



# **President George W. Bush Oral History Project**

## **BRIEFING MATERIALS**

**William McGurn**

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**Presidential Oral History Program**

**MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED OR CIRCULATED**

## WILLIAM MCGURN NEWS TIMELINE

*Prepared by Rob Martin*

*Miller Center, University of Virginia, 12/12/2013*

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### 2001

*June* On the 15<sup>th</sup>, William McGurn begins serving on the President's Commission on White House Fellowships. (<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.org>)

### 2004

*November* Bush is reelected president on the 2<sup>nd</sup>.

*December* McGurn is hired to replace Michael Gerson, President George W. Bush's chief speechwriter, who had suffered a mild heart attack on the 17<sup>th</sup>. Gerson had reportedly attempted to hire McGurn twice before during Bush's first term. McGurn agrees to join the White House staff after meeting personally with the president. McGurn's first task as chief speechwriter is to work on Bush's second inaugural address and the 2005 State of the Union (SOTU) address. Gerson returns to work with McGurn on the addresses after a brief period of recovery. McGurn also works closely with one of Bush's other top speechwriters, John McConnell, on the addresses. (Michael Gerson, *Heroic Conservatism*, New York: HarperOne, 2007, p. 222; *Fox News Network*, 12/18/2004; *Newsweek*, 01/05/2005; *CQ Transcripts*, 02/01/2005; *C-SPAN*, 01/07/2007)

### 2005

*January* Bush delivers his second inaugural address on the 20<sup>th</sup>, in which he lays out the governing principles that will guide the administration through its second term. Bush had told Gerson, "I want this to be the freedom speech." (Gerson, p. 222) Gerson later writes that "the events of 9/11 were the context for the entire speech." (Gerson, p. 224; *CQ Transcripts*, 02/01/2005)

On the 30<sup>th</sup>, Bush speaks on the elections in Iraq. (<http://presidentialrhetoric.com>)

*February* Bush delivers the SOTU address on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Bush had conducted his first teleprompter read-through three days before the address, giving his sixth read-through of the 20<sup>th</sup> draft the morning of the address in the White House family theater. McGurn, Gerson, and McConnell, the three principal authors of the speech, attend the read-through. McGurn attends the SOTU address with the other speechwriters on the House floor. The administration had decided to lead off Bush's second term with Social Security reform, calling for private accounts for individual workers. Simplifying the tax code is also high on the agenda. The administration plans to move on immigration reform later in the second term. (Andrew Busch, "George W. Bush's Domestic Policy Agenda," in Mark Rozell and Gleaves Whitney, ed., *Testing the Limits*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield

Publishers, Inc., 2009, pp. 56-57; <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov>; *CQ Transcripts*, 02/01/2005; *The New York Times*, 02/03/2005, 01/30/2006; *Hardball*, 01/23/2007)

The White House formally names McGurn assistant to the president for speechwriting on the 9<sup>th</sup>. McGurn heads a staff of thirteen. Marc Thiessen and Chris Michel serve as McGurn's two deputies. Thiessen had previously written speeches for Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Michel had recently graduated from Yale in 2004. Mark Busse, a speechwriter on the NSC staff, reports to both McGurn and Stephen Hadley, the national security adviser. McConnell is named chief speechwriter for Vice President Dick Cheney while retaining the title deputy assistant to the president. Gerson shifts to policy and strategic planning but continues to work on Bush's major policy addresses. (Bradley Patterson, *To Serve the President: Continuity and Innovation in the White House Staff*, New York: Brookings Institution Press, 2010, pp. 220-222; <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov>, 02/09/2005; *The Washington Post*, 02/09/2005)

Bush begins a five-state tour to help build support for Social Security reform. Typically either McGurn, Thiessen or Michel accompanies Bush when he travels. Bush also gives numerous speeches on Social Security reform throughout the spring. (*CQ Transcripts*, 02/01/2005)

*May* Gerson is credited with writing a controversial speech given by Bush in Latvia on the 7<sup>th</sup> to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nazi Germany's surrender to the Allies and the end of World War II in Europe. The speech contains passages that are highly critical of the agreement concluded by Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill in February 1945 at Yalta, which effectively ceded control of Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union and set the stage for the Cold War. In his speech, Bush states that Yalta followed in the "unjust tradition" of Munich and the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. (*The New York Times*, 05/16/2005)

