



Screen Savorer

by John H. Fund

POLITICO.COM OPENED A rich vein of controversy in March when it reported that “President Obama doesn’t go anywhere without his teleprompter.... No other president has used one so consistently and at so many events, large and small.” Indeed, I have learned Obama sometimes brings a teleprompter to the Indian Treaty Room at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building and uses it to speak to as few as 15 people.

Obama’s reliance on the device has led some to assert it has become a crutch he can’t throw away—much like the cigarettes it’s been rumored the chief executive still sneaks puffs on. “After the teleprompter malfunctioned a few times last summer and Obama delivered some less-than-soaring speeches, reports surfaced that he was training to wean himself off of the device while on vacation in Hawaii. But no luck,” noted Politico.com.

Indeed, several reporters took notice of the new teleprompter that Obama unveiled at his late March news conference. Fox News opened its post-conference analysis by showing a picture of a 52-inch teleprompter that had been positioned in the back of the room, replacing the usual two screens flanking the podium. The change had clearly been made to make sure the TV cameras covering the event didn’t pick up a view of the device. Moderate columnist Ruben Navarrette acknowledged that “the popular narrative from conservatives—that Obama stumbles when he is off the teleprompter—is becoming more believable.”

But do conservatives agree on the significance of the fact that a man known as a gifted orator often uses a teleprompter? There are sharp divergences of opinion. Thomas Sowell of the Hoover Institution is acidic: “As it turns out, Obama has been such a bumbling incompetent that he probably couldn’t handle a trip through a Wendy’s drive-in window without a teleprompter telling him what to order.” Michael Gerson, former speechwriter for President Bush, is

kinder, even gentle: “With a teleprompter, Obama can be ambitiously eloquent, without it, he tends to be soberly professional. A teleprompter speech represents the elevation of writing in politics. And good writing has an authenticity of its own.”

Tucker Carlson, the former MSNBC host, took issue with Obama critics such as Glenn Beck who worry that the teleprompter should cause Americans



to worry “about who’s writing every word for this man.” “I am completely for the teleprompter,” he told a New York audience this month. “I know it’s frustrating for conservatives that there’s this narrative that Obama is stunningly eloquent when he’s often not. But you can’t change a narrative once it’s set in people’s minds. They will even reject direct evidence to the contrary.” Deroy Murdock, a syndicated columnist for Scripps Howard, also gives Obama a pass: “God bless him and his teleprompter. Ronald Reagan used one to great effect to give great speeches, so who are we to criticize its use now?”

Liberals responded to the Obama teleprompter issue by dismissing it and using it as an excuse for more Bush bashing. CNN’s Rick Sanchez introduced a segment on the issue by claiming “the far right this week has been saying that President Obama is too

stupid to talk without a script.” He then played David Letterman’s skit titled “Teleprompter vs. No Teleprompter,” which pitted an excerpt from Obama’s first speech to Congress against a clip from an informal town hall meeting given by former President Bush. It was no contest, although it would have been fairer also to compare an Obama speech with one of his own gaffe-prone speeches when he was winging it on the campaign trail.

All that said, Obama sometimes gets a bum rap for mistakes related to his constant traveling companion. At a March St. Patrick’s Day event, he was standing next to Irish prime minister Brian Cowen when the foreign leader started giving President Obama’s remarks off the teleprompter. Mr. Obama then stepped in and said: “First, I’d like to say thank you to President Obama....” But he was ad-libbing to break the tension, not reading mindlessly from the screen. Yet even Obama’s joke served to underline an impression that he’s become overly scripted and too dependent on the device.

THE JOKE HAS GONE SO FAR that a satirical blog (www.baracksteleprompter.blogspot.com) has been started in which the president’s teleprompter dishes up presidential gossip and snarky comments about White House message development. In mid-March, the blog noted press reports that Obama’s aides were trying *again* to wean the president off the teleprompter crutch. “Are they insane? With this rabid press corps constantly looking to pin Him down for every...detail about obscure legislation like the TARP funding? Or the economic stimulus bill? All that kind of detail can’t be fit on little note cards.”

