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**Civics 101**

**Episode 29: Political Speechwriters**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:59] Hello I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101. It's the podcast refresher course on some of the basics that you may have forgotten or even slept through in school. We do our best to answer your questions about how American democracy works. Many of you have also told us that you'd like to get that insider's view from people who work or have worked in government. And that's what we've got on tap today. A real treat. Sarada Peri was senior presidential speechwriter for Barack Obama. She's going to tell us a little bit about how the sausage was made. Sarada, welcome to Civics 101.

**Sarada Peri:** [00:01:31] Thank you. Thanks for having me.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:32] So how does one become a speechwriter

**Sarada Peri:** [00:01:35] You know I have no idea. If you if you put a bunch of speechwriters into a room and asked them how they became speechwriters they would probably each give you a different story. So some people historically have come to speech writing by way of journalism others kind of fell into it doing various communications jobs. And you know maybe you're on a campaign and you were the best writer so you just kind of fell into that role. I actually worked in policy for a long time. I was on Capitol Hill working for a senator doing health care and education policy. And I sort of woke up one day and realized that I really wanted to be writing. And so a friend put me in touch with somebody who was a speechwriter. And it kind of just went from there.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:18] How do you get someone else's voice

**Sarada Peri:** [00:02:22] So I actually think it's less about getting how someone speaks and more about how someone thinks. And so you really want to spend time sort of immersing yourself in their thinking which is often in the form of you know talking to them and spending as much time as you can in the case of working for the president. You might get limited time with the person. But I had the good fortune of working for somebody who had been in office for a few years and so I could read every single thing President Obama had said, you know all of the transcripts of the interviews he had given, his books. You know even when he was on Jimmy Fallon or something so really immersing yourself in all of their public comments and as well as conversations with them to kind of figure out how they see the world and use that to kind of develop your sense of their voice.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:10] Does that rub off, I mean did you find yourselves sort of thinking less the president?

**Sarada Peri:** [00:03:14] Not as brilliantly but it is funny how you sort of especially when you're writing for one person I would joke that I kind of started to kind of inhabit the mind and soul of Barack Obama in some way. Right. So you know whenever something happened in the world my first question wasn't What do I think, it was, What does Barack Obama think about this.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:32] You thought about having a press conference

**Sarada Peri:** [00:03:34] Definitely. Were ghosts for a reason.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:37] So yeah let's hear a little bit about that because I wonder if you know I'm sure in many cases with Barack Obama especially well known as an orator. Is it annoying at all to have someone else getting all the credit for this stuff that you write

[00:03:51] No no no it's not at all. Well first of all I don't think. It would be disingenuous for us to say that we wrote and write everything as speechwriters, the best speeches are collaborations. And so what we're really trying to do and certainly in the case of the president but with anyone that you work with is help them figure out what they want to say and then more often than not use their words to do that. So it's really a collaboration. And with President Obama we weren't making policy we weren't making up what he wanted to say we got that direction from him. And you know if you want credit for what you say that or what you write then write it under a byline and go and give the speech. But ultimately you know when President Obama gave a speech that I had worked with him on it was he who was held accountable for it. Right? Not me. And so my job is is to help him do that the best he can. But we're not there to take the credit for having helped them craft. At least that's what I think.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:46] So let's go through a little bit of that preparation how it goes. You know that you get assigned a speech you said it's a collaboration. So do you meet with the rest of the staff, do you have to do research, do you have conversations with the person about what they're looking for ? How does it go?

