

JUDSON CHURCHILL WELLIVER, WORDSMITH

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Judson Churchill Welliver, the first full-time speechwriter for an American president (Warren G. Harding), was both speechwriter and journalist, a Progressive Era writer who believed in the potential of American democracy and industrial strength, if properly regulated, to transform the world. Infused with progressive-minded economic imagery and enriched by his grasp of mythology, history, economics, politics, and literature, Welliver's writings reflected his times and shaped public opinion.

48 From Warren G. Harding to George W. Bush, presidents of the United States have relied on speechwriters to edit, research, and ghostwrite speeches to meet the rising communication demands of the "rhetorical presidency." Judson Churchill Welliver was the first full-time speechwriter for an American president. Before Welliver, trusted presidential advisers occasionally helped compose the chief executives' public addresses. Alexander Hamilton assisted George Washington with the "Farewell Address," and William Seward contributed ideas and recommended phrases for Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address, some of which Lincoln used in one form or another. The primacy of the speechwriting responsibility, which evolved into a formalized function carried out in a White House Office of Speechwriting, is the basis for Welliver's historical significance. The creation of an organization of former presidential speechwriters, the Judson Welliver Society, acknowledges and commemorates the important role that Welliver played in institutionalizing the speechwriting function in the White House.

Welliver set a precedent that contributed to his obscurity. Speechwriters should be heard but not seen, should labor not in the public eye but behind the scenes to create and maintain the illusion that the president is the wellspring of his own eloquence. Notwithstanding, the extent to which the major speeches of twentieth-century presidents were ghostwritten is a source of continuing controversy. If Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover

were the last presidents to write their own speeches, what was Welliver's role in Coolidge's administration? The staffing process used to prepare presidential speeches obscures their authorship. Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan used speechwriters but also expended time and attention on their speeches. Reagan's real voice in a speech was enmeshed in multiple layers of editing by the speechwriting staff, cabinet officials, and others. When Bill Clinton left his prepared manuscripts to improvise a major speech, sometimes to good effect, he distressed his senior staffers. In any case, speechwriters acknowledge that the final product is usually in some measure a president's own work. Even the presidents most reliant on speechwriters were not the mindless puppets their harshest critics portray.

JUDSON C. WELLIVER, JOURNALIST

His present day obscurity notwithstanding, Welliver left his imprint on American journalism in the early twentieth century. The *New York Times* obituary eschews the word speechwriter, identifying him instead as a newspaperman. Like his contemporary David Graham Phillips, Welliver was an important Progressive Era writer, but Phillips was a muckraker. In fact, that epithet describing journalists who specialize in sensational exposés of the misdeeds of America's business elite and the misfortunes of its working class (the latter typically resulting from the former) was first applied to Phillips, a popular and successful novelist in his day. His articles in *Cosmopolitan* revealed rampant corruption in the U.S. Senate and linked it with the practice of electing senators in state legislatures, where corporations exercised undue influence to select senators beholden to big business. Those articles fueled agitation for direct election of senators. After naming as betrayers of the public interest several prominent senators, including close political allies of President Theodore Roosevelt, Phillips became the implied, but hardly anonymous, object of scorn in Roosevelt's famous tirade against the "man with the muckrake."

Welliver, who enjoyed a longer and more varied career than Phillips, was not a muckraker per se. However, his writings embody progressive ideals that the muckrakers championed, including a belief in the potential of American democracy and industrial strength, if properly regulated, to overcome entrenched poverty and transform the world for the better.

Welliver was born in 1871 in the small town of Aledo, Illinois, a short distance from the Mississippi River and the Quad Cities. Upon graduation from Cornell College in Iowa, he began a career in journalism with the *Sioux City*

Journal. After establishing his career through a rapid succession of jobs with various Iowa newspapers, Welliver accepted an editorial position with Frank A. Munsey's *Washington Times*, where he specialized in writing political commentaries. He held a number of posts with other newspapers throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century (e.g., London correspondent for the *New York Sun*, 1917–18, and editor of the *Washington Herald*, 1927–28.)¹

When Welliver was not working on newspapers, he was advising presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Warren G. Harding, and Calvin Coolidge, freelancing magazine articles, and handling publicity for the Pullman Company, the American Petroleum Institute, and the Sun Oil Company. Welliver's awareness of public policy issues made him a valued speechwriter and adviser to presidents as did the passion with which he expressed his ideas and the imagery he used in his persuasive rhetoric.