*Summer* Bush gives several talks on renewing the Patriot Act on the 9<sup>th</sup>. (<http://presidentialrhetoric.com>)

*September* Bush delivers his address on rebuilding in the wake of Hurricane Katrina from New Orleans on the 15<sup>th</sup>. Gerson had helped McGurn write the speech. Hurricane Katrina had made landfall in Louisiana on August 29<sup>th</sup>. (Karl Rove, *Courage and Consequence: My Life as a Conservative in the Fight*, New York: Threshold Editions, 2010, pp. 443-459; Dick Cheney, *In My Time*, New York: Threshold, 2012, pp. 429-431; *The Washington Post*, 09/24/2005)

*December* After giving a nationally-televised address on Iraq from the Oval Office on the 18<sup>th</sup>, Bush meets with Gerson and White House Counselor Dan Bartlett to discuss policy elements to be included in the SOTU address. Gerson immediately starts working on an outline of the speech. (*The New York Times*, 01/30/2006)

## 2006

- January* Bush delivers the SOTU address on the 31<sup>st</sup>, which includes energy, health and education proposals. McGurn had said that the speech would be more thematic featuring fewer specific programs than in previous SOTU addresses. Roughly half of the speech is on foreign policy. Bush had asked that the speech be “visionary.” Gerson and McConnell both work with McGurn and his staff to help write the speech. Bush had begun running-through the speech with the speechwriters in the Oval Office the previous week before reading-through the speech in the White House family theater. McGurn attends the SOTU address. (*The New York Times*, 01/30/2006, 02/01/2006)
- February* Bush gives an address on the 2007 budget on the 8<sup>th</sup>. (<http://presidentialrhetoric.com>)
- March* On the 3<sup>rd</sup>, Bush gives an address in New Delhi on the U.S., India, and nuclear technology. (<http://presidentialrhetoric.com>)
- On the 28<sup>th</sup>, Josh Bolten replaces Andrew Card as White House chief of staff. (*The Washington Post*, 03/29/2006)
- May* Bush gives a live televised address on comprehensive immigration reform on the 15<sup>th</sup>, which entails plans to deploy 6,000 National Guard troops to the border. (*USA Today*, 05/18/2006)
- June* Bush addresses the troops in a surprise trip to Iraq on the 13<sup>th</sup>. (<http://presidentialrhetoric.com>)
- It is announced that Gerson is leaving the White House on the 14<sup>th</sup>. (*C-SPAN*, 01/07/2007)
- September* In a live televised address, Bush acknowledges for the first time on the 6<sup>th</sup> the CIA’s program of secret detention of terrorist suspects in foreign prisons and the use of harsh interrogation methods to collect intelligence. The speech is written by Thiessen, McConnell and McGurn. In it, Bush defends the CIA’s work as “having saved lives.” He also expresses a willingness to work with Congress to authorize new military commissions that were struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Hamden v. Rumsfeld*. Over the coming weeks, Bush gives a series of speeches on Iraq and the war on terror. (Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington*, New York: Crown Publishers, 2011, p. 502; *The Washington Post*, 09/07/2006, 09/08/2006)
- Bush gives an address on the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. McGurn, Thiessen and Michel had met with the president in the Oval Office the previous Saturday for a line-by-line edit of the speech. McGurn later says Bush was the strictest and “most involved” editor he had ever worked for, dubbing Bush

“editor-in-chief.” (*The Washington Post*, 01/28/2008; *The Wall Street Journal*, 11/08/2006; *The New York Times*, 01/22/2007)

*November* The Democrats win control of both the House and Senate in the midterm elections. (*The Washington Times*, 11/12/2006)

During the Thanksgiving pardon ceremony for two turkeys, Bush explains how his dog, Barney, “came out a little early... And instead of chasing the soccer ball, he chased the bird. And it kind of made the turkey nervous. See, the turkey was nervous to begin with. Nobody's told him yet about the pardon I'm about to give him.” (CNN, 11/22/2006)

*December* McGurn and Michel meet with Bush in the Oval Office to discuss the president's upcoming Iraq speech when Bush says, “I need to get started on the State of the Union. We can't wait.” McConnell and former Bush speechwriter Matthew Scully are brought in to work with Thiessen, who has already started work on the SOTU, while McGurn and Michel finish the Iraq speech. Bush tells the speechwriters that he wants a more “thematic” speech that focuses on a shorter list of policy programs he can work with the Democrats on, such as immigration, energy and health care. (*The New York Times*, 01/22/2007)

