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# 'Undelivered' Review: Alternate History in the Speechwriter's Backup File

What if Nixon had decided not to resign, or the D-Day invasion force had been beaten back? The words were already prepared.



Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy photographed while reading over the text of a speech. PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner  
July 15, 2022 10:48 am ET



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In 1974, facing impeachment in the House and trial in the Senate at the climax of the Watergate scandal, Richard Nixon solemnly told the nation from the Oval Office: "I shall see the Constitutional process through—whatever the outcome. I shall appear before the Senate, and answer under oath . . . any and all questions put to me there."

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Undelivered: The Never-Hearth Speeches That Would Have Rewritten History

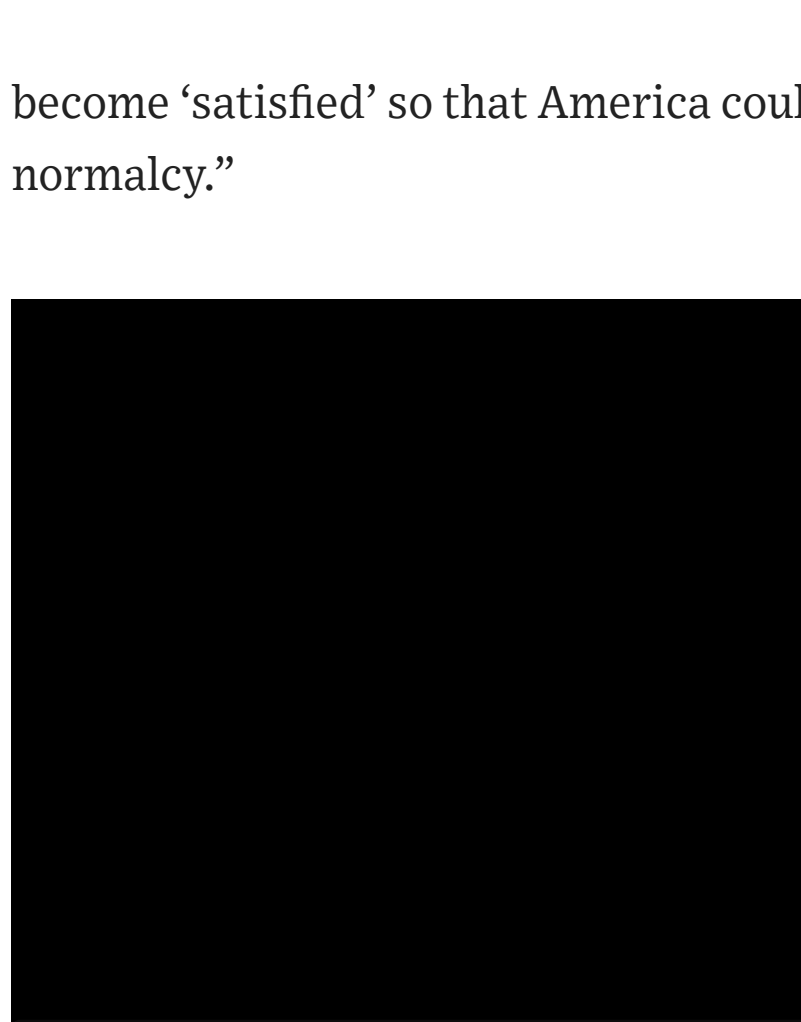
By Jeff Nussbaum

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PREVIEW



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"Undelivered" is actually two books skillfully interwoven, the way a polished scribe melds two complementary speech texts. One deals with the undelivered speeches and the often-fraught historical settings in which they were crafted and ultimately stashed in history's rabbit hole. The other is a wry inside look at the rhetorical sausage-making process, including tricks of the trade like "Howdahell duty"—finding colorful local references for a campaigning pol's speech so the locals marvel at the speaker's familiarity with their lives. ("Howdahell did he know that?")

Besides Nixon, Ike, Dr. King and Hillary, Mr. Nussbaum's anthology of curiosities also includes the unspoken words of King Edward VIII, who gave up the British throne for love, the tormented Emperor Hirohito in the ruins of defeated Japan, the anarchist Emma Goldman, Helen Keller and Albert Einstein, John F. Kennedy and FDR, and a dissident Wampanoag tribesman with no love for the Pilgrim fathers who was barred from speaking at a Plymouth Rock celebration.

As the sun set on D-Day in 1944, Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander of history's greatest amphibious assault, announced: "Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. [Our armed forces] did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone."