Welliver was in England during the tense months before America's entry into World War I as a British ally, an experience that may have cultivated within him an unmistakably Anglophile disposition. Welliver published several articles about Great Britain during and after the war.²

An article published in *National Geographic* in October 1918—"What the War Has Done for Britain"—is infused with progressive economic imagery and criticism of Anglophobic Americans. Welliver asked rhetorically if his American homeland was truly "sordid and selfish" and "merely a race of profiteers." Money he personified as part of the fighting force that accompanied American soldiers: "our millions of soldiers and billions of wealth fighting alongside Britain's." Britain had not been attacked, but she entered the war and turned it into "a contest between systems rather than States; between ideals, not alliances; between good morals and bad morals," and other countries followed her example. But "the wealth and resources of the empire—in men, money, and industry—were not the greatest of Britain's contributions. More potent than these was the fund of moral credit enlisted in the cause." Welliver's verbs artistically linked military concerns, moral obligation, and economic policy.³

Welliver's grasp of mythology and history enriched his writing. A familiarity with Lincoln's "House Divided" speech and its biblical precedent is evident in his comments on European imperialism: "The world could not exist half slave and half free." "The proletarian Cerberus" casts a negative light on Russian and German economic philosophies. His reference is to the three-headed dog that guards the gates of Tartarus, the land of the dead,

and whose threat is neutralized by gifts of cake, by which it is distracted. Russia, the proletarian Cerberus, is not as fierce as its appearance suggests and is mollified by “those sops which autocratic Germany tossed” to it. Mixing mythology (Cerberus), Marxism (proletariat), German economic policies (welfare), and unethical practices (bribery) packs his poetic phrases with meaning that bespeaks knowledge of classical mythology, world history, biblical literature, and current events. Welliver expressed pleasure that the challenge of war helped inspire “social and industrial democracy.”⁴

The well-read Welliver produced prose that was aesthetically satisfying and thoughtful. While only exceptionally well-informed readers appreciated some of his statements and allusions, he offered much to the less informed masses as well. His explanation of the British compromise with Spain to acquire iron ore is a case in point. Wartime naval tonnage restrictions in 1917 resulted in a British ban on imported Spanish oranges. But two of Britain’s allies, France and Italy, desperately needed Spanish iron ore to keep their war efforts alive. Spain wisely linked iron ore exports to orange sales. Without fanfare, Britain ended its embargo on Spanish oranges and thus kept the vital supply of iron ore flowing to its allies. At issue were supply and demand, geopolitics, and international diplomacy, but Welliver succinctly explained the intricacies of the situation in engaging, easily understood prose.

The month before the 1920 presidential election, in which Harding won the White House with Welliver’s assistance, the journalist reflected on the future of the British Empire following the Great War. He praised the Empire for focusing its vision upward, for allowing idealism to counteract the paralyzing discouragement of immediate circumstances. Avoid the daunting “financial bogs, social morasses, and political ditches,” Welliver urged, not by focusing on them directly but by “watching the distant lights” and de-emphasizing “the mud and mire.”⁵

