CHAPTER 1

Writing JFK

Shortly after midnight on April 17, 1961, a band of Cuban exiles, under the direction of the United States government, attacked Cuba at and near the Bay of Pigs. The invasion, which had been rumored in the press for weeks, was a disaster. Within two days most of the invading force was killed or captured, as the United States struggled to deny, then defend, its actions. John F. Kennedy, who had been president for less than three months, asked himself, "How could I have been so stupid as to let them proceed?" Others were asking the same question. As the events in Cuba were unfolding, Kennedy went on with his earlier commitments to appear in public. Among these commitments were speeches to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, on April 20, and to the American Newspaper Publishers Association, on April 27. Those two speeches, and the story of their creation and reception in the midst of an unfolding crisis of leadership, are the subject of this book.

This book is a case study in the construction of John F. Kennedy's presidential leadership through public rhetoric; about the authorship of that rhetoric; and about the mediation of that rhetoric through the press. I explore the relation of press, public rhetoric, and presidential speechwriting as interacting forces that contributed to the writing of the presidency of JFK. Kennedy on occasion spoke directly to the press; all of his speeches were reported through the press, which shaped and

filtered the nation's sense of what Kennedy had said; several of his most important speeches were written partly with direct or indirect contributions from the press. In a sense, Kennedy's speeches and the press as an influence before and after those speeches weave themselves inseparably into one larger rhetorical text. But if the textual elements are in many ways inseparable, the separate threads are discernible, and when examined in the retrospective magnifying glass of rhetorical inquiry have much to tell us about the processes of contemporary government.

John Kennedy's assassination in November, 1963, seemed at the time, and has ever seemed in retrospect, a tragic turning point in the American experience, coloring as it did our subsequent national derangement in Vietnam and Watergate, and in the political murders of Malcolm X; Michael Schwerner; James Chaney; Andrew Goodman; Medgar Evers; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Robert Kennedy; and others. The assassination of President Kennedy also gave rise to a counter-current, however—the myth of Camelot and the urgency of completing the Kennedy legacy through the great domestic programs of the Lyndon Johnson administration, chiefly in civil rights and the Great Society programs in medical care, education, and social welfare.

The power of the presidency to make myth and change history, revealed in the events following November, 1963, had a history in somewhat less apocalyptic developments. The Kennedy presidency was a time of accomplishment and crisis. The two speeches studied in this volume are not his most eloquent or celebrated, though they are among the most revealing. A reader looking for the most eloquent Kennedy speeches might turn to the inaugural address, and to the transformative speeches of two days in June of 1963, when he turned sharply toward a more peaceful tone in relations with the Soviet Union and when he took upon himself the claim that civil rights had reached a stage of "moral crisis" for the nation. Only the president could have enacted the rhetorical gestures of the American University commencement address of June 10, 1963, and the civil rights address of June 11, 1963. Although others might have made the arguments offered in those speeches, only the president could have said the precise words, and only

the president could have enacted the performances embodied in those speeches. And yet President Kennedy was not the sole author of his speeches, and most of his speeches became known to his audiences through the contexts, interpretations, and mediation of the press. How that process worked—how John F. Kennedy's utterances came to be made and understood—is the subject of this investigation. The greatest of Kennedy's speeches depended on the lessons, the practices, and the talents that had been exercised week after week over a period of many years, and that are revealed vividly in the speeches he made during the Bay of Pigs crisis.

The methods I use in this study are largely historical and critical, but I do hope that something like a grounded theory of one aspect of presidential rhetoric may emerge. Rhetorical analysis involves a double historical task of trying to reconstruct what happened in some complex set of events and what seemed to have been happening to those who were involved in those events at the time. We will never, looking back, be able to reconstruct a perfectly complete or impartial understanding of a rhetorical episode, but the attempt to make such a reconstruction can help us to recapture something of the particular moment and to understand more fully the experience of living in a rhetorical world. Presidential speeches are created and spoken under conditions where outcomes are, by definition, uncertain, and where every participant is likely to have a somewhat different set of purposes, understandings, and impressions. And yet presidential speaking—like most rhetorical interaction—partly has the effect of bringing some coherence to the multiplicity of points of view. How that coherence is achieved—or not—and what is remembered or forgotten, noticed or ignored, in its achievement has historical and rhetorical importance.

At the conceptual level, this book addresses the relations among presidential speechwriting, presidential speechmaking, and press coverage of presidential rhetoric. Presidential speeches influence political discourse, policy, and public opinion. In an important sense, they may be said to constitute policy not only by influencing through argument but also by enacting through performance. The structures of speechwriting influence both speech texts and policy formation. The press mediates

and in some ways formulates presidential rhetoric. We need to know more about how these processes work. In this exploration of press, speechwriting, and presidential rhetoric, I use two case studies of speeches early in the Kennedy administration to understand the two-way processes by which presidential rhetoric is addressed *to* the press, *through* the press to the public, using materials written in public and behind the scenes *by* the press, and *over* the heads of the press to the public; at the same time, these cases illustrate how both the public and the press contribute to presidential rhetoric by providing material to the speechwriting process itself. Hence, the processes of rhetorical influence run not only from but also to the president in a complex cycle with many possible variations.

