

White House Exit Interview
Caryl Connor: Presidential Speechwriter

Interview with Caryl Connor in the Old Executive Office Building, Room 492, December 19, 1978. 10 o'clock AM. Interviewer is David Alsobrook, Presidential Papers Staff.

Alsobrook: I thought that the most obvious question I could ask you is: What does a presidential speechwriter do?

Connor: We write the president's speeches in addition to the speeches of the press. We also do proclamations and veto messages and bill signing statements. In addition to that we do the policy editing of a great deal of material prepared for the president by other people. An example would be a letter to the heads of African nations. The chiefs of state of African nations, drafts with the state Department brought into NSC here and it will come down to us and we will edit it. Anything done for the president's signature will come to the speechwriting office. Speeches are, of course, the large product, visible product.

Alsobrook: Were there particular speeches that you worked on that stand out in your mind as you think back on your tenure here?

Connor: Ah, yes. I think that the Texas trip, which was in June, stands out in my mind because I had responsibility essentially for the whole trip. There were a number of speeches. The major speech was a Houston dinner speech for a big DNC fundraiser but despite the fact that it was a party function we decided to do a Daniel-in-the-Lion's-Den speech and it was an Energy-in-Houston speech--not a popular topic at the time because Houston is of course an oil industry town. This was the president's intense lobbying for the energy legislation which was very unpopular in Houston. There were other things in the speech it was fun to do and there were a number of other speeches involved in the Texas trip.

A month later in July, I did most of the German trip speeches--the primary speech there being the Bonn dinner speech. This was preliminary to the Bonn Economic Summit and, in that case, we had two primary policy goals. One was the bilateral issues, reassuring our NATO allies that we were indeed committed to all of our treaty arrangements. The other one was the economic trading partner goals. Two messages were delivered in the Bonn statement dinner speech, is my point. It preceded by one day the economic summit.

The primary message in terms of our economic trading partners was the president's determination to get a handle on the deficit and the balance of trade deficit as far as domestic budget deficits and the current accounts balance deficit. I have a personal recollection of that series of speeches, of those relating to that trip, because I got cheated out a trip because I was supposed to go on the advance trip. Someone was leaving our staff, Griffin Smith, and Jim [James

Fallows, chief speechwriter] said to me “Why don’t we let Griffin go because it will be his last chance for a trip?” And Jim said “You can go on the real trip” and I said “Okay, that’s fine, although the advance trip is always more fun than the real trip because you have to work on the real trip.” (laughter) Everybody lobbies you on the plane all the way across with changes for the speeches. The advance trip was just going with all those nice advance people who were fun. Anyway, I didn’t get to go on either trip because, when it came down to the real trip, other things came up and the president decided that he wanted Jim to go. Jim didn’t want to go but he ended up going. So I missed out on both the trips to Germany, though I did all the speeches for the German trip--almost all. I think there were a few little ones that were like tourist type stuff that I did not do.

Alsobrook: Did you travel on any other trips?

Connor: I went to Florida to NASA space center and to Disney World, on the Florida trip. And, that was the president’s birthday. It was especially fun because coming back on Air Force One there was champagne and birthday cake and because it was the president’s birthday Mrs. Carter went and Amy went. They came up to the staff section of the plane on the way back. It was something like 11 o’clock at night as we were flying back we were singing Happy Birthday to the president and drinking champagne and it was great fun. Plus there was marvelous food--big batches of oysters and shrimp and crab. Huge platters of food-- it was the only time in my life when I’ve seen more oysters than I could eat.

Alsobrook: This question may sound rather artificial, but I think you can probably relate it to the question I just asked you. I’m not exactly sure how a presidential speech is born. Could you take perhaps say one of your Houston speeches or maybe one of the speeches on the German trip and maybe explain from inception through delivery what happens to a speech?

Connor: I will. I think it is a mistake to think that it is typical, I can take any one, but the process might be rather different. I will explain, in fact I will give you two different examples since I was just talking about it and you relate to the Texas and the German trip.

