Confessions of a Presidential Speechwriter

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CHAPTER FIVE

Working at Mr. Jefferson’s University

Back in San Diego, I received a call out of the blue from a friend with whom I had gone to graduate school. He had left Penn State to take a job teaching rhetoric and public address at the University of Virginia. He had not completed his PhD and so he was not retained. He called to ask me if I would like to replace him; he would be glad to recommend me to the department. I agreed, and on a cold but clear late November day, I found myself in Charlottesville, Virginia, interviewing for the job of debate coach and teacher of rhetoric and public address.

The vibes at the University of Virginia were positive as I toured the well-groomed, tree-lined grounds. I had a wonderful breakfast with the student committee; each member was articulate and bright. My traditional version of American public address seemed well suited to Mr. Jefferson’s University. He had built it and been its first rector. The history department contained professors whose books I had read when doing research on various papers. Unlike San Diego State, this campus could offer PhDs, and there was talk of moving beyond the master’s level in the Speech Communication Department. I also felt at home in Charlottesville because of having lived in Virginia as a kid and traveled around the state. I was issued an offer a week later. It raised my salary by 20 percent and promoted me to associate professor, and the dean promised me tenure in one year if the faculty of the department voted for it. I accepted, but asked the officials at Virginia to keep it quiet. I did not want my grievance at San Diego State to become moot.

My grievance finally reached the office of the president at San Diego State in March 1973; it wouldn’t be the last time I saw how slowly the wheels of justice turned on a college campus. President Brage Golding, who had a reputation for fairness, called my department chair and me into his
office. He told us that he had an agreement drawn up that he wanted us to sign. It overturned my termination; I would be retained and eligible for consideration for tenure in the following year. The agreement forbade the department from ever referring to the “termination” or the circumstances surrounding it. I would agree not to sue the university for any damage to my reputation.

My chair sat stoically through President Golding’s instructions and then signed the agreement, as did I. The president thanked us and began to show us to the door. “Before we leave,” I interrupted, “I have another document for the two of you.” From the look on their faces, I could see they were expecting a subpoena. Instead I handed them copies of my letter of acceptance for the Virginia job, which would start in the fall of 1973.

“But why did you put us through this if you were leaving?” my chair asked.

Now it was Golding’s turn to interrupt. “Bob, the lad wanted to clear his name.” Then he turned to me. “Congratulations, you’re going to love it at Virginia.”

While my parents were unhappy that I would be leaving, Dennis was proud of me. I had gotten him into Chico State, where he would have a successful time in the coming years, in fact finding the woman to whom he is still married.

I had talked my new position over with John Macksoud during several visits to Santa Barbara. I returned at the end of the semester to learn that he too would be moving east. Reputable publishers either demanded unacceptable changes to his book, or rejected it outright. So Macksoud decided to publish the book on his own. It is called Other Illusions and is not written in the usual academic style. Eventually, I wrote two flattering reviews of the book in major journals, but it never went anywhere. In any case, forced to leave UC Santa Barbara, John landed on his feet, taking a job at the State University of New York campus in Binghamton.

In late August of 1973, I jumped into my 1969 Mustang for the long journey across America to Charlottesville, Virginia. I picked Dennis up in Boise, where he was working on a construction job for his uncle’s company. I retraced part of the trip I had taken as a kid in 1953 by driving Dennis up into the Big Horn Mountains, across their beautiful meadows, and down and out across the plains. Dennis and I eventually made our way to Washington, D.C., where I showed him the sights and then put him on a plane home. The next day I drove down to Charlottesville and moved into an apartment on Jefferson Park Avenue that looked out toward Mr. Jefferson’s Monticello. It was an easy walk to the little white house on the campus that
served as the department office on Dawson’s Row. I was given the former kitchen to use as the debate office. It was quaint, but I believed I could make it work.