Presidential speechmaking has long been of interest to scholars of rhetoric, of the presidency, and of the relations of press and politics. I draw on these somewhat disparate traditions in this study of the speeches of John F. Kennedy.

In his book *The Rhetorical Presidency,* Jeffrey Tulis argues that Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson introduced a new feature of the presidency. Both men not only spoke more frequently than their nineteenth-century predecessors, but also they developed a practice of speaking over the heads of Congress to the people. This practice, writes Tulis, is a historical development not anticipated by the Constitution and, though it has become commonplace, it is not inevitable. The rhetorical presidency may tend to hinder rather than advance deliberative democracy, since a president has no Constitutional equal and tends not to commit to public rhetoric until he has come to the point of advocating a particular program of action.[1]

In *Spin Control,* John Anthony Maltese traces the history of the White House Office of Communications from its invention by President Richard Nixon as a means of allowing the president to speak over the heads of the press, and especially of the national press, to the people and to local and regional media, thus avoiding the critical mediation of specialized political journalists. In adopting the practice of holding regular, live, televised news conferences, over considerable protest from newspaper journalists, John F. Kennedy can be understood in retro-

spect as having advanced the means by which presidents can speak over the heads of the press.

Every scholar of Kennedy and the press is indebted to Montague Kern, Patricia W. Levering, and Ralph B. Levering, whose 1983 book *The Kennedy Crises: The Press, the Presidency, and Foreign Policy* investigates press-presidency interaction in four Kennedy foreign policy crises—Laos and Berlin in 1961, Cuba in 1962, and Vietnam in 1963, working "toward an understanding of the conditions under which the press can apply pressure on a president and, conversely, the influence that he can have on press coverage."[2] In this present volume I work in a slightly different direction from that of Kern, Levering, and Levering, concentrating on Kennedy's speechmaking in two case studies that combine foreign and domestic issues and that, implicitly and explicitly, concern the press itself as the subject under discussion. I hope that this difference in focus, and the availability of additional documentary and interview sources, will amplify our understanding of John F. Kennedy's complex rhetorical leadership and its relationship with the press. Kern, Levering, and Levering begin their book by describing how Kennedy speechwriter Theodore Sorensen solicited ideas for an October, 1961, speech from Joseph Alsop, Walter Lippmann, and other journalists. "What is especially significant in this episode is not that they gave long and thoughtful replies, parts of which were incorporated into the speech, but rather that the president was putting these prominent columnists in a position where it would be more difficult to criticize his policies."[3] Although it is true that Kennedy and Sorensen gained influence over journalists and academics by this tactic, and had done so at least since the 1960 presidential campaign, as had other presidents and candidates before them, it seems to me that it is also important to pay serious attention to what presidents say and how they come to say it. Presidential speeches have an enduring importance as the discourse of democracy. In presidential rhetoric, quality matters as much as success, which itself can be immediate or long-term, direct or indirect. Often, the side effects of a presidential speech are as important as any direct effects, especially as those side effects accumulate over time. Furthermore, success is judged not only

from the perspective of the administration, but also from the perspectives of other agents, including the press and the public. Hence, in this account, I examine closely the texts of two presidential speeches; the processes of speech composition; and the complex ways in which press and public interacted with the speeches as acts and as texts. Kern, Levering, and Levering reported that they were attempting to "represent two academic disciplines, political science and history, each with its own methodology and approach to knowledge," one interested in the theoretical and methodological, the other in chronology and particularity.[4] Their book makes an enduring contribution; it is hoped that the rhetorical perspective of my book adds something to the conversation.

A number of rhetorical scholars have made notable contributions to the study of John F. Kennedy's speeches. Their work is cited in context in the course of the following chapters. Among the works published most recently are Steven R. Goldzwig and George N. Dionisopoulos, *"In a Perilous Hour": The Public Address of John F. Kennedy;* Vito N. Silvestri, *Becoming JFK: A Profile in Communication;* Kimber Charles Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy, and the Rhetoric of Foreign Aid;* and Garth E. Pauley, *The Modern Presidency and Civil Rights: Rhetoric on Race from Roosevelt to Nixon.*[5]