The German trip I’ll do first. The Bonn dinner speech, because it was international had some substantial policy drafting work done out of the National Security Council. Henry Owens, our ambassador to trade negotiations, the administration’s ambassador, had done a memo for Brzezinski, and Brzezinski had given a draft of Henry Owen’s memo to Bob Hunter who was our person for Western Europe. Bob had done a very rough first draft of the speech, but it had enough content in it that I could sit down without any further research. This is unique, this is not a common circumstance, but I could sit down with Bob’s draft and with Griffin’s notes from the advance trip to Germany with my old Kennedy Berlin speeches out of the Presidential Papers library that I was trying to put

together. With just those few documents, sit down in my own office and do a draft of that speech in probably four or five hours. As soon as I had my draft done I sent it back to Brzezinski for his policy approval and I think he made two relatively minor changes and I did some redrafting and sent it to the president, the president made only, again, maybe two minor changes. That speech went through essentially on the first draft with very minor changes. One would say there is a first draft and an edited revised, finished first draft. Many speeches, I was not involved in one, but Jim [Fallows] told me once, there was a forty-two draft speech. I do not believe I could have stood that.

Alsobrook: Which speech was that, do you know?

Connor: No. I don't remember. It was before I came. I have been involved in some speeches, notably the Inflation speech that went through seven...eight...I don't remember if the last draft was seven, eight, or nine but at any rate, it had very substantial redrafting. And that was the speech that was primarily Jim's but I was working on it with him and we were working essentially together on each draft, because the policy changed in the process of the drafting of the speech, which often happens.

Mr. [Michael] Blumenthal and Mr. [Charles] Shultz did not always agree; each of them sent back a draft with changes that reflect basic policy disagreements. In that, I will tell you something which may have some historical interest, and I am saying it since I understand this will not be generally given out. With the inflation speech which, as you know, is a major statement by Mr. Carter, of change in the administration's priorities; unemployment to inflation and the announcement of voluntary guidelines and a number of other steps that would be taken.

The first draft of the speech was very upbeat and very positive and it concerned me because I felt that it was not...the first draft of the speech was entirely Jim's and it was done at the general direction of Jerry Rafshoon and it was not, it did not at the time seem to me a very serious speech. It wasn't solid. So I did something that I should not have done by the rules of this institution. I sent a copy to Clark Clifford who was someone I had worked with in the past on speeches before coming to the White House, and I considered Mr. Clifford, who's worked for every President since Harry Truman to be a very wise councilor. I had spoken to him on the phone and I said to him, "This is a speech which is very private and it must be kept very private. And I would appreciate your evaluation." He sent it back to me with a note saying that all his comments on the speech were hand written so that even his secretary would not see it, respecting the confidence. Nonetheless when I told Jim I was doing this, Jim said that, "If Rafshoon finds out you let it out of the building, you will be fired instantly." (laughter)

It was a very tightly held speech. I felt in this case that my judgment of Clark Clifford was adequate to take care of the President's real needs. Clark Clifford's reaction to the speech was much the same as mine. The speech as finally given reflected that point of view. It was not upbeat; it said this is a long tough battle and we have every confidence that with these measures we will eventually win, but it is not going to be an easy task.

What else did you ask? How was the speech written, well, the Texas speech is a totally different kind of example. It was, because it was a DNC-sponsored affair. I called Bob Strauss, I called John White. Anne Wexler called me and asked me to please get in touch with Liz Carpenter, who used to be Mrs. Johnson's press secretary. I talked to all the tipsters around town, Lloyd Hankler, all those people who knew what goes on.

Alsobrook: You had suggested another question to me, that is: You mentioned the input that various people have into a speech. You know, the various drafts that come back to you and so on. In regard to the Inflation speech, who were some of the people who had input. I think you mentioned Blumenthal and Hills.

Connor: Everybody in the end. The first several drafts of the Inflation speech were very tightly held. In fact I will tell you a story about Mr. Blumenthal. I believe it was draft number five when it finally went out of the close confines of the White House. And into a meeting in which Mr. Carter presented it to members of the cabinet who were appropriately interested. Mr. [Ray] Marshall was there, Mr. Blumenthal was there. And, a copy of, and again I think it was the fifth draft, was passed around to everyone there.

Everyone had reactions to the content of that draft. Mr. Blumenthal, who subsequently was demonstrably right, was concerned that there was not enough emphasis on supporting the dollar, and the weakness of the dollar, and steps we would take to shore up the dollar. He felt that was an essential aspect of this message and he kept coming back to it as other people worked through the speech and through the other elements of the speech.

There was considerable resentment of Mr. Blumenthal. Many people on the White House staff do not like Mr. Blumenthal for reasons that the press has taken account of. Mr. Blumenthal had to leave early-- there was a banking association meeting in Hawaii and he had to catch a plane to go there. He left early taking with him his draft. The president collected all the drafts at the end of the meeting. A White House staff person, very senior, said, "Ha, ha, ha, Mike doesn't know he is the only one who has a draft, so if this is in the Post tomorrow, we will know where it came from this time!" This was said with great glee—the notion of "Ah ha! We will catch him this time!" —which indicates simply the attitude the White House versus the Cabinet on policy-making.

