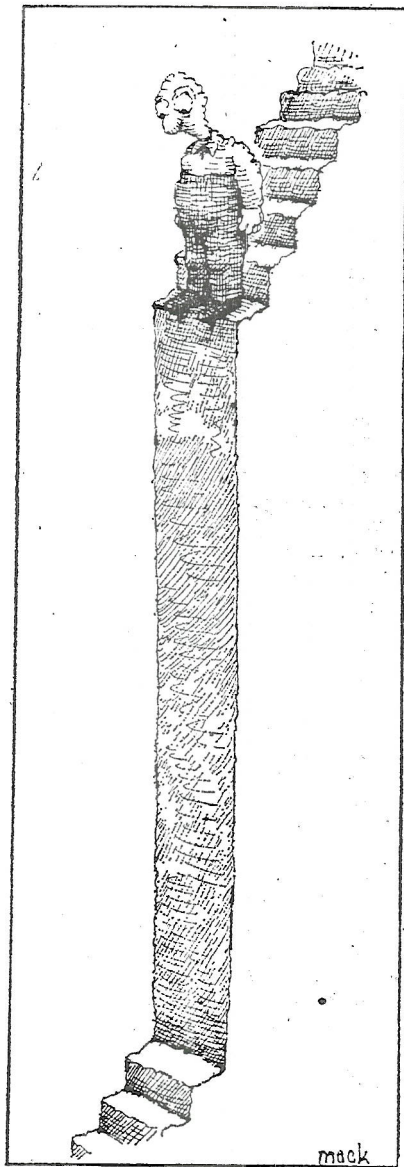


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Writer Responsibility



By Jerome J. Shestack

PHILADELPHIA—The Nixon speechwriters, it appears, like to be heard in their own name.

The Op-Ed page is a favored spot. Messrs. Buchanan and Bakshian have submitted witty and erudite defenses of the President. And William Safire, the cleverest of all (witness his resignation just prior to the deluge), turns in a bi-weekly column, in prose or poetry, which often is a charmingly constructed polemic designed to win sympathy for his former White House colleagues and to remind us ever so gently that the good guys also have some skeletons in the closet.

Since the Nixon speechwriters have voluntarily come into the open, isn't it pertinent to ask what they knew about Watergate?

On what basis did they ghost-write the denials, later retracted, and the reports of investigations, later conceded never to have taken place? With whom did they check before

presenting in polished syntax the guises of ignorance and the faces of outraged innocence? Is a speechwriter without responsibility?

Let's understand something about speechwriters. Presidential speechwriters are not robot-like scribes transcribing what is dictated. Leading Presidential speechwriters are persons of attainment, experience and competence. As we know from the books and columns they write after their speechwriting stint, they help develop strategy and suggest policies.

The research that should and does go into a Presidential speech is enormous. Major speechwriters must and do have access to the very staff information available to the President. And speechwriters use that access to gather data and assimilate needed raw material. If a speechwriter wants to check on facts, he certainly has the means to do so. Given the importance that Presidents place on their speeches, who would deny information to a Presidential speechwriter?

During the recent campaign, as a speechwriter for Sargent Shriver, gathering and verifying the facts was a critical part of my task. Research on a major speech was intensive. And staff people on the campaign plane and in the Washington headquarters went over major speeches minutely, challenging facts and demanding back-up. Because they knew that Mr. Shriver would demand it if they did not. He did it anyway. Mr. Shriver even introduced the idea of footnotes to speeches to show the sources.

I remember once we had been told that a Watergate figure had checked into a Portland, Ore., hotel at the same time as Mr. Nixon. A staffer suggested making something out of it in a speech. I tried to check it out, but, oddly, the hotel records had been transferred and were not available. So we didn't use it. And that is as it should be. For a speechwriter does have a responsibility—to the man for whom he writes—that the facts are correct. And to the public, if that man insists on untruth.

What about Mr. Nixon's speechwriters? Perhaps they knew the facts, yet withheld them from the President and drafted misleading speeches. If so, they bear a heavy measure of culpability.

Or perhaps they heard nothing, learned nothing, knew nothing. If so, they were inept and failed in their responsibility.

Then again, it may be they were told what to write. What happens when a speechwriter is told to write something which he knows or believes to be untrue or misleading? Then he faces his own moment of truth. There is, after all, an alternative. It's not necessary to give up the ghost—just the ghost-writing.

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