## **2007**

*January* On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Bush delivers President Gerald Ford's eulogy. (<http://presidentialrhetoric.com>)

On the 10<sup>th</sup>, Bush announces on live television a surge of roughly 20,000 troops to Iraq. The plan called for a new counterinsurgency strategy to gain the support of the Iraqi people and for General David Petraeus to serve as the new ground commander in Iraq. Bush's announcement is met with criticism from Democrats. (Rove, pp. 479-481; <http://www.cnn.com>)

On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Bush delivers the SOTU, which is his first since Gerson left the White House and the Democrats won control of Congress. The SOTU highlights Bush's plan to begin work on comprehensive immigration reform. Bush had held several run-throughs in the White House family theater starting the previous week. (Rove, pp. 467-470; *The New York Times*, 01/22/2007; *NPR*, 01/23/2007; *Hardball*, 01/23/2007)

*May* Bush gives a speech commemorating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the settlement at Jamestown, Virginia on the 7<sup>th</sup>. (<http://presidentialrhetoric.com>)

*September* Bush addresses the troops in the Anbar province of Iraq on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. (<http://presidentialrhetoric.com>)

Bush addresses the United Nations on the 25<sup>th</sup>. (<http://presidentialrhetoric.com>)

*November* On the 27<sup>th</sup>, Bush gives an address at the Annapolis Conference to help implement Bush's Middle East peace process initiative, the "Roadmap for Peace." The attendees include Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. (<http://presidentialrhetoric.com>)

*December* The White House announces on the 14<sup>th</sup> that McGurn will step down as chief speechwriter after the president gives his final SOTU. (<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.org>; *The Washington Post*, 12/17/2007)

## **2008**

*January* McGurn travels with Bush on a trip to the Middle East. The goals of the trip include building international pressure against Iran's nuclear program, supporting the Middle East peace process, and promoting democracy in the region. In Egypt, Bush praises the people's work to achieve "progress towards political openness." (*The Jerusalem Post*, 01/18/2008) There had reportedly been some disagreement over how critical the speech should be of the Egyptian government's resistance to democratic reform. Bush addresses the troops in Kuwait and gives his only formal speech on the trip in the United Arab Emirates. He also travels to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the West Bank, and makes his first trip to Israel as president. (<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.org>; *The Washington Post*, 01/07/2008, 01/28/2008)

Bush announces an economic stimulus proposal on the 18<sup>th</sup>. (Henry M. Paulson Jr., *On the Brink*, New York: Business Plus, 2010, pp. 84-85; *The New York Times*, 01/17/2008)

Bush delivers his final SOTU on the 28<sup>th</sup>. The address highlights national security and the economy, including the need for greater fiscal discipline, and for passing an economic stimulus package to help bolster the slowing economy. Bush also discusses his governing philosophy and the importance of "trusting and empowering the American people." (*The Washington Times*, 01/29/2008) Bush had told his speechwriters the previous summer that he would like to give a speech at some point on his governing philosophy. The outline of the address was ready for Bush by Christmas. Bush started reviewing drafts of the address after returning from the Middle East and practicing the speech in the White House movie theater the week before the SOTU. (*The Washington Post*, 01/28/2008; *The Washington Times*, 01/29/2008)

*February* McGurn resigns effective on the 8<sup>th</sup>. He is succeeded by Thiessen as chief speechwriter. (<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.org>)

## **TIMELINES**

- William McGurn News Timeline, prepared by Rob Martin, Miller Center, University of Virginia, 12/12/2013.
- Timeline of the Bush Presidency, prepared by Justin Peck and Bryan Craig, Miller Center, University of Virginia, 04/30/2010.

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- "Personnel Announcement," 02/09/2008, <[georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov](http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov)> (12/12/2013).
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- Elisabeth Bumiller and Richard Stevenson, "Bush, at 2<sup>nd</sup> Inaugural, Says Spread of Liberty is the 'Calling of our Time,'" *The New York Times*, 01/21/2005.
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- Elisabeth Bumiller and Anne Kornblut, "Guests Help to Embody Administration Policies," *The New York Times*, 02/03/2005.
- Elisabeth Bumiller, "Summing up the Union, And in the Boss's Words," *The New York Times*, 01/30/2006.
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## **WILLIAM MCGURN SUGGESTED TOPICS**

*Prepared by Rob Martin*

*Miller Center, University of Virginia, 12/19/2013*

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### ***Your Early Relationship with Bush***

- How did you first meet George W. Bush? What were your early impressions of him?