Historical knowledge and a penchant for creative research gave Welliver informed views on economic matters. To provide historical perspective on postwar England, he reminded readers that British debt was a recurring issue. In 1721, Britain had faced a “prodigious debt” but despite the warnings of “prophets of disaster” had grown wealthier anyway. Costly eighteenth-century wars would swell the debt, yet greater national wealth “submerged the debt into unimportance.” Britain’s contemporary (1920) debt of 8 billion pounds was serious (“nigh half its wealth”), but the country was not without offsetting global possessions to counterbalance the liability: “As security [the Empire]

holds nearly a third of the world.” Welliver’s analysis was laced with references to foreign commerce, the world’s workshop, factory production, and wage-price comparisons. Insights into Australasian coal, iron, steel, shipbuilding, railroads, and naval strength enhanced his global outlook. With characteristic verve, Welliver wrote about the international gold market, arguing that national debt had “long been utilized as the basis of money systems” by the Bank of England and the American financial system that had emerged under Alexander Hamilton’s leadership. Gold was poised to “abdicate” to a new world financial “king” (credit). London’s gold market “migrate[d]” to New York; gold “flow[ed] to the U. S.” “The machinery of credit” served as “the real lever,” and the lever’s “fulcrum” comprised British banks.⁶

Welliver’s writing was artistic, original, and informed. “Like the man who fell into the river and was hauled out with his pockets full of fishes,” post-war Britain acquired much from its triumph over Germany. Welliver likened England to a puppeteer that “hold[s] the strings on the world’s business,” to a farmer who spreads the fertilizer of credit while primed “to reap a harvest of trade,” and to a bookkeeper that “keeps the world’s books.” Meanwhile, London is the “gravity center of the world finance” and money is “a yardstick, a standard gallon-measure, a basis of computation, not...a commodity.”⁷

Welliver’s gift for blending historical knowledge, economic interest, and literary symbolism served him well as a presidential speechwriter. His literary production during these years, however, did not come to a standstill. He remained first and foremost a journalist and only secondarily a speechwriter, although the latter role became his principal historical claim to fame while his literary output now goes largely unnoticed. Yet as a mirror of his times and a shaper of public opinion through his writings, he was a major journalist, both before and after he turned his talents to writing speeches.

JUDSON C. WELLIVER, SPEECHWRITER

The job of first full-time presidential speechwriter did not come with that title. Welliver was referred to as “literary clerk” or “political secretary,” titles that suggest a minor role in the White House, an unlikely diminution of responsibilities for a key player in the 1920 political campaign that Harding won by a historic margin of victory. These job titles belie Welliver’s function and role as public policy adviser to President Harding. Welliver served in this capacity from Harding’s inauguration in 1921 until resigning in November 1925 during Calvin Coolidge’s presidency.

Before Harding's campaign, Welliver played a minor role in Theodore Roosevelt's administration and took part in some political mischief that helped undermine William Howard Taft's troubled presidency and boosted Roosevelt's efforts to secure the Republican Party's nomination in 1912. As excerpted in the *New York Times* on September 16, 1910, Welliver launched a devastating *ad hominem* attack on Taft in an opinion piece written for *Hampton's Magazine* entitled "The Collapse of the Taft Administration."

Not only did the President early discover his fatal incapacity for loyalty to old friendship, but he developed likewise, behind the mask of the "Taft smile," a violence of temper, an utter incapacity to brook disagreement or opposition, and an arrogance of opinion that brought many sad shocks to men who least realized these new traits and were least entitled to be discomfited because of them.

The pretext for Welliver's harsh remarks was Taft's alleged reprisals against Republican members of Congress who opposed the administration's policies on domestic economic issues. These so-called insurgents included Wisconsin Senator Robert La Follette, whom Welliver accused Taft of plotting to destroy.⁸

Apparently Harding, who was neither intellectually nor temperamentally suited for the presidency, needed a minder, a role that was filled at least in part by Welliver, who, as illustrated in the preceding incident, was no stranger to the rough and tumble of high-level Republican politics. At the beginning of his administration, Harding, disregarding his suspect qualifications for the office, seems to have enjoyed the presidency. He reportedly said on one occasion, "Being President is an easy job." Soon enough, however, he would offer a less sanguine assessment of the demands of the office and his ability to meet them, confessing to a golfing partner, "I don't think I'm big enough for the Presidency." In an incident recorded (but not necessarily corroborated) in several accounts of his administration, Harding declined an interview with a foreign correspondent to discuss European affairs, deferring to Welliver's expertise with a remark that is astonishingly self-deprecating but insightful about the probable influence Welliver wielded behind the scenes: "I don't know anything about this European stuff. You [Arthur S. Draper] and Jud [Welliver] get together and he can tell me later; *he handles these matters for me*" (emphasis added).⁹

