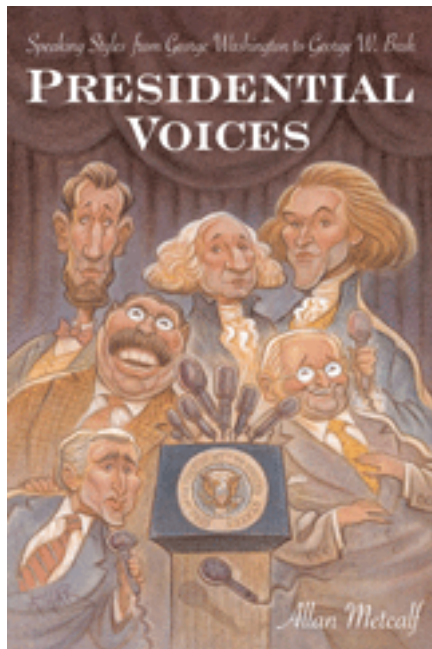


Press Release



Presidential Voices

by [Allan Metcalf](#)

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"A lighthearted journey through the rhetoric of our country's 43 presidents . . . entertaining." — Booklist

About the Book

"If we are looking for a category of speakers to exemplify American English from the very beginning of the United States to the present day, we can do no better than pay attention to the presidents." — from the Introduction

How should a President talk? George Washington never spoke publicly for more than ten minutes because his false teeth required him to keep his jaws clenched, yet his lofty rhetoric established the presidency as a dignified institution. John Adams once held Congress spellbound throughout a 700-word sentence. In contrast, Harry Truman's speeches were uncomfortably stilted until he threw away his script and talked off the cuff in his naturally combative, down-home style. In *Presidential Voices: Speaking Styles from George Washington to George W. Bush* (Houghton Mifflin paperback, July), the renowned language expert Allan Metcalf offers readers a unique take on the American presidency, just in time for the 2004 elections.

The power of speech — both what is said and how it is spoken — is of crucial importance in politics. Nowhere is this more evident than the presidency. Yet for every Washington or Adams, there is a Thomas Jefferson — a president who was such a bad public speaker that he declined to deliver a State of the Union address to Congress, instead beginning a century-long tradition of sending congressional members a letter — or a George W. Bush, whose ungainly phrases (*misunderestimate, women of cover, embetterment of mankind*) have helped make him a "blunderer of heroic stature."

Drawing from a wide variety of sources, Metcalf examines the speaking styles, regional accents, and distinctive vocabularies of the presidents, from Silent Cal to the Great Communicator. Along the way, he looks at the leading candidates for blunderer in chief, and selects the leading neologists (inventors of new words). Finally, Metcalf examines the hidden influence of speechwriters and the changing media to see how presidents present themselves to voters, an issue of particular relevance in this election year.

Many books have been written on the policies, rhetoric, and character of presidents. Metcalf (*Predicting New Words*) is the first expert to look at the *language* of the presidency, what was said and why it was said that way. After reading *Presidential Voices*, you'll never listen to a presidential speech in the same way again!

About the Author

Allan Metcalf is professor of English at MacMurray College and executive secretary of the American Dialect Society. A favored media expert on language, he has been interviewed for NBC-TV's *Weekend Today*, NPR's *Talk of the Nation*, Voice of America's *Wordmaster*, *USA Today*, *Glamour*, the Associated Press, and countless other regional and national programs and publications. His books on language include *Predicting New Words: The Secrets of Their Success*, *How We Talk: American Regional English Today*, *America in So Many Words* (with David K. Barnhart), and *The World in So Many Words*. His books on writing include *Research to the Point* and *Essentials of Writing to the Point*. He lives in Jacksonville, Illinois.

A Conversation with Allan Metcalf

Q) Why did you choose to write about the presidents?

A) Because they were there. No other kind of person or officeholder has been so thoroughly scrutinized, both by contemporaries and by posterity, throughout the entire history of the United States, as our forty-three presidents. For example, I knew that actual voice recordings existed for half of them, going as far back as Grover Cleveland, and I knew that even further back than that there would be comments on their speaking abilities and styles. So here was a ready-made sample of American speech going back more than two centuries.

Furthermore, by virtue of their office, what they said was important. By no means did we elect them for their speaking ability, and we didn't even elect some of them, but once in office they spoke for all of us.

I was curious to learn how the norms for cultivated, educated speech had changed over the centuries, as exemplified by the presidents. For that matter, I wondered what we expected from our presidents in speaking styles and ability. And I wanted to make this a practical book, too, so I included a chapter that will be useful to anyone who finds herself or himself elevated to the presidency, entitled "How to Talk Like a President."

Q) Aren't there plenty of books about the presidents already? What's new in yours?

