Tribute to William Safire (1929 - 2009)

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GEORGE VITAL ZAMMIT, OCT 1 2009

On Monday 28 September 2009 it was announced that William Safire, Pulitzer Prize Winner, speechwriter and columnist had passed away. The loss of Safire deprives enthusiasts of Presidential history from a player that oversaw one of the most tumultuous yet successful American Presidencies of the Cold War. It is in his indelible role as speechwriter for the 37th President of the United States Richard Nixon, that Safire most notably left his mark. Although he became a regular columnist with the New York Times with over 3000 articles by the time he retired,[1] it was his spell as White House aide that permitted him to be also part of the most extensively researched periods in history.

Behind every President, a team of speechwriters is assembled to articulate and formulate drafts for the President. They are rarely visible for the public, a reason for which they have also been referred to as White House 'ghosts',[2] but their crafty use of the language bear a huge weight on Presidential rhetoric. Safire's is a story of a speechwriter, a bright political etymologist whose talent was brought in to supplement a team of speechwriters that would draw some of the most striking phrases of Presidential history.

Safire, a moderate Jewish intellectual[3], born in December 1929 started in public relations and went on to become a radio and television producer. In 1959, during his stint as a press agent representing a homebuilder exhibiting the 'typical American house' in Moscow, Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev were touring round the American exhibition[4]. At a point he yelled for attention of his exhibit and aides moved the leaders towards Safire's kitchen. This is as he recalls, was the first time he met Nixon.

The Vice President was clobbered and rattled by Khrushchev, to which Nixon retained self composure and shot back with sophistication and tact. For the occasion, 'Nixon was superb'[5] Safire said. He would take his 'first and last news photo'[6], featuring the leaders in the 'Kitchen Conference', a photo which would be reproduced in many a publication in the aftermath. He subsequently joined the Nixon campaign in 1960 and in 1968, went on to join a team of speechwriters when Nixon won the Presidency. The team was composed of Ray Price and Pat Buchanan, lead by Jim Keogh, former editor of *Time*[7]. Price was the liberal, Safire the centrist while Buchanan was the conservative,[8] an ideological balance that guaranteed Nixon a pragmatism that would not stall his political efforts. Safire would say that he was 'an opportunist' and that he 'would go one way and then the other, depending on the circumstances.'[9]

One characteristic that has defined legacies of Presidents has been their power of speech, with Richard Neustadt defining Presidential power as the power to persuade[10]. From Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself', Kennedy's 'Ich bin ein Berliner', Nixon's 'Silent majority', to Reagan's 'Mr Gorbachev, Tear down this wall' – all remain powerful words that resonate in the hallmarks of the Presidency and that during their times inspired a nation to follow its leader. It is through a number of speeches that Richard Nixon rose as a politician that would fight back and capture the hearts. Nixon would complain whenever his speeches lacked the 'heart'[11] or 'feeling' in them[12]. According to Robert Schlesinger, Nixon was an 'intelligent editor' to his speeches and Safire considered him 'a real collaborator' who weighed his words.[13] 'Very few speeches actually influence the course of history,' Nixon would write in his memoirs,[14] but on those that would, he wanted to also have his mark on.[15]

In the first volume of his memoirs in the White House, Henry Kissinger described Safire as 'sporadically witty,

flexible, with a brilliant sense of public relations and an ability to turn a phrase that sometimes obscured its meaning in clever alliterations.'[16] Conrad Black picks Safire as one of those in the Nixon White House who were 'eminently respectable' and a 'paragon of selflessness.'[17] He would one day be summoned to the White House for a top secret assignment during a Super Bowl game from the stadium's public address system. The announcer was telling him to call at his office, an address which he would later learn had been 'picked up on television and carried to sixty million fans watching the game at home.'[18]

