

# Is Ghost Writing Dishonest?

**A Debate**

## I—A Man Should Speak for Himself

**by RAYMOND CLAPPER**

**O**NE MORNING during the political campaign last fall, I was in my office reading the text of a speech which had been delivered the night before by Thomas E. Dewey, then a candidate for governor of New York. To me it seemed an excellent speech, and, carrying the morning newspaper in my hand, I went into the adjoining editorial room and said to one of my colleagues, "Have you read this speech of Dewey's? It is a splendid job."

My colleague looked up and, in a matter-of-fact request for information, asked, "Who is writing Dewey's speeches?"

I said I didn't know.

Later, that conversation came back to mind, and I realized that unconsciously both of us had assumed that Dewey was not writing his own speeches. Both of us instinctively thought first of some anonymous ghost writer, buried in a quiet office, surrounded by reference material, grinding out speeches for one of the most conspicuously able candidates for office in that election, a man who is entirely competent to prepare his own speeches.

Ghost writing has become such a commonplace in politics that it is taken for granted. A politician is assumed not to have bothered to prepare his own written speeches.

Someone who wants to do his country a good turn should found a society to drive the ghost writer out of politics. When you hear a political speaker working from manuscript you are almost safe in assuming that a ghost writer is hovering around. The practice goes from

Roosevelt down. It has turned political speaking into a synthetic, artificial, somewhat phony kind of public discussion actually conducted by an assortment of Charley Michelsons speaking through prominent political mouthpieces.

During the last two years of the Hoover Administration, Michelson had standing permission from a number of Democratic senators and representatives to issue statements of his own composition under their names. "Whatever you say I'll stand for." Consequently, whenever Hoover made some public statement, Michelson immediately pounded out an answer on his typewriter, selected the most effective name from his list of "ghostees," and within an hour had the Democratic comment laid down in mimeographed form on the desk of every Washington correspondent. His success with that technique has caused it to be generally adopted.

Postmaster General Farley, Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, doesn't write the speeches he delivers. They are prepared either by Michelson or by his assistant, Edward Roddan, who wrote Farley's recent book.

Most of the speeches made by John Hamilton, Chairman of the Republican National Committee, are prepared by his publicity director, Franklyn Waltman.

These official party ghost writers maintain speech factories for the good party men and women who are in need of literary assistance. Once I thought I detected a conflict of policy

## THE FORUM

between two leading party figures, but I was promptly assured that I could not be correct, because the same ghost writer had composed both masterpieces, and he knew jolly well there was no conflict. He had tried to say the same thing in different words in the two speeches.

During the Senate debate last spring on the reorganization bill, two senators opposing the measure had the embarrassing misfortune to receive copies of the same manuscript. Each senator delivered the speech as his own and on the same day. If you will look in the permanent bound volumes of the *Congressional Record* for March 23, 1938, you will find, on page 3,903, remarks by Senator Byrd of Virginia which were repeated in verbatim passages an hour later by Senator Burke of Nebraska, as shown on page 3,948 of the same issue of the *Record*. Both had been supplied with the same ghost material, and neither had bothered to revise the text into words of his own.

In the same way, an identical passage appeared in speeches of both Franklin D. Roosevelt and Alfred E. Smith in the spring of 1932, when both were seeking the Democratic presidential nomination.

In the Library of Congress is a staff of research specialists assigned to prepare speeches for senators and representatives. Many members of Congress employ former newspapermen as secretaries and thus have their own individual ghost writers. Some of these secretaries are able to add to their earnings by writing magazine articles for the signature of the boss. They provide the copy, and the senators or representatives lend their names.

Ghost writing is not new. It has existed in American public life from the days of George Washington, whose farewell address was ghost-written for him by Alexander Hamilton.

When Andrew Jackson decided to issue his nullification proclamation, he called in his Secretary of State, Edward Livingston, who wrote the proclamation; but in this instance both the principal and the ghost signed their names to the document.