And work it did. After only two semesters on the campus, my sections of the undergraduate courses expanded to well over a hundred students each, numbers unheard of in the department before that time. The fact that I had worked at CBS News didn’t hurt. Soon my courses were cross-listed in American Studies, and students in the Government and History Departments were encouraged to take them. The department’s faculty considered me an established scholar who was publishing regularly: eight scholarly articles, two in the prestigious journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric.* I had learned the art of academic titling; one article was dubbed “The Medieval Subjugation and the Existential Elevation of Rhetoric.” (Makes you want to run out and get a copy.) My first book, *Ideas in Conflict: The Bases of Argument* was a textbook put out by Bobbs-Merrill in 1972, which I wrote with my former debate partner David Hunsaker, whom I had helped bring to San Diego State after he decided not to become a lawyer. The book did well because it was relevant to students; it used contemporary examples and case studies to illustrate its theories of argumentation. These were drawn from congressional testimony on the war in Vietnam, speeches on the national crime wave, and economic problems. I also completed another textbook, this time on rhetorical criticism, to go along with new articles in American public address on Nixon and Daniel Webster.

However, I enjoyed the teaching more than anything else because the students at Virginia turned out to be very special. At one point, the university had been invited into the Ivy League, but decided not to join those “Yankee schools,” which were elitist and private. When I showed up to teach my first class (I had always worn a tie to class at San Diego State, much to the chagrin of the faculty who walked around as if they were in Honolulu), I believed I was well dressed in my sport coat and tie. But as I looked over the class, I realized that almost every male student was better dressed than I was. The next day I went shopping at the “corner,” a quaint row of upscale shops near the campus. The one area where I outdid my male students was in footwear. The campus tradition was to wear loafers without socks, which led to many colds among the male students during the winter.

One of the nicest things about the university was that professors called each other “Mister” or “Miss” or “Miz,” not “Doctor.” It was assumed that if you were on the faculty, you had a doctorate. This tradition somewhat reduced the two-class nature of the tenure system and avoided confusing faculty with the doctors who taught at the medical school.
The school had a football team; the students used its poor record as an excuse to drink. While the rest of America’s campuses had fallen into drug use, uva maintained its tradition of drunkenness. Mint julep–filled Jefferson Cups were ubiquitous. Unlike the football team, the basketball team was a big winner, providing yet another excuse to drink. It was regularly in the top twenty in the United States and won the Atlantic Coast Conference while I was there. Wally Walker, who went on to become an nba star, took one of my classes.

LASTING FRIENDSHIPS

As at San Diego State, I often had students to my apartment, and later to my house, for dinner. While at San Diego I would find one or two students a year that I wanted to mentor, at Virginia there two or three a semester. Many students of mine went on to careers in the media, including Katie Couric of NBC’s Today Show and CBS’s Evening News, and Wyatt Andrews, who eventually became a White House correspondent for CBS News. Wyatt and I provided statewide radio coverage of Virginia’s 1975 elections.

The debate team held its own, though I was unable to change the tradition at uva that no one did individual events. These debaters were all going on to law school. I did advise the on-campus Jefferson Society, which met once a month to discuss some important political or ethical question in parliamentary-style debate. At the end of the evening, the house would divide for or against the question.

Since college, I had always opposed fraternities as aristocratic, anti-educational, and exclusionary. I didn’t even go through rush for the eight fraternities at ucsb, fearful of being rejected. However, at Virginia, Zeta Psi focused on helping its members attain better grades, and had a charming mix of young men who became student leaders. After a few meals at the Zeta house as a guest of some of my students, I became a regular and began advising the young men about their lives. Later I even taught a class exclusively for their house. Throughout all of this activity, I remained in the closet, and remarkably, my sexuality was questioned by only one student, who “sensed” that I was gay and came on to me. He was very handsome. But I turned him away and prayed to God not to test me like that again.
THE NATIONAL SCENE

While I vacationed at my folks’ back in San Diego for the summer of 1974, the events leading to the inevitable resignation of Richard Nixon occurred. In early August, he spoke from the Oval Office, and it killed me that this man who had come from a lower-class family in Southern California and risen to the top due to his own diligence had thrown everything away by trying to cover up a crime. That night my sister and I joined David Hunsaker and his wife for dinner and the play *Henry IV, Part 2*, by Shakespeare. As I sat in the Old Globe Theatre and heard the words “Uneasy rests the head that wears the crown,” I wept. The next day I wept again as Nixon rambled through his farewell to his staff. He spoke of his “sainted mother” and I thought, yes, she was the perfectionist who kept you in a constant state of guilt. It became your comfort; you could not live without it. You were, as Kenneth Burke tells us, “rotten with perfection.” And so you committed a crime so that you could feel the guilt again, and in the process you let all of us down.

