood, and he was afraid to go out at night. That

stuck in his [Clinton's] mind, because it was kind of a counterintuitive kind of a statement. Usually if you're quoting someone who's a refugee from an unfree country and comes to the United States, you're talking about what freedom means to them, and here the man was saying that he really wasn't free here, either. The anecdotes that the staff finds for presidents that just tend to illustrate what the president would say anyway are nowhere near as moving as some kind of encounter with a regular American that the president himself—or someday will be herself—remembers.

On the second point about teleprompters—this is going back to what I believe Ken said at the beginning, about whether President Reagan would have been lost in a teleprompter. With President Clinton, it was the opposite. The teleprompter operator got lost in his speeches in the rare occasions other than the inaugural, where we for some reason would have a teleprompter. Almost inevitably, President Clinton would go off text, and he'd improvise, and then the question was, where, if anywhere, was he landing on the teleprompter?

I remember several times, mostly during the campaign, before we learned not to give Bill Clinton the teleprompter, I would be with the teleprompter operator, and I had the text that was on the teleprompter, and all of a sudden the candidate would take off from the teleprompter text, and I could tell that the teleprompter operator was in need of some kind of high blood pressure medication at that point. The teleprompter operators would wonder where on earth the candidate was going to land, and I would try to offer them some general guidance as to what to do with the teleprompter text. With Clinton, at least, it often wasn't a matter of whether he would use a text on paper or use a teleprompter. It was whether he would use any kind of text at all.

**Cary:** I could chime in on both real quick. I think that the Lenny Skutnik innovation was a result of the fact that the State of the Union address is a laundry list most times, and there are no stories

in that. I think all of us agree that great speeches have great stories in them. People love to tell stories; people love to listen to stories. There's a scarcity of opportunities for stories in your typical State of the Union address. I think that was their way of getting stories in, which was brilliant. The inaugural address doesn't have very many stories, because it's a more elevated style of speaking, and you don't necessarily have a place for stories in that either because of its unique nature.

I had one client—I probably shouldn't name any names—who was a Republican woman who was giving speeches, and nobody could remember what she was saying in her speeches. So they came and showed them to me and said, "What's the problem here? Why can't anybody remember what's in her speeches?" Well, you read the speech, and it was just all platitudes. I said, "There's no mention in here of PTAs [Parent-Teacher Associations] or kids or kitchen tables or everyday life. It's all just rhetoric." They said, "Well, that's because that's how her life is. She doesn't have kids. She doesn't have PTA meetings to go to and things like that." I said, "Well, then we're going to put some stories in that she has met people who have." That was the way to bring her down to a more understandable level for people, telling stories of people she had encountered, or her sisters, or her cousins, or whatever. That's how we were able to make her human and memorable.

There are reasons for the stories, and they have to fit the speech. The State of the Union needs stories, but not because you necessarily need to personalize the president. You need to make it interesting so people will continue to tune in and not change the channel.

One more thing: President Bush would be the first to say that he hated giving big speeches and was not considered very good on a teleprompter, didn't enjoy it. Ten times out of ten, he would rather be in a room with 25 people, talking to them. Very funny guy, and that never

came across to the American people, to his great detriment. He's very good in smaller groups.

When I first got to the White House, we had a paper cutter that we would use to cut the index cards to just the right width so they would fit inside his coat pocket, because he was so much better with index cards than any sort of teleprompter or long speech. Then the staff secretary's office had this thing like a matrix, where it depended on the size of the audience, the size of the room, and in some cases the weather that day, whether he was going to be using index cards in his breast pocket or paper in that box that they have which has velvet on the inside. He would use that, but not if it was a windy day, because then the paper could take off from the podium outdoors. Those would be in a three-ring binder. The speech would be in a three-ring binder so he wouldn't have the paper flying around. If it was a big enough crowd, then it would go to the teleprompter.

If President-elect Trump doesn't seem particularly to like to be on teleprompter, it may be that the pendulum swings back and he goes back to the old-fashioned way, with index cards and paper and velvet boxes and all that sort of thing. If that's what makes him more comfortable and still allows some staffing and fact checking and discipline to the process, but makes him more comfortable on the podium, they might consider doing something like that.

**Lucadamo:** That was going to be my question. I presume with President-elect Trump, you're going to have somebody who errs more on the side of a Reagan or a Clinton or somebody who's more colloquial and off the cuff. How do you as a speechwriter make sure that the soul of the remarks and the message stay there, knowing ahead of time that he's most likely going to deviate, or most assuredly going to deviate?