### ***The White House Speechwriting Office***

- How did you come to serve as Bush's chief speechwriter? What was your relevant experience? Who recruited you? Do you recall having any conversations with the president about his expectations of you in this role? Tell us about your relationship with Bush. How often would you meet with him?
- What were your main responsibilities as chief speechwriter? Was it difficult for you to make the transition from journalism to presidential speechwriting? Comment on Michael Gerson's decision to switch over to policy and strategic planning in the second term. Did Gerson retain any of his responsibilities as chief speechwriter? Discuss the different types of speeches and public statements your office would typically be responsible for drafting.
- Discuss the set-up and operation of your speechwriting staff. Did you make any changes after taking over for Gerson? How large was your staff? With whom did you work most closely? Tell us about your relationship with your deputies, Marc Thiessen and Chris Michel, as well as with Gerson. Tell us about your relationship with John McConnell, who also worked for the vice president, and NSC speechwriter Mark Busse.
- Take us through the speechwriting process in the Bush administration for the major addresses. Discuss the role the cabinet departments and White House policy councils played in gathering and reviewing policy ideas. How was it decided which policy proposals would get into the speeches? Did you play a role in mediating these issues? At what point did the outlining and drafting of the speeches begin? Comment on the staff secretary's staffing process. Who typically was allowed to review drafts of the speeches?
- What role did Bush play in this process? At which stages of the speechwriting process was he most active? How did Bush like to rehearse his speeches? Did Bush also tend to rehearse smaller addresses as well?
- How did you go about learning to write for Bush and finding the words that fit the president's own language? How long did it take before you felt that you and the president were in sync? What role did faith play in the president's public statements?
- How would you characterize Bush's public speaking style? How was it different when he was speaking from prepared remarks as opposed to speaking extemporaneously?
- Which speechwriters would typically travel with Bush? Tell us about your experiences traveling with the president.
- What challenges were posed when your office was asked to prepare a speech on sensitive or classified material?
- Discuss the role of rhetoric in the Bush presidency. How did Bush himself view the role of speechwriters in his administration? How important did he see speechmaking in the overall context of his presidency?

### ***Key Speeches and Major Addresses***

- Tell us about your work writing Bush's second inaugural address and the 2005 State of the Union (SOTU) address. At what stage did you come into the speechwriting process? What role did Gerson and McConnell each play after you came aboard? What special challenges were posed by your sudden transitioning in as the president's speechwriter? What guidance did the president give you in drafting these addresses? Comment on the role that "freedom" played as a theme in the second inaugural address. Tell us about your experiences drafting the 2005 SOTU.
- Tell us about your work writing Bush's other SOTU addresses. What did Bush hope to achieve in each address? Which do you think were the most successful?
- Discuss some of Bush's other major addresses, such as the addresses announcing the surge in Iraq, military commissions, and immigration reform. Comment on your work on ceremonial and crisis addresses, such as the 2005 Latvia speech on the end of World War II, the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina. How did the speechwriting process vary when preparing a ceremonial or crisis address as opposed to a SOTU? How was it different writing speeches specifically for international audiences, such as in Abu Dhabi, at the Annapolis Conference, or to the UN?
- Discuss your work towards the end of your tenure in the Bush administration as the economy began to struggle. How did you try to frame the speeches on the economy and economic stimulus?

### ***The Bush Presidency in Retrospect***

- What were your biggest accomplishments working for Bush?
- Which were the most challenging speeches you were asked to write? What types of speeches did you enjoy writing the most? Of which speeches were you the most proud?
- Coming from a background in journalism, were you ever surprised how the speeches you wrote were interpreted and reported in the press?
- What were Bush's greatest assets as president? Assess his strengths and weaknesses as a public speaker and as a leader.
- What do you think were the strengths and weaknesses of the Bush administration?
- What were the most common misconceptions held about Bush by the general public, by the media, and by Congress?
- How should the Bush administration be viewed by future historians?