



Speech Impediment

A middle power rises or falls on the quality of its ideas, but it's still the Americans who make the best foreign policy speeches. Michael Fullilove

The commonly accepted wisdom is that good public language is finished and the great speech is dead. I was nearly convinced of that a few years ago by George W. Bush, a president who, on his day, can give a very fine speech. But it was on a different day when he looked out into an audience in New Hampshire and said: "I know how hard it is to put food on your families."

On the whole, however, I am an optimist. There are remarkable contemporary speeches as well as historical ones – speeches that sing, that engage the heart and the head: Paul Keating on the Unknown Soldier, Robert Hughes on the republic, John Howard on Gallipoli, Linda Burney on growing up indigenous, Andrew Denton on Allan Border, and many others.

Speeches matter. There is no better way to tell a story, no better way to convict a criminal, defend an innocent, prosecute a cause or toast your gran's birthday. A PowerPoint slide never changed anyone's life, except maybe for the worse. Speeches change people's lives. In foreign policy, there is rarely a better way to make an argument about the world.

Owen Harries sent a minute to Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock

in the late 1970s containing some uncommon wisdom:

"Speech-making is one of the most important activities in foreign policy. Much of foreign policy – particularly in the case of a country like Australia, which has limited power to deploy – is declaratory rather than operational. On many issues we cannot do anything except make our views known. This does not mean that such declarations are unimportant or should be treated lightly. Even when divorced from any commitment to act, speeches can have a very important effect on the attitudes of other states and on domestic opinion."

To some degree at least, a middle power rises or falls on the quality of its ideas, which are usually expressed in speeches. But the best foreign policy writing in the world is American. Franklin D. Roosevelt used his homely fireside chats to dramatise a distant war to an isolationist people, and gradually ratcheted up public preparedness to enter the European conflict. Ronald Reagan marshaled his phrases and sent them into battle against the Evil Empire. John F. Kennedy's crisp classicism set the gold standard for foreign policy speeches. Recall the following lines from his Inaugural:



"In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility – I welcome it.

With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own."

A critical part of American foreign policy speechmaking, as Kennedy's Inaugural demonstrates, is the emphasis on values. Successive presidents and secretaries of state have given values-laden speeches.

Melvyn Leffler from the University of Virginia has argued that values are asserted most strongly in Washington at times of heightened perceptions of threats. Think of Woodrow Wilson during World War I; FDR in the lead-up to World War II; Kennedy during the crises over Berlin and Cuba; Reagan during the war in Afghanistan. When threats are low, by contrast, rhetoric is more prosaic and the engagement with interests is more direct. Leffler suggests values-talk helps to mobilise public support for policy, which then tempts governments to overreach beyond a careful calculation of interests.

Leffler's argument helps to explain the shift in Bush's rhetoric. During the 2000 campaign the Bush team's words were shorn of idealism. In her often-cited *Foreign Affairs* article, Condoleezza Rice provided a classic realist formulation: a Republican administration would refocus "on the national interest and the pursuit of key priorities".

A year later, September 11 revolutionised threat perceptions and, with it, Washington's rhetoric. "Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place," said Bush at West Point in June 2002. "There can be no neutrality between justice and cruelty, between the innocent and the guilty. We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name."

In his Second Inaugural, Bush said: "America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one... It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." His fifth State of the Union in January was like a "greatest hits" compilation, taking us back to this kind of rhetoric. This surprised many because the substance of US foreign policy has been so much more realist in the year since the Second Inaugural was delivered.

In my opinion Bush's values-talk was actually fairly consistent with previous presidents. What was new, in the first three years of his first term, was the link he drew between values and coercion – between freedom and force – and his new emphasis on pre-emption, regime change and unilateralism. Since 2004, however, there has been a noticeable recalibration back to a more moderate international policy.

This points to another danger of highfalutin speeches: in overreaching they can open up a gap between rhetoric and reality (as with the State of the Union's optimism about progress in Iraq) that undermines foreign policy credibility.

After all that excitement, coming back down to the plane of Australian foreign policy speeches may seem like a relief. However one can have too much of anything, even moderation.

In my research for *Men and Women of Australia!*, my recent collection of great Australian speeches, I read many foreign policy speeches. They did not exactly set my pulse racing.