When solicited for his advice, Safire obliged with suggestions that supported the thoughts of the Presidency he served. 'A speechwriter, one might think, is no policy setter, only an articulation aide whose highest duty is to reflect the desires of the President and his expert adviser' would Safire later write.[19] Nixon's penchant for secrecy was in itself an open secret. As soon as he assumed office he surrounded himself with H.R. Haldeman, Chief of Staff and John Ehrlichmann, Domestic Policy Advisor who would shield him from his cabinet and formed what would then be called the Berlin Wall.[20] Nixon's White House was not unlike any other, every Presidency had its own philosophy of work and organized a structure which it deemed most fit. But probably, Nixon's was the most exclusionist in terms of not utilizing its own Cabinet as much as other Presidencies did. Foreign policy was conducted by the President himself and his National Security Advisor. Secretary of State Bill Rogers, himself a personal friend of Nixon, would not even be informed of foreign policy initiatives that were being taken. Nor would Secretary of Defence Melvin Laird be informed on the strategies and tactics adopted for the Armed Forces in South Vietnam.

One such ground breaking secret negotiation was the opening to China which Nixon wanted to push to break through the China-Russian alliance that was forged by Communism. The relationship with China would force Russia to rethink its position as a global force and compel it to move towards another Nixon triumph, the arms control agreement with the Soviet Union. In a memo sent to Kissinger, Safire wrote a quotation from the late UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold about secrecy which he suggested could be used if prompted on why such negotiations were shielded from the public: 'The most dangerous of all moral dilemmas: When we are obliged to conceal truth in order to help the truth to be victorious.'[21]

When not sufficiently happy with a draft, Nixon would assign a redraft to Safire, the 'writer with a more gentle tone.'[22] In the then landmark of space discovery, the moon landing of Apollo 11, Safire took inspiration from Walter Cronkite's announcement[23] that the landing would be near the Sea of Tranquillity[24], and called the President suggesting that he uses the phrase when he is in contact with the astronauts. Safire hinted that the phrase could be used in reference to a generation of peace which the President was auguring. After all, the President had in his inauguration speech stated that 'the greatest honour history can bestow, is the title of peacemaker',[25] a phrase which would later be inscribed on his tomb in Yorba Linda. Nixon took the idea, and during the communication with the astronauts he said 'as you talk to us with from the Sea of Tranquillity, it inspires us to redouble our efforts, to bring peace and tranquillity to earth', after which he called Safire and told him that the idea had worked.[26]

Despite an unwavering loyalty, Nixon's streak of paranoia did not spare anyone, not even Safire.[27] The wiretapping of Safire was seemingly approved by Kissinger or Al Hague 'because Safire had been talking to a journalist.'[28] He was in fact wiretapped like nearly all other aides in the White House. We have reasons to understand that Nixon did this as routine and not because he doubted Safire's integrity. For example, Kissinger and his entire National Security Council were all wiretapped in an effort to identify leaks that could potentially jeopardize the administration's efforts in foreign and defence policy.[29] Despite this, and although Safire had quit for the President's second term, Nixon kept holding him in high esteem.

In his recollection of relations with his staff, Nixon affirmed that 'to be successful, a leader must develop a core of loyal staff members who share his sense of mission, serve as his early warning system, possess acute political instincts, and have the competence to protect him from his own mistakes.' Nixon recalls 'Safire expressed his concern that Henry Kissinger was getting too much credit for our foreign policy initiatives at my expense', going on to show one of the qualities the President must have appreciated (loyalty) about his speechwriter.[30] In his conversations with Monica Crowley, Nixon would later on chastise some of the columnists in the New York Times, referring to them as 'intellectual elitists' that were a 'permissive bunch', 'except for Safire'.[31] On choosing a campaign team for the 1996 elections to run against incumbent Bill Clinton, Nixon advised Bob Dole to 'accept

everyone's support but to limit his circle of closest advisers to those who would be qualified to serve in his administration should he be elected …. since there was no room in a presidential campaign or in an administration for lightweights.' In support of this argument Nixon cited 'heavyweight' members of his own administration, a list that included also Safire.[32]

The immediate aftermath of the 1972 landslide victory in which Nixon swept all states but Massachusetts (carrying 60% of the popular vote), saw the President asking for everybody's resignation. It is not clear whether this held any weight on Safire or not, but as from January 1973 he moved to the New York Times to become a regular columnist. After Watergate, a scandal which spelled out the political demise of Nixon, some were of the opinion that Nixon was deliberately butchered by a then liberal media which treated him differently from his predecessors. From his column, Safire would go on to ask: '… And as each new abuse of power finally dribbles out we can ask ourselves: Why now? Why not two years ago?'[33]