A) There are plenty of books about the presidents' politics, performance in office, and personalities, and there are lots of books about their rhetoric, but hardly anything directly on their language. My book gets into everything about presidential language — not just speaking styles, which changed from century to century, but also accents and vocabulary, bloviators and blunderers. You can find out who (in my opinion) was the greatest presidential orator, who was the greatest creator of new words, who was the most down-to-earth president, and who was the greatest blunderer. I also deal with the role of speechwriters and with the speaking styles of make-believe presidents in the movies and on television.

All that is just the first half of the book. The second half has a chapter for each and every president, not only major ones such as Washington and Lincoln but even obscure ones like Franklin Pierce, the only president to *affirm* rather than *swear* to uphold the Constitution, and whose eloquence was attested to by none other than the campaign biographer Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Q) So . . . who was the greatest presidential orator?

A) I think it's the same president who used the longest sentence in any inaugural address, 727 words before coming to a stop. That's more than a mouthful! But if you pay close attention, as I do, to his use of these 727 words, you'll discover the culminating moments of the greatest presidential oration . . . by John Adams in 1797.

You might think Lincoln was the greatest. True, Lincoln's speeches are remembered while Adams's are not. But in my book, Lincoln is No. 2. Adams had a greater effect on the audiences he spoke to.

Q) What about modern presidents? Were any of them great orators?

A) No, the development of modern media — the phonograph, radio, and television — brought an end to the era of oratory. Sound bites took the place of lengthy speeches, or to put it another way, lengthy speeches that had once been fully developed arguments became collections of sound bites. A twentieth-century president had to be a great communicator rather than a great orator.

The great twentieth-century communicators of course include the Great Communicator himself, Ronald Reagan, and also his predecessors, the two Roosevelts and John F. Kennedy. We remember them for their quips and turns of phrase, not their entire speeches. Teddy Roosevelt called the presidency a "bully pulpit" and invented terms such as "muckraker" and "lunatic fringe." Franklin Roosevelt is remembered for statements like "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," Kennedy for "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," and Reagan for "evil empire" and "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Q) You mentioned choosing the biggest presidential "bloviator." What's that, and who is it?

A) That would be Warren G. Harding, president during the early 1920s, an orator in the

grand old style who found himself in the wrong century. Critics like H. L. Mencken gnashed their teeth when Harding would declaim: "America's present need is not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy; not revolution, but restoration" — and so on for five more alliterating pairs. "It is so bad that a sort of grandeur creeps into it," Mencken grudgingly acknowledged, and Harding went on cheerfully "bloviating" — his own term — until his untimely death in office.

Q) And what about down-to-earth presidents?

A) There's a tradition of a president being a true man of the people, preferably born in a log cabin, which goes back to the election of Andrew Jackson in 1829. But if you look more closely at Jackson, and at other presidents from humble circumstances such as Lincoln and Andrew Johnson, you find that they all made an effort to cultivate and dignify their speech, so that by the time they became president, their language was almost as genteel as that of a Virginia aristocrat.

It wasn't until the mid-twentieth century that a true down-to-earth president came along: Harry Truman. In his first years as president he tried his best to use a formal style, helped by his speechwriters — until in his whistlestop election campaign of 1948 he discovered how much more effective he was in his "give 'em hell" style.

Ever since Truman, there have been presidents who admire his style and might want to try it for themselves, but they have not found it possible to break away from the elevated style of the presidency the way Truman did. George W. Bush, for example, has spoiled his down-to-earth West Texas speech by too much Eastern education and mentoring.

Q) A while back you mentioned innovators.

A) Yes, the greatest creator of new words among the presidents was, as you might expect, Thomas Jefferson. He was a great advocate of neology, the creation of new words; he thought new words were needed for the new flora and fauna of the New World, as well as for the new political order established by the creation of the United States.

Among the more than one hundred words for which Jefferson provides earliest evidence in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are scientific terms such as *odometer* and *megalonyx* (a fossil sloth); homely terms such as *breadstuff*; political terms such as *Anglomania*, *Anglophobia*, and *electioneering*; and everyday words such as *sanction* ("approve"), *indecipherable*, and *belittle*.

Right in the same class with Jefferson as a neologist is none other than our current president, George W. Bush. Admittedly, he's at the foot of the class rather than the head of it, an inadvertent neologist rather than a deliberate one. But he comes up with some gems, including *misunderestimate*, *arbo-tree-ist*, *women of cover*, and my favorite, *embetterment*, which he used several times in the phrase "the embetterment of mankind." Who else could manage to transform embitterment into embetterment?

Q) What were some of the surprises you encountered?

A) I was surprised at how influential George Washington has been on all the presidents after him. The language they use in inaugural addresses and State of the Union messages still has

Washingtonian echoes.

I was surprised at how shy certain of our Founding Fathers were about public speaking, even though they were gifted writers: Jefferson in particular, and Madison even more.

I was surprised at how unimpressive Lincoln's first inaugural address was.