In November, I returned to New York City to work for CBS for election-night coverage. It was great seeing Mike Wallace, Walter Cronkite, and the other stars at CBS again. My job was to help Marty Plissner put together a context for the election. It was easy; it was all about Watergate. The question was how many seats were the Republicans going to lose in the House and the Senate. I was appalled at how partisan the reporting was. On election night, it was as if Watergate gave the CBS gang an excuse to go rogue liberal. Even though we were live to the nation, every time a member of the House Judiciary Committee who had voted against Nixon’s impeachment was defeated, a cheer from the staff went up in the background. Every time a Republican senator lost, another cheer went up. I knew that most of the journalists at CBS were Democrats and liberals—Mike Wallace and Bernard Goldberg being the exceptions—but this was ridiculous.

I again worked with the square-jawed John Hart on the trend desk. We tried to make sense out of the exit polls. The most depressing stories were about how many voters could not name their congressman. Remember, these are people who went into a polling place and cast a vote for someone running for Congress; that’s what the midterm election is all about. We found that only 25 percent of those voters could name their congressman; the numbers were even lower for state and local officials. So much for Jefferson’s essential ingredient to successful democracy—an educated public.

It was a bad night for Republicans. By the end of the evening, they had a net loss of four Senate seats and over forty House seats. They lost
the momentum Nixon had given them in the South in 1972. The new president, Gerald Ford, was not helping. He was not a great speaker and had been appointed vice president by Nixon. And now he faced a hostile House and Senate chock full of Democrats seeking revenge for his pardon of Nixon, after which Ford’s approval ratings in the Gallup poll dropped from 71 to 49 percent, and would eventually fall to 33 percent as inflation ate away at incomes.

Worse than Watergate was the fall of South Vietnam in the spring semester of 1975. I was furious that the Congress had refused to provide funds to defend the country that was being invaded in what I believed was a violation of the treaty signed in Paris by Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho.

My campus life was going much better. I was chosen to give the annual “Honor Speech” to incoming freshmen in the fall of 1975. They were required to read a book of my choosing, which was Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, a terrific story of a man and his son riding a motorcycle across the country as the man recounts his education and searches for the meaning of “quality.” The book is existential and studies rhetoric, so it had become one of my favorites. Over two thousand freshman had to listen to my speech on the university’s honor system, which brooks no lying, cheating, or stealing. If you got caught, you were booted off the campus and your name appeared in the student newspaper in a small black box. My Honor Speech began by quoting from Falstaff’s remarks in Shakespeare’s play about the coming of age of Henry V. Falstaff claims that “honor” is just a word; it can’t do anything. In my attempt to prove old Falstaff wrong, I suggested that the honor system ensures “a society in which you can freely find your own potential.” I hoped to convince the freshmen that without honor, life is meaningless at best and can be pretty low for those who would trade honor for power, fame, and/or fortune. It was an easy sell after Watergate.

Members of the administration seemed happy with the address. The dean of students, Ernie Ern, became a fan. Katie Couric did a favorable review for the Cavalier Daily. Freshmen flocked to my classes, and I was invited to important parties by various professors, administrators, and clubs. My faculty unanimously recommended me for tenure. In fact, the long letter from the chair on behalf of the committee said the recommendation was made with “great enthusiasm.” It continued: “We firmly believe that he amply exceeds all of the standard requirements for a favorable tenure decision.” The letter reminded the new dean that his predecessor had wanted to bring me in with tenure, but the department had asked for a probationary year to make sure I could teach effectively in the uva environment.
Soon after, I received a call from Dean Edwin Floyd, who had just come out of the math department to replace the dean who hired me. He asked me to his office. He was gaunt, thin, and serious-looking in his black suit and thin black tie. He had lost his right hand at some point in his youth and a forked hook had replaced it. Dean Floyd told me that after consultation with the college tenure committee, he wanted to postpone an assessment of my tenure for one year to allow me to “consolidate my research.” He could not understand how I could do research on Daniel Webster, who was a nineteenth-century figure, and research on Nixon, who was a twentieth-century figure. I explained that both were politically significant speakers and my work focused on criticism of public address, not biography. He responded that at Virginia, one was expected to be “narrowly focused to develop an expertise, not to be a surveyor who was all over the map.” I repeated that my narrow focus was rhetorical criticism of public address, not historical figures; they were simply my case studies. “But,” he replied, “you also write about Aristotle.”