Safire published a number of books on language and politics. In his early years he had published*The Relations Explosion* (1963), *Plunging into* Politics (1964) and *The New Language of* Politics (1968). A major contribution came in *Lend me Your Ears**[34]*** (2004), a compilation of public orations that according to him were amongst the greatest speeches in history. These ranged from the ancient Pericles' funeral oration for the Athenians that lost their lives in the Peloponnesian War, Napoleon exhorting his troops against the enemies of France, George Washington's farewell speech, Lincoln's Gettysburg's address during the American Civil War, Churchill's call for Britain's boldness and bravery, Nixon's rally for the 'great silent majority' to support the war in Vietnam, and many others expressive acts of delivery that enchanted crowds with eloquence and passion. This book added to another compilation,*Words of Wisdom* (1990) which had featured a myriad of quotations that delighted human thought. Recently, *Safire's Political Dictionary* was published in 2008, a vast collection of terms that explain 'what American politicians are saying.'[35]

A distinguishing contribution of Safire came in his book *Before the Fall* (1975) – one of the most detailed accounts of the Nixon presidency in that it gives frank and candid observations of someone very close to the circle of power. Safire gives a lucid account of the pre-Watergate White House, its dynamics, behind the scenes, the people, the issues and events of one of the most successful Presidencies in history. Avid history lovers find in this book many of the necessary pieces that define the jigsaw puzzle that was Nixon's character. Few are those books that present illustrations containing actual notes scribbled by the President over speech drafts, memoranda to internal staff, or sketches and doodles of which the author kept a copy. One particular note Nixon wrote, though never uttered in public, apparently was prepared in the case a question cropped up on the seemingly political burial Ted Kennedy was destined to after the Chappaquiddick incident: 'A man is not finished when he's defeated. He's finished when he quits.'[36] It is in this book that we come close to understand Nixon better, a picture that probably no one will completely ever comprehend but which Safire metaphorically likens to a 'multi-layered cake'.[37]

The cake would have an icing on the surface, the one visible to the public, the President as 'conservative, stern, dignified and proper.' The first layer underneath the icing was a 'progressive politician, willing and even eager to surprise with liberal ideas.' Underneath this was an 'unnecessarily pugnacious man …. self-made, self-pitying, but not self-centered.' The next was the 'poker player with a long record of winning … the negotiator who will wait out the most patient or nervy opponent.' Under that, the 'hater, impugner of motives, the man who claims he is not angry with the press because he cannot be angry with somebody he does not respect.' Another layer was 'the realist … who senses weakness and opportunities in political alignments and international affairs … and who could summon up confidence to impose his presence and much of his idea of order on the rest of the world.' Under that was the 'observer-participant' self-reflecting man with a 'concern about how his actions will appear to historians.' Then there was 'the man of extraordinary courage, the calculating risk-taker' that led him to 'summit triumphs unprecedented for an American President that Churchill[38] himself would have applauded.' Underneath that was the 'loner', a man who receded into solitude wilfully to solve his problems, 'the intellectual who prefers the hard study of written briefs to the liveliness of a spoken briefing.'

Safire's cake metaphor is inescapable to decipher who Nixon really was – the perception of him depended on which layer of the cake you choose. Safire believed that only the whole cake makes up the 'real' Nixon, including other

layers which he did not mention because he did not know: 'When you take a bite of the cake that is Nixon, you must get a mouthful of all the layers; nibbling along one level is not permitted.' You had to have one whole piece, Safire would say, the 'bitter with the sweet.'[39]

Nixon would go on to say that 'the judgement of history depends on who writes it.'[40] A comprehensive judgement can only be obtained, if who writes it sneaks into each layer, connects between each one, and probably discover even more. History is still judging Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, John Kennedy and others. Thanks to Safire, we got a closer glimpse of the Nixon Presidency and acquired remarkable contributions on the use of language in politics. It is not only a writer of history who we will miss, we will miss someone who made history with diligence and candor, and political science richer as a result.