I was delighted, perhaps rather than surprised, by Theodore Roosevelt's irrepressible expressiveness. When he was struck in the heart by an assassin's bullet before a speech in Milwaukee during the 1912 presidential campaign, he refused medical treatment until he had given his full speech, waving the text with a bullet hole in it and declaring, "It takes more than that to kill a Bull Moose."

I was surprised that "Silent Cal" Coolidge was not so silent. He was said to have made more speeches than any previous president.

I was surprised that George W. Bush is so little troubled by his language blunders that he even read aloud from a book of *Bushisms*, laughing at his own mistakes, at a Texas Celebration of Reading early in his presidency.

I was also surprised, in general, at how little it apparently matters that a president have good speaking ability. George W. Bush is only the latest example of lack of eloquence combined with political success. Zachary Taylor, for example, was said to be "a poor speaker, often stammering, and unable to put together a string of ideas."

Q) How does John Kerry compare to George W. Bush as a presidential speaker?

A) Kerry has no trouble sounding presidential. He is at a disadvantage compared to Bush, however, when he tries to sound natural and down-to-earth.

Praise for Allan Metcalf

For *Predicting New Words*

"Serious philology breezily presented." — William Safire, *New York Times Magazine*

"The appeal of this book is in the stories: how Allen Walker Read beat rival sleuths to the source of OK . . . and the Boston contest that inspired the coining of scofflaw, which won its creators a \$200 prize. You couldn't make this stuff up." — Jan Freeman, *Boston Globe*

"There's nothing inert about our language, as Allan Metcalf gleefully demonstrates in *Predicting New Words*, his brisk, scholarly romp that will appeal beyond the usual word mavens." — *Christian Science Monitor*

For *How We Talk*

"Celebrates our nation's diversity, and the veteran dialectologist Metcalf is a master at it." — William Safire, *New York Times*

For *America in So Many Words*

"Gives the general reader . . . reason to explore and to love the vast riches of our language." — Wayne Glowka, *American Speech*

For *The World in So Many Words*

"Charming . . . an engaging linguistic tour of the words we use, where they come from, and how they came about." — Jonathan Shipley, *BookBrowser*

Did You Know?

- **Thomas Jefferson** was belittled by an English magazine for using the word *belittle*.
- **Warren G. Harding** was belittled by an English newspaper for using the word *hospitalization*.
- **Abraham Lincoln** was largely responsible for citizens of Michigan being known as *Michiganders*.
- **Teddy Roosevelt** was such an advocate of spelling reform that he instructed the Public Printer to use spellings like *tho* and *thru*, but he gave up when the Supreme Court and Congress would not accept them.
- **Herbert Hoover** had a game named after him: Hooverball. It was a combination of volleyball and tennis, played with a soft six-pound medicine ball by Hoover himself and top aides outdoors at 7 a.m. every day for health purposes.
- The *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes **Lyndon Johnson** two times for examples of word usage. It quotes his wife, Lady Bird Johnson, more than two hundred times.
- Speechwriters for **Gerald Ford** were instructed not to use the words *judgment* or *nuclear*, because he mispronounced them.
- **Ronald Reagan** was the first president to introduce "heroes in the balcony" during a State of the Union address. The first, in 1982, was Lenny Skutnik, who had rescued a woman from the icy waters of the Potomac after the crash of Air Florida Flight 90 just two weeks earlier.
- **Reagan** first used the phrase "evil empire" in an otherwise unremarkable speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in 1983. It was buried deep in the prepared text of the speech so that it would escape notice by the State Department and certain of his advisers, who would have insisted that he delete it.
- **George W. Bush** is a "nucular" president, pronouncing the word that way instead of *nuclear* as it is spelled. "Nucular" is the pronunciation generally used by the military, including W's distinguished predecessor **Dwight Eisenhower**.
- **George W. Bush** inadvertently creates many new words, such as *mential*, *subliminable*, *punditry*, and *ooching*, but *strategery* is not one of them. It was invented by writers for

Saturday Night Live for a show just before the 2000 election. Bush's foreign policy advisors liked that word so much that shortly after he took office they nicknamed themselves the "Stratergy Group."

The Presidential Records Act (PRA) of 1978, 44 U.S.C. §§ 2201-2207, is an Act of the United States Congress governing the official records of Presidents and Vice Presidents created or received after January 20, 1981, and mandating the preservation of all presidential records. Enacted November 4, 1978, the PRA changed the legal ownership of the President's official records from private to public, and established a new statutory structure under which Presidents must manage their records. The PRA is called "Presidential Voices: Speaking Styles from George Washington to George W. Bush." AA: He listened to recordings, where he could. He got a sense of how the early presidents sounded by what people had to say about their speeches. [Allan Metcalf, Presidential Voices: Speaking Styles from George Washington to George W Bush, published by Houghton Mifflin in July 2004; paperback, pp256; ISBN 0-618-44374-6, US price \$12.95.] Search World Wide Words. Support this website!