“With all due respect, sir, I write about Aristotle’s theory of rhetoric because it is what I use to perform the analyses I publish.” He told me that the committee could not understand this and that I should focus my research in one area. He also told me that working at CBS was a distraction from a serious research focus. “But, Dean Floyd, what I write for the correspondents at CBS goes out to 20 million people. Shouldn’t that count for something?”

“It is a service, I suppose. But here at Mr. Jefferson’s University, it does not count as scholarly publication. Mr. Jefferson did not even believe that journalism was a fit subject for the students here, so we have never had any courses in that field.”

I wanted to say, “Well, screw Jefferson, he owned slaves. Are you going to allow slavery here too? Most of the professors at UVA would have given their right arm to write for Walter Cronkite.” But I held my tongue, particularly the part about the right arm. I could see that Dean Floyd was not going to relent. Then he dropped another bombshell. “By the way, it doesn’t help that you co-author articles. We only count articles and books which are sole-authored.”

“But, Dean Floyd, that makes no sense. I can have my co-authors tell you what I contributed. In some cases, it was out of kindness that I named people co-authors because they played some role in the development of the article or contributed to the research. I’ve always been generous in that regard, and now you are going punish me for it.”

“Well, that’s the tradition here and I doubt if you can overturn it.” So I shook his left hand and told him I would try to do a better job explaining
in my next application what I try to do with my publications. I received a formal letter from the dean saying I would be considered again for tenure during the 1975–76 school year, and if I did not attain it, I would be given a “terminal year” for 1976–77.

The former dean invited me to his house when he learned of Floyd’s decision. Because he was a famous professor of the history of Irish immigration and a former dean, Bob Cross lived in one of the “pavilions” on the “lawn” at the center of campus. Jefferson had designed a very beautiful little college. Twelve two-story pavilions, six to each side of the quad, were provided for faculty. They were to teach students in the lower-level living room while they lived in the upper level. Faculty could meet with each other and avoid students by traversing a walkway between the pavilions that was built on top of the small student rooms, which in turn were strung along between the first floors of the pavilions. Still in use, the student rooms have fireplaces but no bathrooms; the location of the bathrooms and showers require that students exit their cubbyholes and go outside. This journey could be quite harrowing in the depths of winter. Only honor students are allowed to occupy the cubbyholes, except for the one that had been occupied by Edgar Allen Poe when he was a student. It is preserved as a tiny museum. Each pavilion has a beautiful backyard planted to match the month that corresponds to its number. For example, the garden of Pavilion Twelve is filled with holly bushes and Scotch pines. The gardens were divided from one another by waving S-shaped walls, which Jefferson had built on a bet that he could not build a wall only one brick thick that would remain standing. The clever inventor came up with curving walls and they stand to this day.

The camellia- and azalea-filled garden behind Bob Cross’s pavilion was in full bloom as we sat on his back patio late on a spring afternoon and sipped whiskey. He believed, with the change of deans and a new president, Frank Herford out of the sciences, that the university was turning on the liberal arts and looking for a more scientific orientation. “That’s where the government grants are,” he informed me. Cross told me to put my publications first on my list of priorities. “That’s how you will be remembered in the long run, Craig. Not by your service, not by your students, but by what you publish.” I didn’t agree with that assessment, but I wasn’t going to argue with him. He was trying to help me. As I was leaving, Cross said that even good publications might not be enough.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because Dean Floyd may be trying to get rid of your department.”

I was surprised. Yes, the department chair did not fit in on the campus and had taken the department in the wrong direction. I could hear Dean
Floyd saying, “Intercultural communications is not what Mr. Jefferson’s University is about.” However, I believed the situation could be corrected. Change chairs and refocus the department on its strengths: rhetoric and public address. “Craig,” Bob Cross intoned, “it may be too late for that. Just publish your pants off and maybe they’ll move you to American Studies.”