I found older speeches like that of the MP and later chief justice of Victoria, George Higinbotham, in favour of the annexation of New Guinea, or NSW MP William Arthur Holman against involvement in the Boer War. I dug into H.V. Evatt's archives looking for rich seams but I did not find them; not in his Oliver Wendell Holmes Lectures at Harvard, for example, or his speeches at San Francisco or on Indonesian independence. Evatt's domestic speeches were much better. This phenomenon was common. I would read very thoughtful speeches from someone on our Constitution or national identity or immigration, only to find their foreign policy speeches were less impressive.

Menzies was always a class act, of course: an advocate by profession and temperament, with brilliant timing, a sharp wit and a striking presence on the rostrum. His simple speech taking Australia into the war against Germany was very nicely done, although many have queried the automaticity of the famous sentence: "Great Britain has declared war upon her and... as a result, Australia is also at war." Menzies' speeches on things he cared about – such as the British Commonwealth – were always impressive. Gough Whitlam's speeches on the link between foreign policy and nationalism were interesting, as was Bob Hawke's address to the US Congress in 1988.



In general, though, Australian foreign policy speeches are workmanlike rather than profound. They have content but not too much flair. I don't say they are inaccurate or that they fail to perform the function of relaying information on the government's position. Rather, they are disappointing because they so often lack big ideas, and because the mental process of converting a text from a cabinet submission or press release into a speech often seems not to have been undertaken. Sometimes the most important elements of a good speech are lacking, including structure, logic, colour, and style.

There are, of course, exceptions to the rule. Billy Hughes' heretical speeches in favour of conscription in 1916-17 were powerful. John Curtin gave some fine speeches during World War II. His speech in the House of Representatives during the Battle of the Coral Sea is rightly famous; but my favourite is a rousing talk he gave at a lunch hosted by the Lord Mayor of London at Mansion House, in which he baited the English over cricket and claimed that the dictators had to be driven off lest they interfere with the playing of Test matches at Lord's. Sir Percy Spender's first parliamentary speech as minister for external affairs in March 1950 was tightly argued and contained the memorable line: "No nation can escape its geography." Vietnam produced Arthur Calwell's masterful parliamentary statement of opposition to the war in 1965, which laid out Labor's principled position in plain English. The foreign policy speeches of Paul Keating and Gareth Evans were of a consistently high quality. But overall I found Australian foreign policy rhetoric a little disappointing.

It's not that every policy maker should imagine they're speaking at Gettysburg. Ideas need not be expressed in reversible sentences or rhyming couplets. We have a vernacular culture and generally don't like the big melodramatic set-piecer. But we would benefit if more attention was paid to the crafting of the foreign policy argument.

So why are Australian foreign policy speeches often dull? There are at least four possible explanations, none of which is satisfying.

First, some argue that foreign policy is too important for party politics. I believe the exact opposite: foreign policy is too important to be excluded from politics. The competing arguments on international policy no less than domestic policy ought to be exposed to discussion and debate in order that their strength can be tested.

The second explanation is that flashiness can be fatal. In his memo

to Peacock, Harries noted the problem of multiple and diverse audiences: "Content and language which may be appropriate to one audience may be highly offensive to another. As sovereign states, and matters of national prestige, honour and interests, are involved, this must be seriously considered." But this doesn't mean that foreign policy speeches need be boring. In the end, a speech is just a speech. A speech is not a treaty, and delivering a speech should not be like negotiating a text.

A third possibility is that foreign policy lacks domestic political force, so ministers and prime ministers don't try too hard with foreign policy speeches. If this was ever true, it is no longer the case. After September 11, the Bali bombings and the Iraq war, foreign policy is right at the centre of things. Even something as obscure as a single desk for the marketing of wheat sales is the stuff of debate in pubs and clubs as well as the ministry and the parliament.

The final argument is that Australia's external circumstances have conditioned our foreign policy in the direction of pragmatism, which does not make for brilliant speeches. We cannot remake the world in our own image, so foreign policy acquires a pragmatic tone. It's hard to draft soaring rhetoric about market access or alliance management.

Australian policy may have a strong pragmatic streak; but it also has moments of idealism, whether it be Menzies' affection for Britain, Evatt's obsession with international machinery, Fraser's and Hawke's opposition to apartheid, or Keating's efforts to contribute to nuclear disarmament. There is plenty of room for big ideas – and good writing.

We are living at a moment in history marked by huge challenges and transformative change. Few countries in the world are better placed than Australia – an English-speaking, multicultural country with a large economy and a small but effective military, a reliable ally of the US, a knowledgeable interlocutor with Asia – to contribute to the global conversation.

But such a contribution will require better rhetoric from our foreign policy makers. We should tell them there's a constituency for it – and not only at the Lowy Institute and among readers of *The Diplomat*. ■

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