



Some Words for Nixon

In an excerpt from his new memoir, *Speechwright*, William Gavin ASC'62 looks back at his time as a speechwriter for Richard Nixon, the first of several high-profile political figures he served.

In April 1967 a young high-school teacher named William Gavin ASC'62 sat down in his office at Penn's Graduate School of Education and wrote a letter to a presidential hopeful named Richard Nixon. Inspired by a magazine article that had portrayed the candidate as having a serious shot at winning the Republican presidential nomination despite his bitter presidential and gubernatorial defeats earlier that decade, Gavin wrote:

Dear Mr. Nixon:

May I offer two suggestions concerning your plans for 1968? 1. Run. You can win. Nothing can happen to you, politically speaking, that is worse than what has happened to you. Ortega y Gasset says in "The Revolt of the Masses": "... these are the only genuine ideas; the ideas of the shipwrecked. All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, face. He who does not really feel himself lost, is lost without remission ..." You, in effect, are lost. That is why you are the only political figure with the vision to see things the way they are and not as leftist or rightist kooks would have them. Run. You will win.



After offering some advice on how to appear on television, “as if I knew anything about the subject,” Gavin signed off with: “Good luck, and I know you can win if you see yourself for what you are: a man who has been beaten, humiliated, hated, but who can still see the truth.”

To his astonishment Gavin not only received a formal letter from Nixon but also an invitation from Leonard Garment—Nixon’s law partner and campaign organizer (later his special counsel during the Watergate hearings)—inviting him to New York to “have a talk.” One thing led to another, and by the following spring Nixon had asked Gavin to join his campaign as a speechwriter. He became known informally as the “staff poet” and the guy who wrote “with heart,” and when Nixon was elected president the following year, Gavin followed him to the White House. There he wrote speeches and contributed ideas for the next year and a half. While he eventually tired of his role as utility infielder on a team that included such heavy hitters as William Safire, Pat Buchanan, and Ray Price, he learned an enormous amount about his craft—and politics—from the man he had once approvingly described as “lost.”

It was a remarkable ascent for a self-described “street-corner conservative” (a phrase he later used as the title of his first book) from Jersey City, New Jersey, whose political leanings were at odds with those of his staunchly Democratic Irish-Catholic family.

While Gavin fueled his growing conservatism with William F. Buckley’s *National Review*, he describes himself as a “member of the camp that holds the idea that conservatism is more a tendency to look at the world in certain ways rather than a full-blown ideology with answers to everything.”

That lack of ideological rigidity is part of Gavin’s considerable appeal as the first-person storyteller in *Speechwright*, his memoir (published this month by Michigan State University Press) of speechcrafting for Nixon, Ronald Reagan, US Senator James Buckley of New York, and Representative Bob Michel of Illinois, who became House Minority Whip and later House Minority Leader. His stories resonate as we approach another presidential election year.

When Gavin attended Nixon’s funeral in 1994, he found himself flashing back to Miami Beach in August 1968, the day after his new boss had given his nationally televised acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention. Gavin had contributed some ideas to that speech, but because he had sent them in at the last minute, he didn’t think that Nixon had even seen them, let alone planned to use them. As it turned out, Nixon was so pleased with the ideas that the next day he sought Gavin out, put his arm around the younger man’s shoulder—“a most uncharacteristic gesture by this most private of men”—and led him away from the cheering crowd to thank him for his contributions.

The End of Rhetoric

In a recent interview with senior editor Samuel Hughes, author William Gavin talked about his years as a speechwriter, the politicians who used his words, and the ways they achieved their rhetorical goals. Here are some parts of that conversation:

Q&A

You mentioned that [US Senator] Jim Buckley [R-New York] wanted to leave a crowd thinking not what a great speaker he was but what a good argument he had made.

What he basically said was, “I am accused of making arguments that cannot be put into law because of the nature of the Senate in which I work. I admire those who can compromise and make deals and that kind of thing. But there’s also room for an argument to be made.” And it must be made by the ones who are upholding the principles of the party, because they show the boundaries of what is not only possible but what is desirable. And if no one does that, then you have people just going around and talking without any rootedness, if you will, in principle.

Remember the context. There was a time when a guy like Jim Buckley was considered to be rather odd—a nice man in his own way, but rather odd. Not our kind. And the Senate was dominated by liberals.

They simply didn’t consider conservatism to be a serious point of view.

Jim—out of necessity, because we were a beleaguered outpost in the Senate—made sure that almost every speech he did was one in which he laid out not only his own argument but sometimes arguments that might be made against it. And this is something I think is important in American rhetoric. You lay out your argument, but then you say, ‘Look, folks, I know there are people who disagree. Let me give you one reason why. Guy said this about Social Security. I understand that argument. It’s a good argument. But I don’t think it’s the best argument.’