Welliver, who spent many hours with Harding, delivered his own sobering, if sympathetic, assessment of Harding's fitness for the office in a conversation with the journalist William Allen White:

You can't know what the President is going through. You see he doesn't understand it; he just doesn't know a thousand things that he ought to know. And he realizes his ignorance, and he is afraid. He has no idea where to turn.¹⁰

After Harding's death, Welliver stayed on for the first two years of Coolidge's administration, in what may have been a diminished capacity. In an essay about Patrick Buchanan's 1988 presidential aspirations, *New York Times* columnist William Safire, who, like Buchanan, was a former Nixon speechwriter, mentioned Buchanan's membership in the Judson Welliver Society and informed readers that Welliver "was responsible for the reputation for eloquence held by Calvin Coolidge."¹¹ This offhand remark invited a sharp rebuttal from Kathleen Donald, executive director of the Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation:

[Welliver] may well have assisted Coolidge in researching facts for his speeches. But certainly he was not responsible for Coolidge's eloquence, which was well established before he became President. Coolidge's son, John, adamantly maintains that his father wrote his own speeches, often laboring over the precise choice of words.¹²

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Donald's account conflicts with earlier assertions made by Safire that "Welliver put the thoughts of Harding and Coolidge in presentable form" and "helped Calvin Coolidge reach his rhetorical heights," questioning Coolidge's eloquence and suggesting that Welliver was more than a fact finder for the president.¹³ Welliver himself delighted in critical comparisons of Harding's and Coolidge's oratorical styles, since Welliver created both by adapting to each president's natural tendencies so that Harding speeches sounded like Harding and Coolidge speeches sounded like Coolidge.

The Coolidge Papers in the National Archives suggest that Welliver's tenure with the Coolidge administration came to an abrupt and unexpected end. Welliver's handwritten letter to presidential adviser Everett Sanders in October 1925, giving notice of his intention to resign the position in order

to accept "an attractive business offer," was followed by a formal letter of resignation typewritten on White House stationery and dated October 26, 1925. An admiring staff member, Noah P. Webster, responded to news of his resignation with a mixture of chagrin and gratitude: "We all miss you very much, and this is especially so in my case. You know what a delight it was to me to sit at your feet like a pupil of Plato and listen to your words of wisdom."

CONCLUSION

The Harding Memorial Association chose Welliver to serve as the late president's official biographer, and work on the project ensued but was abandoned because of objections raised by other Harding associates.¹⁴ After leaving the Coolidge administration, Welliver continued to write and publish for a few years then joined Sun Oil Company in 1931.¹⁵

NOTES

1. "Judson C. Welliver, Newspaper Man, 72," *New York Times* (April 15, 1943): A25.
2. Judson C. Welliver, "What the War Has Done for Britain," *National Geographic Magazine* 34, no. 4 (October 1918): 278–97, and "The New British Empire," *Century* 100, no. 6 (October 1920): 721–29.
3. Welliver, "What the War Has Done for Britain," 279–97.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Welliver, "The New British Empire," 721–29.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. "Says Taft Showed Hatred: J. C. Welliver Tells of Bitter Denunciations of Insurgents by Him," *New York Times* (September 16, 1910): A2.
9. Francis Russell, *Shadow of Blooming Grove: Warren G. Harding in His Times* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 443, 452.
10. *Ibid.*, 559.
11. William Safire, "Buchanan's Win Wish," *New York Times* (January 19, 1987): A17.
12. Kathleen Donald, "Coolidge Was Eloquent Without Welliver," Letter to the Editor, *New York Times* (February, 18, 1987): A30.
13. William Safire, "The Secret of Carter," *New York Times* (April 26, 1979): A23.
14. Russell, *Shadow of Blooming Grove*, 625.
15. "Judson C. Welliver, Newspaper Man."