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[1] The Times, 28 September 2009, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article6851787.ece

[2] White House Ghosts, http://www.whitehouseghostsbook.com/

[3] Conrad Black, *Richard M. Nixon – A Life in Full*, Public Affairs, New York, 2007, pp. 474

[4] For a detailed account, see Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1990, pp.235 – 291

[5] William Safire, *Before The Fall – An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House*, Belmont Tower Book, New York, 1975, pp. 4

[6] Ibid, pp. 57

[7] New York Times, 14 May 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/14/nyregion/14Keogh.html

[8] Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts – Presidents and Their Speechwriters*, Simon and Schuster, New York, pp. 194

[9] Ibid, pp. 190

[10] Richard Neustadt, Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents, Free Press, New York, 1990

[11] Nixon 'hid his heart from public view but always wanted "heart" to inspire his rhetoric.' For another insightful view on the Nixon speechwriting atmosphere, see William Gavin, "*Source Material: His Heart's Abundance: Notes of a Nixon Speechwriter*", Presidential Studies Quarterly, 31, No. 2 (June), 2001, pp. 358 – 368

[12] Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts – Presidents and Their Speechwriters*, Simon and Schuster, New York, pp. 192

[13] Ibid, pp. 197

[14] Ibid, pp. 204

[15] Though a number of speeches were charged with rhetoric, Nixon "overwhelmingly focused on substantive policy statements instead of symbolic statements." See Melanie Burns et. al, "*What Presidents talk about: The Nixon Case*", Presidential Studies Quarterly, 33, No. 4 (December), 2003, pp. 751 – 771

[16] Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, Little Brown and Company, 1979, pp. 77

[17] Conrad Black, *Richard M. Nixon – A Life in Full*, Public Affairs, New York, 2007, pp. 996

[18] William Safire, *Before The Fall – An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House*, Belmont Tower Book, New York, 1975, pp. 398

[19] Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts – Presidents and Their Speechwriters*, Simon and Schuster, New York, pp. 197

[20] Haldemann and Ehrclihmann coincidentally both had German ancestry.

[21] Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, Little Brown and Company, 1979, pp. 763

[22] Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts – Presidents and Their Speechwriters*, Simon and Schuster, New York, pp. 196

[23] The New Nixon, http://thenewnixon.org/2009/07/20/nixon-cronkite-apollo-11-and-the-sea-of-tranquility/

[24] The Sea of Tranquillity (Mare Tranquillitatis), where maria (plural of mare) on the moon are plains on the moon. They are called maria because very early astronomers thought that these areas on the moon were great seas, http://www.enchantedlearning.com/subjects/astronomy/moon/

[25] News Scotsman, http://news.scotsman.com/world/Presidents-who-left-their-mark.4891942.jp

[26] Richard Nixon, A & E Biography, DVD, 1996, Chapter 6, 55min

[27] David Gergen, *Eyewitness to Power*, Simon and Schuster, 2000, pp. 78

[28] Conrad Black, *Richard M. Nixon – A Life in Full*, Public Affairs, New York, 2007, pp. 609

[29] The Atlantic, "Kissinger and Nixon in the White House", Volume 249, No. 5, May 1982, pp.

35-58, http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/82may/hershwh2.htm

[30] Richard Nixon, *In the Arena – A Memoir of Victory, Defeat and Renewal*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1990, pp. 277

[31] Monica Crowley, *Nixon Off The Record*, Random House, New York, 1996, pp. 64

[32] Ibid, pp. 199

[33] Julie Nixon Eisenhower, *Pat Nixon – The Untold Story*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1986, pp. 445

[34] William Safire, *Lend Me Your Ears*, W.W. Norton & Co, USA, 2004

[35] William Safire, *Safire's Political Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, USA, 2008

[36] William Safire, *Before The Fall – An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House*, Belmont Tower Book, New York, 1975, pp. 155

[37] Ibid. pp. 96 – 106

[38] Nixon had a strong admiration for Winston Churchill, considering him "the largest human being of our time". He dedicates a chapter to him in his book *Leaders*, Warner Books, 1982, pp. 7 – 39

[39] Richard Nixon, A & E Biography, DVD, 1996, Chapter 8, 1hr 29min

[40] Nixon, American Experience, PBS Home Video, 1990.