Jim had to do something like that almost every time he spoke. And in doing so he created a rhetoric which was at once civil, forceful, rational, and, because it was all those things, inspirational to those who looked to Jim for guidance. And he combined all those things without rabble-rousing. He was just a great guy.

You talked about Bob Michel’s speech before the first Gulf War [in which the Republican House Minority Leader agreed that there was “not a perfect fit between the lessons of Munich and the problem of Kuwait” but asked “that we at least consider that delay often can have more serious consequences later on than swift action”]. By acknowledging the validity of the beliefs on the other side of the aisle in a non-demagogical way, his speech comes across as quite moving as well as effective.

Bob made two speeches. I didn’t include the first speech in the book. I can remember the line because I helped contribute to it. He said of President [George H.W.] Bush, “President Bush needs our help, and we all have different opinions here. And the question is, are we going to be a tower of strength, or are we going to be a Tower of Babel? Are we going to send different voices out so Saddam will hear different kinds of things, or are we going to get [united]”—that kind of thing.

The speech that’s in the book—it’s not a speech. It’s remarks, really. He was sitting there thinking, “What the heck can you say?” And then he just came up with that idea.

Excerpt

MY fellow campaign aides, still applauding and cheering, looked on in amazement and, I suspect, incomprehension. Why was the brand-new 1968 presidential candidate of the Republican Party, a world-class political figure, talking privately with this guy? The few who recognized me knew I was a high-school English teacher.

Now, as we stood together near an exit of the room, Nixon kept his right hand on my shoulder and said, with a big smile, "I just want to thank you for your contribution last night. You could tell I used your themes. After the speech I was looking for you, but we couldn't find you."

I didn't tell him that the reason I could not be found was that I had not gone to the convention hall. I had stayed in the hotel, disconsolate, ready to go home to Abington, Pennsylvania, if not in ignominy, at least as a failure. ... On the night of the acceptance speech, I had my pity party in the Nixon hospitality suite of the hotel with my campaign pal Jack Caulfield, a New York City detective, who had been doing security work for Nixon.

Nixon started off his speech with a pledge that this time (as opposed to 1960) he would win. A few minutes into the speech I heard a little contribution I had made, just a phrase, nothing big. But I was surprised and delighted. So Nixon had read the material I sent in at the last minute, before the staff flew from the New York campaign headquarters to Miami Beach, and he had thought my words worth using. A triumph. A minor triumph, of course, but as a speechwriter, you take what you can get. ...

I knew, just by the way Nixon was punching home those cheer lines, that he was really enjoying this, feeling the words, not just saying them. And then, toward the end of the speech, he said, "And tonight, therefore, as we make this commitment, let us look into our hearts and let us look down into the faces of our children. In their faces is our hope, our love, and our courage. Tonight I see the face of a child. He lives in a great city. He's black. Or he's white. He's Mexican, Italian, Polish. None of that matters. What matters, he's an American child. That child in that great city is more important than any politician's promise. He is America. He is a poet, he's a scientist, he's a great teacher, he's a proud craftsman. He's everything we ever hoped to be and everything we dare to dream to be. He sleeps the sleep of childhood and he dreams the dreams of a child."

"Jack," I said, arising from my chair, "that's my stuff!"

I let out a yell that must have been heard on the beach. This was *my* stuff, about children. Nixon had taken the risk of using my emotional, thoroughly un-Nixon-like, atypical material that,

the same thing [with different people]. With Obama it is this reasonable, professorial, almost condescending type of rhetoric which seeks to impart to his audience the fact that what he's saying is not only right, but it's reasonable. With Bob Michel it was the fact that here was a man who was just a guy from Peoria, and what he said was backed up by all that. And with Jim Buckley it was a much more intellectual kind of thing.

But in each of the three cases, it was the presentation of a persona which was likable, believable, and had something that transcended the rhetoric.

A speech is more than words written for somebody, or even sometimes more than the delivery. It's just something there that people have, and it's a gift in public life. Not everybody has it—but if you've got it, it's worth almost everything.



Bill Gavin (right) shares a laugh with former President Richard Nixon and House Minority Leader Bob Michel in the latter's office on March 8, 1990.

And every time I look at the man, I think to myself, "When he was 19 years old, he waded onto a beach, six days after D-Day. Young boys in the *Wehrmacht* were trying to kill him." And so when he went into politics, he didn't use metaphors like "This is war" and "We're in the trenches." He had seen the real thing. And boy, I learned early on, he simply wouldn't do that.

I don't think anybody ever said Bob was eloquent. And I wouldn't even say

they were greatly constructed words, because they were mine, and I just tried to do the job that was done. But what he brought was this other part of rhetoric which is so mysterious, and that is the presence of a human being. It's mysterious. It is as mysterious as great art or music or anything else.

Talk about that a little more.

