**By Tom Engelhardt**

# Love bytes: rhetorical hacks and the Rhetoric Hackers

IN A SURPRISINGLY MODEST STUCCO cottage on Bloch Street in suburban San Diego lives Professor Woodrow ("Woody") Wilson, who holds the Turing Chair in the combined English/Computer Sciences degree program at the University of San Diego and is this nation's pre-eminent Rhetoric Hacker.

I was drawn to the remarkable 32-year-old full professor and others in his strange new profession in search of some in-depth analysis of George Bush's widely praised inaugural address. Still, as Professor Wilson ushered me into his computer-packed living room, I had to admit to him that I would have been less surprised had I found him in a cyberpunk novel.

"Who said Southern California isn't a cyberpunk novel?" he replied, smiling. "In all seriousness, there's nothing futurisitic about Rhetoric Hacking, or RH as we call it. Once speechwriting went computer-generated, we just naturally came into existence. Clear off those floppies and take a seat."

I indicated that, before turning to his analysis of the inaugural address, I was curious to know a little about him, about how he got here.

"Simple," he answered, "RH is a Southern California phenomenon. Don't ask me why, but the money's here. The profession's in its infancy, of course, but I like to think of it as an analytic-predictive science. You see, once speeches—and I don't care whether you're talking political, military or corporate here—once they ceased to be written by individuals, it became possible, at least in theory, to computer-disassemble them into their component policy parts. And I guess there are corporate interests out here willing to pay cash for that knowledge.

"So I'm a Californian to pay my bills, but it's love of the discipline that keeps me here. I'm a Maine boy by birth, MIT-trained, an Easterner at heart. All you have to do is look out that window for proof."
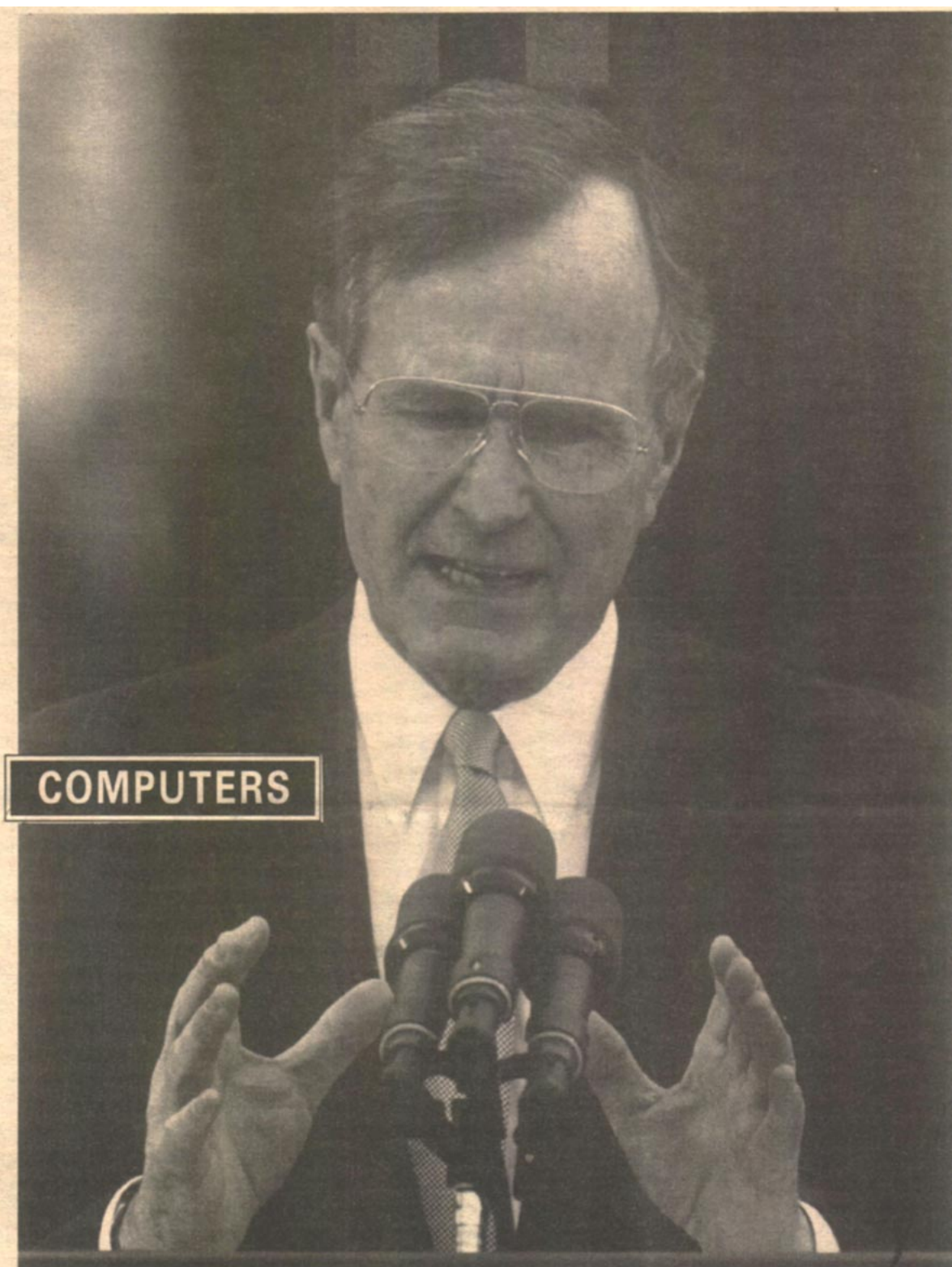
I glanced into his backyard at what appeared to be the top half of a small, fortress-like, concrete-roofed enclosure.

