

January 17, 2005

WHITE HOUSE LETTER

## The Man Who Puts Words in the President's Mouth Defends His Style

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**W**ASHINGTON

Michael Gerson, President Bush's 40-year-old speechwriter, had a mild heart attack in mid-December that put him in intensive care for two days. The timing could not have been worse for Mr. Gerson: it was the height of speechwriting season, and Mr. Bush's second Inaugural Address and 2005 State of the Union address were menacingly close.

So two short weeks later, Mr. Gerson was back in the office full time to deal with a boss who has never taken a hands-off approach to his speechwriters' prose.

As recently as late last week, Mr. Gerson said, the president was making significant revisions almost daily to final drafts of the Inaugural Address. Mr. Bush does not write large portions of his speeches himself, but he does like to aggressively prune and to second- and third-guess.

"He reads it in the evening and he'll usually have changes the next day," Mr. Gerson said in an interview on his cellphone on Friday as he paced the halls in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building next door to the White House. "He will take out whole sentences that he thinks are repetitive or interrupt the flow when he's reading it aloud. And then he'll want some explanatory material added."

Mr. Gerson would not preview the substance of the speech, which is certain to include the kind of religious language that Mr. Gerson, an evangelical Christian, is known for. But he did say the president would set out the big themes of his foreign and domestic policies in Thursday's Inaugural Address and follow up with details in his State of Union address early next month.

Although Mr. Bush is expected to put forth an ambitious social agenda focused on his "ownership society," a slogan summing up a Republican philosophy that promises people more financial control over their lives, the campaign against terrorism will be central in his remarks.

"It was very important for leaders like Truman and Kennedy at the beginning of the cold war to explain directly to the American people what the stakes of the war were and how the government was going to proceed," Mr. Gerson said. "We're in an analogous situation: we're at the beginning of another generational struggle. It's to some extent a requirement of leadership for the president to inform Americans about that struggle and how we will proceed."

Mr. Bush has often talked about that struggle in the context of religion, and has included religious

rhetoric in the major speeches of his first term. The language has angered many of Mr. Bush's critics and unsettled some religious leaders, who say that Mr. Bush sounds more like a preacher than the president of a secular nation. Mr. Gerson is behind much of that prose, although it is speechwriters' etiquette never to claim authorship.

Still, Mr. Gerson wrote Mr. Bush's 2003 State of the Union address, which included the phrase "there is power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people." Mr. Bush was promoting his initiative that makes it easier for religious groups to receive government money for social programs by alluding to the chorus of an old Christian gospel hymn, "there is power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the lamb."

The language offends people like the Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, the president of the Interfaith Alliance, a liberal religious group in Washington.

"Anybody who grew up in a Christian evangelical tradition would have latched on to it immediately," Mr. Gaddy said in an interview on Saturday. "He's pushing a piece of legislation in which he has been saying, 'We're not funding faith, we're funding social services.' But he's advocating the passage of the legislation using the language of a very particular faith."

Mr. Gerson has been for the most part publicly silent about the religious rhetoric in the president's speeches, but last month, in remarks to reporters at a conference in Key West, Fla., Mr. Gerson defended his use of the language of faith.

"The important theological principle here, I believe, is to avoid identifying the purposes of an individual or a nation with the purposes of God," Mr. Gerson said at the conference, organized by the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a research institution in Washington. "That seems presumptuous to me, and we've done our best to avoid the temptation."

Mr. Gerson cited one of the president's most quoted lines, from his speech to Congress on Sept. 20, 2001: "Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them."

Although Mr. Bush's critics have interpreted the line as evidence that the president believes that God is on the side of the United States, Mr. Gerson said that in his view such language was not new in presidential rhetoric and that former President Bill Clinton referred more often to Jesus Christ than Mr. Bush does. Mr. Bush's supporters note that presidents like Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy invoked God in their speeches and that Franklin D. Roosevelt announced D-Day to the nation in the form of a prayer.

But Mr. Gerson said there were also other reasons to use religious language in presidential speeches.

"I think the reality here is that scrubbing public discourse of religion or religious ideas would remove one of the main sources of social justice in our history," Mr. Gerson said. "Without an appeal to justice rooted in faith, there would have been no abolition movement, no civil rights movement, no pro-life movement."

Mr. Gerson studied theology at Wheaton College, worked for Charles W. Colson at Prison Fellowship Ministries and covered politics for U.S. News & World Report. Even some of Mr. Bush's critics praise his prose as eloquent, but Mr. Gerson is now in the process of leaving speechwriting for what is expected to be a promotion to a larger policy role on the president's staff. William McGurn, a former

Wall Street Journal editorial writer, has moved into Mr. Gerson's old job as chief speechwriter.

"The complicating factor of my life is the staffing process," Mr. Gerson said in Key West. "Because we write beautiful things and then it goes to every senior member of the White House, and they all get a chance to comment and change things, and sometimes we get good speeches out of that process."

In the interview last week, Mr. Gerson said that his doctors told him that his heart attack had more to do with family history than stress.

But in Key West, Mr. Gerson said that "before a speech, you feel like the most important person in the world, and after a speech you're just a writer and really don't matter very much." He recalled staying with the president at Buckingham Palace and then afterward writing a Medicare speech "that's a disaster, and it's your fault, and how could you be such an idiot."

Mr. Gerson smiled. "So it's that kind of job," he said.