SPECIAL DELIVERIES
Thoughts from a preeminent essayist on the makings of a great speech.

FORMER AMBASSADOR ROBERT STRAUSS LIKES TO START HIS ADDRESSES this way: "Before I begin this speech," he says, "I have something to say." And before beginning my instruction, I want to make a point: There are secrets to speechwriting and speechmaking that you can learn and use.

What turns an everyday expression of views into more than a respectable address — into a "great speech"?

A great speech — even a good speech — must have shapeliness, some thematic anatomy. "Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em; then tell 'em; then tell 'em what you told 'em." That simple organizing principle is the primary adage of speechmaking. At meetings of the Judson Welliver Society, the association of former White House speechwriters, you can hear a low buzz in the room between after-dinner toasts. It is the distinguished membership murmuring the mantra: "Tell them what you're going to tell them; then tell them; then tell them what you told them." We know whereof we speak. Take it from the fast-shuffling old pros: graceful organization — shapeliness — is the second step to a great speech.

(Wait a minute; what is the first step? It is, "Shake hands with your audience." That was accomplished here with the Bob Strauss line. Make the first step a quickstep; get your smile, then get to work.)

A skeleton needs life. Beyond structure is pulse. A good speech has a beat, a changing rhythm, a sense of movement that gets the audience tapping its mind's foot. (If the mind can have an eye, it can have a foot; every metaphor can be extended.) If there is one technique that orators down the ages have agreed to use, it's *anaphora*, the repeated beginning. Here's Demosthenes: "When they brought .... suits against me — when they menaced — when they promised — when they set these miscreants like wild beasts upon me ...." Here's Jesus: "Blessed are the poor in spirit. ... Blessed are the meek. ... Blessed are the peacemakers. ...." Here's JFK: "Let both sides explore. .... Let both sides seek. .... Let both sides unite. ...." Don't knock this obvious parallelism: It sings. It excites. It works. What else makes a great speech? Occasion. There comes a dramatic moment in the life of a person or a party or a nation that cries out for the uplift and release of a speech. Someone is called upon to articulate the hope, pride, or grief of all. The speaker becomes the cynosure, the brilliant object of guidance; he or she is all alone out there on the coup, and the world stops to look and listen. That instant access to fame gives the edge to an inaugural address, or to a speech on some state occasion or award ceremony; the occasion, by being invested with solemnity or importance, boosts the speech itself.

An idea closely related to occasion is "forum," from the Roman place of speechifying. When I was writing speeches in the White

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BY WILLIAM SAFIRE

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120

SKY March 1990
House, I had a perfect forum: the Oval Office, which is now a permanent television set. Using this setting, a President must explain rather than declaim; the technique of televised speechmaking is to speak to an audience of one. That calls for a conversational tone, even though the conversation is a monologue, and a seriousness of expression. It also calls for a short, intense speech, 20 minutes tops; tuning out, mental or physical, becomes rampant as attention spans shorten.

To the handshake, shape, pulse, and occasion or forum, add the fifth step: focus. A great speech need not start out great and stay great all the way through to a great finish. It should first engage the interest, and allow a dip for the audience to get comfortable as the speaker works his way into the theme; then it should build toward its key moment well ahead of the peroration. Here is how the political economist John Stuart Mill defined the art of the orator: "Everything important to his purpose was said at the exact moment when he had brought the minds of his audience into the state most fitted to receive it."

Note the word "purpose." A speech should be made for a good reason. No worthy speech was ever made to sound off, to feed the speaker's ego, to flatter or intimidate the crowd. A great speech inspires, ennobles, rallies, leads.

Oratory is an art, not a science, and a great orator may choose to grab, slug, provoke, or tickle. Whatever tone the orator chooses, if he wants to make a memorable speech, he should make a phrase.

Phrasemaking is easy. Suppose you want to enliven a speech about the division of a continent. Think of a metaphor about division; how about the asbestos sheet that is lowered onto the stage to separate the audience from fire backstage? It's called an iron curtain. Go ahead, the metaphor may be trite, but give it a shot. And you can use it derivatively: if you're talking about China, boost the analogy to a bamboo curtain. If you're unwilling to let a simile be your umbrella, there's always alliteration: "not nostrums but normalcy", a catchier word, by the way, than "normality" or the "nattering nabobs of negativity." If you're really stuck, put "new" in front of any grand noun, and capitalize the phrase; it worked with "nationalism," "freedom," "deal," "frontier," and "world order," and it can work for you.