"That was my pool. I had it converted to house my mainframe. It's attached by tunnel to the basement and, by the way, totally bombproof! With that and this," he added, sweeping the room with a single gesture, "I have the power to break any speech another computer can encode."

"As for the inaugural address...," I muttered to bring him back to the subject at hand.

"Well, I've worked on a lot of speeches in my day, but that one's what we call a 'hot snag.' I can assure you of one thing, though. This speechwriter Peggy Noonan—and I'd put that name in quotes if I were you—she doesn't exist. On the evidence of the inaugural address, it's statistically impossible for a single speechwriter, or even two or three together, to have produced the profound space-time disorientation of its underlying images, or in RH terms, its degree of 'RAM dissonance.' There's no question that Peggy Noonan is actually one or more software programs, and the speculation in the field is that 'she' and the speech she 'wrote' were generated by one of the Defense Department's systems.

"You can only take a guess like that due to recent breakthroughs in the recognition of programming signature phrases. These act like signposts pointing toward the origins of any piece of modern rhetoric. In addition, DOD systems are notoriously cumbersome. You might even say 'bureaucratic,' if such a term could be applied to a computer. Forget the complex programming problems of Star Wars, even the DOD's computer-generated speeches clunk. I have to admit, though, it does make our job a damn sight easier when it comes to identification.

"Now this speech we're talking about was a dud even by DOD standards. I mean, a 'healing' speech riven by clashing modules of imagery? Who ever heard of it? Here," Professor Wilson suddenly reached across me to pick up a sheaf of sprocketed paper and began leafing through it. "No sooner is a 'new breeze' blowing than we're breaking 'new ground,' walking through a door into 'a room called Tomorrow,' making a 'vow on marble steps,' ending our differences 'at the water's edge,' fretting that we 'can't turn back the clocks,' announcing that 'we don't wish to turn back time' and eugolgizing a time when 'our mothers were young.' Such confused image location leads to classic

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tautologies like 'the old ideas are new again because they're not old' or statements of bizarre spatial disorientation. Here, take this one: 'Good faith can be a spiral that endlessly moves on.'

"Of course, you could have discovered this much just by picking up the speech yourself. But it's amazing! No one notices when the parts don't fit. You know, I'm in on the ground floor of a new computer science called Movie Hacking, and we're finding the same thing there. Various bits and pieces of film randomly placed side by side now make up the majority of Hollywood hits. One theory among hackers is that no one notices because of the instant and effusive media attention that follows. And a lot of us believe that that attention is itself computer-generated. However, I won't push the point on you.

"The only point I will push is based on my analysis of the mixed-metaphor status of presidential addresses historically. I have already gone back as far as Van Buren and hope to be all the way to Washington by the end of next month. What there can be no question about is that the clashing image content of all political speeches has been on an extraordinary trajectory upward for the last decade. This particular speech is only an extreme example of its kind.

"The real question is what kind of extremity it represents. We've been arguing the question back and forth on *that*." Professor Wilson pointed at a shimmering amber screen set into the wall on the far side of the room. "That's our R-Double-H connection, our professional hotline and bulletin board. For instance, Jack Kahn up at Pomona State, another Easterner, by the way, considers the address reflective of the paralytic state of what he likes to call the Bush Id-Ware—that is, a numbing confusion of purpose, direction, time and vision at the deepest, computer-driven levels of the new administration. He highlights the last image in the speech—'I see history as a book with many pages'—all, he points out, obviously blanks—as striking evidence for his thesis.

"And he might be right, but I'd like to leave you with a more disturbing possibility. My research suggests that even a DOD rhetoric program would be unlikely to produce the sort of image dissonance evident in this speech. In fact, as I compute them, the odds against such an occurrence once in a century are approximately 10,000-to-1. So, for my money, everything points to one overriding possibility. Somewhere in the bowels of the Bush administration a computer virus is loose and slowly replicating itself."

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**Tom Engelhardt** is an editor at Pantheon Books.

