

Friends, Romans, Countrymen:
What the Great Political Speeches Can Teach Us About Public Speaking
By Robert A. Lehrman, Tufts '65

They've seen his face half covered in blood, a cyborg battering him until one glowing red eye winks out. Tonight, though, his eyes are bright. He strides onstage wearing a black suit and yellow tie, his overwhelmingly white teeth fixed in a grin, mouthing thank-yous to a crowd that won't stop cheering.

"*What a greeding,*" Arnold Schwarzenegger says, finally, to twenty thousand Republicans at the 2004 National Convention, nodding like a man who deserves it. "This is like winning an Oscar. As if I would know." They're roaring.

But soon he starts telling a story. It's about himself—as a boy, in occupied Austria. His family didn't have a car, Arnold says. But one night he was in his uncle's car when Soviet soldiers stopped them at a checkpoint. He tells us what he had always been told: that Soviet soldiers might whisk his family away, never to be heard from again. "I was not an action hero then," he says.

The crowd is doing a strange thing for a political convention. Schwarzenegger has made them listen.

Or rather, he and his speechwriter, Landon Parvin, have. Because while people complain about political rhetoric—Phony! Dull! Pandering! Negative!—truly skilled writers like Parvin produce speeches that are engaging, moving, and even substantive. Sure, politicians sometimes drone through clumsy drafts, or mislead us with hasty generalization, personal attacks, and apples-to-oranges analogies; neither skill nor honesty is the province of one political view. But at the national level, a lot of their speeches are terrific.

That shouldn't be a surprise. Politicians speak more than anyone in American life—up to twenty times a day, if they're campaigning. Politicians depend on speeches to convince people not just to agree with them, but to vote and work for them. In politics, speeches are a little like job interviews. They need to be good.

What Schwarzenegger—or Barack Obama—does at the podium offers lessons for anyone who ever speaks in front of a group. Students in my speech and speechwriting classes at American University sometimes find that hard to believe. Public speaking scares them. I've seen students freeze up, burst into tears, turn red, or tremble so hard their pants flutter. Many can't imagine getting through a three-minute speech, much less being as good as an exactor and governor.

But they can, and do. My students learn by watching the speakers and studying their texts. And so can you. In fact, you don't even have to take a class.

I've identified a few of the most important things that political speeches can teach the rest of us about how to engage an audience. While there are all kinds of subtle points I could make about structure, language, and wit, these principles are certainly enough to get you started. Whether you're talking to a Rotary Club or trying to hold the attention of a sixth-grade class—whether writing a speech you intend to read or (the infinitely preferable option) preparing notes for one you'll deliver without a script—these eight tips will bring you closer to becoming the kind of speaker you'd like to be.

MAKE IT SIMPLE

A while back, researchers surveyed English-speaking patients at Los Angeles hospitals to see what they could understand. They showed them this sentence: "Do not take this medicine on

an empty stomach.”

Forty-two percent couldn't understand it. Surprising? Not to speechwriters. We cater to average Americans, and average Americans read at a seventh-grade level.

That distresses some scholars of presidential rhetoric who believe such dumbing down makes it impossible to mount a complex argument. But even writing at a twelfth-grade level means three or four Americans out of ten can't understand you. In the real world of politics it's tough to succeed by going to your boss and saying, “Here's the draft. Thirty percent of your audience won't understand it.”

That's why the best political speeches use simple words and short sentences. Does that mean they can't say anything profound? Not at all. *I have a dream. . . . Tear down this wall. . . . Yes we can.* Those lines reached just about everyone. Peggy Noonan wrote Ronald Reagan's famous 1986 speech after the *Challenger* explosion at a fourth-grade level. Barack Obama's 2010 State of the Union speech? Ninth grade. This article? Eighth grade.

Most people can speak more simply without sacrificing nuance. If you find yourself saying “currently” instead of “now” or “utilize” instead of “use,” or depending on the wretchedly weak passive voice (example: “if passive voice is used by you”), you're on the wrong track.

How can you check the complexity of your language? If you use Microsoft Word, enable the Flesch-Kincaid readability guide that pops up on your computer after the Spell & Grammar check. You will be amazed how often you can express ideas more simply.

MAKE IT MEMORABLE

“Americans expect us to go to Washington for the right reasons, not just to mingle with the right people,” said Sarah Palin in 2008, reading the Republican Convention speech Matthew Scully wrote for her.