**Kusnet:** I think what we would do with President Clinton was study the transcripts of everything he said, especially what was extemporized, and try to develop texts that built on unscripted

remarks that he himself had made, because they were the best window into what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it. And for someone who has a natural talent for speaking, as with Bill Clinton, you can construct a very good speech out of things that he himself has said. What you're adding is a structure to it, and some examples and some arguments and so on, but you try to use his words whenever possible.

**Khachigian:** I don't think anyone would dispute that Clinton was a very gifted communicator and speaker. There are probably very few risks in him extemporizing. At the outset, I would say that, given the experience in the campaign, very frankly, if I was sitting in the room with President-elect Trump, I'd say, "Look, there's probably some risk in your extemporizing as president, and I'd recommend against it. If you're willing to take the advice, it'd be advantageous to you. If you're not willing to take it, you'll probably find out pretty soon that it's not going to work in your favor." In his case, I think the teleprompter means discipline.

As for the stories, I don't know—to be an anecdotist, Reagan was great at it. He had a wonderful story in his inaugural speech about the doughboy in World War I who carried messages in the Rainbow Division. Then, in his speech after he returned from being shot, delivered before a Joint Session, we found a letter from a young boy, Peter Sweeney, cautioning President Reagan not to give a speech in his pajamas, which he pulled out of his pocket and used. In his case, both of those stories worked really well.

On the whole, I never, ever, wrote a State of the Union speech again. I think that they've just become a spectacle. I hate it. The standing ovations, up and down, up and down, up and down, it's really sickening to watch. They just become cheerleaders on both sides of the aisle. It's disruptive. I'd love for the president to get up and say, "You know what? Everybody just sit down and listen through the whole speech. Hold your applause, please, because I have some very

serious things to talk about today, and I would really appreciate it if, throughout the whole speech, you would all hold your applause.” That will never happen, but it would sure be nice.

**Cary:** Ken, I’ve heard a couple of conversations about the question of what if there just wasn’t a State of the Union anymore? Because it’s got record low viewership on television. Nobody likes to write it. Nobody likes to listen to it. Would it be the worst thing in the world to just get rid of it?

**Khachigian:** Nixon sent one up in writing, you know. Doesn’t have to be before the Congress. You can just send it up in writing.

**McConnell:** I think if you asked the speechwriting office, it would be unanimous against having the State of the Union, but the communications director will always be in favor of the State of the Union, because you have the assembled Congress, the diplomatic court, the Supreme Court. They have such power. So they’ll never stop it, even though I would agree with you that it’s become such a sad spectacle. I’m glad you made the point, Ken, about the Martin Treptow story in President Reagan’s inaugural address. I was going to make the point that historical references sometimes are better than an anecdote about somebody that the president has met. Sometimes just remind people—because that was a real emotional high point of the Reagan inaugural address, and he was talking about a man underneath a tombstone.

**Khachigian:** Right. That’s a really good point.

**Perry:** Well, we are about to stick our landing. We’ve come to the end of the time that we had set aside. We can’t thank you enough for setting aside your time today. This is not only superb in terms of your memories and your experiences and your stories and your narratives, but in what you were able to offer by way of advice to the incoming administration, which, we know, will be very useful. So with that, thank you all, and I’m going to turn it over to Tony for some final



words.

**Lucadamo:** I was just going to say thank you very, very much. These roundtables mean a great deal. The legislative affairs roundtable, which was the first one we've done, resulted in direct briefings to the Trump team, briefing documents that were sent to them, a transcript that went out to the public, multiple op-eds, just a whole series of great things and great materials that can be used in a number of different ways that are immediately relevant, not just something that goes on the bookshelf of a scholar down here in Charlottesville. It means a lot that you guys would take 90 minutes out of your very, very busy schedules. We appreciate it, and be ready for an annoying amount of correspondence from me on the back end to make sure that you guys review the transcript once we get it and get it signed, because we can't do anything with it until you guys have read it and given it the thumbs up. We'll certainly be in touch, and thank you guys very much.

**Perry:** We look forward to a personal meeting soon, and again, thank you all. We like to say at the Miller Center, we like to have our history both timely and timeless, and we think that this sums up what you offered us today. Many thanks, and good weekend coming up, and happy holidays.