**Sarada Peri:** [00:05:02] Yeah. So I suspect that every White House is different although I think that the processes are probably kind of passed along. So in our case our director of speech writing my boss Cody Keenan would sit down with with us with our team and kind of go through the schedule and help tell us what was coming up generally and then kind of divide up the speeches based on people's time, people's interest you know, who had availability. So you get assigned a speech and it could be anything from this is happening in two days, sorry. You better get going on it. Or it could be. This is happening. You know this is a commencement address that's happening in a month and a half and you have some time. Typically it was maybe a week ahead of time that we had. And then if it was a policy speech or something along those lines you would meet with the relevant policy people you learn about the policy they tell you kind of generally what the message ought to be and then you go back and you work on a draft. And from there I would you know we would write a draft or say I was reading an education policy speech. I would do a draft send it to my boss who would then edit it and then we would circulate around the building. And what that means is the lawyers are seeing it. The fact checkers are seeing it. The policy people are seeing it and everybody has an opportunity to weigh in with their thoughts, make sure things are accurate, make sure making sure that we're also appropriately reflecting the policy. And then it goes to the president who would make his edits, usually by hand. Because he was a you know a writer in that way. And then we would take the draft from there and go final. There are some speeches many actually where we would get his input on the front end so we might meet with him in as advance as possible to get his thinking upfront and then use that to incorporate into your draft and then you go back and forth with him from there. But it really depended on the nature of the speech.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:51] It's funny because I was reading a little bit about the transition from the Obama administration to the Trump administration. And they picked up on you having to return a book to a library on Shimon Peres, that was one of your last chores. So clearly you're doing your own research to someone like in this case Shimon Peres from a book from the War Department library.

**Sarada Peri:** [00:07:14] So that particular book had been taken out by our assistant speechwriter who's part one of her jobs was to help us with research. But yes we did a lot of our own research as speechwriters I think and actually as writers I think research is sort of half the battle. I suspect you'd get this if you talked to other speechwriters too but we're sort of always, we're collectors of ideas and interesting stories and quotes and historical references that can help enhance the argument that you're making or the story that you're telling.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:44] Since you work with a lot of speechwriters, this must happen that a speechwriter might disagree with something that the person delivering it is wanting to express. Did that ever happen for you?

**Sarada Peri:** [00:07:54] So I think in general yes I mean that certainly happens to people and I'm lucky in that in the White House working for President Obama I did not experience that. I mean it would be hard to work for a president with whom you disagree. Now I also now write for a range of people and before going to the White House I did as well. And yes sometimes you do. You know you end up working for somebody that are writing on a particular issue that maybe you you have differences with. And I think for everyone it's kind of personal. Right. So you have to decide is this something that you know I'm helping this person convey their views on something and my fidelity is to them and their ideas and can I be comfortable with that. Or is this a values issue. Is this something that crosses my boundaries personally and I can't do that. I've heard people say and I think this is true that if it's not a values issue if it's not deeply personal but you generally disagree with the viewpoint that your speaker is taking it can actually be helpful to disagree with that person because then you know the opposite side of the argument. You know pretty well. And so you know how to counter that.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:04] What do you think makes a great speech?

**Sarada Peri:** [00:09:07] So when people think about what makes a great speech they'll often think that it's sort of really beautiful soaring language and a kind of rhetoric. But I actually think that if you were to strip all of that away what you would really find in the best speeches is a clear and persuasive argument and the way you get to that is by having a central purpose sort of knowing why you're giving this speech and what exactly you want to convey so that at the end of the speech the audience knows what it ought to think and feel and do. And what often happens when we hear speeches that if the speaker has not identified what that is, why am I delivering this and what do I want the audience to think at the end, it can kind of become what we call a Christmas tree you sort of put a lot of ornaments on the tree, it gets filled up with ideas but there's no sort of driving animating idea behind it that gives the speech a sense of inevitability. And so it gets cluttered. But a great speech kind of strips all that away and makes an argument for one central idea. Now that is then enhanced by interesting stories and colorful language. You want to pace it properly you know, vary your sentence structure, cadence rhythm, all of that. But I think if you don't have a central argument it's probably just going to be OK.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:34] Sarada Peri thank you so much for speaking with us.

**Sarada Peri:** [00:10:37] Thank you for having me.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:42] Sarada Peri was Special Assistant to the president and senior presidential speechwriter for Barack Obama.