TO THE MIX OF WELCOME, STRUCTURE, PULSE, FORUM, FOCUS, PHRASE, AND PURPOSE, AD THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT INGREDIENT: THEME. In the end, you must answer in a word or sentence the question of the person who couldn't be there: what was the speech about? Churchill, in the radio talk that coined a phrase that was transmuted into "blood, sweat, and tears," made a speech about sacrifice. He was the one who faced a sloppy dessert and said, "Take away this pudding; it has no theme." The speech you are reading now is about how to judge a great speech. I have that theme clear in my mind; if you do not discern that as my theme, this is not much of a speech.

Delivered by Demosthenes, however, even this modest effort would seem like a great speech. His countryman, Pericles, who also had a reputation as an orator, made this admiring comparison: "When Pericles speaks, the people say, 'How well he speaks.' But when Demosthenes speaks, the people say, 'Let us march!'" Contrariwise, the best-written speech can fall on its face if poorly delivered. There is the old chestnut about the Texan striding along 57th Street in Manhattan who asked a stranger, "Tell me, partner, how do I get to Carnegie Hall?" and the stranger replied, "Practice, practice." Delivery is the final step to eloquence; it requires practice, discipline, drill, and you can be your own personal trainer. You develop the self-confidence that puts an audience at ease, or sits them up; your eye is in contact with the people, not the page; your joy in your job is contagious.

Woodrow Wilson was originally a political-sciences professor, and his lecture delivery matched his stilted writing. But...
Wilson labored to overcome the professorial style. His earliest writing was about orators and their oratory. He founded the debating society at Princeton and added debate coaching to his teaching; he declaimed in the woods; he set out to defeat his natural inclinations to aloofness and reserve. Ultimately, as he got better at it, the future President gained confidence in himself and wrote to his fiancée, "I enjoy it because it sets my mind—all my faculties—aglow; and I suppose that this very excitement gives my manner an appearance of confidence and self-command which arrests the attention. However that may be, I feel a sort of transformation—and it's hard to go to sleep afterwards." Later, in an essay on the oratory of William Pitt the Elder, Wilson wrote, "Passion is the pith of eloquence."

And on delivery, caveat stentor: When preparing a speech, beware of undeletable words. "Undeletable" is one such trip word; it may look easy enough on the page, and it may be easy to pronounce in the mind when read silently, but when the moment comes to push it past your lips, such a word invites a stumble. And if you practice a trip word out loud and put a check mark over it in your text, you will be all the more sure to stumble. Embrace the thin word; eschew the fat.

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HILE WE ARE ON THE SUBJECT OF TROUBLING VOCABULARY, OBSERVE HOW THE great speeches steer clear of $40 words. Big words, or terms chosen for their strangeness—"I almost said "unfamiliarity"—are a sign of pretension. What do you do when you have a delicious word, one with a little poetry in it, that is just the right word for the meaning—but you know it will sail over the head of your audience? You can use it just as Franklin Delano Roosevelt used "infamy," and thereby stretch the vocabulary of your listener. But it is best if you subtly define it in passing, as if you were adding emphasis.

You are now an abnormally sophisticated audience. You know the tricks of the speech trade, some of the devices of the phrase maker and speech writer, and you expect the speaker now to summarize—to tell "em what he told "em.

Sorry, there's a secret 11th step: Cross "em up now and then. This is, after all, a speech meant to be read, not spoken; the metaphorical listener is really a reader who can skip back as no real listener easily can. You, dear speech reader, are lending not your ears but your eyes, which are much more perceptive and analytic organs. After receiving the moral directions summarized on the tablets he brought down from Mount Sinai, Moses spoke to the people of Israel—but nowhere is it written that he found a need to summarize the Ten Commandments.

What every audience needs, however, is a sense of completion; what the speaker needs is a way out on a high note. That's a necessary ingredient to shapeliness. That calls for a peroration.

A peroration, my friends, is a devastating defense against the dread disease of dribbling-off. It should start with a quiet, declarative sentence; it should build in a series of semicolons; it should employ the pause of parallelism; it should make the furthest rafter reverence with the action and passion of our time, and—throwing aside all rules of short sentences or self-quotiation—it should reach into the hearts and souls of a transfixed humankind to say, "This—this!—is the end of the best speech you've ever had the good fortune to experience." (Sustained applause, punctuated by "Bravo!" "Let us march!" and "You tell 'em, Buster!"—followed by some smart-aleck pundit's wrinkling his nose and wondering aloud, "But what did he really say?")