Standing before the Lincoln Memorial, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gazed at the vast throng at the March on Washington in 1963 and solemnly intoned: "I read a newspaper editorial recently which speculated upon when the leaders of this civil rights movement would become 'satisfied' so that America could return to normalcy . . . we do not want to return to normalcy."

On election night 2016, president-elect Hillary Rodham Clinton rapturously proclaimed: "My fellow Americans: today you sent a message to the whole world: our values endure, our democracy stands strong. . . . Through a long, hard campaign, we were challenged to choose between two very different visions for America . . . And by reaching for unity, decency, and what President Lincoln called 'the better angels of our nature'—we met that challenge."

Even the keenest students of our times won't recognize those words—because they were never uttered. Most of these speeches and statements were drafted for momentous occasions only to be overtaken by events—Nixon opted to resign, D-Day was a triumph, Clinton lost in the Electoral College to Donald Trump—or discarded for better language, like King's "I have a dream" soliloquy.

Now they have been rescued from forgotten files and dusty archives by the accomplished political speechwriter Jeff Nussbaum in his ingenious new book, "Undelivered: The Never-Hearth Speeches That Would Have Rewritten History."

It's a kind of Bizarro World funhouse mirror of alternate history filled with fresh glimpses of the great under pressure and useful insights into how the speakers really felt about the issues they were struggling with. "Not simply historical novelties, [the speeches] show that history is in constant conversation with itself," observes the author, who was Vice President Al Gore's chief amanuensis and oversaw the oratory at a run of Democratic conventions.

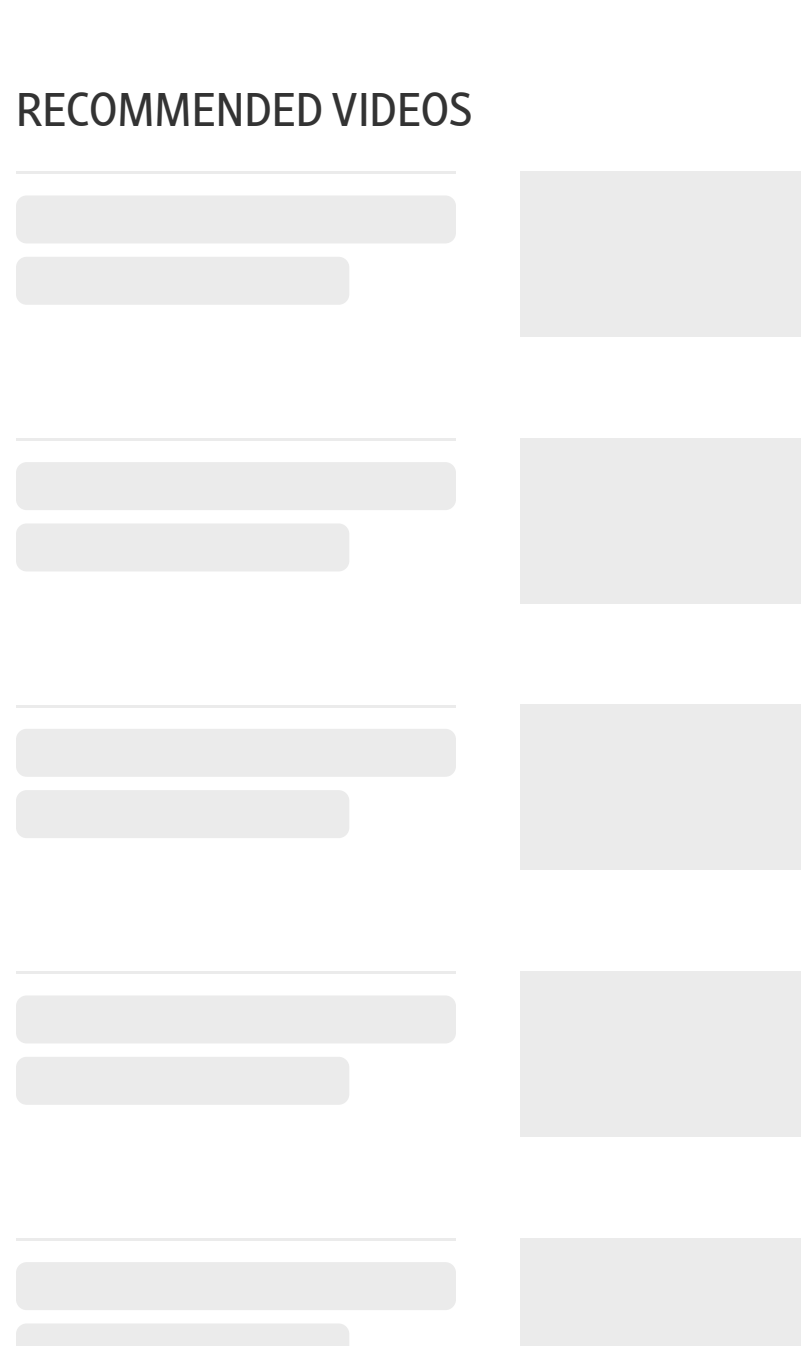
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In the hours before D-Day, with 150,000 allied troops heading across the English Channel toward Normandy in still-unsettled weather, Ike picked up a card and scribbled the speech he would give should the operation fail. Upon rereading it, he manfully replaced the passive-voiced "the troops have been withdrawn" with "I have withdrawn the troops." The card eventually made it into an archive, and on the 20th anniversary of the triumph, Walter Cronkite asked Ike about it. "I was the one that [made] the decision to go . . . and that's that," he said. "If it did fail . . . I was going into oblivion anyway so I might as well take full responsibility."