By Mike Tidwell

# Kennedy mystique and mistakes

ON OCTOBER 22, 1962, MY FATHER jumped out of bed, put on his Air Force uniform, ran onto the tarmac of a Strategic Air Command base in Arkansas and started loading nuclear bombs onto B-47s.

"They kept telling us it wasn't a drill," he told me years later. "But we knew it was a drill. It had to be a drill." Then the planes flew away. "We stood on the runway and watched each plane take off. The planes had never, ever taken off all together with the bombs before."

Whenever books or films about the Cuban missile crisis begin to evoke images that seem too fantastic, I listen to my father. He makes it all real. He participated. "I was sure I was living my last day," he has told me. John F. Kennedy had ordered the planes on alert. He had ordered preparations toward the possible destruction of the world.

**War machine, Peace Corps:** It never came to that, of course. Eventually the crisis ended. The planes came back, and my father helped unload them. Then Kennedy returned his attention to different orders. He told young Americans to go save what the planes hadn't destroyed. He had founded the Peace Corps in 1961, and by late 1962 he was sending volunteers all over the world. Make it better, he told them.

Twenty-five years after Kennedy's assassination, it is interesting to note

## INTERVENTION

that two of the things he is best remembered for—the Cuban missile crisis and the Peace Corps—make little sense coming from the same man. It is also interesting to note that this contradiction is not an aberration. There is something insistently American about it. One reason Kennedy remains so popular in memory is that he personified some of our nation's deep contradictory impulses. Do we dominate the world with force (and risk destroying it) or do we strive to change it and improve it through goodwill?

The Peace Corps, now 27 years old, is alive and well and currently undergoing one of the largest expansions in its history. World poverty is a stubborn foe, and the agency says it needs more volunteers in order to remain faithful to Kennedy's dream. Congress has agreed to double the number of volunteers worldwide from 5,000 to 10,000 by 1992. This expansion will include the historic entry of the Peace Corps into China.

At the same time, the American military juggernaut steams on. A trillion-dollar peacetime buildup has produced the following armed forces personnel levels: Air Force, 598,000; Army, 770,000; Navy 602,000; Marines, 199,000. And nuclear weapons production and secret wars—popular in Kennedy's day—have not been left out. The metaphors have changed from gaps and dominoes to windows and brush fires, but the impulse is the same: intense concern for national security.

**Deep contradictions:** This tendency toward contradictory policies is not a phenomenon restricted to our leaders in Washington. It is—if my life is any indication—a contradiction we Americans bump into in our work, our homes and our family lives.

After leaving the Air Force in 1964, my father went to college on the GI

> **This tendency toward contradictory policies is not a phenomenon restricted to our leaders. It is—if my life is any indication—a contradiction we Americans bump into every day.**

Bill and pursued a career in electronics. By the time I graduated from college he was running his own company. But after all those job changes and family migrations, he still had his Air Force duffel bag. I found it in a closet when I was packing to leave for Africa in 1984. I was heading to Zaire as a Peace Corps volunteer to teach protein-starved villagers how to build fish ponds. I pulled the duffel bag out of the closet and discovered it in good condition. Our family name was stenciled across the canvas. I decided to use the bag to carry my things to Zaire.

Living conditions in Zaire were hard. Into my father's duffel bag I stuffed a mosquito net, a Swiss army knife, a flashlight, boots. Then I hesitated. Taking the Air Force bag might be a mistake, I thought. The blue military color might cause uneasiness among Zairians who remembered 1960. In that year the Central Intelligence Agency orchestrated the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, Zaire's first and only democratically elected prime minister. Lumumba was the shining Kennedy figure of Zairian history. He was young, intelligent, full of vision. Then our country helped kill him. An authoritarian government backed by the U.S. eventually gained control after the assassination and has ruled in Zaire ever since. The government has abolished political freedoms and led the country into economic collapse.

I was about to put my father's duffel bag back in the closet when a quick re-examination assuaged my concerns. The bag, I noticed, had faded over the years to a blue-white color pale enough to hide its original purpose. I went ahead and used it. I took the duffel bag, this veteran of the Cuban missile crisis, with me on my two-year trip to Africa as a development worker sent to alleviate poverty my country had helped create.

I have recently returned home from my work abroad, and my father and I have spent considerable time swapping stories about our different rites of service. Neither of us has any regrets. We support the respective government policies we helped carry out. Besides, regrets would be out of place. We're an American family. Contradictory experiences are normal. We both did what our country said was right. And we both worked to carry out the orders of the same president: John F. Kennedy.

The Peace Corps will no doubt be around when my son reaches the age when he decides to leave home and serve. World poverty isn't going anywhere. It'll be around, if he's interested. And so will the Air Force. And so will the CIA. I know which one I hope he chooses. ■

**Mike Tidwell** is a writer living in Atlanta. He is writing a book about his experiences working with African peasants in Zaire.



Collage by Peter Hannan