Indeed, the teleprompter blog has confirmed reports in *The American Spectator* online that the White House is now “looking into how to hide video screens in podiums the president uses.” Such placement of screens would allow aides to scroll speech texts, messages, and even statistical data or quick points to be made by Obama in answering press questions. That would create a “wow” factor—an

impression of competence and skill that would be unwarranted—akin to when President Kennedy was leaked in advance some of the questions that would be posed to him at White House news conferences, which reinforced the liberal narrative that he was a charming master of all subjects.

Using teleprompters for speeches is fine. What worries some Americans and should worry reporters is if use of such devices goes further and allows a president to pretend he is something he is not. As

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former Bush administration speechwriter Peter Roff notes, a presidential news conference is a test of sorts—a test of presidential skill under pressure. Having top aides transmit behind-the-scenes updates to be used during a seemingly spontaneous event would be akin to a student writing the answers to a test on a shirt cuff. After all, it wasn’t so long ago that left-wing bloggers fell into a frenzied lather complaining that the bulge in President Bush’s suit during a 2004 debate with John Kerry was secretly giving him electronic assistance in answering questions.

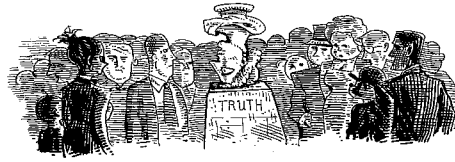
Barack Obama isn’t the first president to use a teleprompter, and such a device can clarify his thinking and make it easier for the American people to understand his policies. But it’s also appropriate for the media to note just how much more he is using it than did his predecessors, and that there is a line beyond which a “Great Communicator” becomes a “Wizard of Oz”—a puffed-up figure who is much less impressive once people look behind the curtain. ❁

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Welcome to Beeson

by Jonathan Aitken

QUIRKY PHILANTHROPY AND REFORM THEOLOGY seem unlikely bedfellows, but between them they have created one of the newest and most interesting schools of divinity in the United States. Welcome to Beeson, an increasingly admired evangelical but ecumenical seminary on the campus of Samford University near Birmingham, Alabama. Financially endowed beyond the dreams of most other comparable religious teaching establishments, Beeson celebrates its 21st anniversary this year. It owes its rising reputation to two remarkable founding fathers.

The crusty and mildly eccentric benefactor behind the school was Ralph Waldo Beeson (1900–1990), a former sales agent for the Liberty National Life Insurance Company (now Torchmark). He bet his life savings on Liberty shares during the stock exchange crash of 1929, eventually selling them at the top of the market in the 1980s. This made him a fortune of well over \$100 million. He spent little of it on himself, living so frugally that his reluctance to buy new trousers became a local legend.

Beeson lived in a modest home on Shades Mountain overlooking the Samford campus. He donated several new buildings to the university, saying that he liked to look out from his bedroom and keep an eye on his philanthropic investments. By far the most generous of these was his endowment of a new divinity school with a gift worth more than \$70 million, believed to be the largest ever from a single

donor in the history of theological education. In 1988 he attached conditions to his founder's bequest that have subsequently shaped the school's scholarship and spirituality.

Beeson was brought up as a Methodist—his father's name was John Wesley Beeson—he married a Baptist, and they became Presbyterians, but he resisted the narrow exclusivism of these traditions. He insisted that his school should be interdenominational and nonsectarian while at the same time staying faithful to Scripture, to historic Christian doctrine, and to the heritage of the Reformation. The result is that Beeson today describes itself as “confessional, covenantal, evangelical, ecumenical and reformational,” a combination that exists in no other seminary on an American university campus.



Ralph Waldo Beeson requested two other conditions that have proved distinctive for his school. First, that it should stay small, and second, that it should be easily affordable. Under the terms of his will, the student body is limited to a total of 180. Students pay maximum annual fees of \$5,500, although two-thirds of them make average payments of \$1,700 and one-third pay nothing at all. By comparison, most other divinity students in peer institutions (i.e., Wheaton; Fuller; Dallas Theological Seminary; Gordon-Conwell) have to pay much higher fees—usually at the \$15,000–\$20,000 level. Because Beeson is neither driven by enrollment numbers nor constrained by the usual funding pressures, it can