

Political Lifesaver/Writer

Peggy Noonan is best known as a top speechwriter to Ronald Reagan and George Bush. She has penned such well known addresses as Reagan's remarks after the Challenger disaster and Bush's 1988 acceptance speech for the Republican presidential nomination. Before coming to the Reagan White House, she was a producer and writer at CBS News in New York.

Peggy Noonan is also a skilled observer whose insights into the often muddled world of national politics can make even the most jaded reader take notice. She spoke with David A. Fuscus of the Ripon Forum from her New York City apartment on the presidential race and what George Bush must do to win.

Ripon Forum: *As everyone is aware, the president is having some problems now. Many people in the Republican Party are somewhat frustrated that the president seems unable to communicate his message. Do you think that's an accurate statement?*

Ms. Noonan: Well, I think you are accurately capturing the frustration of people, but I do believe that the president's problem is the manner in which he communicates his program itself. I think what matters for him very much now is action, not so much what he says, but what he does each day.

Ripon Forum: *Are you saying he is effectively communicating except there's nothing to communicate?*

Ms. Noonan: I don't think it's fair to go that far. That's just too dramatic. But there is a tendency in White Houses to assume when a president's point of view is not getting across that it is a communications problem, and it may be deeper than that. What in fact he is trying to communicate may itself be somewhat muddled.

Ripon Forum: *In the past, President Bush has been quite successful in communicating his intentions to the American public. Do you feel that what has to be*



done now is a complete policy overhaul and is there time for that?

Ms. Noonan: Well, you know, it's funny. People love to say, broadcasters love to say, "Well, three months is a lifetime in politics." But there's something funny: three months is also just three months, so time is getting short. I think the president will win if over the next three months the actions he takes each day are good, sound reasoned actions which can be explained to people. This is not a year in which what you say counts so much as what you do.

Ripon Forum: *Do you think that's different than past presidential elections? Do you think we're seeing a realignment of the presidential election process?*

Ms. Noonan: I think every four years you get an election, and each election has its own special character, its own specific atmospherics. We love to compare one election with another election, as in 1992, "Well, now let's draw parallels between '92 and '80." And you can always draw some parallels, but the fact is each four years, each election, is an original thing that never happened before. It's all always new. That's one of the frustrating, horrible and truly delightful things about national politics.

Ripon Forum: *Over the past few months, Bill Clinton has risen from depths of a terrible public image and turned himself into a viable presidential candidate. How much of this is because of his proposals and how much does it have to do with image management?*

Ms. Noonan: It is communications, the manner about which you communicate is always important, but it is rarely the central thing. Reagan was an eloquent man, but he was not a successful president because he was an eloquent man. He was a successful president because he did the right things, he was guided by the right philosophies. He had a philosophical framework. He had ideology. He had serious political views. And the fact that he could articulate them well was all the better, but he would have been successful without having articulated them as well as he did.

Ripon Forum: *Do you think George Bush would be more successful at this point if he had a firmer ideology like Ronald Reagan and was less of a political pragmatist?*

Ms. Noonan: He would be more successful if it were clearer to people that he was guided by principle and seriously thought-out philosophical positions.

Ripon Forum: *To get back to Bill Clinton and Al Gore, they seem to have a great deal of*

appeal to many in America, even a certain segment of the Republican Party. Do you think that we're going to see some defections from Republican moderates this year?

Ms. Noonan: Probably. There are a number of people who simply desire change. This is understandable. One party has controlled the presidency for 12 years. And with the exception of the interruption of four years of Mr. Carter, the Republicans have controlled the presidency since 1968. The Republicans have, in effect, in our generation, owned the presidency. Well, I'm not going to give you any cyclical theory like that of Mr. Schlesinger, but people who have eaten vanilla for three weeks



straight are apt to sit up at one point and say, "I certainly would like some chocolate." Photo by David Valdez

The desire for change is forceful, and understandably so. I think Clinton and Gore, at the moment, have a great appeal to those who would simply like a change of scenery at the top and to those who feel that things have fallen apart a bit in the past few years and maybe we ought to let

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"If You Want a Fight, Here's a Fight"

these other young fellows give it a shot.

Ripon Forum: *On the other hand, to use your metaphor, the American people have been eating chocolate in the Congress since 1954. President Bush has been trying to focus attention on the Democratic Congress for some time now and it does seem to be working. Do you think he will be successful in focusing the electorate's desire for*

Frankly, I think the president should have gone to war with Congress over some specific and serious things three years ago. He should have given a year to try to work it out with them, but when he realized this is a Democratic Congress devoted to thwarting good programs, he should have gone to war. There should have been less of, 'My good friend, Danny Rostenkowski,' and more of, 'If you want a fight, here's a fight.'

