

Citizen Palin

Why Sarah Palin Quoted Westbrook Pegler

By [Tiphaine Dickson](#)

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Sarah Palin's RNC speech in St. Paul drew near-unanimous plaudits: John McCain's vice-presidential candidate, after enduring a Labor Day weekend fraught with salacious speculation about her family, and the revelation that her unwed 17 year-old daughter was pregnant, emerged from her oratory hailed as the next Ronald Reagan.

The speech was written by Matthew Scully, who worked for President George W. Bush for five years, and was part of the team that drafted the President's post-September 11th addresses and every major speech of the first term. No stranger to the art of creating statesmanship in the barely literate, Scully had been hired before the surprising selection of Alaska governor Sarah Palin as vice-presidential candidate; portions of the speech touching on Senators Obama and McCain had been written before her selection was announced.

Scully and Palin sat together and developed-over "hours and hours and hours and hours" according to Mark Salter, McCain's closest aide, speechwriter, and co-author-what would become the defining, and indeed pivotal, moment in the current Presidential campaign.

Scully has described the process of speechwriting with loving and useful detail as a collaborative effort, informed by historical precedent, and a careful understanding of, and appreciation for, the politician meant to deliver the speech. In settling scores with his former colleague, Mike Gershon, in a long 2007 piece in *The Atlantic*, Scully depicts a meticulous, creative, solemn, collegial process where scores of drafts are revised and edited, both by the speechwriting team and by political higher-ups: a process where every reference is carefully chosen, and every phrase is weighed for rhetorical punch and discursive balance.

As Scully sat with Palin, many of the McCain campaign's most senior staff were most likely called upon to review and comment the emerging speech's leitmotiv: small town values of decency, service and integrity, facing off against the unreliability of the community-organizing urbanites in truly fighting for the interests of the people, or for the nation's war efforts. The novelty of a relatively young woman speaking to the RNC was offset by a retro feel: something from bygone days when things were simple, and moral response to enemies something that one didn't have to think too hard about. Something harkening back to the Truman years.

One passage from the speech made it explicit:

"Long ago, a young farmer and a haberdasher from Missouri, he followed an unlikely path — he followed an unlikely path to the vice presidency. And a writer observed, "We grow good people in our small towns, with honesty and sincerity and dignity," and I know just the kind of people that writer had in

mind when he praised Harry Truman.

I grew up with those people. They're the ones who do some of the hardest work in America, who grow our food, and run our factories, and fight our wars. They love their country in good times and bad, and they're always proud of America."

Who are these people who "fight our wars", love their country "in good times and bad", and who-ostensibly, contrary to some people-are "always proud of America? They are the people observed by the anonymous "writer", the people "grown" in small towns, people like Harry Truman, described in that passage by Westbrook Pegler, Hearst Newspapers' bellicose cold-warrior.

This quote appears in Patrick Buchanan's *Right From the Beginning*:

"When Harry Truman came into the presidency, Pegler welcomed him. "We grow good people in our small towns, with honesty, sincerity and dignity," he wrote; but earlier, Pegler had told his readers the man from Missouri was someone to watch out for. "This Truman," Pegler wrote, when Harry was nominated for vice president, "is thin-lipped, a hater, and not above offering you his hand to yank you off balance, and work you over with a chair leg, a pool cue, or something out of his pocket."

Pegler's earlier description of Truman, lacks in homespun integrity what it more than makes up for in grit: Truman is portrayed as a pit bull, another of the strongest notes in Palin's speech.

Westbrook Pegler was not just a Hearst populist, he was a raving McCarthyite whose hatred of Communists ultimately turned his prose into anti-semitic bile, much like that of the German fascists he'd most reviled in his earlier days. Before Truman, say.