It's very difficult to pinpoint exactly what that is because it isn't always

with bad delivery, or just one misstep, could turn into sentimental mush and make him a laughingstock. But he was in control of the material all the way. The changes he had made in the few muddled paragraphs I had sent to him gave my words deeper meaning, because he had taken what I had written and made it his own.

Shortly after Gavin was hired, a Nixon advisor named Bryce Harlow told him that “a good speechwriter gives the boss what he wants. But a very good speechwriter also gives the boss what he needs. The two aren’t always the same, and sometimes you have to tell him what he needs.” A few days later Gavin made his way to the front cabin of the plane to talk about speechwriting with the candidate.

Nixon, relaxed, legs crossed, was wearing a blue-checked sports coat (where did he get those things?) and a blue tie with a white shirt. He was twirling a pair of eyeglasses in his left hand. I had never seen him wear glasses in public. He nodded to me and then began to talk about the need for better endings for his stump speech.

“What I want,” he said “is little anecdotes, little parables, something with *heart*. You can do that, Bill; you write with heart.”

The three of us talked about the problem for a few minutes. The anecdotes could not be “corny,” Nixon said, but had to have *heart*, “bring home a point.” ...

“I know they say I’m corny, but that doesn’t bother me,” he said, in what I would soon discover was a familiar pattern. “They” meant liberals or intellectuals on the left or people who had Nixon on their enemies list—didn’t like him, hated him. But that didn’t bother him at all, and in fact he was glad they didn’t like him. He welcomed their scorn, and if they

thought he was corny, so be it. He didn’t realize using the word “corny” was itself corny.

“But I know what works, goddamn it,” he continued. “The speeches need *heart*, anecdotes, parables.” ...

At this point I made a suggestion (“*tell him what he needs*”): “If the problem is that your critics say you don’t have heart, why not pick up on the passage from the acceptance speech and have a kid, or a group of kids, come up on the platform with you at one of the rallies? You don’t speak to them, but while they are there, you talk about kids everywhere, their future, the way you did in Miami.”

There was a long moment of silence. No, a long, *long* moment of silence. Dick Moore cleared his throat and said, “Well, Bill, I don’t know ...”

Nixon said, “Bill, I couldn’t do that.”

He looked out the scratched window next to him and then turned back to me. “It’s not me,” he said. “Besides, they’ll say I’m using the kids.”

They. Always the They people. ...

I went back to my seat (on this day Bryce was not with us) and sat in gloom. I had made a fool of myself before the boss, maybe the only chance I would have to talk to him personally for I didn’t know how long. I should have thought out what I was going to say. I should have just kept my mouth shut. I should have done this. I should have done that. Tell him what he needs. Oh, yeah?

But in retrospect I think I did the right thing. I can see now that Nixon was amused at my naiveté. God only knows he had enough—too many?—hard-bitten political pros on his campaign, so maybe my inexperience once again worked in my favor. After all, my suggestion wasn’t that bad. But it also

You talk about “working rhetoric” and the need to craft clear, punchy arguments for achievable goals. Who do you admire for that today?

I think the best place to look for working rhetoric is going to be in the acceptance speeches next year. [The Republican candidates] are not yet at the Holy Grail; they’re not yet president, and they can make their inaugural addresses with all the appeals to history and everything. They’ve got to work, man; they’ve got to cover all of their weaknesses, and they’ve got to show you something.

Most of the stuff that I am familiar with from this race is in debates. And in debates, you have to talk a kind of a haiku. You have to talk in sound bites and [answer] the quick question and that kind of thing. So I’ll wait until whoever the nominee is, and we’ll see what happens.

Now, obviously you have to get

back to Obama. And as I said in the book, he’s got a strange kind of articulateness. It’s more about who he is than what he says. I don’t think since he has become a national figure he has said one memorable sentence. I suppose that goes for most political figures. They say billions of words, and you’re going to remember one thing. But I think he’s the guy who has set the new standard. And that’s why in the beginning of the book I say, “Thank you, Mr. President. You’ve brought rhetoric back to where it should be in public affairs.”

But my final analysis of him would be he has a marvelous gift for almost conversational rhetoric. He doesn’t try to soar for the heights very often. And he’s really good at that. But I think he’s gone to the well once too often, if I may coin a cliché. That’s my feeling.

I was thinking of very cunningly

titling my book *The End of Rhetoric*, meaning two things: What is the end of rhetoric—its purposes, its goals? But also the end of rhetoric. We seem not to have been given many great speeches or inspiring speeches, whatever it happens to be. And I think [Obama] really brought rhetoric back to a position where we’re looking at how people say things, as well as what the substance is.

Now, can I break in and tell a story?

By all means.