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Ripon Forum: *Certainly last year would have been a very good opportunity.*

Ms. Noonan: What makes me anxious is that we're getting a little late in the day for this war. I fear that the Republicans have misunderstood a very new but very clear phenomenon this year, and that is that the electorate became politically engaged very early on. They were politically engaged last winter. They were certainly deeply engaged by last spring. This is something new in the rhythms of the presidential year. For the president and those around him to think that the election year this year begins the day after Labor Day, I think that is a mistake, it has been a mistake. The election began right around the State of the Union.

Ripon Forum: *The press often reports that President Bush considers elections cyclical events, with repeating high and low points. Do you think that the Republicans pay too much attention to the idea that this is just a normal election cycle? Throughout this conversation you've been talking about political change and how this particular cycle is unique. Not many established people in the Republican Party are talking like that. To what degree are they going to have to start thinking anew to win this election?*

Ms. Noonan: It's a different kind of year. Big books are going to be written about this year. One of the things that's different is that people got engaged, politically engaged, early. I think the party has been a little bit late in catching on to the special realities of 1992.

Ripon Forum: *Do you think Ross Perot is the reason for this early political engagement?*

Ms. Noonan: No, but Ross Perot was a manifestation of early engagement. People started to look at the fellows up in New Hampshire, the Democrats in New Hampshire; they judged Mr. Bush and Mr. Buchanan; and a lot of them still didn't have someone they wanted to fix on as their guy. Mr. Perot sensed this. Mr. Perot probably also felt it himself. Mr. Perot put himself into the race, and then for his own perhaps exotic reasons got out and changed the calculus once again.

Ripon Forum: *Do you think the Republicans or the Democrats benefit from Perot's withdrawal, or are those voters simply up for grabs?*

Ms. Noonan: You know, I never think in terms of "C" is out, therefore who gains more, "B" or "A"? I think it's more interesting to think in terms of what did "C" mean and what did those who supported him want, and how should we address



Photo by
Ken Schumacher

their concerns and talk to them about it?

Ripon Forum: *In your book, What I Saw At The Revolution, you talk about the frustrations of writing in a political environment with so much input from so many different people. How effective are speeches in general when they have to go through so many people? Is it difficult to come out with a good product?*

Ms. Noonan: Oh, sure. You know how it is for a writer. Writers are always frustrated because in so many ways it is a losing game. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote to Gerald Murphy, "Life is a cheat and the conditions are those of defeat." I frequently think of those words when I think about speechwriting. A speechwriter is one part of a large machine, but a speechwriter is unlike everybody else in that machine.

A speechwriter is a writer, and a writer who is good knows how the speech ought to be. But the speechwriter is only a speechwriter and not a chief of staff, and not a head of domestic policy, and not a major NSC official. And those folks, for reasons that are sometimes serious, quite serious, sometimes less so, change speeches in ways that always make speechwriters who are good cry. If you're good, you cry; if you aren't, you don't. So the better you are, the more frustrated you would be.

So all of the speechwriters who are deeply, deeply frustrated, it's probably because they're very, very talented.

Ripon Forum: *You referred to yourself as a "Reaganite" in the past. Is that a fair characterization?*

Ms. Noonan: Ronald Reagan really brought me into Republican politics. I believed in what he believed in, and so I wanted to join his cause. And so I have come from that part of the party, the Reagan party. And so I would be happy to be characterized as that.

Ripon Forum: *As a "Reaganite," do you see the very conservative wing of the Republican Party as being dissatisfied with George Bush?*

Ms. Noonan: Yes.

Ripon Forum: *And how is that going to affect the election this year?*

Ms. Noonan: I don't know. I simply don't know. I suppose it will break down this way: Your basic Republican, who votes for the Republican whether he likes the fellow or not; your Bush Republicans who like the president very much; your practical Republicans who kind of figure, "I wish there were someone who was a, real clear conservative in this race, but as there isn't, I will pick the rightward, most viable candidate, and that is Mr. Bush." Those folks will all go to the president, and I would suspect that's a large segment of the conservative vote. But there will also be some who are so frustrated that they want to punish the president for not having led in the way they expected, and they may go for Mr. Clinton and they may stay home. And then they may vote for the Libertarian. It's hard to call.

Ripon Forum: *Ronald Reagan is now speaking at the convention, which certainly doesn't surprise anyone. Do you think there's any role for him to play in this election other than serving as an elder statesman and mentor to George Bush?*

Ms. Noonan: Oh, yes. Ronald Reagan is a great man and the American people know in their hearts he is a great man. And he is generous too, at his age, when he doesn't have to, to show up with such vigor and commitment at this convention to help his party.

And I think he deserves everyone's thanks, real strong thanks, for that. If he is of the mood to go out on the stump in 1992, I would say to the president's advisors: "You get that man a stump." ■