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Watching the First Lady Perfect Her Message

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Laura W. Bush wrapped up the second night of the Republican National Convention with a compelling speech that revealed as much about her style as it did about her husband. She touched on substantive policy issues and revealed stories about a wartime president making tough decisions in the face of terror and war. She also gave America insight into her own life and style as an effective public speaker.

I started writing speeches for Laura Bush in 1995 and worked with her through 2002, save 11 months with now-Senator John Cornyn. What a rare opportunity it was to be a young writer working with this remarkable woman from the first months of her career as First Lady of Texas. I watched her find her voice, develop her policies and cultivate a speaking style so effective that she is widely recognized as a powerful asset to her husband's presidency.

In 1995 my first Laura Bush assignment was to write a fund-raising speech for a Texas organization that served seriously ill or injured children. We reviewed my draft over a cup of coffee. She didn't change much; she liked the balance of fact to sweet sentiment. The formula worked. The audience didn't cry -- they *sobbed* and passed around tissues as she spoke. So began a speech-writing process that would become our routine for many years.

She approached her speeches with the keen focus of an educator and the kindness of a woman with tremendous heart. She rarely declined invitations to speak about the things that mattered most to her; Children. Education. Literacy. Libraries. Arts and letters. Women's health and women's rights. Her husband.

She made a study of her lifelong interests, and they developed into concrete policies that were successfully implemented in Texas. Parents and policymakers began to focus on early childhood cognitive development. The Texas Book Festival became a successful Texas tradition.

One day we unearthed a treasure that would become a hallmark of a Laura Bush speech. We received a package of mail from elementary school students for Mrs. Bush -- each titled, "What I have learned."

One letter said, "I learned you can't feed a fish milk." We howled and put it in a speech. We wove many children's words into subsequent speeches. Letters continue to be a rich source of inspiration.

Tuesday night Mrs. Bush mentioned a letter from a military husband who wrote about what *he* has learned while his wife is in Iraq. He said, “I have ruined at least three loads of laundry. Once you turn everything pink, it stays pink.”

More speech material came from Mrs. Bush’s interactions with people. She often told me about her encounters with the people of Texas – and later America. I worked what I could into her remarks, and audiences related to the rare perspective.

Mrs. Bush insisted on being factual and substantive, and I sometimes scrambled to keep up with the voracious reader and disciplined student of her issues. She challenged me to find and mind facts; to add supporting evidence; to rework statements that leaned towards glib. We tinkered until sentences were taut and straight-forward. My background pulled me towards flowery; she reeled me in. But there was salvation in her humor.

Laura Bush loves laughter. I could persuade her to place punch lines here and there – a family story or self-deprecating humor. It worked. She knows how to read an audience, and her timing is impeccable.

Tuesday night I watched again as she struck a fine balance in words. Karen Hughes worked closely with Mrs. Bush on the remarks. Karen brings something to her speeches that few can match – the insight of a family friend and the skill of one of the nation’s great writers.

When the President introduced her, I recalled an early experience. I was traveling as a press aide, going to hear a speech I’d written. The car was quiet and the scent of Sharpie filled the air. Mrs. Bush read the speech, striking words and writing notes in the margins. I cringed. Each corrective stroke moved my words farther away from perfection. She must have realized how tense I was. When we arrived, she looked at me and smiled.

She said, “Are you nervous for me?”

I don’t suppose I ever stopped being nervous. It happens when someone you care about is out on the line, hanging on by the clothespins of your words.

As she walked across the stage at the Republican National Convention on Tuesday, I felt the familiar pang and smiled at the recollection. When she finished to roaring applause I realized, as I always did, that we had nothing to worry about. She nailed the speech, as usual.

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