People who contributed to that speech were Labor Department people who came over. Secretary Marshall did indeed make some valuable, useful contributions. Almost everyone on the Council of Economic Advisors of the senior staff level went over it, almost, there was no one who did not have changes of some sort--in some cases, just a word or a phrase. The people that I remember, also there were some people on the Eisenstat staff, Cy, what's his name? [Simon "Si" Lazarus]--was useful. David Rubenstein went over it. A couple of other staff people. Peter Gulick went over it; he was on the Council of Economic Advisors, where Charlie Schultz of course went over it and all of the senior economists. But essentially it was, I'm sure, people at OMB who did. I cannot remember at the moment whether people at OMB made any substantive changes. That is probably an error of my memory, because it seems unlikely that...I really don't remember.

One of the things that Blumenthal did insist on which was a major change which has subsequently become a very important policy issue, was the, originally the speech was drafted in terms of the budget deficit and the goals for next year. There has been over the past six months considerable argument over what the budget deficit was when Mr. Carter came into office. What the last Ford deficit was, what is our next year's deficit going to be, and the figures are adjusted according to who's calculating and what fashion they are--adjustable figures. Mr. Carter had been saying previous to the inflation speech that he had inherited a budget in the high 60's of billions, got it down to the high 50's the first year, got it down to the high 40's and would get it down to the low 30's next year. In that speech for the first time he said under 30. And that is something that is going to be of considerable interest in the coming year because, as you know, OPEC has just raised its prices so it is going to be very difficult to do that.

Alsobrook: Were all speeches prepared for delivery by the President or did you prepare some speeches knowing that they would be released in the form of the news or a press release? I've seen some comments, like the president's comments on Christopher Columbus...

Connor: Oh, yeah. Those were things that I called proclamations we do. The speech writers all do. That is part of what is considered "the everyday shit". There are 3, or 4, or 5 of those things a week. Then there are also what Jim Fallows so endearingly calls "the croakers" [obituary statements] --various other events, such as the balloonist landing in France, we write all those things, yes. The president does not say them. We send them over to the press office and they are released as if the president did say them.

Alsobrook: Are there any of these that are really memorable to you as you think back about your time here?

Connor: Oh, let's see. Yes, I do remember when Byron Goodloe, who was a Congressman [Maryland Democrat], dropped dead jogging during National

Jogging Week and someone in the office had just done the proclamation and I--being a dedicated smoker and non-jogger, the only holdout against the health bigots in my office-- suggested that we remove the healthiness from the jogging proclamation. (laughs)

Alsobrook: Your boss, Jim Fallows wrote a thing on nonsmoking....

Connor: Indeed he did. And Jim and I discussed this at great length and the *New Republic* has a wonderfully enlarged article on people's right to kill themselves in the fashion of their choice. This is up on the wall in my office. There is also a little picture of a rat with a cigarette in his mouth which was contributed by Jim to my office décor.

A number of things stand out as a matter of fact. I remember when Jim came to me and said "I did this last year; you have to do it this year" and it was some absolutely dread disease I had never heard of before. For reasons that are obscure to me it stands out. The disease is something like Lupus or Lupines. Whatever it is, it introduced me to a whole new field of things to worry about.

Alsobrook: [laughs] Things you might die from! Did all of the speechwriters in your office tend to specialize in certain areas of expertise, things that you might die from? How does that work?

Connor: No. Sometimes that was true. I tended to get the economic stuff. I also tended to get the Democratic Party stuff. I think the reasons are I used to work for Senator [Hubert H.] Humphrey and someone at one time had an office in the DNC when it was over in the Watergate office building. Therefore for some obscure reason, probably, relating to those events, people assumed that I knew something about the Democratic Party nationally. So I did the Democratic, DNC thousand dollar a plate fundraising dinner speech here in early October, I think. That sort of thing.

Alsobrook: Is that the one in which the President told the story about his mother and the reporter? Was that an ad lib on his part or did you write that into the speech?

Connor: There is an even better story actually. I didn't write it into the speech. Jerry Doolittle did jokes. In terms of specialization Jerry Doolittle did jokes. I don't do jokes. My cleaning lady doesn't do windows--I don't do jokes. I would love to be able to, it's a skill I do not have. But I recognize a good joke when I see one. In this case the joke submitted by Jerry Doolittle for that dinner and I also got some from Gordon Lowe at the DNC and other people and I just put them all up front and the president didn't like them very much. He didn't find those jokes very appealing and quite frankly I think he was right, they were not very wonderful jokes. However, I'm trying to remember who it was, he had come down from Camp David, which was maybe the week before, and I don't remember precisely

what. I assume the joke you are talking about is the one where Miss Lillian's first question was "Is he married?"