And that I did. I received a highly competitive faculty research grant that resulted in a publication. That was followed by another article on Webster and then an article on the notion of “rhetorical distance” with David Hun-saker. The problem was that two of these were co-authored and Floyd could use that against me. However, I felt responsible for bringing David first to San Diego State and now to Virginia, and he too needed publications for tenure. Since we were both in the same department, at the same university, Floyd would have to credit the articles to at least one of us. Someone had to write the darn things, I would argue.

Trying to ramp things up and “focus” my research, I applied for and received another research grant in 1975, which resulted in another article, followed by two more. Finally, I received a grant that allowed me to travel to London to study the roots of Puritan rhetoric in America. Hopefully, the dean and his committee would see that I was focusing and I was the single author in several publications.

These achievements did not go unnoticed by Professor Gage Chapel, a colleague at Occidental College in Los Angeles. He wrote reminding me that he too was a Republican and wondered if I would ever be interested in writing speeches for a Republican presidential candidate. I told him that I would, but nothing seemed to come of it except that he had piqued my interest in the possibilities of political speechwriting should my academic career derail.

On December 22, 1975, the department sent another letter in support of my being granted tenure. It also summarized a passel of peer reviews of my work that had come in from leading scholars in the field. The department’s letter was seven singled-spaced pages long in making the case for my being tenured, carefully explaining that my research was “focused.”

At the beginning of the spring semester, in late January, I took my top debate team to a national tournament at Boston College. They were in competition with eighty other teams, and so I was delighted when, after the eight preliminary rounds, they qualified for the quarterfinals of the tournament. I was off judging one quarterfinal while they were winning theirs. They lost in the semifinal round, but it was a terrific showing, our best of the year, and put the team into the top four in the nation.
When I returned home from the tournament, a letter was waiting for me from my department chair. I was crushed to learn that I had been denied tenure again. I requested a meeting with Dean Floyd, where he told me the decision was irreversible. I told him that my faculty believed I was a valuable member of the campus community. “But,” he interrupted, “you are not in a valuable department as far as that community is concerned.” Ah, I thought, there it is, just what Bob Cross had told me. They want to get rid of the department and I am the first step.

“I might have to consider legal action given that your predecessor promised me tenure if it were recommended by my department,” I threatened.

“That would be unwise. The best lawyers in this state have all graduated from our law school. Besides, we have not violated any procedures. Bob Cross had no right to make you such a promise, if, in fact, he did.” I started to protest and he raised his left hand to shush me. “I’ll tell you what I would be open to doing. I’ll give you a new three-year contract, with the clear understanding that you must leave by the end of that time.”

So that’s the plan, I thought; they’ll shut me up and phase the department out over the next three years. “Can I think about that?”

“Sure,” he said, waving his hook in the air. “Take all the time you need.”

I concluded that for my own mental health and to set an example for my students, I needed to fight the dean. I had lectured the students on what it meant to be an authentic existentialist. You have to commit to your philosophy; you have to practice what you preach. Now was the time to prove that I was committed to what I had been preaching. Maybe I had seen too many movies, but I believed I could pull off a miracle, as I had at San Diego State, and get this decision reversed.

Without any prompting from me, the school paper took up my cause. The graduate students of my department sent a letter to Provost Shannon expressing their “dismay” over the tenure decision, praising my teaching and the “selfless” way I had mentored them through the thesis process. In a stunning, unprecedented act suggested by Bob Parsley, the Honor Committee president, the student government passed a resolution that I be given tenure. Almost every day there were letters in the school’s two newspapers critical of the tenure decision. One particularly touching one came from four female students, one of whom was on the staff of The Declaration. “His classes are popular and large numbers of non-speech majors are back for second and third times, as well as those who have heard only good things about his entertaining and inspiring teaching. We feel fortunate to be in one of Mr. Smith’s courses. Our only regret is that other University students will not be able to take a course from one of the finest University professors that we have known.”
While absorbed in the fight to avoid a terminal year, I ran across an advertisement for a position at the University of Alabama in Birmingham. It had just been given equal status with the famous or infamous University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, the one at which Governor Wallace had stood in the doorway to block the entrance of the first two black students admitted to the university. Birmingham was looking for a “director” of its new “Division of Communications” that would include speech, print, and broadcast journalism, and public relations. I sent in an application.