Palin was using what's called antithesis—repetition that contrasts what you reject with what you favor. Simple writing doesn't have to be bland; antithesis, the staple of sound bites (“Ask not what your country can do for you . . .”), is one of the most popular ways speechwriters like me help politicians become quotable.

Why does it work? The key element is surprise. In Palin's case we're surprised by her play on the different meanings of right: moral versus fashionable.

Another example: Bill Clinton in his 1993 inaugural. “There's nothing wrong with America that can't be fixed by what's right with America.” The two clauses are the same—except for one key change. Switching “right” for “wrong” produces the surprise.

Is this a technique only for the famous? Hardly. Antithesis works even if you're a dentist talking to the local Kiwanis (“If you come to us in pain, you will leave in comfort”). It is just one of the rhetorical devices politicians use to make you remember.

MAKE IT MOVING

When Arnold Schwarzenegger recounted that childhood episode in 2004, he was using one of the most effective ways to move audiences: story. Researchers have found that opening with a story makes listeners remember more of the rest of your speech.

Anyone who wants to see how skillful politicians use story to create emotion can go to an extraordinary website: www.americanrhetoric.com. There you'll find hundreds of videos and transcripts to study. Watch Ronald Reagan in his 1989 farewell address tell the story of a U.S. sailor encountering Vietnamese boat people in the South China Sea, or watch the opening to his D-Day Fortieth Anniversary speech.

But it's not just stories that move us. Finding the right details can do the same thing. Earlier in his farewell, Reagan is even more effective just describing what it's like to see crowds

from his limo or stand at the window in the White House looking out towards the Potomac. Mario Cuomo in his 1984 Democratic Convention speech uses detail (“a small man with thick calluses on both hands”) to make us see the enormous sacrifices of his immigrant father. And Barack Obama, in his 2008 speech on race, impressed listeners with his frankness through a single detail: the way his white grandmother would make him cringe by confessing “her fear of black men who passed her by on the street.” Reagan, Cuomo, and Obama made brilliant use of detail. But nothing they or their writers did is beyond most people.

Neither is it beyond most of us to quote poetry. On the same website, you can see Ted Kennedy using Tennyson (“To seek, to strive, to find”) at the 1980 Democratic Convention.

Will you feel awkward the first time you quote poetry or tell stories to people you don’t know? Maybe. But in my experience, that won’t last long, because you will learn what politicians have learned: that people remember and appreciate those moments for a long time.

MAKE IT EXCITING

One secret to rousing listeners: repetition. This is not a recent discovery. The Greeks and Romans had names for the various ways to do that. Sometimes politicians use repetition within a sentence (“of the people, by the people”). Sometimes they use litanies of full sentences laced with concrete detail (“I have a dream”).

Why does that work? Because it allows the power of a speech to build, step by step. The same grammatical structure, used again and again, acts like wave after wave of an attacking army. One example of the technique: Bono in the final moments of an otherwise humdrum 2007 NAACP award acceptance (it’s on YouTube). His litany about poverty—“God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. . . . God is under the rubble in the cries we hear during wartime”—brings the cheering crowd to its feet.

Again, repetition is not just for presidents or rock stars. Each semester, I hold a speech contest in which students persuade one another to support their favorite charities. The class votes for the winners and, along with the teacher, contributes to the winning organization.

Last semester one of my students gave a speech about a food drive for the homeless. At the end, stepping away from the lectern, he held up a soup can. “Hunger is no friend to the hungry,” he said, quoting Aristophanes. He offered example after example of homeless and hungry people within a few miles of our campus, each time repeating that single line. Each time his speech grew in power.

He wasn’t an A student. But this time, when he was done, everyone picked him for first place—including me.

MAKE IT FUNNY

“I can’t tell jokes,” people complain. Nonsense. First of all, to be a funny speaker, you only need one joke. Back in the seventies, the United States decided to hand back the Panama Canal to Panama (it was on their land, after all). But California Senator S.I. Hayakawa was against the idea. “It’s ours—we stole it fair and square,” he said.

Crowds loved this blend of cheekiness and patriotism. He used that line all the time. And when he forgot, crowds would yell out, “What about Panama?” to give him another chance. Anyone can find one or two jokes and use them again and again.

But politicians, especially those doing the roasts that have become a Washington tradition, know something else about being funny: the best humor is self-deprecating. “Singe, don’t burn,” reads the motto of the Gridiron Club, the Washington institution that has held roasts for over a century. That makes sense. After the roast is over, politicians may have to cut a deal with those they’ve been lampooning. Besides, Americans think cutting someone down is mean,

especially if the person is in the room. It's much safer to make fun of oneself.