I was in the second class of the Annenberg School. Gilbert Seldes was the dean then. His idea was that the school would have what he called a humanist rather than a scientific or an analytical point of view. And we spent a lot of time discussing issues, one of which was: What is the difference between the public interest and the public’s interest? In those days,

wasn't useful. Nixon knew—or thought he knew—he couldn't get away with such a gimmick. "They" would say he was using children as props, and it could have been interpreted that way. I guess he was right; it could be seen as exploiting children. But if used sparingly, it would have added a bit of color to the stump speech and might have worked.

AT one point in the campaign, all the writers got a memorandum ("From: RN"), outlining what he wanted for the rest of the tour: "I don't think we are yet hitting the mark," he wrote, "an excerpt should be no more than 1 to 1½ pages long. It should be meaty and quotable and should be material I can easily work into a stump speech, even if I am speaking outdoors without a podium."

He then instructed us on the importance of giving the local press something to write about: "More often than not a statement dealing with a local subject and zeroing in on a local problem should be dropped off at most stops. This will give enormous local coverage, and since it will not require me to include the material in my speech, it imposes no burden on me ... a case in point was the statement Pat Buchanan prepared reacting to the Yuppies that broke up the Catholic mass in Milwaukee. As a matter of fact, that statement even deserved national play."

And, as always, the need for good excerpts: "If we scattergun too much we are not going to have an impact. That is why I repeat we must have at least two excerpts a week which hit some aspect of the law and order theme and one or two a week which hit some aspect of the spending theme and one, two or three a week which hit the foreign policy, respect for America theme."

He went on to remind us to use his own words about Hubert Humphrey being the "most expensive member of the Senate"—in other words, no one introduced more bills calling for more spending than Humphrey. We should be "hammering him hard and regularly on the spending theme ... and hammering on the fact that he defends the (law and order) record of the [Johnson] Administration ... Demand replies. Put him on the defensive just as he is trying to put us on the defensive."

He then offered some general guidelines for our writing: "Don't be cute or gimmicky—just hit hard with crisp one-liners whenever they are appropriate ... most of our excerpts suffer from not being current and livelier. This could be corrected by simply spending a little more time reading the daily news summaries and zeroing in on some of those problems ... we should drop in regular statements, about two a week from now on, that are meaty, substantive, they will not have any impact on voters but they will impress the press."

Nixon's memo can still serve as a handbook for political speech writers, especially during a campaign: *Hitting the mark. Meaty. Quotable. Hit hard. Be crisp. Zero in. Don't be cute or gimmicky. Be current. Put your opponent on the defensive. Try to shape press coverage.*

Tactical. Direct. Doable. Pure working rhetoric. Pure Nixon.

None of these qualities has anything to do with eloquence. Nixon believed that eloquence, although it had its time and place in rhetoric, had to take a backseat to forcefulness, directness, timeliness, brevity, and, especially, "zeroing in"—saying precisely what was needed, no more no less. He wanted to make arguments with his words and make history with his decisions. ♦

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everything had to go through the FCC, so if you got a license to have a TV station, one of the deals was that you had to operate in "the public interest," not the public's interest.

He was a principled liberal all his life, very active in the anti-nuclear stuff. But he told us the story of when he was a critic for what was then called the *Saturday Review of Literature*. It was edited by another famous liberal of the time, Norman Cousins. And Seldes was the television critic, because back in the 1920s he singlehandedly invented media criticism. He wrote a book called *The Seven Lively Arts* in which he took things such as movies, vaudeville, comic strips, everything—took them seriously, looked at them from a scholar's point of view.

So Edward R. Murrow—who, by the way, is a friend of Seldes, and Seldes admires him greatly—does a program

against Senator Joe McCarthy. It's one of the most famous programs on television: highly edited, the purpose of which was to show Senator McCarthy in the worst possible light. And it was universally admired by liberals, called one of the great moments, not only in television journalism but in American history.

Seldes wrote a review of that program, and this is what he said: "I have absolutely no respect for Senator McCarthy. I think he's done great damage to the country. I admire Ed Murrow more than anybody else. But I have to say to my fellow liberals, is this the kind of thing we want? How will we like it if the other people get people as good as this, and they use the same techniques against us?"

Well, all hell broke loose. More letters came in to the *Saturday Review* than anyone could remember, lambast-

ing Seldes, 90 percent of them from liberals, 50 percent of them from guys who liked Seldes, saying, "How can you give aid and comfort to this beast prowling the American landscape, and blast Ed Murrow?" And Seldes, in telling the story, said, "At one point there was a move to remove me [as television editor], but Norman Cousins wouldn't hear of it. He said, 'You made a point. It's not a point I agree with, but you stay on.'" Which, by the way, is a good liberal principle.

I always remember Seldes for that. You know, there's a phrase in America, "to speak truth to power." But when you speak the truth in politics to your own friends, they don't like it. It's the toughest thing in the world to do. You have to have courage, and you have to have confidence, and you have to have an ability to make your argument clearly. And not too many people can do that, on either side of the aisle.