Then something happened that reasserted my romanticism. It began with an invitation to the University of North Carolina to give a guest lecture in the spring of 1976. That campus, the oldest public university in America, is beautiful in April, replete with dogwoods, and I was delighted to be there to talk about political communication. It turned out that on this particular day, President Gerald Ford was also visiting the campus to give an address to the Future Homemakers of America. After wins in the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary, he had lost five primaries in a row to Ronald Reagan, who had given a nationally televised speech to revive his candidacy. The fight for the Republican nomination was on.

So after my 10 a.m. lecture, we all strolled over to hear President Ford at noon. His speech was an embarrassment, and I took a lot of flack from my friends on the UNC faculty for being a Republican. When I got back to Charlottesville, I couldn’t sleep. So I wrote a five-page, very polite single-spaced critique of the President’s speech, and at 3 a.m. I passed out. The next morning I mailed my screed to “President Gerald Ford, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C. 20501.”

Little did I know that a few days before my letter arrived, a White House speechwriter had been fired, the twentieth to leave that embattled writing staff. Since the White House mailroom is a small community full of gossips and people wanting to advance their careers, a mail boy fished my letter out of a stack and sent up to Doug Smith, an assistant to Robert Hartmann, the counselor to the president for speechwriting. Smith showed my letter to Bob Orben, the editor and manager of the speechwriting den. Orben called his friend Gage Chapel at Occidental College and asked Chapel if he had ever heard of me. Luckily, Chapel remembered our exchange from November and recommended me for the job.

When I got the call from Bob Orben, I believed that one of my debaters was playing a practical joke on me. So Orben told me to call the White House switchboard and ask for him. Reluctantly, I did just that and was put through. He asked some questions and then invited me up to the Old Executive Office Building (OEOB) for an interview. I arrived on the 18th of May. I passed through security in awe of the surroundings. The OEOB looked like
a giant gray Victorian wedding cake. It had been the State Department for a
time and then housed the Department of War before it became the Defense
Department. Now it housed various staff, including the Vice President and
the speechwriters for the President.

First, I sat down with Doug Smith and handed him a file he had asked
me to prepare. I found him to be quite affable. He put me at ease and I
was able to talk about what I might do for Ford. Smith was very interested
in the fact that I had written my master’s thesis on Ronald Reagan, their
nemesis at the time. He also liked some of my scholarly work on political
rhetoric. “It’s the only academic stuff I’ve ever read that makes any sense,”
he claimed.

Doug Smith passed me and my file along to Orben, who had been a
comedy writer for Red Skelton and Dick Gregory, among others. He
was a delightful man, and I would learn he had an eye for perfection. He
explained how the writing process worked, and that writers had direct access
to the President. I was surprised and delighted. His questioning was much
tougher than Doug Smith’s. He wanted to know if there was anything in my
background that might embarrass the President. “No, I don’t believe so,” I
lied. Orben also wanted to know how I would go about writing a speech.
I explained my Aristotelian technique and he seemed impressed. But my
heart sank a little when he told me the job came with a 30-day trial period,
chiefly because former writers who had been academics had all been abject
failures on the job, and I would have to undergo an FBI investigation to get
security clearance. Thank God I had been celibate.

As Orben walked me over to the West Wing to see Robert Hartmann,
I realized that if I failed any of these interviews, I would be shuffled right
out the front door. I also figured that Hartmann would make the call. I was
nervous and thrilled at the same time.

Orben introduced me to Hartmann, a fireplug of a man, quite gruff
and ruddy of face. Some claimed that was because he started drinking over
lunch and rarely stopped until he hit the hay.3 Leafing through my file,
Hartmann suddenly stopped when he got to the material on how Reagan
put his speeches together. He began to quote it to Orben and then he said,
“This is incredible stuff. Maybe we ought to do something like this here.”

Orben agreed and then said, “I’m going to leave the two of you to talk. I
have a speech to edit.” It was clear to Orben that I had impressed Hartmann.
Had I not done so, I’m sure he would have pulled me out of the interview.