Alsobrook: That's not the one I was thinking of. The one I was thinking of was the joke was something about telling white lies. Go ahead and tell me the one you were talking about "Is he married?"

Connor: This was Miss Lillian's comment. The president said that he came down from Camp David. He had the television appearance with Sadat with Begin, he came down off the platform, walked over to his mother expecting great approbation for this wonderful achievement and she looked at him and said "Tell me about Sadat. Is he married?" Well, the joke originally had been written as "tell me about Begin"; it was supposed to be a Jewish mother joke. [Both laugh] And when Carter told it he simply got the wrong man in. It was just a joke that got twisted up in terms of its ethnic background, possibly deliberately. One never knows with Mr. Carter. Maybe he decided that it would be funnier to mix it up that way. He did equally... He did something which I'm quite sure was mixed up. At the great gala for entertainers two or three weeks ago in which Rick Hertzberg had prepared some material for him saying that politics was closely allied to the second oldest profession, which was entertainment. The president said that politics was closely allied to the oldest profession. With these people... with their jaws dropping.

Alsobrook: I remember that one. Do you think that president, this is just his style? That he likes to take jokes and things that are written into his speeches and change them just as a matter of personal preference?

Connor: I don't think that the speechwriting staff has yet mastered the art of writing humor that Mr. Carter really likes. And occasionally there have been things that I thought were particular, during the GSA scandal, Jerry Doolittle did a series of jokes, several of which I wrote into some speeches because I thought that they were funny often. Often I didn't think these things were funny. And they were things like Ali Baba and the forty building managers. They were fairy tale changes and the president did use them once on one of those stump speeches down in North Carolina and apparently didn't get a laugh. And I felt that the reason was that was a very much Washington/New York joke that wouldn't work down in the back woods of North Carolina. I think it was in Asheville or someplace. But that they were good up here so I wrote them into another speech and he simply didn't use them. They never got used again because they didn't get a laugh the first time.

I think that Jerry Rafshoon has tried to upgrade the quality of the president's humor. It is a very tough thing to do. Early, Jim Fallows tried to get Art Buchwald and Mark Russell, people like that to make contributions. None of them worked. Every president has--of course, every speaker--has very personal feelings about what's funny to him and what he can do. I did the Baltimore

speech for Harry Hughes; I assure you I didn't write into it the fact that the president said that he knew things were doing better because people were waving with their whole hand. I am told that that was said to him on the helicopter going over to Baltimore. It is the sort of thing that I would have never written into a Carter speech because I would have thought that he would find it vulgar. I wouldn't have expected him use it but he did it and it got the best laugh of the whole speech. You just can't tell.

Alsobrook: Caryl, you mentioned briefly Jerry Rafshoon's influence. Have you seen a great deal of change in the President's speaking style since Jerry Rafshoon has come on board?

Connor: I wouldn't see the change because I came almost concurrent with Jerry. I met Jerry in Clark Clifford's office when I was doing some work for Bert Lance last spring. And subsequent to that Jim Fallows had been trying to hire me for some time. There wasn't a slot and Rafshoon approved the slot so Jerry Rafshoon and I came at almost the same time. [The Speechwriters Office had worked for press secretary Jody Powell under the lead of James Fallows, chief speechwriter. In May 1978, the Speechwriters office was transferred to the White House Communications Office under Gerald Rafshoon.]

Have I seen a change as a consumer of speeches from the outside rather than a producer of speeches from the inside? The answer is essentially 'no'. Having talked to Jim and having spent a great deal of time listening to Jim talk about the past as well as the present, I don't think that Jerry Rafshoon has substantially altered the way the presidential speechwriting process is. He has moved in to fill a vacuum and that is because Jody was just so plain busy that he didn't have time to exercise any supervision at all. But I wasn't here in that time period. What I do know is that Jerry Rafshoon very wisely-- I think-- seldom tried to direct the content of a speech. He would often, if I'm starting a draft, and I say, "Do you have any ideas on this?" He would say "Why don't you talk to Greg." Which I think means that he has no particular interest himself; Jerry does not, in making changes. When I finished the DNC dinner speech, he had one change and that was, whoever the entertainer was, it was a kid or somebody. Diana Ross. I had a lead-in sentence that the president didn't know that she was going to sing Happy Birthday. I had a lead-in sentence which gave away the fact that she was going to sing Happy Birthday, so Jerry made that change. It was not a substantive change, it was obviously a change made for reasons to protect the secret for the president. Greg on the other hand was almost always making substantive change. Seldom did the speech writers think that Greg's contributions were an improvement. On the contrary, to put it kindly, people feel that he is ham-handed.