When Sarah Palin came to Washington recently for a roast, she didn't ridicule her favorite target, Barack Obama. Her opening line satirized her own much derided moment: "From here you can see the Russian embassy," she said, and proceeded to make fun of her celebrated non-answers to Katie Couric and her expensive fashion tastes. People who were prepared to hate her, even some Democrats, wound up thinking—to their dismay—she was fun to watch. Which brings up another point.

MAKE THEM LIKE YOU

Aristotle noted that logic could go only so far in persuading people. The character of the speaker—he called it *ethos*—mattered just as much. Twenty-four hundred years later, politicians still follow Aristotle's advice. They go to great lengths to show listeners that they are funny, smart, humble, and patriotic.

And one more thing: that they can concede a point. Why? Because research shows that American audiences don't interpret it as a sign of weakness. They see it as the mark of a reasonable person. Listeners think: "Huh. Here's somebody candid enough to admit when the other side's right." As one classic text on persuasion puts it, this makes speakers "especially trustworthy."

Nobody is more practiced at this than Barack Obama. In 2008 he did it so often the McCain campaign cut an ad stringing together a bunch of his concessions. They didn't run it for long, most likely because focus groups told them it made Obama likable. Early this year, attending the Republican retreat, Obama was true to form. When Mike Pence told him he had been "wrong about unemployment predictions," Obama said, "You're absolutely right."

"Obama concedes a point—without giving an inch," one of my friends said.

To acknowledge that truth isn't always on one side helps bring audiences to *your* side.

RECYCLE

"The taste you hate—twice a day," ran an old Listerine ad. Politicians often feel the same way about stump speeches.

That's to their credit. In contrast to the myths about them, they are usually well informed and full of ideas. They want to show people they can think on their feet. How can they possibly demonstrate that by performing the same script every day?

Most of them eventually give in, though. The advantages are just too great. Americans think people who don't look them in the eye are evasive. A stump lets you talk without notes. You establish eye contact with an audience, use jokes and stories you've told often and know how to make effective, and, like an actor in a play, know exactly which words need emphasis and where to pause.

Ad-libbing, on the other hand, often gets politicians in trouble. Former Virginia governor George Allen's ad-lib to an opponent's campaign worker ("Let's give a welcome to Macaca here"), which many interpreted as a racial slur, destroyed a promising presidential campaign.

Most of us who speak don't have that many original things to say. If you're talking at the Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lions clubs, don't create three speeches. Use the same basic speech and tailor it a little for each group. You'll save a lot of work. And like anything you practice, whether table tennis, or clarinet, or videogames, you'll get a little better each time.

REVEAL YOURSELF

You will notice that, except for the last one, every suggestion I've made so far deals with techniques to persuade listeners about ideas. But when people adamantly disagree with your ideas, it may be impossible to persuade them, no matter how inspiring, moving, amusing, or

exciting your speech is.

Sometimes, though, we come across passages in a political speech that transcend the ideas they illustrate. There is no better example than the story Arnold Schwarzenegger told back in 2004. What was it that made that audience—including his detractors—listen so intently? He made us see him not as a movie cyborg, not as a Republican, but as a scared little kid.

At such moments, politicians communicate not just what they think, but who they are. It's what happens when we hear Ronald Reagan describe his emotions as he looks out from the tinted windows of his limo, or Mario Cuomo show his feelings about a father who sacrificed so much, or Barack Obama give us a glimpse of his private pain.

By letting us enter their inner lives, they provide the shock of recognition we experience in great novels: the reminder that we can have things in common even with people we don't like. Does it mean we accept their ideas? No. But it eases our hostility towards them. And in a day when placard-waving, epithet-screaming crowds set the tone of political discourse, that's not a bad thing.

So as we prepare for times when we have to get up and talk to a group of people in our own communities, there's one final lesson from the memorable speeches of political life.

As important as it is to search for ways to communicate ideas, we will communicate best when we let the other side see how we and they are alike. And that's a piece of information we won't find by looking on Google but by looking inward. When, like Schwarzenegger, or Cuomo, or Reagan, or Obama, we reveal something of ourselves, we too can reach more than those already on our side.

It's not impossible. If the Terminator can make listeners see that he is one of them, surely that should be within reach for the rest of us.

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