Now Hartmann began his questioning. He flicked a page of data at me.
“Look at these results from the Texas primary. How do you account for
that?” The sheet summarized Ford’s bad loss to Reagan.
I wasn’t quite sure what Hartmann was getting at. I told him Texas was a very conservative state and very open to Reagan’s kind of rhetoric. Hartmann’s reply revealed a White House in denial. He said, “I don’t agree. It’s just magic.”

Stunned for a moment, I replied, “Look at the results. Over 400,000 for Reagan; only 136,000 for President Ford. It’s not magic; it’s enthusiasm.”

“What would you do in California? If we could embarrass Reagan there, we could end this fight.”

“You can’t beat Reagan in California, but if Ford were to make a Trumanesque whistle-stop tour of the Central Valley, he might get enough votes to score a moral victory.”

I could tell he didn’t like my beard, and he flat out told me that “Every professor we have hired has failed. They try to make the President too eloquent. He’s uncomfortable with airy fairy stuff. Worse yet, it takes professors forever to compose a speech. Sometimes a speech has to be written overnight and none of them could ever do that.”

“I understand. My training has prepared me to work quickly. I also believe the President should speak the language of the common man.”

“Exactly,” Hartmann confirmed. “Yes, that’s what the President wants. You can dress it up a bit, add a punch line, but keep it simple.”

“Like FDR,” I conjectured.

“How’s that?”

“If you look at FDR’s speeches, you’ll see that he uses very simple words but uses rhetorical tactics like rhythm and repetition to hold attention. Look at his First Inaugural, ‘The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.’ Mostly one syllable words and a nice easy rhythm and repetition.”

“I never thought about his speeches that way.”

“Look at the ‘Four Freedoms’ address where he ends his appeals four times with the phrase ‘everywhere in the world.’ Nice alliteration and repetition to drive the point home.”

Suddenly, Hartmann stood up. “Can you excuse me for just a minute?”

“Yes, sure.”

Hartmann left the room. I sat back and looked at his photos with the President and foreign dignitaries. I thought, this is where I belong. I could do this.

Hartmann returned and asked me to follow him. We joined Doug Smith in the West Wing mess and we continued the conversation. They ate up my theories. When I walked out the front gate of the White House, I was dizzy with enthusiasm. I drove through rain to Pittsburgh, where I was staying with one of my debaters and his family for a few days. That night Ford won
his make-or-break primary in Michigan and I waited for a call from the White House. Each time the phone rang, I stood up and listened eagerly for my hosts to summon me. But the call did not come that night, or the next day. But it did come on the third day; Doug Smith called to confirm my appointment and asked me to start the job as soon as possible.

A JOB AT THE WHITE HOUSE

On May 24, 1976, I began as one of President Ford’s full-time speechwriters. Hartmann introduced me to the President in the Oval Office and I was overwhelmed by the gravity of the place. There he was: Gerald Ford, thin-haired and puffing on a pipe. I heard Hartmann say, “Pending security clearance, Mr. President, this is Professor Smith. He’ll be your newest speechwriter.”

The President rose, shook my hand, and then stared at my beard. “Professor Smith, the other professors we’ve hired work too slowly and try to put big words in my mouth. I want to speak plainly and clearly. Can you do that for me?”

“Why, yes, Mr. President, I believe I can.”

“Good. We’ve got a hell of a climb in front of us. Five primaries tomorrow, then I’ve got to secure the nomination and overcome a 33 percent gap in the polls to beat a peanut farmer from Georgia.”

“I’m up for the fight, sir.”

“How old are you? I can’t tell with that beard covering your face.”

“I’m thirty-one.”

“That’s a good age. My chief of staff is thirty-four.”

“Yes, I know. Mr. Cheney was the youngest presidential chief of staff ever appointed.”

“Sounds like you’ve done your homework. Now let me get back to work. I’ll see you when you’re assigned your first speech.”

I shook his hand. “Thank you, Mr. President.” He had a dry, warm hand and a firm grip. I turned to leave him with Hartmann and suddenly realized that I could not see a way out. In my nervousness, I had forgotten how we came into the office, and given its oval shape and that the doors were curved to match the wall, I could not find the exit.

I heard Hartmann over my shoulder as I wandered around the room. “Craig, the door is over there.” He pointed and I finally figured out where it was.
“Thank you,” and out I went—but imagined the President saying, “Damn professors, can’t find their way out of a room with two doors.”