Alsobrook: Really you answered at least two other questions that I was going to ask you. One thing that I did want to ask you about is your past experience in government. Could you tell me about previous jobs that you may have had that

prepared you to do this job? I think you may have even answered this in one form or another. Are there particular jobs in your background that you think really prepared you for this one?

Connor: My first Washington job was running the Washington office of Joseph Neapolitan and Associates. Joe Neapolitan worked in the Kennedy campaign and the former vice president of that campaign was O'Brien who was, of course, at that time in the Kennedy White House. I learned political Washington out of Joe's office. Later I worked in Commerce. I was a consultant to John Connor, did some speech writing there, I was a consultant to John Gardner, and did some speech writing when he was secretary of HEW. And I worked closely with Senator Humphrey.

In the period of time that I worked for Senator Humphrey I worked closely with the Democratic Policy Council. We were the party out of power at that time--the loyal opposition, theoretically, in British terms. The Democratic Policy Council provided at that time the only place for the party to develop any programs and platforms and opposition to the Nixon White House. So all those things made me politically aware. Subsequently I worked for the Bank of America as a speech writer for Tom Claxton who was the president and chief executive officer. This gave me a different kind of exposure. A lot of economic background, which was useful.

Alsobrook: Could you tell me a little bit about the differences between the pressures that you experienced in those jobs and the perhaps unique pressures associated with this job?

Connor: There is nothing like working in the White House. It is far more limiting. You cannot make policy if you are a speech writer. In almost any other situation you may propose a new policy in your speech and go to your boss or client and argue it. You don't do that with the president because policy is established by people who have such responsibilities. What you have to do is work with the policy people. A great deal less creativity and imagination is involved.

Also, Mr. Carter is someone who is not as interested in eloquence in his speeches. I had at one time a White House detail in the Johnson administration. Mr. Johnson was very anxious that everything he said really make a point and be said wonderfully well. And he had a great many impressive writers on his staff and people talk about Kennedy's impressive writers and people tend to forget that Mr. Johnson had a very impressive collection of people, high level and a lot of them.

This is smallest speech writing staff any White House has ever had. And I think I am the only one... well, Jerry Doolittle has some previous government background. Rick Hertzberg came straight from the *New Yorker*. Jim [Fallows] came out of a magazine background. Bill Griffin came out of a magazine

background. Achsah [Neesmith] came out of a newspaper background. I think I'm the only person who's ever done speech-writing in previous situations—which in most White Houses would have mattered. It didn't here because Mr. Carter really doesn't want ... does not think of the presidency as a bully pulpit, which many presidents of course do, and he does not take every occasion to make a wonderful, memorable speech. He wants to make his point, get the data across and sit down.

Alsobrook: That's interesting because Jody Powell has used that particular term before—"bully pulpit" in quoting Teddy Roosevelt. That's a really interesting comment. You answered that question to a T. That was exactly the comparison I was interested in. Did you play any part in the 1976 presidential campaign?

Connor: No, I was working with the Bank of America in San Francisco. The only part I played was that I had at the time written a letter to Jack Watson in Atlanta and to Dick Moe whom I knew—I knew Dick Moe, not Jack Watson. I said that I would like to do whatever I could in San Francisco to help Mr. Carter. And I had a letter saying that urged me to get everybody to vote for him and do all you can—with no specifics. So I did not do anything.

Alsobrook: But the Carter transition, did you do any work in the transition?

Connor: No, I was still working--I came here from San Francisco, during a visit during the inaugural week.

Alsobrook: Do you have any future plans that you can tell me about?

Connor: I have future plans that I *cannot* tell you about (laughter)...probably because I'm not sure yet. If they were absolutely locked up I would be happy to tell you about them.

Alsobrook: Maybe I can rephrase this question: what would you like to do in the future? Without telling me the specific job.

Connor: It's a very difficult thing to answer because it's a very specific thing which I can't be too general about. If it works out I will know exactly what I'm doing, and if it does not work out then I will probably go back to what I did before, which is working for selected clients.

Alsobrook: Okay. Thank you very much, Caryl. I appreciate your taking time.