After Japan surrendered, Mr. Nussbaum relates, Emperor Hirohito wanted to apologize to his people in a broadcast and contemplated abdication—touching off an exhausting hunt in his court for the Japanese *mots justes* to register the precise shade of regret the celestial ruler might utter. The emperor was never satisfied with the results—and the Americans refused to let him give up the throne—so in 1955, on the 10th anniversary of the surrender, he finally expressed himself in a 31-syllable *waka*:

Awakened from sleep while on a trip  
My heart choked  
With memories of things a decade ago.

Edward VIII didn't want to give up his crown, but had to. Encouraged by Winston Churchill, who may have hoped saving the king would thrust him back into power, Edward had a speech drafted in which he asked his subjects to consent to his retaining his position if the divorcée Wallis Simpson became his wife-consort but not their Queen. "Now that I have [taken] you so fully into my confidence," he would say, "I feel it is best to go away for a while, so that you may reflect calmly and quiet but without undue delay on what I have said." Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and Parliament thought otherwise, the speech was shelved, and the king was forced to abdicate on Dec. 10, 1936.

John F. Kennedy, whose rhetoric as crafted by Ted Sorensen set a modern presidential standard, turns up twice, first with a chilling Cuban Missile Crisis address that he would have delivered had he agreed with advisers to an airstrike on Khrushchev's nuclear stockpile on the island. The other is a speech to a Dallas civic group that would have been given on, yes, Nov. 22, 1963.

Mr. Nussbaum also includes the painful words prepared for Mayor Abe Beame during New York's 1975 fiscal crisis after President Gerald Ford refused to bail out the city. Beame's declaration of the city's bankruptcy was scalded at the last minute when the prickly teachers' union head, Albert Shanker, agreed to buy \$150 million more in city bonds. And there's a blunt speech that Boston Mayor Kevin White almost gave defying court-ordered school busing as the city erupted in the mid-1970s.

There's poignance, too. In March 1913, Helen Keller, who became an American icon despite being deaf and blind, was planning to address a spectacular women's suffrage rally in Washington on the day before the inauguration of President Woodrow Wilson. A rowdy, drunken mob of men broke up the meeting and Keller, fearing for her safety, never recited the speech she'd committed to memory. But seven months later she published a magazine article promoting the cause, which contained the optimistic argument that with the vote "women will be able to protect themselves from man-made laws that are antagonistic to their interests."

Like so many others Mr. Nussbaum covers in his book, Keller, for all her handicaps, was a visionary. And like so many of them, she couldn't foresee the abrupt turns history would take despite her fondest hopes, darkest fears and attempts to bend the future—through deeds and eloquent oratory—to her desired ends.

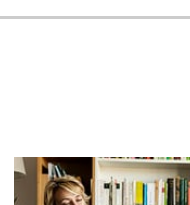
—Mr. Kosner's "It's News to Me" is a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

Appeared in the July 16, 2022, print edition as "Words Unspoken."

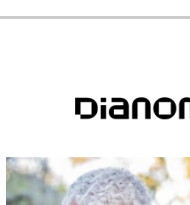
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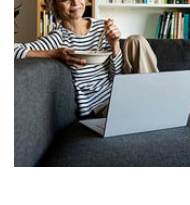
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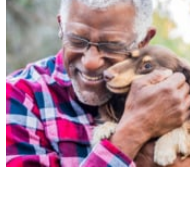
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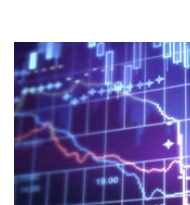
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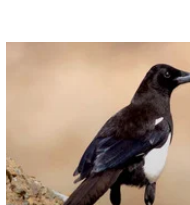
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