A few days later, Hartmann notified me that he was extending my probationary period to 60 days, but he said, “Consider yourself a regular with us.” I had to keep convincing myself that I was not dreaming.

The night of May 25th was a nail biter. In the end, Ford won three of the five primaries—Kentucky, Tennessee, and Oregon—all in what the press dubbed “Reagan territory.” The next day, after reading all of Ford’s testimony from when he was nominated for vice president and reading his most important speeches, I was given a 90-minute briefing late in the afternoon by Doug Smith on the President’s preferences. “His range of adaptability is small. We’ve learned what he likes. You’ll want to provide language that makes the President feel comfortable. That will improve his delivery, which, as you may have noticed, needs work.” This briefing included a list of words that were never to appear in a Ford speech, since he had learned to pronounce these words incorrectly at a young age. Judgment became “judgahment”; guarantee became “garntee.” Jules Witcover later reported:

Ford’s inability to pronounce difficult words, and some not so difficult was immediately seized upon as a measure of his brainpower. . . . In early February [1974], he stumbled an inordinate number of times in a speech on his energy proposals before getting out the word ‘geothermal’ correctly. A tape of the speech became an overnight box-office hit in the White House press room.5

By this time, I could see that too many people wanted to please Ford rather than improve him. Worse, in the competition for the President’s ear, there was a good deal of backstabbing going on. And there were relationships to watch for. Cheney was pawn to Rumsfeld’s bishop; the same arrangement existed between Brent Scowcroft and Henry Kissinger. William Simon, treasury secretary, and Alan Greenspan, economic advisor, had major domestic-policy influence.

The other members of the writing team included George Denison, a shy man who had come over from Readers’ Digest; Patrick Butler, a twenty-six-year-old reporter from Tennessee who had become a House staffer; Milt Friedman (not the economist), an aging owl full of wisdom but in no hurry to finish a speech; and David Boorstin, a young liberal who specialized in defense issues, and the son of the famous historian and head of the Library of Congress Daniel Boorstin. David Boorstin and Pat Butler were in league and often ridiculed Hartmann over lunch with me, whom they sought as a new ally. I later learned that before I arrived, Hartmann had once fired
Butler for going over Hartmann’s head to the President, but the firing was rescinded by Dick Cheney, who was not a fan of Hartmann’s. I observed the interplay from my windowless broom closet of an office.

Gerald Ford’s education did not include any extensive training for speaking other than law school. In fact, he lost his campaign for class president in high school, running as a “progressive.” At the University of Michigan, he was a football star, not a star orator. At Yale, he learned legal argument and developed a healthy respect for evidence, but did not distinguish himself as a speaker. Nonetheless, his achievement at Yale is impressive when you realize that he coached their football team at the same time he was finishing his law degree in the top third of a very impressive group of students.

Ford served in the U.S. House of Representatives for a quarter of a century and as its minority leader from 1965 to 1974, during which time he gave 530 speeches at Republican fundraisers alone. At such events, speakers often are told their speeches were wonderful, even when they were not. Succumbing to the flattery, Ford was under the impression that he was a good public speaker, when in fact, he was not.

Ironically, in the pre-Reagan era, Ford was probably the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge, but Reagan’s attacks on Ford’s moderation, particularly his policy of détente with the Soviets, made him seem more moderate than he was. At heart he was a congressional compromiser, a fiscal conservative with libertarian tendencies who hated government overregulation and believed in a hawkish foreign policy. Like Harry Truman, whom Ford admired, he ascended to the presidency with less preparation for national speechmaking than his predecessor. And like Truman, his speaking style would evolve dramatically while he was president. By the summer of 1976, Ford wanted to pull off the same kind of upset Truman had pulled off over Thomas E. Dewey in 1948.

The uva student newspapers ran the story of my appointment on the front pages of the papers. When I drove down for the commencement ceremony on the “lawn” a few days later, I sat with my faculty and they congratulated me on my new assignment. When “Pomp and Circumstance” was struck up, the graduates marched through the columns along the lawn. I was shocked and a little embarrassed when I saw that some held signs that read, “Give Smith Tenure.”