The development of the presidency as a rhetorical office has led a number of scholars to comment on how the office has changed. Theodore Lowi, in *The Personal President: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled,* describes a situation in which a president can win an election by a large margin, but in which he does not transfer his strength to his party. The result is a personal presidency, even what he calls a "plebiscitary republic." Lowi attributes the modern growth of presidential power to Franklin Roosevelt, placing considerable emphasis on the personalization of presidential power under JFK, particularly under the influence of Richard Neustadt's *Presidential Power.* Presidents have to promise more than they can deliver, argues Lowi, and even when they do deliver, this just raises expectations; all this leads to attempts to manipulate the appearance of success, largely through news management and rhetoric. Lowi's analysis, if correct, would explain how,

as the presidency during and after Roosevelt sought new powers, it was necessary for the president to speak more and more frequently, leading, in turn, to the employment of speechwriters, and the changes naturally brought about by the institutionalization of that function. The speeches thus produced would, of course, be designed in part to advance the president's policies, but they would also, and importantly, be used to deploy the sense of the president's enormous political and personal potency. Lowi finds the process that was begun under FDR advanced to completion with John F. Kennedy:

> Completion of the task of redefining the presidency as necessary for the government and for national democracy followed the 1958 congressional elections and the 1960 presidential election. The most important of the authors at that time was Richard Neustadt, whose book *Presidential Power* became the bible of the Kennedy administration and, to say the least, the leading text on the subject among political scientists and journalists. Neustadt's book is based on the thoroughly realistic assumptions that the American national government would not work unless the presidency was effective, and that no president could be effective unless he constantly concerned himself with how each decision he made advanced his power over the administration, the Washington community, Congress, and the people. Since the president's only real power was "the power to persuade," he had to manipulate each of his constituencies in order to use each for the manipulation of the other.[6]

In this book, I argue:

- that the rise of the *ghostwritten presidency* is one feature of the expanding role and the personalization of the presidency in the modern era,
- that the presidential *speeches* and the press relations of John F. Kennedy contributed to a personalization of the presidency, elaborating a depiction of Kennedy, his audience, and other rhetorical agents, and

- that the *press* of the Kennedy period developed a complex rhetoric of subjectivity, attribution, and personification that is a clear foundation for the press practices of the 1990s that attracted the complaints of so many journalists, academic critics, and politicians.

This book is an account of rhetorical agency and its depiction in two speeches by John F. Kennedy—of the way they came to be written, the context in which they were enacted, and the ways in which the press interpreted them. The two speeches occur in April 1961, in the immediate aftermath of the failed Cuban invasion at the Bay of Pigs, when Kennedy spoke to the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) on April 20, and then to the American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA) on April 27.

The two speeches display the implicit and characteristic collaboration of Kennedy with his speechwriters and the press to create a depiction of Kennedy as a political and moral agent. In the ASNE speech, Kennedy is a president in trouble after the failed invasion of Cuba; the press largely mirrors Kennedy's self-depiction as learning from his mistakes and as requiring loyal support in a time of danger. In the ANPA speech, Kennedy appealed to the press to be responsible to issues of national security. The speech was generally regarded as a failed attempt at news management and threatened to sour the portrayal of Kennedy that had emerged just a week before.

Together, these two speeches reveal various dimensions of the complex relations among the press, the speechwriter, and the president as they collaborate to construct the public story of the presidency. The press and the president collaborate to construct a frame that emphasizes the president's subjective point of view, a narrative device that predisposes the reader toward empathy, but that can turn against a president when the press presumes to reveal disreputable motives on the part of a president. The press is a client of the information supplied by the presidency, and in the case of the ANPA speech the press was the public audience for a direct appeal for restraint in the interests of national security. Indirect restraints were constantly practiced; direct restraints were rejected.

John F. Kennedy's speeches to the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the American Newspaper Publishers Association are competent and compelling rhetorical performances, though they do not rank in eloquence or perhaps in wisdom with his very greatest speeches. Kennedy's inaugural address and his speeches of June, 1963—first in a commencement address at American University on foreign policy (June 10, 1963) and the next day in declaring that civil rights was a moral crisis (June 11, 1963)—are greater speeches, and they, too reveal interesting features of the interactions among presidential speech making, speech writing, and the press. Indeed, in a conversation with Theodore Sorensen at Harvard University in the spring of 1999, Mr. Sorensen winced when I said that I was planning to write about the ASNE and ANPA speeches of April, 1961, and nodded approvingly when I said I was also planning in a later project to write about the American University and civil rights speeches of June, 1963. And yet the ASNE and ANPA speeches do have a claim on our attention in their own right and for what they can reveal of the processes of presidential rhetoric. These two speeches of April, 1961, reveal a pattern that unfolded in the rest of the Kennedy presidency and that has been elaborated in the decades since. The enormous power of the presidency to compel press restraint and to command the powers of publicity are inseparable, disguising a complex collaboration in the construction of the rhetorical text of the presidency by the president, his speechwriters, and the press.

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