In 2004, Diane McWhorter took William F. Buckley to task for his oddly admiring profile of Pegler in the *New Yorker*. From McWhorter's *Slate* piece:

"And I doubt readers would be charmed by Pegler's unyielding disregard for "the least inhibition of political correctness" if Buckley had offered examples of that steadfastness: his assertion in November 1963 (at the height of the civil rights movement) that it is "clearly the bounden duty of all intelligent Americans to proclaim and practice bigotry"; his embrace of the label racist, "a common but false synonym for Nazi, used by the bigots of New York"; or his habit of calling Jews "geese," because they hiss when they talk, gulp down everything before them, and foul everything in their wake."

Pegler, the McCain campaign has suggested, in response to the concern expressed by many that Palin chose to quote a journalist best known for his vitriolic prose laced with anti-semitism posing as "populism", wrote in a time where he was not alone in his heinous opinions. Nor was he alone in his cold-war hatred of communists and fellow travellers. He stood out, however, by advocating, in *Newsweek*, days after the outbreak of the Korean War, the execution of all American communists, as the most "sensible and courageous" way to deal with "communists in our midst".

Though Westbrook Pegler is today a relatively obscure footnote (Thomas Frank first recognized the “writer” quoted in Palin’s speech), five minutes invested on Google would have provided those who thought to include his bromide about small-town morality more than enough information about his actual legacy, and one would expect, discouraged any sane political mind from doing so. After all, Pegler is not remembered for writing this phrase (other than in Buchanan’s tome, where it is excerpted to illustrate his ability to embrace a candidate after hurling invective), but rather for being an example of Hearst Corporation’s venomous voice.

Knowing how carefully Matthew Scully writes speeches, and given the stakes in introducing Sarah Palin, then mired in Twin Peaks-gauge scandal and innuendo, as a national political figure, it appears unlikely that the Pegler quote was introduced without being vetted by the McCain campaign. Someone would recognize the unsourced quote, and someone would eventually think it odd, distasteful, even, that a vice-presidential candidate compare herself to Harry Truman, who became President after Roosevelt’s death mere months after the inauguration. More disturbing is the retro ethos provided by the Pegler/Truman one-two punch in the geopolitical context of this campaign: here is a candidate singularly unschooled in foreign policy whose reference to “decency” harkens back to a time, and a character, whose reflexive hatred for Soviets was enough, a time when NATO was created, a time when Truman dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Sarah Palin might not be familiar with the Bush Doctrine, but her speechwriter, and strategists in the Republican party, are surely familiar with the Truman Doctrine: that which began the Cold War, one that again looms large, and whose zeitgeist oddly dots this 21st century speech.

And how does a speechwriter consider his audience when making ideological points? Of Dean Acheson, and this very period, Gore Vidal put it inimitably, in *Vanity Fair* (1999):

“It was Acheson-again-who elegantly explained all the lies that he was obliged to tell Congress and the ten-minute-attention-spanned average American: “If we did make our points clearer than truth, we did not differ from most other educators and could hardly do otherwise. Qualification must give way to simplicity of statement, nicety and nuance to bluntness, almost brutality, in carrying home a point.” Thus were two generations of Americans treated by their overlords until, in the end, at the word “Communism”, there is an orgasmic Pavlovian reflex just as the brain goes dead.”

And there it is: bluntness, brutality and simplicity of statement, unapologetically wrapped up in the words of one of the United States’ most eager peddlers of Acheson’s approach, Westbrook Pegler, the original pitbull.

It strains credulity to imagine Pegler’s “small-town” people, the ones Sarah Palin grew up with, those who “really love their country”, divorced from Pegler’s paranoid anti-semitism, reflexive red-baiting, and racism. So who are these people who really love their country?

A careful, masterful exercise in speechwriting has reintroduced Westbrook Pegler to a new generation, and in fact elevated him to an acceptable political reference, one which Sarah Palin continues to repeat on the campaign trail. It is not an accidental reference, but one that was vetted by the campaign and the party. It’s worth wondering whether somebody hasn’t seen fit to capitalize on Vidal’s “orgasmic Pavlovian reflex just as the brain goes

dead". So far, so good.

Tiphaine Dickson is a defense attorney specialized in international criminal law. She was the first woman to represent a person accused of genocide as lead counsel before a United Nations Tribunal. She can be reached at tiphainedickson@mac.com

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