Harding and Coolidge had the same ghost writer for a time. He was Judson C. Welliver, once a Washington correspondent and hired by Harding to write speeches. Welliver studied the florid Harding style and imitated it perfectly. When Harding died, Welliver continued for Coolidge in the same capacity, switching to

a more abrupt style. He took delight in editorials which commented on the contrast in literary style between Harding's ponderous speeches and those of the tight-lipped Coolidge, he having written both.

## II

I WOULD NOT BE captious on the subject of ghost writers. So, to be sure of my ground, I have consulted one of the best of the ghosts, a man who has ghosted perhaps a hundred major speeches and magazine articles, leaving not a footprint behind to reveal his presence.

I offer him as an expert witness:

There have been some worthy examples of ghost writing, or writing which by hasty definition would fall in that class. But as the practice goes now the evil far outweighs the good, blows little windbags up to three times life size, throws on them responsibilities they are incapable in their natural characters of assuming; and that's a bad thing all around. I say this as a retired ghost.

There are degrees of ghosting. The worst kind is the 100 per cent kind where the ghost — because his publicity job demands it, or because he needs the money if a free lance — provides the idea, the language and the occasion. This is a bad thing, particularly in a democracy where things are supposed to be what they seem. Public men, above all should stand on their own. But when they provide the idea and the occasion, I think the offense is mitigated if they don't happen to have the right gift of language, and obtain some help on that. How many captivating orators has every generation known whose ideas haven't amounted to a whoop? So, if the sound and able man, who really has something to say and who deserves an audience, can borrow a few phrases from some oratorical or literary stylist who has nothing else, I think it may be excused, as with a scientist, a doctor, a soldier who really has something to say, something people should hear, and hasn't the gift or knack of expressing himself in language the populace will read.

But all in all, discouragement of the practice is to be promoted.

With that statement of a ghost writer who knows his trade I am in complete agreement.

My complaint is, of course, directed at the practice as it exists in politics. In sizing up a candidate for office, particularly if he is not running for re-election to a post in which he has established a record of performance, the public necessarily must judge him to a large extent by what he says. It is the direct evidence of what the man is supposed to be. Yet the average candidate for office spends his time shaking hands, receiving delegations of voters, parading; and then, just as he mounts the platform to fill a speaking engagement, a secretary

## IS GHOST WRITING DISHONEST?

rushes up with the text of the speech, fresh from the hidden hand of the ghost writer. I have heard many an important political figure read a speech with halting mispronunciation, clearly indicating unfamiliarity with the text and with some of the eighty-five-cent words incorporated therein.

Voters are entitled to know what a candidate thinks and what he knows. If a candidate or a politician can't stand up and talk for thirty minutes or an hour about issues of this day in his own words and with his own thought, then he ought not to fake it by shoving out a speech which has been prepared for him.

Democratic government is, to a considerable extent, government by discussion. It is not enough to have good ideas. In a democracy it is important to be able to sell them to the pub-

lic. If a political candidate is so inarticulate that he cannot rise to his feet and express himself with reasonable clarity, force, and sincerity, he is miscast — because he will need those very talents to advance his program in the public mind and in legislative debate. He had better give way and allow the ghost writer to be the candidate and himself seek some appointive office which does not require platform ability.

Ghost writing has grown to such an extent that it is something of a fraud on the electorate. Every politician's speech, like his income-tax return, ought to be required to bear a sworn affidavit stating whether or not the speaker has had the assistance of others in preparation of his text. Under such a system we probably should get worse speeches but more genuine ones.



## II—A Legitimate Professional Service

**by J. GEORGE FREDERICK**

**T**HERE IS an amusing side to the dogmatic claim of Mr. Raymond Clapper, the liberal journalist, that ghost writing is dishonest and undesirable. Mr. Clapper has many, many times "interpreted" the feelings and the opinions of the mute, inarticulate "masses." I submit that this, too, is a species of ghost writing, equally honest and equally a public service if competently and sincerely done (as it is by Mr. Clapper).

If you allow a lawyer to interpret what you, his client, think and feel; if you allow your salesman to interpret the "spirit" of your "house"; if you permit your delegated, appointed, or elected representative to "speak for" you, it is obvious that you are not doing anything fundamentally different when you permit a man to put your thoughts into better words than you can command (such expression being a recognized profession in itself).